



Cuffing Season

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Contents

[Foreword](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The One Series](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Danielle Allen](#)

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Cuffing Season

I wasn't looking for a man.

I was looking for a mentor.

When renowned photographer Luca Romano returned home to teach a Photo Storytelling workshop, Hamilton University was buzzing. But a campus wide email warned us not to approach Luca if we weren't selected to participate—and I wasn't selected.

I wasn't looking to break the rules.

I was looking to break into the industry.

I knew getting photographed by Luca Romano would catapult my career. I hoped he'd call, but I had no expectations. I wanted to converse with him, pick his brain, expand my portfolio. That's all.

Listen... I wasn't looking to be his muse.

But I wasn't going to tell him no.

Dedication

To intersectional feminists, male and female.

Cuffing Season is the **standalone** spin-off to Sweatpants Season.

Prologue

I laughed loudly.

I was never able to get through that story without laughing.

Surrounded by one woman and three men, I stopped walking. "...so that's when I realized I was in the wrong class the whole time!"

They laughed causing me to laugh even harder.

"You are hilarious, Serena!" Kate giggled.

"Hilarious and beautiful," Corey complimented between chuckles. His eyes roamed from the tight curls of my hair over my black and white polka dot shirt and down my bright blue pants. "Did you make those?"

"Yes!" I chirped brightly, pride widening my eyes and my smile. Striking a pose, I giggled. "I sure did! They are part of the Simply Serena Collection."

"Your collection is going to be a hit. If they can make everyone's ass look as good as yours does, you're going to have a hit on your hands," Kate mused with a nod, her green eyes giving me a critical onceover. "And it's going to look good on camera, too."

I looked down at the wide-legged pants and my favorite black spiked heels. I grinned as I glanced back up at her. "I think so, too."

“No fair! If I would’ve said that, I would’ve gotten slapped!” Corey laughed, making the two other men chuckle as well.

“Absolutely.” I winked. “So, don’t try it.”

“But I’m a photographer, too!” Corey argued.

“Bye, guys!” Kate laughed as she headed back to the building.

“But would you slap Jerome Bellamy or Luca Romano or Davis Hampton?” Corey’s friend chimed in.

“I don’t know about Davis, but Jerome and Luca are Serena’s dream photographers,” Corey stated with a laugh. “She said in class that she’d let them do anything.”

“What I said was that they could do anything...in terms of photography. Their skill level is that great.” I giggled as I shook my head. “You’re always trying to turn something sexual. That’s one of your problems.”

He imitated an Italian accent. “Would it be better if I talked like this?”

I looked at him, horrified. “No. Not at all.”

“Well, let me take you out to dinner so we can discuss other ways I could improve myself.” Corey made a move to put his arm around me.

I blocked his arm and ducked out of the way. “Who taught you how to flirt?” I swatted at his arm playfully. “Stop this!”

“Let me give you boys some advice...”

They instantly started laughing as they waited for me to continue.

“Excuse me,” a stunning woman interrupted, walking toward me.

She was moving with a purpose, but I had no idea who she was. Her smile was friendly, and her eyes had a hopeful spark in them.

“To be continued. Goodnight, fellas.” With a wave over my shoulder, I flashed my pearly white smile her way.

“I don’t know if you’re familiar with Luca Romano, but —”

My eyebrows flew up. *Luca Romano!*

“I’m familiar with the fact that I prayed to the gods that I’d get into his class and wasn’t selected,” I interjected with a laugh. “I’m guessing you were one of the lucky ones?”

She grinned proudly. “Yes. But if it’s any consolation, my sister wanted this more than anything and she loves his work.”

“So, she feels my pain?”

“I imagine she does.” She laughed along with me. “Speaking of his class, our first assignment is to photograph someone beautiful”—she handed me a photography release and consent form— “and I saw your awesome style and thought you’d be the perfect person for this quick assignment.”

“Well, thank you. I love it when women compliment other women...” I took the paper out of her hand, and I read over it quickly as she spoke.

It was the standard photographer’s release form. I’d just filled one out that morning, and nothing seemed too different except for the fact that my photo wouldn’t be used outside of that one assignment.

“But I have a question...” I looked up and noticed a sexy man in a hoodie standing a few yards away.

“What’s that?” She leaned forward, pulling my attention away from the sexy lurker. Pointing to the bold print on the form, she said, “Just so you know, your photo won’t be used for anything outside of this assignment.”

“Yeah, I read that part, and I’m willing to do it,” I replied, scribbling my sprawling signature along the bottom of the form. “But I was going to ask for something in return.”

“What’s that?” Her words were slow, apprehensive.

“Would you give Luca Romano my card?” I pulled a card out of my back pocket. “I’m a stylist, model, and photographer.”

“Oh, yeah.” She nodded, relieved. Taking my card, she glanced at the name before putting it in her bag with the signed consent form. “I can do that., Serena.”

Oh my god, it worked! I found a loophole in the system! The administration said we couldn't approach Luca. They didn't say anything about having someone else approach him on our behalf.

I could barely contain my excitement. “And what’s your name?”

“I’m Akila.”

After we shook hands, she positioned her camera to her face and snapped a bunch of shots. For the two-minute photoshoot, I effortlessly slipped into model mode. I immediately struck pose after pose, accentuating my angles, and making sure I caught the natural light.

“Got it,” she said as she looked at the screen of the last shot I’d taken. “You made this easy.”

“Thanks! And I appreciate you giving Luca Romano my card. A campus wide email went out asking us to respect his space, but a secondary email went out to the School of the Arts basically asking us not to embarrass Hamilton University by throwing ourselves and our portfolios at him.”

She giggled. “I get it. So, what I’m going to do is rave about my model and give him your card casually once he raves about the pictures here.”

I squealed. “Perfect!”

“Okay, I have to head back to class, but thank you, Serena.”

“No, thank you!”

She turned, and I watched as the lurker looked at her.

Hmm. They must be together.

His face and body shifted as she grew closer to him. He said something to her as he fell into step with her. They looked completely at ease with one another, yet at the same time, the flirty way they interacted made it seem like they were at the beginning stages of their relationship. The space between them, the stolen glances, the adoration that clearly existed painted a vivid picture in my mind until they disappeared into the building. In that moment, I yearned for whatever it was they had.

“No,” I whispered, shaking off the thought and forcing my legs to make it across campus to the parking lot.

I needed to stay focused on my work. I had a fashion show to prepare for. I had a fashion line to perfect and finalize. I had head shots to send out. I had goals to accomplish. I had dreams to chase.

I didn't have the time for a man in my life.

Chapter One

“Hello?” I answered my cell phone as I eyed myself in the mirror.

“May I speak with Ms. Serena Brooks?” the deep, accented voice rumbled on the other end.

I paused as I took a second glance at the way my olive-green jumpsuit complimented my mocha complexion and fit my form perfectly. “This is she...” I pulled the phone from my ear to eye the unknown number. “May I ask who’s speaking?”

“Luca Romano.”

“Listen... I don’t have time for games or bullshit, Corey,” I sighed. “Pretending to be Luca Romano is lame.” I sucked my teeth. “With your fake ass accent.”

Hanging up the phone, I slipped into the expensive shoes I was gifted after an internship with New York Fashion Week the year before. I felt slightly overdressed for an exhibit at Rich Gallery, but it was hosted by Luca Romano.

Speaking of which...

I rolled my eyes as Corey called from the same number he called from before.

“Corey—”

“This isn’t Corey. This is Luca Romano.”

Silence.

My mouth opened and then closed.

That girl—Anika or Arika or something—had said she'd give him my card but that was over a month ago.

This can't be real. This isn't real.

“Prove it.”

He laughed, deep and rough. “I don't have to prove shit.”

I smiled. Something about the way he said it confirmed it in my gut before my brain knew it to be true.

“Okay,” I conceded, my tone softening. “But quick question... what's the name of the starlet that catapulted your career?”

“Jordan Brewers.”

“Anyone worth their salt knows that answer!”

“So why did you ask it?”

“Because I needed to know if I was dealing with an amateur or a professional.”

“I don't have time for your games, Ms. Brooks.” He sounded amused. “I have an event.”

“Okay, last question. If you're Luca Romano, how did you get my number?”

“A student of mine photographed you for an assignment.”

My brain confirmed that it was Luca and my stomach dropped. It was him. I didn't tell anyone about giving my card to that woman to give to Luca because I didn't want to get in trouble with the Dean of Students. I was in my final year of my master's program. I couldn't afford to be suspended or expelled.

“Hello?” The questioning in his tone alerted me that I had been silent for far too long.

“I'm sorry, hi. I'm still here.” I paused, getting myself together. “I'm—wow—stunned. I didn't expect to hear from you.”

“Well, the reason I'm calling is because I've been asked to shoot something, and your face popped in my head.”

“What?” I gasped, bringing my hand to my chest. My heart was racing.

“I’ve looked over the photos my student took of you and I can’t get your face out of my head. I think you’re perfect for this project.”

“Yes,” I replied automatically. “I’ll do it.”

He let out a chuckle. “I haven’t told you what it is yet.”

“You’re Luca-fucking-Romano. If you think I’m perfect for the project, I’m in.”

“Nice.” He let out an amused grunt. “I need to meet my students for their exhibit, but thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but he had already disconnected the call.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. I looked around my empty bedroom before screaming, “Oh! My! God!”

I didn’t know what to do or who I could even call. Even though they’d be excited for me, my parents had no idea who Luca was and wouldn’t get the significance. My best friend was on a romantic getaway with her husband. And all my other friends were artists who also received the email warning us against approaching Luca.

Trying to contain my excitement, I gave myself another onceover in the mirror before I yelled to the ceiling. “Oh! My! God!”

The sound of my upstairs neighbor banging on her floor caused me to roll my eyes, but at the same time, I snapped my lips shut.

But I don’t say anything when you have a full fucking parade at six o’clock every morning, I grumbled under my breath before my lips turned upward again. Fuck it. I’m about to see Luca Romano, and he just called me.

Doing a little jig, swinging my hips, I grabbed my keys and headed to Rich Gallery. Nothing was going to get me down.

“Hello?” I answered the phone as I sped down the highway.

“Serena Brooks!” My best friend screamed as soon as I answered.

“Vanessa Franklin!” I yelled back with a giggle.

“Why didn’t you call me to tell me about your night with Marcus?”

“Because you’re on the final days of your anniversary trip! I wanted you and Derrick to enjoy your time together.”

“You and I both know Derrick knows that this is a package deal. He married me, and he got the both of us. I was waiting for you to let me know about the date last night. Even he asked on the way back from dinner how things were going.”

I laughed. “He asked what?”

“He asked how your date with Marcus went.”

“Sheesh,” I groaned good-naturedly. “He takes his big brother duties way too seriously.”

“I think he just wants to get you married off because he’s tired of his friends asking if you’re single.”

“I told him that he could hook me up with Trent!”

Vanessa chuckled. “Exactly! I told him that if he isn’t trying to hook you up with Trent, don’t bother.”

“Right?” I eased my car off the highway and onto the street where Rich Gallery was located. “His boys have been trying since you two got together. Trent is the only one who hasn’t tried. And believe me, if he did try, I’d give it to him.”

She howled with laughter. “You are so ridiculous!”

I grinned. “This is true.”

“Now tell me about Marcus. After seven months of begging for a chance to take you out, you finally said yes. Please tell me he pulled out all the stops.”

I circled the block looking for a place to park. “We had dinner at this cool restaurant that had a great band. I thought

that was it, but he followed it up with drinks and dancing at a lounge. His roommate works there so Marcus was able to reserve a special section and everything. And then...we spent the night together.”

Vanessa started squealing. “Oh my god! Tell me everything!”

Grinning, I scanned the street for an available space. “After dancing, we went back to his place to listen to music —”

“You know how you are when it comes to listening to good music!”

I laughed, nodding. “Yeah, and his playlist was on point.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Absolutely.” I grinned. “It was a good night.”

Vanessa cackled wildly. “You slept with him!”

“I sure did.” I laughed as I eased into a parking spot three blocks away. “And it was so good.”

“Finally! You needed some dick. You were stressing out about your fashion show even though we both know it’s going to be a hit! So, I’m glad Marcus got in there and calmed your ass down.”

I could barely breathe because I was laughing so hard. “You are ridiculous!”

“You spent the last couple of months backed up—”

“I was finishing the spring collection!” I interrupted, amusement in my words.

“You were stressing out over the spring collection,” she corrected me.

“The fashion show is two weeks away.”

“And you had everything finalized two months ago.”

“I wanted to be sold out before school started.”

“And you’ll be sold out by the day of the show, and that’s what matters.”

My voice was low as I sighed. “Thanks. I just want everything to be perfect, and I wanted to be completely done before the semester started.”

“And you were. But then you got caught up in school work and planning the show, and I think you lost sight of what’s important.”

Shaking my head, I eyed my reflection in the mirror. “And what’s that?”

“Having fun. Enjoying your final year as a college student.”

“I know, I know.” I took a deep breath. “I’m less stressed now.”

“Of course, you are! Sex is a natural stress reliever, and you have options. Explore those options!

“Oh, last night I did... and it was pretty great, but...”

“But?” She interrupted, worry tinging her words “But what? What happened?”

“But that’s not the only reason I’m less stressed.”

She sighed. “Oh, I thought you were going to say something bad happened. Like the sex was bad. Or the condom broke. Or that you didn’t use a condom—yikes.”

Rolling my eyes, I scoffed. “No. No. And hell no. The reason I’m less stressed is a secret.”

“I’m listening...”

Looking around, I allowed myself the indulgence of grinning giddily. “Luca Romano called me!”

“What? What?!” Her voice elevated as I started repeating myself.

“Luca called me! He called me! He wants to meet me!”

“What?!” Vanessa’s screams melded with my own.

“I know!”

“How? Why? Are you serious? How did this happen?”

I took a deep breath. “One of his students approached me to pose for one of the assignments for his photography class. I may have given her a card and asked her to turn it in with her work.”

“Yes! Taking risks! I love it!”

“It was a big risk, but even though it’s a borderline offense, I didn’t violate anything they told us we couldn’t do.”

“You mean besides proposition Luca Romano?”

I let my head fall back as I laughed loudly. “I didn’t proposition him! I gave my card to someone who sought me out. This woman approached me and asked me to pose for her. All I did was hand her my card and asked her to turn it in with her work,” I argued. “So technically, I didn’t approach Luca, and I didn’t break any rules.”

“Loopholes for the win!”

“Loopholes for the win.”

“So, he called and what did he say?”

“He said he was interested in working on something with me. With me!” I squeaked in disbelief.

“Oh my god... this is it! Simply Serena is about to blow up!”

My heart swelled at my best friend’s word. “Thanks, Nessa.”

“I’m serious... having Luca photograph you in your own line will catapult your career. That’s what happened with—”

“Jordan Brewers,” I interjected. “I know. But he didn’t actually say he was going to photograph my line. He wants to talk to me about a project he has going on. But I’m hoping I can spin that into him photographing me in Simply Serena.”

“Of course, you will get him to do it!” Vanessa’s tone was confident and matter-of-fact.

“That’s the plan. I just have to wow him with whatever it is he wants me to do. If he’s impressed by my modeling and

professionalism, the least he'll do is look at my line. And if he sees it, I think I could get him to see my vision."

"Great idea! Be so good at his thing that he'll want to thank you by doing your thing."

"If I could get him to photograph my line ahead of the fashion show..." I sighed. "That would be so huge for me. That's the break I need."

"That's the break you're going to get."

My stomach fluttered with excitement. "I know. I feel it. I'm going for it. I have nothing to lose."

"When are you going to get more information?"

I opened the door to my car and stepped out. "No clue. I talked to him not even an hour ago, and he had no idea I was attending the showcase."

"You had tickets for that for a week so it's not at all going to look creepy that you showed up," Vanessa assured me.

I stopped in my tracks. "You think it's going to look creepy?"

"You talked to him an hour ago and then show up where he's going to be... yeah, a little. But because you already had your ticket, it won't."

"I didn't even think about that." I stood on the sidewalk and glanced between my car and Rich Gallery.

"No! Don't let me get in your head. You need to go in there."

I shook off the moment of hesitation. "This isn't some man I'm interested in. This is the man who is going to change the trajectory of my career."

"Exactly! If he photographs Simply Serena, great. But even if he just uses you in his project, that's huge."

"And I'll learn a lot from him." I took long strides toward the Rich Gallery. "No matter what, I'll be able to spend time with him and absorb his creativity. Hell, if I play my cards right, I might be able to pull off my own photoshoot."

“You know I’m ready to model, just say the word.”

“Yes!”

“Well... I’ve been eating everything while on this getaway, so give me a few weeks to lose the extra weight, and then I’m ready.”

I laughed loudly.

We quickly wrapped up our conversation. After she told me that Derrick had arranged for them to have couple’s massages, she made me promise to text her after the gallery showcase. I stood in front of the building as we said our goodbyes.

“Here goes nothing,” I mumbled under my breath before approaching the front door.

Chapter Two

I saw a bunch of people from school. It appeared as if half of the crowd was either a current student or alumni of Hamilton University. The other half of the art show attendees seemed to be a mix of Richland's artsy crowd and the family members of the artists. The environment felt friendly and crackled with excitement.

"What are you smiling about?" a gravelly male voice spoke from behind me.

My eyes widened. "Marcus?" I turned to face him. "Marcus! What are you doing here?" I smiled up at him as we hugged. "I didn't know you were coming to this."

"A friend had an extra ticket and asked me at the last minute." He looked me up and down. "As always, you look really good, Serena."

"Thank you." I grinned. "It's Simply Serena."

"There is nothing simple about you. And as good as you look now..." He leaned down, his lips grazing my ear. "You looked even better wrapped in my sheets."

I felt my face heat as the memory of our time together flashed in my brain. I smiled. "It was a good time."

He nodded. "It was. I'm hoping for another round sometime soon. You mentioned something about me modeling for you and I'm going to let you know right now, after the way you rode this dick, I'll pose for whatever it is you want me to.

Just give me the details, and I'll make time for you. I have to go meet someone, but I'm going to text you later and—"

"Marcus!" A woman with long brown braids sashayed over to him. "I've been looking all over for you." She shifted her gaze to me. "Oh, hello."

She was beautiful—tall, slim, and stylishly dressed.

"Hey." My lips lifted into a polite smile. Extending my hand, I reached out to shake hers. "I'm Serena. Nice to meet you."

She gripped my hand firmly. "I'm Veronica. Marcus's girl."

My eyebrows flew up. *Marcus's girl? Girl? As in girlfriend? What the fuck?*

"You look surprised." She looked between the two of us before putting her hand on her hip. "Marcus... were you over here flirting?"

He slipped his arm around her waist. "Can you blame me? Look at her."

"She is gorgeous," Veronica agreed, eyeing me. "But I've only been back in town for a couple of weeks, so I'm going to be selfish and demand all of your attention be directed at me."

"Aww, I'm sorry, boo," he replied, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Serena and I had a business class together in the spring. I was just telling her that we should get together soon."

She kissed him on the lips before turning to me. "Well, any friend of Marcus's is a friend of mine. You should have dinner with us next weekend."

"Yeah," Marcus agreed with a smirk. "Have dinner with us."

"Um," I mumbled. Still in shock, I stared at Marcus, trying to understand what was going on. "Okay."

"Great! I'm sure Marcus has your number, so we'll call," Veronica chirped. Turning to Marcus, she continued. "I need to

show you something hilarious. Come on.”

As she pulled him away, he looked back at me and gave me a look that I couldn't decipher.

My eyebrows furrowed.

I stood silently stunned. I didn't know what to say or what to make of what just happened. I was frozen in thought for a few seconds before Jessica Morgan, one of the models I worked with often, tapped my shoulder.

“Earth to Serena,” Jessica giggled.

I blinked rapidly. “Sorry! Hey, Jess.”

“What's wrong?”

“I was just...” I shook my head. “I'm fine. How are you?”

Linking her arm in mine, the six-foot tall model beamed. “I'm amazing! I got booked for a national campaign!”

My eyes widened, and jaw dropped. “Jessica-motherfucking-Morgan! I'm so proud of you!”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She beamed with excitement. “Most of my portfolio is from the stuff that I've done with you, so thank you for believing in me and giving me the opportunity.”

“You deserve this. I can't wait to see you in a national campaign.”

“Well, you know nothing is final until the paperwork is signed, but they called me this morning and I've been riding that high ever since.” She squealed, garnering the attention of a few people around us. “Sorry, I'm just excited,” she explained with a laugh.

“As you should be! This is huge.” I squeezed her arm a little tighter as we walked to the first photo display. “If these people knew that a star was in their midst, they wouldn't be looking crazy at your excitement.”

“Speaking of stars...” Jessica lowered her voice. “I saw you talking to Marcus. Did he tell you that he may be getting drafted to play professionally?”

My head whipped around to face her. “What?”

“Yes! Have you not been paying attention to the buzz on campus?”

“If it doesn’t have to do with this fashion show or my line...” I shook my head. “No.”

“Well, word on the street is that there’s been some increased interest after last season. The professional basketball teams in New York and Philadelphia are looking at him. Ever since that article came out a month ago, people have been flocking to him, and he’s been the ‘it’ guy on campus.”

“Even more than normal?”

“Way more. Oh! You know how you made that awesome men’s jacket? You should get Marcus to model it! That’ll bring so much attention to Simply Serena.”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, I asked him about it,” I admitted slowly. “But I don’t know.”

“Why? Use his pseudo-celebrity persona to boost your brand! Use his crush on you to your benefit!”

“It’s just...” My words trailed off.

It’s just that I fucked him and am just now learning that he had a girlfriend that everyone apparently knew about but me.

“Is it because he has a crush on you, and his girlfriend is back in town?”

I tried to mask my shock as I narrowly missed bumping into an older couple. “Did everyone know about his girlfriend? Because he never once mentioned her to me.”

Jessica shrugged. “I only found out a couple of weeks ago because she was featured in this newsletter for having the best boobs of the day or the week or something like that. Marcus ended up confronting The Lost Boys, and word on the street is that’s why the newsletters stopped going out.”

“Wow,” I whistled as we made our way to the next group of photos. “But continue... Marcus confronted The Lost Boys, and what happened?”

“Half the campus was talking about how Marcus was defending his girl’s honor and the other half was like ‘ummm, Marcus has a girlfriend?’” She laughed. “It was hot news for three days, and then the football team won against Hillman and it was on to the next thing...” She shrugged off-handedly. “You didn’t know any of this?”

“The only reason I knew about the bullshit with The Lost Boys is because a couple of models who auditioned for the fashion show mentioned they were in the newsletter. Even that caught me by surprise because I thought The Lost Boys were Mu Epsilon Nu and Mu Epsilon Nu was banned for hazing or something a couple of years ago.”

“It was only for that year, and they found a loophole that classified The Lost Boys as separate from the fraternity because they don’t record the show on campus.” Jessica looked at me with a mixture of surprise and disappointment. “You have to pay attention to campus life, Serena! This was a huge deal! For almost two weeks, these asshats were calling out women around campus for wearing low cut tops, and they were calling breasts fun bags.”

“Fun bags?” I scoffed, my lip curling in disgust. “What the hell is that?”

She giggled. “Exactly! It was a mess.” Shaking her head, she bumped me with her hip. “All of this was happening on campus, and you were none the wiser. You need to get out more. You’re twenty-six and your twenties are just passing you by!”

I laughed.

We talked about Simply Serena, the national campaign she booked, and how we could take our careers to the next level. Catching up with Jess was always good for the creative soul.

“Oh, hello!” I remarked, stopping in my tracks.

Jessica’s soft brown curls bounced as she moved her head from side to side looking around at the photo display. “So. Many...”

“Dick prints,” I finished her sentence as I gawked at picture number three.

“Who is Akila Bishara? She’s my hero,” Jessica murmured as she closely examined each photo.

“Akila Bishara?” I looked at the nameplate on the wall and then looked around until I spotted the woman who approached me weeks prior. “That’s her!”

“That’s who?”

“That’s—” I stopped myself from confessing the Luca connection. Clearing my throat, I started again, turning my back to Akila. “That’s the woman that took my picture for an assignment.”

“Well, obviously she has great taste because she captured your beauty and then she also captured these dicks!” She gestured to the crowd around us. “And she captured everyone’s attention.”

I laughed. “True. This had to be a fun assignment.”

“It was,” Akila replied from behind me. As soon as I turned, her smile grew. “Hey! I thought that was you.”

“Akila! Hey!” I grinned with the excitement of my secret. “This is Jess. Jess, this is Akila.”

“Akila...” Jessica dragged her name out as they shook hands. “I’m going to need the phone number of a couple of these men. Once the crowd moves, I’ll be able to narrow down my selection. Give me one minute.”

I laughed as Jessica moved down to check out the rest of the photos in the photo story.

“Thanks again for letting me get that picture of you,” Akila started. “I got an A if you were wondering.”

Lowering my voice so no one else could hear, I filled her in. “Luca called.”

Her eyes widened, and she let out a silent scream. “That’s great! Have you two set anything up?”

“No, he just called a few hours ago.”

“I knew it! You have such a cool look—beautiful, edgy and with great style. Perfect model. I knew he’d call!”

I put my hand over my heart. “I appreciate that so much. I’m actually a fashion designer first, and I got into modeling and photography to show-off my designs.”

“Oh wow! So, what is he going to work with you on?”

“I don’t know. But honestly, I’m just excited to meet him and learn from him.”

Akila’s eyebrows flew up. “You haven’t met him yet?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Let’s change that.”

Grabbing my wrist, Akila pulled me to the other side of her wall. “Excuse me.” She dropped hold of my arm and walked up to Luca Romano as he was speaking with a broad-shouldered man. “Excuse me, gentleman...”

The man talking to Luca turned and lit up at the sight of Akila. Seeing his profile and the way he gazed at her, I immediately remembered him from the day she approached me.

“Carlos, Luca... this is Serena.” She turned to me. “Serena, this is my...” Her smile grew. “This is my boyfriend, Carlos.”

“Hi, Carlos.” I took a step closer and shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Serena,” Carlos responded with a firm handshake.

“And this is Luca Romano,” Akila continued, stepping beside her boyfriend and gesturing to the superstar photographer.

I inhaled sharply. *Luca Romano.*

He was handsome—clean-shaven, chiseled jaw, close Caesar haircut, flawless caramel skin, full, sexy lips and almond shaped light brown eyes. He was wearing black slacks, a black button-up shirt, and black shoes. The top two buttons were left unbuttoned, and I noticed a necklace tucked inside.

Besides the platinum watch, he looked understated. He was sleek and sexy, but more low-key than I expected. As good looking as he was, it was the cool confidence that he exuded that made my face heat under his gaze.

He could change my life.

“Luca Romano,” I stated in awe, reaching my hand out to shake his.

Nerves knotted my stomach.

Our eyes locked, and there was a brief hesitation before he extended his hand to meet mine. “Serena Brooks. In the flesh.” He paused. “And to be clear, we spoke earlier.”

“How could I forget?”

“It was a memorable conversation. What was it you said? A fake ass accent?”

I erupted with a loud laugh before covering my mouth with my free hand.

His eyebrows shot up and he took a step back, letting my hand slip from his grasp. “Wow.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know, I know. I have a loud laugh.”

He nodded. “Yes, you do.” Lowering his voice, he added. “I like that.”

“Luca! Luca!” A blonde woman ran up to him, completely ignoring the fact that I was talking to him. “Luca, I need you,” she cooed.

I glanced over at Akila and Carlos who were both watching the entire scene play out. Carlos had a surprised expression, but Akila looked irritated.

“I’m in the middle of a conversation, Jennifer,” Luca pointed out gently. “Give me a couple of minutes.”

“Okay, but I need you to hurry. It’s important. Please,” she whined in a mix of baby-talk and the staccato tone of her speaking voice. She glanced at me. “She’s not even in our class.”

“Jennifer. I said I’m in the middle of a conversation, and I will be right with you.” His voice was even and firm, but his accent thickened. He didn’t raise his voice or snap at her, but he didn’t have to.

For the first time, Jennifer looked at me. She put her hands on her slim hips and eyed me before turning back to Luca. “Okay, I’ll be at my photo story wall.”

Without another word she turned on her heel and stalked off.

Luca gave me an apologetic smile. “What were we discussing before the interruption?”

You said you liked my laugh.

“I’m not sure,” I lied with a smile. “But I am sure I want to work with you, so I’m glad you called.”

His face lit up. “That’s good to hear because seeing you in person confirms that you’d be perfect for the project.” He gave me a quick onceover. “I like your style.”

“Thank you.” I smiled, debating on if I should tell him it was part of my collection. I decided to wait until we had a business meeting. “When would you be free to discuss the project in detail?”

“A meeting was rescheduled for next week, so I have some time tomorrow. Is that too short notice for you?”

“Tomorrow evening.” I pretended to mull it over before slowly nodding. “I think I can make myself available.”

“Okay, I’ll contact you with the details.” He extended his hand.

I shook it. “It’s nice to meet you and to see you in person.”

“You, too.”

He gave me a short nod before he walked away.

I looked to my right. Carlos was speaking with someone about his work, but Akila was staring at me, grinning.

I made a beeline to her and enveloped her into a hug. “Thank you. I owe you one.”

“You are so welcome, and you don’t owe me a thing! We’re even. I just can’t wait to see what comes of this.”

Backing away from her, I noticed how fashionable she was. “I know! I’m sending you tickets to my fashion show.”

“Oh, that’ll be great.”

We exchanged phone numbers and goodbyes as a couple of people were waiting to hear from her on her side of the wall.

I made a beeline into the restroom and checked all five stalls to ensure they were empty. Pulling my cellphone out of my bag, I called Vanessa.

“Hello,” my best friend answered on the first ring.

“Hey! I have to tell you something. You have a minute?” I asked quietly.

“Why are you whispering? Derrick, baby, will you go get me a bottle of water from downstairs please? Thank you. I love you.” She paused. “Okay, he’s gone. Serena what’s wrong?”

“First and foremost, I met Luca and he’s supposed to call me later to set up a meeting for tomorrow.”

“OHMIGOD!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and could still hear cheering.

“Nessa,” I laughed, trying to get her attention. “Nessa, I don’t have much time, and I have to tell you the second thing.”

“There’s more?! Spill it!”

“Marcus is here—”

“Round two!”

“He’s here with his girlfriend.”

There was complete silence for ten whole seconds. “What? Girlfriend?”

“Yeah.” I looked at my reflection in the mirror, deciding to reapply my gloss. “He apparently has a girlfriend.”

“What the hell? But you two just hooked up? And he’s been after you for months!”

“I know. I don’t know what’s going on. And then they asked me to come over for dinner. She was like any friend of Marcus’s is a friend of mine.”

“Either they’re angling for a threesome or she’s trying to see if Marcus is faithful.”

“Right? I don’t know what’s going on, but I was so shocked that I couldn’t even call him out or confront him about anything.”

“Yeah, that’s crazy. I wouldn’t have known what to say either. You were blindsided by an unknown girlfriend!”

“That’s the thing... I ran into Jess, and she knew. She said it’s been pretty public all this semester.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry, Serena. I was hoping he would be steady—”

“Come on now. You know it was never going to be anything like that. He’s twenty-two. He’s apparently going to get signed to a professional contract. I was not thinking it was going to be more than what it was—a good time. My issue is with the fact that he has a girlfriend and never once mentioned her.”

“You should cuss him out.” She lowered her voice. “I hear Derrick coming back.”

“Oh okay, this is the last part,” I promised. “I would’ve cussed him out...but I already asked him to pose in the jacket. And Jess pointed out that since he’s getting so much attention now, I should feature him in the Simply Serena promotional shoots.”

“Ooooooh... that’s a good idea. Remember that ad campaign you posed for with the two football players? Once they hit it big, your picture was everywhere.”

“Yeah. I know.” I nodded even though she couldn’t see me. “And as mad as I am that he’d cheat on his girlfriend with me, I can’t stop thinking about how it would get a lot of attention if I used him. So, I’m conflicted.”

“The moment he did what he did without telling you the whole story, he used you. So, you are allowed to use him in your campaign. He owes you.”

“Good point.” I sighed. “Okay, I’m sorry. Go back to your husband. I’m going to use the restroom and then find Jess.”

“Don’t apologize. Call whenever. I mean, we are probably having sex in the next few minutes, so give us an hour and then call anytime.”

Laughing, I said goodbye to my best friend and then locked myself in the bathroom stall furthest away from the door.

Although jumpsuits and rompers were cute, the absurdity of having to strip naked to go to the bathroom was always a struggle. Before I could maneuver out of my jumpsuit, I jumped at the sound of women loudly entering the restroom.

“...with Luca?” the first woman questioned irritably.

Hearing his name and that distinctly familiar voice caused me to listen closer.

“I’m not sure, but it wasn’t like he was talking to her for that long,” the second female voice answered. “He’s been moving around the room, making small talk and answering questions. I haven’t really seen him talk to anyone for more than a quick minute. Well, except for...”

“Except for that one girl who was all in Luca’s face. Do you know her?”

“I know of her, but I don’t know her. She’s pretty popular though. I’m pretty sure her name is Serena.”

With one foot in and one foot out of my jumpsuit, I froze as she said my name.

“I highly doubt she’s Luca’s type,” the first woman commented rudely. “Did you see those hips? She’s like a size

twelve, and her hair is a big poof.”

“Jennifer!” The other woman admonished with a giggle. “So, why are you worried about her?”

Jennifer? Jennifer? The skinny blonde?

“Because he actually had the audacity to brush me off while he was talking to her,” Jennifer shouted. “I have dibs on him. I’ve been playing the long game for him. Do you know what I had to do to get into his seminar?”

“Bitch, of course I know! I wrote your writing samples!”

Jennifer laughed. “Yeah, that’s true. It’s been so long since I was in school. I never would’ve been able to do that shit without you. But that’s what I’m saying—I did what it took to get in that class because I needed face-to-face time with him. He’s hot, single, and rich. That’s what I’m looking for in a man.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Exactly. And that’s why I need to keep the vultures away from him. And that Serena girl has vulture written all over her.”

“Maybe they were talking business or she’s buying one of the photographs? And besides, you said that he was into you and that you two had a connection. A conversation with someone else isn’t going to change that. So, what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that she was all over him, and she’s probably trying to fuck him. And the fact that he would turn me away to continue speaking with her just rubbed me the wrong way.” She paused. “The slutty way she was hanging all over him...yeah, she’s trying to fuck him.”

“Jennifer!” The second woman let out a laugh. “They talked for a couple of minutes. I think you need to calm down a bit.”

“I won’t calm down until I seal the deal with him. If I would’ve had sex with him already, I wouldn’t be worried

about anyone else. I would have him eating out the palm of my hand...amongst other things.”

“Jennifer!” The second woman let out a laugh. “This is way too much information.”

“So tonight, I will be the last one to leave, and I will be leaving with him. Thanks for driving my car back to my place. I’ll tell him I need a ride because you left without me and then once we’re alone in his car, one thing will definitely lead to another.”

“You are so bad, Jenny!”

“I’m so bad, but I’m so good,” she giggled. “So, if you see anyone talking to him and being flirty, let me know. And especially keep an eye on that Serena girl.”

They giggled as they left the bathroom.

After doing my business and washing my hands, I exited the restroom with a smirk.

I had a quick introduction with Luca, and it has people talking already? I laughed to myself. They are really going to lose their shit when they see he’s going to use me in his next project.

“What are you smiling about?” Marcus asked, seeming to appear from nowhere.

“Why do you keep easing out of the shadows?” I looked around before adding, “And what the actual fuck?”

“I was going to tell you.”

I made a face. “When? And don’t you think that’s something I deserved to know before I accepted your invitation to go out?”

“But you wouldn’t have gone out with me if I would’ve told you then. I planned to tell you before we...” He licked his lips and smiled. “But one thing led to another.”

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. “You have some nerve. I can’t believe you’d put me in this

awkward ass situation. I should go tell her right now. She has a right to know.”

“Oh, she already knows, and she’s cool with it.”

“What?”

He gave me an apologetic look. “Listen, we have an open relationship, and that only works if we’re safe and if we’re honest with each other.”

I felt like I was in an alternate dimension or the seventh circle of hell.

“What the fuck?” I hissed. “So, you remembered to get permission from your girlfriend, but you didn’t bother to let me know? You basically made me some sort of side chick?!”

“I was going to tell you.” He moved his head to stay in my line of sight as I rolled my eyes. “I swear to God I was going to tell you. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.”

“That’s not good enough,” I grumbled as I started to walk away.

“I’ll model your jacket.”

I stopped.

Personally, I knew Marcus was wrong for not telling me. Professionally, I knew Marcus would be a huge deal and bring Simply Serena additional attention. So, even though I knew I should’ve just found someone else to model the jacket, I turned back toward him.

“I’ll model your jacket,” he repeated apologetically.

Glaring at him, I stepped a bit closer. “I’m not having dinner with you and your girlfriend. We’re both—hell, all three of us—are going to pretend like what happened between us didn’t happen.”

“Does that mean you’re going to forgive me and take me up on my offer?” He smiled, and his bright teeth glowed white.

“I’ll text you the time and date of the shoot when that time comes. Outside of that, don’t send me any more text

messages.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t date men with girlfriends.”

I walked off without waiting for him to say anything else.

“Serena!” Jessica called, still standing near the Sweatpants Season exhibit. She ran up to me and hissed, “First and foremost, what was that with Marcus?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing. Just him agreeing to model the jacket.”

“Ah! Good! But even more exciting... I saw you talking to Luca earlier. Tell me everything!”

I wanted to tell her, but I knew it wasn’t a good idea. Jessica Morgan was a great person and so much fun to hang out with, but she wasn’t great with secrets.

“He remembered my face from the project,” I answered.

“Ah!” She bounced on her heels. “That’s awesome! Maybe he’ll want to work with you. I’m sure he sees a lot of faces so if he remembered yours, that means you stood out to him. I love it!” She grabbed my arm and her eyes widened. “If you work with him and Marcus, Simply Serena will blow up. Mark my words. You get those two on board with you, you’ll be the talk of the town!”

Chapter Three

The heel of my black boots made a soft rapping noise against the wood paneling of the upscale restaurant as I was seated at a table. Nerves and excitement swirled inside me as I anticipated Luca's arrival. I hadn't talked to him since we said goodbye when I left the showcase Friday night. He texted me the address to District, his favorite restaurant, on Saturday morning. So, for ten minutes, I sat in my black and grey herringbone skirt and formfitting white shirt waiting for him to arrive.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like anything while you wait?" the waitress asked me for the second time.

"I'm sure. I don't want to risk getting anything on my top before my meeting," I admitted with a smile.

"Understood," she nodded. "It's a very cute outfit!"

"Thank you. It's from the Simply Serena Collection."

"I've never heard of it."

My smile grew. "Well!" I dug into my black leather bag and pulled out my card and a flyer for the fashion show. "You should come. The show is two weeks from today. There are still a few tickets available online."

"Thanks!" She read the flyer before slipping both cards into her pocket. "I'm going to check this out."

"You should! I look forward to seeing you there."

As she walked away, I turned my head in time to catch a glimpse of a man making his way toward me.

“Oh, hey!” I greeted Luca as he approached.

“Serena Brooks.” His accent seemed more pronounced as he said my name. He reached out for my hand and I gave it to him. With sincerity, he looked deep into my eyes. “I’m sorry I’m late. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long.”

Giving his hand a comforting squeeze, I smiled. “No, you’re fine. I haven’t been waiting long. You’re only five minutes late.”

“I’ll make it up to you.” He let my hand slip from his as he took the seat across from me. “Thank you for meeting me.”

“It’s an honor. Working with you is a dream come true.”

“The honor is mine. You’re even more beautiful in person,” he acknowledged without the least bit of sexual interest.

“Thank you. You, too.”

He averted his eyes shyly for a second before changing the subject.

We made small talk for a few minutes until the waitress came to take our order. I ordered a black bean burger and fries. He ordered a steak with a side of asparagus.

Luca handed the waitress our menus. “Thank you.” After she walked away, his eyes met mine. “So, you’re a vegetarian?”

“Nope. I just like the taste of black bean burgers more than actual burgers.”

His eyes widened. “What?”

I laughed. “Yes! Why does that weird people out?”

“Because that makes no sense.”

“You make no sense. You ordered a steak and substituted the baked potato for asparagus.” I lifted my arms in confusion. “Do you have an aversion to potatoes?”

He chuckled. “No. But I have something in a few weeks that I’m trying to get ready for.”

I tilted my head to the side and eyed him suspiciously. “Well, now you have to tell me about this mystery potato-free thing you’re doing.”

His shoulders shook as he laughed harder. “It’s...” His voice trailed off as he collected himself. “It’s a thing.”

“Luca Romano has secrets.” I picked up my water glass and sipped. “Give me three guesses.”

“Go for it.”

“And you promise you’ll tell me if I’m right?”

He licked his lips. “I promise.”

“You’re going to an adult prom and you want to fit into your tux?”

His eyebrows furrowed as he looked around in disbelief. “What? No!”

“You’re going to a nudist colony and you want to make sure your six-pack is standing out?”

The amusement was evident in his face. “No.”

I shrugged. “So, basically, you’re a monster who hates carbohydrates? Got it.”

Letting a laugh slip out, he asked, “What is wrong with you?”

“Not a thing.” I paused. “Because I eat carbs.”

“Are you going to keep giving me shit until I tell you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, pretty much. Because not eating carbs deserves an explanation.”

Never taking his eyes off me, he picked up his glass of water and took a sip. With a sigh, he answered, “I’m being featured in a magazine—in front of the lens.”

“That’s awesome! Congratulations!”

His lips turned upward, but I could see a hint of reservation in his eyes. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

For the first time there was a beat of silence that hung between us. It wasn’t awkward or intimidating, but it was there.

Dropping my voice a bit lower, I broke the quiet moment. “You’re not comfortable being in front of the camera, are you?”

“I know what I’m good at, and that keeps me behind the camera.”

“It’s going to be amazing,” I expressed with determination. “You’re great at what you do, so if you’re able to direct the models that you use, you’ll be able to direct yourself. You got this.”

The right side of his lip quirked upward in a slight smile. Clearing his throat, he shifted the conversation. “What are you studying at Hamilton University?”

“Fashion Business Management.”

“Bachelor’s?”

“For my bachelor’s degree, I double majored in Fashion Design and Business. And I finish my master’s degree in Fashion Merchandising and Marketing this spring.”

He let out an impressed whistle. “Nice. And you have your own line already?”

Pride heated my face, and I sat up a little straighter. “Yes. There’s actually going to be a fashion show soon if you’re interested in coming.”

“Let me know the information and I’ll see if I can make it.”

I grabbed a flyer out of my bag and handed it to him. “Here you go.”

He smirked. “You came prepared, didn’t you?”

“I already gave one to the hostess, the waitress, and now you.” Winking at him, I added, “If you stay ready, you don’t

have to get ready.”

Licking his lips, he pulled his eyes from me and read the flyer. With a nod of his head, he pulled out his phone. “I’m putting it on my calendar, but I won’t know for sure if I’ll be able to make it until closer to the day.”

“That’s fine. Thank you.” I waited until he looked at me again. “So, what made you do this seminar, and are you doing it again?”

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

“The money.”

“You little gold-digger.”

He laughed. “The money is what convinced me to do it. But I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t think it was beneficial for both me and the students involved.”

“Are you doing it again?”

His eyes glimmered. “If I were to do it again, the information would go out on Monday, and the seminar would start in November.”

I nodded, understanding exactly what he was saying. “This must be what insider trading feels like,” I mused, stroking my chin. “You went to Hamilton, right?”

Choking on his water, he laughed before answering. “Yeah, eight years ago. So, when the opportunity presented itself, I decided to come home and spend time with my dad.”

“Home? So, you were born and raised here?” I asked, knitting my brows. “Your accent isn’t giving me Maryland vibes.”

“My mom is from the Bronx, but she was born in Italy. My dad is from Baltimore. My grandma got sick and came to stay with us, so I grew up with my grandma and mom. I didn’t move to Maryland until junior year of high school. I applied to Hamilton and…” He stretched his arms out at his sides. “Here I am.”

“I know photographing Jordan Brewers was the thing that made you famous—”

“I’m not famous.”

Ignoring his interruption, I continued, “But what made you pick up a camera in the first place?”

“I started shooting parties and events in college, and it evolved—”

Wagging my finger at him and playfully glaring across the table, I added, “No, sir... don’t give me the bullshit answer you’d give to an interviewer. I want to know what really got you into photography.”

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

He tapped his finger against his glass as he eyed me. “I have family in Italy—Palermo. I would spend half the summer with my family over there and the other half in West Baltimore. On my thirteenth birthday, my dad got me a camera and told me to spend the summer taking pictures of every beautiful thing I could see.”

“Everything beautiful in Italy?”

“In Italy and in West Baltimore.” He took a sip of his water. “He used to always say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is in the eye of the photographer. And beauty is in the eye of the subject.”

“I like that.” Licking my lips, I considered the statement. “That’s deep.”

“My dad is a deep man.”

We were both quiet, reflective for a moment.

“Here’s your food,” the waitress interrupted, setting our plates between us. “Do you need anything else at the moment?”

“Serena?” Luca questioned.

“No, I think I’m okay,” I replied.

“Looks like we’re okay. Thank you.” Luca flashed a polite smile at the waitress. As soon as she walked away, he smirked at me. “Those fries do look good.”

I shook my head. “Nooooo... you wanted the asparagus,” I teased.

He chuckled just before taking a bite of one of the green stalks. “Mmm.”

Smirking, I took a bite of a fry.

With a serious expression, Luca leaned forward. “Now that we have our food, I want to talk to you about something...”

My heartrate spiked in anticipation as I waited for him to continue. I didn’t move. Seconds ticked by and we just silently stared at one another.

“Vegetarianism,” he deadpanned. “Why did you give up meat?”

I couldn’t take it anymore. Throwing the other half of my fry in the pile of fries from which it came, the question just burst out of me. “Luca, when are you going to tell me about the project?”

I watched the corners of his mouth turn upward.

Feigning confusion, he gasped, “What project? I thought this was a date.”

With a giggle, I rolled my eyes. “Cut the shit! You know damn well what project I’m talking about.”

He let out a short laugh as he wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Okay, okay. I was hired to do a conceptual shoot about finding beauty in unconventional places. If you’re up for it and available next weekend, that’s when I’d like to get started. The theme—”

“I’m in.”

He gave me a look. “Just like that.”

I shrugged. “Just like that.”

“Serena, Serena, Serena.” Grinning, he picked up his water. “You are nothing like I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

He sat back in his chair, studying me. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I expected you to be a little difficult.”

I winked. “Oh, I am.”

He laughed. “Got it.”

“But seriously, you are a legend. I could learn so much from you, and that alone would be good for my career. Maybe...” I suddenly got nervous at the thought of asking him to work on photos for me. Glancing down at my plate, I summoned my courage. “Maybe, um...between shots and makeup changes, you could give me some tips on how to shoot an idea I have for my line.”

“Yeah, of course.”

A sigh of relief left my body, and I took a big bite of my veggie burger.

He held my gaze for a minute. “Did you think I was going to tell you no?”

My lips curled upward after I swallowed. “It was a possibility.”

He nodded as he chewed a piece of steak. “You think I’m the kind of asshole that’ll ask you to model for me and wouldn’t help you in return?”

Giggling, I shook my head. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. I just didn’t know what you might say—you being a big celebrity and all. The school basically forbid us to approach you, so I was hesitant to mention my idea.”

“That was because—”

“Because you’re a celebrity and you had the school in a tizzy.” I chomped down on a fry as I watched his eyes dance in amusement. “You don’t have time for mere mortals.”

“Cut that shit out right now,” he groaned.

Giving him my most innocent look, I widened my eyes. “What shit? Whatever do you mean?”

He glared at me. “You’re right. You are difficult.”

I giggled at his expression and words, but when his chuckles mixed with mine, it just made me laugh harder.

Once his laughter died down, his expression turned thoughtful. “The only difference between me and you is platform and audience. Don’t ever be afraid to ask for what you want—especially with me. If I can help you, I will.”

A warmth filled my chest. “Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

He held my gaze for a beat too long.

“Are you two still doing alright?” the waitress asked, refilling our glasses of water.

“Yes, we are,” he answered for the both of us. “Thank you.”

“Um, this is for you,” she said to him.

Looking away from his face, I noticed the tray in her hand with the tumbler filled with amber liquid. She sat it down in front of him.

He eyed the glass. “I didn’t order this.”

“Yeah...” She glanced at me, giving me an apologetic look. “I didn’t want to bring it, but my boss said I had to.”

“I appreciate it.” He handed the drink back to her. “But no thank you.”

She nodded once and scurried away.

I raised an eyebrow and tried not to laugh. “Well, well, well...” I murmured before taking another bite of my food.

Luca shook his head. “What?”

I pointed to my mouth as I chewed. After swallowing, I sang, “Oh nothing.”

He glared at me, but a smile played on his lips, so I continued.

“You didn’t have to turn down the drink on account of me.” I lifted my hand up. “I mean, we are on a date after all. But we’re keeping it casual, so you didn’t have to turn down a free drink.”

He shook his head. “I turned it down out of principle. I’m here with you—and whoever sent it doesn’t know if you’re my date or not. So, it was disrespectful of them to send it over. And I’m many things, but I’m not disrespectful.”

I saw that he was serious, so I switched gears. “Yeah... it’s definitely a bold move. I mean, you’re a good-looking guy. You are talented, and you dress well. I completely get why they would be interested. But I wouldn’t ever send a drink to a man if I didn’t know for sure they weren’t on a date.”

I could tell he was struggling not to smile. “So, you wouldn’t have sent me a drink?”

“Hell no.”

He put his hand over his heart. “Ouch.”

I started giggling.

“You didn’t have to say ‘hell no’, Serena,” Luca sulked in jest. “Just a no would’ve sufficed.”

Laughing harder, I shook my head. “No, no, no... this isn’t about me. This is about your hotness driving women to waste their money on rude drinks.” I looked around the room. “Who do you think it is?”

“I have no idea who it could be. I’m not worried about it. I have a beautiful date. What would I need with someone else?”

I hated that my entire body heated at his words, so I ignored the question. “I’m curious.” I looked around and didn’t see anyone really standing out. When I returned my eyes to Luca’s face, he was watching me. “What?”

He sat back in his chair. “I don’t know.” His words had a hint of amusement within them. “There’s something about you that’s just—”

“Luca! Hey, Luca!”

I turned my head just in time to see the blonde from the gallery walk up to our table.

“Jennifer?” Luca balked.

She stopped just past me and positioned herself so that her back was to me. Trailing her bright red fingernails across the tablecloth, she greeted Luca again. “Hi. Did you get my drink?”

“I did, thank you.” He gestured my way and then locked eyes with me. “But my lovely date and I aren’t drinking this evening.”

Date...? Interesting.

She moved a little closer to him. “Can I talk to you? It’s important.”

“No.”

“No?”

The shock in her voice almost brought me into a fit of giggles.

“I’m sorry; but as you can see, I’m here with Serena and I don’t want to be rude. But it was nice to see you.”

“Luca!” She lowered her voice. “What are you doing here with her? You know she’s a student, right?”

Oh, so she’s a snitch. Got it. I laughed hard internally.

“Who I dine with is none of your business.” He gave her a look to punctuate the end of the sentence. “Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

“I thought you said you didn’t date students,” she hissed.

Even though she purposely tried to keep her back toward me, I could still see her profile, and her face was reddening. I pursed my lips to keep from smiling. But the moment Luca’s eyes met mine again, I started grinning.

“We’re in the middle of something, and you’re interrupting our meal.” Luca’s voice was firm but not harsh. He shifted his

gaze to her. "Please, enjoy the rest of your night."

She turned to glare at me before looking back at Luca. "When you're done slumming it with that ho, you know where to find me," Jennifer snipped before storming off.

"Yikes," I murmured, eating another fry.

"I'm sorry about that," Luca apologized before scrubbing his face with his hands.

"Lovers quarrel?" I joked, trying to ease the irritation off his face.

"More like obsessed student."

I chomped on another fry and waited for him to continue. When he didn't, I quirked an eyebrow. "Go on."

"I shouldn't discuss a student with you."

"Technically, you're no longer an instructor at Hamilton, so..."

He chewed his last bite of steak and seemed to be considering. "All I can say is that she has been throwing herself at me since the first day of class."

"Scandalous!" I leaned over the table. "Did anything happen? Did you two have a moment?"

"Hell no. I don't mix business with pleasure."

"No business and pleasure?" I pursed my lips. "So, you've never slept with any of the models you've photographed?"

"Early in my career. But not in the last five or six years. And I wouldn't sleep with one of my students."

"Hm." I felt my face twist even though I tried to keep it emotionless.

"What was that?" He pointed at me. "What's that face?"

"I'm just..." I shrugged my shoulders and searched for the words I wanted to say next in the space above his head.

"You just what?"

“I’m just surprised,” I said slowly. “No judgment either way.”

“Why are you surprised? I like boundaries. When I’m single, I’m single. When I’m in a relationship, I’m in a relationship. When I’m working, I’m working.”

I searched his eyes and took in the handsomeness of his face. “I just figured this can’t be the first time a student has thrown herself at you because, believe me, there are a lot of Jennifers on campus.” I let out a little giggle as I thought about all the people—men and women—who mentioned they wanted to shoot their shot with the talented photographer. “You’re very attractive and successful. You’ve been here for what? Six weeks? It wouldn’t have surprised me if you had some sort of wild, illicit hookup with one of your students.” I tilted my head, scrutinizing his every movement.

There was a glint in his eyes as he picked up his water glass and took a long gulp.

Gasping, my hand flew to my chest. “You have slept with a student!” I whispered enthusiastically.

He just looked at me for a minute and I met his gaze. The longer we eyed one another, the more his lips twitched.

Breaking the silence, he leaned forward in his chair. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I’ve never slept with any of my students.”

I narrowed my eyes because I felt like there was more to it than that.

He took a sip of water, but still couldn’t manage to mask the smile that tugged at his lips.

And it dawned on me.

My jaw dropped. “You’ve slept with students—they just weren’t yours!”

“Unintentionally, I slept with a twenty-nine-year-old woman and a forty-year-old woman... who happen to be

students... here.”

His honesty and candor made me feel closer to him.

“Hey,” I started gently. “I’m not judging.”

He made a face. “Judging or not, I’m thirty-one. I wanted you to know that I didn’t sleep with some nineteen-year-old or something. Your peer group is a little too young for me.”

“First of all,” I started, causing him to laugh. “I’m twenty-six.”

His eyebrows raised fractionally. “So, you’re saying you’re old enough for me?”

It was my turn to laugh. My face heated because I was caught off guard. “No!”

“Interesting,” he joked sarcastically.

“Stop it! No! What I’m saying is that I’m twenty-six, and nineteen isn’t exactly my peer group. I’m closer to your age than a teenager.” I glared at him, stifling my amusement. “Shut up!”

He laughed harder. “I’m just messing with you. I know you didn’t mean it like that.”

“You’re going to be in big trouble messing with me, Luca Romano.”

His eyes dropped from my eyes to my lips. “I believe it, Serena Brooks.”

My mouth went dry.

Chapter Four

*M*y dinner with Luca Romano was a success. We talked and joked around until we realized that we'd been there for hours and it was closing time. After he paid the bill, he walked me to my car and thanked me for my company. We shook hands and agreed to meet on campus—in the classroom where his seminar was being held—after my class on Monday.

He wanted to coordinate schedules for the locations of his shoot, and he agreed to look at my designs and give me feedback for my Simply Serena promotional ad campaign. It was a good time, but knowing I had a Monday night meeting with him kept me on edge for the rest of the weekend. By Sunday night, I convinced myself that I needed to approach my meeting with Luca as if we didn't hang out like friends the night before.

I sat down in the second bedroom that I converted into my design room. I grabbed all my sketches and spread them out on the floor. It was one thing when I was going to try to do the campaign myself, but the fact that I was going to have Luca Romano's professional eyes on my work, I knew I had to bring it. Tapping a notebook, I planned to flesh out my best ideas. I'd just finished writing out the first idea when my phone rang.

My stomach flipped as I stared at the name flashing across my screen.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Serena.” His voice was unique—deep, sexy, accented. I knew who he was before he introduced himself. “It’s Luca.”

“Hey!” I greeted him. “How are you?”

“I’m cool. How are you?”

I looked at the spread around me and the one sole idea that I had written down on my notebook. “I’m fine.”

“Are you busy?”

“Not really,” I lied. “What’s going on? Everything okay?”

*Please don’t cancel our meeting tomorrow, I prayed.
Please don’t cancel our meeting tomorrow.*

“Yeah, everything is cool. I just finished up a long day and was going to take a ride.” There was a heavy pause. “Talking to you last night was a good time. I figured I’d ask if you were interested in getting together—to talk.”

My eyebrows flew up. I sat in a stunned silence for a few seconds. “You want to get together tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Um...”

“No pressure. It wouldn’t even be about work. We will still have our meeting on Monday, and I’m still moving forward with you in my project. It was just a thought. Don’t worry about it.”

I glanced at my sketches around the room. “No, I want to. But what time? I’m not dressed.”

“I could pick you up in an hour.”

“Oh! O-okay,” I stammered, suddenly nervous.

I gave him my address, and then we exchanged goodbyes.

Leaping to my feet, I ran to the other end of the apartment to figure out what I was going to wear. After pulling out two outfits that I couldn’t decide between, I showered and moisturized. While slipping on a sexy bra and panty set, I realized what I was doing.

“This isn’t a date,” I muttered to myself as I looked at myself in the mirror. The bra was sexy, and the panties were barely there. “What am I doing?”

I put the dress I’d pulled out back in the closet and went with the more casual look. Deciding on the skintight jeans and a long sleeved emerald green shirt, I paired it with brown boots. My tightly coiled hair was left in its natural state. Sliding gold pins in my hair, I added gold earrings and a watch to complete my look.

Serena: *Luca called. He wants to talk, and he’s on his way to pick me up now.*

I’d barely put my phone down when it rang, and I knew it was Vanessa before I even looked.

“Hello?” I answered with a laugh.

“What do you mean he’s on his way to pick you up? Is this a date?”

“Nessa, no!” I made my way to the bathroom to do my makeup.

“Is it business?”

“Well...no.”

“You’re going on a date with Luca Romano!”

I looked at my face in the mirror. “It’s not a date.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Just jeans and that long-sleeved green top that I got on sale this summer.”

“The low cut one!”

I looked down. While the shirt showed off my assets, it wasn’t obscene. And it wasn’t low enough to be considered “the low cut” shirt.

“The one with all the buttons on the wrists,” I explained, looking at myself in the full-length mirror.

“Yeah, we’re definitely talking about the same shirt and it’s perfect! It’s casual, but not too casual. It’s sexy, but not too

sexy. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. I think we’re just going to ride around and talk.”

“Ride around and talk?” Vanessa yelled something to her husband before continuing with me. “Derrick always complains that I take too long to get ready, but guess who just finished getting ready?”

I laughed as I heard Derrick arguing his side of the story in the background.

“Anyway,” Vanessa said loudly, directing her attention back to me. “This could go either way, but it feels like a date to me.”

The idea of it being a date stirred something up.

“Okay, so last night when we hung out, it was a really good time,” I admitted, deciding against makeup.

“Yeah, I got that from your text last night,” she giggled.

Rolling my eyes, I continued, “We talked a lot about work and how we got into it and pursuing our passions and just...it was about business, but it was bigger than that. It wasn’t just discussing his project and my project, it was about how our work was our life.”

“I like the sound of that. But as I was saying, if you two talked for like five hours last night, what other business stuff would he need to discuss with you?”

“That’s the thing, he said it wouldn’t be about business.”

“Oh my god, it’s a date!”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t get the sense that he was asking me on a date. He called and literally asked me to go for a ride with him. Like a friend. It’s a friend date.”

“A friend date?” She sounded skeptical. “I don’t know...”

“When we were out last night, it felt like we’d known each other for years. It was just easy. But now...” I hesitated before continuing in a hushed tone. “I got butterflies when I thought about it being a date.”

“Ooooooooooh! You’re not worried about if it’s a date or not. You’re worried because you want it to be. That’s exciting because you haven’t been into a guy in months.”

“Vanessa!” I groaned, shaking my head. “You’re missing my entire point.”

“What’s your point? I’m listening. I’m obviously not at dinner!” She added that last part loudly, clearly directed at Derrick.

I chuckled under my breath. “My point is that if we’re business associates, that’s fine. If we’re friends, that’s fine. If it’s a date, that’s fine. But all I was looking for was a mentor. I gave Akila my card in hopes that he could mentor me, maybe help me with my campaign. I never thought he’d be so—”

“Handsome? Funny? Talented?”

“Great. He’s a really great guy.” I exhaled. “And I don’t want to end up messing up a business thing because I’m overthinking everything.”

“Well, take it one day at a time. You two may hang out tonight and you realize that he’s a great collaborator, but he wouldn’t be someone you’d date.”

Not likely.

“I don’t know. But you’re right about one thing. I’m going to take it one day at a time. We’ll chill tonight and then we’ll have our business meeting tomorrow and then we’ll go from there.”

“Wait! I forgot you were meeting him tomorrow!”

“Yes.”

“You know what this means? This is a date!” She squealed excitedly before dissolving into a fit of giggles. “I’m just kidding. Sorry. Hello? Serena!”

I pursed my lips and glared at my reflection in the mirror since I couldn’t glare at her. Shaking my head, I refused to laugh. “And for that, I’m getting off the phone with you, and I will not call you with the details when I get back.”

“Don’t be like that,” Vanessa chuckled. “Call me later and tell me what happened!”

“Nope! Enjoy dinner with Derrick!”

“Send me a text and let me know where you’re going.” Vanessa laughed even harder, triggering me to laugh as well.

“I will. Have fun at dinner. And what is Derrick doing?”

“I’m about to go check and see. Text me when you make it back.”

We said our goodbyes and I ended the call.

Fifteen minutes later, I grabbed a brown jacket that matched my boots and headed outside. It was a beautiful night, and I wanted to eliminate any potential weirdness by not having Luca come to the door.

My phone vibrated in my back pocket. Pulling it out, I smiled at Luca’s text.

Luca: *I’ll be there in two minutes.*

Serena: *I’m outside.*

By the time I slipped the phone into my bag and slipped it on my forearm, Luca’s black luxury sedan pulled up in front of me. He rolled down his tinted window.

“Serena Brooks.”

“Luca Romano.” I walked to the passenger side and slid into the leather seat. The smell of his cologne infiltrated my lungs, and I resisted the urge to make an appreciative noise. Looking around before making eye contact, I nodded. “Nice car.”

He looked at me and smiled. “Thank you. Are you ready?”

I quirked a perfectly arched eyebrow. “Are you?”

He chuckled to himself. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

The sound of his laugh warmly spread through me, and I instantly relaxed. “Oh! I love this song!”

He turned the music up. We pulled out of my apartment complex and cruised down the road, heading toward downtown. Once the song was over, I adjusted the volume and turned in my seat.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, staring at his profile. His perfect bone structure was on display, and I couldn’t help but notice.

“Nothing in particular.” He looked over at me and smiled. “What’s on your mind?”

“That I’m in the car with the talented Luca Romano, headed to an unknown destination. Now what’s on your mind?”

“Honestly?”

I smiled. “Always.”

Without looking at me, he said, “That you’re beautiful.”

My breathing faltered. “Oh!”

“And I’m trying not to think about work, but seeing you without makeup...” Glancing at me, he nodded. “You’re actually incredibly beautiful. You don’t need makeup or editing to make you beautiful.”

“Thank you.” My face flushed at his compliment, but I noticed that he wasn’t speaking from a place of attraction. He was just making an observation. He was working. “Just for the record, I’m also beautiful with makeup and editing.”

He chuckled. “Got it.” He turned the music up a little. “Do you like this song?”

I leaned toward him. “Do I?”

I launched into the lyrics of the rap and he joined in. Loudly, we rapped the entire song. We managed to sing the chorus and do all adlibs and backup vocals, too. When we finished, we laughed, and I gave us a round of applause.

“We killed that!” he joked.

“We should put together a mixtape.”

“If we were a group, what would our name be?”

“Something that encompasses what we do.” I tapped my chin. “Double...?”

“Double Exposure?”

I giggled. “Double Sided Tape?”

We laughed at the horrible names we came up with as Luca got on the interstate. Between singing and rapping random songs, we tried to figure out a name of our singing group that would encompass both of our careers. By the time he’d taken the exit, we’d decided on the name Beholder.

“This is legit now,” I declared, wiping the tear from my eye. “Now that we’ve put a name to it, this is real.”

“From this point forward, I’m introducing myself as the lead singer of Beholder,” Luca announced ceremoniously.

I put my hands up. “Hold up! What do you mean lead singer?”

“Did you not hear the runs I just did?” He made a face that cracked me up. “Did you not hear those notes I hit?”

My jaw dropped. “You are not the lead singer! I carried us. You didn’t even know the lyrics to the last song. You were straight mumbling.”

“Come on, Serena. Don’t do that. You know I killed it.”

I howled, clutching my side. I hadn’t laughed so much in a long time. “You killed this group. That’s the only thing you killed.”

“I’m done! My solo career was just about to take off anyway.” He pulled down a road that lead to a mostly empty, gravel parking area.

“Where are we?” I wondered, looking around.

“This is where they are building a drive-in movie theatre.”

“Oh, cool!”

“And that’s Dowdy Lake,” he answered, parking so that we were facing the lake.

All the spots that would've been ideal for looking at the lake were taken, so we got out of the car. Grabbing my jacket, I followed behind Luca. The chain separated the gravel parking area from the grass and rock bank of the lake.

“Here,” Luca said, offering his arm.

I took it, and he helped me step over the chain and then continued assisting me until we made it to the flat surface.

“Wow.” I took in the way the moon cast light over the lake. The mix of yellow, orange, and green leaves seemed to glitter from both the moonlight and the street lights. “This is beautiful.”

“Yeah. There’s only a short period of time where it looks like this. Every fall, I try to catch it at least once during the day and once at night.”

There were a handful of people, mostly couples, scattered along the bank, so I kept my voice low. “Have you seen it during the day yet?”

“Not this year. Saturday will be when I see this”—he gestured in front of us—“in the daylight.” A small smile played on his lips as he took in the scenery. “There’s nothing like natural beauty. There’s no filter necessary. It just is.”

I stared at him. The awe in his voice spoke to who he was as a person and who he was as an artist.

We stood side-by-side in silence for a few minutes. It wasn’t awkward at all. I felt comfortable and serene. My mind was blank for a while, and then I started thinking about my parents and how thankful I am for them.

“What are you thinking about?” Luca asked, interrupting our tranquil moment.

“How blessed I am. You?”

“The same.” He nodded. “That’s the power of this place. I usually have a lot going on in my head at one time and nothing can slow it down. I’ve tried working out, food, sex, music, and nothing works. But I come to Dowdy Lake to take in the beauty, and it slows everything down, clears my head, and

gives me clarity. And when I feel that, it's a blessing." He pointed to a bench that was being vacated at that very moment. "Come on. Quick. But play it cool."

We started walking leisurely toward it at first, looking around. He started whistling and sped up. I bumped him and then started jogging. Laughing, he grabbed me just before we fell onto the wooden bench.

"I said play it cool," he playfully admonished me.

"That's what you said, but that's not what you did! That whole plan went to hell. When you started whistling and walking like you were going to see The Wizard, I knew that we didn't have much time before someone snatched our spot."

He chuckled. "Who was coming?" He gestured to the other people around. Two of them were sitting on separate stone structures, three of them were sitting on blankets, and one person was there taking pictures. "Who, Serena?"

We tried to laugh quietly, but that only made us laugh harder. When the amusement left the moment, we sat contently.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I started, knowing that the statement already started off rough once it left my mouth.

His brows furrowed, but he said nothing.

"You are really good looking. You are funny and smart and talented—"

"Thanks. I'm not going to lie, it started off questionable, but I can't say I hate where this is going."

Amusement altered my speech as I continued, "But when you were telling me about the profile that's being done on you, you seemed uncomfortable."

He chuckled. "I am."

"Is it the interview or the photos that make you uncomfortable?"

"The photos."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. I didn't want to push or pry, but I knew if I complimented him anymore, it would look like I was throwing myself at him.

I opened my mouth to ask another question, but he beat me to it.

“You said you were thinking about how blessed you are.” He seemed to be choosing his words carefully, timidly. “What would you say is your biggest blessing?”

“My parents. Hands down. They've helped me so much. I worked at a fabric store part-time and even with my discount, the fabrics I wanted for my designs were pricey. They helped me get what I needed to get started. When they saw that I was able to pay them back within a week, for loan purposes, they became my bank. Their financial support has been the biggest blessing, but their emotional support has been a gift from God.” I smiled, thinking about Mom and Dad. “What's your biggest blessing?”

With his focus on the picturesque landscape before us, he took a moment before he answered. “The people I meet along the way.”

I thought about what he'd said and again, we fell into a comfortable silence.

“This is really beautiful.” I looked over at the others. “Oh! They are taking this romantic spot to a whole other level,” I whispered, gesturing with my head. One of the couples on one of the blankets seemed to be having sex. “I should look away, but it's compelling.”

“Ahh... So, you're a voyeur, I see.”

I turned to look at him. “I wouldn't call myself a voyeur, but I enjoy being entertained.”

He smirked. “You keep surprising me at every turn.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Because you don't think women watch porn?”

He put his arm on the back of the bench. “No, I know they do. Just not many admit it freely.” He glanced over my head

and his eyebrows shot up. “I don’t think they’re even trying to hide it anymore.”

I looked over and saw one body on top of the other body and shook my head. “They better hope the police don’t show up.”

“Maybe that’s part of the thrill—getting caught.”

“I wouldn’t know. Anything that would get me sent to jail is not a fantasy of mine.”

Luca’s smile widened, but he remained quiet.

“Your silence is peculiar,” I announced, tapping my chin dramatically. “You brought one of those students here, didn’t you?”

He shook his head. “Hell no.”

“Why ‘hell no’ as opposed to just no?”

“Because those were unplanned, unexpected one-night stands.” He shook his head. “This isn’t a place you take a one-night stand.”

“And where do you take your one-night stands?”

“Usually their place. Or a hotel.”

“Why don’t you take your one-night stands home?”

He chuckled. “Why do you keep saying one-night stands?”

I grinned. “What do you want me to call them? Your dates? Why don’t you take your one-night stand dates home?”

“Because I don’t let just anyone into my space.”

“But you’re down to get into just anyone’s space.” I joked.

“Ohhhh, you got jokes!” He bumped me with his shoulder.

“I’m just playing!” I tried to wrap my arms around him to give him a hug, and he playfully pushed my arms away from him. “I really am just playing!” Giggling, I grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry. You know I’m not judging you at all. At all.”

He stopped resisting, so we were leaning against each other. “I know.” He looked at me. “That you were joking,” he

clarified.

“So... why don't you bring your dates home?”

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

He cleared his throat. “If I'm dating someone, of course I invite them to my house. If it's a one-time thing, it's just sex. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea and think it could be more than that.” He shrugged. “I carry the situations differently.”

“So, you bring your A-game when it's something real, but your B-game for one-nighters?”

He licked his lips. “All I have is A-game. I don't know how to bring anything less than that. So, I find it best to not sleep with a woman more than once if I don't want a relationship with her.”

“Do you think a one-night stand can turn into a relationship?”

“It's possible. Hell, it's happened.” He stared at me for a second and then smirked. “You're asking a lot of questions about my sex life.”

I elbowed him. “I'm just curious about how this one-and-done approach works.”

“The no repeat rule keeps it casual and it's better than unintentionally leading someone on.”

“Do you always use protection?”

“Always. Besides the fact that I'm not trying to have a kid right now, there's too many other risks. What about you?”

“Every single time. No exceptions. Unless I'm in a committed relationship, any partner I have has to wrap it up.”

“Same here. Even in a relationship, if she's not on birth control, I'm not taking the chance.”

I hesitated for a moment. “If you only do one-night-stands, does that mean you have sex with a lot of random women, or

do you only have sex every now and again? I'm intrigued."

He grinned. "You want the number, don't you?"

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling. "No, I don't need to know your body count."

"Well, what if we were dating... if I said my body count was one hundred, you'd be cool with that?"

"If you had a clean bill of health, I'd be fine with your sexual history. My concern would be if you were actually interested in me or if you were looking for another notch on your belt."

"That's fair. What about you?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Are you asking me my body count?"

"Would you answer me if I did?"

"Yeah." I lifted my shoulders. "You can ask me anything you want."

"Nah, I'm just playing with you. I wouldn't ask you that."

"That's fine." I poked him in the chest. "Because we're talking about you, your one-night stands, and your intimacy issues right now."

We laughed until there was just amused silence between us.

"Sex with someone you care about is always going to be better. But when done right, sex is always intimate."

The sound of his voice when he said that was too much. Swallowing hard, I looked over the water. "I guess what I'm wondering is more about your personal fulfillment than anything. Since you don't do repeats, are you satisfied with just that?"

"Are you asking me if I want more?"

I thought about it for a second and then I looked back at him. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Yes. I do. But it's complicated."

“Well, when was your last relationship—?”

“No, no, no,” he interrupted with a mischievous grin. “It’s my turn to ask you some personal questions. Are you single?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time you had sex?”

“Last week,” I admitted.

Nodding slowly, his jaw clenched. “Ex-boyfriend? One-night stand? Friend with benefits?”

“No, he wasn’t any of that. He was a candidate for a friends-with-benefits type of situation, but that’s not happening. I shut it down.”

His jaw relaxed. “Why isn’t it going to work?”

My lip curled in disgust. “Because I found out after the fact that he has a girlfriend.”

“Damn, that’s fucked up.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it really was. I was mad and when I said I was going to tell his girlfriend, he said she already knew.” I shook my head. “I don’t know what they have going on, but I told his ass that there would be no repeat performance.”

“So, is that what you’re looking for? A friends-with-benefits situation?”

“No, not necessarily. I just hadn’t had sex in a long time and he had been actively pursuing me since January, so I thought, why not?”

“Why had it been so long?”

“The main reason is that there’s no time. I have school, and I’m building my business and for whatever reason, that’s a problem for a lot of these guys out here. It’s...” My sentence trailed off as I tried to figure out the best way to put it without sounding arrogant.

“It’s hard to find people who get it, who are as ambitious as you, who grind like you do,” he offered, taking the words from my mouth.

Startled, I met his gaze and held it. “Yeah,” I whispered. “Exactly.”

“It’s hard to find someone who understands what you do and why you do it. Especially when it’s not a traditional career path.” He shifted his gaze to the lake. “I get that.”

I observed his profile and the way he chewed on his bottom lip. “Is that why you said you wanted a relationship, but it’s complicated?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” He looked at me. “Because if I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it right and with the right one.”

There was a little flutter in my belly. “I feel the same way.”

“What—”

Dragging my eyes and thoughts away from him, I interrupted, “Nope, my turn!” I folded my arms across my chest. “What happened today?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you just need to drive?”

He didn’t say anything for a while. “Long day, and I needed to relax.”

“This is a great place to relax,” I sighed, taking in the scenic view. “I hope it’s helping.”

“It is.”

I looked up into the sky. “I haven’t taken time like this in forever. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Usually nothing stops my mind from thinking about work. From design, production, marketing, to the work I have to do for school, my mind is constantly focused on my goals.” Marveling at the stars, I inhaled the crisp air deeply. “I needed this, and I didn’t even know I needed it.”

I opened my mouth to continue, but froze when I glanced over at him.

Luca was studying me and when our eyes locked, his gaze was penetrating. I felt seen in a way that made me feel vulnerable and simultaneously exhilarated.

A small huff of air left my lungs.

“We should head back,” he uttered softly.

I nodded, unable to speak.

Chapter Five

Because of the impromptu meeting with Luca, I'd spent all night thinking about that moment before we left the lake. We drove home and were singing and joking around like old friends. Everything was fine. But when I got home and climbed in bed, all I could think about was the way he looked at me. But when I woke up on Monday, I was all over the place.

Sketches, swatches, idea notebook What am I missing? I don't want him to think I'm unprepared. I don't want him to think that because we hung out a couple of times, I'm not professional. Am I going to be late? Shit! I am.

I arrived on campus and to class later than usual. But being in class got me out of my head and into fashion mode. By the time class ended, I was mentally ready to see Luca again.

"Did you get the email?" Kate asked as we walked out of the classroom together. "Are you going to apply?"

The email for an additional section of Photography 250: Visual Storytelling went out that morning, and I feigned surprise along with everyone else.

"I'm not going to apply. It's more geared towards writers, and that's not me." I checked the time on my phone before slipping it into the pocket of my purple dress. "What about you?"

"Of course! I'm going to have one of the writing tutors review the sample I submitted before and tweak that."

“Great idea. Good luck!”

She lowered her voice as we exited the building. “Maybe you could put in a good word for me.”

I felt the knot form in my gut. Keeping my voice steady, I asked, “What do you mean?”

She tucked her blondish brown hair behind her ear and whispered, “With Luca.”

“Huh?”

Kate stopped walking and looked at me quizzically. “You don’t have to hide it. Everyone knows about you two.”

Everyone found out I was posing for Luca’s project? How? Is he going to think I told everyone? Is he going to remove me from the project? Is he still going to help me? Is the school going to suspend or expel me?

Questions spun in my head at a dizzying rate, but the only question I could muster to ask Kate fell from my lips in a stunned sputter.

I blinked. “What?”

“Everyone knows.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I stammered nervously. I didn’t rattle easily, but that shook me to my core.

“Don’t even try to deny it! Everyone—and I mean everyone—knows.”

“Everyone knows?”

She nodded profusely. “I found out because I overheard a couple of people talking about it in the library. Then, before I could get my notebook out, the entire table was discussing it. Apparently, it’s been all over the place since the email went out announcing his second class.”

“They...were talking about me and Luca?” Confusion slowing down my words.

“Yes!”

My mouth opened and then closed several times as I tried to come up with what to say.

“It’s a good thing, Serena! You’re so lucky. I have so many questions, but I don’t want to be rude.” She giggled. “I don’t want to overstep.”

“I don’t...know what to say.” My heart thudded against my chest as I stopped in front of the building where Luca’s classroom was located. “I um...”

She winked. “Yeah, I know you probably can’t say much. But just answer this. How did you score with him? I mean, yes, you’re gorgeous. But with the ban on us approaching him, how did you manage to get close enough to him to get him?”

I swallowed hard.

If I answer this, does that mean that I’m confirming that I violated the school mandate? If I answer this, does that mean that I will put both my future with Hamilton University, and Luca’s, in jeopardy? If I answer this, will it make things better or worse?

I only had a split second to decide.

“We were introduced by an acquaintance,” I blurted out.

Answering the question and getting in front of it had to be better than denying it and then Luca’s project getting published.

“Ahh! That’s amazing, Serena! I’m so happy for you!” Kate yelled, jumping up and down enthusiastically. She pulled her ringing phone out of her pocket. Staring at her phone with a puzzled expression, she continued, “And don’t worry about the other stuff. People are just jealous. Hello?”

She answered the phone before I had a chance to process what she’d said.

“What other stuff?”

She pointed at the phone and mouthed, “I’ll call you later.”

Waving at me, she walked away, leaving me stunned. I turned around and jumped a little. “Corey!”

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” Corey’s voice was low and flat. “I wanted us to talk privately. I was waiting until I saw you and Kate were finished before I came up.”

“What’s up?” My brows knitted. I felt unease as I registered the way he regarded me. “I have a meeting.”

“Is it true?”

I started to walk by him, but he put his hand on my arm to stop me. “I have a meeting, Corey.”

He dropped his hand from my skin. “I just... I guess I’m confused and disappointed. I didn’t think you were like that.”

You didn’t think I would violate the policy? You didn’t think I would go behind everyone’s back and try to get in good with Luca? You didn’t think I would go so far to make sure my career takes off and I’m successful?

I pulled my eyes away from him.

Even though I knew that I technically didn’t do anything wrong, I felt a little guilty. I felt like I was going to get this personal one-on-one experience that other people had to pay for because I found a loophole.

I didn’t do anything wrong. I mean, not really.

I had nothing to be ashamed of, so I rolled my shoulders back and looked him square in the eye. That surge of confidence was short-lived because the way Corey was looking at me stung.

“Wow, so it’s true.” He recoiled, shaking his head. “I thought you and I—” He cut himself off and made a face. “I didn’t think you were like that. I can’t even look at you the same, Serena.”

“I have to go. Have a good night,” I announced, rushing into the building.

Even though I had on high-heeled boots, I ran up the steps as if I was wearing sneakers. I didn’t stop moving until I burst my way into Luca’s classroom, unintentionally slamming the door behind me.

“Serena.” Luca stood up. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, sorry,” I apologized, forcing a smile on my face. “I’m okay.”

He walked around to the front of his desk and leaned against it. “You came into my classroom and slammed my door, and now you’re lying to my face?” He let out a low whistle. “You’re on thin ice.”

His words tugged a small smile out of me, but my mind was racing, and I couldn’t speak.

“Come here.” He gestured to the desk directly in front of him. “Come. Here,” he repeated, firmly.

Sighing, I sulked across the room and placed my stuff on the desk. I was too wired to sit.

He silently observed me.

I didn’t know how to tell him what was happening. I figured he wasn’t up to date with campus gossip and since it affected him too, I needed to let him know.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I took a deep breath. “Okay, so...I just found out that a bunch of people have been talking.”

Luca nodded. “That’s what people do. Don’t let it get to you.” He paused. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I swallowed hard. It was more difficult than I thought it was going to be to tell him that the cat was out of the bag. I didn’t know if he was going to be mad. I didn’t know if he was going to no longer work with me. But worst of all, I didn’t know if I was going to be expelled for violating the no-Luca mandate from the administrators.

I was going to be sick.

“Luca, I have to tell you something.”

His brown eyes inadvertently comforted me as he searched my face. “After all the stories we swapped this weekend, you can tell me anything.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. Shifting my weight from my left foot to my right and back again, I rolled my shoulders back and met his gaze.

My stomach knotted.

Something about the way he looked at me made me want to spill my guts.

“Akila approached me to pose for her picture, and I told her to give you my card. We weren’t supposed to approach you, and so I felt like because she approached me, and she would be giving you the card, and it was completely up to you to call...” My explanation trailed off as I let the information settle around us. “The opportunity presented itself, and I jumped on it. I didn’t know her before she approached me, but she needed something from me, and I wanted to be on your radar. I don’t feel like I did anything wrong, per se. But I do feel a little guilty now that everyone knows.”

“Everyone knows that you gave a fellow student a business card?”

“Everyone knows that we’re working together because I found a loophole.”

His brows furrowed. “Did you tell anyone that we’re working together and that you’re my muse?”

His muse? Did he say muse?

“No.” My voice faltered so I cleared my voice to mask it. “Well, my best friend knows, but she doesn’t go here anymore. But no one here knows.”

“I haven’t told anyone. When I choose a new muse, I keep it a secret until I finish the project.” Rubbing his hands together, he took a step toward me. “So, if you haven’t told anyone and I haven’t told anyone, how would anyone know we’re working together?”

“I don’t know.” I pulled my hands out of my pockets and shrugged, palms up.

Grabbing my hands, Luca pulled me closer to him. He stared at the nail indentions in my palms. “What are you

doing?”

“I must’ve clenched my fists too tight.” I watched his thumbs sweep over my skin and tears pricked my eyes. There was so much on the line, and I was just tired. “I swear I didn’t say anything.” My voice cracked and because he still had my hands, I couldn’t even hide my face.

“Hey,” he softly called to me, forcing me to look up at him. “I believe you. Just tell me what they said about us working together.”

“I’ve known Kate for the last couple of years. She knows me, and she knows I’m not shady. Just now after class, she asked me if the rumors about us were true. And I didn’t know what she was talking about. And she said that she understood why you would be interested, but she wondered how we met. I told her that someone introduced us. And then she told me not to worry about what people say and that they’re jealous.”

He was quiet for a moment. “So, she didn’t actually say anything about you being my muse or anything about my upcoming project?”

“I...guess not specifically. But that’s the only thing that makes sense.” I closed my eyes and exhaled. “If you need to select someone else, I understand. But...”

“But what?” His voice was soft and his accent, thick.

I let my lashes flutter open and realized how close we were. “But I don’t want you to pick someone else.”

He stared into my eyes and when his gaze dropped to my lips, my belly flipped.

Clearing his throat, Luca took a step back and let my hands go. “Serena, I don’t like for people to know who or what my subject is before I shoot it because of creative reasons. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re perfect for this project. There’s no one else for it, so don’t worry about that.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I murmured, “Thank you.”

Even though I was relieved to hear he still wanted to photograph me, I was equally concerned with being suspended

and any negative blowback Luca could receive. I didn't want our careers being negatively impacted.

He leaned against his desk. "You're welcome. But I'm going to help you with your promo shots, right? So, we're even and you don't have to keep thanking me."

"Thank you." I smiled appreciatively. I hesitated before adding, "I'm also worried about what the school will say."

He shrugged nonchalantly. "We were introduced by a former student of my seminar and I called you. That's the truth, and that's all they need to know."

"Thank you." I nodded, trying to hold back the tears of relief. He was taking everything in stride. I couldn't have asked for a better reaction. "Is there anything you want me to do about the rumors? Do you want me to deny it? Do you want —?"

"Hey, Luca," a woman entered the room without knocking. She looked familiar, but I couldn't remember her name. I assumed we'd had a class together at some point. If she recognized me, she didn't let on as she kept her eyes on Luca. "Oh... I thought you were alone."

"No, we're in a meeting."

"A meeting," she giggled, but her eyes narrowed. "I bet."

"Yes. A meeting, Ana." Pushing himself off the desk, he gave her a look. "How can I help you?"

"Oh, Luca..." She dragged his name out in a saccharine sweet voice. "I came here to ask you if you meant what you said a few weeks ago because from what I've been hearing..."

I felt my eyebrow quirk slightly as I glanced at Luca. *Is this one of the students he slept with?*

Luca scrubbed his face with his hands. "What are you doing?"

"No, what are you doing? And with her!" Snapping her head in my direction, she looked at me and grimaced. "Serena, I guess the rumors are true."

Surprised to be addressed so rudely, I scoffed, “What?”

She didn’t respond to me. Instead, she stared at Luca. “You said you weren’t interested in dating a student, so I came to ask you about what I’d heard, and…” She shook her head and gestured to us. “And here you are. You better be careful with this one, Luca.”

I was confused to the point that it was almost comical.

Luca looked irritated by the interruption. “It’s time for you to go.”

“*Everyone* loves Serena Brooks. And I do mean *everyone*,” she sneered. “I always figured there was a catch to her popularity. I didn’t guess that it was because she’s a slut. But it makes sense.”

“What?” I screeched, doing a double take.

“That’s enough,” Luca commanded roughly. “You need to go, Ana. You’re out of line.”

“You’re out of line! You’re here with this slut doing God knows what,” she spat.

“Don’t say that again,” he warned, clearly agitated.

She looked pleased that she’d gotten under his skin. “Don’t like hearing the truth about your girl? Well, here’s something you might not know. She’s fucking you to help her career. Just like she fucked the others.” She looked directly at me. “You’re just running through all the successful men of Hamilton University. Social climbing one dick at a time.”

I didn’t get a chance to respond because Luca was already halfway across the room, pointing for her to leave. “Leave. Now.”

“Ask her about Trey, Jeremiah, Peter, and Marcus. Oh! And can’t forget Corey.”

“What about them?” I questioned with a laugh.

My amusement must’ve angered her as she yelled, “You fucked them to get what you want just like you’re doing with Luca!”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you crazy?”

“See, Luca, she can’t deny it because she knows it’s true. She knows she slept with them,” she taunted.

Them? No. One of them? Yes.

Trey and Jeremiah were on the football team, and we posed for some provocative photos together for a grad student’s lingerie line during my junior year. People assumed things happened on the shoot. I flat out denied it, but I always suspected the designers started that rumor, and Trey and Jeremiah never denied it in order to keep people wondering. The footballers graduated that year and went on to play professionally. The pictures resurfaced after Trey had a huge rookie season, reigniting the speculation. By that time, I realized people were going to believe what they wanted to believe.

Peter and I openly flirted two semesters ago when we met at an investment event being held on campus. We ended up making out one night at a fraternity party. It never went any further than that, but everyone assumed it did since we spent hours at that party talking and kissing. It wasn’t until after our make-out session that I learned that his dad was one of the biggest investment bankers on the east coast and Peter was primed to take over the company one day. It was a flirtatious night that ended in a difference of opinion and a peaceful parting of ways.

Corey was cool and seemed to do well in the classes we had together. We had a friendly relationship, but I wasn’t interested in anything romantic or sexual. Because I wasn’t attracted or interested, he seemed to want me even more.

And then there’s Marcus.

Marcus and I fucked. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he wore me out. The whole night was just nonstop fun, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Until I found out about his girlfriend, I was considering another night together after the fashion show.

But I didn’t owe her an explanation.

None of that made me a slut. I didn't know where she was getting her information, but I wasn't going to dignify her allegations with a response. I'd been with a handful of men, but most of the men she named weren't part of my sexual history. But even if they had been, that didn't make me a slut.

"Are you a whore?" She cackled like a lunatic as Luca ushered her out of the room. "It just makes me mad that Luca would give someone with your track record the time of day over someone like me. I'm a good girl!"

Provoked, I opened my mouth to respond and then snapped it shut. I didn't owe her or anyone else an explanation. Who I did and didn't sleep with was no one else's business. Only one out of the five names she dropped was accurate, but I realized that it wasn't about me at all. It was about Luca. She only wanted to slut-shame me because she perceived me as a threat.

He slammed the door behind her and then turned the lock.

The sound vibrated through the room.

"So... I'm going to go out on a limb and say that Kate wasn't talking about us working together when she said everyone knows about us." I paused, observing the way his jaw was clenched as he walked back toward his desk. "Between the blonde at dinner and the psychopath just now, I'm sensing a trend," I joked lightly.

Luca gave me a look before he scrubbed his face with his hands. "I'm sorry about that."

"I'm just playing with you."

"I know," he sighed, stopping in front of his desk, a few feet away from me.

After a moment of silence, I took a step toward him. "You called her Ana. I take it you know her?"

"She's friends with one of the women I had the one-night stand with when I first got here."

"Ah. One of the students."

He looked me squarely in my eyes. "Yes."

Holding his gaze, I nodded. “The twenty-nine-year-old or the forty-year-old?”

“Twenty-nine.”

I shook my head, never breaking eye contact. “From her reaction, I would’ve thought she was the one you slept with.”

“She was trying, but I turned her down. I honestly didn’t even know the twenty-nine-year-old was a student when I met her. Ana approached me first, but she seemed too young for me. And from the way she acted just now, I was right.”

“You made a good call.”

“Yeah.” He searched my eyes. “I’m sorry about what she said about you. I probably shouldn’t have asked you to meet me to discuss the project locally. I’m sure someone saw us and made assumptions.”

“I’m sure that someone was the blonde.”

He scoffed. “I have no doubt.”

We were both quiet for a moment.

“Does this happen to you often?” I asked.

“What?” Luca asked quietly.

“Women throwing themselves at you and attacking any woman they think is a threat,” I clarified.

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

“To my knowledge, this is the first time,” he admitted, looking as though he was stunned.

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? Hm.”

“What?”

Letting my lips curl into a smile, I folded my arms over my chest. “Honestly?”

He smirked. “Always.”

“I’m just surprised. You’re talented, successful, sexy and that accent...” I fanned myself and bit my lip dramatically.

The deep rumble of his laugh chased away the tension in the room. “Thanks for that.”

“No problem,” I said with a smile. “And so we’re clear, I’m not just trying to sleep with you to help my career.”

He cocked his head to the side. “So, it’s not *just* to help your career?”

I felt my face heat as I heard what I’d said. Rolling my eyes to hide my amusement, I put my hands on my hips. “I meant, I’m not trying to use you or sleep with you.”

“That’s not what Ana said,” he teased, folding his arms across his chest.

“Ana’s full of shit.”

The look he gave me shifted from amused to probing as we stood a few feet from one another. I felt the energy in the room shift as well.

“Ask me,” I finally demanded after sixty seconds of silence.

He inched closer. “Ask you what?”

“Whatever questions are floating in the back of your mind thanks to Ana.” I squared my shoulders. “You answered all of my questions. If you have anything you want to ask me before we start working together, I want you to ask me.”

He wet his lips. “Have you ever slept with someone to better your career?”

“No,” I answered, firmly and indignantly.

“Okay.” He held my gaze for a second longer, then turning, he walked around his desk and sat in his chair.

“That’s all you want to know?” I asked skeptically. I figured he was going to ask me about how many people I slept with on Ana’s list.

“You are the only person I can envision for this project. That’s the only thing that matters to me. Everything else is background noise. Now, let’s get to work, shall we?”

Chapter Six

I wasn't sure if it was because Luca Romano was accepting submissions for a second section of his photography seminar or because Luca Romano was a Hamilton University celebrity, but the rumor mill was spinning out of control. By the time Friday rolled around, I couldn't make moves on campus without someone bringing it up. Between strangers complaining and congratulating me on getting close to Luca, and classmates asking for introductions, I was exhausted.

All the designers participating in the fashion show were given access to studios to be used as private workspaces for one week before the show. Someone moved out of theirs early so I'd picked up the keys and moved all my stuff into my space that morning.

"You look tired," Jessica commented as I pulled my sunglasses off and dropped my oversized bag on the table.

"It's been a busy week," I replied, pulling out my notebook. "Thanks for coming in early. I had an idea about the final dress."

"Really?" Her voice had a hint of concern. "The dress is perfect. You really have outdone yourself."

"I had a dream last night and—well, you'll see. I just need to know if these shoes fit you." I handed her the shoes, and she followed me to the rack on the other side of the room.

Taking the last bag off the rack, I pulled out the green dress.

Jessica made the same cooing noise she had every time she saw it. “Thank you for choosing me to wear this, Serena.”

The dress was short in the front and long in the back. Like most of the pieces in the collection, the plunging neckline and unique hemline were what made it really pop. It was the grand finale of my show, and after talking to Luca, it was the piece that would be featured on my marketing materials for my promotional campaign.

I helped Jessica into the dress. Pinning it at the waist, I repositioned where it would fall on her slimmer body. Once the dress fell the way I wanted it to, I helped her slip on the stiletto-heeled, ombre-colored shoes. It was perfect.

“I love it. I mean, I liked the other shoes with it, but these are so much better,” she commented.

“But let’s see how they look when you move.”

I watched her strut to the other side of the room, pose, turn, pose, and walk back.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, pumping my arms in the air.

After helping her out of the dress, I placed it back on the hanger.

“How are you holding up?” Jessica asked.

“I’m great now. The shoes turned out exactly how I hoped they would. I had to go get them custom made, but it was worth it.”

“That’s great! I thought you were borrowing shoes to save money.”

I straightened the dress and slowly fit it inside the garment bag. “I am for all the other looks. But since we have the same shoe size, I’ll be keeping those for myself.”

“Good!” She stopped, and even though my back was to her, I could hear her hesitation. “Serena... how are you for real?”

I turned around and looked at her. “My focus is on the show. These rumors are nothing but a distraction.”

“Yeah, but I wish there was something that you could do. They’re saying how you’re sleeping with Luca to launch your line and that you’ve slept with a bunch of men who will help you be successful ahead of graduation. What’s interesting is that there’s a lot of girls telling other girls that you are doing things right because you’re only sleeping with men who can help your career. And then you know how guys can be. But it doesn’t make any sense why everyone is so concerned with who you’re fucking.”

Flashing back to an angry Ana, I shook my head. “Because the men they’re saying I’ve slept with have achieved some sort of success, so now; all of a sudden, I’m a gold-digger, a clout chaser, a social climber, an inspiration, a success story, and a role model. I overheard two people arguing over if I was a whore or not since it seemed that I only fucked dudes with money or fame. They settled on me being a slut because whore was harsh, and they heard I was nice.”

“Wow.” Her eyes were big and watery. “I’m sorry that they said that, but even more sorry that you had to overhear it.”

“Thanks.”

“A lot of them are jealous.”

“I know. But they are jealous of relationships that never existed.” I shook my head. “It’s insane.”

“Maybe once Luca Romano isn’t on campus anymore, everything will die down.”

“This shouldn’t even be a thing. Technically, he’s been on campus for six weeks, and because one obsessed fan sees me with him for a business dinner, she spreads a rumor that piggybacks on old rumors.” I snapped my fingers. “And just like that—a shitstorm.”

“You should put out a statement saying that you didn’t sleep with any of them, and they need to chill the fuck out.”

“But that’s the thing... I’m more frustrated by the fact that they are saying that I’m trying to sleep my way to the top. It’s

so not even like that.” I put my hands on my hips. “When I make it to the top, it’s going to be because I worked my ass off and not because I slept with some man.”

“I know that’s right!” Jessica walked over to give me a high-five, and then she slung her slim arm around my shoulders. “You are such an inspiration.” She bumped me with her hip. “And not just because everyone thinks you’re fucking two NFL players, a future NBA player, and a famous photographer. You’re an inspiration because you’re a badass.”

I let out a rueful laugh. “Thanks.”

We left the workspace and headed downstairs with boxes of shoes. As we approached the auditorium where the catwalk was installed, all the models were already there. I went over the upcoming week, the rehearsals, final fittings, and then I had them all put on their shoes so they could walk the runway in them to make sure they were comfortable. After we spent twenty minutes on walking and I was just about to conclude the brief meeting, I heard a giggle and a squeal. I didn’t know what was going on until I heard the auditorium door shut loudly.

I turned around.

Luca.

He gave me a head nod and then sat down.

Wearing a black jacket, a plain white t-shirt, and black jeans, he looked good. I could see why some of the models were giggling. He definitely knew how to make an entrance.

Great. Let’s ramp up the rumor mill with this little display, I snapped internally as I turned back toward the models who were standing taller and smiling brighter.

I sighed and instantly felt bad. It wasn’t his fault. He just arrived earlier than I anticipated, and I’d hoped he was going to meet me upstairs.

Clearing my throat, I continued, “As I was saying, please be on time Monday. Like the itinerary says, we’ll meet at seven o’clock upstairs in Studio C. Thank you so much.”

The models clapped before removing their shoes and giving them back to me. As they were starting to head out, I heard a few of them chatting with Luca.

“You need help?” Jessica’s eyes widened as if she were trying to signal something to me.

Giving her an appreciative smile, I nodded. “If you could help get them out of here that would be great.”

“Got it. Call me if you need me.”

“Let me help you with that,” Luca suggested from directly behind me.

I jumped, not expecting him to be that close. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“You forgot I was here that quickly?” he joked.

“No, but I didn’t think you were right behind me.” My tone was sharper than I intended. I rubbed my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He put his hand on my back. “Are you okay?”

It was the first time he’d touched anything other than my hands, and I immediately felt warm all over. Swallowing hard, I nodded. He removed his hand, and I ignored the fact that my skin tingled in that spot.

He took the bag out of my hands and carried both sacks to the elevator. We rode up in silence and then didn’t speak again until we were in the workspace.

“Where do you want this?” Luca asked.

“On the table is fine. I’ll put them away later. Thank you.” I walked over to the clothing rack. Pulling the green dress from the rack, I hung it up separately and unzipped the garment bag. “This is it.”

He whistled. “Wow... I like that.”

The swell in my chest chased away all the frustration I felt earlier. “Really?”

“Really. But I need to see it on.”

“On Monday, I can send you a picture of it on the model who will be wearing it.”

He pulled out the stool from under the table and sat down. “You told me that you made the dress for you, so I already know it fits you. Go ahead and try it on so I can see it.”

Damn.

I forgot that when we talked about my marketing campaign on Monday, I told him that the spring line was inspired by the dress I made for an event. When we talked on the phone on Wednesday, I confessed that I ended up being so in love with the dress that I didn't wear it to the event and instead, created twenty original pieces that fit the style story. And in our Thursday conversation, he said he needed to see the dress in order to better help me with my photoshoot concept.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. I had told him too much, and there was no real way out of it.

Luca swiveled around so his back was to me. “I'll face this way, so you can change.”

I stared at the back of his head. “I thought you said you had something you had to do tonight.”

“I do, and I will make it on time. I don't hear you changing though.”

I slowly took the dress out of the bag and then hung it back on the rack. “Fine. But—”

“But nothing, Serena Brooks. Are you changing?”

Smiling, I glared at his back. “I'm changing now. Don't turn around.”

“I wouldn't do that.”

Taking the pins out of the dress, I caressed the material between my fingers. There was a partition across the room, but after another glance over my shoulder, I trusted that Luca was a man of his word.

I pulled my maroon sweater dress over my head and then unsnapped my bra. Quickly tossing those on the ottoman

nearby, I removed my black combat boots. Standing in just a pair of lavender satin panties, I held my breasts in my hands and double checked that Luca was still playing on his phone.

“Are you dressed yet?” he asked as if he could feel my eyes on him.

“I’m putting the dress on now,” I announced as I slipped the dress over my head.

Looking in the mirror, I couldn’t help but smile. It looked so good. It was the type of dress that looked great on most body types. I was curvier than Jess and her legs were longer than mine, but the dress still looked gorgeous. I didn’t have the tape to secure and lift my heavy breasts. But as long as I didn’t move too much, I knew it should be okay. Grabbing the shoes, I slipped them on, and then I scrutinized myself in the mirror.

“Okay.” I stepped forward. “You can turn around.”

Luca turned around and immediately rose to his feet. My heart thumped as I felt his gaze moving over my body. His chest rose and fell as he silently took me in. Under his heated glare, my body caught fire. Seconds ticked by and he just stood there, transfixed. He inspected every inch of me and when our eyes met, my breathing hitched.

For the first time, Luca didn’t look at me like a photographer would look at his muse he wanted to shoot. He looked at me like a man would look at a woman he wanted to devour.

“You look...” He let out a heavy breath as his eyes swept over me again. “Wow.”

With my hands on my hips and holding eye contact, I walked across the room as I would walk down a runway. When I was two feet in front of him I stopped, posed, and then turned to walk back to where I began. I whipped around to face him and waited.

Clearing his throat, he tore his eyes away from me. “You look beautiful. The dress looks even better on you than it did on the hanger.”

“Thank you.”

We were engulfed in silence while he typed something into his phone. After he slipped it back into his pocket, he looked up at me again and the lust was gone. “Something like that requires a simple black backdrop...something that captures the movement of the dress in the photo.” He walked over to me and looked at my legs. “May I?”

“Okay...” My tone hesitant.

He grabbed the longer back hem of the dress and straightened it out. “Can I reposition your feet?”

“Yes.”

He kneeled in front of me and wrapped his hand around my ankle. Tugging, he made sure my legs were about a foot and a half apart. He kept his head down until he stood again.

“Don’t move,” he commanded, backing away.

Watching his eyes ping across my dress as if mentally taking notes, I could tell he was in his photography powerhouse mode. Backing away, he kept his focus and seemed to be in the zone. I noticed a little crease between his eyebrows as he started to nod.

“I will shoot your ad,” he offered, slipping his hands into his pockets.

I gasped, bringing my hands to my face. “What?”

“You can let me know if you want me to or—”

“Yes! Yes! Of course, I do!”

“Good.” He smirked. “But I have one condition.”

“What? Anything?”

“You have to model it.”

I shook my head. “Oh no... I have someone—”

“No,” he interrupted. “It needs to be you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I watched him head to the door as if the conversation was over. “But—”

“No buts.”

“Luca.”

“Serena.”

“Luca.”

Opening the door, he turned to face me. His eyes flicked over my body. “There is no one else.”

The door closed, and I let out a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding.

Chapter Seven

“Welcome to Date Night with The Lost Boys! I’m City Boy,” City Boy opened enthusiastically.

“And I’m Country Boy,” Country Boy added, his deep voice bursting through the speakers.

“We have a big show tonight. Country Boy and I are kicking tonight’s episode off with the biggest story of the week,” City Boy teased loudly.

“I feel like our listeners already know where you’re headed with this,” Country Boy stated, his deep voice bursting through the speakers. “There’s been a lot of talk this week”

“The hot weather has officially faded away and we’ve had our first solid week of fall. So, you know what that means... it’s cuffing season,” City Boy started.

“Yes, sir! Cuffing season is upon us,” Country Boy added with a laugh. “And for those of you that don’t know, cuffing season is that time of year when you want to be cuffed—or in other words, tied down in a serious relationship.”

“So, in honor of cuffing season, and the trending topic of the week according to our emails, this week’s episode is titled...” City Boy paused for dramatic effect. “You can’t turn a ho into a housewife.”

“City, chill,” Country Boy warned with a laugh.

“What?” City Boy exclaimed. “I’m just asking if a sexually promiscuous woman is worthy of being cuffed. I’m trying to help the people out! I want these Captain Save-A-Ho types to know that some of these hoes don’t want to be saved. And the ones that do want to be saved come with a risk. I’m a man of the people. I’m here to help and offer my expert opinion.”

“Expert opinion?”

“Yes, expert! And to each his own, but in my expert opinion, I don’t think you can turn a ho into a housewife. What about you, Country? Do you think you can turn a ho into a housewife?”

“Hell no,” Country Boy answered.

“So, here’s what the talk of the town is... Luca Romano is a hometown celebrity, a fellow alum of Hamilton University, and an all-around good dude. He has money and fame and a sweet little gig on campus right now. He can and probably has had his fair share of women in town—on and off campus. I’m sure he’s getting with most of the models he shoots. And that’s cool. But here’s the thing... Luca Romano has been seen spending a lot of time with Serena Br—”

“Woah, woah, woah...” Country Boy interrupted quickly. “Just to stay on the safe side, let’s avoid using her name. Give her a nickname.”

“Good point... We’ll call her Venus,” City Boy said with a laugh. “So, Luca Romano, man who can get with probably most of the women in town, has been seen on dates with and spending time with Venus. Rumor has it that they’ve been actually dating—not just fucking around, sources say they are dating.”

“Well, what’s the problem with that, City?” Country Boy asked. “Who is Venus?”

“Venus is a model and fashion designer, and while that sounds like she would be a good fit for Luca, we’ve learned a little more about her this week.” City Boy cleared his throat before playing music.

“Ho” by Ludacris burst through the speakers.

Country Boy could barely keep it together when the music stopped. His laughter mingled with his words, and it was hard to understand what he said at first. “Man, you are so wrong for that! You know that was messed up!”

“That’s the new theme song when we refer to Venus and those like her,” City Boy explained. “We’ve learned that Venus has many, many bodies under her belt. She’s slept with quite a few eligible bachelors on campus. She seems to like the moneymakers.”

“Would that make her a ho or a...” Country Boy interjected before attempting to change the subject. “Never mind. Keep going.”

“No, I think what you were about to say is a fair point that we’ll have to come back to—is Venus a ho or a whore? A ho likes to fuck around for the pleasure of fucking around. A whore likes to fuck around for money. If Venus is limiting her fucking to men who have financial means, does that mean she’s a whore?” City Boy posed the question in a pseudo-thoughtful manner.

“I think it depends on the situation,” Country Boy responded. “If she is getting money or some sort of financial boost in exchange for sex, then yeah... that would make her a whore. But since we don’t know if she’s getting paid or not, we can’t say for sure.”

“Okay, okay,” City Boy considered his words. “Well, let’s just call her a ho because regardless of if she was getting money, we know she was getting fucked. And that brings us to our first email from Adam D who writes: Lost Boys, what’s up? I’m a recent grad of HU and a longtime listener. I’m confused about what Luca Romano is doing. The goal is to fuck sluts and settle down with good girls. Is there a shift coming where turning a ho into a housewife is the thing to do? Because I can’t get with it. I’d fuck a ho, but I respect myself too much to be in a relationship with a girl who has fucked everybody. What is Luca thinking?”

Country Boy whistled. *“That’s a hell of an email to start off with. But to answer your question, Adam, I would say he’s probably not thinking. I’m not going to lie, Venus is sexy as hell. She’s not the typical model. She’s curvier. She’s got ass and tits for days.”*

“Curvier? That’s one way to put it. Her fun bags are definitely motorboat worthy.” City Boy snickered. *“Adam, we think Luca might be thinking with his dick. And truth be told, he may not have known she has such a notorious past. He’s been traveling the world, so he may not have any local friends who let him know that he’s involved with a ho. I definitely get him fucking a ho, but I can’t imagine him knowingly cuffing a ho.”*

“That’s a good point. He may not know. He could be blinded by how sexy she is and could have no clue that she’s been around,” Country Boy agreed. *“Good question, Adam.”*

Clearing his throat, City Boy switched gears. *“We’ve had a bunch of emails that hit on the same point, and I’m going to read a few of the quotes. ‘Now if a woman has more than five partners, I’m already looking at her sideways.’ ‘At twenty-five, a woman shouldn’t have been with more than three people if she’s looking to be a wife.’ ‘I want to marry a woman whose pussy only knows my dick.’ ‘I can’t be with a girl who has been with more than twenty people. Twenty is the max. I don’t care how old she is.’ ‘I like women who are more virginal than slutty. I’d rather be with someone who has had sex with one guy than fifteen or more.’ ‘After she hits double digits, she’s the town bicycle.’ ‘I’m thirty-five and if she’s my age, she shouldn’t have been with more than fifteen men.’ ‘Just because I know things happen, I’ll say fifteen is the most a woman should ever be with.’ ‘If a woman has been with more than twenty-five, she’s a ho. I don’t care what anyone says.’ ‘If she’s slept with ten, that’s enough. That eleventh needs to be her husband or she’s definitely heading down a ho path.’ ‘My wife needs to be a virgin.’ ‘I probably wouldn’t raise my eyebrows until she got to thirty’.”*

“So, there doesn’t seem to be a general consensus about the magic number of partners a woman can have. I think it

depends on her age, the situation, how old she was when she started having sex to really pinpoint a number. But just based on what I've seen in my twenty-five years, I'm going to say ten. I think ten is a nice round number. As I get older, the number will increase along with it. But if she's twenty-five, anything over ten, I'm going to feel like we're approaching ho-ness. I don't want to cuff a ho, but I do want a woman with a little bit of experience. I want her to know what she's doing, but I don't want her out here doing everybody," Country Boy said with a laugh.

City Boy chuckled along with him. "I hear you. I hear you. But I want a good girl, man. I want her to be as close to a virgin as possible. I don't want her to have too many bodies under her belt. If she's a virgin, even better. Tell you the truth, I'd like to pretend she didn't even know what sex was until she met me. But we'll never really know the truth because you know women lie about how many men they've been with anyway."

The sound of a record scratching rang out. "Speak on it, City! Speak on it! I want to know the truth! I want accurate numbers so I can move forward knowing what's up for real."

"Women will be out here fucking everybody and then tell the next dude that she's only been with three men. And we will believe it because we want to believe it. We want to! I know I want to believe that she got all her skills from God. Lie to me, baby. I don't want your ho-fax. I don't want your ho-story. I don't want to know ever. So in a situation like the one Luca finds himself in, how do you look at your girl the same way knowing not only a snippet of how many men she's been with, but now you know everybody knows she's a ho, too? This isn't a ho from another city, either. This is a hometown ho. Ser-Venus is a ho that everyone knows is a ho," City Boy continued, causing Country Boy to laugh uncomfortably. "I think that's what's so compelling about this story. No one knew she was a ho until she got with Luca, so maybe it's the spotlight that brought the truth to light. So, for people like me, I'll never deal with a girl in the spotlight. For those like Country that want to know, shine a spotlight on her and let the truth come to you."

“Everything you said brought up some important questions. What number officially makes a girl a ho? Does it matter if she’s a ho if no one knows she’s a ho? And does celebrity have anything to do with the information that’s coming out about Venus now?” Country Boy asked.

“I can answer these questions for you here and now. Anything over fifteen is a ho. Anything over ten is ho-ish. It does matter if she’s a ho, but not as much if no one knows about it. And the fact that she’s fucking with Luca Romano is absolutely the reason this is happening. Absolutely. Because Venus has been on the scene for a minute now. She’s known, but no one really knew her business until now. She graduated from our undergrad class. I remember there was some talk about her when she hooked up with that big shot at one of our parties.”

“I remember that. But what’s interesting is that it wasn’t really about her being a ho or a slut. It was about her only being interested in him for his money and how he could finance her clothing line.”

“Yeah, it was less of a ho conversation and more of a gold digger conversation,” City Boy agreed. “But there have been quite a few emails that also called her a gold digger because her track record has shown a history of fucking men who can boost her career. While when she was dealing with the banker, she didn’t have a legitimate business. She had a dream. She wore some dope outfits. She could dress her ass off. And scrolling through her social media, she still can. But there was nothing really there for him to support. I mean, money is money, but she didn’t have a business. So, this is where the gold digger piece is important... Luca Romano could actually help her career. Does that change the conversation? Is she just a smart business woman? Using what she has to get what she wants?”

“I think it’s smart, to be honest,” Country Boy admitted amidst City Boys booing. “No, no, no... hear me out. If you’re going to be a ho, be a smart ho. Be a ho for somebody that can do something for you.”

“That’s twenty-six-year-old with a good job Country Boy talking, because I remember the old Country Boy.”

“Oh, hell yeah... a few years ago, I wouldn’t be advocating for that shit because I didn’t have shit, and I needed hoes that wanted to be hoes for the sake of being hoes.”

The two of them cackled loudly.

“But it is also important to note, none of my girlfriends have ever been hoes or sluts or whatever else,” Country Boy continued.

“And they damn sure weren’t gold diggers since they were messing with you,” City Boy laughed. Once their amusement subsided, he continued. “But to your point, you fucked some hoes back in the day, but you never cuffed them. So, do you think you can turn a ho into a housewife?”

“I mean...” Country stretched the word out as he considered the question. “I think it depends on the situation. I wouldn’t because that’s not for me. But I think some hoes can be reformed. Hoes need love, too!”

“You know damn well you can’t turn a ho into a housewife!” City Boy yelled. “Here’s why... if she’s a ho, you know she likes to fuck, and that variety is the spice of life. So, a ho is going to ho until she can’t ho no more. And by that time, why would you want to settle down with someone who has been stretched out and used up? Why would you want to commit yourself to someone that everyone else has been with? Nobody wants to be out with their girl and then have most of the other dudes in town talking about ‘yeah, I hit that’.”

“I see what you’re saying, but I definitely see some hoes getting married,” Country Boy pointed out. “I’m thinking about this one chick, and she was real slutty—I mean, she taught me everything I know—she is happily married now. So, I think some people can be reformed.”

“How long has she been married? Is it who I think it is?”

There was a beat of silence.

City Boy began to chuckle. "Oh yeah! Okay, I take that back. We do know one success story. And without putting her business in the streets, she moved away in order to find this happiness. Her husband might not ever find out she used to be a ho. He might be just like me and just accept the low number because we don't want to think that our girl has ever been with anybody else. And if he knows, God bless him. He's a saint and a forgiving man because that girl was whew! But outside of her, who can you think of?"

"To be real, just celebrities."

"And that's the only exception. You can be a ho turned into a housewife if you are a celebrity or if you are rich," City Boy explained. "But if you're just a garden-variety ho, no quality dude is going to wife you."

"Here's an interesting email from DannyBoy: 'What's up, Lost Boys? I got into an argument with a couple of friends of mine over this, and I want you to settle it for us. Luca Romano has probably slept with a lot of people. Venus has slept with a lot of people. But it's different for men than it is for women. Men are doing the penetrating and women are the ones being penetrated. Men are dominant. Women are supposed to be submissive. Men are designed to be hunters, and women are designed to wait for us to come back from the hunt. Men are supposed to sow their wild oats while women are supposed to keep their virtue intact. Men aren't hoes for doing what we were made to do. Women are hoes for doing what we were meant to do. Am I right or am I right?'"

"Danny Boy, you are correct," City Boy said with a laugh. "I know it's hard for some people to hear and to understand, but the facts are what they are. Men are hunters. Women are gatherers. Country Boy, what's your take?"

"A ho can be a man or a woman. Men can be hoes. Men are hoes. A lot of men are out here being a ho. Same with women. The difference is men are supposed to be hoes and women aren't supposed to be. We don't make the rules so don't come after us. But that's just the way it is and the way it's been," Country Boy explained.

“Do you think it should change?”

“I think it should probably change, but I don’t think it will change.”

“If it hasn’t changed since the dawn of time, why do you think it probably should change?”

“Because of the two of us, one of us has to have a positive outlook,” Country Boy laughed. “And I know your ass isn’t going to say anything positive.”

“Well, what’s your honest answer? Do you think women should be able to be hoes without judgement or that men should be judged more harshly for being a ho?” City questioned him, amusement still tinging his words.

“If I’m being real, if I had to choose, I would say women should be able to ho without judgement.”

“Why?”

“If I met a woman who judged me based off of my ho-story or my ho-fax...” He made a scoffing noise. “It’s just better for everybody if we shred the evidence and keep it moving forward.”

“True, true.” City Boy chuckled. “To settle your dispute Danny Boy, The Lost Boys conclude that some men are hoes, and it’s okay because men are designed to be a ho. And some women are hoes, and it’s not okay because women aren’t supposed to be a ho. We don’t make the rules. We just follow them.”

“Oh wait, here’s something interesting,” Country Boy interjected. “This email from B-Boy is saying that Venus was on a date with Luca last weekend and the weekend before that she was with NBA prospect Marcus—”

“Hold up,” City Boy interrupted. “The same Marcus with the girlfriend who made our—”

“That’s the one.”

“Well, loyal listeners... this is the perfect ho breakdown. First and foremost, we have the side chick angle. Anyone who is a side chick is automatically a ho. If you are down to let us

hit it knowing we have a girlfriend or a wife, you are automatically bumped up to ho status. Second, we have the social perception. There's Marcus who has clearly been fucking his girlfriend and Venus. And then we have Venus who has been fucking Marcus and Luca. But of all the emails we received, none brought up the fact that Marcus was a ho because of what he did. The only person being looked at like a ho is Venus. And you know why? Because men are going to do what men are going to do."

"In Venus's defense, I'm sure if she knew all of this would come out, she would've made different choices. Dealing with two people who are a big deal—especially on campus right now—is why everyone is talking. But if it was two ordinary dudes, no one would care, and she could've gotten away with it."

"Yeah, but you can't change what happened now. All you can do is embrace the fact that everyone knows what Venus is about now. But the most telling thing will be how Luca Romano reacts when he finds out," City Boy snickered.

"Let's move the conversation away from Venus for a second. You think we could get Luca on?" Country Boy wondered. "He could tell us what he's thinking?"

"Probably not. Especially if he wants to keep fucking her. No... we'll have to see if we can get Marcus in the studio."

"Ummm, City..." Country Boy snorted. "Did you forget what happened a couple of weeks ago? He wasn't too happy about us talking about his girlfriend."

"You're right. He may not be happy about us talking about his side chick either then," City Boy provoked. "I think our friend Marcus might want to share his side of the story."

"City, what are you implying?" Country Boy sounded uneasy.

"I think the people want to hear the truth, and you know I'm all about giving the people what they want. Now, let's take a call from the phone line—remember we take calls between

eight thirty and nine o'clock every Friday when we can get to it. Okay, Caller, you're on with Date Night."

"Hey, City Boy! What's up, Country Boy? I'm Brady, and my question is about Los Cabos. I went back—"

"Who?" City Boy asked.

"Los Cabos...?" Brady sounded unsure of himself. "The other Lost Boy? I saw you posted on social media a couple of weeks ago that he died—"

"Yeah, his death was a sad one, but what can you do," City Boy interjected.

"Um... that's what I was calling about. I just saw him last night on a date with his girlfriend."

"We posted on social media that the topic was about turning a ho into a housewife. Unless you have information about his girlfriend being a ho, this isn't exactly on topic. But I pray to God you have a ho-story about his girl." City Boy laughed. "That would be epic."

"Come on, City. That's enough. You're going too far." Country warned before directing his words at the caller. "Brady, Los Cabos is alive and well. He's moved on and is spending his free time in a relationship. It is cuffing season after all. You have a question about cuffing season?"

"Actually, I do," Brady answered. "I've been dating this girl for about nine months and she's perfect. I know for a fact that I want to marry her."

"Did you check her ho-fax?" City Boy asked.

"Yes," Brady laughed. "And that's the problem."

"Tell us more," City Boy implored.

"Well, I found out that back in her hometown, she used to get around. But then she moved here for a job and no one knows. I heard about the situation with—"

"Don't use her name. Say Venus, please," Country Boy interrupted quickly.

“I heard about Venus and now I’m questioning going to my girl’s ten-year high school reunion. It’s cool here. No one knows who she was here. But it’s likely everyone will be talking about her and me and us when we go to her hometown. I don’t want to be known as the guy who turned a ho into a housewife. So, I don’t know what to do. I was wondering if you knew if Luca has made any statements? I saw the two of them together tonight, and there’s no way he hasn’t heard the talk around campus. I can’t talk to my boys about this. I can’t talk to my family about this. So, City and Country... you two are all I have as far as advice goes. Can you get me in touch with Luca or maybe pass along a question for me—I’ll take anything. I just want to know.”

“Well, damn,” Country Boy started. “I don’t know what to tell you. I mean, if you love her, you could think of it like this: she’s fucked a lot of men in her past, but when she met you, she decided to settle down. So, of all those other men, you were her favorite. You were the best.”

“I didn’t think of it like that,” Brady said slowly. “Okay, okay.”

City Boy cleared his throat. “That’s a good way to look at it. Hoes need love too, Brady. You took one for the team and turned a ho into a housewife. You are the real MVP! Thanks for calling, man!”

“City,” Country Boy chastised. “Thanks for your call, man.”

“What? You gave some good advice, and I gave him some motivational words. He took one for the team,” City Boy added with a chuckle. “Stop looking at me like that!”

“You need help,” Country Boy informed him.

“We’ll tackle mental health another time. But for the rest of October, we’re going to help our fellow brothers out as we transition into cuffing season.”

“Lord help us all,” Country Boy groaned.

City Boy laughed. “Okay, that’s it for tonight. Tune in next week and we’ll answer more of your emails, and we’ll be

taking calls based on the topic we post on social media. Check us out next week. You don't want to miss it. I'm City Boy—

"I'm Country Boy..."

"And this is Date Night with the Lost Boys," the two of them said in unison.

Chapter Eight

I received four text messages, three emails, and two phone calls about it by the time I'd gotten up, taken a shower, and ate breakfast on Saturday morning. I'd heard of Date Night with The Lost Boys, but I'd never listened to their podcast. Never in my life did I think I would ever be the subject of one of their shows. But after having people reach out to me to tell me that I needed to listen to it, I decided to wait until my drive to Luca's photoshoot to take the time to hear what the fuss was about.

That was my first mistake.

I sat outside the old wooden barn on the backside of Dowdy Farms. Located about thirty minutes from home, the farm was the picturesque location for country-style weddings and events just on the outskirts of town. The beautiful late afternoon sun blazed the sky as anger blazed through my veins.

Rubbing my eyes, I fought back the same tears that I'd been fighting since the podcast opened with its bullshit. I'd had people talk about me over the years, but it was normal high school nonsense or college pettiness. But what I was experiencing was on a whole other level. The fact that I was publicly being called a ho and slut-shamed for things I didn't even do was bad enough. But what was crippling to me was the fear of how the negative attention was going to affect the official launch of Simply Serena and my business relationship with Luca.

Beating the steering wheel, I let out a primal scream. The few birds that had been lounging on the corner of the barn scattered. My brain was spinning. I had so many thoughts running through my mind that I started to feel dizzy. I wasn't sure if it was the thought of the theoretical collapse of my opportunities or the humidity of the car, but I couldn't breathe.

Scrambling out of the car, I fell to the ground, panting. Struggling to suck in enough air, the tears I'd been holding back dropped. My heart raced as I let out everything that was bottled up in me. I was exhausted. I was stressed. I was angry. I was emotionally drained. So, I cried.

And that was my second mistake.

After expelling all the negative energy and pent up emotions, I stood to my feet, brushed myself off, and wiped my face. No epiphany changed my circumstances, but I was done sulking. I gave into everything I felt for fifteen minutes, but I had to shake it off. With a deep breath, I got back into my car, cranked the volume of my favorite song, and then drove further into the property to the Dowdy farmhouse.

I'd only been to Dowdy Farms once for a wedding. And while the barns for events were rustic and charming, the Dowdy farmhouse was lush and elegant. The cost to rent a barn on the property was expensive, but the price to rent the farmhouse was outrageous. I'd only seen pictures of the inside of the place, so I let my curiosity lure me up the driveway. I parked close to the three cars next to the house.

"Okay, let's do this," I mumbled as I took a deep breath.

Checking my reflection in the mirror, I regretted not wearing any makeup. The lack of mascara and eyeliner just brought more attention to the fact that my eyes were pink. My skin was clear but slightly flushed. Although Luca had seen me without makeup before, I felt exposed and vulnerable. I didn't feel like I needed makeup, but if I'd worn it, it wouldn't be as easy to see my emotions splayed out on my face.

At least my hair looks good.

“Hello,” I called out as I pushed open the midnight blue door. I stopped in my tracks. “Woah.”

The chandelier sparkled from above, casting rays of natural sunlight throughout the open space of the foyer. The sheer elegance of the ballroom to my right and the overall décor made me feel severely underdressed in my jeans and plain white t-shirt. The wide staircase was ahead of me, but I was so caught up with the way the light bounced off the marble floor that I didn’t notice the male figure when it appeared.

“Serena,” Luca’s deep voice called out to me from the top of the stairs.

My stomach fluttered at the sound of his voice. “Hey.”

“You’re early...”

I forced myself to smile despite all that was on my mind. “I hope that’s okay. It didn’t take as long as I thought it might to get here.”

“Of course, it’s okay. Eleanor left one of her bags at the place we had lunch, so she had to go back and get it.”

“Eleanor?”

“She’s the makeup artist. She’ll be back in the next thirty minutes.”

“Oh, okay.” I looked around nervously. *Does that mean we’re here alone?*

“I need to finish setting up. But if you want to put your stuff down, we’ll be up here. How was your drive?”

“It wasn’t bad.” Hoisting my bag up my shoulder, I climbed the steps. “I was here for a wedding at one of the barns a couple of years ago. I’ve never been in here before.” I looked around as I got closer to him. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, it is. And this isn’t even the best part.” Following him, I was led to a room at the end of a hallway. He opened the door and then stepped back to let me enter first. “This is the best part.”

“Wow,” I breathed as my eyes went straight to the window wall. The view of the lake was breathtakingly serene. All the colors were so vivid—the dark blue water, the light blue sky, the green grass, the red and gold leaves on the trees. It was the epitome of a beautiful fall day.

“You can put your stuff here.” He pointed to a table as he made his way to the window wall. “And if you want anything to eat or drink, I have stuff for you.”

“Oh, thank you.” Distractedly, I put my bag down in the chair and then made a beeline for the window wall. Even with his camera and lighting equipment set up partially in the way, I was still in awe. “This view is incredible.” I gasped. “This is where we were last weekend.”

“Yeah, but further down the lake.”

We quietly took in the beauty of nature. After a minute, I turned and found him staring at me.

I swallowed hard. “What?” My voice was shallow as I looked into the depths of his eyes. It was as if I didn’t realize how close we were standing to one another until we made eye contact.

“You’re beautiful.”

My heart beat faster. “Thank you.”

He took a step closer to me. “Do you mind if I touch you?”

My stomach flipped as anticipation ripped through me. “I don’t mind,” I murmured breathily.

He reached out, and the back of his hand grazed my cheek. “It really stands out in the sunlight,” he realized slowly. “You’re just naturally...this beautiful.”

I tried to steady my breathing as his fingers slowly hooked my chin. I licked my lips, and I watched as his eyes zeroed in on them. I felt like he was going to kiss me, and my heart sped up. My attraction to him was never as intense as it was in that moment.

He tilted my head upward and my lips parted instantly.

“Perfect. The way the light is hitting your face right now is perfect.” His voice was low, sexy. My eyes were just about to flutter closed when he continued. “I’m going to take some shots just like this.” He gently moved my chin in the other direction, away from his face. “Perfect. Can you change into the strapless shirt, so I can get some natural shots?”

I swallowed the desire that had bubbled up from the depths of me and tried to force it back down. Blinking rapidly, I avoided his gaze by turning toward my bag. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, I, um, I got it. It’s in my bag.” I stammered as I flew across the room. “The bathroom is here? Yeah, I see it. Changing now.”

Closing the bathroom door behind me, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I was flushed, wide-eyed, and terrified. I changed into the white tube top and cursed myself for not bringing the strapless bra. My nipples were hard as rocks. My mind flashed back to a minute earlier and how badly I wanted Luca to kiss me.

What was that?

Of course, I thought Luca was attractive. He was Luca-fucking-Romano. But I didn’t want him as anything more than my mentor, and he didn’t want me as anything but his muse. Despite what everyone speculated, it was a business relationship turned friendship.

So, what was that? Why did my entire body shake the moment he touched my face?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced the thoughts out of my head and shook off the lingering feelings. My eyes flew open.

That’s it!

It was the way he looked at me.

Luca had a special way of looking at me that was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I’d seen a flash of it before but standing so close to him as he appreciated my beauty was heavy. It felt deeper than an appreciation of my looks. It was as if he was seeing the beauty within me as well. It was hard to explain, but that had to be why that moment was so intense. That and the lingering emotions from earlier.

Shit. Earlier.

With the awe-inducing view and then the moment with Luca, I temporarily forgot about the horrific podcast. I stared at myself in the mirror and saw my eyes starting to water. I knew I had to tell him about it. I'd known the moment I heard The Lost Boys made us the topic of the week. It was bad enough that people were spreading rumors on campus, but to have a whole podcast dedicated to lies about my alleged promiscuity and Luca's alleged bad judgement in cuffing me was too much.

I shook my head.

Luca and I were possibly attracted to each other, but the connection we had was genuine friendship. Every time we talked, we got personal. So, the moment that we shared was just a mix between familiarity and attraction.

And even if Luca and I had a real moment, it doesn't matter because if I were to act on it, Luca would assume the rumors were true.

"Serena?" Luca called out, interrupting my thoughts and startling me.

I opened the door and stepped out of the bathroom. "I'm ready. Sorry. Just touching up my hair."

He smiled at me. "No problem." Unlatching the door to the balcony, he stepped outside with his camera in his hand. "I want to get a few test shots."

As soon as I stepped out onto the balcony, I felt so torn. On one hand, I knew I had to tell him. On the other hand, he already said it didn't matter.

But did it not matter because it was from a jealous woman? Would it matter more now that it was now a public spectacle?

"I need you to stand right here," he directed, gesturing to the corner.

I placed my hands on the railing and turned my face toward the sun.

“Perfect,” he commented. The sound of the camera clicking and whizzing followed. I knew my angles, so I posed with little guidance from him. “That’s it. Hold right there.”

We went through a series of poses that ranged from having me as the focal point to making the scenery the focal point. When he felt like he’d gotten what he wanted, he stepped back into the room, staring at his camera.

“Oh, yeah...” Without looking up, he nodded at me. “These are good.”

“I have to tell you something,” I blurted out as I followed him into the room. I waited for him to finally look up before I continued. “So, there are some rumors...”

He sat down on an antique loveseat, placing his camera on the table beside it. “I know.”

I felt my pulse quickening as I paced several feet in front of him. “You know?”

He watched me walk back and forth as he replied, “I know that people are saying we’re involved.”

“Do you know what else they’re saying?” Wringing my hands, I studied his face. “About me? About us?”

“What?”

My eyes started burning. “This bullshit local podcast dedicated a whole show to calling me a gold-digging ho. And that I’m using you and...” My voice trailed off as I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Just lie after lie. And it’s not like that. It’s not like that at all.”

“Come here.” Luca patted the seat next to him. “Please.”

I crossed the room and sat beside him. He put his arm on the back of the loveseat and although he wasn’t touching me, I immediately felt comforted by him. When I looked into his eyes at such a close range, my stomach fluttered.

I took a deep breath. “I just don’t want the bullshit to mess things up with us.”

“Serena,” he started, his voice low and deep. “The rumors don’t change anything on my end. Are you having second thoughts about working with me?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Okay, cool.” He gave me a little smile before continuing. “I meant what I said... your face is the only face that came to mind for this project. There’s no one else. I selected you because you are the woman I want”—he licked his lips—“for this project.”

That slight hesitation and the way his tongue darted across his full lips made my breathing hitch. “I’m glad,” I murmured. “Thank you.”

“I don’t care about your past. None of that matters.”

Closing my eyes and forgetting that his arm was behind me, I let my head fall back. He moved his arm behind my neck and his hand settled on my shoulder. I inhaled his scent and opened my mouth to speak but was interrupted.

“You told me you wouldn’t sleep with someone to advance your career. That’s the only thing I was curious about. All the other stuff is white noise to me.”

I shook my head. “With everything they’re saying, how is that the only thing?”

“Honestly?”

I opened my eyes and lifted my head up. “Always.”

“I’ve had someone do that to me before.”

My eyebrows flew up. “You had someone sleep with you just to advance their career? Someone you cared about or just a random model?”

“Yes. Someone I cared about.” He paused. “But it worked out because it ended up helping my career more than anything I’d ever done, so it is what it is.”

“I’m sorry that happened. I—” My sentence stopped abruptly as I realized who used him.

Holy shit. Luca Romano and Jordan Brewers.

His brows furrowed. “What?”

“Was Jordan Brewster the one that did that to you?” I whispered.

“Yes. It was her.” He shrugged, causing our bodies to shift into one another. “But we weren’t right for each other, and it ended up being as big of a break for me as it was for her. It was for the best.”

“I’m glad that it worked out for you in the end.”

“And this situation is going to work out for you in the end.” He shook his head. “If someone is calling you a gold-digging ho, they don’t know the woman I’ve gotten to know. I don’t care what anyone has to say.”

I sighed dramatically. *He obviously didn’t hear the podcast.*

“There’s something special about you, Serena,” he continued.

My heart thudded. “It doesn’t change your view of me professionally.” I swallowed the nerves that tried to stop me from speaking. “But what about personally?”

His eyes searched mine. “Personally, I like you and as long as it didn’t interfere with what we have going on at Hamilton, I didn’t care that they were saying we were together.”

My mind instantly went back to what they’d said about me on the podcast.

“So, it doesn’t bother you to be linked to me even though they are calling me a slut, claiming I slept with random people, alleging that I specifically target men with money?” I rolled my eyes in disbelief. “With all that, you’re still not bothered by everyone saying that we’re together?”

“No. Why would it bother me?” His fingers moved against the bare skin of my shoulder, and I felt the goosebumps erupt under his touch. “None of that matters. You know who you are. You know what you did or didn’t do. And I know the Serena Brooks that I met.”

I didn't know what was sexier—what he said or the way he was looking at me as he said it.

“Good to know,” I whispered. Noticing how close his face was to mine, my stomach flipped.

“It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.”

“Honestly... I was more concerned with how it would affect things with us than what everyone else thought.”

“It doesn't change how I feel about you.”

Even though I was pretty sure he was talking about our professional relationship, something in my gut made me feel like there was more to it. From the way he was looking at me, the way he was speaking to me, and the way his energy was calling out to me, I felt like maybe there was something happening between us.

I bit down on my bottom lip to stop myself from saying too much. “If they were saying you'd slept with a bunch of people you didn't sleep with, it wouldn't change how I felt about you either.”

“Good to know.” His fingers moved in a circular pattern against my arm. “But I am sorry this is happening to you.”

“Thanks. But it's not your fault.”

“It is. I don't mix business with pleasure, so I shouldn't have taken you to my favorite restaurant—for hours. I shouldn't have met with you on campus—for hours. And even though no one knows about it, I shouldn't have gone on that drive with you or talk to you on the phone—for hours.”

“I liked those things,” I admitted nervously.

“Me, too.” He paused. “When I'm with you, things slow down.”

“What do you mean?”

He blinked as if he'd realized what he'd said. “This whole thing is my fault because I should've done more to make sure you were protected. I should've made sure you were okay.”

“I appreciate you saying that, but I don’t think there was anything you could’ve done to stop this. It’s bitter people spreading lies because they don’t know what’s really going on.”

“And that’s on me. It’s my process. But I could publicly deny that anything is going on between us. I’ve already spoken with the departmental dean, your advisor, and the president of the school and assured them that you wouldn’t be considered for the seminar—”

My eyebrows flew up. “What? My advisor? The dean?” Panic swept through me. “What are you talking about?”

“They reached out on Wednesday about the rumors, and I told them that our relationship wasn’t—”

“Oh my god,” I gasped, interrupting again. “But we talked for a long time on Wednesday night. You didn’t say anything.”

“Because it was nothing. I assured them that it was professional and friendly. It was a no brainer to be transparent with the administration about the situation.” He hesitated, taking a deep breath, and his eyes bore into mine. “But if you want me to, I could put something on social media. I could go on that podcast. I could post something on my own site and make it clear that there’s nothing going on between us except business.” His eyes dipped to my lips again and his voice became softer, sexier. “If that’s what you want.”

I tipped my head up slightly, bringing our mouths even closer together. “Okay,” I murmured, my heart beating wildly.

He dipped his head, and his nose just barely brushed against mine. His lips were an inch away and I could feel his restraint. “Is that what you want?”

Silence shrouded us as we just breathed each other in. I knew he was waiting for me to make the move, and my mouth watered with anticipation. I wanted to kiss him. There was a fire that crackled between us, and all it would take was for me to close the gap. But I hesitated.

And that was my third mistake.

“Luca!” a woman’s voice cracked through the air, startling us apart as she burst into the room. “You will never guess where they found my makeup bag! It was—!” The woman stopped abruptly, eyeing us with suspicion. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Luca and I answered in unison.

Her eyes zeroed in on his arm around my shoulder as she backed away. “I can just do your makeup after whatever this is”—she gestured to us— “is done.”

Slipping his arm from around me and grabbing his camera, Luca stood. “Eleanor, this is Serena. Serena, this is Eleanor. She’s going to do your makeup.”

Chapter Nine

Vanessa stared at me. Sitting in my living room, I'd just finished telling her about my photoshoot with Luca, and all she did was stare blankly in response.

"Are you going to say something?" I asked when I couldn't take it anymore.

"You two really just never revisited the moment you had before the makeup artist got there?" Vanessa's brown eyes were wide and Bambi-like as she stared at me.

"No. We weren't ever alone again. While she was doing my makeup, a team of people showed up. It was never another moment where it was just the two of us."

She just stared.

"Nessa!" I threw my hands in the air and then stood. I started pacing the room. "Say something! I need help!"

"I don't know what to say." She slumped back against the pillows of the couch and shook her head. "I'm in shock."

"Me, too. And I don't know what to do with it. It's been twenty-four hours, and there's been no contact. We were talking every day and then we almost kiss and nothing—no call, no text, nothing." I stopped pacing and put my hands on my hips. "It's just making me wonder."

"About?"

“Well...” I dug my fingers into my hips as I started to admit my concerns. “When Eleanor came in and asked if she was interrupting anything, he said no really quickly.”

She squinted as she followed my movements back and forth across the living room. “Didn’t you say no at the exact same time?”

“Yeah, but still. It just doesn’t sit well with me now that I think back on it. When there were so many people around, he was all business. And even between shots, he never tried to create any one-on-one time. And now the fact that he hasn’t called me in twenty-four hours.” I lifted my arms as if I proved my point. “It just feels like he said no because he didn’t want anyone to know. Like he’s embarrassed or something.”

Vanessa’s lips turned downward. “Why would he be embarrassed by you? He all but proclaimed his love for you.”

I avoided eye contact. “Because of the stuff they were saying on that podcast.”

I’d tried to keep my thoughts from going that way. But when I didn’t hear from him by lunch time on Sunday, the little nagging thought grew. By the time Vanessa showed up for dinner, I couldn’t shut the thoughts down. I just kept hearing the annoying voices of City Boy and Country Boy as they demeaned me, disrespected me, and ridiculed Luca for dating me. While it bothered me to have people speculate about my sex life, it was on a whole different level when it negatively impacted my real life. And a part of me felt like maybe Luca felt the same way they felt.

“Oh, Serena...”

“Maybe he just wanted to fuck me and while he was saying all the stuff he was saying to me, he didn’t want anyone else to think he was actually trying to date me.”

Vanessa moved her head from side to side. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

I looked her in her eyes and admitted what I didn’t even realize until that moment. “I think I hesitated to kiss him

because I was worried that he was trying to see if the rumors were true or not.”

“You think he was trying to test you?”

I nodded. “Maybe he thinks I’m easy and slutty and a ho that’s trying to use him to get publicity before my launch. Maybe he really does believe all that other bullshit they’re saying.”

“You slept with one guy in the last few months. That doesn’t make you a ho.”

“I know, but that’s not the point.”

“Why don’t you tell him the truth? Tell him that you’ve only slept with one of the five guys that were named. You don’t have to tell him who you slept with or even how many people you slept with. But why not tell him the truth so if he is judging you based on that, at least he’ll know.”

“We already talked about it. He said it didn’t matter to him, and then I told him it wasn’t true. He said it was ‘white noise’ to him.”

“Oh yeah, you did say that.” She sighed. “I know it sucks, but maybe you have to tell him again to make sure he knows the truth.”

“I shouldn’t have to do all that. And even if I had slept with all five of them, that wouldn’t make me a ho either. The people spreading these rumors are perpetuating this idea that I’m some kind of gold-digging slut because over the course of the last few years, they’ve pinpointed five men who had decent financial stuff going on to link me to. Five! So, sleeping with five men in three or four years is all it takes to be labeled a ho nowadays? That’s bullshit. And if Luca subscribes to that same mentality, he’s not who I thought he was.”

“I feel you. But I can’t see Luca listening to a podcast that is focused on giving out horrible advice and dating tips to men who don’t have a clue. So, maybe it doesn’t have anything to do with the podcast or the rumors... maybe he’s just being a typical single man. Sometimes a man is just looking for

someone willing to sleep with him, and sometimes he's looking for a relationship. And when they run game, it's hard to know which is which. So... just because he's MIA doesn't necessarily mean it's tied to that podcast."

I crossed the room and plopped down on the couch beside her. "Maybe. I don't know." I squeezed my eyes shut. "He just seemed so sincere. I believed him."

"Call him."

My eyes popped open. "What?"

"If you call him and he blows you off, you'll know. If you call him and he was just missing in action for the day, you'll know." She patted my leg. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Uhhh... he could decide to not work on my campaign. He could decide that he doesn't want to use me in his campaign. Even worse, he could tell me that everything he said was a lie and that he was just testing me.

She stuck her hand out. "Where's your phone? Call him."

"No!" I stuffed my phone in my pocket.

"He may be the most famous man you've ever almost-kissed, but he's not *famous*, famous. Don't let the fact that he's a big deal make you forget that you are, too."

I smiled at my best friend as I considered her words. I appreciated her more than she knew. "It's not that."

"Well, what is it? You weren't even this bad over Randall, and you loved that man."

I burst out laughing. "That was different."

I dated Randall for a little over two and a half years and just broke up in January. He got a job in Portland, Oregon and we tried long distance for a little while, but it was too hard. It was a great opportunity for him, but I knew he wasn't the man for me because he wanted me to leave school to follow him. As much as I loved him, when he gave me the ultimatum, I knew I had to let him go.

“Call. Luca.”

I sighed. “If he isn’t interested in me because he isn’t interested in me, I would be okay with that. But the idea that some bullshit makes him not want to pursue me is what gets me.”

“Why?”

“Because he gets it.” I looked at her for a long time before saying it out loud. “Because he gets me.”

Vanessa’s jaw dropped. “You like him.”

“He’s okay.”

She laughed. “Oh, you really like him. You *like him*, like him!”

“It doesn’t matter because it’s over now.”

“Because you haven’t heard from him in twenty-four hours?”

“Yes.” I pouted, not understanding why my best friend wasn’t following my completely rational line of thinking. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because you sound crazy.”

“I know,” I wailed covering my face. “I know!”

“Have you ever thought that maybe he hasn’t called you because he made a move and you didn’t reciprocate?”

That thought crossed my mind at first. But as the voices of The Lost Boys echoed louder and louder, it became all I could focus on.

I pursed my lips but stayed silent.

“Call him.” She stood and slipped on her shoes. “Call him now.”

“Fine. But if he doesn’t answer—”

“If he doesn’t answer, we riot at midnight! But if he does answer, you tell him that you like him and that you should’ve kissed him.”

“If he answers, I’ll just feel him out. If he doesn’t answer, I’m going to put it all behind me and focus on my show. It’s in less than a week.”

“I think that’s a good plan.” She pointed at me. “So, call him.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” I conceded with a dramatic sigh.

“I’ll text you when I get home.” She blew me a kiss before walking out of my apartment.

I laughed. She lived within the same complex, in the building next door.

Two minutes later, I got her text message and I smiled.

Vanessa Franklin: *I’m home. Call him.*

“Okay, I’ll call,” I muttered as I stared at her text.

Scrolling to his name, I took a deep breath.

The phone rang.

And then went to voicemail mid-ring.

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. It wasn’t quite eight o’clock so as time ticked by and my call wasn’t returned, a text message wasn’t sent, I felt more and more bothered by it. I replayed everything that happened between us—both when we were alone and when his team showed up—and I analyzed everything that we said to one another. But what made my heart clench was the way he looked at me.

“There’s no way he could’ve been faking that,” I breathed as I tried to blink away the mental image.

I checked my phone one more time to see if he’d reached out.

He hadn’t.

I fell asleep that night with my phone face down on the nightstand. When I woke up, I resisted for two whole minutes before checking my phone to see if I had any missed calls or text messages.

I did.

But not from Luca.

The rational part of my brain knew he could've had a reasonable explanation since we weren't together, and he wasn't obligated to talk to me every night. But the irrational part of my brain assumed the worst, and I wasn't quite ready to admit that my feelings were hurt.

Just as I was about to put my phone down, it vibrated. My heart fluttered, and I hated that I hoped it was Luca.

It wasn't.

Marcus: *My girl and I agreed that it's not the best time for me to be in your show or campaign. Maybe once this whole thing dies down, we can try it again. But right now, with scouts looking, I need to distance myself from this whole thing. And Veronica isn't cool with things not being discreet. Sorry.*

I stared at my phone, processing what I read.

He pursued me for the majority of the year. He didn't tell me he even had a girlfriend. He paraded me all around town. He was an active participant in everything that went down at his house. And now he's pulling out of modeling for Simply Serena because he needs to distance himself from me? Seriously?

"I can't even deal with this right now," I muttered as I composed a short text in response before blocking him.

Serena: *Lose my number.*

Falling back against my pillows, I felt my anger and frustration building up. I slammed my phone down against the bed before aggressively jerking the covers over my shoulders. I still hadn't heard from Luca. Marcus had hung me out to dry. And everyone seemed to think that my sex life was their business—when, in fact, it wasn't. The Lost Boys made things worse with their toxic line of thinking and sexist attitudes. But the person who started the whole thing was whose head I wanted on a stick.

Besides the fact that it was a bold faced lie, the stupid rumor shouldn't have even been a big deal. But I realized that it changed the way people interacted with me, the way Luca

communicated with me on a personal level, and the business arrangements I set up to promote my business. The way I was being judged and slandered was ridiculous because even if it were true, it was no one else's business.

Frustration gave way to anger as I considered the fact that if I were a man, none of the bullshit I was being put through would be happening.

My phone vibrated and even though I was riled up, the idea that it might be Luca gave me butterflies.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Serena! It's Akila. Do you have a minute?”

I sat up in bed. “Hey! Yeah, I'm free. What's up?”

“You've heard of Re-Mix Magazine, right?”

“Of course! Luna Daniels is an inspiration.”

“Well, I want to do a profile on you for Re-Mix.”

“What?” I let out a shocked laugh. “Really?”

“Yes. I think because of your reputation as a trendsetter and the fact that you're launching your clothing line soon, you're Re-Mix material. During the Friday staff meeting, I pitched the idea to Luna since your fashion show is Saturday, and she agreed.”

“Wow! Thank you!”

“Can I be completely honest with you?”

My brows furrowed. “Yes, of course.”

“After this weekend, I was fired up and this morning I was able to convince Luna to give me more space to focus on turning your profile into a feature.”

A feature is a multiple page spread. Oh. My. God.

“Are you serious?” I whispered, scared it was a practical joke.

“Yes. I'm serious, but here's the thing... this will be a feature for you and Simply Serena. But it'll also be a 'fuck

you' to Date Night with The Lost Boys for that vile podcast they released.”

“You heard it?”

“Yeah. They are trash, and they need to be stopped. But I want you to know that you can accept the online profile or the feature or both. The profile will go online and will talk solely about Simply Serena—a review of the fashion show and a quick glimpse at your Black-owned, female-owned business. And like I said, the feature will be about you, Simply Serena, and female sexuality. My first thought was to go after The Lost Boys, but then I thought about how I could use this to give you the opportunity to change the narrative. I could call them out while promoting you at the same time. Or I could just call them out. I don't know if you're interested in—”

“Let's do it.” My jaw clenched with determination.

“Are you sure? You can think about—”

“There's nothing to think about. Fuck The Lost Boys.”

Akila laughed. “Fuck The Lost Boys.”

Chapter Ten

Akila Bishara arrived at my workspace on campus around three o'clock in the afternoon. She looked fashionable yet seriously dressed in a mulberry-colored business suit. With a notebook in one hand and a pink handbag in the other, she followed me around the space for a quick tour.

"You are extremely talented," Akila gushed, eyeing the pieces for the fashion show. She looked over at me with her eyes wide. "It's mind-blowing how good these are. And the quality? Wow."

I grinned. "Thank you."

She eyed a black dress that was short in the front and a little longer in the back. The flirty dress had a plunging lace neckline that met the chiffon skirt. "Is your stuff going to be available for purchase after the show?"

Joy seeped through my pores as I let the sentence roll around in my head a few times. "I'm doing an official launch of my business in January, but I'm going to start taking preorders after the show. Do you have something in mind?"

"This." She pointed at the black dress. "I want this dress. My parents are renewing their vows at the end of the month on the same day as my boyfriend's gala. I feel like this is the perfect dress to wear to both."

"Your boyfriend has a gala?"

She laughed. “No, it’s not his gala. It’s a gala for a charity he’s been involved with for years. They’re honoring him and a bunch of other community donors. He’s a teacher and did different drives and initiatives through his school.” Her smile fell. “He also used to be on Date Night and raised money through the podcast.”

My smile fell at the mention of Date Night. “He used to be one of The Lost Boys?”

She nodded. “I’ll tell you all about it once we get started. But first...” She pointed at the dress again and then clasped her hands together in prayer. “Is this a possibility?”

I was still in a state of shock. “Yeah.” I nodded, still trying to wrap my mind around what she was telling me. “With school and everything, it’ll take me a couple of days after I get your measurements.”

“Ah! Thank you!” She clapped excitedly. “Okay, I know you don’t have a lot of time before your fitting and rehearsal, so we can go ahead and get started.”

If her boyfriend is a former Lost Boy, how is this going to even work?

“I have a question,” I started as we sat down at the table.

She pulled out her voice recorder before looking at me expectantly. “Sure, go ahead.”

“You said that you wanted the feature to be about me and combating the rumors about me, in addition to highlighting my work.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“And this is also going to be a ‘fuck you’ to Date Night.”

She nodded. “Yes, definitely.”

“How?” My face scrunched in confusion as I looked at her. “You’re dating a Lost Boy...? I don’t understand.”

She took off her jacket and exposed a pink camisole that matched her shoes. “No, he’s not a Lost Boy anymore. It’s a long story, but I met Carlos through Luca’s class...”

My stomach fluttered at the mention of his name, but I ignored it as I listened intently.

Fifteen minutes later, I wiped tears from the corner of my eyes as I watched her do the same.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I whispered, reaching out for her hand.

“And I’m sorry that happened to you,” she murmured back, squeezing my hand in solidarity.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe these assholes. They are given this platform and are unbelievably reckless with it.”

“I have an article coming out in the print version of Re-Mix that reads them for the filth that they are.” She grinned. “It’ll be out this month.”

“Good. Because they need to be stopped.”

“And this is exactly why we’re going to stop them.” She opened her notebook and clicked her pen. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

She hit the record button. “Let’s start with the rumors and then end with Simply Serena. That way, we can end on a high note.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed, crossing my legs and sitting back in my chair.

Akila leaned forward a bit. “For the record, are you a ho?”

“No.”

“And that’s that.” She sat back and nodded. “Is everything they said a lie?”

“Just about.” I went back and forth in my head about telling her about Marcus before deciding to cop to it. “I slept with one of the men they are alleging I slept with—one. The others are just people I know.”

“Why do you think the rumors started in the first place?”

“Because Luca Romano is in town for business. He’s a well-known guy, and someone saw us having dinner together

and made some assumptions. The five people they handpicked for this fabrication all happen to be successful in their fields. They wanted to create a certain narrative, and they framed it the way they wanted to with lies.”

She nodded. “That’s good.” She wrote down everything I said verbatim. “Have you denied the rumors?”

“People who actually know me know it’s bullshit. But people who know of me...” I shrugged, “apparently are prone to believe what they hear. I just keep getting told that the lies are being spread all over, but only one person ever asked if it was true. And it was one of the men they included in the rumor!”

“What bothers you most about the ho allegations?”

“The fact that it was based on lies, but also that the word ho was being tossed around in the first place. This wouldn’t have happened if I was a man. They named five men and called me a ho because they lied and said I slept with them. Five men? By whose standards does that make me a ho? And even if they had listed ten, twenty, thirty men, why would that make me a ho? Why is female sexuality scrutinized harshly by both men and women, but male sexuality is just accepted? The implications of a woman being a ho keeps her from exploring her sexuality and moving on to new experiences when she isn’t being satisfied by her partner. It shames a woman into ‘keeping her body count low’ in order to be considered a lady. But that same logic isn’t applied to men. Men will have multiple partners and explore their sexuality, moving on to someone else when they aren’t satisfied and aren’t typically called hoes. And even when they are, the significance of that title isn’t as severe, and they aren’t judged harshly.”

Akila nodded. “I completely agree.” She paused for a second. “Who do you think would start a rumor like that?”

“No comment.” I gave her a look.

“Off the record, do you have an idea?”

“Off the record, yes.”

“Off the record, who?”

“Off the record, I’m ninety-nine percent sure it was this asshole named Jennifer.”

Akila’s eyes narrowed and her mouth hardened. “Jennifer. Blonde bob, completely bitchy attitude, nasally voice, rude as hell?”

“That’s the one.” I connected the dots and nodded. “It makes sense that you’d know her. Luca did say she was in his seminar and came on to him.”

“He was being modest. She only took the seminar because she wanted to get with him, and she used every opportunity she could to parade herself in front of him. She didn’t just come on to him; she threw herself at him.”

“Well, that explains why when she saw us, she went off. She called me a ho before she stormed away and then by Monday, everyone thought we were dating, and a fake sexual history had been created.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her. I’m not going to write any of that in the article, but would you mind if I looked into it?”

I shrugged. “Go ahead. If she admits to doing it, then I don’t mind name dropping in the article. Because that’s part of what’s wrong here. I truly think this whole thing started because of Jennifer’s petty jealousy. She is a grown ass woman, and she called me a ho because I was out to dinner with a man who isn’t her boyfriend or husband. She wanted him, and she thought I had him, so she called me a ho. She doesn’t know anything about me but because I’m her ‘rival’ and she wants me out of the way, she spread lies about me.”

“What do you think the goal was?”

I felt the pit in my stomach grow. “I think the goal was to make me an unattractive option for Luca.” I looked down at my hands.

And it worked.

I pushed the thought out of my head, looked back up, and continued. “If she was able to succeed in making the idea of me synonymous with being sexually promiscuous and a gold-digger, it would increase the chance that he would only be

interested in me for sex and nothing more. And if I'm no longer a contender, she thinks she'll have a shot with him."

She jotted down notes. "What do you think the goal was for The Lost Boys?"

"I think the goal of The Lost Boys was to shame me and to perpetuate the idea that women aren't allowed to do whatever the fuck they want to do with their bodies, but men can. They reiterated the idea that women who they deem a ho aren't worthy of being in a relationship and that there's a certain number of partners a woman can have before she loses the potential to be a girlfriend or wife. They seem to think that same logic doesn't apply to men though. And that double standard along with the slut-shaming is why The Lost Boys are bad for the community at large. They are a bunch of degenerate creeps who slut-shame for sport, and they need to be stopped."

"This is excellent content." She scribbled a bunch of stuff down before asking, "Do you worry about the slut-shaming damaging your reputation?"

"Yes and no. I worry that it'll affect my business. I've had two models drop out of my fashion show because of it. But I don't worry about it affecting my dating life because any man that I'd want wouldn't be threatened by my past, and he wouldn't automatically believe everything he heard about me."

"Hold on." She held up her hand. "Did the models say they weren't going to be in the show because of the rumors?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I got a text message last night saying they needed to back out because they didn't want to be associated with 'slut wear', which is the phrase The Lost Boys used in their podcast. My social media pages have been sprinkled with ho, slut, and gold digger references." I sighed. "I should be able to replace the models and I've been deleting posts, but it blows my mind that I'm even having to deal with it."

"So, this is truly impacting your life?"

"It is. Anytime I'm spending the week leading up to my show looking for models or removing comments from my

business social media pages, it has gone too far.”

“I agree,” she commented, writing her notes.

The interview felt more like two friends catching up. We spent the next thirty minutes talking about Simply Serena and my launch for the upcoming year. Just talking about everything I had in the works made me extremely excited for the future, and the passion for fashion design poured out of me.

“Final question,” Akila started. “What do you want people to know about Serena Brooks?”

I considered her question for a minute. “I design from the heart, and I pour love into every creation. I design for everybody and every body.”

“I love that. Is that your tagline?”

I nodded. “Yes. Simply Serena: Designed for every body.”

“Love that.”

“Thanks!”

“Any last words?”

I smiled. “Don’t believe the rumors, but definitely believe the hype.”

Akila sat back in her seat as she pressed the off button on the recorder. “This is going to be huge. I feel it.”

“I do, too. Thank you for this opportunity.”

“No, thank you.” She shook her head. “You got me an A on my very first assignment with Luca.”

I opened my mouth to respond and she continued, “And then you are going to have me looking like a knockout at my parent’s vow renewal and at Carlos’s gala. So again, thank you.”

I laughed. “Well, how about we say that we’re even?”

Slipping into her jacket, she giggled. “Deal.” Standing, she gathered her things. “Oh! And how are things with you and Luca?”

I froze. “What do you mean?” I replied quickly.

Akila gave me a look before breaking into a little smile. She tilted her head. “I thought you and Luca had plans to meet to discuss working together or something. Isn’t that what you two talked about at the showcase?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah.” I stood, avoiding eye contact. “Luca is...” I had a flashback to the photoshoot. “Very professional.”

Her smile grew. “That’s cool.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“I’m going to be honest. When you two were talking, I thought I saw some sparks.”

I shook my head slowly. “Nope. We have a professional relationship.”

Grinning, she walked to the door. “Okay.”

“Bye, Akila,” I called out, turning my back to her.

“Bye! Send me an invoice!”

The door clicked and something inside me did as well.

Luca Romano and I are nothing more than two professionals using each other for our respective projects. Yeah, we talked every day for hours. Yeah, I felt something. And yeah, he hurt my feelings. But it doesn’t matter. It was only supposed to be a business relationship anyway. And what does it matter if a business associate doesn’t call me in days?

“It doesn’t matter,” I mumbled under my breath.

I was going to be featured in his project and whether or not he followed through with photographing my campaign, I’d still get publicity from him using me in his. There really wasn’t any reason for me to be mad. I was going to be in a Luca Romano project. The rumor that I was dating Luca was what got me a feature in Re-Mix Magazine. If nothing else, my association with Luca served me more than it hurt me professionally. But personally, it stung.

But I don’t have any reason to be mad at him.

I acknowledged that I was being overly dramatic, breathed, and then let it go.

I had more important things to focus on. I had a fashion show. I had a website to finish. I had clothes to make. I had things to do. And what I didn't have time for was a man who acted as if he was embarrassed by me while in front of other people.

I didn't know if it was the rumors or maybe the fact that he lost interest or if he was just trying to get to know me as his muse and once he photographed me, he was done. I didn't know, and I couldn't concern myself with figuring out why.

"Hey, Serena!" Jessica called out as she pushed the door opened. She walked into the workspace with three other models in tow.

Forcing thoughts of Luca out of my head, I allowed my face to erupt into a huge smile. "Hey, guys! Come on in. I can't wait to see the clothes on you."

Chapter Eleven

“Are you seriously ignoring the call?” Vanessa asked me as we sat outside on Wednesday night.

“Yeah, I’ll call him back,” I replied nonchalantly, pulling my denim jacket around me tighter.

“Well, I want to know where the hell he’s been for the last five days!”

I shrugged, but I couldn’t deny that I wanted answers, too.

I was admittedly hurt that I hadn’t heard from Luca at first—with the weekend being the hardest. But on Monday, as I fit my models with my Simply Serena pieces and accessories, my focus shifted. On Tuesday, I dramatically concluded that I’d probably never hear from him again. I created a list of amazing photographers I’d worked with in the past to shoot my advertising and marketing campaign. As I went over makeup and hair options with the models, my mind was occupied. But just before I fell asleep that night, he sent a text that read ‘Sorry. Busy.’ So, to get a call on Wednesday night didn’t make me want to prioritize him—especially since he didn’t prioritize me.

“It’s too late to be a business call,” Vanessa mused.

“It’s not even eight o’clock yet,” I laughed, looking at the missed call notification on my phone.

“No, but if he’s calling about still shooting your campaign or about tickets to the fashion show or even about his project, then you know it’s business, and you should carry the

conversation with that energy. If he calls just to see how you're doing, it's personal, and you should give him a piece of your mind!" She stood up and put her hands on her hips. "How dare he disappear for five days and then feel like he can pop back up?"

I turned my lips upward to smile at my best friend. "Nessa, honestly, I'm not worried about it."

She pursed her lips. "Honestly, I can still see the hurt in your eyes."

I looked away quickly. "I'm not worried about it. That doesn't mean it didn't hurt."

"I just—"

"It's not that he was obligated to call me every day. We weren't dating. We weren't fucking. We weren't doing anything that would obligate him to me. We've only known each other for a couple of weeks, so I'm not mad at him for not calling. I realized while I was in bed this morning that the reason it hurt was because I'd gotten used to talking to him. I'd gotten used to the routine of spending hours on the phone with him, discussing the past, the present, and the future." I closed my eyes and sighed wistfully. "He got me in a way that not many men would, so we clicked. So, the problem was that I got too comfortable with something that was only ever supposed to be business anyway."

"It's not all on you! He was wrong!" Vanessa argued. "This is not all on you!"

"There was definitely mutual interest there. There was no way he could've been faking the way he looked at me. It wasn't just one sided." I stood up and hugged her. "But at the end of the day, I'm responsible for my feelings and I put too much stock into what I thought was there."

She pulled out of the hug and eyed me suspiciously. "How are you always so cool about letting men go? You are always so mature and rational when it comes to ending things."

"It's my keen eye for fashion. I can always spot what doesn't work. Clothes or relationships, if it doesn't work, it

doesn't work. You can't try to pretty it up with accessories and think that's going to change anything. You can't force two pieces to work. You can have two great articles of clothing that individually look great and work on their own, but that doesn't mean they'll work together."

"That's true. But still..."

"It's like if I'm a beautiful gown and he's a pair of sexy jeans, we are amazing individually, but we don't belong together. And I'm not into forcing things that aren't meant to go together. So, it's all good. It's all professional. It's no big deal."

"Mm hmm. Well, I'm going to go home so you can call him and then immediately call me and tell me what happened."

I laughed. "Isn't that what we always do?"

"I'm nervous."

"Why are you nervous?"

Her smile dimmed a bit and her eyes filled with concern. "Because I don't think he's jeans." She paused. "I'm nervous because I think he might be a tux."

We stared at each other in that telepathic way best friends do.

She didn't say it, and she didn't compel me to say it, either. But it was clear that we were both hoping that Luca had a valid explanation.

"I'll call you in a minute," I informed her as I made my way to my apartment building.

My heart thumped in my chest the entire walk to my place and when I got home, it beat even harder and louder.

"You can do this," I coached myself as I hit the button to call him.

I waited.

I waited.

Mid-ring, Luca's accented voice boomed through the phone. "Hello? Serena?"

The way he said my name was sexy as hell.

Closing my eyes, I blocked out how it made me feel and focused on keeping it professional. "Hey, how are you?"

"I'm great! How are you?"

I tried really hard not to be put off by how nonchalant he seemed after ignoring me for days.

"That's good to hear. I'm fine. What's up?"

"How are you?"

I kept my tone measured, unbothered. "I'm fine."

He was quiet for at least thirty seconds before he cleared his throat. "I was calling to see if you wanted to check out some of the shots from the shoot on Saturday."

"I'm two days away from the fashion show, so I'm focused on that. When do you have to submit them?"

He paused. "In a week and a half. You can check it out another time." He cleared his throat again. "Are you ready for your show?"

"Yeah, I am."

There was a marked silence that settled over the line. It was awkward, but it also pulsated with unasked questions.

"I uh—I would need to do the photoshoot for your campaign before my seminar starts. Do you have a date in mind?"

Grabbing the planner in my design room, I looked over the month of October. "Either Wednesday or Friday of next week works for me."

"Is Friday enough time?"

I nodded, tapping the pen against the planner. "Yeah, it is. I'll let the models know. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He waited a beat before continuing, "Talk to me."

“About?”

Luca chuckled lightly. “Serena.”

“I’m not sure what you want from me, Luca. Is this a personal relationship or a business relationship? I don’t know how to carry it with you.”

“What do you mean? Can’t it be both?”

“I thought it was, but...”

“But what?”

I sighed. “But you made it clear that it was business. You can’t flip flop between the two.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you home?”

“Of course, you don’t.” Exhaling, I shook my head. “Yeah, I am.”

“Okay. Can we talk face-to-face? I’m outside.”

I froze. “What?”

“I was running some errands and ended up on this side of town. I remembered you said you lived in this apartment complex.”

I rolled my eyes as I walked into the living room. “You also have my address.”

He laughed. “Yeah, that too. Can I come up?”

I looked down at my black leggings and red t-shirt and considered changing. My hair was pushed back with a simple, black headwrap. My face was free of makeup, and I wasn’t wearing any earrings.

You know what? No. Why am I going to change?

“I’ll come outside to you,” I responded, slipping my ballet slippers on.

“Really?”

“Really.” Grabbing my keys, I walked out the front door with the phone still pressed to my ear. “Where are you?”

I spotted him as soon as the question rolled off my tongue. Standing under a street light in grey sweatpants, a white t-shirt, and a red and grey jacket, he looked good. My stomach flipped at the sight of him.

“I’m standing on the sidewalk watching you walk toward me with a frown on your face.”

I did everything I could to resist the smile that tried to force my lips upward. Glaring at him, I hung up the phone.

“Serena Brooks,” Luca greeted me, opening his arms wide.

“Luca Romano,” I returned, reaching my hand toward his for a shake.

His face fell slightly as he let his arms drop so he could shake my hand. “Talk to me. Did I do something?”

I tried to pull my hand away, but he didn’t let it go. Instead, he rubbed his thumb across my knuckles and stared deep into my eyes. My skin tingled from his touch. I squeezed his hand before pulling from his grasp.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I just...” I closed my eyes for a second as I prepared to admit how I felt. “I thought this was something that it wasn’t, and I got my feelings hurt.”

He searched my face with his brows furrowed. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“From the beginning, it just felt like we clicked. And even though I didn’t know you, I immediately felt comfortable with you.”

“I felt the same way.”

“I knew we were establishing a business relationship, but from that night we had dinner, it felt like we had a personal relationship, too. I saw you a few times last week, and we talked every single night for hours about so much more than just our work. So, I thought...” I hesitated. “There was something here.”

“Again, I felt the same way.”

“And then I didn’t hear from you for days.”

“Because I was working.” He was quiet, looking at me expectantly. “Hold up... Is that why you’re mad? Because I was working?”

“No. I’m not mad that you were working. I’m not mad at all. I just had gotten used to the amount of time we’d...” I took a breath. “My feelings were a little hurt, but that’s because I was looking at this situation as if we were more than just business associates. I know that we aren’t now, so I’m just trying to keep things professional.”

“So... because I was working, we’re just business associates now?” He took a step backward and scrubbed his face with his hands.

I opened my mouth to tell him that it was also how he changed the way he interacted with me on Saturday, but when his eyes met mine, my voice faltered.

“Serena...” He laced his fingers and rested them on his head. “Honestly, I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” I forced myself to smile even though my eyes started stinging. “You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

“This whole thing is because I didn’t call you for a few days. I’m sorry I didn’t call. I didn’t realize it was going to be a big deal.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I bristled.

“Well, it sounds like it’s a big deal.”

“I expected something from you that I shouldn’t have. That’s on me. My mistake.”

“Mistake...” He nodded. “Good to know.”

“Listen, I don’t want to argue with you. I wasn’t even going to bring it up. You showed up over here and asked me to tell you what was going on. So, here we are.” I threw my hands up in the air and let them crash down.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” he muttered, his frustration evident.

“What was a bad idea?”

“This.”

I recoiled, giving him a look. “You asked me what was going on, so I tell you and your response is that you knew this was a bad idea? Really?”

“Yes, really,” he growled.

“Wow...” I took a step forward to ensure he could see the seriousness in my eyes. “Maybe you should go.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.” He shrugged. “Like I said, this was a bad idea.”

I put my hands on my hips. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I shouldn’t have come here tonight.”

“So, why did you?” My voice was louder, firmer.

He didn’t immediately respond. He looked at me in that way that pierced me to my core. “Because I...” His sentence trailed off.

My heart pounded. “Because you what?”

He shifted his gaze away from me. “Because I wasn’t thinking.”

“Me either, apparently.”

We stared at each other wordlessly. The stillness settled around us, and my eyes pricked with tears. The conversation took a turn I wasn’t expecting, and whatever was happening between us wasn’t rooted in anger. But for whatever reason, we just kept triggering one another.

I took a breath. “Luca, I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I don’t want to fight with you either.”

“Okay—”

Turning his back to me, Luca interrupted, “Take it easy, Serena.”

Stunned, I stood there in shock as he pulled his keys from his jacket pocket. As I watched him walk away, I found my voice. “Yeah, you too, Luca.”

I turned on my heel and stormed off. Each step I took felt like my feet were made of lead. Even though it was heavy, my heart rattled in my chest. I walked into my apartment and collapsed on the couch.

Our professional relationship was intact when I left the apartment, but when I came back in, it didn’t even seem like that was left.

“What the hell happened?” I murmured aloud, tears forming in the corners of my eyes.

I sent Vanessa a quick text that simply stated that it didn’t go well. It was an understatement, but I knew if I divulged everything that happened, she would’ve come over. She would’ve tried to make me talk to see how I felt, but I didn’t know how to put what I felt into words without sounding delusion. There was something between me and Luca, and I couldn’t explain it. We’d spent every day for a week getting to know one another and it just felt different. I knew it wasn’t love—it was way too soon to be love—but it was something.

Two unruly tears streamed down my cheeks and an emptiness cracked open my chest. I pulled off my jacket just as there was a knock on my door.

I knew I should’ve waited to text her.

Vanessa and I were always there for one another, no exceptions. So, I should’ve assumed that no matter what I wrote in the text, she would show up for details.

Especially since Derrick was watching the game with his boys.

Quickly wiping my face, I scrambled to my feet. I checked myself out in the mirror and while my eyes were glassy, I didn’t look like I was crying. I did look sad though.

“I’m fine,” I assured her as I swung the door open.

My heart and breathing stopped. Grabbing the doorjamb, I kept myself from tipping over in shock.

“I couldn’t just leave things like that,” Luca started, his eyes boring into mine. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I mean, yeah... I um...” I stumbled over my words as I closed the door behind me. I was taken aback and wasn’t at all prepared to verbalize how I was feeling. He was arm’s length away and with the way he was staring at me, I just blurted it out. “I mean, it was the calling thing, but it was also how Saturday went down followed by the calling thing.”

“It was uncomfortable...?”

I hesitated because I didn’t know if he was asking me or telling me.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” he continued. “That’s the last thing I wanted.”

I teetered between being lost in his presence and processing his words. The sincerity in his expression made my stomach flutter. “I just felt like there was something happening between us...”

His tongue ran along his bottom lip. “I felt it, too.” He stepped closer. “Do you still feel it?”

My eyes pinged around his face. When our eyes met again, something shifted. My sweater felt too hot, the air felt too thick, and my heart beat too quickly. With his question, the atmosphere between us had changed.

I cleared my throat. “That’s a complicated question,” I responded hesitantly, my vocal pitch sounding off.

“It’s not.” His brown eyes burned into mine as he closed the gap between us. “Do. You. Still. Feel it?”

The hurt I’d felt from his rejection kept me cautious, but the way he looked at me took my breath away. After seconds ticked by, I answered his question with a question. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

My skin heated before I fully registered what he'd said. I swallowed hard. "Is it just right now?"

"No."

My stomach knotted as I stared at him. "You felt it at the shoot, too?"

"Yes."

"Did you want to kiss me?"

"Yes." He brought his hands up to cup my face.

My heart thumped loudly against my chest, and my eyes almost closed. My body flooded with desire the moment his fingertip touched my skin, and I shuddered.

"I still do want to kiss you," he whispered, his thumbs lightly grazing my cheeks.

"Mm," I breathed, unable to formulate a complete thought. I knew I had questions for him, and I knew I needed answers. But it felt like he was seducing me with the jolts of pleasure his contact summoned beneath my skin.

With my back pressed against the door, my heart raced. I couldn't walk away even if I wanted to. Our faces gravitated closer, and my lips parted instinctively. I took slow, shallow breaths as his mouth hovered over mine. If I moved a fraction of an inch, our lips would connect, and the thought of his lips touching mine made my skin hum with anticipation. The sexual tension that existed between us as we got to know one another culminated in that moment. For the second time, we hovered on the precipice of desire, and I couldn't let the moment pass again.

So, I fell.

My eyelashes fluttered closed and my hands fisted his shirt. Pushing up on my toes, the sounds of the night dissipated into nothing as we kissed. We took our time, making each meeting of our lips more decadent than the one before it. The build-up, the argument, the sexual tension, and the fact that I missed him worked together to ignite the fire between us. What felt initially like a spark was stoked into a full-blown

flame as his mouth moved over mine worshipfully. In turn, I expressed everything I'd felt for him without words. The kiss was intense yet delicate and I could feel him restraining himself. But when my tongue met his, his body pinned me against the door and a deep, rumbling moan vibrated through him.

After a minute, he tore himself away from me and took a couple of steps back. My lips and my body instantly longed for his touch. My eyes broke from his as I noticed that he was as turned on as I was. The bulge in his sweatpants let me know that I wasn't imagining the pressure against my belly as he held me against the door.

Very, very nice, Mr. Romano... sheesh!

Licking my lips, I returned my eyes to his. My heightened arousal and internal salacious thoughts were no match for what I felt when he looked at me like that.

Be still, my fucking heart.

"Serena," he started, his voice low. "I've wanted to do that since dinner at District. It started as a business meeting, but as the night went on..." He looked as if he didn't understand what was happening either. "I don't know... it felt like... more."

I nodded. "And then on Saturday..."

"On Saturday, I felt the same way. There's something about you that I can't shake."

Although my heart skipped a beat hearing his words, he misunderstood what I was asking. I inhaled deeply and forced myself to ask the question. "So, what happened?" My voice was soft and tentative as I exposed myself. "We had a moment and then you just..." I lifted my arms and then let them drop, slapping my thighs. "It was different afterward."

He licked his lips and took a step closer to me. "Honestly?"

"Always."

"I just didn't want anyone to see us together."

What the fuck?

I felt like I'd been punched in my stomach. "What?" I even sounded as if the wind was knocked out of me.

"I didn't want anyone to think we had something going on," he clarified with his eyes dancing around my face.

The footsteps pounding the pavement dragged my attention away from the sting of Luca's admission. "Oh, sorry!" Vanessa yelped, coming to a complete stop as soon as she noticed us. "I can come back."

"No, it's okay." My voice cracked, and I was pretty sure everyone heard it. I glanced at Luca, but it hurt all over again, so I looked away. "Luca, this is my best friend, Vanessa Franklin. Vanessa, this is Luca Romano."

Clearing his throat, he took a step back and extended a hand to her. "It's very nice to meet you, Vanessa."

"It's nice to meet you as well," she greeted him with a huge smile.

When she looked at me, I widened my eyes incrementally.

"I uh—need to talk to you, Serena. It's urgent. It's an emergency. I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said, linking her arm with mine. "I just need to speak with you right now."

Forcing a smile on my face, I looked at Luca. "Thank you for your honesty." I swallowed hard, opening my door. "I need to go, but thanks for stopping by. I'm sure the pictures turned out great. I mean, of course they did. You're Luca Romano."

His sexy jaw clenched as if he was refraining from saying something. But after his last admission, I knew I wasn't emotionally in a space to hear anything else from him.

He held my gaze as Vanessa opened the door behind me. "Give me a call when you're free."

I nodded. "It's uh—I'll try. I um, I have my show on Saturday so it's going to be crazy."

“Okay, but I do want to finish this conversation. Call me,” he reiterated. “It was nice meeting you, Vanessa.” Even though he was speaking to her, he didn’t take his eyes off me. “Have a good night.”

“Have a good night,” I murmured, walking into my apartment on Vanessa’s heels.

As soon as she closed the door behind her, she exclaimed in a whisper, “What was that? Girl! He—”

I turned around to face her and as soon as I opened my mouth, the tears started to drop. “He said he didn’t want anyone to see us together.”

“What?!” Her eyes widened, and she rushed to my side. “No, he didn’t.”

I nodded, swiping at my face. “That’s verbatim what he said. I asked him what happened on Saturday, and he said he didn’t want anyone to see us together.”

She brought her hands to her mouth. “What?”

“And then to clarify, he said that he didn’t want anyone to think we were together.”

“What the fuck? No! What the actual fuck is that?”

I threw my hands up. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything. I was in shock. And then you came and...” I shook my head. Choking back the emotion, I closed my eyes. “I felt like that’s what it was but hearing him say it was worse than I imagined it would be.”

“Did he say it was because of the rumors?”

“What else could it be?”

She was quiet. “I’m so sorry, Serena.”

Opening my eyes, I mustered a small smile. “I asked him for the truth, and he gave it to me. So, I can’t be mad.” I lifted my shoulders helplessly. “I’m hurt, but I’m not mad. I just hate that I got my feelings so caught up, so quickly.” My throat

burned with unshed tears. “There was something there, Nessa. There was something. I-I really liked him.” I let out a humorless laugh and a tear fell. “I still like him...”

I wanted to tell her that I’d just had the kind of kiss that made knees weak and hearts flutter, but I heard his words replay in my mind, crushing me. My mouth snapped shut and I let my sentence trail off.

“I know you like him.” Vanessa wrapped her arms around me, and I hugged her back. “And from the way he was looking at you, the feeling is mutual.”

“That’s what I thought too, but—”

Pulling out of the hug, she placed her hands on my shoulders and gave me a stern look. “No, listen to me. That man looks at you like Derrick looks at me. The feeling is mutual. I mean, come on. He couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “Yeah, but it doesn’t matter since he doesn’t want anyone to see us together.”

Just saying it gutted me, but I refused to let another tear fall.

“And for that, fuck him. But I just wanted to let you know that you weren’t alone in your feelings. I saw it, too. And any man who could walk away from you is an idiot anyway.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Nessa.”

“Fuck him.”

“Fuck him.”

Chapter Twelve

Dressed in custom robes, we stood in a circle, clapping after finishing a prayer backstage. My show was going to start in exactly one hour. The DJ started spinning the carefully cultivated mood music, and doors were officially opened for attendees to mingle and find their seats. I could hear people already in the audience, and I wanted to peek out to see who showed up early, but I knew I needed to stay focused. I'd gotten through the last few days by being singularly focused on my show. I threw myself into finalizing details and preparing for the official launch of my career in the fashion world. I was so busy. But I wasn't busy enough that I didn't think about him or that kiss.

"You ladies look amazing!" I squealed as I looked at their creative up-dos. "I'm proud of this line. I'm proud of Simply Serena. And I'm proud to have you walking in my very first fashion show. All of you who have been with me from the beginning, I appreciate it more than you know. Erin and Jada, thank you for stepping in last minute to walk tonight." I looked around at everyone, my eyes welling with tears. "I couldn't have picked a better group of people to surround me. Tonight, we will rip the runway and then after we change, we will celebrate in VIP at Savor!"

Giddiness and excitement rippled through the group at the prospect of being in VIP at the grand opening of the newest club in the area.

Shaking off the wave of emotions, I lifted my hands in the air. “Okay, okay. You have forty minutes to finish hair and make-up before we line up. Twenty minutes before showtime, I’ll do the final onceover and we’ll steam any wrinkles. I’ll go on stage and say my piece and then when I get back here, the music will start, and we will do everything as we rehearsed. Please get help to put on your outfits.” I pointed to four classmates wearing all black. “These volunteers are here to help so utilize them. Do not rip, stretch, or tear anything. Ask for help. The five of us are here!”

As everyone moved around, starting to get dressed, Kate came over in her all black outfit. Throwing her arms around me, she exclaimed, “I’m so proud of you! Tonight is going to be epic!”

“Thank you so much! And thank you for volunteering for my show.” I lowered my voice. “I would be freaking out if you weren’t here.”

Everyone in our two-part Collection and Portfolio course had to complete a fashion show and volunteer to help in at least three others. While we had to put together a cohesive line that represented our fashion aesthetic, our grade was also dependent upon how well we assisted others during their shows. Kate was the first to sign up for mine. I made her my assistant director, and I looked forward to assisting with her show in December.

“Your line is incredible so even if I weren’t here, you’d have nothing to freak out about.” She tucked her blondish brown hair behind her ear and lowered her voice. “Except maybe that.” She gestured behind me.

I gave her a questioning look as I turned around to investigate what she was talking about.

“Talk about a show stopper,” Kate giggled from behind me. “I’m going to go help Jess with her makeup.”

I heard her, but I didn’t respond because I was trying to figure out who was doing security.

“How did you get back here?” I questioned as I marched over to him halfway hiding behind a piece of panel that was left from Friday’s fashion show.

Marcus shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. “I told the guy I wanted to wish you luck, and he let me through. He had the female security guard come back here first to make sure everyone was dressed.”

Fortunately, I’d put up a makeshift dressing area for the models who wanted privacy, but the fact that security was just letting people through was concerning. I looked around in annoyance. “And he just let you in?”

“He said I brought this school a championship, so…” His sentence trailed off.

Damn basketball fan.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. “That is something I’ll have to take care of because I definitely told them no visitors. My parents aren’t even back here!” Opening my eyes, I exhaled loudly. “This is a big night for me. What do you want?”

“Well, looking at you in this robe is making me want you.”

My lip curled in disgust. “And I mean this with all disrespect: go to hell.”

“Don’t be like that, Serena.”

“Goodbye, Marcus.”

I turned on my heel, ready to storm off, but he grabbed my wrist.

“Serena, please. I—”

I snatched my arm from his grasp. “Don’t ever put your hands on me again!” I hissed. “You misrepresented yourself, and then you flaked on me. I don’t play when it comes to my business. There’s nothing for us to talk about.”

“I just came back here to apologize.” He lifted his hands in surrender. “That’s all. I’ve called and texted a few times, but I

couldn't get in touch with you. So, I decided I needed to do it in person.”

I glared at him. “It couldn't have waited until after the show? You could back out of a business arrangement via text, but on the biggest night of my academic and professional career, you decide to pop up uninvited and unannounced? Really?”

He started using his hands emphatically. “Veronica wasn't cool with the idea of us working together. She's been getting a lot of heat from all this. People have been calling her dumb for staying with me since they think I cheated. She's having a rough time—”

My eyes widened at his audacity. “She's having a rough time?” I scoffed.

“I know things haven't been good for you either, but I just wanted to explain the reason why she wouldn't like it if everyone saw me interacting with you. She was fine with the fact that we... you know. But she doesn't like people rubbing her face in it. She's my girl, so I had to do what would make her happy. I'm sorry if that messed up your show.”

“Got it. Thanks.” I gave him a thumbs up. “You've said what you wanted to say and I have less than an hour to get things together, so can you show yourself out? I need to focus on what's really important. And that's not what you two have going on.” I pointed toward the exit. “Go.”

He started walking backward. “She was trying to save face and was caught off guard. I'll figure out a way to make it right.” Turning, he continued toward the door.

I didn't know what he was talking about and I didn't care. I had more important things to think about.

“Haru!” I called out to one of the models as I walked back into the organized madness of backstage. Since she was going to open the show, I needed her to be perfect. Pointing to her hair, I asked, “What happened?”

She looked in the mirror and gasped. “I'm not sure. I'm so sorry!”

“No worries.” I glanced at the clock—thirty-seven minutes until they had to line up for inspection, fifty-seven minutes until the show officially started. “You have time and all they really have to do is fix that part.”

I tried to busy myself with other little tasks, but I was so overly prepared that everything seemed to be flowing smoothly. I didn’t have anything to do but walk around and make sure everyone was okay. Over the sounds of hair dryers, conversation, and laughter, I heard the music from the event space and I smiled.

It’s happening. This is really happening!

I started making my way to the back entrance, so I could talk to security.

Do I have everything? Am I ready for this? Did I bring my business cards?

“Are you okay?” Jess asked from behind me, bringing me out of my own head.

I turned to face her, flashing a smile. “I’m just ready to get this show on the road.” I studied her face. “Your makeup looks good.”

“You know what else looks good?” She looked over my shoulder and wiggled her eyebrows. “I think someone is waiting for you.”

I know Marcus didn’t bring his ass back.

“Are you serious?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Yeah...” She winked at me. “I’ll give you a minute.”

I turned around ready to curse Marcus out and froze.

My heart stopped and then quickly sped up. I was immobilized, held captive by his gaze. The backstage noise faded away, and all I could hear was my heart beating a mile a minute. In black pants, a fitted white shirt, and black boots, Luca stood in the narrow walkway that was supposed to be closed off to anyone who wasn’t part of my show.

Who is in charge of security?

Swallowing hard, I forced my legs to move toward him. Glancing over my shoulder, I checked to make sure no one was able to see us. I stopped a few feet in front of him. “What are you doing here?”

The way his long-sleeved shirt hugged his muscles was a little distracting. He pushed up his sleeves, showing off his forearms, and checked his watch. “Can I have five minutes of your time?”

“I don’t have five minutes.” Anxiously, I played with the belt of my robe. When I’d ignored his calls and text messages on Thursday and Friday, it was easier to push my feelings to the side. Being in his presence was too much, and I just didn’t want to experience an emotional upheaval before my show. “The show is starting in like fifty minutes. Can we do this after I’m done, please?”

“I’m heading up to Pittsburgh tonight. I have a shoot in the morning, and I still need to pack.” His voice lowered and held a pleading quality. “Please.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I shakily exhaled. “Five minutes.”

“Well, then I’m not going to waste my time telling you how beautiful you look because I know you already know that. How are you feeling?”

The knot in my stomach tightened. I cleared my throat. “About the show or about this conversation?”

His jaw clenched. “The show.”

“I’m nervous,” I answered honestly. “The models are great. The clothes look great. I’m nervous, but I’m good.” I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone had come to the side of the room where we were. “I’ll feel better once it starts.”

“I’ve seen your collection and your rehearsal,” he began, pulling my attention back to him. “You have nothing to be nervous about. You’re going to be great. You have an impressive line and a professional caliber show on your hands.”

I licked my lips. “Thank you.”

His eyes zeroed in on my tongue before flicking back to meet my stare. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest. He walked closer to me until there was no space between us. My breathing hitched, and I willed myself to look away. But it didn't work. I tried to remind myself that I wasn't dealing with him on a personal level. But it didn't work. Instead, I allowed his scent to infiltrate my lungs and fill my spirit. The energy between us was electric, and my lips tingled with the memory of our kiss.

Luca was as close as he could be without touching me. “You've been blowing me off and ordinarily, I would've taken the hint and walked away, but there's something here. There's something between us that I can't shake, and I couldn't go another day without telling you that, Serena.”

His accented voice said my name in a way that spoke to the depths of me. It took everything in me not to be seduced in that moment.

Putting my hands up to his firm chest, I gently pushed, creating the distance I needed to respond. “Let me guess... you want to sneak around? Keep whatever this is between us private?”

“I'm willing to do whatever I need to do to spend more time with you.”

I shook my head. “I don't date men who want to hide me.” Feeling myself getting emotional, I turned to walk away. “I need to get back—”

Moving quickly, he caught my arm and spun me back toward him. Seeing my face, he dropped his hand from my robe. “Hide you? What are you talking about?”

“You're clearly embarrassed for this to be anything.” My eyes stung, but since he'd brought it up, I realized how badly I needed to have the conversation. I needed the weight of his hurt off me.

“What are you talking about? I'm not embarrassed for this to be anything!” He studied my face as if he were seeing me

for the first time. “You don’t honestly believe that, do you?”

“It’s what you said! You admitted that you didn’t want anyone to think we were together. You—”

“I did that for you!” His voice was a little louder, a little rougher as he interrupted me. “That was for your benefit!”

I rolled my eyes. “Listen, I need to get—”

“You’re beautiful, talented, creative, smart, strong, and I can’t stop thinking about you. I’m not embarrassed to be seen with you or to be with you. I said I didn’t want anyone to think we were together because I was trying to protect you.”

My heated face scrunched in confusion, trying to make sense of what he was saying. “Protect me? How?”

“Almost all of the people helping with the shoot were connected to Hamilton in some way. I just kept thinking that if they saw us together, the rumors would’ve just continued. I saw the look on your face when you were telling me about the podcast. Seeing us together would’ve made it worse, and I couldn’t do that to you. Not without us at least talking about the risk. I wanted to protect you. I still want to protect you.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, unsure of what to believe or how I felt.

It wasn’t that what he was saying wasn’t the truth. If word got out that Luca and I were caught kissing on set, it would’ve made everyone who was calling me ho, slut, and gold digger feel validated. So, on one hand, I understood what he was saying about protecting me from the rumor mill. But on the other hand, he didn’t protect my feelings when he chose not to communicate with me.

He shook his head. “In everyone’s mind who believes that shit about you, being with me will confirm that rumor and people might say that means all of the rumors are true. I didn’t want to give them any fuel to throw on the fire. You deserve better than that.”

“But you’re here now...on campus...with students all around. Almost all the models go here or graduated from here. My professor could walk back here any minute. Most of the

audience is affiliated with Hamilton University in some way.” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “So, which is it? You didn’t want to make a move in front of the people you shoot with because you wanted to protect me or the better you think I deserve is sneaking around and hiding behind this partition?”

A pained expression crossed his face. “It’s...” He sighed. “I want to do what’s best for you. That’s all. And I just wanted to let you know how I feel.”

Something in me cracked. “So, why didn’t you say that Saturday night after the shoot?” I demanded, my voice hoarse with vulnerability. “Because you did everything you could to avoid me when you weren’t actually shooting. Then you ignored me for days. And then you told me that the reason for treating me like I didn’t mean anything to you was because you didn’t want anyone to think we were together.” I tilted my head to the side. “And now you want me to believe you were hurting me to protect me.”

I wanted to call bullshit, but the way he looked at me caused the word to melt on my tongue. The way he looked at me brought my feelings front and center, and my eyes started to water. I looked away.

“I’m sorry, Serena. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I guess I didn’t think about how it would come across. I was just so focused on not making anything worse for you.” With sincerity dripping from each word, he brought his hands to my face, cupping my cheeks and forcing me to look at him. “I could see how the rumors were wearing you down, and I didn’t want to add to the problem. I didn’t mean to make you think that I...”

He shook his head as his sentence trailed off, bringing his face closer.

Closing my eyes, I let what he’d said seep into me. Between his words and his nearness, I was overwhelmed.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time,” he whispered, his fingers flexing against my face. “You wouldn’t take my calls, and I just needed to talk to you.” He paused, rubbing his nose against mine. “Look at me, please.”

My lashes fluttered opened, and he was so close that I felt emotional. I sucked in a deep breath. Seconds ticked by and his eyes implored mine, begging me to say something, but I was too lost in them to speak immediately. Bringing my hands up to cover his, I hoped he couldn't feel the way I was trembling.

"I just needed to see you," he reiterated so softly.

"You just needed to see me and talk to me?" I murmured, intoxicated by the way he looked at me. "Is that the only reason you came back here?"

"Maybe one other thing..."

My heart was pounding. "What?"

Crashing his lips into mine, he kissed me with enough passion to take my breath away. Butterflies spread across my belly as his full lips overpowered my own. When his tongue grazed mine, it sent shivers up and down my spine. A flurry of emotions awakened my entire body and before I could fully bask in what was happening, it was over.

Moving back a few inches, his eyes flashed with the same intensity as that fleeting kiss. We just stood there staring at one another for a moment.

"What was that?" I breathlessly wondered aloud.

Without taking his eyes off me, his hands slowly ran down my neck, over my shoulders, and then down my arms until our fingers intertwined. "That was me claiming you as mine."

That was the moment I realized that the man before me weakened me. I felt my face heat, and I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but the sound of Kate's voice shattered the moment before I could formulate an intelligent thought.

"You need to be dressed in fifteen minutes! Keep an eye on the time, people!" Kate announced loudly.

I glanced at my watch. *Shit! That means I've been with Luca for fifteen minutes.*

“I have to go,” I informed him, pushing down my feelings and mentally preparing myself for what I needed to do.

“I know.” Dipping down to brush his lips against mine, Luca whispered, “You’ve been preparing your whole life for this, and I know how much this means to you. You’re ready. You worked your ass off for this. You sacrificed for this. Be in the moment.”

He gave me the pep talk I didn’t know that I needed and sealed it with a kiss. The beautifully talented and creative man looked into my eyes and could see my beautifully talented and creative soul, and he spoke to it. And while I saw his sincerity, felt his genuineness, and tasted his truth, the fact that he snuck in and kissed me in secret didn’t work for me.

I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from crying. I had work to do. “Bye, Luca.”

Fifteen minutes flew by and before I knew it, twenty models decked out in Simply Serena designs stood in front of me. In the order that they were to make their way down the runway, the models looked like a manifestation of my dreams. One by one, I inspected the overall look and had the makeup artist and hair dresser touching up things as we moved down the line. From head to toe, their entire look was exactly what I’d conceptualized. I was overcome with excitement seeing how perfectly everything had come together.

“Five minutes!” Kate’s voice boomed, and a hush fell over the entire backstage area.

“Is everyone ready? Everyone good?” I quickly checked in on the photographers and then I peeked out of the curtain to see a packed house.

My stomach dropped.

I didn’t even look to see if I could spot my parents or Vanessa and Derrick in the crowd. I had seats blocked off for them specifically, so I knew where they should’ve been.

I took a deep breath.

I went to one of the many long full-length mirrors and untied my robe. I let it slip from my shoulders, exposing my

outfit. My hair was twisted and pinned with gold accessories forming a crown on the top of my head. A short, strapless, gold lamé dress covered my body, stopping mid-thigh. The sweetheart neckline showed off my cleavage, and the fluid movement of the material was sexy without being over the top. I stepped out of my flats and stepped into a pair of black four-inch stilettos with gold ankle straps and a gold heel.

The catcalling started immediately.

“Stop it!” I laughed, waving my hand dismissively. “But thank you.” I looked around the room with pride and excitement as I made my way to the curtain that led out to the stage. “This is it. You all look beautiful. Thank you in advance for being amazing.”

I walked over to the curtain, took a deep breath, and I waited for my cue. When “None of Your Business” by Salt-N-Pepa started, I smiled and patiently waited until the beat dropped. Squaring my shoulders, I walked out to wild applause from the mostly female audience. The song played through the first verse as I posed center stage. The music came to a stop, but the applause didn’t.

Giggling to myself, I waved before bringing the microphone to my mouth. “Thank you. Thank you so much.” The crowd quieted, so I continued. “Welcome to the Fashion 699: Collection and Portfolio fashion show for Simply Serena. Fashion has always been an important part of my life, and to have this platform to display my heart and soul in this way means everything to me. Clothes are a way to define yourself and showcase your personality. Fashion is not only a way to exert your individuality but also your freedom. You are free to choose what you wear. You are free to choose what you do. You are free to live the life you create for yourself.”

The audience applauded, and I took the time to scan the crowd. When I looked at the section I roped off for photographers, my eyes landed on Luca Romano. Standing beside the two photographers I hired, he lowered his camera to wink at me. I felt that wink to my core. Flushed, I ripped my eyes away from him.

“We were asked to discuss our style story and inspiration for our collections. But I’d like to take it a step further with a message. No one’s approval or disapproval will affect us unless we grant it credibility and status. Stop validating the opinions of people who don’t matter. The last couple of weeks have been...interesting, to say the least. A lot of untrue things have been said about me that attack my character, but I never let it define me. I know who I am, I know what I’m about, and I know where I’m going. And it occurred to me that the way I’ve been overcoming the last couple of weeks is how I’ve always dealt with life. And the way I move through the world has been and will always be the inspiration for my collection. Simply Serena is about confidence, strength, and individuality. We aren’t defined by anyone other than ourselves. So, my style story, my inspiration, and my message to you is to be free. Free of other people’s expectation, other people’s opinions, other people’s shaming. Simply Serena gives you the freedom to be exactly who you are and to look good doing it. So, without further ado, I’m proud to introduce the Simply Serena Collection.”

With a wave, I signaled the DJ to play Salt-N-Pepper again as I exited the runway platform to a round of applause.

One minute later, the smooth, mid-tempo show music started playing. I looked from Haru to Jessica, everyone looked amazing from head to toe.

They practiced the walk. They rehearsed how this goes. They know what they’re doing, I reminded myself silently. Remembering Luca’s words, my nerves settled, allowing me the calm to enjoy my moment.

I let out a deep breath and gave a nod for the curtains to open. In a pair of white, high-waisted shorts with a sheer green shirt and a deconstructed green and blue blazer, Haru smiled, giving me a thumbs up. And when the beat changed, she walked onto the platform and posed to the sound of “oohs and ahhs” before making her way down the runway.

As each model walked, I saw the same pleased look on their face when they returned. Fifteen minutes later, I walked the catwalk again with all twenty of them to a standing

ovation. They left the stage, but I grabbed the microphone from the DJ.

“Thank you all for being here! I hope you had a good time. I’d be remiss if I didn’t thank my mom and dad for loving me, supporting me, and buying me a sewing machine for my tenth birthday. I love you both so much. I’d like to thank all of my friends and family for sharing in this moment with me—in particular, Vanessa, my best friend who is more like a sister to me, and her husband, Derrick. Thank you to Mr. Lam and Mrs. Holliday for their guidance during this last stretch of my program. Thank you to everyone who helped with the show, but specifically, Kate, DJ Poison, and the incredible photographers, makeup artists, and hair dressers. Thank you to the media outlets and fashion bloggers who are here.” I took a deep breath. “And finally, thank you to all of you who got tickets and showed up tonight. You could’ve done anything else with your Saturday night, but you decided to be here for my show. I am truly humbled. Simply Serena officially opens for business January first, but you can begin preordering the items that you’ve seen here on November first. Check my website for details. Thank you!” As the applause thundered, I added, “Ten o’clock, after party at Savor!”

With a wave, my first professional fashion show ended.

After the models were out of their outfits, I placed them in garment bags and hung them on my portable rolling rack. I went out the back door to pack my car before going back in the building. I made a beeline to my parents, Vanessa and Derrick, and a few friends and family members that were seated in the front. After a quick exchange and a round of hugs, I had to go do an interview with bloggers and two members of the media that I had to convince to come to the show. I looked for Luca on my way, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

The interview went well, and I got the sense that all of them truly enjoyed the collection. I stood in a classroom near the elevator bank with Akila, an art and culture writer from the Richland Times, a fashion writer from a regional magazine, and about twenty bloggers. They had questions and words of

praise that really blew me away. By the time I took the last question and said goodbye, the only person left in the auditorium was the DJ, who was packing his equipment, and Kate, who was flirting with the DJ as he packed.

After watching them interact for a second, I said goodbye to DJ Poison and waited for Kate out in the hall.

“Sorry!” Kate apologized as she walked up to me. “The security guard said we could leave after Paul is finished packing up.”

“DJ Poison’s name is Paul? I never would’ve guessed.” I smirked at her. “So, what’s up with you and DJ Poison—excuse me, you and Paul?”

“I don’t know,” she giggled, covering her face. “He’s going to meet me at Savor, so we’ll see. Anyway, how did your meeting with the press go?”

I could feel happiness radiating off me. “It went really well! I’m so excited.”

“Your show was amazing. I’m serious. That’s what everyone was saying, too. From what you said in the beginning, from the song you chose to walk out to, oh my god! I thought you said you were walking out to Beyoncé and then all of a sudden, ah! Brilliant! It was absolutely brilliant, Serena!”

“Thank you.” I grinned. “I can’t believe it’s done. I feel like it was a wedding. Months of preparation and attention to detail and then, from beginning to end, it was over in an hour. I’m exhausted, but...” I put my hands to my cheeks. “This was my dream come true.”

“You honestly knocked it out of the park. This was a homerun, for sure. And not just with the clothes. You’ve always had impeccable taste. But what you said beforehand about not letting what other people say define you. That was perfect.”

“Thank you, Kate.” I massaged my cheeks because they hurt from smiling so hard. “Tonight was truly something special.”

“This is the last of it,” Paul informed us as he exited the auditorium. “Serena, thank you for hiring me. Kate, see you tonight.”

I smiled at the man who had graciously DJed my event for a fraction of his usual cost. “Thanks, Paul!”

“I need to go home and change, but I’ll text you,” Kate replied.

“That’s cool.” He pushed the main door open with his back. “You look beautiful as is though.” And then he left.

My eyebrows shot to the middle of my forehead as I stared at Kate. “Girl!”

Her face was beet red. “Did that just happen?” She squealed.

“I’ll wait around for the security guard. Go get ready for your date,” I told her as I gave her a hug.

Squealing, she hugged me back. “Are you sure?”

“You’ve done enough. You went above and beyond what Mr. Lam asked us to do as my assistant. Now, go! You have a fine ass man waiting to get a text from you.”

Jumping up and down a bit, she squealed again. “I do! Thank you, Serena. I’m going to go home and—oh!” She stopped abruptly.

I was about to respond when movement down the hall caught my attention.

Right on time, I thought as the security guard appeared from the direction of the bathrooms.

“We’re all done! The DJ got his stuff, so that should be it. We’re leaving,” I yelled out to him. I waited for him to wave before I turned my attention back to Kate. “Let’s go!”

We walked out into the relatively warm October night and headed to the parking lot.

“You needed to focus on putting on an excellent show—and you did. But now that it’s done, I have to tell you something,” she began slowly.

“What’s up?”

“The show was the most important thing, so I didn’t want to say anything when I found out because I wanted your head to be in the game.”

I laughed. “Spit it out, Kate!” I was so high off life, I didn’t think anything could bring me down.

“The um... Lost Boys.” She fiddled with her keys. “There was this really messed up podcast. I couldn’t listen to the whole thing this morning, because it was... I just... I don’t know if that’s even allowed. They didn’t say your name, but I just... I just wanted you to know it was out there. It’s... it’s bad. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Fuck The Lost Boys.

Chapter Thirteen

“*W*here are you?” Vanessa asked as soon as I picked up the phone.

“I had to bring all of my stuff in and then I took a shower. I’m almost finished getting ready though.” I looked at the clock. “I’m going to be at least fifteen minutes late, but the VIP section is reserved for ten o’clock. Are you there already?”

“I just got here. Derrick and a couple of his friends are inside at the bar.” She lowered her voice. “Trey’s on the way.”

“If he thought I was too much for him before, you and I both know he thinks I’m too much for him now.” I let out a humorous laugh. “Honestly, I’m taking a break from men. I’m tired of their shit.”

“What? You just got done with a break from men!”

“That was a work break. I was unintentionally not dating because I was focused on work. This is a man break. I am intentionally not dating because I’m focused on myself.”

“What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Serena, we’ve been best friends since we were little—”

“Since we were seventeen, but continue,” I corrected her, trying not to smile.

“We’ve been best friends forever, and I can tell that some shit happened. So, spill it.”

“I’ll tell you when I get there.”

“No, ma’am! You need to tell me now, so we can get it out of your system. When you arrive here, you need to be in a different mindset. This is a celebration for you. And you deserve to be celebrated. So, spill it.”

I sighed. “First, I was backstage, and Marcus showed up ___”

“What did that spineless ass hat want?”

Hearing Vanessa snap put a smile on my face as I hit the speakerphone button. “Right?!” I eyed the dress I was going to wear as I pulled on my G-string. “He snuck backstage to apologize and to tell me that his girlfriend was having a hard time with the rumors and he didn’t want to make it worse for her by appearing with me in the campaign.”

“He should’ve never slept with you when he knew he had a girlfriend in the first place.”

“Exactly! That’s my point! I understand him doing what he feels like he needs to do to make sure his girlfriend is happy. I even understand to some degree where she may not feel comfortable with him working with me. And I’m not judging their open relationship. If that’s what they want, fine, whatever. But no one was open with me! I didn’t know about her at all, and I told him that I wasn’t sleeping with him again because he has a girlfriend. And he agreed to do the campaign, and she knew about what happened with us. I was the last to know!”

“So, what’s her problem?”

“Apparently because everyone is saying that we slept together and they’re looking at her with pity because she was allegedly cheated on.” I rolled my eyes as I rolled on my deodorant. “I just hate that the first man I decide to get back out there and destress with had a whole girlfriend he didn’t bother to mention.”

“Why would they even come to the show if it was a problem?”

“Exactly! Why were they there? It makes no sense!” I threw my arms up in the air. “So, that was annoying. But what took the cake was Luca.”

“Yeah, I definitely saw him and wanted to ask you about it. I thought he was taking pictures of the stuff for your campaign. I didn’t realize he was taking pictures of the fashion show, too.”

“I didn’t know he was doing that either!”

“He’s not charging you, is he?” Vanessa asked quickly.

I could imagine the facial expression she was making, and I laughed lightly. “He better not! I didn’t ask him to do that. But before that even happened, he also snuck backstage and —”

“Where was security?” she interrupted. “Your parents and I were joking about sneaking back there to wish you luck and lo and behold, these motherfuckers were letting any and everybody back there!”

“My thoughts exactly! Marcus said they let him in because he won the school a championship last season. And Luca said they let him back because they treated him like faculty.”

“That’s still messed up that they let them back there. But sorry, please continue.”

“Luca told me that he was treating me differently when his team got to the shoot because he was trying to protect me. He thought if we looked like something was going on, it was going to perpetuate the rumors about us, about me.” I swallowed hard. “He said he thinks there’s something between us, and he couldn’t leave town without letting me know that.”

“Do you believe him?”

I stopped putting lotion on my body and closed my eyes. The memory of the way he looked at me and the way he kissed me caused an increase in my heart rate. “I believe that he has

feelings for me. I believe that there's something real between us. And when he kissed me, the Earth shifted on its axis."

"Oh. My. God. Serena!" Vanessa squealed in delight. "I love this so much! But I know there's a 'but' coming. I can feel it."

"He told me that he can't shake me and that he feels this thing between us...as we're tucked away behind a partition. So, he takes me out to his favorite restaurant which happens to be one of the hottest restaurants in town, so everyone sees us together. And then after the gossip starts swirling around that week, it changed. We had a moment, and then he treated me differently in front of his team. He claimed he was working and busy, so he didn't talk to me for days afterward, and then he showed up here to tell me that he was different because he didn't want anyone to think we were together. And then after I ignore him for a couple of days because *I'm* busy working, he shows up backstage to apologize and to tell me he has feelings for me."

"Holy shit!"

"Yeah. And then he kissed me and gave me a pep talk and..." I sighed, remembering how it felt to have his hands on my face and his lips on mine. "All behind the safety of a partition."

"What did you say?"

My eyes fluttered open. "I told him I didn't date men who had to sneak around with me."

"And?"

"And that's it. I had to get back to work, and he apparently joined the photography pool."

"So, let me get this straight... he just showed up at the event to profess his love for you and then he decided to take pictures for you for free. That's nice that—"

My eyes flew open and I gasped.

"—what?" Vanessa asked, quickly abandoning what she was saying.

Anger and hurt shot through me as I realized what happened. “He probably wanted it to look like I hired him to be there instead of having anyone think we were together. Oh my...” I shook my head as I felt the tears stinging my eyes. “He seemed so sincere when he said everything else was white noise.”

“I saw the way that man looked at you. The feelings have to be real. But if he can’t get over the fact that you were with men before him, fuck him.”

“My thoughts exactly. But it is what it is. Like I said before, if he’s the type of man that would let what people are saying about me get in the way of what was happening between us, then he isn’t the man that I thought he was.” I eyed my dress again and then looked in the mirror. “You know what... I’m putting all of that behind me, and I’m celebrating tonight.”

“Your drinks are on me tonight. And by me, I mean Derrick.”

An unexpected laugh escaped me as my hurt threatened to dampen my spirits. “Thanks, Nessa.”

“Now get your gorgeous ass down here so we can toast to a hell of an accomplishment. And who knows... Trey may surprise you.”

Walking to my closet, I pulled out a new outfit. “You know what, I think I’m going to be the one full of surprises.” The corners of my mouth turned upward. “I’ll text you when I get there.”

I was parked outside of Savor forty-five minutes later.

After sending Vanessa a text message, I stepped out of my car in black thigh-high boots and pulled my denim shorts down. Grabbing my cropped leather jacket, I slipped it on over my white graphic t-shirt. I heard something drop and when I shifted to the left, I saw that it was an old pen top. The shorts stopped right where my ass met my thighs, so I knew bending down wouldn’t be an option.

I’ll get that later, I assured myself.

The temperature had dropped by ten o'clock. So, while I looked good as I walked toward the building, I knew the leather jacket would be coming off within ten minutes of arriving.

"Hey! Love your boots," the woman who checked my ID complimented as I entered the building.

"Thanks!" I flashed her a bright smile. "Oh, and I'm on the VIP list. I reserved a section."

She looked at my ID again and then checked her handheld electronic device. "Ms. Brooks!" With her free hand, she passed me a bracelet. "Welcome to Savor. Your section is on the second floor, right behind the DJ booth." She pressed a button on her headset. "Ben, Serena Brooks is on her way to you. She's in Section A. Please show her the way. Thank you." She looked at me. "You're all set. Have a great time tonight!"

I thanked her and headed toward the big black door as she collected the ID and payment from the people behind me. The music was muffled, but the beat pulsed through the walls. The door opened as I approached, and I couldn't help but smile. The music was going, people were on the dance floor, and four members of security greeted me.

"Ms. Brooks?" A big burly man with cute dimples questioned with a smirk.

"Ben?" I returned.

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. You can take these steps to your section or you could cross the dance floor and take the stairs by the DJ booth." He pointed across the crowded room. "If you need an escort, let me know."

"I think I got it, but thanks, Ben."

I took the stairs and headed to my section. The position behind the DJ booth had the best vantage point. Twelve out of the twenty models, both photographers, most of the makeup artists and hairdressers, and two of my classmates were in the large section even though only half of the group were able to sit comfortably. As I looked around, I saw Kate and Paul slow dancing off-beat near the VIP bar. I saw several friends and

classmates that I made small talk with, but I had my eye out for Vanessa.

It had been fifteen minutes since I texted her and just as I was going to send another, the DJ started spinning our favorite song.

Vanessa: *I'm just seeing your text. The line for the bathroom was ridiculous. Our song is on! Meet me on the dance floor if you can.*

Serena: *On my way!*

I took the stairs right next to my section, and I was only halfway down when I spotted her in a black dress that I'd made her last year.

"Nessa!" I called out as I reached the floor.

She couldn't hear me over the music, but she must have felt me coming because she turned my way.

"Serena!" She threw her arms around me and then whispered, "Marcus is here."

"Marcus who?" I snarled, making her laugh.

"True, true."

I slipped off my jacket, and her jaw dropped.

"I love that so fucking much!" She screamed as she read my shirt with the sentence, Define "Slut", emblazoned in black.

The DJ played three hits back to back and we danced hard and really let loose.

"This is exactly what I needed," I yelled to Vanessa over the throbbing beat of the music.

"I hate this song!" Vanessa shouted back as a new song pumped through the speakers.

I shook my ass and swayed my body as we moved away from a couple of men who were trying to dance with us and toward a cocktail table.

Vanessa dropped her body into the chair with a dramatic flair, crossing her legs as she landed. Running her hand through her long, black hair, she looked around.

“I know you said you’re taking a break, but”—she winked— “I see some good-looking men in here tonight! Have you seen anyone who caught your eye?”

“I can’t hear you,” I replied in a sing-song voice.

She laughed, lifting her arms in surrender. “Fine, fine. But you and I both know that once you start filling all those orders you’re going to get, you’re going to need a way to relieve your stress.”

“I’m going to take up knitting.”

With a grin, she rolled her eyes.

As an annoying song with a catchy beat started pumping through the speakers, I started shaking my shoulders and bobbing my head. “We love this song! Let’s go back out!”

“I hate this song!”

I grinned at her. “You’re missing out,” I teased as I started shimmying my way backward toward the dance floor.

SHE CHUCKLED and reached her hand out. “But give me your jacket. I’m going to go give it to Derrick to hold and then get us some drinks. What do you want?” Her eyes lit up. “Unless you want to come with me. He’s at the bar with Trey and some of the other guys.”

I handed over my jacket. “Tell him I said thank you and that I’ll come say hi in a minute. Right now, I need to dance!”

Feeling the music run through me, I lifted my arms in the air and swayed my hips. It wasn’t long before I felt the heat of someone taller than me pressing up against me from behind. Glancing over my shoulder, I caught the eye of my dance partner. He had dark eyes, a bright smile, and smooth dance moves.

It’s just a dance, I thought with a shrug.

I turned my body to face him and kept dancing.

Why does he look familiar? I wondered as I checked him out.

He moved closer so that our bodies were flush against one another. With his hands on my hips, he started rolling his body, grinding into me.

I like the way Luca's hands felt on my hips.

The thought popped in my head out of nowhere, surprising me.

Focusing on the guy in front of me, I created a bit of space between us as I continued to dance. He was staring at me shyly which endeared me to him as one song ended and the next one began. Grabbing my hand, he spun me in a circle and then pulled me back into him.

“Hi.” He leaned down so his mouth was right next to my ear. The bass in his voice caught me off guard. “I’m Rich.”

“Hi,” I returned. “I’m a starving artist.”

He chuckled. “What’s your name?”

“Serena.”

“Nice to meet you, Serena.” He looked me up and down. “You really know how to dance!”

I smiled. “Thanks, Rich!”

For the next couple of songs, we danced and laughed at each other’s over-the-top moves. When the music slowed, Rich took that opportunity to speak. “I want to get a drink. Can I buy you a drink, too?”

I nodded, realizing how parched I was all of a sudden.

Vanessa never came back with my drink, I realized as he led me through the crowd to the bar.

The music wasn’t as loud near the bar, but it was still a club. We just didn’t have to yell at each other anymore.

“Rum and Coke,” he called to the bartender. Looking at me, his eyebrows raised. “What would you like, Serena?”

“Just a bottle of water, please.”

He gave me a look. “You sure? That’s all?”

I smiled. “I’m sure.”

He grinned before turning back to the bartender. “Bottle of water for the lady, please.”

Two minutes later, Rich had his drink and I had my water.

“Thank you.” I twisted the cap and took a gulp.

For five minutes, we had a loud conversation about the music.

Leaning against the bar, Rich finished his drink in what seemed like seconds. Putting the glass on the bar, he pointed at it, signaling for another. Once his order was filled, he turned his attention back to me. “Do you not drink?”

“I do. I just realized that I hadn’t eaten all day, so I’m good with water right now.”

“Cool, cool.” His eyes glanced down at my chest. “So... are we going to talk about this or am I supposed to just throw my definition your way?”

I laughed. “Either or.”

Rich’s hands were up, fingers outstretched, save for the two holding the refilled glass of brown liquor. “I feel like it’s a trap.” He took a sip. “So, I’m going to decline to define for the moment.” He took another sip. “But I’m going to turn the tables on you and ask you to define slut.”

“Ok.” I smirked. “The word slut is a construct directed primarily at women and used to control their actions and bodies.”

“Wow.”

I sipped my water. “I know.”

“You are...” He grinned. “I want to get to know you better.”

“Well, I’m not interested in dating right now, but what would you like to know?”

He looked down into his glass. “Anything you want to tell me.”

I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. “Do you not know what you want to ask?”

“I do, but... You’re nothing like I expected you to be.”

My eyebrows flew up. “You had expectations? What did you expect?”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.” He brushed it off as he finished his drink. “I just thought...never mind. It’s not important.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

He let out a small chuckle. “I just thought you were going to be... different. The way you wouldn’t let me grind on you for very long, you didn’t want me to buy you anything, your definition of slut...” His sentence trailed off, but I was still confused by what he meant. “You’re just different.”

I made a face. “I’ll take that as a compliment... I think.”

“It is! When you hear that someone is a... you know...”—he pointed at my shirt—“you don’t necessarily think...”

He seemed to read the expression on my face, and his sentence trailed off.

“Sorry...” He gave me a look. “You are Serena Brooks, right? The one The Lost Boys were talking about, right?”

My mouth was agape. “Oh. My. God.”

“Listen, I’m cool with it. I like a woman with experience.”

I rolled my eyes and walked off. “Goodbye.”

“Whatever, slut,” he yelled at my back. “I wouldn’t want somebody who was used up by everybody anyway.”

I stopped.

Everyone around us stopped and stared. The music was still thumping through the club, but everyone within ten feet of where we were heard Rich try to embarrass me. I looked around. Some people looked shocked and horrified. Some

people snickered and whispered. Some people had their phones up, waiting for my reaction.

I can walk away and salvage my night, or I can confront him.

I spun around to face him.

“The Lost Boys said it best—you have to treat a ho like the ho she is,” he barked, clearly emboldened by the attention people were paying him.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I cackled. “I’m a slut because I don’t want you? What kind of backwards logic is that?”

“No, you’re a slut because I know you fucked my boy Marcus even though he has a girl. And don’t try to deny it. I saw you.”

“Ooohh,” everyone around us seemed to say in unison.

This motherfucker is Marcus’s roommate! Shit! I thought he looked familiar.

“You didn’t see me do shit,” I snapped, rolling my eyes. “But whoever I do decide to sleep with is my business and has nothing to do with you. So, fuck you and your attempt to call me a slut because I wouldn’t go home with your ass.”

Rich looked over my head and instantly looked nervous. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Derrick, Trey, and their two friends rushing toward me.

“What happened?” Derrick asked me, glaring at Rich. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine.”

One of the men I didn’t know spoke up. “Say the word and I’d break his face for you.”

With a laugh, I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. But I do appreciate it.”

“You owe the lady an apology,” Trey demanded.

Rich dropped his empty glass against the bar. “I’m out of here.” And then loudly adding, “That ho isn’t worth it.”

“Are you okay?” Vanessa asked, pulling my arm and attention. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come over there sooner. I saw you two dancing and thought—shit, I’m sorry. Did he put his hands on you?”

I didn’t even see her due to the size of Derrick and his friends. “No, not at all. I was having a conversation with him and he called me a slut because I wasn’t interested in him.”

Trey whipped around. “He shouldn’t have called you a slut. He was wrong for that. But you shouldn’t have on those short ass shorts and a shirt with the word slut on it.”

My long-standing crush on Trey died in that moment.

Tilting my head to the side, I feigned confusion. “So, I was asking for it?”

“Yes. No, no, no,” he corrected, seeming to realize what he was saying. “He should’ve never disrespected you. You didn’t ask for it. You didn’t deserve it. I’m just saying your outfit is probably not helping the perception.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Opposed to popular belief, he didn’t call me a slut because of my outfit, Trey. He called me a slut because of rumors he heard.” My lip curled in disgust and I snatched my leather jacket from his hands. “But good job jumping to conclusions and placing the blame on me.”

“I heard the podcast,” Trey argued. “It was fucked up, but you’re not helping the situation”—he gestured to my outfit—“dressed like this. Look at you!”

“Wow, Trey,” Vanessa uttered with a repulsed look. “Derrick, we’re going to VIP. I can’t even look at him right now.” Grabbing my arm, she marched me across the room to the staircase. “I can’t believe he would try to put that on you. That’s-that’s victim shaming!”

“For the record, I no longer have a crush on Trey.”

She looked over at me. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure the ‘you were asking for it’ comment eliminated him from contention.”

As we were climbing the steps, I stopped walking and burst out laughing. She looked at me as if I had lost my mind

and then, as usual, my amusement triggered hers. Both of us were gripping each other's arms, holding each other up, as laughter ripped through us.

Vanessa's question came between giggles. "Are you sure you're okay? That whole situation was pretty fucked up."

"Yeah, it was." I wiped the tears from my eyes as the last chuckle erupted from me. "But I'm fine. It's just..." I shook my head. "It's just ironic. I haven't even been here for forty-five minutes and the only man I let dance with me ends up calling me a slut. He believed what he heard about me because of Marcus."

Her eyebrows flew up. "What?"

I made a face. "That dude is Marcus's roommate."

Her mouth fell open. "Wooooooooooooooooow."

I nodded, trying not to smile. "Yeah."

"So, he knows that you slept with him for real." She tried to stifle a laugh as she added, "He didn't just hear the rumors; he heard the headboard."

And with that, we laughed our way up the rest of the stairs.

The DJ stopped the music. "Savor is wishing a happy birthday to Denise, Heywood, and Liza!" He blared a horn as the three other VIP spaces erupted in cheers. "Savor is also saying congratulations to Serena!" He blared another horn as all the people who worked with me on the show cheered. "This song goes out to all of you."

"Well, we have to dance to this," Vanessa pointed out, shaking her shoulders. "It's a celebration!"

I lifted my arms in the air and moved my hips to the beat.

Everyone in my section followed our lead and got to their feet, celebrating my accomplishment. While I was dancing, the encounter with Rich faded away. He didn't matter. His opinion of me didn't matter. Trey's judgment of my outfit didn't matter. The rumors didn't even matter. I was at peace.

I noticed a few people had stopped dancing and were grinning, so I danced harder. I popped my booty. Twisting in a circle, I was about to dip it low, but I stopped abruptly.

My eyes pinged around Luca's perfectly handsome face to the large bouquet of red roses in his hand. My breathing hitched, loudly. I was completely caught off guard.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him as he approached.

"Congratulations, Serena."

"What are you doing here?" I repeated, the knot in my belly tightening.

"I'm on my way up to Pittsburgh now. But I remembered you said you'd be here tonight, and I wanted to give you this." He handed me the bouquet.

My mouth went dry as his hand grazed mine. The electricity that coursed between us caused my skin to heat.

"Thank you. These are beautiful." My voice came out shakily. I cleared my throat and shifted my gaze to the beautiful flowers in my hands. "What's this?"

"A gift. It's part of what I was working on earlier this week. The other part I'll have to give to you when I get back."

"You didn't have to get me anything. I appreciate this though. Wow."

His lips pulled into a smile. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." My heart ricocheted around my chest as our eyes connected again. The way he looked at me stirred something within my soul. I walked to the cocktail table a couple of feet away and set the flowers atop it. I noticed everyone pretending not to be watching intently. I widened my eyes at Vanessa before turning back to face him. "Um, feel free to stay and hang out," I offered, keeping the couple of steps of space between us. "I know you have to get on the road, but if you want to stay, you can."

He took a step closer. "I have to go. It's a four-hour drive, and the shoot is in the morning."

I nodded. “Okay, well... it was nice of you to stop by. And for bringing me flowers.”

His eyes swept down my body. “Define slut, huh?” He smiled. “It’s a bold statement.”

I put my hands on my hips defiantly. “Yes, it is.” I cocked my head to the side. “Do you have a problem with it?”

Closing the gap between us, he searched my face with a mischievous look in his eyes. “Not at all.”

I was hyperaware of everyone watching, but I didn’t know what to do. My mouth opened, but I was in a trance. His body was so close, and the heat that radiated off him warmed me to my core. I took slow shallow breaths as the thought of him kissing me made my skin hum in anticipation.

“Do you know what else is a bold statement?” he whispered intoxicatingly.

I heard the question, but I couldn’t speak. My gaze drifted down to his full lips just as his tongue leisurely brushed across them. Realizing that I was staring, I jerked my eyes back to meet his. I swallowed hard. “What?”

“This.”

All the air left my body when his lips brushed gently against mine. His hands moved to my hips and pulled me into him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and allowed myself the pleasure of sinking into the decadence of kissing him. His mouth moved over mine, and then he pulled away slightly, leaving my lips to tingle.

He put his forehead against mine and we just held each other’s gaze. I barely heard the screaming and catcalling of everyone in my section because of how lost I was in the moment. The electricity between us crackled, and I wanted to be sucked in to feel every watt.

I licked my lips. “I thought you didn’t want anyone to know that there was something here. You said you were trying to protect me. Why are you risking it now?”

“Because I’m a selfish bastard, and I’d rather fight against whatever you’re dealing with with you, than to deny us the chance to see what this is,” he uttered sexily. “I was trying to protect you. But hearing what you said on that runway tonight made me realize that you don’t need me to protect you from what other people think. Fuck other people. It’s about what you think. And when you think about how I feel about you, I don’t want any doubt in your mind about where I stand and what I want.”

The sincerity in his eyes coupled with the sweetness of his words took my breath away.

Dipping his head, his soft, warm lips moved effortlessly over mine. His kiss created a sensation that coursed through my body and slowly intensified. His hands moved until they found a home on my hips, gripping them tightly, pulling my body flush against his. Just as I moaned, he pulled away.

I whimpered, and it took me a few extra seconds to open my eyes.

That first kiss felt like Luca wanted me to know that he wasn’t embarrassed by the rumors. That second kiss felt like Luca wanted me to know that he was claiming me as his.

Luca’s voice was low and soft when he spoke. “I have to go. I’ll be back Monday night.”

I did my best not to purse my lips. “Am I going to hear from you?”

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I’ll do my best. I don’t talk much while I’m working. But we’ll figure something out.” He gave me a peck. “But I can promise you that there won’t be a day that goes by that you don’t hear something from me.”

Nodding, I stared into his eyes. “Okay.”

“Call me when you get home.”

“Call me when you get to Pittsburg.”

He backed away, never taking his eyes off me. “I’ll let you get back to it. Have a good night.”

I grinned. “Bye, Luca. Drive safe.”

He started to turn around and then he stopped. “You look incredible, by the way.” He glanced over my shoulder and smirked. “Vanessa, keep an eye on my girl.”

Chapter Fourteen

“*I know you’re wondering why we are airing an extra segment, but while we were having a meeting tonight, some late breaking news came my way. And wowwwwwwwwwww... Country have you checked social media in the last ten minutes?” City Boy exclaimed to kick off the special addition podcast.*

“No, I haven’t. Checking now,” Country Boy responded.

“Check the messages on the Date Night page.”

“Okay—oh wowwww!”

“Date Night listeners! We have breaking news. Yesterday, we talked about the reasons why cuffing a ho isn’t the way to go but fucking her has some definite perks,” City Boy started. “Per our reports, Luca Romano went to Savor to very publicly celebrate Serena. He brought her flowers and stuck his tongue down her throat. We were sent a video of the PDA, and it looks legit.”

“This is a real video. He’s claiming her with this move right here. He’s claiming her for all to see. It doesn’t look like he cares that she’s been around.”

“Maybe he’s used to dating hoes. He doesn’t live in the real world.”

“What?”

City Boy chuckled lightly. “Hear me out, Country. He’s a well-known photographer. He’s out here photographing

models all the time. He's probably slept with most of them, and they've probably slept with a lot of guys, too. Maybe that's that Hollywood lifestyle. Hollywood is on some other shit. Think about all the celebrities you know who have slept with each other, costars, fans, and whoever else. Hollywood always seems to want to turn a ho into a housewife, but those same rules don't apply in the real world."

"But Ser-Venus isn't Hollywood. I mean unless her fashion line becomes the new certified slut wear and she blows up. She isn't Hollywood, and this isn't Hollywood either."

"Think about all the people who have hooked up and then went on to do movies together or record music together. A lot of these celebrities are out here being hoes and because it's so common, nobody really thinks twice about it. So maybe that's why he's cool with kissing on her in public knowing that she's been with so many men."

"That makes sense," Country Boy agreed. "But it couldn't be me."

"It couldn't be me either. And the reason it couldn't be us is because we live in the real world. Luca has been back here for what? A month or two? And he was in California before coming back here, right? He hasn't been here long enough to shake off the Hollywood lifestyle. But I think the more likely reason he's with her is that he doesn't know she's a slut."

"How could he not know? She addressed the rumors at her fashion show tonight."

"She didn't deny that she was a slut though. She just said it was none of our business."

"That was a dope song choice though," Country admitted with a chuckle.

"Oh, and it looks like her shirt says 'slut' in the video, doesn't it?"

"I can't read the whole thing, but it looks like it said 'fine slut' on the front. I mean... she is fine and she is allegedly a slut, so it works. How could Luca not know?"

“He may think she’s being cheeky. If he doesn’t keep his ear to the streets, he may not know. Once he’s settled into the real world and starts getting to know more people in the area again, he’ll probably start hearing the stories. And all it’ll take is for him to be confronted by the truth before he drops her.”

“Does this man not have friends? If I was going to cuff someone and my friends knew she was branded a ho and didn’t tell me, I’d be mad.” Country Boy made a noise. “Just thinking about it has me pissed off. Don’t let me go down that road blind.”

“That’s why we need to tell him.” City Boy’s tone was serious, almost grim. “We owe him that. If he chooses to fuck with her after he knows what a slut she is, that’s on him. But bro code won’t allow me to let this man unknowingly turn a ho into a housewife.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“As a heart attack. If we don’t, that karma will come back on us. I’m not trying to meet someone and find out after feelings are involved that she’s a slut. I don’t want that for my boy Luca. And besides, Serena will turn into one of those ho inspirational stories. All slutty women will feel that after sleeping with everyone and stretching their pussies out, they deserve to be cuffed.”

“Come on, City. Chill. And the name is Venus, remember?”

“Everybody will be having a ho phase if Venus gets cuffed. It’ll be like Hollywood. And then all of a sudden, being a slut is just an accepted way of life for these chicks. And who wants that?”

“I don’t.”

“Are you with me, Country? We’ll invite Luca down here for a conversation and have special guests in the building. And we’ll record it for our Date Night listeners, so they can see how it plays out.”

“Luca Romano is not going to come on the show to talk about his girl being a slut. Come on, City.” He laughed. “He’s going to walk out of here so fast. Think about it... we have video of him going to an opening of a club. It’s packed to capacity. And he’s carrying roses. All signs point to that man being all up in his feelings for her. You don’t do that for a piece of ass. He’s not coming here.”

“Then we’ll go to him. We’ll just record it.”

“I don’t know, City...” Country Boy cleared his throat. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Especially since someone is probably going to let him know why he’s being confronted.”

“What’s not a good idea is him turning this ho into a housewife! Do you want Luca to be at dinner with Venus, and Marcus come strolling in with his multimillion-dollar basketball contract, or Trey and Jeremiah coming through with their NFL contracts telling Luca that they fucked his bitch?”

“That would be disrespectful.”

“Do you want to live with that kind of karma coming your way, Country? This on the spot interview will be good for everyone. Luca can hear that his girl is a ho from us and promote whatever he has going on right now. We will have good karma, and we honored bro code. Honestly, it’s a win, win. This is going to be good.”

“Lord, help us all,” Country Boy groaned.

City Boy laughed. “Okay, that’s it for this special podcast tonight. We just wanted to give you this late breaking news! So, listeners, if you see Luca Romano out and about, send us a message. If you see him, let us know. We want to talk to him. Tune in on Friday and we’ll have video of our conversation with Luca, we’ll answer more of your emails, and we’ll be taking calls based on the topic we post on social media between eight-thirty and nine. Check us out next week. You don’t want to miss it. I’m City Boy—”

“I’m Country Boy...”

“And this is Date Night with the Lost Boys,” the two of them said in unison.

Chapter Fifteen

Luca: *I was hoping to catch you before class, but the day ran long. If you haven't made it to class yet, give me a call.*

Serena: *I have class every Monday until seven and it's six o'clock... Of course, I'm in class! Haha!*

Luca: *Why are you texting me if you're in class? As a professor, I can tell you that that's messed up.*

Serena: *First of all, you're not a professor!*

Luca: *Oh, ok. You have jokes. You're going to pay for that when I get back.*

Serena: *Haha... And when will that be?*

Luca: *I just got finished with the shoot, and I'm grabbing something to eat. I should be on the road in about an hour.*

Serena: *I'm glad you'll be on your way back soon.*

Luca: *Can I take you to breakfast in the morning?*

Serena: *Yes! I can't wait to see you. You can't do what you did Saturday night and then leave. I've been thinking about it nonstop.*

Luca: *It wasn't easy to leave. Believe me, it was very hard.*

Serena: *Haha! I'm in class, and I refuse to feed into your double entendre.*

Luca: *Ha! You need to be paying attention in class anyway. I'm going to eat so I can get on the road.*

Serena: *I'll call you after I'm home and settled. Drive safe!*

MY HEART FLUTTERED at the thought of seeing him again.

From the moment Luca walked out of the club, our match up was the only thing anyone talked to me about. A few people mentioned my fashion show, and people who had no connection to Hamilton University assumed it was my birthday. By the time I arrived on campus on Monday, the word on the street was that despite my gold-digging past, Luca was my boyfriend and we were serious. All I could do was shake my head at the ridiculousness.

“You can't blame them for thinking that you two are together, though. That was so romantic how he arrived with all those roses,” Kate swooned, her green eyes wide as we walked to our cars.

“That was sweet,” I admitted, unable to hide the smile he put on my face.

“What are you going to do about The Lost Boys?”

“I didn't listen to the whole thing. Someone sent me a link, and I couldn't get through it. It was a lot of the same stuff they were saying last time, so I shut it off. I'm not going to help their numbers by listening to it. I'm hoping the whole thing will blow over. I don't think there's anything I can do at this point? Besides the fact that they are assholes, is there anything else that I need to know?”

“They said they were going to get in touch with Luca.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay. Thanks for the heads up.” I let out a humorless laugh. “If it's not one thing, it's another.”

“Speaking of...” She scrunched her nose. “What are you going to do about Corey?”

I tossed my stuff in the backseat of my car before looking over the hood at her. “He asked me to remove myself from his fashion show, so I did.” I shrugged. “I signed up for five shows because I really do think it'll be good experience to see what works and what doesn't work behind the scenes.”

“Oh, good!” She wiped her brow. “I was worried you only had three.”

“Nope. I’m good to go.”

“I can’t believe he’s mad because you’re dating Luca. He thinks that’s why he didn’t get into Luca’s seminar.”

“Luca doesn’t even talk to me about seminar stuff.” I rolled my eyes. “And anyone who has ever read anything Corey’s written knows good and damn well *that’s* the reason he didn’t get in.”

“That’s what I was thinking when I overheard him say that.” She shook her head. “I’m about to meet Paul for dinner. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck with DJ Poison, but good luck and have fun!”

We said our goodbyes, and then I headed home.

After dinner, laundry, and a shower, I climbed in bed and called Luca.

“Serena Brooks,” he answered on the second ring.

I smiled. “Luca Romano.”

“Are you tired? You sound tired?”

“Monday’s are usually my longest days, but I’m okay. How are you? How was the shoot?”

He told me the ins and outs of the shoot, the client, and why it ran long. I listened to his excitement and his frustration, and I loved that both had equal passion attached to it. It was clear that he loved his work and took it seriously.

“I love hearing you talk about your work. The passion in your voice is really sexy.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. It just shows how deeply you care about your craft, and that’s sexy. That’s passion.”

“That’s how I feel about you.”

My stomach flipped. “R-really?” I stammered, pushing myself up in bed.

“Yeah. When you talk about Simply Serena, there’s so much passion in your voice. At dinner that first night, I knew you were someone who would get it.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “I see what you’re saying now.”

“What did you think I meant?”

“It’s silly,” I giggled. “I thought you were saying that you felt that same passion for your work for me.” I paused. “Because you said ‘that’s how I feel about you’ right after I described how much you cared and how passionate you were. I told you it was silly.”

He was quiet for a moment. “It’s not silly.”

“I don’t know why I thought that’s what you meant. We’ve known each other for two weeks—why does it feel like it’s been longer than two weeks?”

“It has. It’s been seventeen days.”

I laughed. “You only know that because I said it last night.”

“You said sixteen days last night.”

“Congratulations, you know how to add.”

He snickered on the other end of the line. “It does feel like I’ve known you for longer than that though.”

“Probably because we think so much alike.”

“Yeah. What am I thinking about now?”

“That gift you said you had for me?”

“Wow, I really was actually.”

“Are you serious?” I yelled. “That’s crazy, right? What do I win?”

“You don’t have class on Fridays, right?”

“That was a sharp change in subjects,”—I laughed—“but yes, you are correct.”

“The last Friday of the month. Come with me to New York for a few days.”

Holy shit! To New York? To meet his mom and grandma? We are not there yet! I don't even know what this is! Is that what's happening? We aren't there yet.

“For...?”

“I have this thing I have to do.”

“Okay.”

“You sound uncertain.”

I fidgeted with the comforter. “Is this like a meet the parents type of thing because I don't think—”

His laughter cut me off. “Hell no.”

I sighed with relief. “Okay, good.”

“No need to panic. We're not going to the Bronx.” He stopped and made a noise. “Although now I don't know if I should be offended or not by your reaction.”

I chuckled hard. “No, don't be offended! I didn't mean it like that. If we happened to run into your family, that would be fine. But a planned sit-down dinner felt like too much, too soon.”

“You've been my girlfriend for two days. I'd need to make sure you were in love with me before I subjected you to them.”

The grin that spread across my face was goofy as hell, but I couldn't help it. “So, I'm your girlfriend?”

“That's what I hear. If you listen to gossip, that's what the word on the street is.”

“I don't listen to gossip.”

“Neither do I.”

I exhaled loudly and dramatically. “But in this particular case, I think they may be on to something. I need to check the sources though.”

“It's only one source. You can check it though.”

“Who’s your source?”

“Her name is Serena Brooks.”

“And what did she say exactly?”

“You tell me when you check with her.”

“I just checked with her and she said, and I quote, ‘holy shit, Luca Romano is my boyfriend despite the fact that he doesn’t eat carbs,’ end quote.”

His amusement traveled through the phone and wrapped itself around me. “I’m a grown ass man. I’m not going to explain my carb intake to you, woman!”

“If you want to deprive yourself of the best things, you go right ahead, sir.”

“*You* are the best thing. And as long as I have you, I’m not depriving myself of anything.”

“You just gave me butterflies,” I admitted with a giggle.

“Good. I’m trying to give you more than just butterflies though.”

I inhaled deeply. “Oh, really? Like what?”

“Can I come by?”

“Tonight?”

“Right now.”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Yes.”

“Okay, I’m going to take your exit and stop by for a minute.”

“I have my scarf on already. And I’m not wearing anything sexy.”

“I don’t care. I just want to see you, and I have something for you that can’t wait until breakfast. I need to give it to you now.”

Oh, shit!

I pushed my sheets off of me. “How long before you’re here?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

It was the longest ten minutes of my life. When he finally knocked on the door, I looked down at my black leggings. I’d pulled them on since I’d gone to bed in just a t-shirt and panties and I didn’t notice how much lint was on them.

What did I wash these with?

I opened the front door and forgot all about that lint.

I was nervous and excited as I grinned up at him like I’d never seen him before. “Hi.”

He stared at me, looking almost as nervous as I felt. “Hi.”

“Come in.” I gestured for him to come in, and I noticed the big box under his arm.

He stepped through the door, leaned down to kiss me, and then walked into the apartment.

I smiled, closing the door behind him. “You want to take your jacket off?”

He sat the box on the loveseat and then turned back toward me. “No. If I take it off, I’m going to get comfortable and I need to get home, unpack, and send a copy of a contract out.”

“Oh, okay. And I’d love to see where ‘home’ is for you.”

“We can go tomorrow after breakfast, if you want.” He looked around. “This is nice. Definitely can see your style in here.”

“Thank you. Let me give you the tour.”

I showed him around my space, and we ended back in the living room. “You have a nice place.” He stared intently at me. “I hope you’re able to find some place for your gifts.”

I did a little excited dance. “Can I open them?”

“Yes, please.”

He sat down on the couch, and I sat on the loveseat.

I opened the box and gasped. “Luca...”

I pulled out a 16x20 print of me. The photos were from the private photoshoot we had before makeup, wardrobe, and the rest of his team arrived. He captured a photo of me looking directly at him with the fall foliage backdrop. My eyes kept going back to my eyes. I had plenty of pictures of me looking directly at the camera, but I'd never seen myself look like that before.

“Wow... These are beautiful.”

“Thank you, but that's all you. I can't take credit for these.”

“I just... thank you so much.” I studied how I was looking at the camera.

“You see it, too?” He asked as he stood.

I looked up at him and nodded. There was genuine emotion spilling out of my eyes in that photograph.

“I don't mix business with pleasure, Serena. But the way you're looking in this photo is the way you look at me when it's just me and you. Seeing it on film made me realize that this wasn't just an ordinary connection. In the back of my mind, I knew, but I told myself that it was just because you're my muse. But I often have muses—sometimes multiple. They inspire me for a project, and that's it. They fit the project and that's that. But you didn't fit the project. I had to create the project to fit you. The company told me what they wanted, and I told them I had something better.”

My eyebrows flew up. “What?”

“I sent them the picture of you and told them what I wanted to do, what I was inspired to do, and they loved it. But you weren't just inspiring me for their campaign. Talking to you, getting to know you, spending time with you did something to me. I was hoping it was just sex or just work because that's easier. But when we were shooting before anyone else got there and you looked at me like that.” He pointed to the picture. “My whole philosophy went out the window.”

I placed the picture on the seat beside me and stood. “What are you saying, Luca?”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close. “I’m saying that even in those linty ass pants, you are absolutely gorgeous.”

My head fell back, and I laughed so hard. I slapped his arms before reaching up and clasping my hands behind his neck. “You’re always talking shit.”

“That was for the carbs comment earlier.” He grinned, staring into my eyes with adoration.

“It’s weird you don’t eat carbs.”

“It’s weird you don’t have a lint brush.”

“It’s weird how much I like you.”

“It’s weird that it’s taken so long for me to find you.”

My lips parted as a rush of air released. Staring into his eyes as he said those words was getting to be too much for me. My eyes started watering. “Well shit, Luca. You’re going to make me cry.”

Pulling me closer, he murmured, “I just want you to know that I see you.”

That was it for me.

Pushing up on my toes, I pressed my lips to his. The kiss started out emotional and loving—our mouths expressing our feelings without words. But before long, the kiss spiraled into hot and sexy—our bodies craving the opportunity to express those same feelings.

He gripped my hips, pulling me into him. He moaned into my mouth and deepened the kiss.

I could feel how hard he was, and my body reacted to it. “If you don’t leave now, there’s going to be trouble,” I whispered against his lips.

He pulled away slightly and stared into my eyes. “Maybe I like trouble.”

“Clearly, you *are* trouble.”

He rested his forehead against mine and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You’re not wrong.” He kissed me softly. “But for you, I’m going to be good.”

What if I don’t want you to be good? I pushed the thought out of my head as I pushed my hips forward.

His hands slid to my ass and he made an appreciative noise.

“I have no doubt you’ll be good,” I flirted, creating space between us.

Luca let out a long breath. Licking his lips, he looked me up and down. “I have to get the paperwork in by midnight.”

“You don’t have much time,” I pointed out.

“I’m trying to leave, but you—I believe you’re trying to seduce me.”

Laughing, I ran my hands from his shoulders to the middle of his chest. “If I were trying to seduce you, you’d know it.”

He let me go and adjusted himself. “Oh, I know it.”

Playfully, I swatted at him. “Go get your work done so we can go on our first date.”

He grabbed my hand. “Our first date was at District.”

“That was not a date!” I giggled. “That was a business meeting.”

Interlocking our fingers, he headed to the door with me in tow. “I picked the restaurant. I paid. We had a good time. We got personal.” He opened the front door and then turned to look at me. “That’s a date.”

I grinned. “That was a business meeting.”

“So, tomorrow I’m taking you to breakfast. I’m paying. We’re going to have a good time. We’re going to get personal.” He kissed my hand before he asked, “How is that any different?”

“Because now there’s a chance you’ll get lucky.”

His eyebrows flew up and he deadpanned, “What do you mean a chance?”

I laughed, and he joined in.

“I was smooth that night. If you were the average woman, I would’ve taken you home that night.” His eyes danced with amusement at his claim.

“Smooth? You’d just told me that you slept with two people you weren’t interested in. I wasn’t going to sign up to be the third.”

He made a face. “I forgot I told you that on our first date.”

I laughed. “It wasn’t a date! We were getting to know one another, and you told me that you were knocking down sexy coeds.”

“That’s not what I said!”

“You said you were throwing the dick around all over town.”

“Are you slut-shaming me?”

My jaw dropped, and I swatted at his arm. “No! I don’t care that you slept with them. I don’t care what your body count is. I just know that these are women you took home from the bar. There was no date. There was no follow up contact. There was nothing. It was just sex. And that’s cool. But I wasn’t trying to be just sex to you.”

“Ahh.” He nodded. “You knew you wanted more then.”

I pursed my lips and glared at him. “No.”

“I don’t know why I told you everything I told you that night.” He smiled. “But I will say that’s when I realized you weren’t like everybody else.”

“Ahh, I understand.” I nodded. “You knew you wanted more then.”

Laughing through our final kiss goodbye, I closed the door behind him. It wasn’t until I was back in bed that I realized that I hadn’t stopped smiling.

Chapter Sixteen

Wearing a pink and black floral dress with an oversized black sweater, I anxiously waited for Luca to pick me up for breakfast. Even though I just saw him the night before, it felt different at ten o'clock in the morning. He was picking me up for a date—not to hang out, not for a business meeting. My black boots clicked against the floor as I crossed the living room to answer the door.

“Good morning,” Luca greeted me, planting a soft kiss against my lips. He took a step back and let his eyes flit down my body. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I closed and locked the door behind me. “So do you.”

He smirked. “I look beautiful?”

“You do.” I closed the gap between us, running my hands up and down his muscular chest. “You are a beautiful man.”

“I was going for ruggedly handsome...” He smacked my ass. “But I’ll take it.”

I giggled and scurried away from him.

“Are you ready to eat some of the best food you’ve ever tasted?” he asked as he easily caught up and wrapped his arms around my waist.

I squealed as he lifted me from the ground.

When my feet hit the ground, my first instinct was to try to run to his car again. But with his arms around my middle, his

body against my back, and his lips right on the shell of my ear, I melted into him.

“I thought you were going to try to run away,” he whispered.

“It feels too good to run,” I admitted softly, letting my head fall back against him. “You feel good.”

He kissed the exposed area of my neck. “So do you, baby,” he murmured, trailing his lips up my neck toward my ear.

My stomach fluttered. “You called me baby.”

“Oh, I—um...” he stumbled over his words.

Turning my head so our eyes could meet, I smiled. “I like it. Do it again.”

He moved his hands to my hips and squeezed. Pulling my ass back into his denim covered crotch, he let out a low appreciative groan. “Baby...”

The combination of the way he was holding me close and the sound of his voice caused my entire lower body to clench. Desire flooded my system and dampened my panties.

“What was that little noise you made?” Luca whispered before kissing my neck again.

A chill ran down my spine and my eyelashes fluttered shut. “Luca,” I breathed.

“To be continued,” he murmured, kissing me again. He started moving forward, forcing my legs to walk. “Someone is coming.”

I pried my eyes open and saw one of my neighbors taking a slow jog. I watched her watching us for a minute before I lifted my hand and she waved back.

Luca opened the passenger side door and ushered me in.

I grinned. “Thank you.”

He closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side. After sliding in and cranking the engine, he backed out of the parking space. With the music blasting and our fingers

intertwined, we drove to a high-end breakfast bar on the pricey part of town.

“Have you ever eaten here?” he asked as we exited the car.

“Once when they first opened.” When I saw the disappointment on his face, I continued, “But I’ve never been here on a hot date with a ruggedly handsome and talented—”

His lips covered mine, shutting me up and warming me from the inside out. When he pulled away, he stared into my eyes. “Let me take you somewhere you’ve never been—and not just because you called me ruggedly handsome.”

My lips curled upward. “You liked that, didn’t you?” I pushed my lips up against his. “We can eat here. I liked the food my dad picked up from here.”

“I should take you somewhere you’ve never been before. I want our first date to be special.”

My heart skipped a beat as I exhaled. “Luca, I’m with you. It’s already special.”

I saw him try to hide the smile that played on his lips. Without saying another word, he took my hand and led me into the restaurant. We were seated in a corner booth. After looking at the menu for a few minutes, we were ready to order.

“What would you like?” Luca asked, encouraging me to order first.

“Pancakes and bacon, please. Water to drink,” I ordered.

The waiter nodded at me and then shifted his gaze. “And you, sir?”

“Steak, medium well. Brussel sprout omelet. And...water is good.” He handed the waiter the menu while I gawked at him. “What?” he asked after the waiter left.

“Did you want to come here because of the extensive list of deceptively healthy breakfast options?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are my pancakes going to be made out of cardboard?” My voice lowered. “Do they even have syrup?”

He chuckled. “You’re funny. You have a problem, but you’re funny.”

“My only problem is sitting across the table from me.”

“How is this”—he gestured to himself— “a problem?”

“Because you’re over there and not over here.”

He smirked. Moving from his side of the booth, he slid in right beside me. When he lifted his arm to put around me, I instinctively nuzzled into his nook and rested my head.

“Is this too much for a first date?” I wondered.

“Hell yeah.” The amusement dripped from his words, but his fingers rubbed my arm.

“We probably look silly.”

“There is no doubt in my mind.”

I laughed, lifting my head to look at him. “So, why did you come over here?”

His hand came up and fondled my hair. Holding my gaze for a beat too long, he replied, “Because you asked me to.”

My lips parted as I let out a puff of air. “I love the way you look at me.”

“Here are your drinks,” the waiter announced, startling us apart. He dropped the glasses on the table with unnecessary force. “Your food should be out shortly.”

Luca gave him a nod. “Thanks, man.”

When the waiter was out of earshot, I placed my hand on Luca’s knee. “What’s on your agenda for today?”

“How am I supposed to concentrate with your hand on my leg?”

I giggled. “Sorry!” I moved my hand to my lap. “What are you doing today?”

“I didn’t mean for you to move it. I just don’t think it’s fair for you to ask me a question at the same time as your hand makes contact with my leg.”

“It was your knee!”

“It was my thigh!”

“It was your kneecap!”

“It was my upper thigh.”

I covered my mouth to try to smother the laugh that erupted out of me. “It was not!”

“You are a distraction. I need to sit over here.” He kissed my head before returning to his seat. “You’re still a distraction.”

I tilted my head to the side. “You always manage to put a smile on my face.”

He winked at me.

“What are you doing today?” I asked again.

“I have to finalize some stuff with the seminar, do some edits, and make some calls.”

“How are things with the seminar?” I lifted my hand. “I know you can’t tell me any specifics, but are you ready?”

“I’m ready. The class is full already.” He shook his head. “It’s wild.”

“That’s amazing!”

We talked about what he had in store for his class until our food arrived and then the conversation changed directions.

“What are you doing today?” Luca asked after chewing a big bite of steak.

“I’m making dresses. Actually, I’m doing a dress for Akila Bishara. She has an event coming up, and she wanted to purchase something she saw when we did the interview.”

“That’s what’s up.” He took a sip of water. “Are you filling orders already? You have inventory for that?”

“I do personal orders on a case by case basis, but I’m going to have my website ready to accept preorders the first week of November. And in January, I’m going to have it preset with the number of pieces I have so it’ll say ‘sold out’ when I

don't have anymore. Even though I only have the second part of the Collection and Portfolio class next semester, I'm going to try to do as many pieces as I can before the end of the year."

He smiled and looked almost proud. "You're going to be busy."

The fact that it was an observation and not a complaint did something to me.

"Yeah, I am." I swallowed my pancake. "I have a good amount done so far, but if I keep my schedule, I'll be where I need to be by Christmas."

"That's—"

"Luca Romano?" A baby-faced man with curly reddish-brown hair walked up to our table with his phone up in front of him.

"Yes?" Luca looked up at the man standing at the end of our table. He put his fork down and wiped his mouth. "What's up?"

The curly haired man introduced himself. "Sorry to interrupt your meal. My name is Bryant. I just wanted to ask you a few questions."

"I'm enjoying a meal with my girl. But thank you for stopping by," Luca replied graciously.

I glanced at the man and smiled. He wasn't looking at me at all, but as I glanced between Bryant and Luca, something made me uneasy.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I felt like it was my duty to let you know something important." Bryant rubbed his hands together. "It's bro code to let you know that you might need to look into some things with your girl. It didn't seem like you knew you were turning a ho into a housewife."

My eyes widened as I looked at the stranger who wasn't making eye contact with me at all. "What?"

"What the fuck did you just say?" Luca barked, his jaw clenching.

“Don’t get me wrong”—Bryant glanced my way— “she’s hot and I’m sure a good fuck, but come on, bro.”

“You’re going to want to walk away.” Luca’s voice was low enough to not disrupt the other customers, but it had a growl to it that scared me. His eyes were dangerously dark as he rose to his feet. “Now.”

“If you are okay with the fact that she’s a gold-digger, that’s cool. Our followers just want to know what’s the benefit of cuffing a ho—”

“Call her out of her name one more time and I swear to God, I will knock your fucking head off. Don’t try me,” Luca warned, his chest rising and falling quickly.

“He’s not worth it, Luca. Let’s just go.” I took two twenties out of my bag and threw them on the table as I stood. “Let’s just go.”

“You better listen to your girl.” Bryant turned his phone onto me, panning up and down my body. “Because if you put your hands on me, I’m going to sue you. And how will you keep a gold-digging slut like this without money? She looks expensive. And we already know what that mouth do—”

Bryant’s sentence was interrupted by the crack of Luca’s fist connecting with his jaw. Spiraling backward, Bryant tipped over a table and fell to the floor. It was like everything happened in slow motion. Gasps and two separate shrieks rippled through the restaurant. Bryant was splayed out on the floor and looked stunned by the hit. He touched his mouth and when he saw the blood on his fingertips, it seemed like he came to terms with what happened. The commotion that followed was in fast forward.

Springing to his feet, Bryant launched himself at Luca, but slipped. He hopped to his feet again and took a wild swing at Luca. The first hit didn’t connect, but the second one landed against his abs. Luca responded with a jab that rocked him back a few feet. When Bryant tried to come for him again, the waiter and a manager grabbed him, restraining him.

“Hope the slut is worth the lawsuit,” Bryant screamed as he was being held back.

Luca’s voice was low and menacing. “Say that shit again, and I’ll break your fucking jaw.”

“I’ll fucking kill you, bro!” Bryant’s face was red, and spit flew out of his mouth as he yelled. “I’ll kill you and fuck your bitch.”

Luca started advancing toward him. “Try me.”

I stepped in his way, putting my hand on his chest to calm him down. “Look at me. Look at me!” I waited until his gaze met mine. There was a darkness that muddied the depth of his brown eyes, and I knew in my heart that he would’ve broken more than just Bryant’s jaw if I let him. “He doesn’t matter. What he says doesn’t matter. Fuck him. Let’s just go.”

Bryant was belligerently yelling threats in the background, but I stepped closer to Luca. When Bryant said something about his podcast, Luca’s head snapped up. There was a fire in his eyes. Without even hearing everything Bryant had said, I knew he was talking about Date Night. I knew he was one of The Lost Boys.

Probably City Boy.

Luca nodded, but not at me. “Okay, okay.”

I could tell by the curl of his lip and the tension in his face and neck that nothing was okay. It was clear that he was getting pulled into Bryant’s bullshit. He tried to step around me, but I shuffled to my left to stay in his way.

Reaching up, I touched his face. “Luca... look at me. Please, please.”

He pulled his attention away from the screaming idiot and focused on me.

“You have so much more to lose than he does. He’s not worth it,” I pleaded.

He said nothing. His jaw remained clenched, but I saw his eyes softening the longer he looked at me.

I opened my mouth to continue, but it snapped closed when two officers entered through the front door.

“Over here,” the manager called out, raising one hand up to wave them over. That minor move allowed Bryant to get free enough to cross the restaurant in seconds.

Luca stepped forward, pushing me behind him. But just before Bryant was able to reach us, one of the police officers tackled him. He didn’t seem to notice the police until his arms were being twisted behind his back.

“Calm down,” the cop grunted as he struggled to get Bryant’s handcuffs secured. While he was on the ground, they patted him down. With the help of the other cop, he pulled him to his feet. “What’s going on here?” He looked between Luca and Bryant. “I said, what’s going on here?”

“He hit me out of nowhere!” Bryant lied. His face was crimson, and his lip was swollen and bloodied. “He attacked me!”

“That’s not what happened, officer.” Luca’s voice was hard and even.

“Did you hit him?” the second cop asked, walking up to him.

“He confronted me. He was the instigator in this situation.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” the second cop replied curtly. “Did you hit him?”

“I defended myself, yes.”

Don’t answer anymore questions! I wanted to scream.

Scared, I intertwined my fingers with his and tried to fight the tears that pricked my eyes.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” the second cop asked cautiously, his hand on his hip.

“No.”

“Well, I’m checking because there was a fight.” He patted Luca down. “What’s this?”

“My keys, my phone, and my wallet are the only things in my pocket.”

“Well then you shouldn’t have a problem with me pulling those items out.”

“I told you I don’t have a weapon on me. You searched and didn’t find anything. I’m here with my girl. He approached us. If you want to search someone’s pockets, you can search his because I don’t consent to a search,” Luca declared flatly.

“You do not consent to a search, huh?” The first cop scoffed before turning to the manager. “These were the two disorderly ones?”

“Yes.” The manager nodded profusely. “They were eating”—he pointed to me and Luca—“and then he showed up”—he pointed to Bryant—“and then a fight broke out.”

People murmured in agreement.

“Okay, so who attacked who?” the second cop asked.

Everyone started talking at once.

“Okay, that’s enough,” the first cop decided gruffly, eyeing Bryant. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“How do you think my lip got busted?” Bryant hollered. “If you’re arresting me, you need to arrest him, too!”

“Take my keys and drive yourself home. I’ll call you when this is done. I’ll be fine,” Luca reassured me, reaching into his pocket.

“Don’t make another move,” the first cop barked.

I froze.

“We’re taking them both in,” he continued. “Handcuff him.”

“What?” I yelled helplessly as the second cop tugged my hand from Luca’s and placed it behind his back. “What are you doing? He didn’t do anything wrong! Bryant attacked us!”

My eyes brimmed with tears when my eyes met Luca’s. The cop started mirandizing as he was securing Luca. I didn’t know what to do. My insides were twisted with nerves and fear. Still staring at Luca, a tear slid down my cheek, but I quickly swiped it away.

“I’ll meet you at the station,” I promised him.

“No. Go home. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“But I want to be there for you.”

“Go home, Serena. I mean it.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Listen to me. Go home.”

I saw the seriousness in his eyes. “Okay,” I whispered.

Chapter Seventeen

*A*fter crying on the phone to Vanessa, I tried to busy myself by working on Akila's dress. But nothing I did could stop my mind from worrying about Luca. Minutes felt like hours. Hours felt like days. I was stressed. My mind was spinning, trying to think of ways I could help. But I knew that I wasn't going to feel better until I heard his voice.

The moment I saw his name flash across my cell phone screen, I burst into tears.

"Luca?" I answered, masking the fact that I was crying. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good. Are you okay?"

"I'm so sorry," I wept into the phone.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"It's almost five o'clock. You spent all day in jail."

"That's not your fault."

"I know. I just..."

"Serena, he fucked up the moment he disrespected you. I gave him the opportunity to walk away. He didn't take. Everything that happened was on him."

"Thank you for defending me. I just hate that it took your day away. We were just talking about being busy and you

spent your whole day locked up.” I wiped the tears from my cheeks. “I hate that.”

“It was more waiting around than anything. But I’m on my way to campus to finalize some stuff before five. I’m going to hop on a conference call before I meet with the dean. I have a lot to do before he leaves campus. I just wanted to call you and let you know that I’m out, I have my car, and I’m okay.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay. I was so worried. If you get a chance, can you call me later?”

“I will definitely call you later.”

I hung up the phone and cried. I wasn’t sure if they were happy tears or sad tears, but they streamed down my face. When I got myself together, I went back to working on Akila’s dress. I didn’t finish it until late.

“Eight o’clock,” I muttered as I stretched my arms above my head. It usually took three hours to construct that type of dress, but it had taken all day to create it because my head wasn’t in the game.

I knew Luca would call me when he was free, but I was anxious to know more details about what happened. Instead of focusing on what time I’d hear back from him, I worked on my website and ordered necessary fabrics. It was almost eleven o’clock when I got out of the shower and got ready for bed.

“Hello?” I answered the phone as I sank against my pillow.

“Hey,” Luca greeted me. He sounded tired. “Are you in bed? You sound relaxed.”

“I am. Just curled up in bed. How are you?”

“I’m tired, but good. Just finished editing some photos, and I have a couple of early morning meetings so... I’m tired. I should go to sleep.”

“I understand.” I really wanted to know what happened, but if he didn’t feel like talking about it, I wasn’t going to push him. “You’ve had a lot happening today and you have an early morning tomorrow. You should get your rest.”

“Yeah, I should.”

“I agree.”

“And not just an early morning, the whole day is busy tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes, relishing in the sound of his voice. “More the reason for rest.”

We were both quiet for a minute.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to fall asleep anytime soon. I might need to just take a drive for a little while and then try to sleep.”

I didn’t know if he was telling me to let me know or if he was telling me because he wanted me to go with him. “Well... if you can’t sleep and need some company, let me know.”

“You’d ride out with me even though it’s late and you’re already in bed?”

“Yes.”

I heard the smile in his voice when he spoke. “And why is that?”

“Because you asked me to.”

He let out a low whistle and then paused. “Can I see you?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“I’m coming now.”

“I’m not taking my scarf off.”

“I wouldn’t want you to.”

“I’ll see you...soon?”

“Give me twenty minutes.”

“I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

We said our goodbyes, and I smiled against my pillow.

The knock at the door thirty minutes later sent a jolt of excitement through my entire body. The creak of the door opening caused my stomach to flutter. But the sound of his voice as he entered my apartment made my heart skip a beat.

“Serena...?” He stretched out my name as I heard him close and lock the door behind him. “Hey! Serena, it’s me.”

Wearing a silk cami and boyshort set, I welcomed him as I walked from the kitchen to the living room. “Hi, Luca.”

He stopped in his tracks, so I did, too. Allowing his eyes to ping over my face and body, I felt the heat of his gaze slide over me. “Hey.” When our eyes locked, he licked his lips. “Hey...”

I tilted my head to the side and checked him out in his grey sweatpants and matching hoodie. “You already said that.”

“Did I?” he asked, crossing the room and wrapping his arms around me. “I must’ve been distracted.”

I pushed up on my toes and whispered, “What were you distracted by?”

“You.” He gave me a soft, sweet kiss. “Always you.”

“Take your hoodie off and follow me.”

He hung his hoodie on the rack by the door, removed his shoes, and then followed me down the hall. We’d just barely crossed the threshold to my room when he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling my body close. I let it happen, melting into him as he inhaled deeply.

“You smell so good,” he uttered into my neck before kissing it. “You smell good, you look good, you feel good.” He nibbled along my collarbone.

“Mmm,” I moaned softly.

“You sound good,” he added, squeezing me tighter.

I turned around in his arms and clasped my hands behind his neck.

“And you taste good,” he whispered.

His eyes dipped to my lips before he brushed his up against them. It was sensual and unhurried the way he took his time. Moving his mouth over mine, he parted my lips with his tongue temptingly. His hands traveled down my back and cupped my ass, pulling me into him.

I could feel him hardening as my body pressed against his. Feeling his dick swelling as the seconds passed by only spurred me on more. I tried to deepen the kiss, but he pulled back slightly. With a final squeeze of my ass, his hands skated up my arms, over my shoulders, and around my neck. His thumbs stroked my jawline as his tongue finally met mine. Deepening the kiss, our tongues teased the other, intensifying the kiss and the moment. He groaned into my mouth just before he pulled away.

He stared into my eyes before he spoke softly. “Thank you for letting me come over tonight.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I want you here.” I let my hands fall from his shoulders and run down his chest and abs as I backed away from him. “Now let’s get in the bed.”

Pulling his shirt over his head, my eyes pinged over his muscular body. I bit my lip as he forced his grey sweatpants down, stepping out of them. Wearing navy boxer briefs, there was no way he could hide the bulge.

Well, damn.

“That’s going to be a distraction,” I murmured, tearing my eyes away from him. Clearing my throat, I crossed the room to my bed, swaying my hips as I made my way to it.

“So is that,” he countered.

I looked back and caught him staring at my ass, just before I crawled in. “Good.”

He climbed into bed beside me. “I need to apologize to you”

I laid on my back and looked over at him. He propped his head up with his hand and reclined on his side, facing me.

My brows furrowed. “What are you apologizing for?”

He took his free hand and touched my face, instantly softening the confused look that crossed it. “Because of our date.”

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but I’m still sorry our first date ended the way it did. You deserve a real date.”

“That was a real date. Up until that asshole showed up, I was having a really good time with you. My deceptively healthy pancakes tasted good. You showed me a really good time. I like being with you, Luca.”

“I like being with you, too.” He moved his finger down the bridge of my nose, over my lips, and under my chin. “Everything slows down with you,” he admitted quietly.

I knew what I thought it meant, but I wanted him to explain. I didn’t want to make any assumptions. “What does that mean exactly?”

His fingertips skated down my throat. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“Do you remember when we went to Dowdy Lake?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

He licked his lips. “You have the same effect on me.” His fingers slid between the valley of my breasts and trailed down my belly. “When I’m with you... when I talk to you... hell, even when I think of you, you just calm everything down.”

My stomach fluttered. “That’s probably the most romantic thing that anyone has ever said to me in my entire life.”

His fingers lingering on the sliver of exposed skin where my cami and shorts were supposed to meet. He watched me watching him, and the moment grew. “You give me peace.”

My pulse quickened, and my heart raced. I took his hand and placed it on my chest. “This is what you do to me,” I whispered, allowing him to feel his effect on me.

“Your heart,” he uttered in surprise. “It’s beating so fast.”

“It is.” I licked my lips. “You stir me up. You make me feel everything.”

He put his fingers on my neck to check my pulse that way. “All that because you like me.”

I put my hand over his and held his gaze. “All that because you see me.”

He leaned down and kissed me with a reverence and appreciation that spoke volumes. I felt a tear threatening to fall so I pulled out of the kiss, turning my head.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, coaxing my head back his way.

I closed my eyes tight and when I was convinced that I wouldn’t lose it and cry, I took a breath and opened my eyes. “Is he going to sue you? Is he pressing charges? Are you going to have to go to jail?”

“I’m not serving any jail time. It’s a first-time offense. No damage to the restaurant. The only damage was to his face, and a fat lip and a black eye will heal on its own, so there’s no hospital bills coming my way. Witnesses heard what he was saying about us and confirmed that he started the confrontation. But funny enough, I made sure my lawyer knew about the rumors and the podcast that you told me about. My lawyer called a few hours ago and said that Bryant’s on the Date Night podcast—they call him City Boy. After finding that out, my lawyer said that he was going to have this whole thing go away countering with libel, slander, defamation of character lawsuits.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I may have a small fine, but he doesn’t see it being more than that.”

I gasped. “Really?” My eyes instantly pricked with tears, but I was too happy to look away. “I’m so glad to hear that.”

“You were worried about me, baby?”

The corners of my lips turned upward hearing him call me baby. “Yes, I was worried about you.”

“Awww.”

“You can’t go to jail.” I made a face and shook my head. “I’m not a ride-or-die type of woman. If you had to go to jail

for a month for defending me, I'd be willing to still be with you. But anything over a month is questionable. And to be clear, that was just if you went down for defending me. If it was for anything else, nope."

Luca chuckled. "You wouldn't wait for me and put money on my books?"

"Hell no!"

He made a face. "Ouch."

I started giggling.

"You didn't have to say 'hell no', Serena," he sulked comically. "Just a no would've sufficed."

"But you needed to know the severity of the situation. The hell adds the underlined, bolded, and italicized accent that was needed," I joked. My eyes lingered on him. "You look tired."

"I am."

"Will you turn the light off, please?"

He reached over to turn off the light, and the room was engulfed in darkness. I put his hand back on my belly and he slipped it underneath my camisole. His warm hand rested against my skin.

"I'd wait for you if you were locked up," Luca argued.

"You better."

"Oh, is that right?" He tickled me, causing me to squirm and laugh in spurts.

"Stop! I'm sorry! I'm just kidding! Luca! Stop!"

He chuckled but discontinued his tickling. "Your laugh is so loud." He leaned down to kiss my shoulder. "I love it."

Heat spread from where his lips touched my bare skin and warmed me to my core. In the dark, with his hand still resting on my belly, I became hyperaware of the fact that we were two thin pieces of clothing away from being naked in bed together.

I turned on my side, and he adjusted accordingly so that we were spooning. His hand still under my camisole as he

caressed my belly. His breath skated across my neck as he held me close. And his dick firmly pressed against my ass.

I was so comfortable and warm. I felt cocooned in his arms as if that was where I was always meant to be. And as tired as I was, there was a fire brewing at the apex of my thighs. I tried to ignore it, but as the silence settled around us, the pressure only intensified.

I swallowed hard.

“I’m hard because I want you,” he acknowledged, breaking the quiet solitude as if he could hear my thoughts. “I know you can feel me against you, and I don’t want you to think that’s what I came for. I just can’t hide what you do to me, especially since we’re in bed...and I’m feeling your soft skin...and you smell so good.” He inhaled deeply before kissing my neck. “But I came over here to sleep with you, not to sleep with you. You mean something to me, so I’m going to do this right.”

Even though he was right, everything he said made me want him more. “Okay,” I murmured in response. “Tonight isn’t the night. But that is a distraction.”

He chuckled softly. “It isn’t my fault.”

“You’re right.”

I covered my hand with his and pushed it down toward my shorts. Slipping his hand under my waistband, I lifted my leg and guided his fingers over my wetness. He sucked in a sharp intake of air. I let him move in a few rhythmic circles around my throbbing clit before dipping into me. I closed my eyes, relished the feeling, and then closed my legs. Pulling his hand back up to my belly, I fought the urge to continue.

“So, now we can both be distracted,” I concluded.

He didn’t say anything for at least thirty seconds. “That was fucked up.”

I giggled. “It’s the same thing you’re doing to me right now.”

He kissed my neck, my cheek, and when I turned my head, my lips. “You are trouble, Serena Brooks.”

“You like trouble.”

Against the shell of my ear, he whispered, “Very, very much.”

Chapter Eighteen

*B*ecause the temptation was too great, we decided to not spend the night with one another again until we went on a date. We woke up in each other's arms on Wednesday, and it felt right. But the moment only lasted a few minutes because he had an early morning and a long day. My day started later but lasted longer, well after his concluded. We didn't talk much, but we realized that if he rescheduled his dentist appointment and I finished a few extra things on my to-do list, we could make Thursday work for us.

It was a chilly morning and I thought I would be sore from the five miles we managed to cover as we strolled from one end of downtown to the other—and then back to the car. But the only thing that hurt was my side from laughing so hard.

“Well, don't invite a woman on a breakfast date and just have a protein shake and a banana,” I commented as we arrived back at Luca's townhouse.

Luca parked his car behind mine and then turned the ignition off. He looked at me and grinned. “Why are you so full of shit?”

“Because I eat real food,” I quipped.

He tried not to laugh, but his whole body was shaking as he held it in. “I ate a healthy breakfast.”

I put my hand under his shirt and rubbed his belly. I tried to ignore the way his abs rippled under my fingers. “Your

stomach growled loud as hell in the middle of our kiss. Clearly, you're still hungry."

Giving me a look, he leaned his head back against the headrest. "I'm about to eat a whole lot when we get in the house."

My fingers stopped moving and my lips parted. Speechless, I felt his words everywhere.

He smirked. "Get in the house."

Without another word, I opened my door and damn near jumped out of his car. I followed him into his townhouse and as soon as the door closed, his mouth was on mine.

"I need to take a shower. I'm sweaty," I murmured a few minutes later.

"You want to use the one down the hall?"

I nodded. "I just need to grab my stuff from your room."

"Make it quick or I'm coming in with you!"

Laughing my way to his bedroom, I grabbed my bag, packed with the stuff he told me to bring, and made my way down the hall. After a long, hot shower, I stepped out thirty minutes later, shaved, moisturized, and wearing a pink t-shirt dress.

I let the smell of bacon sizzling lead me straight to the kitchen. "It smells great in here."

Luca was wearing grey sweatpants and a tight, white t-shirt. Even with his back to me, seeing him in sweatpants made me smile.

"Thanks!" Glancing over his shoulder, he called me over. "Come have a seat."

Instead of going to the table, I went to him. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I buried my face in his back. The scent of his body wash infiltrated my nostrils and I sighed. "You smell so good."

"So do you. And come to the side so I can see this shirt you have on with no pants."

I moved to the side of him and laughed as he whistled.

“Come here,” he demanded. When I was close enough, he dropped a kiss on my lips. “What would you like to eat?”

“I’m still full. I’ll grab some water or apple juice, if you have it.”

“Help yourself.”

I opened the refrigerator and grabbed the water. “What would you like?”

“I’ll have water. Thanks.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, taking another bottle out. “I’ve been thinking about it, and I have no idea where we’re going today.”

“I got us tickets to the History of Fashion exhibit at the art museum.”

“You did?” I sat down at the table and watched him, my mouth agape. “Are you serious?”

He winked at me. “I did good?”

“You did really good! Oh my god! Thank you!”

When the omelet was done, he brought over plates of bacon, eggs, and cinnamon bread with raisins. He sat it in the middle. He put a plate in front of me and a plate across from me. After grabbing silverware, he sat down.

He tapped the table in front of the bread. “I broke out the cinnamon bread for you.”

“A fashion exhibit and carbs? For me?”

He chuckled. “It’s actually low carb. Taste it. It’s pretty good.”

“It looks delicious, but I’m not hungry.” I paused, taking the piece he’d cut for me. “This really is good!” I looked at all the food between us. “Luca, this is a lot of food.”

He winked. “I told you I was going to eat a whole lot when we got in the house.”

Choking on the bite of bread I'd just popped in my mouth, I couldn't do anything but laugh. "Oh, okay. I see."

We laughed and joked our way through his breakfast. Once he finished eating, we discussed my photoshoot for the next day. When I helped him with the dishes, we discussed our families. And when we got on the couch to watch a movie, we talked about our schedules and our plans.

"I don't have many free days like this," I sighed.

We sat side-by-side, his arm along the back of the couch and my legs draped over his lap. He was staring at me while stroking my bare legs. "Neither do I."

When he gave me a tour of his office, I saw his huge wall calendar. Every day seemed to have a reminder on it. I didn't study it, but I noticed that he had something other than the dentist written down for today.

"Are you missing out on something by being with me today?"

"I'm with you. I'm not missing out on anything."

I pursed my lips and cocked my head to the side. "You know what I mean. Did you have something to do today? Your schedule looks jam-packed like mine."

"Honestly?"

"Always."

"I rearranged something to allow me today. There are things that I can't reschedule, but what I had today wasn't one of them."

"So, what you're saying is that I shouldn't get spoiled by today?"

He chuckled under his breath. "Pretty much. But you should also take away that when I can clear a whole day for you, I will." He hesitated briefly. "What about you?"

"I was taking it easy today because I'm just coming off the fashion show, and I have the shoot with you tomorrow. But usually, my days are full between school, work, and sewing. I

work hard, but I also make time for things that are important to me.”

“After this marketing campaign gets on its way, you’ll have a whole lot of orders to fulfill. People are going to be lining up outside of your classroom to get some Simply Serena.”

I grinned. “I hope so. The lots of orders part, not the lining up outside the classroom part.”

We talked about where his next few assignments were going to take him and how we could carve out as much time as possible while he was doing his seminar at Hamilton. But when I was in the middle of telling him about my interview with Akila, he reached up and touched my face. I bowed to his touch and stopped speaking.

He leaned over and brushed his lips against mine. “I love your voice. I love hearing you speak.” He kissed me again and then sat back. “Please continue.”

It was so unexpected. Butterflies moved from my belly to my chest as I finished telling him.

“It’ll come out the same weekend as the New York trip.” I leaned my head to the side, resting it on his arm and the back of the couch. “Speaking of which, what is this trip about? Is this your interview and half naked photoshoot?”

His gaze shifted away from me, he groaned, “Yeah, something like that.”

“Why are you going to be naked?”

“All of the people being interviewed will be naked.” He pointed in the direction of his office. “I have the paperwork they sent. It has something to do with them getting all of us to bare it all in every sense of the word.” He stared at the TV that had been on mute since we sat down. “I’m not worried about being naked. It’s more about me not being in control of the images, me not having any creative control.”

I nodded. “I can see that. You’ve been a celebrity—”

“I’m not a celebrity.”

“—photographer for several years now, and I’m sure you’ve been the main one calling the shots. This time you’ll have to take direction. I get it.”

A soft smile graced his lips and his eyes returned to mine. “Of course, you do.”

It was like a hug I didn’t know I needed.

Reaching up, I touched his face. “I know it’s going to be different on the opposite side of the camera, but you’re going to be great. The camera loves you—doesn’t matter if you’re behind it or in front of it. This face”—I let my finger drag down his cheek— “this body”—I trailed down his neck, his chest, and his abs— “but most importantly, this heart”—I put my palm over his left pectoral muscle— “is undeniable. The shoot and the interview are going to be incredible because you’re incredible.”

He picked up my hand and kissed it.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” I continued. “But I’m honored you asked me to be there for you and with you.”

“Come here,” he whispered, pulling me until I was straddling his lap. He looked up into my eyes as I sat on top of him. He threaded his fingers through mine and kissed the back of my hand. “What are you doing to me?”

“The same thing you’re doing to me,” I pointed out, leaning down to trail feathery kisses across his lips.

With his hands resting on my hips, he studied my face. “I’m not going to lie to you,” he started in a hushed tone. “I haven’t been in a relationship in a long time. I work a lot. And the last time I was in one, it didn’t work out because she couldn’t understand my work ethic. Well, that and because I didn’t communicate well.”

“I’m glad you know that about yourself so you can work on it. Communication is a big deal for me.”

He licked his lips. “I didn’t think my communication was a problem in my last relationship. That was just something she said. It didn’t even occur to me that there was probably a

whole lot of truth to what she was saying until I met you.” Holding my gaze, he shook his head. “You make me want to talk to you. I’ve never had that before. I’ve never connected with someone like this.”

The sincerity in his eyes moved me. “I’ve never felt as understood as I do with you. You get me, and that’s why my feelings for you are so intense.”

“Same here.” He cleared his throat. “If you want to make it to the museum at a decent time” —he scanned my body and his hands found their way to my hips— “you’re going to have to sit back on the couch.”

It was difficult for me to continue ignoring how hard he was beneath me. He was pressed against the lace of my panties through the cotton of his sweatpants. Feeling the longing in my core, I rotated my hips against him. “And what if I don’t?”

“Serena...” He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the back of the couch.

“Luca.” I placed my hands on the sides of his face and let my nails lightly coast down his perfect jaw. “I have a question for you.”

He sucked in a sharp intake of air as I moved my body back and forth, applying pressure along the length of him. His hands slipped down to my exposed thighs and then slid back up gradually, gripping the flesh of my hips. The low tone of his voice was gritty with want. “What are you doing to me?”

The feeling of his hands clinging to me like he was clinging to his restraint turned me on. “What do you want me to do?”

He lifted his head and looked at me with fire in his eyes. “I had a plan for today. Since we don’t have free days often, I planned this one out. I want it to be perfect and not rushed... but if you keep grinding on me...”

I pressed my lips against his, silencing him. The kiss was hot and needy and as I pulled away, I lightly sucked on his bottom lip. Trailing kisses from his lips across his cheek, I

whispered against his ear. “Right now, there’s nothing I want more than you.”

Groaning, his hands cupped the roundness of my bare ass and pulled me into him harder. “We’ll miss the museum.”

The way he was holding me, I knew he’d already made his peace with pushing the museum trip back.

“You’re right.” I bit his earlobe gently before kissing my way down his neck and over his shoulder. “We should get ready to go.”

“Yes, we should,” he growled.

With a firm hold on my ass with one hand, he reached up, tangling his fingers in my hair. Forcing my head so close to his that our noses almost touched, he stared into my eyes. There was so much want and desire pooled in those brown eyes that chills ran down my spine.

Seconds ticked by. My heart thudded because I knew we were at the point of no return. I waited for him to make the move. I waited to see if we would pull back or dive in deeper. His lips parted, and I could feel his chest rising and falling. And after what felt like an eternity, he gave in.

Capturing my mouth with his, our tongues moved together in worshipful kisses, causing soft moans to escape me. Our breathing became labored as we explored each other’s mouths. I found myself rotating in small circles in his lap and the more he groaned, the damper my panties became. He released his grip on my hair and moved his hand down my back until both hands were back under my dress and resting on my mostly bare ass.

Breaking the kiss, I sat up, trying to catch my breath. His hands rested on the top of my thighs as he stared up at me. His eyes traveled from my face down my neck and lingered on my chest before making its descent down the rest of my body. When his eyes traveled back up, so did his hands. On the way up, he took the dress with him, pulling it over my head. Tossing the dress on the couch beside us, he licked his lips and took me in, making my already erect nipples even harder.

Sliding the soft fabric of my bra straps from my body, his fingertips danced over my shoulders and down my arms. I had goose bumps from his touch. Reaching around, he deftly unhooked my bra and it fell from my body. My heavy breasts were free, and I watched him as he took me in.

He leaned up as if he was going to take a nipple into his mouth, but he only allowed his lips to graze it. Leaning to the other breast, he got close enough for me to feel his nearness and then he retreated, teasing me.

I swallowed hard. “Luca,” I whined wantonly grinding harder into his lap.

As soon as his name rolled off my tongue, he gave in. The wet suction of his mouth engulfed my nipple, and my head fell back. The sensation of his tongue swirling around my nipple shot straight to the apex of my thighs. I gripped his t-shirt to keep myself steady. Alternating between breasts, he trailed light kisses across my breastbone and then up my exposed neck. My skin was on fire.

Sitting back, he just stared at me, his fingers flexing on my hips.

“What are you thinking?” I murmured, reaching between my legs and feeling how damp my G-string was. My fingers skated over his dick and he sucked in air sharply. I bit my lip at his reaction.

He licked his lips. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“How sexy you are.” His eyes flicked down to my mouth, and then he met my gaze again. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anyone the way I want you right now.” His fingers flexed on my hips before moving up and cupping my breasts. His thumbs slid over my nipples and then went to my G-string. “It’s taking everything in me not to rip these off your body.” His hand drifted downward at a snail’s pace until his fingers pushed the scant fabric to the side and stroked my slick lips.

Still holding on to his shirt, I moaned loudly.

“I’m thinking about how good you sound...how good you look... how good you feel...” Holding my gaze, he removed his fingers from my sensitive flesh and licked them. “How good you taste.”

I shook with want. “Stop teasing me,” I begged, attempting to reach into his sweatpants.

“I’m not teasing you, baby. I’m just making sure every cell in your body wakes up for this.”

Putting his arm around my waist, he twisted me so that my back was on the couch and he was hovering over me. He kissed me and then sat back so he could remove my panties. Positioning my legs on either side of his body, he easily slid his finger over my clit before dipping his finger inside.

“I’ll stop if you want me to stop.” His voice was low and rough as he moved his finger over my clit again. “What do you want, Serena?”

I cried out in lust as he pulled his finger almost all the way out before plunging it back in. The sensation forced my eyes closed, my chest up, and my head pushed back into the cushion. Seizing the opportunity, Luca kissed and nibbled from my belly button to my chest.

I sucked in a sharp intake of air when he got to my breast and his tongue swirled around my hardened nipple. He bit down lightly before making his way to the other. The familiar warmth curled in the pit of my stomach as his fingers continued to work in and out of my wetness.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmured as he trailed kisses up my chest and along my collarbone before making a beeline to my lips. “You want me to stop?”

“Don’t stop,” I answered breathily. “Please, don’t stop.”

As soon as his tongue met mine, we moaned in unison.

Luca ended the kiss way too soon, but when I saw him stand and remove his clothes, I didn’t mind anymore.

Holy shit.

I sat up immediately. He was sex personified. With well-defined muscles and a dick that made my mouth water, Luca Romano had full access to every inch of my body. My hands had a mind of their own as they reached out to touch him. I ran my fingers over his hardness, feeling the entire length and width of him. He was hot, heavy, and throbbing in my hand. I stroked it worshipfully, marveling at it.

I looked up at him, my mouth inches from his dick. “You are sexy as hell.”

He put his hands on the side of my face and exhaled. “You have no idea what you do to me.” He grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet. “Don’t look at me like that unless you’re ready for me to be inside you.”

I pressed my body against his, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I’ve been ready,” I whispered against his lips

The passion that emanated from the kiss set me ablaze. I stood on my tip toes to grind myself against his thigh. His hardness speared me above my bellybutton, and I had to physically restrain myself from climbing him.

“Go get in my bed,” he growled, slapping my ass. “Now.”

I made my way to his room and two minutes later, he entered. He placed two bottles of water on the nightstand and then clicked a couple of buttons and music started playing through hidden speakers.

He looked at me and licked his lips. “Spread your legs.”

“Yes, sir.” I propped myself up on my elbows and spread my legs slowly, deliberately.

“This is the breakfast I wanted. I settled for the food earlier, but this was the only thing I wanted to eat,” he uttered as he kneeled on the bed, eyeing me hungrily.

“You say the most perfect—”

My sentence abruptly ended in a loud hiss as Luca’s lips grazed the inside of my thighs. My hips rotated as he blew against me, teasing me. He was so close that if I tilted my hips slightly, his mouth would be on the epicenter of my pleasure.

Holding me in place, he made me wait for it. He palmed the back of my thighs and kissed the length of my pelvis, from hip bone to hip bone. But when his tongue finally licked me, I shuddered. And when his tongue burrowed inside me, desire coiled in my belly, ready to release the tension.

“Oh my god, Luca,” I breathed hotly.

Every time he did something that made me cry out, it seemed to only turn him on more. So, when I moaned, he moaned. And each time he did, it felt like a soft flick against my clit. I squirmed, pleasure dripping from me. He slid a finger inside me, and I gasped loudly. Before I could recover, he slid another one in.

“Mmmm,” he growled, sending vibrations through my entire body.

“That feels so good,” I managed to choke out as he sucked my clit and moved his fingers in and out of me. “Yes, Luca. Right there.”

My body burst into the flames his touch and his moans ignited.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I panted as my body started its quick descent into chaos.

“Yeah, that’s it. Give me all of that,” he grunted as I clamped down around his fingers.

My heart was pounding in my chest as my entire body shot off fireworks. “Oh. My. God.”

I rode the entire wave and he never let up, he never stopped tasting me. I came so hard that I felt completely depleted. Then my mind went blank and temporarily, I was immobilized.

Luca climbed off the bed and then returned a minute later. Even though my eyes were closed, I could feel his eyes on me.

Kissing my smooth skin, Luca made a trail from my ankles to my neck. His hands skillfully moved from lightly tugging at my nipples to massaging my body all over. His hands felt like they were everywhere, and I’d never felt so worshipped in my

life. When he finally brushed his lips with mine, the throbbing ache between my thighs was back.

“I need you inside me,” I told him wantonly.

He closed his eyes and groaned. “Tell me again what you need, baby.”

Spurred on by his reaction, I gently pushed him onto his back. “You took such good care of me, I want to return the favor.” Reaching for his dick, I wrapped my hand around him. He sucked in sharply as I started stroking him.

“I need to feel you deep inside me,” I repeated, my voice needy.

Covering his mouth with mine, I kissed him hard and deep. His hands caressed my body as I played with his. I pulled out of the kiss, so I could marvel at how hard he was. Shifting my gaze to his face, I was caught off guard by the unbridled lust in his expression as he looked at me.

I licked my lips. “Where are your condoms?”

“I put them beside the water.”

We both moved toward that side of the bed, but he was closer. He sat on the edge and put a condom on. When he started to get up, I stopped him.

I put my hand on his chest and gave him a slow, sensual kiss. “Do you know what I was thinking about when we were on the couch?”

Pulling me close, he started kissing my neck. “This?”

I giggled when he nibbled on a spot behind my ear. “This.”

I put my knees on the bed, one on either side of his thighs, and I gradually sank down onto him. With each inch, he filled me, and the sheer pleasure that erupted from my core weakened me. Groaning loudly, I struggled to keep my eyes open as he stretched me out.

“Shit...” he growled as his fingers dug into my ass. “Oh, fuck.”

Using his shoulders and the placement of my feet, I lifted myself up and down in his lap. With one hand on my ass and the other palming my breast, he guided my movements as I rode him. Taking my time, I savored the experience. Letting the tempo build, he watched me grind down on him, panting his name repeatedly. Each time I moaned, so did he. His pleasure was so connected to mine that everything he did set me off and vice versa.

“Luca,” I panted. “Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yesssssssss.”

“Yes, baby. Ride this dick for me, baby.” His breathing was ragged as he alternated between nipples, sucking and biting. “Serena, shit, shit!”

I bounced breathlessly on him as my orgasm built. He placed both hands on my ass and slammed me down onto him harder. His labored breathing matched mine as the pressure built for the both of us. With all the teasing he had done, it didn't take long before I reached my orgasm. I clenched, quivering around him as my carnal desire spread from my core to my weakening limbs.

“You are so wet,” he grunted as he moved his hips upward, meeting me thrust for thrust. “Shit, Serena...”

“Luca,” I screamed silently, my breath coming out in huffs.

My mouth fell open, and my toes curled as a second wave hit me. My head lolled back in ecstasy as pleasure took over. I had no control of my pulsating body. I barely heard him murmuring about how good I felt as I tightened and convulsed around him. Every cell in my body was affected by his touch. My orgasm spread throughout every inch of me and when his mouth covered my nipple, I buckled.

A deep guttural groan escaped from deep in his chest, and I knew he wasn't going to last much longer. Hearing that primal sound come out of him as he climaxed sent an aftershock through me.

Sharing sloppy kisses filled with need and want, our hands roamed freely over each other's bodies. Our lips were feverish and lustful as we grinded against each other. Chest to chest, I

wasn't sure whose heart was beating the fastest, but the way we were still pawing at one another, it didn't seem like it would stop anytime soon.

“Wow.” I exhaled the word when I finally rolled off him.

He reached over and placed his hand on my belly, dragging his fingertips across my skin. “Wow is right.”

Both of us winded, we silently laid side-by-side for a full minute.

“I completely understand why you have a one-night rule. If you take care of a woman like that more than once, there's no way she's not falling in love.”

Even though I meant it jokingly, there was so much truth to it. Luca Romano rocked my entire world.

When I opened my eyes, he was watching me. Heat spread over my skin, and my chest swelled. The way he looked at me made everything else fade away.

Smirking, he stood up, removed the condom, and then rolled on another. Spreading my legs, he moved into position, caging my head with his arms. “Good to know,” he replied, just before lowering his lips to mine.

The kiss wasn't like the sloppy, lust-fueled ones we'd shared a few minutes earlier. He kissed me slowly and with reverence. His tongue parted my lips and met mine with a need that went well beyond sex. He told me secrets, he made me promises, and he confessed his fears in that kiss. It didn't just turn on my body, it turned on my soul and imprinted on my heart. Even with my eyes closed, I saw him—in every kiss, in every touch, I saw him. Tears prick the back of my eyelids as I gave in to my feelings, giving myself to him. My heart thumped from the intimacy and vulnerability.

He pulled out of the kiss as gradually as he entered it.

My lashes fluttered open to find him staring at me. My breathing hitched.

He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. Instead, he rubbed the head of his dick over my wetness. It felt so good

that my eyes started to close.

“Keep your eyes open.” The sexy grit in his voice sent a chill through me.

“Mmm...” I nodded, losing myself in his gaze and his touch simultaneously.

His chest rose and fell as I watched him hold back. His restraint was sexy as hell.

Stretching me out, he eased each thick inch into me making sure I felt him every step of the way. I felt him throbbing inside me as I engulfed him. He grunted his approval as he ran his hands up and down my naked body. I couldn't stop squirming and once he was all the way in, he stopped moving.

“You feel so good,” he groaned as he filled me completely.

Holding my hips, he lifted me slightly so that my ass was off the bed. I tried to rotate with him inside me, but he held me still.

“Lucaaaaa...” Moaning his name, the anticipation and desire caused the tension to build.

His eyes pinged over my nakedness before he met my gaze again. “Are you ready to fall?”

I blinked up at him. “Are you?”

Chapter Nineteen

“*W*hat?” I screeched aloud in the empty room.

I reread the congratulatory letter stapled to the top of the confidentiality agreement and other contractual forms to be a contestant on *The One*. “This has got to be a joke. This has something to do with Koko.”

Although I didn’t let my best friend forget that she was working for a television program that set women back decades, I was so proud of Koko for following her dreams and landing a big-time job on a network TV show.

But what does that have to do with me?

Putting my law degree to work, I carefully read each document addressed to me, starting with the one welcoming me to join the “most popular dating show on TV.” With each line I read, I became uncomfortable.

This almost looks real.

When I finished, I tossed the stack of papers on the wooden coffee table and picked up my cell phone. Standing in the center of the rustic living room of my parents’ Virginia home, I tapped my bare foot against the cold hardwood floor as I pushed the call button. With a hand propped on my hip, I waited for my call to be answered.

I glanced at the clock hanging over the crackling fireplace, calculating the time difference between Virginia and California. *It’s only four o’clock over there so she should be—*

“Zoe!” My best friend’s light airy voice chirped as she answered the phone. “Oh my God!”

“Kumiko Liane Green,” I barked her full name, walking toward my childhood bedroom and closing the door behind me. I flipped on the light and the oceanic blue walls lit up. “This bullshit has your name written all over it.”

The gasping sound of her laughter was infectious as my suspicions were confirmed.

“You ass!” I exclaimed, my smile taking the bite out of my words.

Koko laughed harder.

“This is not funny,” I argued, stifling my own amusement. “I don’t even watch reality TV so as soon as I saw *The One* in the first line of the letter, I knew your ass had something to do with it!”

My mass of curly hair flopped around my shoulders with each shake of my head.

“Two months after you are attached to the show, I get this mysterious paperwork in the mail. Tsk tsk. Your pranks are usually a little more elaborate. You have to step your game up, my friend. You’re slipping,” I teased.

She scoffed, her light voice cackled like an evil villain in a cartoon. “Remember when I first got the offer letter to work with Julia Jones on *The One* and you kept giving me shit?”

I smiled even though my eyes narrowed suspiciously. Standing by my desk, I let my fingers slide across the old leather bound book of poems by Pablo Neruda that I took everywhere.

“Yes,” I replied slowly, before making a beeline to the oversized reading chair in the corner of the room. I tucked my legs underneath me as I got comfortable in the chair. “When my best friend gets hired to work with the Makeup Guru, we celebrate. Even if she’ll be working with her on a show that highlights the death of the feminist movement.”

We both chuckled.

“Do you remember how wasted we were when we celebrated?” Koko asked.

“We?” I laughed, shaking my head at the memory. “Do *you* remember that night at all? You were the one who got drunk.”

“I was so drunk,” she giggled again. “But do you remember how I kept saying that I was going to get you back once I was sober again?”

“Mm-hm. And the next day you told Ethan that I wanted to hook up with him.”

“No...” She stretched the word out longer than necessary. “Well, yes, I did do that. But that wasn’t to get you back; that was a favor. You need to keep Ethan interested and on your radar. He’s a catch!”

I closed my eyes and groaned. “When are you going to let that go? Ethan is my boss and we are just friends.”

Ignoring my protests, she continued, “So anyway, that was a favor, not retaliation. You’re welcome.”

“Ugh,” I grunted in exasperation, throwing my arm up and kicking my legs out. “When I get back to Los Angeles, I’m going to fight you.”

“So as I was saying, I knew exactly how to get you back for saying that I would be painting the faces of—.”

“Of women who possibly have Stockholm Syndrome,” I interrupted, finishing the statement with thinly veiled amusement. Unable to hold back, my head tilted upward and a deep belly laugh erupted out of me. “That was funny. I crack myself up.”

“It’s still funny... which is why I had to come up with the perfect way to get you back.”

I stared at my black tipped fingernails, focusing on a small chip I hadn’t seen earlier. “Faking this letter and this paperwork is pretty good,” I admitted begrudgingly.

“Wait, I haven’t even told you the best part,” Koko insisted between giggles.

“The best part? The best part was how good of a job you did with the legal jargon. Maybe you should’ve attended law school with me.”

The line went silent as my words hung in the air.

Shit. Here it comes.

“Well...now that you brought it up, are you ready to talk about the bar yet?” Koko’s tone shifted abruptly from flighty to serious, catching me off guard.

She wasn’t talking about Breakers Bar, the bar in which I worked. She was talking about the California State Bar Exam, the exam in which I skipped.

I frowned, shaking my head even though she couldn’t see me. “Nope.”

Koko made a grumbling noise from the back of her throat. But it wasn’t a judgmental noise. It was the noise she often made when she was struggling to hold her tongue.

I exhaled nosily in defeat as I slumped deeper into the chair. It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate her concern, because I did.

“I just couldn’t do it. It’s—it’s hard to explain.” I lowered my voice so my mother couldn’t hear me if she was walking around. “My mom is here and I haven’t told my parents yet. But as soon as I get to the airport, I’ll spill.”

“Swear?”

“Swear. But you mentioned something about the best part?”

“Oh yes!” Her voice cracked before she broke into her gasping giggles. “The best part is that it’s real!”

I felt my brows crease in confusion as a smile pulled at the corner of my lips. “What? I can barely understand you.”

No matter what, the loud gasping screeches of Koko’s laugh amused me without fail.

Okay. I pulled the phone from my ear with a rueful smile. *It’s a decent prank, but it’s not that funny.* I shook my head.

“Hello?” I called out, hoping to get her back on track. “What are you talking about?” My stomach plummeted when the realization hit me. “Did you steal this from work? Kumiko! I know I gave you shit about it, but this really is a great opportunity for your career. Don’t get fired over this.”

For whatever reason, my warning just made her gasps turn into a wheezing, choking sound.

I rolled my eyes, trying not to be amused by her. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. “Koko.”

“No, I didn’t steal it. The letter is real!” She explained between pants as she calmed down.

I froze. The word ‘real’ echoed in my head as I struggled to pull what she meant from it. Part of me knew, but I needed confirmation. “Real? What do you mean it’s real?”

“My goal was to submit a packet for you to be a contestant and then post the response letter up at Breakers to get everyone in on the joke. Just being on the set this early, I already know they send out ‘thanks but no thanks’ letters and confidentiality agreements. I should’ve waited for you to get back so I could’ve seen your face! But I had waited too long already for this day so I had the package forwarded to your parents’ house as soon as it arrived here.”

“So you’re saying that the package is real?” I jumped out of the chair and marched out of the bedroom toward the living room. “No, no, no. You’re bullshitting me right now. There’s no way. The paperwork said that I passed the background check. There’s no way it could’ve gone that far without...”

My sentence trailed off.

Over the course of our seven-year friendship, Koko and I told each other everything. We shared our L.A. apartment and we stored all of our personal information in the same safe. Koko knew almost everything about me. She could’ve easily filled out the necessary paperwork.

Gripping the thick stack of papers, I returned to the bedroom. The door closed with a louder bang than I anticipated. “You illegally accessed my personal information

and forged documents in order to submit an application for me to compete on a show that I don't watch and don't believe in to get me back for joking on you?"

The question was met with immediate silence.

After thirty seconds, Koko cleared her throat. "Too far?"

"Hell yes!"

"Are you mad?"

"I'm mad that I'm now associated with this crappy show and there's a paper trail and electronic proof floating around. I'm mad that if I want to get elected to the Supreme Court, someone is going to pull out the list of applicants to *The One* and I will lose my bid because this clearly displays poor judgment."

"But are you mad?"

"Am I mad that you're a diabolical bitch? No."

I had to hand it to her. She waited two months for her prank to come full circle. That's a hell of a commitment.

"I wish I could've seen your face when you got the letter. I can almost visualize you noticing the title and then climbing on your soapbox about the sexist undertones of the show and then the shock of realizing that you applied to be on it. Are you going to write a strongly worded letter about the selection process?" Koko joked.

"Ha ha," I replied without any inflection in my voice. My eyes kept scanning the paperwork.

"Thousands of women enter and only twelve get selected to participate on the show. Well technically twenty-four but twelve are eliminated before the big cocktail party with the eligible bachelor. And there was less than a one percent chance that you'd get selected because of how many people apply so I felt like you were safe from actually being too attached to the show. They may not even keep it on file. I just wanted a letter or email that had your name and that you applied to be on *The One*."

“Like I said, diabolical.” I looked at the congratulatory letter once more before dropping the stack of papers on the desk and pressing my fingertips into my forehead. “But there’s just one little problem with your plan though.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not going on this bullshit show and I’m going to burn all evidence that could link me to it.”

“No!” Koko shouted, making my ear ring. “I’ve waited two months for this! I earned this Zoe Elise Jordan! And I heard that at the bottom of the letter, they actually say ‘Our bachelor is looking for the one Zoe...and it’s not you.’ Please, please tell me it says that. Please.”

I let out a puff of air. “That’s not what mine says.”

“What does it say?”

“Mine says ‘our bachelor is looking for the one Zoe...is it you?’ And then a hefty stack of papers asked me to give up my right to privacy and go parade around on this demeaning show so that I can compete against other women for the affection of a man I don’t know.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’ve been invited to be a contestant on the show,” I clarified, running my free hand down my face. “I’ve been given a week to decide. Well, a week from when they mailed the packet.”

“Oh. My. God!”

I pulled my phone away from my ear, but the damage to my eardrum was already done.

Her words became garbled and then she continued, “Are you going to do it? You have to do it! When do you have to get it back to them?”

Glancing down at the paperwork, I skimmed the paragraphs until I found what I was looking for. “Tomorrow. By close of business.”

“You have to do it!”

I started pacing from one side of the room to the other. “I most certainly do not. That’s a big hell to the no.”

“I know you’re not a risk taker, but just think about it. If you win, you get prize money. That prize money, depending on when you get sent home, would be more than enough to pay for us to go on a shopping spree or for us to go to every Beyoncé and Rihanna concert on the West Coast.”

I stopped in my tracks, trying not to laugh. “So in this scenario, I, alone, whore myself out on TV and we, together, spend the earnings if I win?”

“Or if you don’t like those suggestions, it would be more than enough money for you to reapply to take the bar exam.”

My lips pursed. I walked right into that.

Before I could respond, she rushed on. “We would get to see each other all the time. I’m going to be there every day except Sundays. We can’t go that long without talking! The location is incredible. You’d be staying in a mansion with a pool, a hot tub, a steam room and a relaxing place to read. And, most importantly, the eligible bachelor is Julian Winters.”

We were both quiet for a second. She was likely waiting for a reaction, but I was waiting for clarification.

“Julian Winters?” I asked, starting to pace again.

“Yes!”

My eyebrows came together, perplexed. I threw my hand up in the air. “Who the hell is that?”

“Julian Winters, the music producer.”

As a music lover, I was still stumped. “I have no clue who he is or why you thought I’d care.”

“Well, he’s a song writer and a music producer and he’s totally your type. He kind of looks like that Resident Assistant we had a crush on freshman year. And he was caught up in that copyright infringement lawsuit with that socialite, Janna White. I can’t think of the song now.”

“Ohhhh, yeah,” I remembered, familiarity of the case and the names flooding my brain. “‘Sweet’. That case ended her music career, didn’t it? I loved that song. I vaguely remember that he was the one who wrote it, but they settled out of court, right?”

“Yes. But do you know what he looks like now?”

“No... I just remember being fascinated by the case because—”

“I’m going to go ahead and stop you right there,” she interrupted, cutting me off mid-sentence. “We are not going to talk law right now. We are going to talk about you having the chance to bump uglies with Julian Winters. He is the—”

I frowned as I interjected, “The sheer fact that you said ‘bump uglies’ has disqualified you from giving me advice about anything in general, but sex specifically. You need to—”

A quick knock on the door followed by the sound of it being pushed open forced my sentence to end abruptly.

“Hi,” my mother greeted me as she poked her head into the room. Her bronzy skin glowed with a youthfulness most fifty-five year old women didn’t have. “Are you ready?”

I smiled and nodded.

“I’ll meet you in the car,” my mom whispered, closing the door behind her.

“I’m going to call you later. I’m about to head out with Mom before we meet Dad for dinner.”

“Okay, but search the internet for pictures of Julian and text me your thoughts.”

I chuckled to myself. “Will do.”

Slipping my phone into my back pocket, I quickly put on my socks and boots. Grabbing my grey and blue college hoodie, I pulled it over the white t-shirt and checked myself out in the mirror.

Wearing a hoodie that dwarfed my C-cup breasts and a pair of jeans that I remembered looking better when I purchased

them, I was a sad, cold version of myself. Although my face and hair were flawless, my outfit was questionable at best. But I pulled on my heavy down coat that I kept in Virginia for my visits home and trotted out to meet my mother. I may not have looked like the fashionista that I was in L.A., but the unpredictable Virginia weather put fashion on the backburner.

On the way to the car, I pulled out my phone and searched Julian Winters. My eyebrows flew up immediately when I saw the piercing, grey eyes, short, sexy beard, and endearing smile. There was even a hint of a tattoo peeking out from the sleeve of his t-shirt.

That can't be him.

I was expecting some boring, cookie-cutter, clean-cut guy. But based on the first few pictures, Julian Winters was the exact opposite of boring. Between his looks, his wardrobe, and his career choice, he was interesting. There weren't many photos of him looking directly at the camera. Most of the photos were of him writing or recording.

Successful. Bearded. Tattooed. With an amazing smile. I felt like I was checking off the top tier of my wish list. He's definitely my type.

“What’s with the goofy grin?”

I looked up and my mother had rolled the window down. Opening the door to her BMW, I showed her the picture on my phone as soon as I slid into the seat.

“Nice.” She nodded in appreciation. “New boyfriend?”

I made a face. “No. Just some guy.”

“Mm hmm. Not the way you were just grinning.”

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips to keep from telling her about Koko’s prank.

“Fine,” she continued. “I’ll leave it alone for now. There are more pressing issues.” She gestured to my bundled up state before she backed out of the driveway. “It’s a rather warm, early March night and you’re dressed like we’re going to a football game in the dead of winter. It’s not that cold.”

I looked at her purple pantsuit, multicolored scarf and black leather jacket. She looked warm, but fashionable.

“I’m a California girl now, Mom. Forty-five degrees might as well be sub-zero.”

Mom and I laughed, joked and talked as we ran errands on our way to our favorite Italian restaurant to meet Dad. As she told me about the pro-bono case she took on for a small business, I found myself completely riveted.

“...because giving up is the first step toward failure,” she concluded, using her favorite motivational line.

My stomach tied itself in a knot as I nodded in agreement.

She’s talking about her case. She’s not talking about me, I assured myself as she moved on to tell me about the items she ordered from Neiman Marcus.

Sometimes the line blurred where my mother ended and Elise Jordan the attorney began. My mom was a badass in the courtroom and in life. With her short black hair contrasting with her bronze complexion, she was beautiful. She dressed like she was going to a business meeting with a fashion company at all times. And although I was blessed with her skin tone, hair color, and shapely figure, my mother’s beauty extended beyond her looks.

My mom was fearless. She was the smartest person I knew and a fantastic storyteller. She was the youngest person to make partner at her firm and the first woman. She did mission trips to change the world. She volunteered her time to feed the homeless. She advocated for women in the workplace. She was well-traveled and entertained me with stories about her adventures before she had my brother and me. I’d spent my entire life wanting to follow in her footsteps.

I felt incredibly relaxed as we pulled into the parking spot. For the first time since I arrived on Friday, she didn’t ask me why I came home unexpectedly. She didn’t try to pepper me with questions. Everything felt like it was finally back to normal. It was the best conversation we’d had all week.

“There’s your father,” Mom pointed out as soon as we walked through the front door.

Zachary Jordan II was sitting at a table near the front politely ignoring the flirtatious waitress. Even from across the room, I could tell by the hair flip and arched back that she was flirting.

It wasn’t unusual for women to flirt with my father. He was a handsome man with an awesome wardrobe, courtesy of my mother. He regularly got complimented on his light brown eyes and long lashes, in which I was fortunate enough to inherit.

Besides the fact that he was a great father, what always resonated deeply with me was that the successful pharmacist made it clear that he only had eyes for my mother. And as if on cue, he looked up and spotted her. His grin stretched from ear to ear, but his eyes always seemed to hold so much adoration for her. Even after almost thirty years of marriage, when they were apart for any amount of time, he looked at her like she was the only person who existed. Looking at that type of love and devotion caused my heart to swell.

One day someone will look at me like that. Hopefully.

Once the hostess led us to his table, Dad stood to kiss his wife before pulling me in for a bear hug.

“Hi Dad.” I pulled out of the hug and removed my coat. Once we were all seated, I noticed the table was set for three. “Zach isn’t coming?”

My older brother never turned down a free meal.

The look my parents exchanged gave me pause. I shifted my eyes from one to the other. “Is Zach okay?”

“Yes, of course. He’s working,” my mother answered before the waitress arrived.

We ordered drinks and our favorite dishes without glancing at the menus.

“Okay, what’s going on?” I asked cautiously, nervousness coursing through my veins.

“Zoe...” Dad took a sip of water before he leaned forward. “Is everything okay?”

They know.

With a deep breath, I nodded slowly, looking between them. “How long have you known?”

My mom clasped her hands in her lap. “It’s a two-day exam and you arrived on what would’ve been the second day. We’ve known the whole time.”

Averting my eyes, I nodded and attempted to get my thoughts together.

“Did something happen?” My father’s brows furrowed with concern.

“No. I’m okay. I just...” The words wouldn’t form and my sentence just trailed off into the light buzz of people around us.

“This isn’t like you. You’re impulsive at times, but you don’t shirk your responsibilities. And you’re not frivolous with money,” he sat back in his chair. “I don’t understand, Zoe.”

Shit! I didn’t even think about the money. Eight hundred dollar exam and five hundred dollar exam prep course... courtesy of my parents’ generosity.

My manicured hand covered my mouth as I realized just how royally I fucked up. “I will pay you back every dime.”

Although they always assured me that I didn’t need to work while I was in school, I showed up to work almost every night to take care of myself. But they paid for my school expenses—which included everything related to the bar exam.

“It’s not about the money, Zoe. Your father and I just want to know what made you decide to skip the biggest exam of your life and immediately come here. Don’t get us wrong, we loved having you and seeing you so soon after Christmas. But there has to be an explanation.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to explain it. Fortunately, the waitress dropped off our food and the conversation halted for one full minute. Even after the waitress

left, the awkwardness of knowing they were waiting for a response and not knowing what to say only suppressed my appetite.

“I never meant to keep it from you,” I started, looking between them. “I just didn’t know how to tell you. I’m sorry.”

“What is it that you’re not telling us?” My mother’s exasperated voice filled me with dread because I knew I’d disappointed her. I’d disappointed both of them.

I blinked at her, contemplating my truth.

I’m freaking out.

I’m not ready.

I’m overwhelmed.

Because taking that exam changes everything.

“Zoe.” My father’s baritone pulled me out of my thoughts.

“I’ve been selected to participate on *The One*.” The words flew out of my mouth before I had time to think about it.

“What? What is that?” He looked at Mom who was staring directly at me.

“A reality dating show,” she answered without taking her eyes off of me. She tilted her head to the side slightly, assessing me, assessing my answer. “You didn’t take the California State Bar Exam because you are going on *The One*? The same show you said, and I quote, ‘was setting women back’?”

She doesn’t believe me. She knows me too well.

I had a choice. I could either admit that I was essentially going through a quarter-life crisis or I could dig in and commit.

“I’m interested in knowing more about Julian Winters...”

Which is the truth.

“Filming starts next week...”

Also the truth.

“I decided to just sit for the next exam. In July.”

All facts.

My dad seemed content with my reasoning. “Well that makes sense. You should do something different before beginning your career and take at least one risk. So this makes sense.” He nodded. “I get that. We traveled before starting our careers. And you haven’t dated anyone since Tate so this should be good for you. Have you heard from him?”

I looked over at my mother for help, but she seemed to still be sizing me up, focusing on the holes in my story. I quickly returned my gaze to my father.

“Dad.” I shook my head. “No.”

My father loved Tate Lewis. Even though Tate dropped me as soon as he got an NFL offer and broke my heart three years ago, Dad was still in denial that the situation was seriously over.

“Okay, okay.” He lifted his hands and gave me an easy smile. “So this is one of those shows where the last woman standing gets to be with the man?”

Just hearing it reduced to that made me ashamed of even pretending to go on the show. I almost balked and told the truth, but I heard my mother’s words in my head.

Giving up is the first step to failure.

The words played on a loop.

I took the first step toward failure. Walking away from the test, running home because I got scared, that’s a failure.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. This season the man in question is Julian Winters. He’s a songwriter and music producer. On a fundamental level, I don’t believe in reality dating shows. But I figure, if I participate and I am myself and stay above the fray, it could actually help the image of women that is being conveyed. And he is very intriguing.”

I sold that so smoothly, I almost bought it myself.

My dad nodded in agreement. My mother was a harder sell.

Pulling out my phone, I pulled up the picture of Julian.

“This is him.” I showed my father first and then my mother.

She looked at the phone and then me and then the phone again. A smirk played on her lips. “Ah, I see. Well the look on your face earlier makes a little more sense now. I look forward to watching you on the show, Zoe.”

She didn’t look completely convinced, but she was dropping the issue.

Shit, it worked!

I was surprised, but grateful. But then it hit me.

Shit! Now that means I have to actually go on the show.

Pick up [The One & After The One](#) to see how this story ends!

Epilogue

Two Weeks Later

LOST BOYS LOST: Slut-shaming Scandal Comes to A Head

By Joan Stanford

The Herald

SLUT-SHAMING AND VICTIM blaming is predominately directed toward women and can be harmful socially, psychologically, and emotionally. Additionally, slut-shaming is another way society tries to police female bodies. While men tend to be praised, celebrated, and encouraged to explore their sexuality, women tend to be judged, shamed, and policed for embracing theirs. The prevalence of slut-shaming is rooted in sexism and misogyny and grounded in the belief that men are able to assert themselves, but women are not.

Slut-shaming is more than just name calling. There is a power and control dynamic that disproportionately hurts women. Women are punished socially and professionally for being labeled a slut or ho. Slut-shaming, despite what a woman has or hasn't done, can be a deeply traumatic experience that can make women targets for sexual assault. And it is this issue that has started a firestorm on the campus of Hamilton University.

In a statement from the Andrew Sheldon, President of Hamilton University, Date Night has been permanently cancelled. The controversial podcast hosted by graduated members of the HU chapter of Mu Epsilon Nu fraternity spiked in popularity this year. For the past six years, Date Night used its platform to offer advice to college students and donated ad revenue to local charities. As a new charity is selected, a new trio of alumni are at the helm and guide the tone of the podcast.

A year riddled with envelope pushing topics and a heavy tie-in to the happenings on campus and around the city, Date Night tripled its ad revenue in the first three months. The more recognition they gained, the more money they earned. The uptick in donations seemed to protect them from intense scrutiny. They toed the line and got in hot water a couple of times, but this fall, things took a turn.

In September, Date Night ran into trouble surrounding the objectification of women both in podcast and newsletter form. In October, Date Night faced shaming, bullying, and defamation of character allegations that came to a head when one of the more outspoken members known as City Boy confronted a target off air. That incident sparked a campus-wide discussion and protest. Last week, an article featured in Re-Mix Magazine by A. Bishara highlighted local designer Serena Brooks and sparked a larger discussion. These occurrences caught the attention of the Hamilton University administration.

In response to the outcry and backlash regarding the slow response, President Sheldon made a determination effective immediately. In part, his statement read as follows: ‘Although we commend the charitable contributions stemming from the Date Night with The Lost Boys podcast, Hamilton University has been made aware of the content of said podcast and will discontinue funding to Mu Epsilon Nu. If the fraternity moves forward with the podcast using private funding, we will suspend the fraternity indefinitely.’

When contacted for a follow up, Mu Epsilon Nu fraternity couldn’t be reached for comment. But the reaction on campus

has been largely celebratory. The reaction from our readers has been a resounding good riddance.

Have You Read The One?

THE CATTINESS.

The fights.

The shaming.

I don't generally watch reality television, but I definitely don't watch reality dating shows. Besides the fact that it's completely staged, it's a horrible depiction of people—women especially.

Women are pitted against each other to compete for the affection of a man they “fall in love” with after a week or two.

I call B.S.

It is complete crap.

So when my best friend, Koko, was hired as a makeup artist on the set of the most popular reality dating show, *The One*, I teased her mercilessly.

She told me that if I didn't stop teasing her, she would get me back.

And she did...

Which is how I ended up as a contestant on *The One*.

The One

<http://amzn.to/1RkPnp3>

The One Series

Have You Read The One Series Duet?

The cattiness.

The fights.

The shaming.

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The One (Series Premiere | Part 1 of 2)

<http://amzn.to/1RkPnp3>

After The One (Series Finale | Part 2 of 2)

<http://amzn.to/2bGS7g5>

Playlist

Cuffing Season Playlist

Music inspires me. The artists mentioned below wrote songs and lyrics that depict the mood of Serena Brooks journey in Cuffing Season. If you haven't had a chance to listen to any of these songs, you should purchase them immediately and listen on repeat.

Body Count

Jessie Reyes, Normani, Kehlani

Under Control

The Internet

Incomplete Kisses

Sampha

Maybe

Alina Baraz, Galimatias

Focus

H.E.R.

Bloodflows

SOHN

None of Your Business

Salt-N-Pepa

Hold Me Down

Daniel Caesar

NFWMB

Hozier

Facts

H.E.R.

Acknowledgments

Cuffing Season, like Sweatpants Season before it, is a multilayered novel. On the surface, it is a contemporary romance that deals with what happens when you have instant chemistry with someone, but you're unsure what will come of that attraction. In addition to being fun, sexy, and swoon-worthy, Cuffing Season deals with real issues.

Slut-shaming and victim blaming is predominately directed toward women and can be harmful socially, psychologically, and emotionally. I believe slut-shaming is another way society tries to police female bodies. Regardless of what they did or did not do, women are punished socially and professionally for being labeled a slut or ho. Cuffing Season is a way to remind others that shaming women for their choices to engage with other consenting adults is rooted in sexism and needs to stop.

To my family and friends who have loved and supported me, thank you. I am blessed to have you in my life. I love you all to the moon and back.

Amy—thank you for creating my beautiful covers time and time again.

Jennifer—thank you for your editing, your feedback, and your comments. They are legit the best!

Michelle—thank you for being you and for using your formatting skills on my work. I appreciate you so much.

Kumiko—thank you for being such an asset to my book life. You're the best.

Authors, bloggers, readers, thank you. You have changed my life with your love and support. It truly means so much to me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I can't begin to explain how much it means to me to have you take the time to read my words. It's an honor to do this for a living and it's an honor to be read by you. Sending each and every one of you hugs and love.

www.authordanielleallen.com

Also by Danielle Allen

Fiction and Non-Fiction by Danielle Allen

Cuffing Season

Sweatpants Season

Broken Clocks

Disasters in Dating

Brink of Disaster: That One

Brink of Disaster: This One

The Art of Being (non-fiction)

Nevermore

The One

After The One

Work Song

Heartache

Heartfelt

Love Discovered in New York

Autumn and Summer

Back to Life

Back to Reality

Back to December