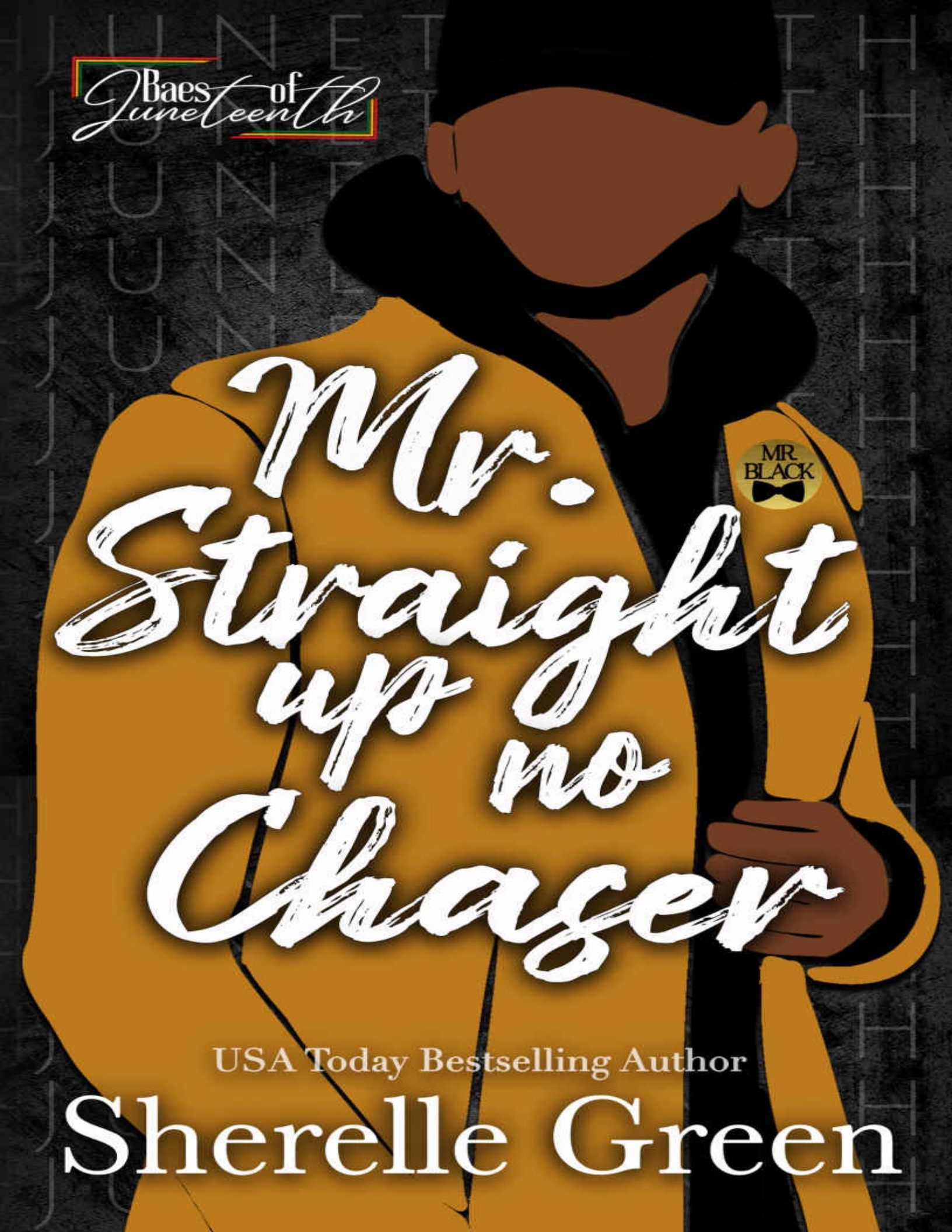


Baes of
Juneteenth

An illustration of a man from the chest up, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark tie. He has a beard and is looking forward. On his left lapel, there is a circular badge that says "MR. BLACK" above a bowtie icon. The background is dark with a repeating pattern of the word "JUNETEENTH" in a light, semi-transparent font.

Mr.
Straight
up no
Charger

USA Today Bestselling Author

Sherelle Green

mr. straight up no chaser

BAES OF JUNETEENTH

SHERELLE GREEN

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Editor: There For You Editing

mr. straight up no chaser

After opening a cultural community center in the heart of Chicago, Porter Crowne is determined to make The Blackout Fest the best Juneteenth celebration yet. Especially when chosen as Mr. Black Chicago. Partnering with influential members of the community will ensure its success. However, if you aren't following the plan, you're in his way just like the curvy, feisty vlogger who argues with every suggestion he has.

Popular influencer, Alanna Raven, has had much success as a body positive educator. When she gets the call to join The Blackout Fest planning committee, she's all in. With a new strategic partnership on the line, she has one chance to shoot her shot. However, she has a deep secret. One that could threaten everything she's worked so hard for. And unfortunately, the one person who can help seal the deal is a man whose mind and body infuriates her more than it should.

thank you

BIG thank you to the authors who helped bring the Baes of Juneteenth series to life in this multi-author anthology.

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.

Mr. Straight Up No Chaser by Sherelle Green

Mr. Right Now by Sheryl Lister

Mr. Down for Whatever by Elle Wright

Mr. Alpha Undone by Kelsey Green

Mr. Second Best by Angela Seals

Mr. Big Stuff by Aja

Mr. Play for Keeps by Kimmie Ferrell

Mr. Take Me As I Am by Iris Bolling

Mr. On Your Knees by A.C. Arthur

Mr. One and Only by Sharon C. Cooper

Mr. Tall Dark and Unavailable by Tina Martin

dedication

To those who have fought and continue to fight every minute, every hour, and every day to educate the world on Black history, Black culture, and Black love.

dear reader

Porter and Alanna tugged at my heartstrings, while diving into the history of Juneteenth took me on a cultural journey I was even more surprised by. There are a lot of powerful quotes throughout, each meant to invoke thought and are a favorite of mine.

If you've read any books in my Crowne Legacy series, you'll recognize familiar names or faces. Porter is the oldest son of Pharaoh Crowne! If you've never read a book by me before, this is a great story to start with.

I love creating bonus content, so make sure you read the bonus quickie at the end! Additionally, check out the list of ways to celebrate Juneteenth and Black history in Chicago.

Much Love, Sherelle

contents

[Message](#)

[Curated Playlists](#)

[The Untold Legacies:](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Epilogue](#)

[Celebrating Juneteenth in Chicago](#)

[Baes of Juneteenth Series](#)

[Want More Crowne Legacy?](#)

[Would Love To Hear From You!](#)

[Want More Black Lush?](#)

[About the Author](#)

message

“I believe in making contradictions productive, not in having to choose one side or the other side. As opposed to choosing either or, choosing both.”

Angela Davis

Author. Political Activist. Scholar.

curated playlists

June 19, 1865...when freedom finally came for all. In 2021, Juneteenth became a federal holiday.

Music inspired by Juneteenth:

[Spotify Playlist](#)

Mood Music for Mr. Straight Up No Chaser:

[Spotify Playlist](#)

“Music is powerful. As people listen to it, they can be affected. They respond.”

Ray Charles

the untold legacies:

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

PORTER

BE PEACEFUL, *be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.* Famous words of Malcom X and the motto I lived by in my life.

A lot of folks assumed I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but mine was wooden and frayed enough to cause the bottom to splinter, cutting my mouth every time I took a bite.

I had to learn to eat without touching the spoon or starve to death. In many ways, the streets of Chicago raised me. Concrete steps and red brick buildings tough enough to withstand decades of people trying to tear them down.

All my life, I'd been wondering when it would finally be my time to step into my truth.

My destiny.

A predetermined legacy that I always felt like I was chasing. A rainbow with no ending or beginning, unable to prove to my family, my community, and especially myself that I was destined for a purpose greater than the life I'd been living. Everyone had a past and parts of their life that they'd rather keep hidden. While some lifestyles were best kept secret, my family was well-known in the world of restaurant chains and athleticism.

I was a Crowne. The grandson of pro-athlete and restaurateur Stanley Crowne, and the great-grandson of activist and pro-athlete Freeman Crowne.

Yet, despite what most of the public knew about the history of the Crownes, I knew a different kind of history. One of organized crime that my father, Pharaoh Crowne, had cultivated into an impressive empire.

Which meant I understood playing in the darkness, lurking in the shadows, and getting my hands dirty more than most.

“Come on,” I muttered, tapping my thumbs against the steering wheel of my rental car as I waited for the black iron gate to open after I entered the code to gain access into the private property.

The sun was starting to set in the distance, but my focus remained on the snaking road that led me closer to the grand Victorian styled home that served as an African American Historical Museum in the day and was considered a historical landmark.

There was something about Victorian homes with their gothic influences and high-pitched ceilings that really spoke to me creatively and I wasn't that creative to begin with.

I parked in the back next to what many would assume was just a tornado shelter.

“Shit,” I huffed, slinging my backpack over my shoulder and glancing at my Cartier watch after I exited the car, noting that I was already forty minutes late for my meeting.

In my defense, I wasn't the kind of man who was usually invited to important meetings that I had to travel by plane and rental car to get to. I left those kinds of meetings to the suits.

I was more of a hoodie and Timberlands kind of guy.

Except today though.

Today, I was looking damn good. I felt out of place enough in my own skin sometimes, so the last thing I wanted to do was show up sticking out like a sore thumb.

When I got the call from the Mr. Black of Scottsdale, Preston Scott, to meet at the secret underground lair that was for founding family members only, I wrestled back and forth on if I should attend. The location wasn't the easiest to get to for me, but that wasn't the only reason I hesitated.

Up until recent years, I'd been an inactive member of Mr. Black, an organization that was created at the height of the civil rights movement when five Black men saw a need to be a beacon of hope in Black communities across the nation. My great-grandfather, Freeman Crowne, was one of the founding fathers of Mr. Black, and was a man who was still admired by so

many in the city of Chicago.

His activism was admiral.

His leadership was unmatched.

His service to his community was generous.

His fight for our country was award-winning.

His skills on the basketball court were Hall of Fame worthy.

Plainly put, he was *that* dude.

In my Crowne family, you usually belonged to one of two groups. There were those who stood tall as trees, strong enough to uplift our race and bear the burdens of society. And there were those climbing up the arms and branches of the ones standing tall to elevate our family and ethnicity to even higher levels of generational wealth and prosperity, whether through legal or illegal means.

I was one of the members that belonged to the third category that didn't get much recognition. The ones doing the dirty work on their hands and knees, planting the seeds in fertilized dirt for those trees to surge and grow strong enough for the others to advance.

I liked the dirt.

But I liked being clean sometimes, too.

I just wasn't there yet, and with so many goals left to accomplish in life, I felt slightly out of place attending this meeting right now.

Chill the fuck out, I inwardly cautioned, adjusting the collar of my shirt before tugging on my olive-colored Alexander Amosu suit as I entered the private code to the building, cursing when I hit the wrong numbers.

There are too many damn codes to get into this mug. I understood why, but I was already trying to figure out if I could suggest some all-black swipe cards instead as I made my way down the narrow hallway to the two-person elevator.

Back when our forefathers used to come to this lair, they took the ten-minute descent down the longest set of winding stairs I'd ever seen in my life.

The first time I visited the lair, I was with my Uncle Nash, and he didn't allow me to use the elevator back up as a rite of passage and understanding of those who came before me.

Before I could reminisce too much, I'd already arrived, walking purposefully down the hallway, only slowing my steps when I reached the main conference room, four pairs of eyes on me when I entered.

Dante Powell. Nero Bond. Titan Stone. Preston Scott. All members of one of the five founding Mr. Black families, myself rounding off the fifth.

“Nice of you to finally show the fuck up,” Titan taunted, the two of us doing our signature handshake.

“You know me,” I teased, popping my collar. “Fashionably late as always.”

“Are you wearing Amosu?” Dante asked. “The Nigerian designer?”

“Sho’ the fuck am.” I placed my backpack down and wiped off the shoulders of my suit to show it off a bit.

Preston shook his head. “We were about to get started with the meeting without you.”

“I told them you’d show up eventually,” Titan mentioned.

“Nah, he didn’t say that shit,” Nero revealed, calling out Titan. “What he said was that one of us should have met you at the airport so you couldn’t back out.”

Titan shrugged. “Or maybe I said that.”

“And be honest,” Nero furthered. “You wanted to ditch us, right?”

I didn’t answer, but they already suspected the truth. A huge reason why I’d actually made the meeting was that Titan had dared me a bill in the group chat that I’d make up some excuse and cancel on them. Anyone who understood anything about me knew that there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do to win one-hundred dollars, but even though all five of us were located in different states and had our own lives, our own friends, and a shitload of responsibilities, we all shared the commonality of being a part of a founding Mr. Black family.

When we attended the national Mr. Black events, we tried not to segregate toward each other too much and give folks reasons to whisper about us, but over the years, it had connected us in ways that didn’t need to be explained. Kind of like that cousin you only saw at family reunions, weddings, or funerals, but always cut up with when trying to guess who was fucking around on who or which family member would be the next one to kick the bucket.

“Gimmie that shit,” I muttered, snatching my money from Titan’s hand before Preston motioned for all of us to take our seats at the round mahogany table that served as one of the few original pieces of furniture left from the organization’s conception in 1965, the same year Malcolm X was assassinated.

“Okay, let’s get started,” Preston stated, hitting buttons on the touch screen of his device. “As part of the founding families, we’ve all been members of Mr. Black since we turned twenty-one. Yet, it wasn’t until I was attending the networking event this past October that I realized for the first time since our grandfathers and great-grandfathers stood in this room, that each founding family has a member as the chosen Mr. Black rep for their city right now.”

I sat up straighter in my chair, sharing a look with Titan before he stated, “I suspected it had been a while. But I must have been so busy with work, I didn’t realize this was the first time in over fifty years.”

“I don’t think the National Executive Board realizes it either,” Preston presumed.

“I agree,” Dante said. “If they had, no doubt they would have called us into a private meeting at the event.”

“And I still can’t get over the fact that none of the members of our family are sitting on the board right now,” Nero reminded.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, soaking in the revelation. “Y’all don’t want to say it, but we know the exec team is bullshit. At least it is when it comes to voting my family on the board. We ain’t clean enough for their bougee asses.”

I loved the Mr. Black organization as a whole though. In more ways than one, becoming Mr. Black had saved me right when I needed it.

“But you can’t knock the fact that the Chicago chapter chose you as their Mr. Black,” Titan indicated. “The people spoke, and the board had to listen.”

“True dat. That’s why I will always preach the good that the men of Mr. Black do. Hands down, we’re the shit.”

Titan laughed at me, shaking his head.

“As founding families, we have clout in this organization even without any of our family on the board,” Dante mentioned.

“We have our forefathers to thank for that.” I kissed up to the sky.

“We do,” Preston agreed, linking his hands in front of him. “However, I’m more concerned about using our leverage in our cities ... since, up until now, all five of us weren’t in this role.”

“What were you thinking?” Nero asked.

“Juneteenth is now a federal holiday, but it doesn’t change the fact that most of the nation is not even acknowledging it,” he answered. “Nor do many Black folks even know why Juneteenth is important.”

I didn't admit to them that until a few years back, I myself hadn't truly known that we celebrated Juneteenth because June 19, 1865 was when enslaved Black people were emancipated in Galveston, Texas more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

In many ways weren't *really* free after that though. Not by a long shot.

Titan crossed his arms over his chest. "You want us to be more educationally focused. Aggressive in our approach to teach our cities through Mr. Black about our culture."

"And shed a bigger spotlight on our history," Dante finished.

"You both read my mind," Preston stated excitedly.

"Because my mind was there, too," Dante responded. "Some of our kids don't have access to the technology needed to learn about Black holidays. Securing resources for our communities to utilize during our Juneteenth events is for the betterment of the people, not the perception."

The perception is never what it seems, I thought, my mind wandering back to a few years ago when nothing in my life seemed to make sense and every part of me was screaming for my mind to understand what my spirit already knew.

"We all have a mission to uphold," I stated. "A birthright as the current Mr. Blacks of our founding fathers who entrusted future generations of their line—blood or otherwise—to continue their mission of making sure our Black and brown youth aren't left out of the history books. I grew up in Black schools that didn't even discuss Black history."

"Exactly," Preston stated, looking to each of us. "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 to forget who they are ... their history. Their place in this society. Their ancestors who fought for their freedom."

"And we must provide them with more resources to pursue fields that they've been told we don't belong in for years," Nero added. "We are losing people daily due to lack of wellness resources or the health system not giving a damn about our lives because even the medical field is uneducated about the ailments that plague us."

Titan nodded. "Education is key. In order to change our circumstances, we must change our mindset as a race and realize our blindness and acceptance to the inequalities."

"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," Preston stated.

“Change must happen now. Not tomorrow. Not with the next Mr. Black. Right now is our time, fellas, and we best use it effectively.”

And I had no doubt we would. Even though I hadn't been a part of many conversations, I paid attention to shit. There'd been chatter amongst so many of the current Mr. Blacks and I was certain we were all trying to accomplish the same goal ... To honor and further our history and the contributions Black people have made in society, while also recognizing the sacrifices of those who came before us.

Something legendary was in the works. I could feel that shit in my bones. Mr. Blacks across the states were trying to further their communities in the right direction and I couldn't wait for the next conference to see how we all continued to come together.

Different cities. Different Mr. Blacks. Same nationwide mission.

Halfway through our meeting, I opened my backpack, and took out my twenty-five-year bottle of Macallan that I had imported from Scotland, along with plastic shot glasses.

"Y'all ready to grow some hair on your chest?" I teased, ready to change their life by introducing them to some good ass liquor and not that cheap shit I knew for a fact some of them drank. Titan knew how I got down, but the rest of them were about to find out.

The five of us didn't get to meet up often, but when we did, we had to perform the same ritual that had become our tradition. After placing three shots in front of us, I filled each one to the rim.

One shot, we tapped on the wooden table and threw back for our Mr. Black founding fathers. Another shot, we tapped and took for our fallen family members and friends. And the last shot, we poured out onto the concrete floor in honor of our fallen Black and brown brothers and sisters across the world.

When the guys were lost in their own thoughts, I poured a shot onto the rug, this time for the friends I'd lost in the streets of Chicago ... then I downed a shot for my soul and the lives lost at my own hands.

I didn't know everyone's past, but mine was filled with some decisions I wasn't proud of, but would do again if it meant protecting my family and the ones I love.

The more we spoke, the more passionate we all became, our minds melding together in a forcefield of knowledge that could only be delivered in such a raw and real way by us. Five men who despite winning Mr. Black in

their city, weren't the typical All-Black-American poster children many would think a prestigious organization necessarily wanted to guide the direction of the association.

But we were exactly who the fuck they got.

I tore off the suit as soon as I got home though. No shade to the designer, but I just didn't understand how men wore these things all damn day.

prologue

*“Heavy is the heart of those who bear the last name Crowne.”
~Pharaoh “Patrón” Crowne~*

FIVE YEARS EARLIER...

PORTER

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness. Words of the infamous Desmond Tutu who sought out to fuse African and Black liberation theologies as a human rights activist and former Archbishop of Cape Town.

I remembered sitting on my dad’s lap back in the day, as he listened to one of Tutu’s last speeches as the archbishop before stepping down. I was only three at the time, so I don’t remember what his speech was about, but I recall when I got older my dad repeating words about *hope*.

And light.

Especially *darkness* though. The kind of blackness that crept into your soul when you thought you were at peace. It’s why I never let my guard down. It’s why my dad, Pharaoh “Patrón” Crowne, kept his friends close, his enemies closer, and his secrets concealed in a triple locked steel vault that was buried so deep, no one would be able to unlock it even when he was no longer here.

My dad had to be tough since there were always enemies lurking, waiting for the king to fall from his throne. Pharaoh, the kingpin. Top drug lord of Chicago and a man who had been running shit before his balls dropped

because, even as a kid, he understood the way the streets worked.

I idolized my father when I was a boy, but it wasn't that I didn't admire my father now. It's just that growing up, all I wanted to do was make him proud and earn that smile from him as he clasped my shoulder and told me I'd done a great job.

That was the thing about my dad. Everyone wanted to get his seal of approval and worshipped the ground he walked on, so I wasn't special in that sense. In fact, if you pulled ten dudes off the streets and asked each of them to tell their story, mine would probably sound similar to more than a few muthafuckas.

I'd been married twice.

Divorced once.

Annulled the other time.

In love before, but not in love with either wife.

Held a gun for the first time on my sixth birthday.

Realized I was good at negotiating at thirteen.

Had my own crew by fifteen.

Made my first kill before I turned sixteen.

Hesitantly became the Street Prince of Chicago under my father's watchful eye.

Left my role of being my father's second in command before twenty.

Was blamed for turning my back on my legacy.

Only maintained my standing because I am a Crowne.

Reluctantly joined the Mr. Black organization at twenty-one.

I'm the father of one great kid.

Been accused of fathering four others.

Acquitted of three.

One is questionable.

And yet, on any given day if you asked me if I was anything like my dad—the father of twelve and lover of too many to count—to the public, I'd nod in agreement.

Under my breath, though, I'd say, "*Hell nah!*" each and every time. My parents were young when they had me ... my mom fifteen and my dad barely sixteen. Some would call me denying any likeness between me and my father rebellion. Others would say I had daddy issues. But if I were honest with my feelings, many wouldn't realize that being the firstborn son of Pharaoh Crowne made me feel inadequate since I hadn't lived up to everyone's

expectations of me.

In the streets, they called me Pistol since I was a master with a gun and never missed my target. I always wondered what kind of praise I would get if I had the same business sense as my dad, but I quickly realized as I was coming up that I was more suited to be a foot soldier. A fighter who was better with his hands than his mind.

I'd seen a lot in my twenty-six years. More fucked-up shit than some saw in a lifetime. I never asked to be born into the world of organized crime, but it came with the territory because of my father. Surviving as a Crowne, though, was more about your state of mind and knowing your place than anything. I wasn't smart like some of my siblings. Not musically talented like others. I didn't have big dreams like most of them, nor did I enjoy the simple act of speaking or talking at all really. I preferred to let my actions do the communicating for me, which worked in some situations, whereas in others, my lack of communication was a hinderance I couldn't shake. When it came to the Crowne charisma, I lacked that shit, so folks called me an acquired taste.

Plainly put, sometimes I felt like an imposter in my own skin, convincing myself that I was satisfied with leading one of my dad's hit squads, when in reality, the act of taking a life was slowly breaking me down more than I cared to admit. And when I allowed myself to dig even deeper into my psyche, I realized that my biggest fear was that I was becoming numb to the killings, chasing that euphoric feeling of eliminating an enemy instead.

Like now.

Especially now.

"He can't be far," I muttered, motioning for three of my guys to head left while me and my righthand, Headlock, headed right. "If you don't see him in five, meet back here."

My other three guys, Big E, Bug, and Guttermouth, nodded their heads in agreement before taking off.

"It's muggy out," Headlock noted as we rounded an abandoned building, our boots barely making a sound since we were light on our feet. "That's a good sign."

I didn't respond to him, but a response wasn't necessary. Only my right hand knew that I preferred to perform a kill right after it rained, when the ground was still damp and the air was still crisp from the downpour.

Most folks waited all year for summertime Chi, but I was one of those

weird muthafuckas who liked the cold more than the heat. The rain over sunshine. Or better yet, that in between stage like now when spring was ending and summer was beginning.

Tonight, the polluted midnight sky was even darker than usual as I made my way through Chicago's Manufacturing District, darting between the narrow alleyways of abandoned or closed businesses. Most of the places in this area were allies of the Crownes, but we still needed to be careful.

Ghosts in the night.

"Twelve o'clock," I muttered, nodding ahead when I spotted our target, his head lowered to the ground.

"Got him." Headlock texted the others that we'd found him. "Let's get this triflin' sonnabitch so I can get back in bed wit' my ol' lady."

A part of me was curious if he was referring to the rich, married woman he was dating, the single mom he was fucking, or the gym owner he'd just started seeing, but I only cared because my girl was pissed at me about whatever she was mad at now and wasn't giving me any. So I was living vicariously through my friend's sexual exploitations instead.

Neither me nor Headlock were with a woman we wanted to wife up though. Nah, those women who stayed on our minds long after we closed our eyes at night weren't fucking with us at the moment.

We did a quick, yet thorough, sweep of the perimeter and established our target was on his own.

"Could be a set up," Headlock murmured.

"Nah, it's not. He's resigned to the fact that there's no turning back," I explained, loud enough for the target to hear me as I came up to him from behind before circling to stand in front of him while Headlock stayed behind him and Big E, Bug, and Guttermouth took to either side when they joined us, forming a pentagon.

"What the fuck are you muttering about?" Guttermouth asked, nudging the tip of his gun into the target's shoulder as his head remained lowered.

The target didn't answer, but I already knew what he was doing. Because of my uncle, Jedidiah "Jackie D" Crowne, I'd grown up with it my entire life.

"He's praying," I enlightened, answering for him. "He's atoning for his sins and asking for forgiveness."

Headlock and I shared a look of understanding as I reminisced about how my uncle would have us reading the bible before a mission. According to him, what we did and the lives we took were enough to break a man's soul,

but faith was what kept us human.

When the target finally ended his prayer and lifted his head, his eyes were filled with so much sadness and regret, I almost lowered my gun.

Almost.

“Tell your dad I’m sorry,” he uttered, his voice cracking with every word.

“Sorry won’t get you out of this shit, Grease,” I told him. “You fucked up and you know it.”

All he did was lower his head again in shame, which annoyed the shit out of me because he knew I wouldn’t shoot a man without looking him in the eye.

He’s not ready to die. He was trying to convince himself that he was, which was why he’d also led us to chase him in a deserted location. But deep down, he wasn’t ready to go. *Are any of us really?*

Grease got his nickname because growing up, he was forever getting into trouble and stayed in sticky situations. But he always managed to get himself out of trouble. Let him tell it, he was born to be a criminal, and since his dad had worked for my father before he was killed in action when Grease was just a boy, I guess he was right about that.

In our world, the criminals controlled the businessmen, businessmen controlled the politicians, politicians controlled the law enforcement, and law enforcement controlled the people, but it all started with us.

The Crownes and other organizations like ours that kept the city safe even if we were the cause of some of the violence. Some called us a mafia family, but to us, we were just family.

Period.

When it came to my dad, though, he lived and breathed the city and embodied every quality needed to be a mafia boss. Oftentimes, my siblings and I joked that my dad only had room for three loves in his life.

His family.

His city.

And whichever woman he was dating at the time.

Us kids fell into the first of his loves ... his family. Yet, none of us were stupid enough to believe that we came before my grandparents, Duchess and Stan, or my uncles and aunts.

Life hadn’t been easy for any of them and they shared an unbreakable bond that couldn’t be destroyed. Being a Crowne meant you always did what was best for the family above all else, and if you didn’t understand that,

someone set you straight real quick.

Betraying my family made you an immediate enemy, and the toughest pill to swallow was when that knife was dug and twisted into your back in such an agonizing way, that you could barely comprehend the betrayal had been from an ally ... a trusted soldier ... a close friend who you used to play in the sandbox with.

“Pistol, you gonna shoot this muthafucka or you want us to do it?” Big E asked.

I shook my head at the sound of my nickname, blinking back my thoughts to focus on the situation at hand.

“Cause we got you if you can’t,” Bug added.

And I knew it was hard for Bug to say that. Grease had been somewhat of a mentor to him before he joined the crew.

“He’s good,” Headlock responded before I could. And that was the crazy thing about it. I really was good. Grease was a favorite of my family, especially Uncle Jedidiah since Grease was always down to pray with him, but my orders from my dad and uncles were to take Grease out, so I was at peace with the situation as much as I could be. No one deceived us without facing dire consequences.

The life-ending kind.

“May the lord be with you as you face your final judgement,” I stated, quoting my Uncle Jedidiah’s words when Grease finally lifted his head and met my gaze.

“Amen,” Headlock added.

The loud pop of the bullet traveling through the barrel of my lucky pistol left a path of smoke as it sliced through the forehead of one of my best friends.

Or, I guess, one of my former best friends.

A traitor.

A sellout.

An informant who had caused us to lose several good and loyal soldiers in a shootout with some dirty cops that weren’t on the Crownes’ payroll. Grease had gotten greedy and fed into the fairytale that those cops would cut him into a hefty deal by helping them take out one of my dad’s biggest suppliers.

They failed their mission.

We lost some good men and women.

And I'd lost a friend who I hadn't even known had betrayed us. He wasn't the first friend I lost, but the first by my hands. That was the toughest part about it for me. The fact that I had trusted Grease with my life, and he sold us up the fucking river.

"P, we gotta go." Headlock tugged on my arm as I stared at Grease's lifeless body. "I'll call your uncle so his team can come clean shit up."

My Uncle Saint was a neat freak and owner of The Drifters, a cleaning organization that disposed of dead bodies and left the scene immaculate without a hint of blood.

I picked up the bullet casing and placed it in my pocket, but as Headlock was calling Uncle Saint while we exited the building, the sound of sirens set us on high alert.

"Shit, the cops never come out here," Guttermouth spat.

"The area was clear," Headlock added.

"Grease could have tipped them off," I stated, motioning for them to follow me. "We gotta get outta here."

"What about the car?" Bug asked.

"Fuck the car."

Since we'd all worn gloves, our fingerprints weren't on anything, and the car we'd taken was clean and not registered, so leaving it wasn't an issue.

Guttermouth, Bug, and Big E didn't know where we were going, but Headlock and I had spent most of our childhood going through underground tunnels in this area to play hide and seek with some of the kids whose parents worked in the manufacturing district.

And Grease, I thought. He'd been with us, too.

My dad used to hate that I hid underground, until he realized it would help me learn how intricate my city really was. A lot of shit happened in areas majority of the public didn't even know existed. We had a saying in our circle. *Harriet used underground tunnels to help us persevere, but in Chicago, dark channels make you disappear.*

Disappearing wasn't always a bad thing though. Like now.

After ten minutes in the tunnels, we came above ground just in time for a CTA bus to approach. We hopped onto the bus, out of breath and no doubt startling the other few passengers as we tried our best to conceal our weapons and not appear guilty of anything, which was kind of pointless.

We were five Black men wearing all black in the middle of the night. And what our appearance didn't say, our eyes probably did since we'd all

experienced too much shit in life already.

“We’re getting off in twelve stops,” I told them, getting settled onto the back of the bus until it was time for us to get off.

“Why are we here?” Big E asked looking around the street after we reached our stop.

“I know a guy who lives nearby.”

“In rich ass River North?” Bug asked. “Who the hell do you know who lives in this bougie part of the city?”

Headlock and I laughed off his statement because if it were up to Bug, he’d never leave the wild 100’s of the south side.

“T-Bone has a place out here and he’s in town right now,” I explained, texting him that we were swinging through. Ideally, it made more sense to head to my dad’s place, but I’d known T-Bone for years, and after the night I had, I needed to feel semi-normal again.

When we reached his condo building, T-Bone was already waiting outside and motioned for us to follow him to the garage where he took us up the freight elevator. I didn’t have to ask why. Knowing T-Bone, he’d set the cameras on a temporary loop to conceal us coming up. Dude was the shit with numbers, but was also great at tech stuff and had done shit like that before.

The first time I witnessed T-Bone at work, my dad and I were in Dallas settling a deal for a company he was slated to do business with. It only took my dad five minutes to realize the CEO of the investment firm was an asshole he didn’t want to align with, but coincidentally his right hand, Titan Stone, was.

Titan and I had first met when I turned twenty-one and went to my first Mr. Black conference with Grandpa Stan and Uncle Nash. Yet, it wasn’t until my dad decided to do business with him before we left Dallas that Titan realized that some of the money the Crownes invested didn’t come from legal businesses.

Titan had his own company now, but he was a trusted ally of the Crownes, and being a part of both my worlds—the streets and Mr. Black—he probably knew more about me than most of my friends, even Headlock. The guys all knew him though. Hence, why I’d given him the nickname T-Bone even if he wasn’t officially part of my crew.

“I should have known yo’ ass had a place out here,” Big E teased, shoving Titan in the shoulder before looking around the place in awe.

“I call dibs on that big ass TV,” Guttermouth announced, running for the remote. Big E made a play for it, but Guttermouth was quick and started running in circles around the coffee table. Bug snagged a bag of Doritos from the counter before he kicked his feet up and started chowing down, laughing at the chase.

“Let me stop these fools before they break something,” Headlock stated, shaking his head.

I followed Titan into the kitchen where there were already two stocky glasses on the counter filled with a brown liquor.

“Whiskey?”

He nodded. “Of course. If you’re texting me at one in the morning, I figured you had a fucked-up night.”

He wouldn’t ask more, part of our agreement with being friends and one of our investment liaisons. He knew the Crownes got dirty, but would never ask what I did for my family, just like I’d never incriminate him by telling him some shit he didn’t need to know and would have to testify against in court.

We sat in silence for ten or twenty minutes. I wasn’t even sure. However, the sounds of a couple of my friends snoring on the couch meant those loyal suckas had fallen asleep.

A text came through from my Uncle Saint, telling me they’d dealt with the cops and the body.

“Thank God,” I muttered, as Titan poured me some more whiskey. I’d been to juvie several times, and although I was at peace with the fact that there was always a chance I could get caught and be convicted of murder, deep down, I didn’t want to be incarcerated.

But at this rate, where else am I headed? The Crownes had impressive lawyers in my family and on payroll, but I was a firm believer in doing the time if I committed the crime. Didn’t mean I was going to turn myself over to the cops though. I had morals, but I wasn’t reckless.

“You good?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was, but found myself downing my drink instead, before standing to look out of the floor-to-ceiling widow.

“I will be,” I finally answered when he came to stand beside me.

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “And I promised I would never ask you what you do for your father, but I can guess.”

“I can’t tell you,” I told him.

“You don’t have to, but you’ve changed a lot over the years, and I see the toll it’s taking on you. Headlock does, too.”

“Y’all talked about me?”

“We’re your friends,” he stated. “He’s discreet like you are, but that’s what friends do. So, Poe, I gotta ask. Whatever you do for your father, is it what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

I continued to gaze out the window, caught off guard by his question. No one had ever asked me that before. *Quit lyin’*, my inner voice reminded. *There was another who asked you the same question.* A woman who was never far from my mind even though she never moved back to Chicago after she graduated college, teaching me that out of sight *wasn’t* out of mind.

Back when she asked me that question, I hadn’t had a good response for her. Even now, I wasn’t sure if my answer was truly what I felt or if I was mentally exhausted upon learning that one of my best friends had betrayed us, resulting in me ending his life.

“I’m a Crowne and the son of Pharaoh. What I do is what I was born to do.”

It was the closest to an admission I’d ever given him. A breadcrumb that I wasn’t happy but felt like I had no choice.

Titan clasped a supportive hand on my shoulder. “I know that, fam, but is this what you want to do for the rest of your life? Who you want to be?”

No, I thought, the answer staring me dead in the face like a bright red blinking light behind steel bars that I wanted to cut off but couldn’t reach.

“My entire life, I’ve tried to figure out where I belong,” I told him. “If I don’t do this, I lose my identity.”

He was quiet for a while, and I figured he was done talking until he finally said, “If you keep up at this pace, as your friend, I worry you won’t have an identity to protect because the carefree Poe I met at the Mr. Black conference will be gone.”

Carefree ... A word that hadn’t been used to describe me in so long, it sounded foreign to my ears. It wasn’t until I reported to my father hours later and finally laid my head down to rest that I thought about one of my favorite quotes again.

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness. It wasn’t necessarily hope that I felt, but Titan’s question had forced me to ask myself if the darkness was where I wanted to stay, or if maybe stepping out from the shadows to get a glimpse of light would save my soul.

one

“A true leader leads by example, but a real leader doesn’t take shit from anybody.”

~Guttermouth~

PRESENT DAY...

PORTER

“This is bullshit,” Old Man Fred huffed, tossing aside the iPad I’d given him. “How do you expect us to keep up with this technology mess?”

“I think mine is dead,” Ms. Ann stated, flipping her iPad upside down and sideways.

“It’s not dead, Ms. Ann,” I explained. “You keep cutting off the power.”

Mr. Emmitt, the man in the room who I was the closest too since his candy store was my favorite place growing up, was muffling words under his breath that I could clearly make out even in his hushed tone.

“It’s never been handled this way before.”

“This young buck has a lot to learn.”

“Wait ‘til I tell his mama.”

It was the last part that made me cringe because Francine Sutter wasn’t a woman to mess with. My parents split when I was a kid, but I was extremely close to my mom. She was big on manners and respecting one’s elders, so I wasn’t going to pop off right now and tell him I knew what I was doing. I would hold my tongue instead. But anyone who knew me knew that was difficult as hell for me to do.

“Juneteenth is in less than two weeks,” Mr. Emmitt reminded. “We already let you change the name of this celebration to The Blackout Fest. But now you want us to clock in and out on this stupid machine like you’re our boss or something.”

“Mr. Emmitt, it’s for keeping track of our notes and schedule of events.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “And I’m well aware that I’m not your boss, but as the Mr. Black representative for this city, I’m in charge of making sure this event goes on without a hitch.”

Old Man Fred pointed into my chest. “We’ve been planning Juneteenth fine in this city before the likes of you came around.”

“It’s because we’re old,” Ms. Patty eluded. “Doesn’t matter that we’re what’s left of the elders who attended the first Juneteenth block party in this community. This young generation is so wet behind the ears, they don’t even hear us when we talk.”

“I hear you just fine, Ms. Patty,” I said, turning Ms. Ann’s iPad on for the umpteenth time tonight.

“Planning with you is just plain silly,” Ms. Verna stated before she started fussing with me over why I’d given Ms. Patty the rose gold iPad and her the silver one that was “butt ugly” in her words.

I released a loud sigh and dragged my hands down my face as I sat down and sunk deeper into my chair, tempted to pull my green hoodie over my head and bury myself into the cotton. Deep down, I understood why they were so frustrated. I was stepping on their toes. Or, rather, the Mr. Black organization was.

Although I’d been a part of Chicago’s Mr. Black organization since I was twenty-one, I’d done bare minimum to stay active until a few years ago. Hell, I’d been shocked I even got nominated since I was known more as one of the bad boys of Mr. Black. Most of us from founding families that were current Mr. Blacks were. We were getting shit done though, a promise we all made a few months ago when we met up at Preston’s request.

The Chicago chapter of Mr. Black had been around since the original 1965 conception, and in 1973, the organization went public with Chicago going public that year as well. Our motto was that we liked our culture Black, and a few of us younger members even added that we also liked our love Black, our women Black, and our souls Black because call me crazy, but a few of us weren’t exactly role models. We were more ... scrappy.

Nevertheless, we were Bold, Loyal, Ambitious, Cool Kings, and showing

a united force between Black males in a world that saw us as an enemy first and man second was important for our future and that of our sons and daughters.

As one of the most diverse cities in the nation, Chicago had a variety of Juneteenth events for people to choose to attend, but the elders sitting before me were amongst the first to ever plan a public Juneteenth event in Chicago.

I still had a job to do though. For the past five years, I'd been trying to clean up my act, and I'd probably hit every bump in the road that I could, the first being the conversation I had with my dad to leave my hit squad.

I made the decision a week after the conversation I had with Titan, and even though I knew I was making the right decision for me, the look of disappointment from my father and the 'I knew this fucker was weak' looks from his trusted advisors, had made me feel like shit. Like I was unappreciative of what he'd sacrificed to get his men to trust me again after stepping down as his second.

Dad was big on surrounding himself with people he could rely on, and with me, he never had to worry about my loyalty. But his men hadn't been so welcoming after the first couple times I stepped down from my role. In a way, I felt like I was always proving myself to somebody, but I didn't apologize for wanting the kind of life I fucking did. One that was dirty when I craved it. Clean when I needed it. Whatever the hell I wanted it to be.

Even now, though, I was still involved with Crowne business in some capacity and always would be. That was family. Enough said. But I didn't want to kill anymore.

Unless I had to.

Okay, so I would never say never. It was more like, I could kill on the weekends if any of my dad's other hit squads needed backup and if I didn't have an event to show face at.

That wasn't important though. What was important was making sure I continued to keep a cleaner image in society like I had the past five years.

It wasn't easy to leave the world I knew to figure out where I fit in this city, but I'd known instantly that I wanted to be a beacon of hope and change in this community even if I was constantly growing myself. A year and a half ago, I finally opened The Rooted Collective, a warehouse loft and former printer factory set up like a community center with office areas, artist lofts, and other unique rooms. Basically, I'd created a multi-purpose venue with seven floors of space to be used for a variety of different activities by a range

of age groups, including a rooftop recreational space covered in graffiti and art murals of the Black history journey in Chicago.

Right after I left the hit squad, I moved to the Bronzeville neighborhood, a community rich in Black culture and Black-owned businesses.

That same year, I'd been attending the Bud Billiken Parade, the nation's largest Black parade, which drew more than one million spectators every August, and crossed paths with Ekon Faye, a man who only recently came out of hiding.

Ekon hailed from the small west African country of Gambia and owned a prominent construction business in Chicago. He was influential in the city despite his infrequent public appearances. It wasn't public news what happened to his wife, but he lost his son and daughter in a tragic accident shortly after his agency made the Forbes Top 100 list.

State Senator Voshon Carrington—who was married to my aunt, Keaton—had a booth at the parade next to Ekon's, but we hadn't said more than a greeting until I overheard him talking about rehabilitating a street in Bronzeville that was filled with abandoned buildings and deserted apartment complexes, overrun with squatters, crackheads, and homeless people.

I knew the street well since, on more than one occasion, my father had sent me and my squad there to check out the scene and make sure no one was being held against their will. Most of the time, we found nothing but the normal scene.

A few times, though, we found exactly what my father was afraid of.

I never thought I'd be interested in gentrification of a street, but by the end of the conversation, I was volunteering my time, eager to see the block be something other than it was. Talking to him and his development team helped me learn more about the community and the variety of art galleries, historical landmarks, and vibrant events it had to offer. I hated to admit I'd originally chosen Bronzeville due to its proximity to Lake Michigan and the sexy ass women who lived in the area.

During the rehabilitation, I dove into whatever pieces of history in the Chicago Public Libraries, cultural museums, and online articles I could find, eager to establish a business in what was historically known as Chicago's Black Metropolis neighborhood.

The Rooted Collective was born and was the first business to open on Black Row, the reformed block that would only contain Black-owned businesses as approved after a grueling back and forth debate with the city.

Shortly after, I won the Mr. Black vote, and although there were several chapter members promoted to our leadership board, I was deemed the sole member to continue to ensure that our Black history and culture was celebrated throughout the city. Even crazier, a muthafucka like me was in the role for four years and fuck if I knew how I'd managed to win when I'd only gotten my shit together a few years ago. Hell, I hadn't even known Ekon was a part of Mr. Black since he'd been MIA from the organization for years, too. We may have grown up differently, but he was like me—born and raised in the streets with secrets so significant, they'd never hear the light of day for fear that too many lives would be ruined.

The members of the Mr. Black Chicago chapter had been easy to win over in a sense, but the Bronzeville neighborhood folks were a different story.

“Youngblood, are you listening?” Old Man Fred asked, popping me upside my head.

“Shit, yeah, I hear you bi— complaining.”

He frowned. “Really? Because your ass looked sleep to me. Did he look sleep to you, Everett?”

Mr. Everett nodded. “Sholl did.”

“Patty, Verna, Ann?”

All three women followed suit.

“Looked that way to me,” Ann stated.

“We must bore him,” Verna added.

Patty shook her head. “They don't make kids like they used to.”

“I was just resting my eyes,” I corrected, but for real, I think I did fall asleep a little.

“Traindriver, you ready to go?” Mr. Everett asked. “We're putting Boss Man to sleep.”

“Not your boss,” I repeated. “But I should be to keep you in line.”

Mr. Everett grunted, not liking my words. And *damn*, I forgot Mr. Traindriver was here since that man never said anything in these meetings. *At least he likes the iPad*. Apparently, he figured out how to take selfies on it too, causing me to stifle a laugh. Nothing was funnier than watching a tall and hefty man grip his chin and pose like he probably did back in the day when he got all the ladies.

No one knew Traindriver's real name except for his brother, Mr. Everett, who would never tell anyone the truth. Traindriver never spoke and he used

to drive the L, Chicago's transit system. He'd had the red eye shift back then. Although we had a lot of elevated train tracks in the city, rumor had it, Traindriver saw a bunch of shit in the underground train tunnels that no one was ever supposed to see and he knew if he spoke, it meant his life. So the man became mute, but women were steadily coming into Mr. Everett's candy shop, throwing the pussy at Traindriver.

Made me question if I needed to keep my damn mouth shut sometimes if women liked us silent as hell. My mama still got on me about speaking before thinking.

Mr. Everett and the others filed out of one of the conference rooms of The Rooted Collective, mumbling something about seeing me bright and early tomorrow. We'd gotten nowhere with finalizing the last-minute plans for The Blackout Fest tonight, but disagreeing with that group was exhausting, so I'd cut my losses and remember that nightly meetings didn't work.

I could only function with them earlier in the day.

I locked the room and headed to the smoothie station on the floor, snagging the berry concoction that the station manager had left for me before she left for the day. *Damn, I wish Amari was here.* My son was seven and he loved smoothies. Even though his mom and I had divorced after a year of marriage when I found her cheating on me with her damn co-worker, I was still active in my son's life.

His mom was engaged to that co-worker now. A European guy who'd taken them on an overseas vacation to his hometown this summer with his two sons that were close to Amari's age.

I wasn't even mad at Amari's mom anymore since I hadn't been much of a husband to her. My heart had always been elsewhere even if I hadn't cheated.

Unlike most nights, no one had reserved any of our spaces for the late shift, and I was grateful to close The Rooted Collective at nine p.m. instead of midnight like I usually did.

I'd just stepped down to the first level when the sound of sandals clicking down the hallway got my attention.

"Shit," I huffed, briefly lowering my head, my body telling me who it was before she approached. "What the hell are you doing here?"

The woman stopped in the middle of the hallway and crossed her arms over her chest, popping out one hip.

"You betta take that bass outta your voice and eliminate the curse words

when you're talking to me," she warned.

"My bad, dollface," I teased, knowing she hated that nickname. "I meant to say, to what do I owe the displeasure of having you trespassing onto my property?"

"Headlock told me I could come in."

I grinded my teeth together. *This dude*. I shook my head at all the shit he'd been telling me lately about me being wound too tight and needing more pussy in my life. Just like my father, I had a weakness when it came to women ... yet, she wasn't just any woman. She was *that* woman. The one who was never far from my thoughts, but remained an ultimate pain in my ass because being around her was just a reminder of what I couldn't have.

Big E and Guttermouth probably told her what time I was ending the meeting, too. They knew my schedule just like I knew theirs and they had a soft spot for the woman standing before me. When I'd gotten out of the game, Headlock had decided to change his life, too, opting to start his own barbershop, Cultured Cutz. Big E, Guttermouth, and Bug had still been in the streets on the Crownes' payroll.

Only in recent months had Big E and Guttermouth come to me about leaving after Bug was killed on a mission while helping my family find a member who was taken during an art event. We all took it hard. Bug was one of the good ones.

"How did you get through the gate in the first place?" I asked.

"Mr. Rigs let me in when Mr. Everett and the group were leaving."

"Hmm. Mr. Rigs must not want to be my gate keeper anymore."

She waved me off, ignoring my threat. I'd had the area secure from the time I opened the place with top trained security. Mr. Rigs had been a squatter in one of the buildings we re-built, and I developed a soft spot for him and couldn't leave him in the streets.

"Quit bullshitting," she said, "and tell me why I received a phone call from my aunt that I needed to help you out ASAP before you completely botched the Juneteenth event."

"I don't care if she's your aunt, the alderman needs to mind her own damn business."

"Porter, you gave the original members of the planning council of this community iPads to keep up with the details of The Blackout Fest."

"Exactly," I stated, outstretching my arms. "That shit was expensive, and those old folks were ungrateful as hell."

"First off, the women told you to stop calling them old," she reminded. "They're seasoned."

"Seasoned still means old," I pointed out. "And it reminds me of marinating meat or something. Whoever came up with that term needs to change that shit."

"Why are you so disrespectful?"

"Why do people expect me to be politically correct?" I countered. "Old is old. New is new. Dead is dead. And seasoned is for describing meat, not people."

"Unbelievable," she huffed, rolling her eyes. "It's not about what you think, it's about what they want. And secondly, you already know Old Man Fred has cataracts and anything electronic hurts his eyes."

"I didn't know that."

"He told you during the first meeting a couple months ago."

I shrugged, failing to ignore the fact that she was still standing in my favorite pose of hers. The I-know-this-muthafucka-didn't-say-that pose. *And she's wearing my favorite color.* Granted, she didn't know I loved the color black, but the fitted maxi dress she was sporting, black glasses, and black baseball cap with the words *Boss Lady* etched onto it was really fucking with me. And her dress had a split in the side to show off those thick thighs and grippable hips.

Usually, she wore her hair wavy and down around her shoulders, but her burgundy braids looked fresh and braids were my kryptonite. Specifically, her in braids.

Shit, why is she here? Each neighborhood had them. Those women who appeared untouchable and out of grasp. Every man had a type, but she was mine all the way. Alanna Raven, blogger and influencer who was sweet with a side of sass and thick with curves that begged for my attention. She was half nerdy librarian and half sexy siren. Dangerous to me in more ways than I cared to admit. Which was precisely why I'd kicked her off the Juneteenth planning committee a month ago.

"Regret your decision yet?" she asked, a knowing glint in her eyes.

"Nah, you were distracting Mr. Everett and the other OGs from business."

"Ha!" she huffed, shaking her head and mumbling something under her breath that sounded a lot like, *couldn't distract you I guess.* I had to have heard her wrong though because she'd been the biggest distraction to me

most of all.

“And you and I couldn’t agree on any ideas,” I continued. “You were turning everyone against me, and folks here already wish I wasn’t involved in the planning at all. That’s why I fired the others, and the only reason I’m dealing with Mr. Everett and his crew is because they started this event.”

“Mr. Everett was your ally in the beginning,” she reminded. “But you don’t respect other people’s opinions, and this celebration isn’t just about you.”

“I know that. I never said it was, but this is my first year as Mr. Black, so I have a lot on the line for this,” I admitted.

To my surprise, her eyes softened as she closed the distance between us, causing me to slightly back into the wall, the hairs on my arm standing to attention even beneath my hoodie.

Crap. I was a reformed ruthless killer as Guttermouth put it, yet, when approached by Alanna close-but-don’t-touch Raven, I clammed up like a little bitch.

“Porter, you may have everyone fooled into thinking you want to finalize the plans for The Blackout Fest on your own, but before you even confessed that, I knew the truth.”

“Which is?” I asked, my mouth suddenly dry.

“You want to be so successful, you’re psyching yourself out.”

Hmm, why does she sound like she’s not talking about the event?

“I’m not psyching myself out,” I retorted.

“You are,” she fired back.

“I’m trying to make this the best celebration yet.”

She lightly gripped my hand, the heat of her palm hot to the touch. “I know that, but you’re self-sabotaging.”

Jasmine and rose. I couldn’t help but inhale her scent when she stood so close. She must have sensed the change of energy because she uncurled her fingers from my hand and took a step back.

“The way I see it, you need me on this planning committee since you seem to fire someone weekly. Porter, you’re losing volunteers left and right, and you’re making more enemies than usual.”

I grunted, hating that she was right. All my life, I’d been the type of dude that had to grow on people when they meet me for the first time, and since moving to the Bronzeville neighborhood, it was clear that the tastebuds of the townfolk still lacked my certain refinement.

I quirked an eyebrow, wondering what her angle was. “Last month, you cursed me out and told me I was the worst event host you’d ever worked with and that you hoped I kicked a rock, tripped over a curb, and got forever diarrhea.”

“Still accurate. I even sent a bulk of toilet tissue to this place in case my prayers were answered.”

I frowned. *Should have known that was her ass.* My general manager had said it had been donated and new business owners in the neighborhood were often hazed a bit, but didn’t say who. The Rooted Collective now had enough to fill all the bathrooms for at least a month.

“Did you have to print my face on the damn toilet tissue though?”

She smirked, her eyes playful. “Of course I did. You’re so full of shit, it’s only right that people wipe their ass with your face.”

I couldn’t help but laugh since, “My point is, you don’t wanna help me.”

“Sure I do.”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked, finishing my smoothie before tossing the cup into a nearby garbage can. “Why would Alanna Raven help me after all these years?”

Her eyes widened at the reminder that we’d known each other for so long. *As if I’d ever forget.*

“Here’s the thing,” she muttered, linking her hands together. “I need a favor.”

I raised a curious eyebrow. “Okay, I’m intrigued. What’s the favor?”

She bit her bottom lip and started looking up at the ceiling as if she found the lights extremely interesting.

“Oh, it must be good if you can’t find the words. You always got some shit to say.”

“I have the words,” she said. “I’m just not sure which version of them I should ask that will result in the answer I want.”

“Fine,” I stated, assuming it was about the event. “You’re rehired for The Blackout Fest. I shouldn’t have fired you in the first place.”

Her smile filled her entire face, my nerves shot that I’d been the asshole to put it there. “Good, because you need me.”

I nodded. “I do.”

“And I need you, too.”

I nodded again. “Still waiting to know—”

“To have sex with me,” she interrupted.

To ... *what?* Nah, I had to have heard her wrong. Hell, we'd avoided the elephant in the room every time we were together for over a decade, and now she was asking me to ... *fuck* her?

I damn near threw up all that smoothie I drank.

"I think I heard you wrong." It wouldn't be the first time I'd imagined her saying those words.

"You didn't," she stated, her eyes studying mine.

"You can have any man in this city," I told her. "Hell, this world."

"For this favor, I need you specifically, Poe."

Shit. Hearing my nickname on her lips did crazy things to me. *And why does she need me?* I didn't ask it, but I knew she sensed it. You could have told me the whole damn world was crumbling around me and I would have been less shocked than hearing Alanna Raven say those words.

"Did you really just offer your pussy on a planning truce?"

She grinned in a sexy way that made my stomach growl. "Yes, I did." She glanced down at her Apple watch. "But let's not discuss the details now, let's talk about this tomorrow."

"There's details?"

"This is me we're talking about. There's always details. I'm busy tomorrow night, but we can meet the night after. But I'll see you at the planning meeting tomorrow morning anyway. I'll be here for that, work mode ready."

"Hold up, you want me to focus on a meeting tomorrow, but you won't tell me why I need to fuck you until the day after?"

She smirked. "Yep." With that, she turned and walked toward the front door, leaving me to pick my jaw off the fucking floor before walking in her direction.

"Yo, how did you know we had a meeting tomorrow morning?"

"Ms. Patty tells me everything," Alanna spat over her shoulder before the door closed behind her with a deafening thump.

What the fuck just happened? "That wasn't how the hell I thought my day would end," I said to myself, cutting off the lights so I could close up shop for the night. I didn't even know why she was asking me to sleep with her, but she knew my ass was gonna say yes.

A woman like her always knew when a man wanted her, and she'd had me by the balls since what felt like forever. She saw how I looked at her ... watched her ... checked her out because I couldn't help myself. The timing

with us had always been off, but all these years, I'd always wanted her.

Never had her though.

And now, she was offering herself to me on a silver fucking platter.

Calm yourself, Poe. You've gotten your hopes up with her before.

Ever want something so bad, but never could attain to achieve it? No doubt there was a catch to what she was offering because when it came to Alanna Raven, nothing was easy.

two

“Nutrition is about more than just care for your body. Your mindset has to be all in.”

~Teia~

ALANNA

“GIRL, if you don’t quit pacing, I’ll handcuff you to the damn table.”

I rolled my eyes at one of my best friend's, Scarlett, as I continued to walk back and forth in front of our booth at a local bar.

“I’m serious,” Scarlett stated, pulling handcuffs out of her purse to prove she meant business.

“Scar, why the hell do you have handcuffs on you right now?” our other girl, Teia, asked.

Scarlett wiggled her eyebrows. “Oh, I met this cute ass chicken wing that I may have to spank later.”

I stopped pacing. “I thought we were over this phase of you calling the men you sleep with chicken wings.”

“And spanking them,” Teia added, scrunching up her nose. “Where the fuck do you even find so many men who liked to be spanked?”

“Oh, I usually find them—”

“It was rhetorical, Scar,” Teia interrupted. “Besides, there is not enough liquor in this place to dissect your love life right now. Tonight, we’re here to ask our girl why she thought it was okay to text us that she was asking the boy who screwed her over in high school to fuck her.”

“Facts,” Scarlett cosigned. “I mean, Porter is fine as hell with his tall, I-

look-too-pretty-to-be-so-dangerous milk chocolate self, but you've been out of town for a while and homeboy is bad news."

"What they said," the last of our close friend group, Rye, stated as she approached with a fresh round of drinks.

"See." Scarlett lifted her eyebrows. "He's not the nice boy you remember hunny."

"Wait, you heard us from the bar?" I asked Rye, glancing around nervously to make sure there was no one there that knew my dad. Unlike the Crownes, the Ravens had a pretty clean image according to the general public.

She laughed. "Sweetie, we all know Scarlett can't whisper for shit, and the bar is kinda dead tonight, so Mike told me I could end my shift early."

Teia laughed. "Girl, please. You would have taken a break to hang with us anyway. And he can't run this place without you. You and Mike might as well both own the bar."

"I know, right?" Rye was beaming as she glanced over at Mike who briefly popped out from his office. "But we like to play like we're still at the bar we worked at in Boystown when he was a disgruntled manager and I was just a girl stuck in a boy's body snapping at his grouchy ass every time he called me a slow bartender and demanded I pick up the pace."

I hugged Rye's shoulders as I thought about that time in her life. Mike wasn't my favorite person, but if she loved him, I guess he was okay. Boystown, Chicago was one of the nation's first official LGBTQ+ neighborhoods. The community had hosted the Chicago Pride Parade since the 1970s and was known for its LGBTQ+ owned businesses and nonstop nightlife. But Rye always had an even bigger purpose for living there.

We'd all been thick as thieves since grammar school, and nothing was more beautiful than watching Rye transition into the woman she was born to be. Boystown wasn't always Black and brown friendly though, so Rye began hosting cultural empowerment mixers in the area and even branched out to teach mixology classes to up-and-coming bartenders.

Although I'd moved away for a while, they kept me in the group messages. Now, those cultural mixers often included Scarlett giving cosmetology advice since she owned one of the best natural hair salons in the city, and Teia giving nutrition advice since she'd gone back to school to become a dietician while working at Pretty Little Flavors cannabis-infused restaurant in the meantime.

Rye was even hosting a prideful Juneteenth mixer at the end of June to spread the love all month where everyone had to dress in costume as their favorite queer celebrity. I already had my outfit picked out that was inspired by Queen Latifah in the movie *Just Wright*.

Now that I was back in Chicago, Rye had already added me as a speaker in the next mixer to discuss my brand, Urban Rose, too. I loved the woman I was, but my entire life, I'd struggled with my fluctuating weight and accepting my body, stretch marks, love handles, and all. None of my friends were surprised when I became a body positive blogger.

The influencer part had been unexpected because I'd never been a fan of social media. Yet, with every podcast and motivational speech I posted, it seemed my followers continued to grow and with that, so did the numerous brands reaching out for me to do paid advertising with them.

One of my favorite items right now was my Swarovski Milenia body chain I was currently wearing over my top. To some, wearing the body chain over my top was a fashion choice they wouldn't have made, but it worked with my style. Plus, as long as I liked it, I didn't give a fuck what anyone else thought.

Although my apartment and storage unit was filled with a host of items that I planned to donate soon, as I did most products or clothing I didn't need that was gifted to me, I'd just received a shipment from Actively Black Athleisure Wear and I was obsessed. My sister, Solange, had put me up on this Black-owned business and when I paired some of the pieces with Savage X Fenty by Rihanna, I damn near switched out my entire wardrobe to wear athleisure wear all the time.

I still had more I wanted to accomplish in life, but in a way, we were all doing what we loved, opting for passion over money and learning that whatever we made was enough ... as long as we were happy.

Except, you're not completely satisfied in all aspects of your life. And I hadn't been for longer than I cared to admit.

"Ugh," Teia groaned. "My friends are either gettin' some or about to get some, and here I am, dickless and depressed, spending every damn day being a hypocrite to my craft while wondering if my hole will ever get as much action as the donuts I keep stuffing my face with."

Scarlett almost spit out her drink, and I finally stopped pacing and fell into the booth, unable to control my laughter.

"Not the donuts, chile," Rye stated, shaking her head and taking the drink

out of Teia's hand, replacing it with a bottle of water. "Let's cut back on your calories where we can since none of us need you bitching about your lifestyle suffering due to lack of dick and too many donuts."

"What about that guy that works with you at Pretty Little Flavors?" I asked.

"Who, Royce? He got back with his girlfriend, and she's the type that would cut a bitch over her man." Teia shivered at the thought. "I don't need that kind of drama in my life."

"Well, I don't think Alanna needs the kind of drama Porter will bring into her life either," Scarlett alluded, putting the attention back on me again. Before Scarlett had come into her own, she'd had it rough with her abusive ex, so I knew my girl just wanted me to be careful out of love. She often said if going through hell and back with him allowed her to help other women that may be in fucked up situations, there was a silver lining in it all.

On the weekends, she even volunteered at Laced, a women's empowerment center that was owned by the Crownes. So Scarlett was in the know about the family more than my other friends.

"I overheard y'all talking about that, too," Rye said. "And I'm not sure Scarlett's use of the word *nice* is ever a word I would have used to describe him. I'm sure what Scar meant was that the streets talk, and your boy, Porter, takes down more men than his dear daddy does these days."

"I know," I admitted, releasing a deep sigh. "The Crownes have always been involved in some ... different kind of work." *Like my family*, I thought, but kept my mouth shut.

When it came to organized crime families, we tried to keep the interworkings of what went down behind closed doors secret from the outside world. Which meant, I went from telling my friends everything growing up, to suddenly needing to play my cards closer to my chest when both of my parents lost their jobs, and my two uncles approached my father about an opportunity to buy three laundromats that had closed down and re-open them to smuggle anything buyers were willing to pay for.

My parents are proud people and they both had worked for the city of Chicago before the 2007 and 2008 financial crises that caused so many to lose their jobs, home, lifestyles, and any security they'd spent their lives building. My life changed overnight, and the odd-end jobs they took couldn't keep our family afloat.

Mom and Dad were hesitant at first, but since my uncles assured them it

would be a small operation, they eventually caved in. Now, the Ravens used those laundromats to clean most of the dirty money that came in and out of the city, and what was once small was larger than anyone had expected.

Deep down, I sensed my friends had a feeling that the Raven laundromat chain, The Rinse Spot, wasn't built with clean money, but they didn't ask and I didn't tell.

"We're not only warning you to be careful because he's a Crowne," Teia claimed. "None of us were raised with silver spoons in our mouths, and we know shit goes down in this city. But, girl, you went away to college and we all stayed local."

"So we saw the change take place in Porter," Scarlett added. "He used to be so carefree and go with the flow, but he's not the same person anymore."

Rye nodded, lowering her voice when she said, "Basically, from the whispers we hear, Porter Crowne went from the bad boy next door to the muthafucking grim reaper, taking the lives of anyone who crossed his father and his family. I'll admit, the Crownes keep this city in check, and I for one appreciate that. But you need to really ask yourself if he's the kind of man you want to be involved with."

I briefly closed my eyes and dropped my head back onto the top of the booth. Nothing they were telling me was anything I didn't already know. In fact, I knew more than they did since my family and his ran in the same circles.

"Listen, I appreciate all of your concern. You're right, I've been away for a while and the Poe I knew is long gone. But I need him."

"For what?" Rye asked.

"Something private," I answered.

Rye threw her hands in the air, turning to Teia. "Can you believe this? She called us daily that time she worried that her gag reflex would stop her from ever sucking dick, but now she wants to keep stuff from us."

I rolled my eyes. "I can suck dick just fine for the record."

"Duh," Teia huffed. "We're the bitches who got those bananas so we could teach you."

Rye mocked like she was wiping a tear away. "Our little baby is all grown up and out here sucking good dick."

All I could do was laugh because yeah, I was pretty good at it.

Not that I was just popping dicks into my mouth.

But when I did, those dudes didn't know what hit them.

“I haven’t seen Porter in a few years since he’s kept to himself a bit,” Scarlett enlightened. “But there’s plenty of dick in this city.”

“He’s who I need,” I stated. “Besides, I’m helping him plan The Blackout Fest anyway, so he owes me.”

Teia snorted. “He would fuck you for free and you know it.”

“Not the point.”

“So he hired you back?” Rye asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, he needs me and I need him.”

My girls shared an apprehensive look before Scarlett told me, “Just tell us what’s going on and we’ll help you find somebody else to fuck.”

“No need,” a deep, make-my-damn-toes-curl kind of voice stated as four men approached our table, coming from the back door instead of the front.

He’s here. And even though I’d just seen him yesterday, the way his light brown eyes were studying me and soaking in the green skirt and white top I was wearing today gave me chills.

I couldn’t help but admire his outfit, too. Dark blue jeans and a white hoodie that had The Rooted Collective logo on it in different shades of brown. Maybe I hadn’t noticed yesterday morning at the meeting, but today he had a freshly cut fade with his waves poppin’ at the top and he’d trimmed his thick beard that was glistening a bit like he’d rubbed some oil in it recently.

Damn, what I’d give to feel that beard rubbing against my inner thighs. I wasn’t aware that I was biting my lower lip and twirling one of my burgundy braids in my hand until his eyes kept dropping to my lips before watching my hands.

“Here they go again,” Guttermouth stated, causing the others to laugh.

I couldn’t even be ashamed that we had an audience witnessing me basically drool all over this man because my friends and his knew I’d wanted Porter for years. The timing had always been off between us though.

“Well, if it isn’t Satan’s little helpers,” Teia spat.

“Quick, cover your face,” Guttermouth prompted, hitting the guys on the shoulder before covering his face. “You can’t look Medusa in the eyes.”

Teia slightly lifted in her seat, ready to pop off at Guttermouth, but Porter’s words made her stop.

“Gino, knock off the teasing,” he warned. “Always getting under Teia’s skin.”

“Gino, huh?” Scarlett stated. “Glad to see you finally stopped using your

stupid ass nickname.”

“You’re just jealous since Guttermouth was always better than Scar,” he spat.

She smacked her lips. “Lies you tell yourself.”

“So are we supposed to call you Hassan and Eddy now?” Rye asked, pointing at Headlock and Big E.

“Teia always called me Hassan,” Headlock stated, licking his lips at her. “But yeah, at The Rooted Collective and my barbershop, most of the kids and folks there call me Hass.”

“Speaking of which,” Porter stated. “Besides Alanna, why have none of you been by my new spot?”

Hmm ... Just hearing him say my name gave me goosebumps. I wonder if he knows how deep his voice got when he said my name? My friends caught the change in his voice though. Porter had asked them a simple question, but they were still eye-fucking him and his friends in appreciation.

I couldn’t help but smile, pinning each of them with an I-told-you-so look when I caught their eye because Porter Crowne was even more fine than he was back in the day. They all looked delicious. Then again, him and his friends never lacked female attention.

They were the boys everyone wanted to fuck back in the day. Then they became the men everyone knew better than to cross. Now, they seemed like a mixture of the two—the boys we once knew and the men forced to grow up too fast and do shit to survive their circumstances.

When I saw Porter a few months ago after over a decade of only seeing him a few brief times here and there, I’d almost tripped over my feet at the fact that the attractive boy I once knew was now a grown ass man dripping with sex appeal.

Guttermouth started squeezing into the section wherever he could after my girls all confirmed that they would check out The Rooted Collective before The Blackout Fest.

“Shit, it’s like a high school reunion in this bitch,” Guttermouth boasted.

“Gino, you ain’t even finish high school,” Scarlett teased.

“Who cares if I got my GED late,” he spat, placing his arm behind Scarlett. “I still remember those three beautiful years of torturing yo’ ass in school.”

Scarlett rolled her eyes while Rye gave Big E a little wave from where he stood trying to hide behind Headlock.

“Hey, Eddy, baby,” Rye crooned. “You know you are too burly to be hiding behind Hassan. Come on out from behind him so I can see you.”

Big E shook his head. “Rye, can you not do this weird shit tonight?”

“It depends,” she teased. “Still pretending you ain’t attracted to me?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it then?” Rye asked.

Big E grunted and looked to Headlock for help.

“Rye, ain’t your man right over there near the bar somewhere?” Headlock asked.

“Exactly,” Big E mumbled. “You’re with Mike.”

“Mike knows I’m a flirt.” Rye’s eyes went back to Big E when Headlock sat down next to Teia. “Now that’s a better view. Still looking nice and ... thick I see.”

“I can’t do this shit tonight,” Big E stated, waving Rye off. “I’ll catch y’all tomorrow.” He dabbed fists with the guys and scowled at Rye, which only made her blow him a good-bye kiss. This was their thing though. Rye flirting with Big E. Big E not-so-secretly crushing on Rye. Rye always in a damn relationship. Big E always trying to figure out where he belonged in her life.

“How have you been, T?” Headlock asked, removing Teia’s water from her hand and taking a big swig. “You’re lookin’ mighty sexy tonight in this red fit.”

Teia’s lashes lowered the way they always did when she was about to flirt her ass off. “Hmm, perhaps if you play your cards right, maybe we—”

“Unh-uh,” Rye interjected, reaching over Teia to place her hands between their faces. “You don’t want to go there again, Teia. Y’all were a trainwreck in high school or did you forget you totaled your car fighting with him?”

Teia shook her head out of her Headlock fog. “Oh shit, you’re right. And this muthafucka still ain’t reimburse me for that expensive ass auto bill.”

“Damn, Rye,” Headlock huffed. “Why are you always cockblocking me?”

“Don’t blame me,” Rye spat, pointing a finger at him. “You’re like a dog sniffing for his bone and you’re only hungry when you sense that Teia is going through a dry spell.”

Teia slapped Rye on the arm.

“Ouch,” Rye yelped, rubbing the spot. “That hurt like hell.”

“As it should,” Teia squabbled. “Tellin’ all my business.”

Guttermouth decided to shoot his shot next while Teia and Rye started bickering. “Scarlett, how about you do me the honor of dancing with me to the next song?”

Scarlett laughed. “Bruh, how many times do I have to remind you that I don’t date white boys?”

“Good thing I’m only half then.”

She shook her head. “Nobody’s dancing, and even if they were, you couldn’t handle me in high school and you damn sho’ can’t now.”

“Says who?” he scoffed.

“Says me, muthafucka. Unless you like to get spanked, we ain’t got shit in common.”

Guttermouth raised a curious eyebrow and sank deeper into the booth. “Did you say spanked?”

“Yeah.” Scarlett lowered her voice, but Rye was right—she couldn’t whisper for shit. “Like with paddles, and whips, and ... other things I have in my possession.”

Guttermouth visibly swallowed, his eyelids lowered. “Oh yeah? You into acrylic paddles or leather ones?”

Scarlett’s eyes sparked with interest. “Both.”

“Then maybe you can show me your collection sometime.” He licked his lips. “Then I’ll show you mine.”

“You’d let me spank you?”

“No doubt,” he said. “As long as you know I’m spanking you back.”

My eyebrows raised in surprise since Guttermouth and Scarlett rarely bonded over anything. At least, they hadn’t when we were younger, but we were all in our early thirties now.

“It’s good to have you home,” Porter muttered, his velvety voice washing over me and gaining my attention ... not that he ever lost it.

“It’s good to be home.”

“You ready to talk?” he asked, nodding to the back of the bar. “I parked out back, but I know Mike has a private room that we could use if you don’t want to talk in my car.”

I looked from the bar to the back door, knowing that all our friends were still focused on us even if they were engrossed in other conversations. In a way, it really did feel like we were fifteen again.

“I don’t know, Poe,” I teased. “My girls think you’re trouble and that I probably should stay as far away from you as I can.”

His eyes dropped to my lips, causing me to suck in a breath. “And what do you think?” he asked.

“I think ...” my voice trailed off when he took a step closer to me, “that you’re trouble.”

It was his scent.

And aura.

And swag.

Hell, everything about him was my type, which meant he was worse than trouble. He had a power over me that I couldn’t explain, and even years apart didn’t diminish that hold.

“You should,” he muttered, before leaning down to my ear.

“Should what?”

“Stay away,” he clarified, the warning in his voice concise and oh so sexy. “I’m even more trouble than I was in high school.”

Doing my best to calm the swarm of beautiful butterflies dancing around in my stomach, I kept my voice level. “You can try to hide the parts of you that you’ve always considered too bad for redemption, but you need to remember something ...”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“That you’ve got to be bad to get into the good kind of trouble.”

And just like back then, I knew he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

Unlike back then, I didn’t give a damn about doing what was best for our families.

three

“Never forget where you’re from or someone will slap you across the back of your head to remind you.”

~Big E~

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO...

PORTER

Growing up in Chicago when your family had too many enemies to keep track of wasn't easy. I didn't want to be at school with a bodyguard, but everybody knew who my father was, and even though most kids wouldn't try anything stupid, some did.

In the sixth grade, I got stabbed a couple times with a fork because my classmate Stacy's father had been killed, and rumor was my dad did it. In seventh grade, Paul and his friends jumped me after school and broke my arm and two ribs. Headlock and Grease found me once they got out of detention and stole a car to drive me to the hospital that day.

By eighth grade, I grew several inches and put on some muscle, so that was the year I started getting a lot of female attention. It felt like I'd become popular overnight, many starting to see the qualities in me like my larger-than-life father.

By freshman year of high school, my dad wasn't taking any chances and I began to notice that my friends never seemed to leave my side and were always around. That's when I found out my closest friends were on my dad's payroll.

Then I noticed that Mr. French and Ms. Deeds didn't seem like your regular teachers, and I pieced together what I could from the stories they would tell the class that they were ex-military. Between the two of them, I had them for most subjects.

By the start of sophomore year, I was being called my dad's twin and the only physical characteristic I had like my mom, Francine, were her light brown eyes. But the truth was, I wasn't like my father either. I may have his height, his stature and broad shoulders, and his smile, but we had plenty of differences.

"Why did you pick me up from school?"

My dad nodded at a few people before he ushered me to get in the back of his custom silver Escalade with the adjusted backseats so that people could sit across from each other instead of behind.

"I was asked to squeeze in a business meeting," he stated, pouring himself a drink and handing me a bottle of water. "He'll be here soon."

I noticed a manila file folder on the seat. "Are you taking the meeting in the car?"

"Yes, it won't take long, and I want you to be here for it."

"Why not take him to one of your nearby offices?"

"He's picking up his daughters," he explained, nodding to my Uncle Jock who was stationed outside of our Escalade.

The moment the man and his daughters came into view, my heart started beating out of my chest at the sight of them ... of *her*.

"Dad, can I go talk to my friends?" one of his daughters asked as soon as the car door opened. Her dad looked hesitant at first, but agreed and had one of his men go with her.

When they got into the SUV, the man greeted me with a nod while the girl's eyes grew wide at the sight of me before she gave me a soft smile.

What is she doing here? I wanted to smile back at her, but I didn't. I couldn't. I'd been with my dad in meetings before and he was always watching my every move.

"Godfrey," my dad addressed.

"Patrón," the man stated, calling my father by the nickname many knew him as. My dad and his siblings all had nicknames after liquor. According to Grandma Duchess, it was necessary to use their nicknames when in public.

Personally, I thought it was kinda BS, at least on my dad's end. A lot of people knew his real name. Before my dad was adopted by the Crownes, he

was a Pierce. Grandpa Pierce used to run the drug streets of Chicago before he died, and my dad took it over as a boy with the guidance of the Crownes.

I guess this life was embedded in my blood, so I'd learned early on not to show any emotion in these meetings, even if it was a simple smile.

"I'll get to the point," Godfrey stated. "I need to know if you're willing to invest in the business we discussed on the phone last week."

"It depends," my dad said. "Are you willing to accept my requests?"

"Your requirements are preposterous," he huffed. "No one would sign a contract like that."

"That's where you're wrong, Godfrey. Many have accepted my terms and come to realize that their business is better off with me backing them."

Godfrey frowned. "I'll bring it up again with the others, but time is of the essence."

"And my time is invaluable."

"You're pulling my leg and making me wait longer than necessary."

"I'm ensuring you and your brothers are worth the investment," Dad amended. "Make no mistake, I don't need you, but you need me. I helped create the pants of this city, while you're still wearing pull-ups."

"You arrogant sonna—"

"Careful, Godfrey," Dad warned. "You don't want to threaten me, especially in front of our kids."

Godfrey gritted his teeth. "I won't tolerate being talked to like this."

"Nor will I."

Godfrey and my dad stared at one another for a few more seconds before my dad told him he'd expect to hear Godfrey's acceptance of his terms by tomorrow.

"I thought I had three more days."

"Now you have one," Dad corrected.

The entire time they were in the SUV, I put all my energy into paying attention to the meeting and ignoring Godfrey's daughter, which was difficult as hell.

"Godfrey and his brothers have a great idea for a reimagined chain of laundromats," Dad told me after Godfrey and his daughter left.

"But you're gonna turn down the investment," I stated, knowing my assessment was true when Dad smiled.

"Porter, this world was challenging me to own my truth the moment I was born. Godfrey hates that a younger man is controlling his fate in this city. But

younger isn't always lesser, just like older isn't always wiser," Dad explained. "There will constantly be someone in this world who will despise you because you're in a better position than they are. An idea may be good, but this family is in the business of investing in people. Not just ideas, products, or companies, but the person or people behind it."

"Godfrey still has a lot to learn," I pointed out. "That's why you won't move forward with him. It's too early to invest without him agreeing to your terms since you'd be putting up the capital."

Dad laughed, glancing at Uncle Jock. "You see, I told his mom he was a smart one."

"A little Patrón in the making," Uncle Jock added, playfully knocking me in the shoulder.

I laughed along with them, but deep down, I was worried that learning these things about my dad's business didn't come naturally and I had to focus on responding how he would expect me to way more than I should.

"I meant to ask," Dad said when we were halfway home. "Do you know Godfrey's daughter?"

"A little," I lied. "I only see her in one of my classes."

"Keep it that way," my dad warned. "As you know, her father and uncles are trying to find their path in the city and making too many mistakes to count along the way. I'm turning down their proposal, and I'll be damned if the Crownes are brought into their mess. You may see her at school, but you stay far away from that girl, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

He and Uncle Jock shared a knowing look, and I prayed to God it wasn't about me, but deep down, I knew it was.

"I mean it, Porter," he reiterated. "Keep away from her, her sister, or any of her friends. Right now, they aren't associates of the Crownes."

"They are an enemy?" I asked.

"Worse," he explained. "Part of why we aren't doing business with them is because they aren't stating their allegiance, so we don't know where they stand. My request is that investing in their business means an alliance with the Crownes, and as you saw, Godfrey and his family are against that."

Shit. Not signing one of my dad's contracts was one thing. But not aligning with him was something else entirely.

"I'll have your Uncle Jock gather a list of the Raven kids that I need you to avoid, but Godfrey and Malinda's daughters are at the top of the list,

understood?”

I nodded. “Understood.”

He smiled with pride. “That’s my boy.”

I was staying with my dad this week instead of my mom, so when we got home, I didn’t release the breath I’d been holding until I had closed the door of my bedroom.

When Pharaoh Crowne said something, everyone in Chicago listened. It had been that way my entire life. My dad and my aunts and uncles hadn’t had an easy life and there were a lot of secrets that my grandparents, Duchess and Stan, still kept from the family. Yet, no one defied my father, so if he said something, you respected his wishes, no questions asked.

The ring of my flip phone broke me out of my trance.

“Hello?”

“Porter, that was intense, right?”

I closed my eyes at the sound of her voice. “Are you still with your dad?”

“He’s in the gas station with my sister,” she said. “Your dad pissed him off more than I’ve ever seen him get pissed before.”

“They hate each other.”

She laughed. “Obviously.”

“We shouldn’t be talking right now.”

“I know, but I wanted to tell you how nice you looked today in your new fit and Jordans.”

I smiled into the phone and told her that I’d liked the outfit she wore today, too. A blue, flowy dress that moved whenever she did, just like her wavy, dark brown hair. She’d even worn blue glasses today to match and all I’d wanted to do during school was pull her into the locker room and fog those things up.

As she continued talking about as many subjects as she could fit in before her dad returned to the car, I just listened to her voice, trying my best to ignore my father’s warning.

“And I can’t wait for you to see my dress for the dance next week,” she stated, reminding me of why I’d finally found the balls to ask her out in the first place.

I was too chicken shit to tell her on the phone, but at school tomorrow, I’d break the news that I had to give her up. Girls had been after me for years and I dated plenty. She was who I wanted though. *My first official girlfriend and it lasted less than a week.*

I was a Crowne, and every decision I made had to be what was best for my family. So tomorrow, I'd break up with Alanna Raven, the girl my father told me to stay away from.

And I'd hate every second of it.

four

“Love is universal. Everyone deserves the right to explore their deepest desires.”

~Rye~

BACK TO PRESENT...

ALANNA

“You think I’m the good kind of trouble, huh?” Poe asked as his eyes held mine, so intense, my words caught in my throat.

“I do,” I admitted. “But I should know better.”

His eyes wandered to my lips before Guttermouth and Teia's voices stole our attention as they argued about something else.

Porter led me away from the table where our friends sat, his mouth still close to my ear. “You’ve always been too pure for a muthafucka like me.”

I exhaled when I felt Poe’s lips tease my earlobe. “You and I both know that’s never mattered to me before.”

“Do you renege on what you offered me yesterday?”

“My pussy on a truce platter as you so eloquently put it,” I teased. “No, the offer still stands.”

“Then we’re going to my truck,” he stated, running a finger down the exposed part of my arm. “My time with you starts now.”

My lips slightly parted in surprise. “I thought you wanted the details first.”

“Nah.” He inhaled against my neck before placing a soft kiss there. “My

tongue is aching with curiosity to see if your pussy tastes as sweet as I've always imagined." His eyes dropped to my mouth before he ran a thumb over my bottom lip. "I want your panties off, legs up, and this sexy ass mouth begging me to suck her dry."

Holy sh— "I see."

"Then I want you riding my face." He kissed the other side of my neck.

"Mhmm."

"If my beard doesn't smell like you after you come, you don't leave my car until it does."

It took all my energy not to check my pulse and see if I was breathing.

"Okay," I squeaked, that one defining word breathless and throaty.

I hoped to God that I didn't skip to the back door, but judging from our friends hushed tones as we walked away, I was sure even if I didn't skip, I probably looked like I wanted to.

I welcomed the slight chill of the unusually cool June night as the breeze slightly lifted my skirt, cooling me off. And damned if I didn't need to fan my pussy right now because she was entirely too wet and excited to spend time with Porter in his car. *What am I, sixteen?*

I used to say it's hard to resist a bad boy that's a good man. But what about a redeemed executioner that's trying to leave his mark on the city? Why was that so irresistible to me?

He didn't have to tell me what he did. I knew. I'd known the moment he first got promoted to his dad's second in command.

To me, it didn't matter how many people thought Porter was all bad. Deep down, I knew there was a good man beneath his tough exterior.

In eighth grade, I'd seen it in the way he used to slip lunch money to a few of the kids in school who couldn't afford to purchase cafeteria food, but never had a home brought lunch either.

Freshman year, he helped a couple boys who had just moved to Chicago and were in a terrible foster home make the basketball team so that they could spend less time with their abusive foster parents.

Sophomore year, he got some upper classmen to stop picking on some incoming freshman who weren't big enough to fight their own battles.

I wasn't naïve enough to ignore the fact that his hands were bloodied with shit he'd done over the years and crimes he'd committed. But at Porter's core, he was a good guy no matter how much he tried to hide it.

I saw it.

I'd always seen it.

And others did, too ... otherwise he wouldn't be Mr. Black right now and I wouldn't be helping him plan The Blackout Fest. Chicago wasn't for the weak and to continue to uplift our community and change the circumstances of many, this city needed people who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

People like Porter, who could put on a suit in the day to negotiate terms with the enemy, but slice the enemy's throat at night if they went against those terms.

It seemed like time slowed as we walked to his car that was parked in the alley, not the parking lot as I suspected.

Reaching back, he grabbed my hand in his and led me to his charcoal GMC Hummer EV that I recognized from The Rooted Collective. I slightly tensed when I noticed the guy standing behind his truck before we even got within a few feet of it.

"You're good," Porter comforted, squeezing my hand.

Porter whispered something to the man and slipped him some money before nodding for him to leave.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"That I don't need him watching my truck right now," he answered, reminding me who he was. "I had the truck recently customized, so it's one of a kind and more spacious than others even if they are the same model, so I need someone watching it in areas I don't frequent as much these days."

He held open the door so I could slide into the leather backseat. "Then I told his ass to make himself scarce for the next hour."

An hour ... I licked my lips as my mind wandered to everything we could do in an hour.

Porter briefly took out his phone before glancing down the alley. Knowing him, there were probably one or two other men nearby watching his back since his friends were still inside of the bar with mine.

I even noticed my dad's security popping up periodically in places I frequented ever since I returned to Chicago. It took some getting used to again, but I had learned to ignore them.

You couldn't ignore Porter though. I tried to push him out of my mind when I first got back, but when Ms. Patty asked me to assist with The Blackout Fest, I hadn't been able to pass up the opportunity to see him again. Tease him again. My mind too curious to see if he still had a hold on my body like he had all those years ago.

He did ...

“I don’t know why I’m so nervous,” I admitted, chastising myself for saying my inner thoughts out loud as I angled my body in the seat so that I was facing him. “We can drive somewhere if you changed your mind about talking.”

Porter didn’t respond as he pressed a button on the car remote and started the truck, his Spotify playlist automatically connecting to the speakers. I couldn’t keep my eyes off his thumbs as he scrolled through a playlist until he stopped on a song that made my toes curl at the first cords.

“They Don’t Know” by Jon B.

My lips curled to the side in a smile as a memory came to mind, and judging by the expression on Porter’s face, he was remembering the same thing.

“Watching you sway to this song during the dance that I was supposed to take you to when we were kids and not even being able to pull you to me for a dance was torture for me.”

“Me too,” I confessed, the memory of the loneliness I felt that night fresh as if it happened yesterday. “I’d really been looking forward to that dance, you have no idea.”

“I did,” he stated. “Because there was nothing more that I wanted to do than hold you close. Claim you as mine in front of everybody.”

I scooted closer at the same time he did. “Secretly, I was ecstatic that you chose not to dance with anyone else that night.”

He gently lifted his right hand and cupped the bottom of my chin. “I couldn’t entertain dancing with another girl when the only one who ever invaded my thoughts was right across the room.” His eyes dropped to my lips. “If I’d had the balls to give my father a piece of my mind back then, I would have listened to the lyrics of this song and not given a damn what anyone thought about us being together.”

My breath caught in my throat at the way his light brown eyes were studying mine, the protective veil he usually wore lowered so that I could see his vulnerability.

Although I’d followed him to his truck knowing damn well what would happen, I wasn’t prepared for the intense pleasure I felt during those first couple seconds where his lips brushed against mine in a gentle caress before he pushed my chin up to lift my head more, his lips hard and demanding within seconds.

“Hmm,” I moaned, loving the unbridled roughness of his lips as we connected for the first time in years. And when our tongues finally united?

Fucking epic.

That’s the only way I could describe it even if it wasn’t poetic at all. We’d kissed in the past, but it wasn’t shit like this. All-consuming and desperate, like we couldn’t get enough of each other.

He tasted like mint and something sweet that I couldn’t place but was addicted to. I needed more of it. More of him.

Sensing my urgency, Porter was already helping me straddle his lap before I was even lifting myself off the seat. The windows were tinted, but I wouldn’t give a damn even if they weren’t. Hell, he could have a camera set up in his truck right now and I’d probably wave into that thing and resume focusing my attention on him.

His big hands went from my waist to my wide hips, his fingers sliding beneath my skirt and up my thighs as I began rotating over the growing tent in his jeans, my pussy clenching as if there wasn’t any fabric between us.

“Fuck,” he spat into the kiss when he discovered that I was soaked through my delicate panties.

I wanted to unzip his jeans and continue with our frenzied movements, but Porter caused me to squeal when he wrapped an arm around me while laying me down on my back, his eyes sharp and his gaze intense as he did so.

“Tell me something,” he muttered as his fingers hotly trailed up my inner thighs again. “Yesterday, did you wear thin ass lace bikini panties like these because you knew I wouldn’t be able to keep my eyes off of your ass as it jiggled in your dress every time you walked?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I wanted to distract you in the planning meeting.”

My breathing was erratic as I watched him watching me.

“You weren’t just giving me a show though.” He played with the end of one of my braids. “When you called yourself whipping all of us into shape by presenting how we would tackle all the shit we still had to do this week for the fest, you made sure you moved your hips with each word. Turning your back to the dry erase board as you wrote in a frenzy, forcing me to swallow my groans.”

“You always have been an ass guy,” I teased.

“Your ass in particular,” he whispered, squeezing both my cheeks to prove his point. “Mr. Everett and Old Man Fred couldn’t even hide their excitement at watching you.”

I shrugged as best I could with him looming over me. “Worth it for your reaction.”

“What about last week?” he asked, slipping his hand into my panties and cupping my entire pussy. “When you wore those tight ass jeans to that alumni step show at UIC that Teia took you to?”

I knew he'd been there, even though I hadn't spotted him. “I wore those jeans hoping you'd see how good my ass looked.”

“You wore them before for me,” he murmured, placing a brief kiss on my lips. “Last month, the day after I fired you from the committee when you went to that candle making class first, then you changed and met Scarlett and Rye for pole dancing.” His breath was warm against my ear. “Why did you torture me that day?”

“Why did you follow me that day?”

“You know why,” he spat, his thumb grazing my clit and causing me to slightly arch my back, bringing our faces closer together.

I rapidly blinked a few times, my glasses fogging up from the tiny, heated gasps that kept escaping my mouth, intermingling with his breath.

“You've always known it,” he said. “Sensed it. Savored the fact that no matter how hard I tried, I could never keep my eyes off you.” He locked me with a serious gaze that caused my gasp to catch in my throat before he added, “Even when you lived in New York, I couldn't stop myself.”

“You mean California,” I corrected, reminding him that I'd gone to college on the West Coast. He didn't shake his head or correct me, but his response was in his eyes, silently telling me that he hadn't confused the location.

My eyes widened in surprise at the revelation that, “You really were watching me in New York, weren't you? That time I felt you in the farmer's market when I first moved there. And that time I took that ferry to Martha's Vineyard for that film festival and that older woman gave me her scarf because I was cold. I thanked her, but she told me someone else deserved the thanks, then she left. Was it you? Did you give her that scarf or pay her to give it to me?”

He still didn't say anything, letting me work through my thoughts.

“When I rented that quaint loft that I designed for my vlogs,” I continued. “You were the person I always felt watching me from across the street.”

There were other times that I'd sensed him in the area watching me ... observing me. A glimpse here and there of someone who looked like him, my

mind convinced that I had to be day-dreaming. But during the time I lived in New York, I hadn't told any of my friends or my family that I was living there, except for my sister, Solange. I let them think I was still in Cali as I made new friends and discovered myself, with only an occasional social media follower assuming I was on vacation when they spotted me.

"I thought Solange told my father and he put security detail on me to keep me safe since he hated us not having protection," I divulged. "I didn't know SoSo told you instead."

"As you know, I'm good friends with your sister," he said, finally speaking as his hands remained on my wetness like a welcome embrace. "But Solange ain't tell me shit."

I yelped again when he gripped each side of my panties, ripping them in half, his eyes flickering with appreciation as he stared at my pussy before lifting his head to my face again.

"Now is the time you should be nervous," he warned, leaning down to sniff my aroma, my eyes wide as I watched his every movement. I wasn't nervous, though, not in the least.

I wasn't anxious when he reached behind me and pulled a lever that sunk the backseat into an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree angle, giving me a new appreciation for the customizations of his truck.

And I definitely wasn't uneasy when he lowered his tall and sexy ass into a position that didn't seem comfortable for him, but placed his head directly in between my legs.

With my skirt still gripped around my waist, I dropped back my knees as much as I could, not prepared for the onslaught of pleasure I felt with the first swipe of his long, hot tongue.

"Oh fuck," I huffed, almost wanting to cover my face with my hands at how great it felt, but not wanting to miss any part of this experience.

It didn't take long before I was moving my hips to meet his strokes, the fact that I was letting him eat me out in his car parked in an alley making me feel like we were young again and that so many years hadn't passed between us.

"Tell me the details," he muttered against my pussy lips.

"Now?" I asked, my voice breathless as he licked up and down my labia, my hands pushing against the door to brace myself.

"Why do you want me to fuck you?" he asked, his masterful tongue destroying me in a slow burn when he worked my clit next.

Lick.

Suck.

Nibble.

Bite.

“I’ve wanted you to fuck me since I found out what fucking was,” I answered, hoping he stopped asking me shit so I wouldn’t have to formulate anymore thoughts right now.

“I’ve been tracking your movements since you got back to town,” he confessed.

“I kinda figured that,” I muttered, briefly closing my eyes when he increased the movements of his tongue. *Wait ... Does he mean—*

“You know about the one-year fellowship with Black Lush, don’t you? You know it’s why I came home? To work for a sexually liberated empire and spread the body positive narrative.”

“I do and I get it. You’re a body positive influencer and Black Lush is the number one business in the nation for adult entertainment.” His light eyes darkened to a strikingly deep brown. “But I know what the hell goes down at the Black Lush sex clubs, and if you offered me your body to tease your curiosity before you give it up to another bastard, you must not know who the fuck I am.”

I swallowed back my desire, turned on by his warning. “You can’t tell me what to do or who to sleep with.”

He stopped teasing me with his tongue.

“Hell no, finish what you started,” I demanded, pushing his head back down.

“Not until you admit you won’t let another muthafucka touch you.”

I gave a slight shrug. “I plan on taking advantage of the entire Black Lush experience.”

“The fuck you will,” he spat. “I shouldn’t even tell you this, but given the circumstances, I think my family will understand.”

“Tell me what?” I asked, forcing myself not to try and push his head down again.

“Black Lush is owned by the Crownes,” he revealed, finally lowering his head again, briefly rolling his tongue over my clit.

Fuck. I did a mental rolodex of everything I read in my onboarding packet, but nowhere in that information did it state anything about the Crownes. It made sense though. When it came to the Crownes, they had their

hands in everything in the city.

Porter grinned against my pussy. “Oh, you didn’t know that, huh, dollface?”

“Don’t call me that shit,” I huffed.

“Promise me you won’t fuck anyone but me during your fellowship.” To drive his point home, his tongue deep dove into my pussy causing my moan to echo throughout the vehicle.

I promise, I thought, but instead, the words out of my mouth where, “Give me a reason to obey you.”

That grin he’d been wearing turned lethal and dangerous, right before he removed his hoodie and wrapped his arms around each thigh, keeping me in place, repeating the pleasure he’d just bestowed upon me.

Lick.

Suck.

Nibble.

Bite.

I rode my body upwards into his mouth with pure unrestrained desire, my hands gripping his head to take what the fuck I wanted from his mouth. His tongue unhinged every part of my pussy, and before I knew it, I was letting myself fully go, embracing the orgasm that snuck on me quickly since I was wound tight after he’d done so much teasing.

When he lifted his face, glistening from my juices, I leaned up and cupped his face, sniffing his beard to make sure it smelled like me like he wanted. The gleam in his eyes when I met his gaze again was even rawer than it had been before.

We both began removing our clothes without even voicing a word, elbows hitting headrests and feet knocking doors. It was frenzied and not graceful, but filled with an urgency I felt in the pit of my soul.

Porter reached to the front seat and opened his glove compartment.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Guttermouth always got jokes and put these flavored condoms in here in place of the Magnums I had.”

“I think they will do.”

“You sure?” he asked.

I nodded. “I’m clean and on birth control.”

“And I’ve been celibate for a while,” he divulged, shocking the hell out of

me. “And I’m clean, too.”

I was sure my Chuck E Cheese grin was anything but sexy, but all smiles were washed from my face as I watched Porter remove his boxers and T-shirt, his final pieces of clothing, and squeeze that flavored condom over his thick and long dick.

I widened my legs and hooked my right foot over the front seat, not giving a damn how crazy I looked.

“Fuck,” he grunted, running a finger from each side of my breasts and down my stomach until he reached my pussy. “You just offering it all to me, huh?”

“Take whatever you want,” I prompted as he slowly lowered himself. I expected him to ease into me gradually, but I was learning to expect the unexpected when it came to Porter Crowne because nothing was gentle about the way he buried his dick inside of my pussy, filling me to my core.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, pleasantly surprised by how easily I took him, proof that I was extremely wet.

“I told you to be careful around me,” he stated, pumping in and out of my pussy with precision.

“I didn’t listen.”

“You sho’ the fuck didn’t.” Placing his hands under my ass, he lifted me to get a better angle, bringing him even deeper. “When you partnered with me in grammar school, I cautioned you. When you tutored me in high school, I warned you. When you moved back to Chicago a few months ago, I tried to keep my distance in public.”

“I’ve always known you were there,” I confessed. “Making sure I was safe. Making sure no one fucked with me, my sister, or my friends. You’ve always had my back and been my protector. Even when you tried to push me away, I knew you still liked me.”

“Nah, baby, you got this shit twisted,” he grunted, his eyes looking beautifully tortured with each stroke. “Like is what you get from your thousands of social media followers. Like is what you have for a coworker that makes your day go by faster. The emotions we feel have always been stronger than like.”

Slow stroke in. Slow stroke out. Slow stroke in.

Pause.

“You ruined me for other women the moment you smiled at me like I wasn’t a lost boy, but instead, was a fucking king.” *Fast stroke in. Fast stroke*

out. Fast stroke in. “You destroyed me the first time you finally let me kiss you like I’d been dying to do for years.” *Fast stroke in. Fast stroke out.* “But you wrecked my entire soul when I had to give you up and you settled for friendship with me because you knew I couldn’t live without you in my life.”

Slow stroke in.

Pause.

“I don’t just like you, Lani. I’m fucking *obsessed* with you.”

And he’s never letting me go again. The truth and ferocity in his eyes would have had some women reaching for the handle of the truck and getting out of the vehicle as fast as they could.

Yet, I knew my ass wasn’t going anywhere. He didn’t even know how special this moment with him was yet, but I needed him in my life. *Not just now*, my inner voice noted, *but for always.*

Honestly, I couldn’t even remember a time in my life when Porter “Poe” Crowne wasn’t consuming every thought of mine. In so many ways, it had never been *what if* we end up together, but *when we* got together and there had never been a doubt we would bring fireworks.

Like now.

As my pussy clenched around his dick with my orgasm threatening to rip through my entire body unapologetically, I kept silent those three words that I desperately wanted to say.

And when we both succumbed to the pleasure and climaxed in a way that was years in the making, I knew in my heart that he felt the exact same way.

five

“Your comfort zone is a trap to keep you stagnant in life. Never be ruled by fear. Step into your power and own that shit. No bitching allowed.”

~Headlock~

PORTER

I HADN'T MEANT for all that stuff to go down in the backseat of my truck, but I couldn't have waited any longer to touch Alanna if I'd tried.

The week had flown by, and it was hard to believe that The Blackout Fest was finally here. Alanna had been right. After that night in my truck, we'd sat down the next day and worked through my final touches for The Blackout Fest. I'd even told her the goal myself, Titan, Preston, Nero, and Dante had to honor our forefathers and educate our communities about Juneteenth ... the history that hadn't made many books.

We'd been short on time after Alanna convinced me to hire back everyone I had fired, but Alanna had taken my final to-do list and broken it up amongst the committee and volunteers according to everyone's individual strengths. The other businesses in Bronzeville were also warming up to me a bit. I didn't expect to win everyone over overnight, but taking Alanna's advice, I'd hosted a pre-party last night at The Rooted Collective and invited the entire neighborhood, all the volunteers, and the local Chicago Mr. Black chapter to publicly apologize for being an asshole and give everyone a good laugh by finally putting that toilet tissue with my face on it in the bathrooms.

The surprise of the night had been when I honored Mr. Everett and his crew for the being the OGs who started the Juneteenth tradition years ago

when many in the community didn't even know what Juneteenth was, but wanted an excuse to party.

Even Old Man Fred got up to speak, sharing his testimony of what it's like to have lived to see Harold Washington as the 51st Mayor of Chicago from 1983 to 1987, then to witness Barack Obama lead our nation as the 44th President of the United States from 2009 to 2017. Both the first Black Americans elected into their roles.

"Chicago is one city. We shall work as one people for our common good and common goals," Old Man Fred stated, quoting Harold Washington.

I wish I'd been alive to see Harold Washington lead this city. In so many ways, Barack Obama was able to become president by standing on the shoulders of Harold Washington and other Black leaders who helped progress our community.

"Let me tell you something. I'm from Chicago. I don't break," Mr. Everett voiced afterwards, quoting Barack Obama. "We don't ask you to believe in our ability to bring change, but rather, we ask you to believe in yours," he added.

Hearing Mr. Everett quote Barack Obama hit me square in the chest. To win Mr. Black, nominees were chosen based off their community work, activism, education, humanitarian work, philanthropy, advocacy and more. Every major US city had Mr. Black nominations to select their representative for their chapter and winning the Chicago vote last year meant that I had four years to evoke as much change as I could.

I believe I'm going to die doing the things I was born to do, I thought, thinking about the words of Fred Hampton, a former deputy chairman of the national Black Panther Party and chair of the Illinois chapter who was assassinated at twenty-one. I believe I'm going to die high off the people. I believe I'm going to die a revolutionary in the international revolutionary proletarian struggle.

I wasn't a mayor or a president or an activist, but I have always been ready to die for my family ... my city ... my people.

Taking our Mr. Black initiative to ensure Black history and culture was celebrated in every city one step further, this morning, I'd invited all the kids in the Bronzeville area, the west and south side of Chicago, and basically anybody who wanted to come to join me for a Q&A with educational pillars in the Chicago community who could speak to why it was important for us as a race not to forget where we came from and shed light on the parts of our

history society didn't want us to know.

With Ms. Patty being a former English teacher, she spoke about Ida B. Wells who was a journalist, activist, and one of the founders of NAACP—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—and how influential the power of words could be.

“Ida B wells said that our race is more sinned against than sinning and we must not forget that. We each have a voice and we best use it wisely.”

At the end, the entire crowd seemed to understand that Juneteenth is about more than just the history behind the day, but rather, a chance for us for come together to celebrate *freedom* and those who fought and continue to fight every day for that freedom.

Both pre-events had been much more powerful than I'd ever imagined, prompting me to take selfies of myself and the audiences that fit into the main gymnasium at The Rooted Collective, texting those selfies to my Mr. Black brothers.

And now, the fest was finally here. The weather was hot with a whopping seventy-five degrees, which was perfect for Chicago. The music was thumping and one of my favorites, “Candy” by Cameo, was currently banging through the speakers. The food was flowing with several food trucks present: Pretty Little Flavors that was owned by Vanessa Blackmore, Smokey's Burgers that was owned by Smokey Robinson Jones, and Some Like It Sweet milkshake and dessert truck that was owned by Kinny Blossom.

I'd even gotten my guy, Grey, the owner of Brewed Awakening Bakery and Café, to open a pop-up shop with coffees all named after Black icons throughout history.

Although the fest had only kicked off two hours ago, the entire Black Row block was already swarming with people.

“I stand corrected,” Mr. Everett stated, clasping me on my shoulder as he approached where I stood in the window of The Rooted Collective that overlooked the entire block. “Your vision for Juneteenth ain't so bad after all. Me and the others were used to having the event in the church every year, but having the fest on Black Row is powerful.”

I smiled at the compliment as I observed everyone in attendance. “Thanks, Mr. E. That means more to me than you realize.”

As we'd requested, everyone was wearing all black. The vendors, the people, and even the dogs and other pets that attendees brought to The

Blackout Fest. It was a vision I'd had ever since I was in high school and got invited to my first all-white party. At the time, I had no idea that my life would consist of getting invited to at least three all-white parties every year.

Researching the history of them, there were many races that held all-white parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet, most Black folks didn't hop on the trend until Hip Hop Icon, Sean "Diddy" Combs, threw his legendary all-white party in the early 2000s.

I wasn't knocking the all-white trend and I definitely wasn't shittin' on Diddy because I looked damn good in all white. But I have always felt like as a race, we needed to incorporate more all-black and shades of melanin themed parties into our event spaces.

My eyes wandered to the booth that Alanna was broadcasting live from for her platform, Urban Rose. Of course she was wearing her sexiest black maxi dress, which I almost told her to change several times, but we were both wearing matching black Jordans, just like we were supposed to do back in high school when I was taking her to that dance.

"I hope you've figured out what you're gonna do to keep that one," Mr. Everett stated.

"I'm working on it," I told him, unable to keep from grinning. "She's pretty damn special."

"She is," he said. "Do you plan to lock her down soon and keep her in Chicago?"

The clearing of a voice caught my attention, but even without looking behind me, I knew who it was. I'd felt that presence my entire life. *What's he doing here?*

"Most of the fam is coming in the evening," I told him. "That's when we'll have a lot of entertainment. And you know your kids, we're late for everything."

Mr. Everett greeted my dad before looking between us and excusing himself. *Come on, Porter, get ahold of yourself.*

I loved my dad. I really did. But there wasn't a time when being around him didn't make me nervous, especially since I'd left the hit squad and was now running The Rooted Collective.

"Great turnout," he stated, walking to me and pulling me in for a hug. He'd always been affectionate, but I noticed he'd been even more attentive since we saw less of each other. "I'm not surprised though. When you put your mind to something, there's nothing you can't achieve."

I smiled. "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that."

He stood by me as I looked back out of the window of my office, our stances mirroring each other.

"Were you gonna tell me you were dating Alanna Raven?" he asked, following my eyes down to her booth.

"Not really. We're adults and it doesn't matter if our fathers don't get along."

"Are you good though?"

"I'm good. You've got a lot of shit on your plate with the family, so you don't have to worry about me."

Dad lowered his head to the floor, and when he looked my way, I saw the hurt in his eyes. "Porter, you are my son. My firstborn. There will never be a time in your life when I don't worry about you."

I winced, thinking about how my words probably sounded. "Sorry, Dad, I didn't mean it like that. You've always been a great father, and I never worry that you don't have my back." I took a deep breath, debating on saying more and opting to go for broke.

"But I've never felt like you truly understood me."

"I do."

"Not all the way," I corrected. "You could run the streets of Chicago with your eyes closed, separating friend from foe and ally from enemy. All my life, everyone told me that everything of yours would be mine one day, but I've always known I wasn't meant for *your* life."

"And I never wanted you to feel forced to do anything you didn't want to do," he stated. "Porter, why do you think I let you leave the streets so many times? I know my kids. I know who was meant for this life, and who—"

"Isn't," I answered for him.

"No, I was going to say I know who was meant for something different ... better ... something perfect for them."

My eyes widened in surprise at his words. "You mean that?"

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Poe, my kids who are in the field working for me ... for the Crowne legacy ... I don't have y'all out there blind. Every time you and your squad went on a mission, I had a backup crew following you just in case. Usually, it was your uncles and their men. Either Jock or Jackie D. You were never out there alone, and if you remember, I never even wanted you to be there when we caught up with Grease."

"I felt like it had to be me though," I explained. "He was my friend. I was

the reason he was close to the family. I'm good with a pistol. I knew I could do it."

"I wasn't worried about your aim," he said. "I was concerned about the toll it takes on your state of mind when forced to kill a friend. A person you trusted with your life. I've been there before and the shit ain't easy. If you're not right here," he pointed to my heart, "then you're not right here." He pointed to my mind.

"I may have built an empire, but it was to provide my kids with opportunities that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't been adopted by Duchess and Stan. I fight daily for y'all and for your futures. And for my grandkids. I've got twelve kids, Poe. I expect one of you or your offspring to be a muthafuckin' president one day."

I laughed, shaking my head as my eyes ventured back to Alanna, prompting me to tell my dad, "I'm not giving her up this time."

"And I'm not asking you to. I just would have liked to have found out that you were dating Alanna through you and not through Godfrey during a meeting."

"We haven't officially discussed anything. But you remember how it went last time you suspected I was dating her."

Dad nodded. "I remember. But as you recall, the Ravens weren't in an allegiance with the Crownes like they are now."

"But you still hate Godfrey."

"Shiddd, that's because he's a hard man to like," he claimed, causing me to laugh.

"I've gotten to know him over the years, and you both are a lot alike."

Dad frowned. "I resent that, but I guess we've found commonality over the years, and I thought with the positive direction your life has taken lately, you might want to tell me some of the good things since you know better than most how much I'm surrounded by the bad."

I studied my dad, noting the slight bags underneath his eyes and extra grey hairs that had popped up in his beard and dreads since the last time I saw him. And not just when I popped up for Sunday dinner. It had been a minute since I actually took the time to truly observe him.

As a boy, it felt like my dad would never get old. He was my Superman, never to age and always there to scare away the bad guys. He was only forty-seven now and still looked intimidating and prominent, but it was in this moment that I realized that while I'd been trying to find my way all these

years, I never stopped to think about how much stress my dad was under in his position. He'd even mentioned retiring early and passing down the torch more times lately than ever before, and I owed it to him to give some insight as to why I found it hard talking to him these past five years.

"I'm sorry," I said, those two words full of so much meaning for me. "I've been distant because I feel guilty."

"About what?"

"I'm the oldest and you were grooming me to take over. Me stepping down means you are forced to wait to see which other kid will step up out of my younger siblings, and for wasting your time, I'm truly sorry."

His eyes softened as he clasped me on my shoulder. "Poe, I don't regret any time we've spent together, and I don't want you to think for one second that I'm not proud of the man you've become. Working to rehabilitate this block and create Black Row. Opening The Rooted Collective. Being named Mr. Black Chicago. Porter, you are thriving and there is nothing a parent loves to see more than their child happy ... truly happy."

This time, it was me who pulled my dad into a hug, caught off guard by the emotions swimming through my body upon having a conversation with my father that I should have had years ago.

"I love you, Porter," he said. "Never forget that shit."

"I won't and I love you, too."

Dad cleared his throat and adjusted the collar of his shirt. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, I'll repeat the question Everett asked you when I showed up." He looked back out the window at Alanna's booth before turning back to me. "Did you finally hit that?"

I boastfully laughed into the air, gripping my stomach. "That is not what the hell Mr. E asked me and that's your future daughter-in-law you're talkin' about."

"I was just fuckin' with you."

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, "And why do you assume I didn't sleep with her in high school?"

He laughed, shaking his head. "A father can tell these things, and any suspicion I had, you confirmed when yo' ass kept flying to New York."

I ran a hand down my face. You knew that too, huh?"

"Godfrey was just glad the secret detail he had tracking Alanna's moves didn't need to make their presence known because you were waiting in the shadows, never letting her out of your sight."

I shook my head, not believing my ears. “I can’t believe you both knew about that shit and didn’t say anything to me.”

He shrugged. “When Amari gets older, you’ll understand why a parent keeps certain things from their kids. Y’all want to be grown, and we want you to spread your wings. You’ve loved her since you were a kid. Godfrey and I finally talked about it once we partnered.”

“I do love her,” I admitted.

“I know.”

“And I think she loves me.”

“She does.”

“And you’re fine with being in-laws with the Ravens?”

He grunted and cracked his neck. “I can tolerate it.”

Deep down, I always knew I’d never let another muthafucka take what was mine, and my dad knew it, too. Alanna Raven had always belonged to me before she even wrapped her head around the idea.

“I should get back,” I mentioned, watching the crowd pick up even more.

“I think I’ll hang out in your office for a bit,” he said, his eyes shining with pride when he looked at me.

I was several feet away before I double-backed and hugged him tightly again. Thanks to Grandpa Stan, all the Crowne men were huggers.

We may kill muthafuckas when needed, but we were also in touch with our feelings. The best way to be according to him.

“Happy Juneteenth, Dad,” I muttered. “No matter how old I get, you’ll always be my hero. Thanks for showing your kids that a Black father could provide for his family, stand strong in his convictions, yet still be vulnerable and allow his heart to love.”

I walked away before he said anything, but didn’t miss the emotion in his voice when he said I was one of the good ones.

“The best things in life are sometimes against the rules. When you break the rules and find your freedom, that's when you can truly live.”

~Alanna "Lani" Raven~

ALANNA

“LANI, aren’t you live right now on IG for The Blackout Fest?” my sister, Solange, asked after she answered my FaceTime call. My sister and I both traveled so much for work that we FaceTimed all the time no matter where we were at.

“I had Rye log into my account and do a takeover to plug her next mixer,” I explained, ducking into the only empty room I could find on the first floor of The Rooted Collective.

“Oh shit,” Solange huffed. “What happened?”

I frowned. “Now, SoSo, why do you assume something happened? Can’t I just be calling my baby sister to check in on her and see how *she’s* doing?”

Solange rolled her eyes. “Come on, sis, spit it out so you can get back to work.”

I glanced behind me at the cracked door before deciding to close it completely for more privacy.

“Okay, so I fucked up.”

“I’m listening,” she stated, briefly placing the phone down to fidget with something I couldn’t make out, multi-tasking as we spoke.

“And I guess I misspoke, because I didn’t really fuck up, but instead I got ___”

“Oh crap!” Solange exclaimed, picking her phone back up. “You fucked Poe!”

I slightly cringed as I glanced around the empty room, grateful I’d closed the door.

“I did,” I admitted, unable to help the grin from spreading across my face. “And our first time together in the car was mind blowing. Like, I had no idea you could do so much in such a tight space.”

I went on to tell her only a few highlights, leaving out the actual details except for Guttermouth trading out the condoms. I thought she’d laugh at that, but instead, her face grew serious.

“Lani, did you forget that you’re not just sleeping with a Crowne, but the son of Pharaoh, the man with hella kids?” she asked.

“That’s his father, not him. He just has Amari, and you know that kid. He’s great. I could tell that and I only met him once.”

“Not that,” she said. “Listen, you can be on the best birth control in the world, but there’s always that tiny percent that it won’t work. And sis, your man has super sperm in his blood.”

“We used protection.”

“No, you used a knock-off brand.”

I frowned, thinking back to the packaging of the condom. “Way to freak me out.”

“I’m just trying to warn you, but you’ll find out if you pop out a baby in nine months.”

“Duly noted,” I deadpanned.

“But enough about that,” she said. “Are you and Porter finally together?”

“We haven’t officially said that, but we are. I feel it. He feels it. It’s obvious to everyone I guess.”

Her eyes softened. “Of course it’s obvious, Lani. I even joked that the only reason Porter and I became friends was because he wanted to keep tabs on you.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Y’all get along without having me in common.”

“We do, but I’ve always felt like Poe was family because of how strongly you both feel about each other. I knew it was only a matter of time before you ended up back home.”

“I came for the Black Lush fellowship,” I defended.

She snorted. “Yeah, okay, sis. Tell me anything.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Maybe he had something to do with it.”

She knowingly smirked. “And maybe you got tired of running from your fate and realized life was too short not to spend it with someone you’ve been in love with since we were kids.”

That part ... I inhaled and closed my eyes, unable to believe that things finally seemed like they were working in our favor. Especially when, at times, it felt like the world was trying to keep us apart.

“I just want it to last as long as it can,” I admitted, my voice dropping an octave. “You and I had our own issues in our family, but he has a lot of demons that I want to help him slay ... if he lets me.”

“It will last, sis,” Solange fortified. “And you’ll be there for him like you always are, just like I’m confident he’ll be your rock, too. Want to know why I know this?”

“Why?” I asked, wishing I could hug her right now.

“Because of who we are,” she said. “Never forget we’re Ravens.”

I wiped a lone tear at hearing her voice the start of our trademark way of saying I love you, the meaning hitting my heart even more with us living in different places.

“You help people cope with their demons,” she said.

“And you turn those demons into beauty,” I finished.

We talked a little bit more and promised to see each other soon, blowing a kiss to one another before hanging up. I stood in silence for a few more seconds, but Solange’s warning was still on my mind.

“Starting tonight, I’ll tell Porter we can’t use those condoms in his car ever again,” I muttered to myself.

Just as I was leaving, I heard a noise coming from the storage closet in the room. *Oh my God*, I thought, my mind racing with who’d been eavesdropping on my conversation since I’d purposely waited until I saw Porter come back outside to the fest before I dipped inside of The Rooted Collective to call my sister.

Not bothering to ask who it was, I walked to the closet and swung the door open, gasping in surprise when three women stumbled out, knocking me to the floor as I braced all of their falls.

“Are you okay?” I asked them, helping each woman up as I freaked out, wondering if they were hurt. “There’s a medical truck on site outside for heat stroke or any other medical issues that may arise today. Let’s get you three checked out.”

Ms. Ann waved me off. “We’re fine, sweetie. You broke our fall.”

I observed them a few more seconds until I was satisfied they really were fine before I crossed my arms over my chest.

“In that case, what were you three doing in the closet?”

The women shared a we’ve-been-caught look

“Actually, I think I cracked a rib,” Ms. Verna moaned.

“My hip hurts,” Ms. Ann claimed.

“Oh no, I can’t see,” Ms. Patty wailed, waving her hands in front of her like she’d gone blind with the fall, only peeking one eye open to make sure she didn’t run into anything.

“Why?” I asked again. “What are you up to?”

It was Ms. Patty who dropped her shoulders and muttered a, “Fine, we’ll share if you want,” as she pulled out several vape pens, edibles gummies, a glass weed pipe, and three blunts.

My eyes widened. “Good lawd, how high are you trying to get?”

“Hi enough to flyyyyyy,” Ms. Ann answered, flapping her wings in a way that let me know they had already gotten into some of it.

“It’s legal now,” Ms. Verna stated as Ms. Ann whipped out a card. “And Ann’s got her medical marijuana card if the po-pos try any funny business.”

“And if you rat us out to Porter that we were smoking in the building,” Ms. Patty warned, waving a finger at me, “I’m calling your mother and telling her that you’re out here sleeping with men without using a condom.”

My mouth dropped. “We’ve been using condoms, just the wrong kind.”

“Are you pregnant?” Ms. Ann asked.

Ms. Verna hit Ms. Patty. “It was probably their first time together, so she wouldn’t know yet anyway.”

I shook my hands in the air. “Even if I was, it’s not anyone’s business but ours.”

“And us,” Ms. Patty pointed out.

“And your sister,” Ms. Ann added.

“And anyone else who may have saw you in the alley like we did,” Ms. Verna revealed. “I guess they wouldn’t know about the fake condoms though.”

“Fake? What?” I squinted my eyes. “They just weren’t a great brand! But what were y’all doing in the alley that night?”

“We’ve got needs,” Ms. Verna stated. “And I won’t tell you which building, but there was a sex class for seniors that night that our girl Queenie was hosting.”

“Queenie as in Porter’s great-grandmother Queenie? The one in the wheelchair.”

Ms. Patty nodded. “Yes. We all have needs, and Queenie keeps us young.”

“And a lot can be done in a wheelchair,” Verna added.

I thought back to Porter’s feisty great-grandmother who was a former Black Panther, cussed like a sailor, and I’d already seen her rolling around with two different men in the city since I’d gotten back.

“That actually makes sense.”

“You know, she could teach you a thing or two,” Ms. Ann alluded. “You can’t knock the knowledge us OGs have.”

“That’s oka—”

It was too late. They were already telling me stories, tips, the time one of them laid it down so good, they put their husband in the grave. *May he rest in peace.*

By the time I returned to my Urban Rose booth, I was convinced that I would never be able to look at Ms. Patty, Ms. Ann, or Ms. Verna the same way again.

I just knew too ... much.

seven

“A man who knows how to use his tongue is extremely useful, but don’t be afraid to direct him on the other things you want.”

~Scarlett~

ALANNA

FOR AS LONG AS I could remember, I’d always been obsessed with the morning time. That moment when the first rays of sunlight hit your face, warming your cheeks like a welcome caress. Or the delicious smell of coffee beans that teased your nostrils even if you hadn’t gotten up to brew yourself a cup yet. It was the anticipation of savoring that piece of bacon on your taste buds or the delicious juice from a peach spilling onto your lips.

Everything was so peaceful in the morning before anyone knew you were even awake. No matter if I was excited for what the day would bring or dreading my hectic schedule and already dreaming about climbing back into bed, nothing beat those early moments. A reminder that you woke up to fight another day and were blessed to be alive to experience the beauty of the morning.

It was only a week since Juneteenth and I had barely gotten to see Porter due to him being booked completely solid in every free room at The Rooted Collective and me having three to four interviews a day for Urban Rose, all our blessings from connections made during The Blackout Fest proving prosperous.

Not to mention I had also had my first day at my one-year Black Lush fellowship as a new blogger for the Lushie app that was set to launch next

month. I only had four weeks to work with the staff and members to gather content, but as excited as I was for this next opportunity, nothing had prepared me for what waking up next to Porter Crowne would be like. How fast my heart would beat when his dick brushed against me in bed or how giddy I got when his hands gripped my ass in the middle of the night.

Especially when he wanted to start my day off right like he was now. Lifting the comforter and sheet, I peered down to the man who was feasting between my legs like I was the only breakfast a muthafucka like him needed.

“Oh shit, Poe,” I muttered. “Right there. Don’t stop.”

His tongue twirled around my clit as he suckled it just the way I desired. Firm, then soft. Fast, then slow. With the perfect amount of saliva to cause me to moan into his bedroom ceiling, grateful I had stayed at his place since he was on the penthouse level of his condo building, which was less chance we’d have neighbors knocking for me to shut the fuck up like at my apartment.

Even though Porter and I had barely gotten to talk about the fact that we were finally together, we seemed to just understand each other without the words, and I never had that before.

In the two weeks since that time in his truck, we tried our best to stay the night together no matter whose place we were at. And I never asked Porter to give me head every morning, but that’s precisely what he did. That was one of the many reasons I loved him. He knew what my body needed better than I did.

I hadn’t told him how I felt yet though.

But he knew.

He *always* knew.

“Hmm,” he moaned when I began rotating my hips against his tongue, his hands securely trapping my thick thighs from moving too much.

If I wanted to, I could have allowed my body to release minutes ago, but I liked to ride out our sexually sensual moments for as long as I could. Boyfriend or not, I couldn’t have him out here thinking he could make me orgasm with the flick of his tongue. Nah, I needed more than that.

It was the way his thumbs caressed my thighs that I loved. His mouth licking up and down my pussy lips that made me wetter. That Gucci Guilty that I swore was embedded in the natural oils of his skin that filled me with even more desire for this man.

To most, he was Porter Crowne, a man whose secrets no one dared to ask

and son of one of the most powerful men in Chicago. But to me, he was the man who had finally stepped into his destiny and found his way. He wasn't all good. Wasn't all evil. But morally grey in a way that couldn't always be defined.

And yet, this complex man understood every part of my being that I'd never even allowed others to see before. The nerdy side, the sexy side, and everything in between.

When I finally allowed myself to give into the orgasm, I wailed in such a satisfying way, my voice slightly cracked.

Then I looked down at his sexy face, glistening beard, and sweaty forehead, letting out another moan of pleasure at the way his eyes sparkled like he wasn't done with me yet.

"Good morning, beautiful," he greeted, before leaning up to glance at the digital clock on his nightstand. "It's seven a.m. How much time you got?"

"Not long. I need to head to Black Lush soon."

He didn't respond, but gripped my ankles and pulled me down the bed. My hands went to his freshly cut hair and neatly trimmed beard, before sliding down his chest until I reached his dick, but something in his eyes caused me to pause.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to ask you about something you mumbled in your sleep?"

Shit. I hated that I sleep-talked, and if Porter was halting my hand on his dick, I must have said something fucked up.

Looking down from my hand to his face I asked, "Uh, it couldn't have been important enough to make you stop me right now."

"It was," he stated. "Either you never told me, or I heard you wrong."

Oh, fuck. From the way he was looking, I could have only confessed one thing. "Porter, it's really not that big of a deal."

He scooted both of us back onto the bed, and I inwardly groaned at his serious expression.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"There isn't exactly a right time to tell the boy you've been crushing on for your entire life that while you'd done a lot in the past, actual intercourse wasn't one of them."

"I wouldn't have judged you for shit," he stated. "You know that."

"That's the reason I needed you before I started my Black Lush fellowship. Not because I wanted to fuck other men. But other reasons."

“Like?” he asked, coaxing me to say it.

I nervously started messing with the ends of my braids. “Even though I’m just a blogger for their app, I wanted to be as sexually liberated as I could before embarking on this journey with Black Lush. That meant I needed to be with the only man in the world who would make me feel that way.” I gently outlined his lips with my finger. “And that’s you. It’s always been you.”

A chill went through my body when he leaned his forehead against mine. I spent every day talking to my followers, but opening up to Porter right now was making me nervous as hell.

“It’s always been you for me, too,” he said. “But I can’t believe I couldn’t tell. I mean, you’re tight as fuck, but I ain’t pick up on shit.”

“That’s because I’ve done a lot of sexual shit and I’m very in tune with my body and what she needs. There are so many levels to intimacy than just intercourse. And a dick may not have entered these pussy walls, but if you think I went thirty years without filling my pussy with my dildo, or Dr. Dick ‘Em Down as I call him, then you’re sadly mistaken. Masturbation is healthy, and my pussy wasn’t lacking male attention in other ways.”

Porter frowned. “Seriously, Lani?”

“What?”

“Well, I sure as fuck ain’t need to hear about other assholes doing shit to you, but I’m ready for a tutorial on how you masturbate whenever you’re ready to show me.”

I laughed. “I’ll show you if you show me.”

“Bet.” He raised an eyebrow. “You still have the dildo?”

“Maybe, maybe not. What will you do if I bring him back here tonight?”

“If you do, I’ll tell you what I’m the most vulnerable about since we got together.” Porter wrapped his arm behind my back and slid me closer to him until my breasts were touching his chest. “Things I’m worried about you finding out from someone else.”

He must mean Grease, I thought. The streets talked about how Bug was killed, but Grease had been the one that was kept under wraps five years ago.

“I love you,” he blurted, catching me off guard not because I was surprised by his feelings, but because at one point in my life, I hadn’t dared myself to hope that I’d ever hear him say those words out loud. “I’ve loved you for so long, I don’t know how not to love you. And I’ve admired you for even longer. The way you go after what you want and how you encourage your followers to be themselves. You’ve always been a bright light in a dark

room for me, and when the walls felt like they were caving in, thinking about you saved me from myself because I knew I couldn't be the man you needed ... the Porter you deserved, if I didn't fix myself first."

He kissed my lips gently, but with an intensity that was all Porter. "There was no chance in hell I had of not being obsessed with everything about you, but I know in order to fully love me back, I eventually have to tell you the man I was to prove to you the man I am."

The man he was? Doesn't he know that I loved that man, too? Can't he tell that the Porter now and the Porter then and the Porter in between were all simply ... him?

"You can tell me everything when you're ready," I told him, taking his face in my hands. "But for the record, I don't care that you've fought, killed, and stabbed in order to protect your family. I understand why you may have to do all of that again to protect those you love. I don't give a shit that you have a past or that we may always need protection from your enemies and those of the Crownes. And I couldn't care less that the burdens of your last name may not ever be concerns you heal from. But above all, I'm sorry that you were betrayed and had to be the one to take the life of one of your best friends to protect the people you love and get retribution for the lives lost."

Porter's lips parted, his eyes studying mine as he gripped both of my wrists while I still held his face in my hands. "How did you know that?"

"I didn't for sure," I admitted. "But I know you, and I was visiting home around that time." I swallowed back my own nerves at what I needed to tell him. "Grease called me that night."

"What?" he asked, standing from the bed. "What the fuck do you mean?"

"After he betrayed the Crownes, Grease was distraught, and I ran into him down the street from Smokey's Burgers after I'd just left the girls. He wasn't even speaking clearly, so I dodged him and tried to get into my rental car quickly, but he pushed me into the passenger seat and took off with me in the car, rattling off how you and your dad knew he was the mole. He was so out of it, though, that I managed to message my dad without him knowing. My dad's team cut him at an intersection five minutes later."

Porter began pacing the bedroom, scratching the back of his head. It took all my good sense to focus on the topic at hand and not the way his dick was swinging as he walked. *Back. Forth. Back. Forth... Shit, why is watching that thang swing so damn sexy?* It almost felt like I was being hypnotized.

"Why didn't anyone tell me this shit?"

“Our fathers thought if you knew, it would make you act irrational.”

He shook his head. “Nah, I just would have shot him faster for even attempting to kidnap you.”

“He wasn’t in his right mind,” I reminded. “He was unraveling, you know that. It doesn’t change what he did, but taking me wasn’t planned.”

“Did Godfrey take him to my dad afterwards?”

I shook my head. “Grease got away, but my dad told yours where he thought he was hiding at, and I guess your dad told you where he was, leaving out the part that he’d taken my car. In a way, I actually think it brought our fathers closer together. They can’t stand each other still, but the respect is there.”

Porter stopped pacing long enough for me to stand and take his face back into my hands. “Poe, I loved you before I even knew your name. When you were just a boy at school watching me walk to my desk in a way that felt entirely too overwhelming as a kid, but I welcomed the attention from you anyway because when you weren’t looking, I was staring back at you just as hard.”

I placed a kiss on each of his cheeks before placing another on his lips. “Life with you will be wild and unpredictable, but this is our time. I’ve loved you through years of being out of my reach or apart from you, so now, I want to love you up close and by your side.”

“Even though parts of me are broken?” he asked, his eyes filled with vulnerability and hope.

“You’re not broken, but it’s the fragmented pieces of you that make your soul so overwhelming beautiful to me.”

This time, when he kissed me, it felt more raw and unhinged than any of our prior kisses, his hands squeezing my ass while his dick poked me in the stomach.

“Do you have to go to work this early?” he asked in between kisses.

“I have about twenty minutes.” I suckled his earlobe. “Make it a quickie, or you’ll be walking around with blue balls until we both get off work tonight.”

I hadn’t expected him to toss me on the bed, the sly smirk that filled his face hitting me in the heart at the same time that he slid into my wet pussy with purpose and precision.

Gasping into the air, I tried my best to control my breathing, but it was no use.

He fucked me so hard, I couldn't even walk the next day.

When I got home, he fucked me again after I reminded him how good I was at sucking dick.

By the time I caved and introduced him to Dr. Dick 'Em Down, he had to run me a hot bath because my pussy was getting more action than she ever had. I welcomed the soreness though.

After all, I'd waited my entire life to be with Poe, and now that we were finally together, we had a *lot* of lost time to make up for.

epilogue

*“If you want to be treated like a king, treat her like a queen, and know that without her, you ain’t shit.”
~Porter “Poe” Crowne~*

SIX MONTHS LATER...

PORTER

“Damn, nephew,” Uncle Hollis teased, nudging me in the arm. “You aiming for twelve like your pops? Or you think you’ll go for fifteen?”

Shaking my head, I motioned for him to cut out the teasing. “Unc, you keep sayin’ the same joke every time I see you, and Alanna has heard it enough, too. Can you chill?”

He waved me off and adjusted his fedora before he spat a, “Sensitive ass,” and went to fuck with someone else. I was a few years younger than Uncle Hollis, but a lot of times, I felt like I was the damn uncle.

Today was too special to let him get to me though. Alanna and I hadn’t expected to get pregnant, let alone with twins, but looking back, I should have anticipated it. We opted not to learn the sex of the twins beforehand, but Guttermouth kept saying we should name one of the twins Gino since he had traded out the condoms in my car. Personally, I didn’t think I knocked her up that day or later in the week, but you couldn’t tell that fool nothing. He’d be old and grey talking about how he’s the reason Alanna and I have the twins.

Although Alanna’s mom had wanted us to have an elaborate baby shower at an exclusive location, we’d opted to have it in one of the large rooms at

The Rooted Collective.

“Can I go play with my cousins?” Amari asked us, praying he was done greeting family members and friends present for the baby shower.

“Of course you can,” Alanna told him, grinning as he hugged her legs before taking off.

I hadn’t known how Amari was going to act when I told him he was about to be a big brother, but he was ready for it and was constantly telling us everything he wanted to teach his unborn siblings when they got here.

I proposed the night she let me watch her use Dr. Dick ‘Em Down, and even though we’d barely been dating when I did, I had waited a lifetime to make Lani mine and my ass was impatient as hell.

“You good, baby?” I asked when Alanna began rubbing her belly.

Her smile was happy, with a hint of a scowl letting me know she was uncomfortable.

“If it isn’t two of my favorite people!” Solange boasted, running up to us with an armful of gifts.

“SoSo!” Alanna squealed, waddling over to her sister and giving her the biggest hug she could given the size of her belly.

Solange also hugged me, but all her focus was on her sister and talking to her stomach in baby language.

“Solange, can you take Lani to the couch in my office?” I asked. “She needs to rest, but she won’t unless we force her.”

Solange winked. “Already on it, bro.”

I didn’t take my eyes off my gorgeous fiancée until she was out of eyesight, soaking in the fact that I’d never been happier than I was right now.

It wasn’t until I’d stepped into the role of Mr. Black that I realized what Stan and Nash had been trying to instill in me my entire life, but especially after I turned twenty-one.

As the son of Pharaoh Crowne, I may have been born to be the next kingpin of Chicago, but as the grandson of Stanley Crowne and great-grandson of Freeman Crowne, I had to give myself permission to become who I already thought I was when I had not one, but several legendary men to look up to.

I was still trying to figure out who that man wanted to be, but I was learning to lead through example and live the life I desired, not the life expected of me. But through Alanna’s guidance and support, I was also accepting the fact that I had to give myself grace. Being a Black man in this

world was hard enough without me making shit more difficult for myself.

I would never be the perfect role model, but I was a prototype for so many men out there who had to get out of their own way to see the choices that lay before them. *And pray that they found a woman strong enough to give them years to figure their shit out.*

My father continued to teach me what it meant to stand in your power, while Stan had taken an active role in helping me realize that strength was different in everyone. Great-grandpa Freeman had given me the gift of always having brothers in this world who had my back, while all my uncles were examples of the fact that the world needed people willing to get their hands dirty for the greater good.

I always tried to do my best, but at my core, I wasn't good or bad, but a mixture of them both, unable to decipher right from wrong most times and probably never would. Yet, I'd found a woman who saw the colors I tried to hide beneath blackness.

When my family needed me, I'd drop everything to help the Crownes and protect my legacy, but I had a clearer picture of what I fight for now.

"I'm proud of you, nephew," Uncle Nash stated as he approached and broke me from my thoughts.

"Thanks, Unc. I appreciate you being here today."

"Wouldn't have missed it."

Just like Uncle Hollis, Uncle Nash wasn't too much older than me either, but he actually treated me like a nephew. I mean, Uncle Hollis was cool and usually had me rolling, but he could run a joke into the ground for real.

Some folks close to us Crownes were surprised that I even called Hollis and Nash uncle instead of their first name, but for me, it was a sign of respect my mom had instilled in me since I was old enough to walk. She made sure I knew that while they felt more like older brothers sometimes, they were still my uncles and should be addressed as such.

We both looked toward the door when Ekon Faye walked into the room and nodded in our direction before greeting some folks. Rebuilding Black Row had gone so well that I was now working with Ekon's company to rehabilitate more streets in Chicago by focusing on other neighborhoods, too.

"Unc, I've been meaning to ask you something for a while now."

"Shoot," he said.

"Did you ask Ekon to take me under his wing for Mr. Black?"

Nash smirked, looking Stan's way as he just arrived with Duchess and

Queenie.

“It was Pops’ idea,” Nash revealed, referring to Stan. “We knew you needed a mentor to navigate getting off the streets to make a name for yourself separate from being Pharaoh’s oldest son. And back then, I couldn’t be here for you full time.”

Because of Crowne business. He didn’t say it, but family missions always came first and I understood that.

“I’m ashamed to admit it took me so long to figure out Ekon probably didn’t take to me without some encouragement.”

“You got it all wrong,” Nash corrected. “Ekon was just as lost as you were. Probably more so in some ways. When you met at the Bud Billiken Parade, he ran into Pops shortly after and asked him questions about you. Pops knew I was friends with Ekon and asked me if he was the kind of man we could trust to be around you.”

“Ekon is cool people,” I said.

Nash nodded. “He is, but he has a past, just like all of us, and years ago after he lost his kids, he was mad at the world and pushed away a lot of people, including your dad.”

My eyes widened. “No shit, Dad and Ekon were friends?”

Nash nodded. “Real good friends. Ekon’s never been in our world, but your dad helped him get settled in Chicago and was one of the first investors in his construction company. When Ekon reached out to me, I figured it was moreso to ask me how your dad was doing, but we sparked our own friendship. The respect between your dad and Ekon was still there, but I thought their friendship was kind of over until they found another commonality to bond them.”

I smiled, shaking my head as realization hit that, “Ekon’s been giving him a play by play on everything I’ve been up to.”

“Every fucking thing,” Nash confirmed, clapping me on the shoulder. “You know Pharaoh. He’s protective as hell over his kids.”

“That he is.” *And I’m damn lucky for it.*

Surveying the room, I spotted my dad as Ekon laughed at something he said right before Godfrey Raven joined the conversation and started laughing along with them.

“Hell really has frozen over,” Nash muttered.

“Ain’t that the truth.”

We spoke a little while longer before I began making rounds again to

everyone who had recently arrived.

It wasn't until we were lying in bed that night and I was listening to Alanna's soft snores that I finally allowed myself to think about something I'd avoided for months.

I could deny it all I want.

Evade it all I could.

Run like hell away from every discussion about it.

Yet, at the end of the day, when the world was calm, when I had my woman next to me while my son was sleeping peacefully in the next room, and when The Rooted Collective and Urban Rose businesses were both thriving, only then could I face the truth.

Guttermouth switching out my Magnums for those bootlegged condoms really probably is the reason I knocked up Alanna.

I wasn't mad at it, just in denial since there was no damn way I was ever naming one of the twins after him. Hell, I wasn't even sure Gino could handle being a godfather. He'd probably be teaching my kid's the proper way to hold a gun before they could even walk or something crazy.

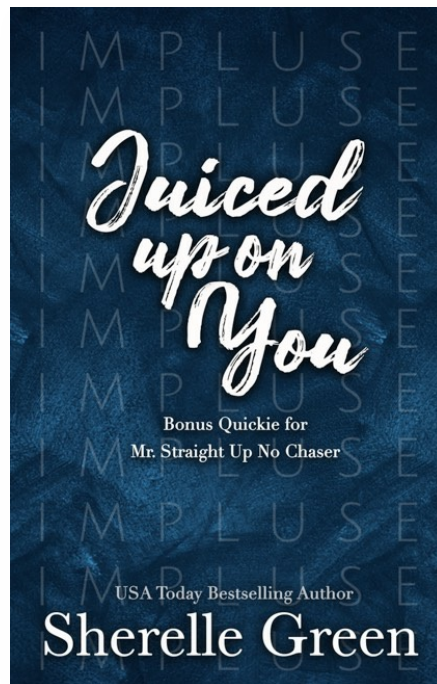
Nah.

Fuck *that* shit.

BONUS SCENE:

Want more? [Click here to read JUICED UP ON YOU](#), a sexy bonus extension of this story that stars Alanna and Porter, Scarlett and Gino, Teia and Hassan, and Rye and Eddy!

bonus epilogue



JUICED UP ON YOU is a sexy bonus that stars Alanna and Porter, Scarlett and Gino, Teia and Hassan, and Rye and Eddy!

*Four couples. Three competitive rounds.
Two final teams. One sexy goal.*

celebrating juneteenth in chicago

There are so many ways to celebrate not just Juneteenth, but Black history every day in Chicago! Below is a spotlight of a few iconic events and historical venues in the city.

Events & Festivals:

[1865 Fest](#)

[African Diaspora International Film Festival](#)

[Juneteenth Jubilee](#)

[Homewood-Flossmoor Juneteenth Festival](#)

[The Silver Room](#) (creator of Chicago's multicultural [Block Party](#))

Art, Culture & Community:

[Bronzeville Art Tour](#)

[Bronzeville Center for the Arts](#)

[American Writers Museum](#)

Buy Black & Eat Black:

[Juneteenth Freedom Market](#)

[Chicago Black Restaurant Week](#)

Black Bookstores:

[Da Book Joint](#)

[Semicolon](#)

[The Underground Bookstore](#)

Historical Venues:

DuSable Museum

American Writers Museum

The highly anticipated Obama Presidential Center

baes of juneteenth series

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.

Mr. Straight Up No Chaser by Sherelle Green

Mr. Right Now by Sheryl Lister

Mr. Down for Whatever by Elle Wright

Mr. Alpha Undone by Kelsey Green

Mr. Second Best by Angela Seals

Mr. Big Stuff by Aja

Mr. Play for Keeps by Kimmie Ferrell

Mr. Take Me As I Am by Iris Bolling

Mr. On Your Knees by A.C. Arthur

Mr. One and Only by Sharon C. Cooper

Mr. Tall Dark and Unavailable by Tina Martin

want more crowne legacy?

For years, these siblings have lived by the code, Know Thy Enemy. However, what seems too good to be true usually is. Some say mafia. They say family. Can they trust their allies and defend the Crowne legacy? Or will they realize that loyalty, love, and honor are luxuries they can't afford?

Jade + Nash: [Face Down Fridays](#)

Saint + Taraj: [Sins of a Saint](#)

Jedidiah + Korie: [Jedidiah's Crowning Glory](#)

Interlude: [Love Always, Tristan](#)

Pharaoh + Genesis: [Throne of a Pharaoh](#)

Nessy + Vick: [Two Dirty Santas](#) (spinoff)

Keaton + Voshon: [Claiming Keaton's Sanctuary](#)

Hollis + CeCe: [To Hollis and Obey](#)

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want more black lush?

TO WORK FLUIDLY and maintain exclusivity, Black Lush continues to operate their divisions as separate entities. However, every business needs support, investors when times get hard, and members who continue to make Black Lush the unstoppable empire it is. And now, right now, you have chance to dive deeper into the exclusive Black Lush empire.

Key Black Lush books:

Face Down Friday's

Two Dirty Santas

Claiming Keaton's Sanctuary

Grown Folks Confessions

Make Me Confess

F-Boy Confessions

Make Them Confess

Sinfully Sweet Confessions

Additional Black Lush books:

#Claimed by Crayson

Caden's #Situationship

Black Friday

Single AF

Bad Decisions Good Regrets

Blue Sapphire Temptation

Sins of a Saint

Jedidiah's Crowning Glory

You were all about that boss life when Jordyn claimed Crayson's entire soul as the badass she is (**Heavenly Hash**). Your mouth dropped in Caden's #Situationship right after you cheered on Ivy in Bad Decisions Good Regrets (**Black Lush Adult Entertainment**). When Meeka was Single AF, you wet your taste buds by diving into new experiences (**Social Experiment Network**). You visited Jade when we she taught you and Ivy a new method (**Bad Decisions Good Regrets**), before Nash dove face down on her (**First Class Fantasy**). Your curiosity was heightened when Korie leveled up the women's empowerment division in Sins of a Saint & Jedidiah's Crowning Glory (**Laced**). Then, you wished you were Nessy in Two Dirty Santas (**Pretty Little Flavors**). Finally, you were stunned to learn that Keaton is the reason for it all (**Black Lush Empire**).

Now, you've been inducted into the world of the naughty Hoods and the kinky days they celebrate (**Naughty Season**). Hope you're strapped up!

about the author

Sherelle Green is a USA Today Bestselling author who has spent over a decade writing sexy and emotionally stirring women's fiction & romance stories, layered with gritty drama. She is captivated by human interactions and the ability to view life through a different pair of eyes.

From intricate family sagas and compelling love affairs, to thought-provoking fiction and romantic thrillers, her novels touch on how experiences & environment impact the way her protagonists view life and love. She invites readers into her creative world by composing multifaceted, unforgettable characters who are beautifully flawed and relatable.

When she's not writing or hosting workshops, she can be found scouring different shops to add to her coffee mug collection or traveling the world to experience new cultures.

