
Chapter 1

FUCK.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Fuckity-fuck-fuck-fuck.

Jane was sitting in her usual spot in the back of the bar, not too far from the bathrooms, and discovering belatedly that she'd let her friends go without realizing that she'd consumed entirely too much alcohol. She'd gotten up, intending to head for said bathrooms, and then had to sit down just as quickly, so that she didn't end up in an undignified heap on the floor.

She caught the waitress' eye, which was much easier to do now that the crowd had thinned out. She thought she was practically the only person in the bar, although she didn't look up from her phone to confirm that thought.

"Christie, can I have a large glass of water and a cup of coffee?"

Christie chuckled. "Feeling it?"

She frowned. "Yes, unfortunately."

"I'm surprised. You can usually pack it away. But that tequila will sneak up on you sometimes."

"Yeah, and on a relatively empty stomach. Thanks so much, dieting—not!" She'd totally forgotten to account for her new eating habits and how they might affect her alcohol tolerance.

Christie laughed. "I hear ya! Just another of the many evils of dieting! I'll have that right over to you."

"You're a doll. Thank you."

She pulled up Uber for ride. There was no way she was going to drive her little car home when she felt like this. She'd just Uber back tomorrow morning to collect it when she woke up—hopefully not feeling as if someone had dragged her tongue along the carpet, if she was able to convince herself to drink enough water before she crawled into bed.

But as she was looking down at her phone, a shadow fell over her. A very big shadow.

And if she used her peripheral vision, she could see that the man casting it was wearing a pair of very old, disreputable boots, probably about a size thirteen or so.

She knew immediately who it was standing over her, not really crowding her, but then, even being in the same universe as he was, was always going to make her feel crowded.

She was uncomfortably aware of the fact that he also still managed to make her feel small, and that was no easy feat since she definitely wasn't a small woman.

Jane staunchly refused to acknowledge him, childish thought it may be, even though she well knew that he wasn't the most patient of men—about some things, anyway. She certainly could remember times when he was extremely patient with her, but she did her best to eradicate those thoughts, to wipe them from her mind one by one as they appeared in her head.

And kept appearing, growing more and more obscene

each time, until she had to worry about leaving a stain on her skirt that he was sure to notice at some point and take it the wrong way.

He certainly wasn't a fan of defiance of any kind, either, but then she hardly thought this qualified.

She had to acknowledge baldly to herself, though, that it didn't really matter whether *she* thought it was. It mattered whether or not *he* thought it was!

Or it used to, anyway.

Of course, that was extremely hard to do when he was standing there looking down at her, mountain that he was, and it was growing worse by the second. She could smell him—in an entirely too delicious way for her inebriated nerves to handle. He was wearing the same distinctive, musky, masculine cologne he always had, and that aching familiar scent was complimented by two others that set her traitorous heart and southern parts to aching in a terrifyingly familiar way. The first was the leather from the jacket he always wore—that was just as bedraggled as his boots, or more so.

And the second was simply *him*.

He smelled like home to her. Always had. Probably always would.

That was another thought that played hell with her, that highlighted the fact that she hadn't gotten over him nearly as much as she would have liked to think she had. Jane's eyes filled for a second, but she ruthlessly fought the tears back. There was no way in hell she was going to cry in front of him.

She'd already shed too many tears on account of Elijah Jackson Ridgeway. She was determined there would be no more.

"Jane."

The man had a voice that would have made him millions if he'd just be willing to read porn out loud on the Internet

somewhere, no doubt. Hell, it didn't even have to be porn, she was ashamed to admit. He could read the instructions for how to put together an Ikea coffee table and she'd get just as wet every time as she wished she wasn't getting right now.

Without looking up at him, she answered in as neutral a tone as she could summon, "Eli."

He didn't respond immediately, which was unusual for him. But apparently thinking about what he was going to say hadn't made any difference in how autocratic it sounded.

"I'm going to take you home."

It wasn't a question; it was a statement. And that was very Eli. He wasn't about to risk the idea of her saying, "No," so he assumed her assent and intended to just move on from there to proceed in the fashion he most preferred.

But her mind reminded her that it was also very like Eli to try to take care of someone, especially a woman.

Especially her.

Jane snorted softly, still not looking away from her phone, even though she wasn't seeing what she was looking at. Every scintilla of her attention was on him, as was usual for her.

Old habits died very hard, apparently.

"Not fucking likely."

He continued to stand there next to her, and she knew exactly what he wanted to do. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his fingers flexing restlessly, as if in anticipation of action. He wanted to pick her up bodily—which he was more than capable of doing. He'd done it when she weighed more than she did now, over her vociferous complaints, and as if she was a size zero.

It was in her mind to warn him not to do it, but she stifled the impulse. She was going to speak to him as little as possible, drink her water and her coffee, and wait for her ride to arrive. She was determined she wasn't even going to give him the satisfaction of asking him to go away.

More softly said than his last edict, but still dominant and commanding as fuck, he intoned, "You're drunk, and I'll make sure you get home safely, if I have to pick you up and carry you out, myself."

That only served to point out to her how well she still knew him.

She gave him a one word response that still let him know that she considered it none of his business. "Uber." Then she continued playing Words with Friends on her phone. Not that she'd managed to put her letters together into any kind of coherent word with him standing there like that, as if he had every right to do so. She couldn't concentrate on the game, could barely see it, and had no idea with whom she was playing at this point. But that didn't matter. All that mattered was that she stay calm and carry on.

He scoffed. "You'd rather pay to get into a car with a stranger—when you're already falling down drunk—than ride home for free with me?"

Jane ignored him, wearing a big smirk that suggested that an idiot would have known that.

His tone was firmly back in dictatorial mode—emphasis on the "dic". He wasn't used to being disobeyed or ignored, especially not by her. "Cancel it, Jane."

Dear God, her name from his lips conjured up even memories of how he'd whispered it hotly into her ear, breathed it prayerfully against her most intimate places, and screamed it out in the throes of ecstasy she had brought him to.

Again, she ignored him, knowing full well that she did so at her own peril.

He waited—less than patiently—for her to say something, anything, then he crouched down next to her chair with surprising grace for such a big man. And they weren't even eye level then, either, she grimaced.

His words were very soft and very firm. "I'm going to take you home, so I can make sure that you've gotten there safely. I suggest that you cancel the Uber, or you're going to have wasted the driver's time."

That, at least, got her to stop playing, he was glad to see, although she'd stubbornly yet to actually look at him.

He'd been surprised to see her in a bar—she'd never had alcohol around him, but he guessed she'd changed some habits. Not that he could blame her. She looked thinner, too, by quite a bit, but he wasn't going to say that to her. His mama hadn't raised no fools.

He wanted nothing more than to do as he'd threatened and sweep her up into his arms and carry her out of there—not because he thought she couldn't handle her own life. Not because he saw her as helpless and weak; he knew she was a very smart, very capable woman. But that didn't stop very primitive urges from coursing through him, and they were all screaming that he needed to protect her—from drinking too much at a bar, from other men who might also come to want her so badly that no amount of masturbating soothed the ache, and, most devastatingly, from himself.

That was not taking into consideration that he ached to have her in his arms again, and if that was the only way to achieve that...

She sighed softly under her breath, but he, of course, heard it. He knew he was the last person she wanted to ever see again, and that he was on her last nerve, and that she was likely fighting back tears. All of which only made him just that much more determined to make sure she got home safely.

"I assume that telling you to go away would be just a

waste of my breath." That, too, was a statement rather than a question, issued in a tone that was so unlike her usual very pleasant one so as to cause the ever-present ache in his chest to become much worse.

Still, Eli couldn't help but want to grin at that, but he did his level best to suppress it.

"You assume correctly, little girl."

Christ, he was killing her—as if he hadn't done that—awfully close to it—once already. And once was more than enough for her.

When she finally did look at him, it was to roll her eyes exaggeratedly and snort softly, and he knew it wasn't at his confirmation of her assumption. It was at the endearment he'd very deliberately used.

It surprised him when she pushed her chair back all of a sudden and skirted deftly around him. He'd immediately stood up, ready to steady her if she was as uneasy on her feet as she had been a while ago. But she was feeling at least somewhat better now, it seemed, leaving him to trail after her like a lost lamb.

"Here you go, Christie." She handed the woman a couple of twenties for the evening's libations, along with a liberal tip. "Are you off now?"

"No, hon, I'm closing." The other woman eyed Eli and shrugged. "Sorry."

"What about Pickle?"

"Pickle's not on tonight, and Henny's gone already."

"Batting a thousand, as usual," she grumbled under her breath. Then she smiled up at Christie. "Thanks, anyway. Have a good night!"

"You, too." Still giving Eli the stink eye, she asked, "Want me to walk you to your Uber?"

"She's cancelling her Uber. I'm going to drive her home," Eli informed her, in no uncertain terms.

"That's why I offered," the woman replied without backing down in the least, which made Jane chuckle.

Eli scowled, which was a look that threw terror into most people's hearts.

But neither of the women around him seemed in the least fazed by it. Come to think of it, neither was his sister anymore. He must be losing his touch.

Jane was waffling, but then she heard the notification that her Uber was going to arrive soon, and she just headed for the door.

Eli easily got there before her short legs could carry her and held the door open. Her "thank you" was barely mumbled and barely civil, but automatic nonetheless.

Unfortunately, those same short legs prevented her from getting to the car, too, before Eli did. It wasn't as if she could run anywhere without knocking herself out with the girls. Seconds later, despite the fact that she had tried to yell and catch his attention so he wouldn't leave, she watched as he departed. Eli put his wallet back in his back pocket as he straightened and turned to catch her eye, looking much too smug for Jane to stand.

So, she just changed course and began to head for the parking lot. She rummaged around in her pocketbook for her keys, found them, and as she was rearranging things and not paying attention to him, she found them scooped out of her hand and into his big one.

Jane put her hand out to him, in mute demand, her mouth a grim, angry line.

He seemed to soften—a bit—and she remembered that coaxing tone well. "Jane, less than ten minutes ago, I watched you stand up and nearly fall down again, you were so drunk. Can you really tell me that you're fine to drive now? I'd sooner let you take the Uber than drive yourself home."

God, she hated him with every part of her body and parts of other people's, too!

Without a word, she stalked over in the relative darkness to his jalopy and stood by the door, waiting for him to unlock it.

"That's someone else's, honey. My car's a bit newer than that." He held out a fob and there was a beep from a car across the lot—something big and muscular and barely leashed, like himself.

Well, at least in his case, she knew for a fact that he wasn't compensating for a small dick.

It hurt to hear it every time he did it, but she ignored the endearment in favor of trudging over to the other car. She pulled on the passenger's door handle, but couldn't get in. The son of a bitch hadn't unlocked the passenger's side, just so he could walk over to her and do so, opening the door for her as he always had.

When Jane was seated, he even presumed to lean in and try to latch her seatbelt for her.

"If you touch that thing, you're going to withdraw a bloody stump," she threatened through her teeth, pulling it across her body and fastening it herself.

Well, it was more than she'd said to him all evening. There was that, at least, he supposed. Threatening bodily harm wasn't exactly what he'd been going for, but he'd take whatever he could get at this point. He knew he didn't really deserve anything better than that, although he had hopes of making her feel much less homicidal towards him in the near future.

Well, maybe not the near future.

Now that they were underway, he put her keys down on the console between them, saying in that low, sexy voice of his, "Thank you for letting me take you home, Jane."

She snatched them away as if she thought he was going

to try to catch her hand and hold it if she didn't, making him grimace at the reminder that he couldn't do that anymore.

She still wasn't looking at him and was acting as if she'd rather be in the car with pretty much anyone but him. Darth Vader, Hitler, and Jeffrey Dahmer all came to mind as replacements she'd probably prefer over his company. And he had only himself to blame for that.

He knew it was a weak start, but he wanted to get her talking. They'd always communicated so well. He'd missed that terribly. In the days and weeks afterward, he'd tried to call her and text her and email her. For the first day or so, they were simply ignored. After that, they all went exactly nowhere—returned undeliverable. She'd been ruthlessly efficient at shutting him out of her life. And, the bald-faced truth was that he couldn't blame her in the least.

His lame conversational gambit sent her digging in her pocketbook again. This time, she came up with earbuds, which she proceeded to plug in and use. He couldn't tell what she was listening to or what she was doing without running them off the road.

So, he reached over and pulled the closest of them out.

"I said, thank you for letting me take you home."

She put the bud back in.

He pulled it out.

Eli raised his voice ridiculously high, which made it crack badly, as if he was imitating her. "No, Eli, thank *you* for taking me home!"

If she didn't hate him for all she was worth, she might have laughed at that. The bud went back in her ear, but it was tugged out a second later.

"Do you like the car?"

She would have tried to crane herself as far away from him as she could in hopes of getting out of his reach, but that was a pipe dream. In these bucket seats—as nice as they

were—her ass was going nowhere, to say nothing of the fact that the man had an unnaturally long reach to go along with his freakishly long legs. Finally, she just left the bud out and continued to not listen to—or watch—an episode of *Castle Rock* on Hulu.

He was too damned distracting for her to comprehend it, not that she was going to let him know that.

In a last-ditch effort to get her attention, he tugged on the iPhone itself, and as a result, the car swerved a bit to the right.

"Fucking hell! And you thought I wouldn't be safe with an Uber driver?" Jane yelled.

"Language, Jane," he scolded softly, and she felt her cheeks flush painfully hot. "You don't think I'll pull this car over right here, right now, and put you over my knee?"

She was outraged at what he was saying but not sure how to best express it, so she said nothing, blinking back tears of frustration.

And, no, she wouldn't put that past him in the least.

"You're perfectly fine with me. She's very responsive," he purred. "Just like—"

"If you finish that sentence, I'm going to punch you in the fucking nuts, and I don't give a fuck whether doing so kills us both."

His equipment immediately tried to crawl back inside him at her words—and the unnaturally calm, if emotion filled, tone in which they were delivered. She was royally pissed, but he also heard the tears she was suppressing in her voice, as much as she tried to cover them up.

Eli shifted uneasily in his seat, and his, "I'm sorry," was undeniably heartfelt. "About everything, I'm sorry."

Jane tried to go back to her phone, but it seemed her thoughts and feelings were in too much of an uproar for her to concentrate on it. They both knew some of it was

the alcohol she'd consumed, but the rest of it was all his fault.

At least she wasn't playing on that damned phone any more. But now, he couldn't think of what to say to her to engage her in any kind of conversation—even an angry one, on her part.

And before he could think of anything, they were at her place, and she was out of the car practically before it came to a stop. He had intended to walk her to her door, even open it for her, if she would allow it. But that would not be happening any time soon.

He did, however, wait until he could see that she'd gotten into her house before he drove away. It was the least he could do—the very, very least.

"Three guesses who was in the bar last night, that I didn't find out about until he was standing next to me, demanding to take me home because I was drunk," she asked as she plopped down on the lounge chair next to the pool at her best friend's house the next night.

"Oh, I know—it was Eli."

Jane glared up at her friend. "You knew he was there?"

Sheila shrugged. "I thought you knew and were playing it cool. And day-um, those worn jeans clung to that beautiful ass of his—he looked scrumptious!"

Jane's expression grew dangerously dark, prompting her friend to say, "Sorry!" It had been more than several months since Jane's life had fallen apart, and she had been handling it almost unsettlingly well, so Sheila wasn't always sure how Jane was going to take things.

"I didn't know you were drunk," Sheila said quickly, hoping to distract her friend from the murderous thoughts

she was apparently dwelling on. "You've had much more than that and been straight as an arrow."

"Yeah, but I'm eating a lot less than I used to, Sheil. I had all of that booze—which was a no-no, by the way—and all I had to eat yesterday was a carefully measured cup of oatmeal for breakfast with a carefully measured half cup of one percent, four carefully measured ounces of chicken with four equally carefully measured ounces of mixed veggies for lunch, along with two tablespoons of *I Can Definitely Believe This Shit Ain't Butter*, and I had nothing for dinner at all. You know what I would have eaten usually. All of those carby bagels and muffins and burgers with fries, and you damned well know I would have ordered something horrendous to eat while we were drinking—at least onion rings or nachos or whatever else. All that shit used to sop up all of the liquor I put away."

"Yeah, I hadn't thought about it, but I guess the skinnier you get, the cheaper a date you'll be!"

Jane frowned as if puzzled at whether she'd just been complimented or insulted. "Thanks?"

"So what happened?" Her friend leaned closer, eager to hear every juicy bit of gossip she could.

"What else? Eli is still Eli. You know what a force of nature that man is. The cheating, lying bastard says 'jump', and ninety-nine-point nine percent of the people around him say, 'yes, Sir, may I have another?'" She conveniently ignored the fact that he'd made her say just that on more than one occasion.

Sheila looked a bit confused. "I think you might have mixed your metaphors, or scrambled your memes, or something like that there."

"Well, you got the gist. He insisted he was going to take me home."

"So?"

Jane drew in a deep breath and exhaled her very reluctant answer. "He took me home."

Her friend practically jumped out of her chair with excitement at hearing this monumental news. "He did?"

"No one from the bar could do it—Christie was working late and the cooks were gone. I had an Uber ordered by the time the asshole came over to me, but he, of course, with his effing stilt legs got to him before me. He paid the guy off to go away, and when I got my keys out, the mofo grabbed them out of my hand, and he had the audacity to remind me that the reason he'd come over was because he'd seen me wobble a little when I got up to leave about ten minutes before."

Sheila immediately became a turncoat. "Then good for him, I say!"

"You had better take that back, missy!" She gave her best friend since kindergarten her most intimidating glare.

But Sheila didn't back down. "I will not. If Eli kept you from becoming a bloodstain on Route 45 last night, then more power to him," she stated defiantly. But Sheila wasn't a fool. She immediately followed it up with a much more conciliatory, "You know how horrible that road is, Jane. Lots of people lose control on it when they're sober. If the choice is between live, pissed at me you and dead, not pissed at me you, I choose the former, and I'm glad he kept you safe." Sheila peeped up at her friend, who didn't look as if she'd softened much. "The bastard!"

That got her. "Damn straight! Fuck him and his potentially lifesaving chivalrous tendencies! Who the fuck does he think he is, anyway?"

"*Yeah!*" Sheila agreed enthusiastically. Then she reconsidered, her face scrunched up as she puzzled. "Wait, what?"

"Just agree with me that he's a worthless piece of—"

"Six-foot-four if he's an inch, muscles bulging beneath a

shirt that can barely contain them, thick salt and pepper hair, beardy goodness—" She'd gotten lost there somewhere.

Jane actually leaned over and got in Sheila's face, growling, "Excuse me? Do I have a traitor in my midst?"

"Goddamned son of a bitch!" Sheila finished with gusto.

"That's much better!"

"But you have to admit that he's damned fine."

"No. I. Do. Not."

"Right." Then she muttered under her breath, "But he is."

Jane snarled at her, and that brought Sheila nicely to heel for the rest of their evening.

The fact that Jane agreed with her friend's description of her ex—even now—was of no matter whatsoever.

Across town, though, it was another story entirely, as Eli indulged a bit more than he usually did while sitting in his beat up old recliner in his lonely living room. Even his usually adoring dog was giving him accusatory looks. He had one hand looking at his phone—not looking for porn to watch, but, instead, scrolling through the texts and emails they'd shared while they were together, with his other hand wrapped around his iron spike of a dick.