

# PRAISE FOR

## *RIPPED FROM OBSCURITY*

### *RT Book Reviews Top Pick*

4.5 stars: “Ashland writes a compelling tale featuring a sexy cowboy who steals a beautiful, spunky author’s heart. This page-turner with swoon-worthy moments, twists, and suspense will keep readers enthralled to the end.”

—*RT Book Reviews Top Pick*

5 stars: “Ashland nailed the push/pull of a great romance while keeping the suspense element tight. Bought it and stayed up way too late reading to the end. Selena isn’t the only one mesmerized by Tucker’s southern charm!”

—*Amazon review – Mar*

5 stars: “I loved this book! The wonderful love story of Selena and Tucker was woven with personal loss and a conspiracy that kept me guessing until the very end. So glad to have found the second installment in the U-District series.”

—*Goodreads review – Sailorswife*

5 stars: “A terrific blend of action, suspense, mystery, and romance. Loved the surprising elements that were revealed as the plotline developed. The intriguing portrayal of Tucker and Selena made them truly memorable and compelling characters. A most entertaining read!”

—*Amazon review – CJR*

5 stars: “Had trouble putting the book down; it was thoroughly enthralling. Characters were very well written and developed. Story very engaging. Waiting impatiently for *Seeking Sanctuary!*”

—*Amazon review – tmb*

# PRAISE FOR

## *SECRETS AT SYNERGY*

5 stars: “An amazingly entertaining book that kept me reading until 4 a.m. in the morning to finish... Jodi Ashland does a stunning job on this novel! She kept me intrigued from page one to the end.... The chemistry between Bryce and Jade

was perfect! It wasn't too sudden nor was it dragged out... This book had my heart racing from beginning to end and I absolutely love it!... This is a wonderful mystery and romance story that is a definite must read!"

—*Goodreads review – Sarah J. Y. C*

5 stars: "Loved the pace: got me interested, set the hook and reeled me in. Good combo of action/suspense/romance. Well written and loved the Seattle references. Hunk meter is high—does Bryce have a brother?"

—*Amazon review – M. McDonough*

4 stars: "First off, I don't normally read suspense, but this was so good I couldn't put it down. Loved the pace: got me interested from the word go. [The] scene was set, then hook line and sinker, I was a goner. Good combo to make in my words perfection: action/suspense/romance and red-hot electricity."

—*Goodreads review – Stacey*

5 stars: "Love this book... couldn't put it down. This is my first book from this author... love the characters so much... [It's] a must-buy.... You won't regret [it]."

—*Goodreads review – Lisa G*

5 stars: "Planned on reading a few pages, but sat up all night and finished it!!!"

—*Amazon review – tmb*

4 stars: "I love Bryce! Give me a brooding hero any day with danger thrown in. Great chemistry and tension between Jade and Bryce make this an absorbing read during a hot summer."

—*Amazon review – Happily Ever After Girl*

5 stars: "The sexual tension between [Jade] and her coworker Bryce made me continue reading for hours. Seriously, I kept reading until I fell asleep with the book beside me.... The conflict and romance kept me constantly intrigued, and I would recommend this to a friend in a heartbeat."

—*Amazon review – Skisocks*

# ALSO BY JODI ASHLAND

## U-District Series

[\*Secrets at Synergy\*](#)

[\*Ripped from Obscurity\*](#)

*Seeking Sanctuary* (coming soon)

## Harper Security Series

*Seeing Double* (coming soon)

# **RIPPED FROM OBSCURITY**

**U-DISTRICT  
BOOK 2**



Duvall  
Press

**JODI ASHLAND**

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## CHAPTER 1

**HER BOOK WAS CONTROVERSIAL** and a huge hit—if Selena Hawkins believed her publicist. And boy did she want to believe Janet after seeing her book of poems in print for the first time. She'd even danced around the stockroom with a copy in her hand.

It was a major bummer not having anyone to share this moment with. Her best friend, Rebecca, wasn't due to arrive at the bookstore for another hour, and Selena's once-inseparable family were now dispersed across the country.

Selena sighed. *Stop it with the pity party already.* She'd just have to mail them copies. She returned her focus to the towering display at the front of her bookstore—her own work occupying the prime window space for a change. As the author, she was able to buy the first one hundred print copies to sell in her very own bookstore. Talk about exclusivity.

She couldn't believe her luck. Since releasing her self-published e-book four weeks ago, it had gone viral, hitting the *New York Times* and Kindle bestseller lists. Selena pinched her arm; nope, not a dream. Tonight red wine and chocolate were in order, lots and lots of chocolate.

Selena ran out front and stood on the red brick pavers lining Ghirardelli Square. The fog had lifted, no doubt providing today's tourists with a glorious view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Inhaling the sea-laden air blowing in from San Francisco Bay, she scrutinized her book display through the window. Just about perfect. The top two tiers of her book pyramid could be moved about one inch to the right. Then it would look great from every angle.

"Love Somebody" by Maroon 5 blared on her cell. It was Rebecca's idea of a not-so-subtle hint. "Hi Janet."

"I'm in publicist heaven. They want to interview you on *Red Carpet*."

Selena sucked in an involuntary breath. "No way!"

"You've got to do this one."

Anxiety snaked up Selena's spine. She grabbed the back of a bench for support. *Please, please, please, don't have a panic attack.* She breathed in and out, concentrating on each inhale and exhale, the only way she'd found to stop an episode before it went full-blown. She hadn't had an incident like this for at least six months. That was the longest stretch since her sister's death. So much for hoping the attacks were gone forever.

"Selena, are you okay?" Janet asked. "You're not having an attack, are you?"

"Need a sec," Selena wheezed out. *Focus. Breathe.*

Slowly, her heart rate and the pain in her chest subsided.

An interview? On TV? Selena shook her head. The whole point of having a pen name was for obscurity—not to go public, and definitely not to go on national television. She didn't even have a blog or a single social media account. What had happened to her sister would *never* happen to her. While it was beyond exciting that

her book was an unexplained success, having the whole world know who she was? Absolutely no way.

“I know what being on *Red Carpet* could do for me, Janet, but... I just can't.”

“I've already turned down other opportunities, Selena. You can't say no to *Red Carpet*. This is a once in a lifetime—”

“No. I can't do it.” She was beginning to regret Janet's assistance, walking buddy or not. Selena's palms began to sweat. “Oh, I don't feel so good. I need to sit down.”

“Take a deep breath. Look, I'll tell them we'll get back to them to give you time to think about it. You will think about it?”

“Yes.” She bit her lip. But if the *thought* of doing it was provoking an attack, how would she ever get through an actual interview?

“My other line is ringing. I'll call you later.” Janet could be overpowering sometimes, but she'd definitely given Selena the kick in the butt needed to make her book successful.

“Thanks, Janet. I'm grateful for everything you've done.”

“Please do think about it. This could be huge.”

And that was exactly the problem.

Selena had already taken a big risk, spending precious cash to publish her deepest feelings. Inheriting the bookstore had seemed a blessing until she'd realized how financially messed up it was. Even an art-school dropout like Selena could do the math.

Somehow that risk had paid off. She actually had a chance to save the store. Who would have guessed her book would ever sell more than a few copies?

And now *Red Carpet* wanted an interview.

Another, scarier risk. One she'd sworn she'd never take.

Success apparently came with a price.

A price she wasn't willing to pay.



**“I DON'T WANT TO BE DOING THIS.”** Tucker Calhoun stared at the gray Stetson on the limo seat next to him and ran a hand through his hair.

“You're runnin' out of time. The money is due in three weeks.”

Tucker bristled at his lawyer's words. He shouldn't have picked up the call. Randall didn't need to remind him his time was almost up. He'd been late with the money once before, and it had cost him another two million. If he was late again, what would happen to—

“Tucker, you still there?”

“Yeah, I'm here.”

“Look, we don't have a choice. You were number one on the country charts 'til that poem was released. The press has taken what was said in that book too far. We were bankin' on sales from your recent release to cover the two million.”

Tucker turned away from the sunrise. It only made his head throb worse. “I'm in San Francisco doing what you've asked. Doesn't mean I have to like it. What if the author doesn't agree to our terms?”

“Be your charmin' self, and little Miss Hawkins will be eatin' out of your hands, doin' exactly what you ask of her.”

“I’m not in a charming mood right now.”

Randall sighed. “If she doesn’t agree, bring her to me. I’m sure I can change her mind.”

“You want me to bring her to Los Angeles? She’ll never agree to that.”

“Make her agree. What choice do you have?” Randall paused. “Who is more important to you: family, or some author you’ve never met who used you to promote her book and ruin your reputation?”

Tucker’s jaw clenched. “You know the answer.”

“Then see to it.”

Tucker hung up and shoved his cell phone in his jeans pocket.

His world had been turned upside down, and for what? Money? None of this made any sense. He had nothing but questions: Why had she left him, why had she never tried to contact him until now? She must be in a heap of trouble. That was the only explanation he could come up with as to why she needed the money so fast.

If only she’d speak to him. He could get to the bottom of it. Even try to help her.

Instead, he’d been driven halfway up the coast to confront some author who’d used him to further her own career. His life story. Yet another woman who’d looked at him and seen dollar signs. At least this one had never pretended to care.



**CALMING DOWN FROM THE PANIC ATTACK** she’d almost had, Selena wiped her palms on the front of her pants and walked back into Ghirardelli Bookstore. She set her phone on the counter and returned her attention to the book display. The bold letters of the title, *FOG*, stood out against the book cover’s black matte background. The gray cowboy hat on the cover appeared suspended in space. She didn’t particularly like the Stetson, but Janet had twisted her arm, since the cowboy hat made an appearance in the last poem of the book. It didn’t make sense to Selena, but who was she to argue with a well-regarded publicist who’d gotten her this far?

Selena reached out to shift the book on top a little to the right.

A man reached past her and plucked the book from her hand.

*How rude.*

She dropped to the balls of her feet. “I’m sorry, but the store isn’t open yet.”

The man turned on his heel and stepped outside.

“Sir, I’m sorry, sir, but you have to pay for that.” She practically had to run after him to keep up with his long strides.

Stopping in front of the store, he opened the book to the last poem and started reading aloud, his back still toward her. His low, southern drawl was as familiar to her as it was to the entire world.

Selena sucked in a breath and crossed her hands over her heart. His very presence was a threat, yet her feet became rooted to the pavers. Even her breathing seemed to stop at his words, the ones she’d penned to paper.

*His eyes are gray, the color of sadness, misery, and sorrow  
His matching hat, button-down shirt, and cowboy boots don’t mask it  
Gray could be silver, the color of shiny sports cars and coin*

RIPPED FROM OBSCURITY

*Meant to exude wealth, power, and fame  
But all I see is the subdued shade of gray and the subdued man*

*Even the absence of color—black—or all colors—white—go with everything  
But gray, what does gray go with except other shades of gray  
It's the color of fog and clouds bloated with rain  
Causing air, sidewalks, and streets to look the same  
Gray drives all signs of life into their cocoons  
It's a lonely color, reflecting the lonely, desperate man*

*Others don't see past the outer beauty of him  
The strong jaw and shoulders imply his character is the same  
His height and long legs mean he is afraid of nothing  
Why can't they see it in his eyes, the ones that betray him  
He's disheartened and he's lost in the fog*

*Come back to me, lyrics sung to the woman who is gone  
His voice exposing his anguish, his eyes showing what it cost  
Did he hurt this woman as much as she hurt him?  
Or did she push him away, as if on a whim?  
Why can't they leave this man alone?  
His words aren't meant for anyone... but the one he has lost*

Steel-gray eyes turned on her as he snapped the book shut, his voice cracking with the final words of the poem. Tucker Calhoun walked toward Selena, his tan cowboy boots thudding on the pavers. His blue jeans and brown leather jacket were well worn and creased in all the right places. He shoved one hand in his pocket, the other gripping the book so tightly his knuckles turned white. With every step, he seemed to get taller, beyond his six feet, or maybe she was cowering.

A final retreat on her part had the store's door handle jabbing into her back.

"Looks like you have one of two options. Lock yourself inside with the books or face me."

*Never run from a threat, or you'll become a target.* How many times had Neal said those words? "My brother's a cop, and he taught me to never run." She stepped forward, drew in a deep breath, and planted her hands firmly on her hips to make her five foot six inches look impressive. Tucker no longer towered over her, and that's when she saw it. His eyes contradicted his anger.

He was suffering. He was in pain.

Tucker shook the book at her. "You need to take this back."

"How?"

"Write a retraction; say the last poem wasn't about me."

"I never said it was about you."

"That's a load of bull. You used the title of my song 'Come Back to Me' and my signature gray eyes and gray hat. You, and the whole damn world knows this is about me." He shoved the book into her chest.

The force smacked her into the door handle again. She clutched the book in her

hand. "What do you mean the whole world knows?"

"It's all over the Internet. Don't you go trying to play me."

Blood drained from her head. The very thing that had killed her sister, she had now done to this complete stranger. "No, I—"

"My misfortune is your *fortune*, right?" He slid his other hand into his pocket.

"That's not why—"

"Sure it is. You're not the first woman to take advantage of me, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that." It wasn't the word she minded; it was his tone.

He gestured to a limo idling at the curb. "You best be fixing to come with me."

Her eyes grew wide. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I don't even know you."

"Sure you do, sweetheart."

How could she respond to that? She'd never met Tucker Calhoun face-to-face before today, yet he said she knew him. That must mean what she'd written in the poem was true.

He rubbed his forehead. "Look, I'd hoped we could come to an agreement. This puts you in deep water. Your publicist's posts imply that the rumors about me are true, based on this poem. We worked hard to put those rumors to bed."

"Posts? Rumors? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right. If you're not going to retract it, you need to speak with my lawyer. Unless of course, you want your lawyer to speak to my lawyer."

"Lawyer? I don't have a lawyer." Her voice faltered. She'd just said too much. How stupid could she be?

"We need to go."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

His step forward and the raise of his eyebrows suggested loud and clear that Tucker Calhoun wasn't used to having anyone say *no* to him. In a swift move, he reached behind her, locked the inside door, and pulled it shut. It was a childish maneuver, one an adolescent might use when he didn't get his way, but he'd managed to lock her out of her own bookstore.

He leaned down and put his lips to her ear. "A couple hours of your time is all I'm asking for. It's the least you can do for me." His voice had softened to butter and his warm breath on her skin sent a pleasant shiver down her spine.

It was getting hard to breathe with him so close. What was he saying? Oh right... she'd done the unthinkable. Never in a million written words did she think anyone would figure out that the poem had anything to do with Tucker Calhoun. And Janet, how could she post things like that on the Internet, after Katie had taken her life because of what had been posted for the world to see? Janet knew darn well the book of poems was centered around her sister's death. Had she used the poem about Tucker on purpose? Is that how she'd gotten the book to go viral, by posting rumors, even lies?

Tucker had good reason to be upset.

He hadn't stepped away from her. Seemed perfectly happy leaving barely an inch between his body and hers. "The woman who wrote that poem isn't afraid of me." His voice and expression oozed southern charm. He put a finger under her chin so she'd look into his eyes. "You aren't afraid of me, now are you, Selena?"

Her pulse jumped. "Of course not," came out barely above a whisper.

His eyes roamed down to her mouth.

*Oh my.*

She couldn't say how long it took before he stepped away and walked back to the limo. A minute... maybe ten. The heat around her dissipated the farther away he got, until Tucker ducked into the limo.

An imposing guy, likely a bodyguard, held the door open... waiting. *For her.*

Her heart raced. Tucker had issued her a challenge, this man whom the entire world knew, but who didn't know her.

She had to make this right.

Her sister had never given her the chance to help, but maybe she could undo the damage Janet had done and somehow make this better for Tucker.

It was one thing to write the poem for herself. Something about hearing Tucker's anguish when she'd been feeling the same way had helped her. Like she wasn't the only one in the entire world lost without someone she loved. Writing her poems had been cathartic. Publishing them was a way to finally work through Katie's death. But releasing the poem about Tucker had been just plain stupid.

The bodyguard continued to stare at her through his sunglasses, one hand on the open door, shifting his weight from side to side.

Selena bit her bottom lip. Should she go with Tucker? She hadn't planned on putting the poem about him in her book to begin with, but Janet had pushed hard and convinced her to do so. Seemed Janet had held back an ulterior motive. The cowboy hat on the front cover made a whole lot more sense now.

The reality was that she was drawn to the man with the gorgeous gray eyes. Her life had been turned upside down, had all but come to a stop, until she'd written down her feelings. Her new book had brought meaning to her life again, but Tucker Calhoun brought something else to it entirely. When he'd stood before her reading in that soft, velvety voice, her body had thrummed with excitement and something oh so female. Despite his harsh words, she was reading something else from him.

This man was hurting. And so was she.

What could be the harm in spending an afternoon with a brooding country star, even if it was to see his lawyer? She turned to go into the bookstore. Right. He'd locked her out. No way to get her purse. Not that she needed one with a limo and driver handy.

Her brother would call her impulsive. Okay, she was a lot impulsive, she'd concede to that. When her sister had said she couldn't go to art school in San Francisco, that's exactly what she'd done. When Mrs. O'Brian had said business classes might help Selena out with the bookstore, she'd signed up right away. And when her brother had told her she was making a big mistake moving in with Paul... yeah, well, he'd been disturbingly right about that one. She clearly didn't always make the right choices. Like publishing a poem about a famous country star.

Just a few hours of her time was all Tucker had asked for. That's what she was telling herself as she walked toward the limo. But how was she going to help him? What did Tucker's attorney want? The sensible thing to do was to find out. Right?



**“MISSING? WHAT DO YOU MEAN** my sister is missing?” Detective Neal

Hawkins of the Seattle Police Department dropped his feet from the top of his cubicle's desk and leaned forward in his chair.

"I thought it was weird when the bookstore was locked during business hours," said Selena's best friend and employee, Rebecca. "She'd never do that. So I thought maybe she was sick, but then I went back to the stockroom, and her purse was there and she was nowhere in sight."

"Slow down, Rebecca. Have you tried calling her?"

"I can't call her cell. It's on the counter, and her keys and wallet are in her purse."

Neal's posture went rigid. "You're sure it's hers?"

"Definitely, and she'd never leave without her cell."

He pulled his mobile out of his back pocket and checked for messages. *Nada*. "Did you try her at home?"

"I did, but she didn't answer. And I checked next door. The owner said he saw her come in this morning."

"Did he see her leave?"

"No, that's just it. And worse, her book came in today. The boxes are in the back and opened. She'd already built a front-window display."

"That doesn't make any sense. You're sure the door was locked?"

"I had to use my key to get in."

Neal swiped a hand down his face. *Okay, this can't be as bad as it seems*. Selena was excited about her book, probably walked across the street to show someone, and accidentally locked herself out. This wouldn't be the first time Selena had done something without thinking it through. "When did you get in?"

"At eight."

Neal glanced at the wall clock. It was ten-fifteen. Selena had been gone for over two hours without keys, money, or a cell phone. "Could she be at one of the stores nearby? Maybe she wanted to show her book around?"

"I've checked."

Neal wrestled between being relieved that Rebecca was thorough and upset because the benign possibilities of where Selena could be were dwindling fast. "Have you checked her place?"

"Not yet. I was going to swing by at lunch."

It was hell being eight hundred miles away at a time like this. "Close the store now and go see if she's home or at one of the neighbors' houses."

"Okay. I'll call you when I get there."

Neal slammed the phone down after Rebecca hung up.

"Something up, Hawk?" Jim Riley, his partner, glanced up from his computer screen.

"Selena's missing."

"How long?"

"Two hours."

Riley leaned back in his chair. "No cause for alarm."

"Her purse was locked inside the store. She's got no money. No phone."

"She's probably with a friend."

"Probably." But Selena hadn't been in San Francisco long enough to make many friends. This was the first time Neal could relate to the numerous phone calls the

office received for missing persons; parents or spouses thinking their loved ones were dead on the side of the road, abducted, or even murdered. Thankfully the majority of them were from overzealous worriers. Dispatch would sometimes get real doozies and share them at the water cooler to entertain anyone who would listen.

This time, he wasn't entertained.

His sister was out there somewhere.

*Where would she go?*

Selena was excited about her book and would want to show it off. She always arrived at the store an hour before it opened. There wouldn't be any customers before business hours.

He pictured the bookstore and the surrounding area. She'd walk outside, go to a nearby business that was already open. She wouldn't want to leave the store unattended. So she'd pull the door closed, maybe lock it, and then realize she'd left her keys behind.

He turned to his computer and typed the address to Selena's bookstore into Google Maps. He hovered over the nearby businesses. One call after another was a bust. No one had seen Selena this morning. Two people mentioned seeing a limousine nearby, but didn't know if it had anything to do with Selena.

Neal rubbed his left shoulder, the gunshot wound a bitter reminder of why he was sitting here filling out paperwork instead of working cases. He pulled out his keys and unlocked his desk drawer. The bottle of Vicodin sat there, still full. He reached for the ibuprofen and swallowed two with his cold coffee.

The clock read ten thirty-three.

Only eighteen minutes had passed since Rebecca's call.

Time was his worst enemy.

Where the hell was Selena?

## CHAPTER 2

“**TELL ME RIGHT NOW** where we’re headed, or I’m going to flag down a passing car for help.” After two hours of being ignored in the limo, Selena began to worry. She’d assumed the lawyer was close to San Francisco. Clearly, she’d been wrong.

Tucker didn’t seem the least bit concerned by her threat. “We’re heading to Los Angeles.”

“L.A.? That’s over six hours from San Francisco.”

“That’s where my lawyer is.”

“You can’t take me all the way to Los Angeles.” Her voice rose an octave. “You said it would be a few hours, not the entire day. This is kidnapping. Take me back now.”

“Kidnapping?” Tucker’s eyes hardened and he rubbed the back of his neck. “This doesn’t even come close. You got into this limo of your own accord. We’re going to Los Angeles to clear this up, once and for all.” His words were forceful, final.

She pressed the button to roll down the window. Locked. And the damned glass was tinted. “Why aren’t we flying?”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Right.”

“I’m dead serious.” His eyes were stern, unblinking.

What was going on with Tucker? How was an up-and-coming country star hurting this much for money? Is that why his lawyer wanted to talk to her? “Fine.” Selena threw out her hand. “Give me your phone then.”

“For what?”

“So I can tell Rebecca that I won’t be back to the store today.”

“Who’s she?”

“She’s my friend, and she works at the store with me. She’s going to be worried.”

He unlocked his phone and handed it to her. Tucker was hurting, of that she was sure. And he was angry with her for writing the poem about him. Of that, she

was doubly sure. For a brief moment, they just stared at each other. Eventually, he broke the silence. “You haven’t made your call.”

“Oh, right.” She held up the phone. Only problem was, there were very few numbers she had memorized, and Rebecca’s new number wasn’t one of them. *Think*. Her store, that number she knew. She dialed. No one picked up. *Where is Rebecca?* She waited for the beep to leave a message, but the phone just rang and rang. *Stupid answering machine*. Another broken piece of equipment she needed to replace. She tried the number again. Finally, the machine picked up.

“Hey, it’s me. I’m on my way to Los Angeles with—”

Tucker shook his head.

“Um, with a . . . friend. It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later. Can you watch the store while I’m gone? Gotta go, thanks, bye.”

She handed Tucker his phone. “I really didn’t think anyone would read my book, let alone know that poem was about you. Are you sure this is as bad as you think?”

His head snapped up. “It’s in the papers, on TV, all over the Internet. Every commentator and gossip columnist is speculating about the woman I’ve lost. They’ve dug up my divorce, think that I—well, you know the rumors.”

“No, I don’t.” She glanced down at her hands. She couldn’t tell him about Katie. “I don’t get on the Internet. I had to have my friend upload my book for me.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t know the success of your book was because of the poem you wrote about me?”

Selena shook her head. “Not until this morning.”

“Well, now you do.”

*Is that what people care about? Gossiping over who the poem is about?* All of her heartache and loss went into that book, and the only thing readers cared about was a country star’s ex. Seriously? Even empty, her stomach was queasy. “I never should have published that book.”

“You mean the poem about me.”

“No, I mean the whole book. I should have known people would be heartless. They say whatever they want on the Internet. They don’t worry about hurting your feelings the way they would in person.” *Like the way they’d hurt Katie*.

The lines around Tucker’s eyes softened. “Words have power.”

*Yeah, too much*. “If I’d known Janet was going to do something like this, I wouldn’t have signed the contract.”

“Contract?” Tucker’s eyebrows drew together. “What kind of contract?”

“She gets a percentage of my royalties. I couldn’t afford to pay her otherwise.”

“So your publicist has an incentive to sell your book any way necessary?”

She sighed, wishing Janet hadn’t come up with the contract idea when Selena had originally declined her persistent offers to help. Publicity for herself was exactly the opposite of what she wanted. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” She’d wanted Janet to get some compensation for her efforts, but how could she have known the lengths to which Janet would go to sell the book?

“That puts you in a predicament.”

“Yes, it does.” Selena looked out the window and let the cars speeding in the other direction turn to a blur. Her stomach started to grumble. “Can I have a soda?”

“Sure. Not a very good host today.” Tucker poured soda into a glass, then

dropped two pieces of ice into her drink.

“I didn’t ask for ice.”

“Want me to take them back?”

“No.” She pulled the glass out of his hands because she wouldn’t put it past him to snatch them out anyway.

His intense eyes stared into hers as she took a sip. “So, who’d you lose? Your mother?”

Selena sucked tiny soda bubbles into her lungs and tried desperately to get a breath.

He took the glass from her two seconds before she would have spilled it on his crotch, then handed her a napkin while her coughing fit continued.

She stared at him, waiting for her breathing to return to normal. Was that concern on his face? That would be surprising, given he was willing to sue her. Apparently her choking to death in his limo wouldn’t be good publicity either.

He remained silent, but handed the drink back to her.

How could she tell him about Katie? And her own part in what had happened? She ran her finger up and down the condensation on the side of the glass. “It was my younger sister.”

He gave a slight nod.

“I had a hard time with it. My old boss gave me a journal, said it would help. I stared at it for days, not knowing what to write. Then one morning I woke up with words swarming in my head. I spewed them out as fast as I could, and when I read them back, I realized it was a poem, about my sister.”

“It helped?”

“Yes, the pain”—she put her fist to her heart—“seemed a little lighter.”

His eyes locked on her fist. Normally she’d be annoyed with a man staring at her chest, but Tucker’s thoughts were somewhere else... maybe with the woman he’d lost.

The window felt cool as she rested her cheek against it. They were in the carpool lane of I-5, hauling ass compared to those in the other lanes.

Suspicion swirled in his foggy eyes. “I break women’s hearts every day. You’re the first to write a poem about me.”

“I don’t have a crush on you, if that’s what you think.”

“I’m getting that impression. Then why’d you write it?”

“About two months ago, my friend said she was tired of me being depressed, that a year and a half was enough, and she dragged me to a concert.”

“I wasn’t on tour.”

“It was the Summer Nights special that CBS recorded in Las Vegas. Her uncle works for the network and knows she’s a huge country fan.”

“And you’re not?”

“Not on your life. I prefer pop and alternative.” His bleak expression suggested he was into pop music as much as she was into country. “Anyway, you sang ‘Come Back to Me,’ the most beautiful song I’d ever heard. Something in your voice spoke to me.”

What had been a brief smile faded.

“And then I heard it again during the concert on TV. I understood your pain.”

“And so you wrote the poem.”

“And so I wrote the poem.” She wasn’t about to tell him she’d watched the recording about a dozen times, or that his words had haunted her dreams. “Rebecca found my journal one day and read it without my permission. She pushed me to get it published and said self-publishing was painless. So I did it under my pen name, Kay Sutherland. Which reminds me. How did you find me?”

“It took a while, but my lawyer found your real name through your ISBN.”

“I bought it before I decided on Kay Sutherland.”

“I like your real name better.”

“Yeah, well, I like my privacy better.”

He raised his drink in agreement. His cell phone rang, blaring some country song. He glanced at the number before picking it up. “Yeah, Pops, what do you want?”

*That sounded heartless.*

“Again?” He raised his eyes to the limo’s roof. “When will you stop—it’ll have to be Tuesday. I’ll see you then.” He hung up and shoved the phone in his pocket.

“My dad died of a heart attack when I was nine.”

Tucker’s eyes shifted to hers.

“I’d give anything to be annoyed with him right now.”

Deep sadness reflected in his eyes. He looked down at the floor for a moment and then back into her eyes. “I understand now why you were able to write that poem about me.”

She wanted to ask more, but a lump had formed in her throat.

Tucker stretched out his long legs and placed his Stetson low on his forehead, blocking his eyes. In less than a few minutes, his breathing turned shallow.

He’d taken off his jacket when he’d gotten into the limo, revealing a gray T-shirt. Now, with his arms crossed over his chest, his heavily veined hands and strong forearms were clearly visible.

The cowboy hat inched its way down Tucker’s face. She expected him to push it back up. He didn’t move. If Tucker had come from Los Angeles this morning, he had to have left for her place in the wee morning hours. He must be exhausted.

The hat was now over his face.

*Can he breathe under there?*

Selena unbuckled her seatbelt and crossed over to his side of the limo. Gently, she pulled the hat from Tucker’s face.

Still no movement.

He had a full head of dark hair, the kind you just want to run your hands through. And before she could stop herself, that’s exactly what she was doing. Running a finger through his thick hair.

A soft moan came from deep in his throat.

She jerked her hand away, expecting Tucker’s eyes to pop open and him to say “What the hell are you doing?”

He didn’t stir.

*Hmm, who are you dreaming about?*

The lines on his forehead that had been there the entire morning were now gone. What was he so worried about? Why did it matter if her book caused him a couple

weeks of bad publicity? Famous people got that all the time. Something else must be going on.

She ran her eyes down the side of his stubbled face and strong jawline. How many women had kissed those luscious lips? Probably a lot. Selena looked away from his gorgeous face and down to the hat she was holding. The excitement of getting to know this famous country singer would have to be enough for her. And maybe a peek or two at his fine physique.

She'd had enough heartache to last her a lifetime, and Tucker was sure to be nothing but trouble for any woman in his life. Selena laid the Stetson on the seat between them and buckled in. Facing forward was much easier on her stomach.

The endless thump of tires on the beat-up highway was all she got for the next four hours, with only one pit stop between. What she wouldn't have given for a sketchbook. She let out a huge breath when they entered West Hollywood, the skyscrapers of L.A. towering overhead, blocking out the sun and casting a permanent shadow over the city. The low buildings along San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf had never held as much appeal for her as they did now.

Tucker sat up and rubbed his sleepy eyes with the backs of his fingers. He glanced at the cowboy hat on the seat next to him and then at her.

She smiled. "So what does your lawyer want from me?"

"Not much, sweetheart. Just two million dollars."



**HE HAD TO BE JOKING.** But the seriousness of Tucker's expression told Selena otherwise.

The bodyguard opened the door for her and she stepped out with cramped legs.

A monstrous building loomed before her, its large windows and dark metal façade reflecting the Los Angeles skyline. The sign for the restaurant on the bottom floor read *Chaya Downtown*. Selena followed Tucker into the Japanese restaurant.

*Ugh, raw seafood.*

She couldn't tolerate the taste or texture of the stuff. The place was packed with people in back-to-back tables. Obviously, this was a great restaurant for those who liked sushi.

The place was fairly classy. Thank heavens she was wearing a black and white floral sundress with low-heeled sandals. If she'd been wearing jeans—oh who was she kidding? Tucker was wearing jeans, and no one seemed to notice him.

*Which is odd.*

She took a look at her world-famous companion. He'd thrown on a pair of dark glasses and was chomping on gum. His mouth slanted sideways as he chewed it open-mouthed. Without his cowboy hat to draw attention and with that goofy grin on his face, why would anyone think he was a star?

Tucker had the dumb-ass act down perfectly, even changing the way he walked. He'd erased that long arrogant stride, with his hands in his jean pockets and his thumbs hanging out, and replaced it with a slouching stroll that said he was going nowhere fast.

The bodyguard escorted her and Tucker into a private room in the back.

The dumb-ass routine disappeared behind closed doors. "Selena Hawkins,"

Tucker gestured to a man sitting at a private table, “this is my lawyer and manager, Randall White.”

“Mr. White.” The name contradicted his black suit, dark hair, and what seemed to be beady black eyes. Maybe they were just really deep brown, and her hyperactive imagination was getting the best of her.

The lawyer stood and pulled out a chair for her. “Please have a seat, Miss Hawkins. May I pour you a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you.” Selena put her hand over the glass. No doubt the bottle of wine was as expensive as Mr. White’s shiny black suit. Water was all she planned to drink to keep a clear head.

“It’s not good manners to be late.” The lawyer looked at his client. “I started lunch without you.”

Tucker didn’t respond. He stood with his arms crossed and one foot pointing toward the door. Was he as uncomfortable being here as she was?

Mr. White sat and bit into a piece of raw fish. “Congratulations are in order, Miss Hawkins. Your book of poems is a hit. What an achievement for a first-time author.”

Selena’s eyebrows drew together. Was that a compliment or a jab? Mr. White’s eyes were sincere, even his smile. “Thank you.”

“I’m afraid the last poem has put us in a bit of a bind though.” His voice carried the same warm southern charm as his client’s.

“You’re worried about Tucker’s image?”

The lawyer glanced at his client and then back at her. “You two have talked?”

“Yes, and I can’t imagine how this could hurt Tucker. If anything, it should make him more popular.”

“I wish that were true, Miss Hawkins.”

“The rumors Tucker mentioned couldn’t possibly have this kind of impact.”

Mr. White’s eyebrows drew together. “The ones your publicist started.”

“As I explained to Tucker, I don’t know what Janet posted or what rumors led to the success of my book.”

“I see...” The lawyer leaned back and glanced at Tucker, who nodded. “The day after Tucker’s ex-girlfriend was in a car accident that broke her nose, a tabloid took a picture of her and captioned it with ‘Tucker Hits Ex?’ We spent considerable time and money dispelling the rumors. Then your publicist linked your poem with the rumor.”

*Crap.* “‘Did he hurt this woman as much as she hurt him?’” Selena quoted a line from her poem.

“Precisely. Your publicist linked your poem to the rumors about why Tucker lost her. Some of Tucker’s fans are callin’ for a boycott of his music ’cause they believe he’s a domestic abuser.”

Selena turned to Tucker. Never once, even when he’d initially approached her, anger all over him, had she gotten the feeling he would hit her. Not that she knew any abusers of women. “How did your ex break her nose?”

“Airbag deployed,” Tucker said without a hint of deception in his voice.

“The point is,” the lawyer continued, “we spent considerable time and money to get that taken care of, and then your poem stirred up that nest of hornets all over

again. Given you used the title of Tucker's song, there's nothin' we can do to deny your poem is about Tucker. Only you can do that."

"How?"

"Go public. Tell people it's not about Tucker. You used a couple of words that happen to point to him and his music and that's all." He shrugged like it was no big deal.

But it was a huge deal. "I can't do that. It would be a lie."

Mr. White fell silent. He swiped back a piece of hair that had fallen from the comb-over he was using to cover his receding hairline and turned to Tucker.

Tucker didn't move, didn't utter a word.

The lawyer's eyes creased in concern. "I'm afraid the alternative will be much messier, Miss Hawkins."

"And what alternative might that be?" As if she didn't already know.

"It seems you're costing my client a lot of money."

"Two million dollars?" She crossed her arms.

His hand paused on its way to his mouth. "Exactly."

"How could I have affected Tucker's sales that much?"

"I have very precise charts on Tucker's sales projections. After your book's release and your publicist's strategic posts, Tucker's sales started to lag. I've determined over the next three weeks, Tucker will lose over two million in sales if something isn't done to reverse it."

"Then why aren't you talking to Janet about this?"

"Your publicist was very clever and careful in her wording. She simply got people to read *your* poem."

"I don't have any money for you to take." Selena's voice shook. Every cent she'd made from *FOG* she'd be pouring into the bookstore, and she was already planning to get a loan against her townhouse so she could buy newer books, take out some ads, and update the store's interior before it failed.

"My research indicates you inherited a townhouse in San Francisco, and that, Miss Hawkins, is some prime real estate in a hot market. My realtor tells me it's worth at least half a million, maybe quite a bit more. And, although you lease the bookstore's retail space, you do have substantial inventory. Then there are the past and future royalties from the sale of your new book."

She swallowed hard. He was going to take everything from her. Once again she'd show her family just what a screwup she was. Art-school dropout, kicked out of her apartment, and now she'd even lose what she'd inherited from her employer. "So you plan to sue me if I don't make a public retraction?"

"I see you're a smart woman." Mr. White smiled and licked soy sauce from his finger.

Selena's nostrils flared. No one was going to threaten her, nice man or not. "And I see you're a smart man." She clamped her hands together on the table and leaned in. "So let's see if you understand this. If you take me to court, you will have to prove that what I've said is false. And you can't do that, because your client has all but confirmed that what I've written is true. I will then have to hire a lawyer, and I'll sue for legal expenses. This is a lose-lose situation for you." Her palms began to sweat, and Selena prayed she wouldn't have to hire an attorney with the bank loan

meant to save her store.

Mr. White's superior smile turned into a grim line.

"I can see you understand." Selena stood and walked out with her head held high, her shoulders back, and what she hoped was a look of confidence on her face. Inside, her stomach was churning.

She shoved open the glass door to the outside, stepped onto the busy sidewalk, and inhaled car fumes. She had absolutely no clue where she was other than Los Angeles. To top it off, she had no purse, no phone, and no way home.

*Crap!*

What was she going to do now? She could go back in and ask Tucker for a ride, but she didn't want to give that lawyer the satisfaction. She walked to the end of the block. Maybe it was time to call Neal. Her brother would give her a ration for getting in a car with a complete stranger and driving all the way to Los Angeles. But he'd help her.

A black car with dark tinted windows pulled up to the corner, the bass loud enough she couldn't hear herself think. The car was so low to the ground, it was a wonder it didn't scrape against the asphalt, and its bright orange hubcaps kept spinning, even when the car came to a halt—right in front of her.

Selena stopped when the passenger window rolled down.

"Need a ride, sister?"

The small tattoo on her right shoulder was nothing compared to the full sleeve of them that ran down the entire length of the man's arm.

"No, I'm good." She forged a polite smile and took a cautious step back from the curb.

Quick as the snake tattoo on his arm, the man lunged out the window and yanked her toward his car.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jodi Ashland is an award-winning author of romantic suspense. If you enjoy reading about empowered women who overcome adversity, flawed sexy heroes who love them, and action packed mystery and suspense, then you'll love Jodi Ashland's books. Jodi has a B.S. in Information Systems and an M.B.A. but has pursued her true passion writing novels and poems. She is a mother of two, cancer survivor, kayaker, skier, gardener, camper, and lover of all things outdoors.

Visit Jodi Ashland at [www.jodiashland.com](http://www.jodiashland.com) or on any of her social media sites where she looks forward to meeting you.