



ROCK STAR

JESSA JAMES

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CONTENTS

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[EXTENDED EPILOGUE - Serena](#)

[EXTENDED EPILOGUE - Rhys](#)

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Also by Jessa James](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Serena Woods stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, relieved that her eyes didn't give away the pounding that was happening behind them. She would have splashed some water on her face, but her mother surely would have had some kind of adverse medical reaction if she so much as thought of smudging her carefully applied makeup. Perhaps a heart attack, or maybe a stroke.

Serena probably should have eaten more than just the bite-sized appetizer at dinner, but with her mother sitting right next to her, it just hadn't been possible to dig into the main course. Let alone with the gusto the poor salmon had deserved.

So here she was, in the tiny designer dress selected and purchased by her mother, with another fierce headache that was undoubtedly due to her mother's obsession over the past few weeks with making sure Serena fit into her dress tonight without a hitch.

Serena sighed and finished washing her hands, then headed out into the ballroom where the charity event was

in full swing. Not that her treacherous thoughts would have ever made it into words, but she seriously hated being dragged along like a show pony. Her mother always insisted on looking like a perfect little family. The only reason most people even donated to these charities was solely for optics, not because they actually cared or were passionate about the causes.

Serena fully supported the causes, but she hated the events themselves. The only upside for her was watching the guests arrive, taking in the beautiful designer attire and silently evaluating whether or not she thought each designer would approve.

Tonight's event was in support of a local social services agency her parents had supported for several years. Serena and her sister had even done some volunteer work for the agency back in high school, and it made Serena happy to see that this year's attendance numbers had shattered the previous year's record. Apparently some famous band had recorded their own music video for a new song, saving a sizable amount of money in the process. The band had then donated all of the proceeds to the foundation.

Plans had been made for the video to be premiered later tonight, and some of the band members were even rumored to be making an appearance. Serena didn't know who they were even though her mother had mentioned the name on their way to the gala, but it hadn't seemed familiar. All the same, she was grateful for what they had done for the foundation. The increased interest in the event was undoubtedly due to the band, so whoever they were, they

were going to make many underprivileged and homeless children very, very happy.

Serena made her way across the ballroom as her blue eyes darted back and forth, seeking out her parents. She couldn't wait to leave. Her headache was getting worse, and she really just wanted to get home, take some aspirin, and maybe call Bryan.

Bryan. Butterflies in her stomach started fluttering at the thought of her fiancé and what tomorrow might hold for them. They had been dating for about eighteen months when he had popped the question roughly six months ago. It hadn't been entirely unexpected, as he had really been starting to come into his own at the exclusive law firm that employed him. A shiny new wife was the next step in the plan.

She had accepted his proposal eagerly, despite the fact that with his increasing success, the more arrogant and flashy he had become. She figured it was just a phase he was going through, and that once they were married next year, he would settle down again. He'd been working so hard, he'd been unable to attend the gala with her tonight.

She felt he'd been very patient with her, considering they had been dating just under two years and they hadn't yet consummated their relationship. Tomorrow, however, they would be spending the whole day together, with her staying over at his place for the first time. She hoped that wouldn't be the only thing she would be doing for the first time...

"Serena," her mother's voice rang out just ahead of her. "Where have you been? I would like you to meet Dr. and

Mrs. Kent. They're on the board for the foundation." Clearly these people were important to her mother, as her usually narrowed eyes were now wide with excitement. Serena turned to face a kind-looking elderly couple. "Nice to meet you," she said as she extended her hand politely. "Serena Woods." They muttered pleasantries as she turned her attention back to her mother. "Mom, I know it's still early, but my head is killing me, so I'm just going to head home."

Her mother's narrowed eyes moved firmly back into place at her statement, but obviously she didn't want to cause a scene in front of the Kents, so she simply nodded and air-kissed her cheek as she mumbled, "Feel better, sweetheart. We'll see you in the morning." Her dad just nodded goodbye, engrossed in his conversation with the good Dr. Kent.

She didn't see her sister, so she decided to head out without saying goodbye. Knowing her sister, she was probably off in some corner making out with the next Mr. Right. And her sister wouldn't have wanted to risk their mother's wrath getting caught doing something so very inappropriate in a public place, so she doubted her sister would be easy to find.

She had ridden here with her family, so she'd have to hail a cab outside the hotel to get home, which was actually kind of an exciting thought for her.

She was so lost in thought at the prospect that she made a wrong turn somewhere, and was now on a balcony on what she figured was the completely wrong side of the hotel. Damn. She looked around for a map denoting her

current position, but there were none to be found. There was, however, a man on the balcony with his back to her, although he had started turning around as soon as she had stumbled onto the balcony.

Holy hell. She may have been engaged, but she wasn't blind, and the man that stood in front of her was by far the most handsome person she had ever set eyes on. He had long, curly dark hair that fell to his shoulders, and although she couldn't make out the color of his eyes in the low light, she could feel them piercing her own. His full lips were set in a thin line. He was wearing a dark suit that looked custom tailored, with tattoos on one hand, winding into the sleeve of his shirt. He seemed to be taking her in, drawing her in with a magnetic field that made every hair on her body stand on end, and her stomach feel warm. Well, this was awkward. And definitely not something she felt she should be experiencing with a man who wasn't her fiancé.

“Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt. I must have made a wrong turn from the fundraiser.” At that, she turned without waiting for him to say anything in return, and hurriedly made her way down the hallway, her face burning with humiliation.

“*W*here to, miss?” the cabbie asked once she was settled in the backseat. Her first thought was home, but then she realized her parents were likely to stay at the gala for another few hours given how early it was still. A little thrill ran through her as she stammered out Bryan's address instead.

His new apartment was in a modern building not too far away, and she knew the doorman plus the security code to get in, so she figured she would surprise him when he got home from work. Maybe she would even cook dinner for him, to give him a taste of what it would be like after they got married. Then, she thought shyly with a blush, maybe she would give him a taste of something else. Bryan had never gone down on her before, but from what Mary - her best friend - kept telling her, it was quite the experience. Her sex clenched at the thought, still riled up by the encounter she'd had with the extremely hot guy before leaving the fundraiser.

Yes, this is a good idea, she quietly convinced herself. Surely he'd love the surprise. *Maybe it's too intrusive*, the

loud voice of her self-doubt piped up in her head. She mulled it over. *No, if he's tired when he gets home, or if he gets angry when he finds me there, she thought, I'll just apologize and leave.*

Her mind firmly made up just as the cabbie slowed down outside the building, she paid the fare and greeted the doorman as she swept by him and into the stately white lobby. With its sleek modern lines and impersonal mirrored aluminum finishes, it wasn't exactly the kind of building she'd imagined she'd move into one day, but it wasn't bad by any stretch of the imagination.

The elevator made a low digital ding as it arrived to carry her up to her future apartment. Another little thrill ran through her. This was the wildest thing she'd ever done. Sad, she knew, but that didn't make it any less true.

Her parents were really protective. So at twenty-two, Serena found herself still living at home and working in her family's company with her mother still pretty much controlling every aspect of her life. *Not much room for wild adventures there, she thought ruefully.*

The elevator carried her straight up to his floor and deposited her there with another soft chime. She headed to his apartment, punching in the security code her had given her not even a week ago so she could bring in his dry cleaning one afternoon.

His apartment wasn't huge, although it felt spacious due to clever architecture. It was a one-bedroom with an open concept dining room that blended seamlessly into a living room and kitchen, with a balcony off to one side. Rent was pricey in this part of town. Bryan had opted for this place

over a cozy three-bedroom place she had preferred, making the argument that it was closer to his office, with a great address, and therefore was a better investment.

The first thing she noticed as she stepped inside was that the apartment wasn't as dark and quiet as she had thought it would be. The lights in the living room were on, although they had been dimmed to their lowest setting, and soft music was playing through the built-in sound system. The soft music, however, was not the only sound she heard.

There was also moaning. Loud, female moaning. She rounded the corner from the small entryway into the open living room, and there, sprawled out naked on the couch Serena had picked out, was a raven-haired girl clearly in the throes of orgasm. On top of her – pounding into her like his life depended on it – was her dearest Bryan, eyes screwed shut.

What. The. Actual. Fuck. Her stomach bottomed out, her mouth dried up, and her head was suddenly swimming like she'd had too much wine. She must have made some involuntary noise, because at that moment Bryan opened his eyes wide and stared straight into hers.

“Serena?” he gasped her name almost uncertainly, as if he thought his eyes might be playing tricks on him, but she was out the door and back in the elevator before she could be sure.

She had no idea how she'd ended up here. Her mind had gone completely blank once she had punched the button for the ground floor in Bryan's building, but she now found herself pounding on the door to Josh's tiny apartment in an infinitely less impressive building.

Her childhood friend flung the door open and took one look at her face before he pulled her into his warm arms.

"Mom or Bryan?" he asked, her face nestled in his chest.

"Bryan," she managed, tears streaming out hard and fast now, wetting his dark green t-shirt.

She wasn't sure how long they stood there, her crying pathetically into his chest in the still open doorway, but eventually he pulled her into his apartment and kicked the door shut as he led her into the kitchen.

"What the fuck did that asshole do to you? If he hurt you, Serena..." he began, his dark eyes thunderous and his long brown hair falling into his face. "No, no, it's nothing like that. Not physically, anyway," she said. She collapsed onto one of the stools around his kitchen counter. "I went to surprise him after the charity dinner. He told me he had to

work late and wouldn't be able to make it. So I thought it would be a nice surprise if I cooked him a late dinner for when he got home. Only," she wiped at her eyes and took a few deep calming breaths before continuing, "he was already home. And he wasn't alone."

She had been friends with Josh since his family had moved in next door to hers when she was seven, and he was eight. She didn't need to say anything more before he strode back to her and pulled her into his chest again. He ran his hand up and down her back to comfort her while letting her cry it out. He whispered what she assumed were words of comfort into her ear, although she couldn't quite make them out over her loud sobs.

Serena was an ugly crier, and had been her entire life. As a result, she was loathe to cry in front of people, but Josh had known her for long enough that it didn't seem to matter anymore. Besides, it wasn't as if she could stop if she tried.

They stayed like that for a while, with Josh stroking her back until the tears subsided, and he only let her go once she was silent once more. He turned to flick on the kettle before muttering, "No, something stronger," to himself, then flicked the kettle off. He reached into the fridge to pull out a bottle of wine.

For most people, wine is probably not considered "something stronger," she thought to herself. But she wasn't a big drinker, so wine was plenty strong for her. Had it been Katie, her sister, or Mary, her best friend, a bottle of vodka would have been more appropriate. Maybe even more than one.

Josh opened the bottle and poured two huge glasses before returning what little was left in the bottle to the fridge. He kept quiet, waiting for her to talk, knowing that her thoughts would be all jumbled and that she would need time to process before telling him the rest of the story. So they just sat there, sipping their wine in the kind of comfortable silence that could only be born from years of friendship, until Serena began to talk.

“I’m such an idiot. Of course I was never going to be enough for him. Why the fuck did I make myself believe that a guy like that would be happy with a girl like me forever? You should have seen this other woman, Josh. I could never compare with someone like that.”

Still he kept quiet, waiting for her to continue. His only reaction was a slight lift of his eyebrows, as if she had said something surprising. Though she couldn't imagine what, so she kept venting.

“I mean, how long did I think it would be before he realized how just plain boring I am? I mean, I’ve known the guy three years. I’m actually surprised that it took him this long. I mean, fuck. We’ve been together for two years, and we haven’t even done it yet. Well, I haven’t done it. Seems he has been doing it.”

At this, Josh's mouth opened a bit, and he sucked in a quiet breath. *Shit*, she thought, *now I've gone and made him uncomfortable*. Sex was the one thing they didn't talk about. Whenever the topic came up, he always kept his mouth shut.

She had asked him about it once in all their years of friendship. Katie and Mary had been laughing over what

they called their “sexploits” one rare night they had all gone out clubbing together, and the two of them had headed for the dance floor after the conversation. Josh had just sat there shaking his head. Serena had no doubt he was definitely not celibate, as she had seen him with many girls over the years, though never the same one for more than a couple of weeks. Still, he had never breathed one word about sex to her.

His answer that night had been simple. “It's not something I want to get into with you,” he had said and stalked toward the bar, effectively ending that line of questioning.

Fast forward to however many years later, and here she was, just throwing it out there. She felt she was just excellent at fucking things up tonight.

“Serena honey,” Josh said finally, “I've known you for longer than I care to admit, and believe me when I say there is nothing plain or boring about you. If he couldn't even keep his dick in his pants until you were ready, then fuck him! You can do so much better than that arrogant prick. And no, I'm not just saying that. You should be with someone who worships the ground you walk on. Not someone who throws scraps of his time at you and only wants a trophy wife for his stuffy work functions,” he fumed.

He seemed genuinely pissed off. At this realization, she let some of her own anger go and let him channel it for her. He really was a great friend.

They stayed like that for hours, talking and sipping their wine, although she cried occasionally. Eventually she texted

her mom to say she was at Josh's, and that she would see them in the morning before she passed out in Josh's spare bedroom, still clad in the tiny designer dress her mother had laid out on her bed for the charity gala. It seemed like decades ago.

Six days. That's how long it had taken for her prettily planned life to go to hell in a handbasket. Or maybe up in flames was a better phrase. Well, whatever you wanted to call it, that's what had happened.

She replayed the events of the last six days in her sore head. It was her second wineover in the span of just one week. For someone who didn't really drink, this seemed a tad excessive.

She had returned home the morning after staying at Josh's, only to find her parents and Bryan pacing the lush lounge in her family's well-appointed hoher. Apparently he had filled them in on her surprise visit to his apartment the night before, and her subsequent exit. He had, of course, neglected to mention her reason for leaving so abruptly, and had made her out to be some kind of hormonal lunatic.

She had stared incredulously as her mother and Bryan bore down on her, questioning and somehow fuming at her behavior. Her mother had berated her for being so rude as to intrude on Bryan unannounced and then fleeing, and Bryan had shouted something about how she had dared to

spend the night alone at another man's apartment. He'd also made a cutting remark about how she'd had the nerve to just "waltz in" the following morning while wearing the same outfit from the night before with no shame whatsoever.

She had stared at them stupidly, and then done the only thing she could think of in that moment. She pulled Bryan's ring off of her finger, and threw it at his head. Her aim, however, hadn't been amazing. The ring had gone flying past Bryan's head, sailing through the air only to land in her father's coffee as he sat silently in a wingback chair behind Bryan, surveying the scene with hooded eyes.

That had shut them up. "Mother," she spat as she turned toward her first, "I went to my fiancé's apartment, the one where we were going to live together. The one I helped him pick out and furnish, I'll remind you. I went because I was concerned about how hard he's been working, and I wanted to cook him a meal like a proper little wifey. Only he hasn't been working hard, it seems he has been *fucking* hard." She heard a sharp intake of breath at this statement, although she didn't know who it had come from, since the rage had made her hungover head swirl. "I left because he was busy giving it to some other girl."

"Serena," her mother had breathed, "how dare you use such language?" She had ignored her and turned to Bryan instead.

"AND YOU, YOU FILTHY..." Some choice words entered her head, but for the sake of her mother's heart, she went with,

“Swine! I've been planning our wedding, and that's what you've been doing?” She'd finally let it all out.

The screaming match had culminated in her mother fainting - yes, she was that dramatic - and her father escorting Bryan out the door with a warning to never darken their doorstep again. She threw herself up the stairs and into her bedroom.

She had mostly stayed locked in her bedroom for the next couple of days, her father and Katie checking on her occasionally. She hadn't spoken to her mother since the big blowout, but from the snippets of conversation she'd heard whenever she had snuck out of the bedroom to the kitchen for more tea or ice cream, her mother was furious she had broken off her engagement to “such an eligible man” and lamenting that she “couldn't have acted like a lady and forgiven his one indiscretion” in what she described as his “moment of weakness.”

Wow mom, so much for female empowerment. I don't know why they even let us vote, she had thought sarcastically upon hearing her mother's ranting. Again, those were treacherous thoughts that would never be formed into words. Serena had chided herself for not speaking up.

Three days after the fight, her mother had thrown open her bedroom door, pulled open her drawn curtains so violently she thought they might tear - though that would hardly have been a loss, as in her last redecorating fit she had somehow decided princess pink was an appropriate color for a twenty-one-year-old - ignored Serena's puffy

eyes, and had perched graciously, but dramatically on the edge of her bed.

“Well Serena, since you seem to have some sort of plan for your future I don't know about since you threw the plan that I *did* know about out of the window with both hands, do you care to share what you intend on doing with yourself now?”

She had looked into her mother's narrowed grey eyes and was overcome with a sense of shame. Her mother had worked hard to find someone she considered suitable for her to date, and had been so supportive of the relationship – some nights she had stayed up late to talk with Serena about the problems she'd been having with Bryan, and had thrown herself into wedding planning these last six months.

“I'm so sorry, mom,” she muttered, tears she hadn't even realized she still had in her now threatening to spill. “I was just so hurt and shocked that I didn't consider the consequences of my actions until just now.” A familiar sense of overwhelming shame and guilt settled over Serena.

Her mother had been right, there had been a plan. One that her mother had carefully crafted and had been working on for Serena's entire life, and with one tantrum, Serena had thrown it all away. No wonder her mother was so angry at her. After all, men cheated, didn't they? She suddenly wondered if her mother had forgiven her father for any such indiscretions, but she quickly pushed that thought away. No, her father would never.

Nevertheless, she had heard countless stories from her friends about their fathers' adulterous affairs, and yet, most

were still married. Perhaps it came with the territory, but how would she know? Bryan had been her first serious boyfriend, and her mother never spoke of such things.

She thought back to how she had felt the moment she had laid eyes on the scene playing out on Bryan's couch, and felt sure she had made the right decision. Plan be damned, what he had done to her was unforgivable.

"I'm sorry, mom. I just knew I could never be with Bryan after what I saw. I know how hard you worked, but I'll make it up you. I'll enroll in school. I'll work really hard, and I'll make you proud of me again," she had vowed quietly.

It had all tumbled out so fast, and she had been so desperate to just say something that would make the situation better, that for the second time in three days, she had accidentally stumbled into a life-changing argument.

"School?" her mother had repeated coolly. "And what, exactly, would you be enrolling for, dear? You're four years out of high school, you've not applied for colleges anywhere, and you have no work experience other than helping out at your father's company."

Her mother was right yet again. The plan for her life had never included college. Katie, her sister, who had somehow managed to escape from the rigid confines of their mother's master plan for her to an extent, had insisted on obtaining a degree before settling down. She had dug her heels in until their father had finally convinced their mother to let her do it.

Katie was a year younger than she was, and almost finished with her degree. She had also somehow managed to move into an off-campus apartment at some point,

although there were rules, of course. Her sister was required to visit home at least once every few days, attend all family functions, and her mother still bought her clothes and groceries. Still, it was considerably more freedom than Serena had.

Serena, however, had started working for their father's company straight out of high school. She had started as an assistant to a low-level marketing manager at Woods Co, the family empire that had been started by her grandfather some sixty years ago. She was likely to stay in that position until she was married off and raising babies.

So she was safe, earned a reasonably comfortable salary, had become very good at her job and had settled into a routine, constantly under the watchful eyes of her mother.

Her job in the marketing department wasn't bad, as it meant that she got to work a little on ad campaigns for the company and occasionally even got to meet the lead designers. She was little more than a glorified secretary, really, but it wasn't all bad.

"I know, mom," she said, "but I've been thinking about it a bit, and I'd really like to go to design school."

She thought of all the sketches she'd drawn over the past few years, stowed safely under her bed and in her desk at the office, and was considering showing them to her mother, when she realized her mother was laughing at her. "Design school?" she scoffed. "That's not a plan, honey!"

And so it had become a fight. She spent the next two days trying in vain to convince her parents, but her dad had grown incredibly angry at the suggestion that she wanted

to leave the company to go to school instead - not that he had ever shown any interest in her becoming more involved in the company.

He had, in fact, always complained about not having any sons to take over from him when he was ready to retire, but failed to acknowledge his daughters could do the job just as well. He seemed content in letting their mother choose appropriate husbands for them so maybe one day he would have a son-in-law he could groom to take over his empire.

Her mom may have laughed at first, but the more she realized Serena was serious, the more unreasonable she became. At some point during a particularly heated argument, Serena had pulled the sketches out from under her bed and hurled them at her parents' faces. Her mistake.

Her mother had gone completely pale, as though the fact she had sketched them at all was a betrayal, and merely evidence that she had been planning all along to renege on the carefully crafted plan her mother had for her life. Her father had just stared at her before accusing her of stealing his company's time if she had done them on the clock, and then walked out in a huff.

It was then that it had hit her. Instead of supporting her after having found out what Bryan had done, instead of helping her figure out what to do from here, they had laughed at her, ridiculed her, blamed her for Bryan's indiscretion, screamed at her, and essentially accused her of stealing money from them.

If she was ever going to pursue her passion and live her life, she had to get away from here. Away from her parents

and their controlling ways and overprotectiveness.

It had taken everything in her, and she'd had to dig deep to find the one assertive bone in her body, but somehow she had done it. She left.

In that moment she had hurried upstairs, threw some clothes and toiletries into a travel bag, and on the way out to her car, had announced to her stunned parents that she was leaving, and that she would find a way to do it on her own.

It wasn't until her car had screeched out of their driveway and she had driven around some that she had calmed down enough to realize what she had just done. She couldn't go back home, and she doubted she could go back to her job at the company. Her sister lived with three roommates in her apartment, so crashing there was impossible, and Mary was out of town for a few days. She belatedly realized she should have thought this through more carefully, but there was no going back now.

She had no place to live, no job, not much money saved up, and no idea how she was going to get herself out of this predicament.

She turned her car around and headed in the direction of Josh's apartment. Perhaps he would take pity on her yet again, and let her stay in his spare bedroom until Mary came home. At the very least she hoped he would be there so she could vent.

As it turned out, he was home. One look at her tearstained face, hunched shoulders and travel bag, and he had pulled her into his apartment without question.