

## **JAY HUTCHISON AND TESSA REID SPLIT AFTER 7 YEARS**

The rumors are true: it's over for Grammy-winning rock sensation, Jay Hutchison, and his fiancée, Tessa Reid, Jay's publicist has confirmed to Brightside, after two months of speculation.

It looks like true love has prevailed, and it's a happy ending for Jay, as he reportedly called it quits with Tessa two months ago and returned to Australia to rekindle things with his high school sweetheart.



Tessa, a songwriter and Grammy-winner in her own right, was a source of many rumors and controversies over the course of their seven-year relationship. Allegedly, she stole Jay, twenty-four years her senior, from right under his ex-wife, Steph Hutchison's, nose.

Tessa, it seems, has fled from London to New York with her tail between her legs. Perhaps that'll teach her to think twice before stealing other people's husbands...

Representatives for Jay and Tessa declined to comment.



## CHAPTER ONE



# Tessa

She should've known better than to fall for a fucking rockstar.

Tessa turned away from the newspaper stand, her heart thundering in her chest, as the eye of the seller danced between the unflattering paparazzi shot on the cover of the tabloid and the woman herself.

She hurried across the road, shivering against the unseasonable summer chill and breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped into the bookstore, the jingle of the doorbell and smell of paper settling her nerves.

Most songwriters drew on their own experiences for their craft, but Tessa found inspiration elsewhere. Time after time, she stepped into the shoes of royals and assassins, lovers and liars. She tugged on threads of fantasy, heartbreak, *once upon a*

*times*, and happy endings, and wove them into four-minute elegies.

Though she wrote her own stories too, she swathed them in metaphors, never giving more than a taste of her personal life. She may have dated one of the world's biggest musicians, but that didn't mean she owed anyone her love, her joy, her pain. And she certainly didn't owe them her privacy. *Not that she'd been afforded much of that*, she thought, scowling through the window at the newspaper stand across the street.

Her place in the public eye had been cemented at sixteen, when her song was chosen to represent the United Kingdom in an international song contest. Her place on the British tabloids hit list had been cemented when she'd had the audacity to fall in love with Jay Hutchison. And now, her place was New York, trying desperately to scrape the pieces of herself together after seven years had come to a close with one, *"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."*

She shook herself and turned to the romance section. Though she had no interest in an actual romance these days, she'd been devouring the summer romances she'd packed. She needed to remind herself that happy endings existed, even if only in books.

She picked up a floppy paperback and flicked through it, bringing it to her nose and breathing in the scent of ink and fresh paper. With a sigh, she held the book to her chest. She really had no busi-

ness buying more books, but most of her collection was still packaged in cardboard boxes en route to New York.

A soft chuckle sounded from behind her and she looked up, eyes wide. A South Asian man with dark hair pulled back in a bun and tattoos coiling around one side of his face, neck, and arms stood there, twinkling eyes on her and her books.

He reached for the bookshelf beside them and grabbed a forest green hardback. He held it out to her. “Try that one. I swear deckled edges smell better.” Blood rushed to Tessa’s cheeks, but she took it from his outstretched hand and brought it to her nose.

He was right. The deckled edges made the book smell more like an old book, the smell so reminiscent of the antique bookstore that she and Jay used to frequent that homesickness flooded her.

“It does smell better,” she admitted, turning the book over to scan the synopsis before handing it back. *Fantasy, heists, romance...* “Would it be unreasonable for me to grab a copy just because it smells good?”

The man laughed, the sound warm and rich like hot cocoa, and shook his head. Tessa tried not to notice how his hair danced around his face when he laughed. “Not weird. If it helps, the story is great too.”

“You don’t need to convince me,” Tessa said,

picking up the sequel for good measure. “I have a book-buying problem.”

He leaned against the shelf and Tessa’s eyes flashed to the small sliver of skin revealed by his t-shirt riding up. More ink lay below. She dragged her eyes back up to his face, hoping he hadn’t noticed her gaze. “It’s only a problem when they take up so much space that you can’t navigate your apartment,” he said, running his eyes over the stack and smiling. “Until then, it’s an investment.”

“You’re my kind of enabler. Thanks.” Tessa answered with a laugh, and the man grinned at her. Her stomach did somersaults, but the butterflies were nothing compared to the prickles of guilt that pierced her chest for even looking at him. *It’s been two months*, she reminded herself. *And you’re just looking.*

“Anytime.” He hesitated, as if he wanted to say more. “See you around,” he settled on, before giving her a soft smile and a wave and heading out of the stacks.

By the time Tessa made it to the counter twenty minutes later and gave up her pretense of not looking for him, he was gone. She shouldered her now ridiculously heavy tote bag full of books and cursed as she stepped out into the torrential downpour. Thirteen years in England had desensitized her to rain, but her books... Her grumbling stomach and the ever-dimming light decided for her. She hugged the tote bag close to her chest and darted out down

the street, ducking into the first restaurant she came across.

She was a little bedraggled for the swanky hotel restaurant, but the hostess smiled widely. “Welcome. Do you have a reservation?”

“I don’t, sorry. Do you have any availability?”

“Just for one?” Tessa nodded, and the hostess hummed, scanning the busy restaurant. “We have plenty of space at the bar if that works.”

“That’s great. Thanks.”

Tessa followed the hostess and settled at the bar, quickly scanning the menu and ordering, trying to ignore the bartender’s double-take as he took her in. She pulled the deckle-edged hardback from her tote bag and cracked it open, hiding behind it.

She was ten chapters in, her dinner long since finished, and already lost in the fantasy world, when a familiar deep voice said, “What’s the verdict?”

The smile, when she turned, was familiar too, as the man from the bookstore stood behind her. The butterflies returned in full, unwelcome force. “So far, so good.”

“You mind?” he asked, gesturing to the barstool beside her. Tessa shook her head against her better judgment, and he took a seat. “I’m River.”

“Tessa.” She reached out to shake his hand and ignored the fluttering in her belly. His hand was smooth and warm in hers.

“It looks like we have pretty similar taste,” he said with a nod to the tote bag. He ran a hand

through his hair, the fluorescents catching the side of his face and illuminating the tattoos scrawled across his golden brown skin. The black ink curved along his temples in a swirly pattern, but as the light caught it, Tessa realized it was made of hundreds of tiny words.

Before she could answer, the bartender greeted River by name, and they both ordered drinks and dessert. “Do you come here a lot?” she asked when he turned back to her.

“I’m staying here for a couple of weeks while they do renovations in my building. I can put up with a lot, but a lack of running water is my limit.”

“How do you stay so close to a bookstore and not buy books every day?”

A wry smile flashed on his lips. “I’ve bought three today alone. My roommate is out of town and I’m expecting a scolding when he gets back.”

“He doesn’t like books?”

“He loves them, but he loves space more and you know New York apartments.”

Tessa hadn’t seen her apartment in person yet, but the shaky video her realtor had sent had been just clear enough for her to fall in love with the gorgeous West Village apartment. She wasn’t due to get the keys for another week, and she couldn’t wait to get in and settled. This was New York, so she knew it was smaller than the London penthouse she’d spent the past six years living in, but she

didn't mind small—less space to be alone. Less space to think about what she'd left behind.

She drained her almost-finished whiskey and ginger beer and let the bitters wash away thoughts of Jay.

“So, what do you do?” she asked River, as the bartender set down more drinks and dessert. She'd been unable to decide between Black Forest fudge cake and tiramisu so River, who, by his own confession, could have eaten the entire dessert menu if allowed, had suggested they ordered both, split them, and added a crème brûlée for good measure.

“I'm a writer,” he said, running a finger around the rim of his glass.

Her interest piqued, Tessa sat forward. “What kind of writer?”

“A romance writer,” he said, his voice catching a little and his ears turning pink. “I, uh, I self publish under a pen name.”

Tessa got the distinct feeling that River had no desire to share his pen name, and could she blame him? She had no intention of telling him who she was. She could guess why he seemed almost embarrassed to tell her. So much of the world still frowned upon romance as a genre, treating it with less validity than other genres. “That's so badass. I love romance. Clearly.” She gestured to her tote bag with a smile. “Did you ever want to write under your own name?”

River nodded, and the smile that lifted his lips



was sad. “Someday maybe. I’ve had a couple of offers from publishers wanting to pick up my books, but that wouldn’t be anonymous and there’s safety in pen names, you know? Especially in romance. There’s so much stigma.”

Tessa’s brows knit together. “That’s shit. I wish I could say I can’t believe that’s still the case, but...”

River chuckled. “Yeah, so much of publishing still lives in the Stone Age. What do you do?”

Tessa swallowed, tapping her nails against her glass. River didn’t seem to recognize her, and it was nice to have a conversation with someone who wasn’t aware of her reputation. “I’m a songwriter. The music industry is much the same.”

He whistled. “I can imagine. Would I know any of your work?”

Tessa hesitated before rhyming off a few of her songs that had topped the charts, omitting Jay’s music, and River’s eyebrows climbed higher and higher.

“Holy shit, that’s... Fuck, that’s impressive,” he said when he picked his jaw up from the table. “Wow.”

“Thanks,” she said with a soft smile.

“Two writers drinking whiskey in a bar might be the most NYC thing ever, huh?” River said with a laugh and Tessa wanted to write about the sound, wanted to put the twinkle in his dark eyes to paper. They were several drinks in and the alcohol in her

veins made him look a little hazy, like a grainy old photograph.

“What a disgusting cliché we are,” she agreed, and she tried to ignore the guilt that fluttered in her stomach.

River nudged her knee with his, a mischievous look on his face. “I don’t mind.”

Tessa had been out of the dating pool for a while, but she was pretty sure he was flirting. Hell, she’d never really entered the dating pool. She hadn’t been looking for anyone, least of all a man twenty-four years her senior, when she met Jay and she hadn’t had to try with him. It had just happened. Sure, she’d had a casual thing here or there, but he was the first person she’d invested any time in. And for all the romance novels she’d torn through in her life, Tessa didn’t have any idea how to flirt with the man before her.

*Did she even want to flirt with him?* She shouldn’t. She was nowhere near ready for anything new. Her heart was still reeling, still raw. But she couldn’t deny that River intrigued her. So maybe she could lean into it for one day, one night. She didn’t have to marry him, for Christ’s sake; she could just enjoy his company for now and walk away with no attachment.

She’d done the obligatory casual rebound hookup, and when it hadn’t made her feel good, she’d tried again. A man from a dating app, the cute girl from her local coffee shop in London, since she

would never see her again anyway, even a hurried tryst in the bathroom at Heathrow, and she had felt numb to them all. She missed Jay, even if she didn't want to, but she *really* missed good sex.

But River... She didn't know if it was the soft cadence of his voice that sounded like music, the whiskey or the whorls of black ink, but, for the first time in a long time, flames licked at her. She caught her bottom lip in her teeth and River's eyes snapped to them. He swallowed.

Tessa cleared her throat. "God, I couldn't possibly eat another bite." She pushed the plate of fudge cake away to give her something, anything, to do with her hands.

"Come on, you can manage one more," River said, the twinkle of a challenge in his eyes. He snagged the fork, and the remaining bite, from her plate and held it up to her mouth. "You know you want to," he teased and *fuck*, she was too stubborn to turn down the challenge.

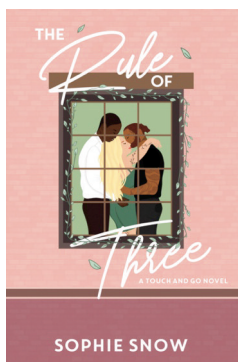
She leaned forward and closed her lips around the tines, her eyes fluttering closed as the tart cherry jam flooded her tongue. She hummed as she pulled away, smiling. When she opened her eyes, the fork was still suspended and River's mouth had parted.

Tessa stilled, her eyes glued to his lips, and licked hers. "Delicious," she said, and her voice sounded not quite her own. And in the theme of not being quite herself, she leaned closer to him, testing him.

River dropped the fork, the sound barely audible over the rushing of blood in Tessa's ears. He took a shaky breath. "Do you want to—"

"Yes," she replied, too quickly to think it through.

*Her reputation has never been worse.  
Their love fell apart and left them with a missing  
piece.  
Can three broken hearts hold on to each other  
long enough to fight for their happy ending?*



**I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek of *The Rule of Three*. Available now via Kindle Unlimited, eBook, and paperback!**

**Find out more at [www.sophiesnowbooks.com](http://www.sophiesnowbooks.com)**