

DEADLY OBSESSION

By Victoria Paige

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Synopsis:

*Warning. Romantic suspense with dark themes. Extremely obsessive and jealous hero. Strong language and sexual content with sexual deviant situations that may be disturbing. Mature audience, 18 years and above.

The first time Jake sees Ella he is struck by her beauty.

He becomes obsessed.

His obsession becomes a deadly affair.

You see, Ella belongs to someone else.

Someone determined to keep her ... or kill her.

CHAPTER ONE

“You like that, my little slut?”

Jake whispered to the woman he was fucking over the sink. “You’ve been eye-fucking me the whole evening.” He thrust hard as if to make a point. “You think I’m not taking you up on it?”

“I haven’t,” Ella gasped.

“Liar,” Jake growled. He lifted away from her, staring down to where they were joined, the hard length of him sliding in and out of her. This encounter was inevitable. Who would have thought his cold shower minutes ago had been useless.

He had trouble keeping his hard-on down while he lifted weights in the country club’s gym. Maybe if her ass weren’t in his face every time he bent over a bench to lift a dumbbell, it wouldn’t be as painful. Watching her dab sweat in between her breasts was pure torture as well. They were flattened partially by a sports bra, but her ample cleavage was enough to tease a saint. Three days this week they danced around their attraction to each other. Well, this shit stopped now. He was taking her up on that blatant offer in her eyes.

He had just emerged from the men’s locker room when he saw her enter the ladies’ room at the other end of the club. He had checked both sides of the hallway before he slipped through the restroom door. Their eyes met in the mirror. She was still sweaty from her workout. Without a word, he locked the door, stalked toward her, and spun her around. He immediately crushed her lips in a punishing, scorching kiss, after which he pulled away and said, “If you don’t want this, now is the time to say no.”

She stared at his throat for a beat before lifting hooded caramel eyes to his. “I want this.”

The back of her hand brushed his straining erection.

Clenching his jaw tightly, he turned her around and bent her over the sink. He fished a condom from his wallet and returned it to the gym bag, which he dropped to the floor.

Freeing his cock from the confines of his shorts, his eyes briefly left hers as he rolled the condom down his length.

He needed to fuck her.

Right now.

This instant.

He shoved her gym shorts down to her knees, exposing the porcelain smooth curve of her ass. He stomped them to the floor and freed her toned shapely limbs. Kicking her legs apart, he hissed in pleasure as anticipation tightened his balls to an unbearable degree. “You’re so damned beautiful. You’re almost unreal.”

He reached under her to pull down the zipper of her bra; her tits spilled out. With his forearm hooked under her breasts, his hand squeezed one firm globe. He inhaled sharply, wanting to feast on her tits and suck on a nipple, but his dick was making all the decisions at the moment.

Jake folded over her back and worked his cock inside her. Her sweat mixed with the scent of her perfume intoxicated him in a raw and sensual way. He could feel her wetness, but she was still fucking tight. He pumped in slowly, pushing in a little, withdrawing, and then pushing in a bit further. When he was seated balls deep, Ella whimpered softly, and that was when he let her have it. Withdrawing almost to the tip, he thrust in fully and started pumping steadily. He increased his pace until he was stroking inside her furiously, his pelvis slapping against her ass.

His fingers dragged into her hair, taking hold near her scalp to pull her head back. She moaned in response, and he got even harder, if that were possible.

“More,” she begged. “Fuck me harder.”

He gripped her hair tighter and rode her. The deeper he slammed into her, the more excited she became. There was a moment Jake thought he was hurting her, for the edge of that sink couldn’t be comfortable, but when he tried to ease up, she protested almost in a panic. “No! Don’t stop.”

A base instinct took over. He couldn't hold back as his climax overwhelmed his body. He suppressed his roar as much as he could and grunted his release. He shoved in one more time and came, sagging onto her back.

"You okay?" His breathing was ragged.

Ella sighed. "I'm fine."

Her response was flat.

Jake levered up, his brows furrowing. He never thought he'd ever ask this next question. "Did you come? I'm sorry I didn't ask—"

"I said it's fine," she responded sharply and wiggled out from under him. They quietly put themselves back to rights.

Jake was feeling all kinds of douchebag for not making sure she came first. He had always prioritized his partner's pleasure. Then again, no woman ever made him lose control this way. And there was that elephant in the room.

"So, what now?" he asked warily.

"What do you mean?"

Jake snorted in disbelief. "I don't normally fuck someone else's girlfriend."

"You didn't seem too concerned just now." Her lips twisted derisively. She leaned back against the sink. "I guess I'll skip my cardio and go home."

"Home where? Back to him? Tell me, Ella, are you going to tell him how you spread your legs so readily for a man you barely know?" Jake didn't understand why he was this furious. She was someone he fucked, and for some perverted reason, he felt justified. So why was he disgusted with himself and pissed at her?

She exhaled another sigh and walked to the door. "There's nothing to tell."

"You're right. Because this is the last time this is happening."

Her face was expressionless as she digested his statement.

"I can live with that," Ella said.

She left him feeling as unsettled as ever.

Pathetic.

He had become a pathetic bastard ruled by a needy dick.

Jake Hopper sat in his Chevy pickup as he surveyed the sprawling estate before him. Behind the automated iron gates lived the woman who had driven him insane with the pleasures of the flesh. He was under no illusion this was love. For the past month, he had become obsessed with fucking Ella Michel. He blamed it on the excitement derived from the secretive nature of their relationship. After his vehement declaration he wasn't going to have sex with her again, that resolve crumbled the very next day. He dragged her into the linen supplies closet at the club and took her against the wall. He fucked her raw, not easing up pounding into her until he forced her to come. This continued for three weeks. Ella came in late at night to the club's 24-hour fitness center, so he timed his workouts to match her schedule. Sometimes they would be the only ones left in the club's gym. Their last encounter took place in the ladies' locker room after she was pink and damp from the shower.

He couldn't stop this madness. Something about her reeled him in helplessly. He fully understood the extent of his insanity when she failed to show up last week. Until then, Jake denied his insidious jealousy and growing feelings of possessiveness. She wasn't just a woman he could fuck and forget; he knew that now. That realization had led to this point.

Seven days he had been without her. Jake didn't share, but it was the only way he could have her. Imagining her getting fucked by Samuel Clayton was like acid burning through his brain.

Samuel Clayton.

The man who had seduced his ex-wife—Leslie. Samuel Clayton had been a client of his company, Steele Construction. Leslie headed the interior design department. Little did he know that his wife was offering more than the company's services. Jake's marriage to Leslie had been troubled in its last two years. Counseling and vacations did nothing to salvage his lackluster feelings for his wife, now ex-wife. Their only common ground was business, which never translated well into any chemistry at all in their personal life. What he thought was a strategic marriage four years ago, crashed and burned when his private investigator showed him pictures of his wife sucking Samuel Clayton's dick. Jake started divorce proceedings immediately, and

Leslie, who had fought it before, had eagerly accepted the dissolution of their marriage a year ago.

Even if he initiated the divorce, her reaction didn't sit well on his ego that time. He had been like a dog who no longer wanted the bone, but didn't want another to have it. And Jake had hated Samuel Clayton since then. Needless to say, new business with the man was no longer an option.

Jake's eyes drifted to the front of the house, remembering the first time he had seen Ella. He moved in the same social circles as Clayton. He would never have stepped into that fucker's house if it wasn't for what he had done to Leslie.

A little over two months ago, Jake received a call from the hospital informing him that Leslie had been in a car accident. He was still her emergency contact person. His ex-wife suffered several broken ribs, bruises, contusions to the face, and a broken wrist. The doctor told him he didn't believe all the injuries were due to the car accident. Jake tried to talk to Leslie, but his ex-wife was tight-lipped, almost afraid even, to say otherwise, but her eyes said it all—Clayton had beaten the shit out of her.

Jake, plagued by guilt, plotted ways to confront Clayton. The solution came a few days later when his company received an invitation to a black-tie affair at Clayton's mansion. Jake believed the party was a manipulation on the millionaire's part. By showing up with a new girlfriend on his arm, any accusations by Leslie would only be the rants of a woman scorned.

All eyes were on Samuel Clayton's new girlfriend, Jake's included. Ella Michel was presented elaborately in a speech where Clayton hinted he may very well be taken off the marriage market. Jake couldn't fault the other man's taste and made him second-guess Leslie's injuries. Maybe the doctor was wrong? There was no question that Leslie Hopper was breathtakingly attractive, but compared to Ella, whose otherworldly beauty robbed Jake of coherent thought, his ex-wife's charms paled considerably. Ella had the face of an angel; impossibly long, dark lashes framed unusual caramel eyes under perfectly arched brows. Her delicate nose tilted up pertly above full pillowy lips, and her oval face was graced with high cheekbones. Creamy skin, hair the color of dark mahogany and seductively wavy, he longed to dig his fingers in her glorious tresses just so he could tilt her head to gaze upon her face. Jake

wasn't a poet or a man of flowery words, but the arresting beauty that was Ella certainly inspired that sentiment in him.

Jake's carefully prepared words accusing the other man of physical abuse sounded ineffectual now. So he stood by in a corner, drank the man's liquor, and watched Clayton dote over his new acquisition.

Jake hated him more that night because Samuel Clayton had something he coveted. Quite desperately, as he soon found out.

Jake's mind returned to the present when the gates to the mansion opened. The latest model of the Mercedes S-Class sedan purred out from the driveway. He recognized Clayton at the wheel. Financially, Clayton and Jake were on equal footing. The other man was old money. Jake was new money, earned from sweat and blood. Clayton was tall, lean, and blond, a refined gentleman—although that could be up for question. As for Jake, he was told that even wearing a tux, he could never hide his rough beginnings from the streets of Chicago. And he was fine with that. Dark-haired and standing at six-three, years at construction sites and his previous life built his deep tan and solid muscles.

Watching Clayton's car drive away, he contemplated pushing the buzzer at the gate. Would Ella let him in?

The choice was taken away from him when the gates swiveled open again. This time, Ella's silver Crossfire zipped out to the main road. Curious, Jake started his pickup and followed her. He checked his watch. He didn't have a meeting until 10:00 a.m., so he had about an hour and a half to play stalker.

He frowned when Ella took the road to a rundown part of the city. The road was speckled with cheap motels and strip bars. What was her business here?

His chest pounded when she turned in to one of the sleaziest motels in the area. A weird feeling in his gut threatened to make him puke his breakfast. What the fuck? What the fuck was she doing? Was she meeting another lover? Was this assignation the reason why Jake hadn't seen her in a week?

Jake shook his head, clearing his riotous thoughts. He did have confirmation that Ella and

Clayton left on a trip.

This woman was driving him insane.

He drove past the motel and circled back just in time to see her walk down to one of the rooms. She wouldn't recognize his pickup because he used a different car when he went to the club. He parked a few doors down from where she stopped and watched with trepidation. Ella knocked on the door, looking right and left apprehensively as if sensing she was being watched.

Yes, my little slut, I have my eyes on you. A rage so deep pulsed through his veins.

The door opened, but Jake couldn't see who was inside. Ella disappeared into the room and the door closed. A myriad of emotions gripped him. A part of him wanted to kick in the door, haul her over his shoulder, take her to his house, and tie her to his bed. The logical part of him told him to check with the front desk to see who was in room 22. But his pride told him to drive away.

Drive the fuck away, Hopper, you pathetic shit.

Red hazed his vision and he had impulsively taken out his business card and scribbled on the back of it. He slammed out of his pickup and stalked to her car, affixing his card to her windshield wipers.

Jake was going to drive away, but he wanted her to know he knew what a whore she was. It took some effort, but he managed to make himself drive out of the parking lot and get on with his life.

“We're on track for our third quarter revenues, 350 million for our end-of-year target of 1.5 billion.”

Jake sat at the head of the conference table listening to his CFO, business partner, and friend, Rick Steele, give the management team a rundown of the company's performance for their presentation to the board members next week. Steele Construction had been in Rick's family for over a hundred years, but the market crash seven years ago nearly wiped out the business. Jake had worked fifteen years for the company, starting as a humble construction worker while he pursued his college degree. When he graduated, he was immediately transferred

to their engineering department and worked his way up to project management. When the company ran into financial troubles, Jake and Rick were instrumental in turning the company around. Jake had money saved up, and in the end, he had invested his own money and was made CEO soon after. Only Rick knew of Jake's previous life and how he had made the money. That was a life Jake hoped he had permanently left in Chicago.

"We're getting at least 250 grand interior design work from the Pallas Hotel Group," Leslie added. "I think the contract will be signed before we close this quarter." One of Steele Construction's specialties was boutique hotels, which were becoming popular in their Washington DC/Northern Virginia location as well as their San Francisco branch.

Jake nodded at his ex-wife. During the early weeks of their divorce proceedings, their business relationship had been strained. But they had soon developed a cordial rapport. Leslie was one of the area's best interior designers and Jake would be a fool to let their personal issues affect the company. Leslie, though, had been trying to get back into Jake's personal life, dropping hints of dinners and sometimes calling him over to fix some imaginary problems at her house. Jake had no desire to rekindle anything with her, especially now that he was in this fucked-up situation with Ella.

He tried to concentrate on Rick's closing pep-talk and grunted, "Good work everyone," when the meeting ended. Everyone got up and started filing out the door, chattering and mumbling, oblivious to the dark cloud hanging over their CEO. Everyone that is, except Rick and Leslie.

"Jake. A word?" Rick eyed him warily. "Leslie, could you excuse us?"

"If you don't mind, Rick, I'd like to be around when you rip wonder boy here a new one," Leslie said.

"Since when did you two become such buddies?" Jake asked sarcastically. Rick tolerated Leslie and had maintained from the beginning that Jake had made a mistake in marrying her. He guessed Rick knew what true love was since he was happily married with two kids.

"You've been acting churlish for the past week," Rick said, adjusting his glasses. His friend was not as tall and built like Jake, but he was athletic enough to go head-to-head with him at the club's racquetball courts. "You've bowed out of games for the past month and have been

hitting the weight room hard. Are you pissed at me or something? You've been avoiding drinks with me—"

"Jesus, Rick, are we joined at the hip or something?" Jake muttered. "We'll have drinks tonight if you've been missing me."

"Oh," Rick said, taken aback by his quick acquiesce. "So it's not something I did?"

Jake grinned at his friend as guilt nagged him. He'd become so preoccupied with Ella, he'd been blind to everything else going on in the office. Thank God that was over.

Fuck, who was he kidding? There was an empty void at the pit of his stomach that couldn't be filled with anything except the caramel-eyed angel who had haunted his every waking moment.

His personal assistant, Leah, poked her head in the conference room. "An Ella Michel is waiting at reception. I told her she would need an appointment, but she insisted she needed only five minutes and since you—"

Jake couldn't name the emotion that came over him. Whether it was anger, hope, or joy, he didn't waste any time saying, "Show her to my office."

Rick's brows were arched in curiosity, while Leslie's were furrowed in a deep frown. Both were annoyingly at his heels as he tried his best not to hurry back to his office. He even stopped to have a word with one of the architects who happened to be walking down the hallway. When it appeared they were going to wait him out, he gave up his delaying tactics.

His friend gave a low whistle when he spotted Ella being led into Jake's office. "Could we have finally discovered the reason for your shit mood?"

"She's Sam's girlfriend," Leslie hissed. "What the hell is she doing here, Jake?"

Infuriated, he turned to face them. "None of your damned business. Now don't you two have something to do?"

Rick shrugged, but the look in his eyes said he was definitely going to be probing later. Leslie looked ready to spit nails, but Jake glared at her until she grudgingly turned and stomped down the hallway toward her department.

Leah was looking at Jake with concerned eyes. "Any lady who looks like Ms. Michel

spells trouble. I hope you know what you're doing, boss."

His assistant was always a straight shooter, and Jake had no problem allowing her commentaries on his personal life slide. He was even amused at times, but at the moment, he wanted everyone to stay out of his business.

"I don't need bullshit from you too, Leah," he snapped at his assistant. Her eyes widened in consternation because Jake rarely lost his temper with her.

Sighing, he stood in front of the door, his fingers curling around the handle. Images of ways he wanted to fuck Ella flashed through his head. "Hold all my calls. I do not want to be disturbed."

CHAPTER TWO

Anticipation thrummed through his veins as Jake opened the door to his office, trying his best not to be moved by the treacherous woman before him. There she stood, skeins of her glorious hair framing cheeks flushed by the cold winds of January. Her expressive eyes watched him carefully like he was a predator about to pounce. He certainly felt that way. And from his conflicted emotions, anger won out. He closed the door and locked it.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he pushed through his teeth.

Her chin tilted up defiantly. “You followed me this morning.”

“Yeah? You think I wouldn’t find out you have another fuck buddy on the side?” Jake sneered, the desire to hurt her driving his words. “What are you, Ella? Some kind of nympho?”

She flinched at his last statement. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Jake snorted a mirthless laughter. “What I understand is with as much mileage you put your body through, you really do need to keep in shape at the gym.”

Anger lit her eyes. Her chin jutted out. “Is that why you called me a whore?” Her eyes never left his as she walked toward him. Planting herself squarely in his space, she tucked the business card he had left her back into his trousers.

Her touch burned through the fabric of his pants. The close proximity where her fingers brushed was the very part of his body that screamed to be inside her. He gritted his teeth. “Yes. Well-deserved, don’t you think?”

“You can’t seem to resist me.” Her lips tilted in a sexy smirk. The bitch knew her effect on him.

“Ella, I’m not a man who shares my woman. If you think I’ll stand—”

“But I’m not yours,” she taunted. “I’m Sam’s.”

It took all of Jake’s self-control not to throttle her. His breathing turned erratic, and she simply watched him with cool detachment. She was playing a game; that much was obvious. She was testing his limits. The question was why? How long before he snapped and actually hurt her?

Alarm trilled in his head. The times when Ella came the hardest were the times when he had fucked her almost brutally. Jake had never been as rough in sex as he had been with her. But somehow, Ella awakened the savagery he thought he had buried with his old life.

“Get out, Ella,” Jake growled. “I never, ever hurt women. But I’m dangerously close to wringing your neck.”

There it was. Excitement in her eyes. Was she a textbook masochist?

Her fingers touched his belt.

His hands came down on her wrists, stilling her intent. He ducked his head and rasped, “What are you doing?”

She tracked backwards, tugging him toward his desk, and like a lemming, he followed her lead, mesmerized by the promise in her eyes.

“Don’t, Ella,” he said hoarsely. The fight had gone out of him when she positioned him against the desk, letting her fingers deliberately work his belt. His cock was already straining against his zipper.

She tilted her head up and pressed her mouth against his. Jake groaned, burying his fingers into her hair and taking over the kiss. He devoured her mouth with all the anxiety, frustration, and anger he felt this past week. She moaned into his mouth the same time her fingers wrapped around his pulsing cock.

He tore his lips away. “No other man, Ella. I can’t stand another having these lips.” His fingers gripped her hair and pulled her head back so she was trapped staring up at him. “When we’re together, you’re mine. Not fucking Samuel Clayton’s,” he said fiercely. “Got me?”

“Got you,” she whispered.

“And you tell whoever you met at the motel that he’s out of your life.”

“He’s gone. I ended it today.”

He wanted to push for her to leave Clayton, but he'd done that the last time he'd seen her and she took off and left him for a week. It was her way of controlling him. Fuck her. He'd play her game for now, because in that instant, the way she was fisting and pumping his dick was causing his IQ to drop as fast as the blood from his brain.

He was about to kiss her again when she dropped to her knees. Almost immediately, he felt her moist, warm lips close over the head of his shaft, her tongue swirling around sensitive skin. Jake's eyes rolled back as he sagged against the desk.

"Fuck!" he groaned. One of his hands let go of her head to grip the edge of the desk. He was afraid with both hands forcing her head down to take him, she would gag, especially in the agitated state he was in. With his left hand still digging into her scalp, he urged her to take him deeper, "That's it, baby. You can take me." He gritted his teeth when she took slow, deliberate pulls up his length, sucking him at the same time draining him of the last resistance he had against her. She double-fisted him when he was poised to come, and when he finally shot his load into her mouth, the vibrations of pleasure from her throat completely unhinged him. "Fuck, Ella, that's so good. Lick it, baby."

She gave his dick one final swirl with her tongue before she released it. He was still breathing unevenly when he gripped her shoulders and yanked her to her feet.

She yelped in pain, startling him.

His eyes searched hers. "What's wrong, Ella? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No." Her eyes lowered and stared at a spot on his desk. "You surprised me, that's all."

Bullshit.

His suspicions in place, he began to unbutton her sweater. This time it was her hands that circled his wrists. "Don't, Jake."

Brushing her fingers aside, he continued his intent and peeled the sweater from her shoulders and sucked in his breath. Ella was wearing a camisole which did nothing to hide the angry bruises marring the creamy skin along her arms.

"I'll fucking kill him," Jake swore, the violence he was feeling almost too much to contain within him. He had to hit something, preferably Clayton, but the wall would do.

"Jake, let it go."

“How could you stay with him?”

“He gives me what I need.”

“What? Pain?” Jake pushed away from her, shaking his head, and trying to comprehend the whole situation. “What kind of sick fuck is he?” He glared at her. “What kind of sick fuck are you?”

As the words left his mouth, he regretted them, because the expression on her face shuttered. All emotion had leaked out as though he had punched holes through her.

“Like I said, you’ll never understand,” she said quietly. She shrugged back into her sweater and buttoned herself up. “It was a mistake for me to come here. I won’t bother you again.”

She turned to walk out, but Jake grabbed her hand and spun her around to face him.

“Just like that?” he snarled. “Was that how you ended it with that other poor fucker?”

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“Jake—”

“I said, no,” Jake growled. “You suck me off like that and basically strip me of my pride, make me fucking weak and crazy over you, and you think you can just walk out on me again? You’ll find out what it means for Jake Hopper to be obsessed over you, baby, and I’m not quitting until I fuck some sense into you to leave that son of a bitch Clayton. You think I’ll let another woman I know get abused by him again?”

“What?”

“My ex-wife, Leslie. He beat her within an inch of her life.”

“You must be mistaken.”

Jake snorted. “I’m not. I have more or less proof of what he’s capable of. He’s a pathological abuser.”

“He—”

He cupped Ella’s face. Her beautiful face. If that fucker laid another hand on her, Jake was sure he would go homicidal. “I need to see you again. There’s nothing more I want right now than to fuck you.” To fuck his brand of possession on her.

“Sam left this morning for Dallas. He won’t be back until Saturday.”

Jake’s nostrils flared at the implication. He was still the interloper in her relationship with Clayton. He’d endeavor to change it, and he was sure it meant stealing another man’s woman.

“Let me get this straight, you’re fucking Clayton’s girl?”

An urge to clock Rick across his perturbed face had Jake gripping his glass tighter. His friend spoke the way he usually did, frank and to the point. “Yes. And keep your voice down.”

They were at a bar near the Steele Construction building where their employees frequently unwound with a few drinks before going home.

“Damn, Jake,” Rick muttered. “I hope this is not some kind of revenge on the guy. I didn’t think it bothered you too much he took Leslie off your hands. No offense to Leslie, but you and her? Totally wrong for each other.”

Jake took a sip of his whiskey. “I’ll admit, for the first week I was with Ella, I convinced myself that was all it was. Payback. But I was kidding myself. I want her, Rick. I want her to be mine.”

His friend scrubbed his face in frustration. Finally, he glared at Jake. “How? How have your scruples gone to shit?”

“Hey, it’s not like they’re married,” Jake mumbled into his glass.

“What?” Rick mock-curling his palm over his right ear, leaning toward him. “What was that? Are you seriously fucking with me, Jake? You’ve got women throwing themselves at you. Decent women who wouldn’t fuck around on their man. Tell me, even if she leaves Clayton for you, will you trust her not to cheat on you and have another man on the side?”

His friend was right. In his focus of being the other man, Jake had not considered beyond when Ella became his. Would she have a faithful bone in her body? The thought burned a hole through his gut. He couldn’t take another minute of his friend’s logic. “I don’t have time for this shit.” Jake stood to leave.

Rick’s hand landed on his shoulder and pushed him back on the barstool. “Sit your ass down. I swear, before this night is over, I hope I’ll have hammered some sense in you.”

He glared at his friend, who glared right back. “I don’t need your advice on my love life, Rick.”

Rick chortled. “What love life? It’s your fuck life, buddy. Because no way could that woman be in love with you. She’s using you for something, and it’s not because you’ll be swearing undying love for her. Christ, you’re thirty-eight years old. Too old to be led around by your dick. Granted, the woman’s gorgeous, but that kind of beauty can get a man in a lot of trouble.”

Same advice as Leah. Was Jake really that blind? “What are you suggesting for me to do?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Rick shook his head. “Shut it down. Now.”

“Clayton is a damned abuser. You should have seen the bruises on her arms, Rick.”

“Dammit!” Rick muttered. “Help her leave Clayton. But I’m telling you, buddy, once a cheater, she’ll always be one. I’m pissed that she made you one as well. Don’t you think it’s just a knight-in-shining-armor complex that’s making you want to be with her?”

Jake didn’t know. Was it? Did he just want to save Ella?

“Look, step back from all these sexual endorphins for a minute and gain some perspective.” Rick must have seen the scowl on Jake’s face for his friend added, “Stop looking at me like that. You’ve got nothing going with her except the sex.”

“There could be more,” Jake pushed through his teeth, hating how his friend was laying out the shallowness of what he had with Ella.

“But there’s none at the moment, is there? You haven’t dated. From what you’ve told me, you haven’t even met outside the club, and no, I don’t want to know what went on in your office today.” Rick leaned into his space. “Cut. Her. Loose.”

“I told her I’m not quitting her.”

“Was that before or after coitus?” Rick asked dryly.

“What the fuck?”

“Men make dumb promises after getting laid.”

“Seriously, how does Anne put up with your shit?”

“She loves me. I love her,” Rick stated. “It’s not complicated once you know she’s the

one.” His friend sighed. “Look at you. You’re all twisted in knots; it’s almost painful to look at you in this mood.”

“I’ll be sure to stay out of your way while I’m polluting the air with my mood.”

“I’m trying to help you, man, give you some perspective. If I’d known sooner, I would have stuck my nose in your business before you’d handed your balls over to this chick.”

Jake bristled at the look of pity Rick shot him.

“I’ve never seen you this way. Not even during your divorce,” Rick paused. “Fuck, especially not during your divorce.”

Jake tipped back his whiskey and poured another glass. He checked the time. He was picking up Ella from the country club in another two hours, leaving her car there and taking her back to his place. Jake had insisted. He wanted to fuck her on his bed, not in some sleazy corner of the club again like she was some bored matron fucking her tennis instructor.

Just when he thought Rick was getting through to him, visions of spreading Ella on his bed with her legs hooked around his ass with him buried deep inside her, fucking her into the mattress, erased all of his friend’s good intentions. Jake knew he needed to get burned badly to break free from Ella’s hold on his dick.

“You’ve got that intense look in your eyes,” Rick said in resignation. “I hope you know what you’re doing, buddy.” He raised his glass to him. “Regardless, I’ll help you pick up the pieces.”

“Thanks.” Jake smiled wryly.

The fallout happened sooner than later.

It was only inevitable since Jake was never a man to share his woman. He had three days to spend with her before Clayton returned. The first night at his home, having her finally in his bed, had shown him how it could be. He liked her in his house, in his life. Her insistence not to stay the night didn’t sit well with him, but he let her have her way. Could Ella blame him for wanting every minute with her? He also discovered how little he knew of her. He thought she was a lady of leisure, living on the generous allowance provided by Clayton. When he had

suggested spending the entire Thursday together, he found out she was a student at Georgetown University studying linguistics. She was fluent in French, as was her heritage, but also German and Russian. Jake was ashamed that he had not bothered to explore Ella beyond her face and body. Was Rick correct in his assessment that all they had between them was sex?

Since she had classes Thursday morning, it was only in the afternoon when she came to him. They hardly left his bedroom. Burning the sheets, slamming against walls, fucking on the dresser. It was heaven inside her. He couldn't get enough of her lips, her pussy, her tits, her body.

Despite the sensual web she'd woven around him, he did make an effort to learn more about her. Jake tried to ask about her parents, but she changed the subject. When he tried to ask her where she grew up, she distracted him with a blowjob.

Now it was Friday afternoon. Being sexually sated Thursday had him thinking more clearly. He stopped by his office this morning to meet with a private investigator. Jake was determined to find out everything about Ella Michel—her parents, where she grew up, where she went to school. Fuck, even what her favorite food was. She was so damned secretive about herself; he was beginning to feel like she had no other use for him other than a ready cock to impale herself on.

With Rick's words, and the lack of personal connection, the dissatisfaction of their affair started to fester in Jake's psyche. Clayton was returning tomorrow. Would Jake be relegated to a club fuck again?

No.

Fucking.

Way.

Tonight he was making her choose. Either she stayed the night, or he gave her an ultimatum. The blinders were definitely off. This was what Jake feared. Everything he was doing with Ella was out of character for him. He was definitely feeling jealousy now, unlike the first few times he fucked her knowing she'd be going home to be fucked by Clayton as well. That time he felt an odd sense of revenge. Well, not anymore. His emotions for her shifted. He was beginning to feel something. It wasn't love, because in a way, he hated her because he couldn't quit her. He needed to set some boundaries for himself that unless she shared something of

herself other than the physical, Jake couldn't allow himself to feel anything more.

The sound of her car pulling up his driveway quickened his pulse. He walked to the kitchen where a door exited into a garage. He punched the button that would lift the gates. Her car pulled in. Their clandestine trysts. Jake felt the side of his lips curl in a sneer. Yes, his unsettled feelings would fester, turning into resentment before eventually turning into pure hate.

Watching her emerge from the car, an ache pierced his chest. Their situation was killing him, and it killed him more that he was the only one fighting for it.

"Sorry, got held up," Ella breathed.

Jake didn't say anything, simply pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Afterward, he let her go and walked to the kitchen.

"You want anything to drink?"

"Jake, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, I thought if you didn't want a drink, we could get straight to fucking."

"What is wrong with you?" Ella snapped. "If we're going to spend our time with your little-boy sulks, I'm going home."

"Little-boy sulks?" Jake glared at her. "You think this"—he jerked his thumb to his chest—"is what it is? Your boyfriend," he spat, "is returning tomorrow. What are your plans?"

"I don't know his schedule—"

"I'm not on Clayton's schedule—"

"Well, I am!" Ella shouted. "What do you want from me, Jake? You want me to leave him?"

Jake swallowed a knot in his throat. "Do you love him?"

Her eyes snapped to his. "You really want me to answer that."

"Yes!"

"Not yet."

"Do you love me?"

"How about you, Jake?" Ella challenged. "Do you love me?"

"I could love you if you just let me in!" Jake shouted. "Not just your body. Your mind,

your fucking heart. You don't tell me a damned thing!"

Ella started shaking her head, her eyes deepening with an emotion—anguish.

"Why, Ella?" his voice choked. "Why won't you let me in your heart?"

"It's ugly," she whispered. "If you knew what I am, why I am this way—"

"Why you like pain?" Jake asked quietly. He had never mentioned her masochistic tendencies since their fight in the office.

"Yes."

"Does Clayton know?"

Ella nodded. "Sam understands."

"Because he's a sadistic son of a bitch," Jake growled. He dragged her against him. "Show me. Show me exactly what he does for you." He exhaled heavily. "But you have to promise to leave him if I can give you what he can."

"Jake, you're not the type of person—"

"I will try to be that person," Jake muttered against her temple. "Show me, Ella."

Ella stepped back from him and held his hand. She led him to his bedroom.

The late afternoon sun streamed through the windows of his bedroom, bathing Ella in an ethereal glow. Jake took out his smartphone, his chest tightening as he took pictures of her tranquil face, the only way to keep her image for an eternity.

He was done. He couldn't be what she needed.

Every cell of his body had come alive when Ella pulled him into his bedroom. They kissed languidly, teasingly. She undressed him, pulled off his shirt, pressed her lips on his chest, and tongued his nipple while she slipped off his belt, which she tossed on the bed. Jake stiffened and thought, *yes*, he could give her a few thwacks with the belt, although he'd prefer to spank her. She pulled down his zipper and shoved down his jeans under his ass, whispering in his ear, "Take it all off."

Then she backed away, pulling her dress over her head and tossing it on the floor. Her body was made for fucking. Lush breasts, tiny waist that flared into generous hips, and an ass

meant for a man's hands to dig into while he fucked her. Not any man. Jake. She took off her bra and playfully slung it at him. Jake chuckled as he approached her. Without warning, he picked her up just as she removed her panties and tossed her on the bed.

She squealed adorably, making him hard. He immediately fell between her legs and wrapped them around him as he devoured her lips. He kissed down her body, sucking her tits. He loved their pink-pebbled peaks. He had never seen nipples so perfect.

He inserted a finger into her pussy, but she wasn't wet enough to take him. God, he wanted inside, but first he needed to make her come. His thumb massaged her clit as two fingers fucked her. He had never gone down on her. She wouldn't let him and it pissed him off. But he was never going to get tired of asking because he was fucking good with his tongue.

"I can eat you," Jake offered. "Tell me what you need to get there, baby."

She reached for the belt. "Put it around my neck."

"Wh-What?"

"You're backing out?" Her eyes were searching.

"No," Jake said with a sinking feeling. It took all his concentration to keep his erection going. He did as he was told, looping the belt around her neck. "I . . . Fuck . . . Ella . . . this is dangerous. What if I truly hurt you?"

"I say blue," Ella whispered. "You stop. I won't let you get far . . . just enough so I can still communicate."

Jake put on a condom. He needed her warmth around his dick because his entire body had gone cold. He plunged inside her as he pulled on the belt fractionally.

"More," she urged, her eyes on him. He watched the belt restrict her airflow, pinching the skin on her neck.

Jake's body came back to life when he saw her eyes glaze with pleasure. His cock continued to move in and out as fascination at what was happening gripped him. He tightened the belt further until finally, Ella gasped, "Blue."

Jake allowed the belt to ease her airway. She moaned incoherently as her climax hit her. "Now! Fuck me hard. Now!"

He pumped furiously, gripping her ass, driving deeply into her. He could feel the

contractions of her pussy, knowing she came hard, but he couldn't find his own release. Jake gave up and pulled out. She whimpered and rolled into him. His arms came around her, squeezing her tight. He'd heard of erotic asphyxia before, but he couldn't do it on a sex partner. Not willingly, and it was never going to be mutually satisfying.

"You okay, Jake?" Ella's sated eyes looked up at him.

"Not really."

"Oh," was all she said before she fell into slumber.

So now he was committing her features to memory while waiting for her to wake up. As if sensing eyes on her, her lids fluttered open. Eyes that held him captive. Ella was a combination of vulnerability and power. Men would die to protect her, yet would be enslaved by the power of her sensuality.

Her rosy-pink lips pursed into a sad smile. "It's not going to work, is it?"

"No, Ella. I can't go that far."

She slipped from the bed and started to get dressed.

"Is there any other way?" Jake asked, desperate to keep her. "I can show you other ways to achieve pleasure, Ella. It doesn't have to be through pain."

"Pain is the only way I know."

"That's bullshit!" Jake screamed, scrambling off the bed and stalking toward her. "You won't even try! I understand for some it's a lifestyle, but you've admitted for you it was because of something ugly. If we overcome what fucked you up, maybe you wouldn't need this pain?"

"What are you? A shrink now?" Ella asked.

"Don't mock me," Jake growled. "I'm only trying to help you."

"Why? Why do you want to help me?"

"Because I think I'm FUCKING IN LOVE WITH YOU!"

There. He said it. Jake was confused. He didn't know if he loved her, but when the words tumbled out of his mouth, they felt so right.

"Don't fall in love with me, Jake," Ella whispered. The horror on her face ripped his heart out. But he wasn't going to let her watch him unravel.

“Fuck you!” Jake thundered. “Get out of here, you unfeeling bitch!”

“Jake—”

“GET OUT!”

She could have sobbed, he didn't care. He left her to finish up in the bedroom and walked to the kitchen to get himself a drink. The night was young. It was Friday night, perfect to drown himself in a bottle of Jack.

“Goodbye, Jake,” he heard her voice behind him.

He didn't turn around. He heard the door open and close, heard the garage door trundle up and her car pull away with finality.

Over. They were over.

CHAPTER THREE

His phone rang incessantly.

What the fuck?

It was Saturday afternoon and Jake was waking up to a disgusting hangover. Cottony mouth, a crick in the neck, and the stale smell of whiskey in his nose. What better way to celebrate the life of the most pathetic man on the planet? How could he let a woman get to him like this? It was as if Ella had a golden pussy. Remembering how it felt inside her only made him more miserable. The annoying ring of his phone had him threatening whoever was on the other end.

Caller ID said it was Rick.

“What?” Jake growled.

“Holy shit, man! Turn on the TV.”

“What’s going on? Have zombies taken over the world?” Jake muttered, grabbing the remote and turning on his TV.

“Channel Six.”

Jake cursed when it took him two tries to get to the right channel. Fucking hangover.

The image on the screen confused him. Why the hell was Clayton on TV being led away in handcuffs?

“I’m so sorry, man.”

Why was Rick apologizing?

That was when Jake saw the caption at the bottom of the screen.

Area businessman Samuel Clayton arrested for murder of live-in girlfriend.

The first thought that crossed Jake's mind was he was trapped in a nightmare. Rick's frantic voice faded into the background as bile rose up his throat. Jake dropped the phone and ran to the bathroom and emptied the alcohol he consumed last night into the toilet. He downed mouthwash, spat it out, and rushed back in front of the TV, punching the volume up. He grabbed the phone.

"Rick, you there?" His breathing was ragged, his voice hoarse. "Tell me this is a fucking joke or I'm in a nightmare."

There was a stretch of silence.

"Rick?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Jake."

"Oh, God . . . Oh, God." Jake sank to the couch. His world tilted on its axis. Chills crawled all over his body, draining his limbs of strength. His eyes riveted on the TV, the channel's reporter came on screen.

"There will be a news conference at the hospital at 4:00 p.m. But sources say, Samuel Clayton's girlfriend, Ella Michel, flagged down a motorist who rushed her to the hospital where she died from her injuries . . ."

"What have I done, Rick?" Jake said brokenly. "I sent her home. I sent her to her death."

"Damn it, Jake. It's not your fault. I'm coming over."

Jake's eyes drifted to the screen when he heard the words *FBI Investigation*.

". . . FBI is currently sweeping through Clayton's estate. The agency is tight-lipped about the whole case, but it appears Samuel Clayton had been under investigation for the disappearance of several women . . ."

Jake's vision clouded in fury. That bastard. If the FBI didn't nail his ass, he would take him down.

"You hear that, Jake? You were right. I'm so sorry, man. I shouldn't have said—"

"I'm heading to the hospital. I want some answers."