# Fifty Shades Trilogy

## E L James

Fifty Shades of Grey

Fifty Shades Darker

Fifty Shades Freed

# FIFTY SHADES
## *Trilogy*

---

E L James

*Vintage Books*
*A Division of Random House, Inc. | New York*

A VINTAGE EBOOK EDITION

*Fifty Shades of Grey* copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.
*Fifty Shades Darker* copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.
*Fifty Shades Freed* copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.

All rights reserved. The novels contained in this omnibus were each published separately in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. All were originally published in Australia by The Writer's Coffee Shop Publishing House, New South Wales, in 2011.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed* are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The author published an earlier serialized version of these stories online with different characters as "Master of the Universe" under the pseudonym Snowqueen's Icedragon.

**Vintage eISBN: 978-0-345-80357-3**

*Trilogy cover design by Peter Quach*

*Fifty Shades of Grey*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by Papuga2006*
*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*

*Fifty Shades Darker*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by E. Spek*
*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*

*Fifty Shades Freed*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by Kineticimagery*
*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*

www.vintagebooks.com

v3.1_r5

# Contents

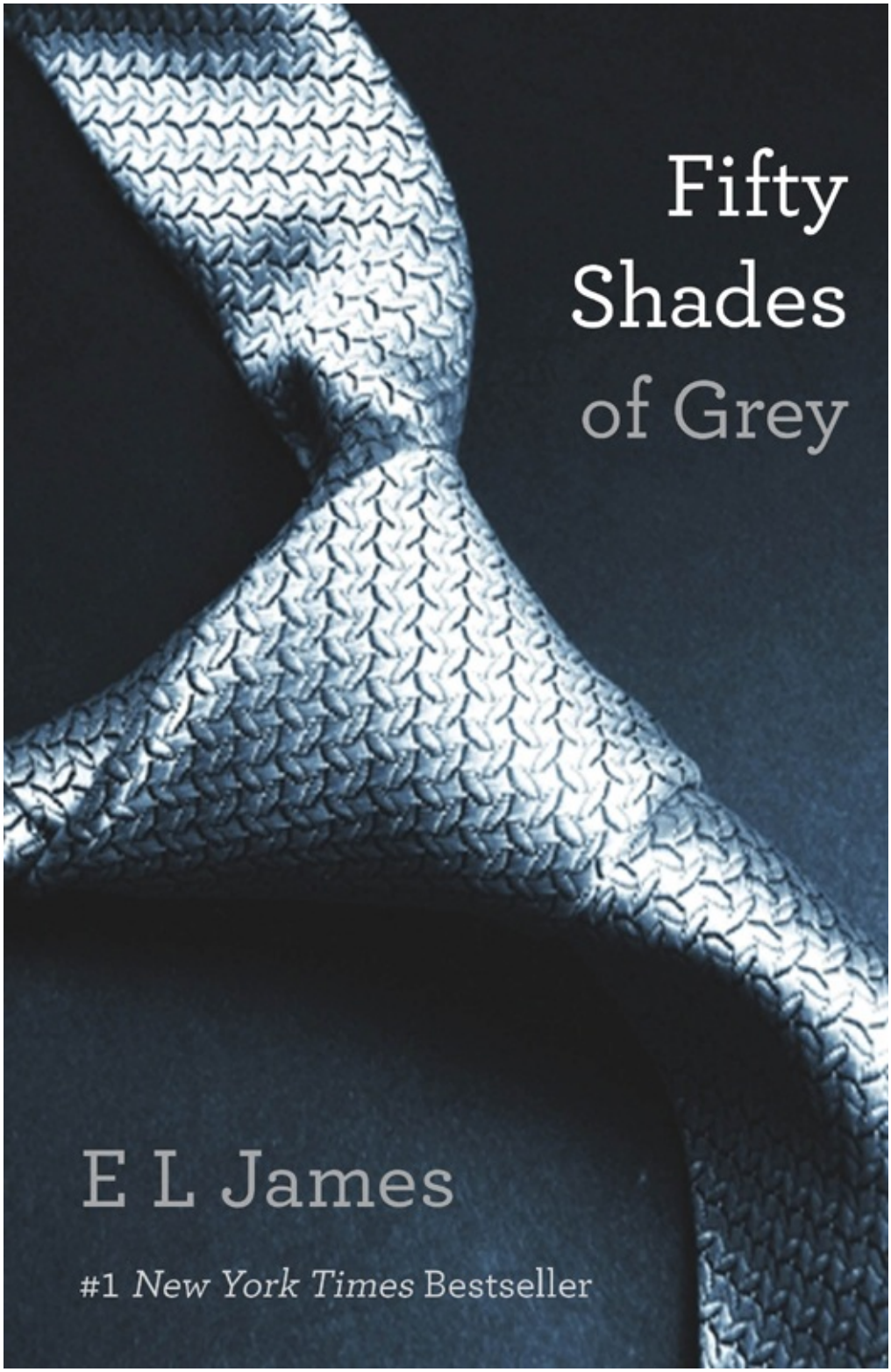
*Cover*
*Title page*
*Copyright*

Fifty Shades of Grey

Fifty Shades Darker

Fifty Shades Freed

*About the Author*


Fifty
Shades
of Grey
E L James
#1 New York Times Bestseller

# FIFTY SHADES *of* GREY

E L James

*Vintage Books*
*A Division of Random House, Inc. | New York*

First published by The Writer's Coffee Shop Publishing House,
Australia, 2011

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, APRIL 2012

*Copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.*

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The author published an earlier serialized version of this story online with different characters as "Master of the Universe" under the pseudonym Snowqueen's Icedragon.

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at Library of Congress.

eISBN: 978-1-61213-029-3

*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by Papuga2006*

www.vintagebooks.com

v3.1

*For Niall,*
*the master of my universe*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the following people for their help and support:

To my husband, Niall, thank you for tolerating my obsession, being a domestic god, and doing the first edit.

To my boss, Lisa, thank you for putting up with me over the last year or so while I indulged in this madness.

To CCL, I'll never tell, but thank you.

To the original bunker babes, thank you for your friendship and constant support.

To SR, thank you for all the helpful advice from the start and for going first.

To Sue Malone, thanks for sorting me out.

To Amanda and all at TWCS, thank you for taking a punt

# Contents

*Master - Table of Contents*

*Fifty Shades of Grey*
*Copyright*
*Dedication*
*Acknowledgments*

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two
Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six

## CHAPTER ONE

I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair—it just won't behave, and damn Katherine Kavanagh for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I should be studying for my final exams, which are next week, yet here I am trying to brush my hair into submission. *I must not sleep with it wet. I must not sleep with it wet.* Reciting this mantra several times, I attempt, once more, to bring it under control with the brush. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up. My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi-presentable.

Kate is my roommate, and she has chosen today of all days to succumb to the flu. Therefore, she cannot attend the interview she'd arranged to do, with some mega-industrialist tycoon I've never heard of, for the student newspaper. So I have been volunteered. I have final exams to cram for and one essay to finish, and I'm supposed to be working this afternoon, but no—today I have to drive 165 miles to downtown Seattle in order to meet the enigmatic CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. As an exceptional entrepreneur and major benefactor of our university, his time is extraordinarily precious—much more precious than mine—but he has granted Kate an interview. A real coup, she tells me. Damn her extracurricular activities.

Kate is huddled on the couch in the living room.

"Ana, I'm sorry. It took me nine months to get this interview. It will take another six to reschedule, and we'll both have graduated by then. As the editor, I can't blow this off. Please," Kate begs me in her rasping, sore throat voice. How does she do it? Even ill she looks gamine and gorgeous, strawberry blond hair in place and green eyes bright, although now red rimmed and runny. I ignore my pang of unwelcome sympathy.

"Of course I'll go, Kate. You should get back to bed. Would you like some NyQuil or Tylenol?"

"NyQuil, please. Here are the questions and my digital recorder. Just press record here. Make notes, I'll transcribe it all."

"I know nothing about him," I murmur, trying and failing to suppress my rising panic.

“The questions will see you through. Go. It’s a long drive. I don’t want you to be late.”

“Okay, I’m going. Get back to bed. I made you some soup to heat up later.” I stare at her fondly. *Only for you, Kate, would I do this*.

“I will. Good luck. And thanks, Ana—as usual, you’re my lifesaver.”

Gathering my backpack, I smile wryly at her, then head out the door to the car. I cannot believe I have let Kate talk me into this. But then Kate can talk anyone into anything. She’ll make an exceptional journalist. She’s articulate, strong, persuasive, argumentative, beautiful—and she’s my dearest, dearest friend.

THE ROADS ARE CLEAR as I set off from Vancouver, Washington, toward Interstate 5. It’s early, and I don’t have to be in Seattle until two this afternoon. Fortunately, Kate has lent me her sporty Mercedes CLK. I’m not sure Wanda, my old VW Beetle, would make the journey in time. Oh, the Merc is a fun drive, and the miles slip away as I hit the pedal to the metal.

My destination is the headquarters of Mr. Grey’s global enterprise. It’s a huge twenty-story office building, all curved glass and steel, an architect’s utilitarian fantasy, with GREY HOUSE written discreetly in steel over the glass front doors. It’s a quarter to two when I arrive, greatly relieved that I’m not late as I walk into the enormous—and frankly intimidating—glass, steel, and white sandstone lobby.

Behind the solid sandstone desk, a very attractive, groomed, blonde young woman smiles pleasantly at me. She’s wearing the sharpest charcoal suit jacket and white shirt I have ever seen. She looks immaculate.

“I’m here to see Mr. Grey. Anastasia Steele for Katherine Kavanagh.”

“Excuse me one moment, Miss Steele.” She arches her eyebrow as I stand self-consciously before her. I’m beginning to wish I’d borrowed one of Kate’s formal blazers rather than worn my navy-blue jacket. I have made an effort and worn my one and only skirt, my sensible brown knee-length boots, and a blue sweater. For me, this is smart. I tuck one of the escaped tendrils of my hair behind my ear as I pretend she doesn’t intimidate me.

“Miss Kavanagh is expected. Please sign in here, Miss Steele. You’ll want the last elevator on the right, press for the twentieth floor.” She smiles kindly at me, amused no doubt, as I sign in.

She hands me a security pass that has “visitor” very firmly stamped on the front. I can’t help my smirk. Surely it’s obvious that I’m just visiting. I don’t fit in here at all. *Nothing changes*. I inwardly sigh. Thanking her, I walk over to the bank of elevators and past the two security men who are both far more smartly dressed than I am in their well-cut black suits.

The elevator whisks me at terminal velocity to the twentieth floor. The doors slide open, and I'm in another large lobby—again all glass, steel, and white sandstone. I'm confronted by another desk of sandstone and another young blonde woman, this time dressed impeccably in black and white, who rises to greet me.

"Miss Steele, could you wait here, please?" She points to a seated area of white leather chairs.

Behind the leather chairs is a spacious glass-walled meeting room with an equally spacious dark wood table and at least twenty matching chairs around it. Beyond that, there is a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the Seattle skyline that looks out through the city toward the Sound. It's a stunning vista, and I'm momentarily paralyzed by the view. *Wow*.

I sit down, fish the questions from my backpack, and go through them, inwardly cursing Kate for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this man I'm about to interview. He could be ninety or he could be thirty. The uncertainty is galling, and my nerves resurface, making me fidget. I've never been comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring the anonymity of a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously at the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, curled up in a chair in the campus library. Not sitting twitching nervously in a colossal glass-and-stone edifice.

I roll my eyes at myself. *Get a grip, Steele*. Judging from the building, which is too clinical and modern, I guess Grey is in his forties: fit, tanned, and fair-haired to match the rest of the personnel.

Another elegant, flawlessly dressed blonde comes out of a large door to the right. What is it with all the immaculate blondes? It's like Stepford here. Taking a deep breath, I stand up.

"Miss Steele?" the latest blonde asks.

"Yes," I croak, and clear my throat. "Yes." There, that sounded more confident.

"Mr. Grey will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket?"

"Oh, please." I struggle out of the jacket.

"Have you been offered any refreshment?"

"Um—no." Oh dear, is Blonde Number One in trouble?

Blonde Number Two frowns and eyes the young woman at the desk.

"Would you like tea, coffee, water?" she asks, turning her attention back to me.

"A glass of water. Thank you," I murmur.

"Olivia, please fetch Miss Steele a glass of water." Her voice is stern. Olivia

scoots up and scurries to a door on the other side of the foyer.

"My apologies, Miss Steele, Olivia is our new intern. Please be seated. Mr. Grey will be another five minutes."

Olivia returns with a glass of iced water.

"Here you go, Miss Steele."

"Thank you."

Blonde Number Two marches over to the large desk, her heels clicking and echoing on the sandstone floor. She sits down, and they both continue their work.

Perhaps Mr. Grey insists on all his employees being blonde. I'm wondering idly if that's legal, when the office door opens and a tall, elegantly dressed, attractive African American man with short dreads exits. I have definitely worn the wrong clothes.

He turns and says through the door, "Golf this week, Grey?"

I don't hear the reply. He turns, sees me, and smiles, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners. Olivia has jumped up and called the elevator. She seems to excel at jumping from her seat. She's more nervous than me!

"Good afternoon, ladies," he says as he departs through the sliding door.

"Mr. Grey will see you now, Miss Steele. Do go through," Blonde Number Two says. I stand rather shakily, trying to suppress my nerves. Gathering up my backpack, I abandon my glass of water and make my way to the partially open door.

"You don't need to knock—just go in." She smiles kindly.

I push open the door and stumble through, tripping over my own feet and falling headfirst into the office.

Double crap—me and my two left feet! I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to Mr. Grey's office, and gentle hands are around me, helping me to stand. I am so embarrassed, damn my clumsiness. I have to steel myself to glance up. Holy cow—he's so young.

"Miss Kavanagh." He extends a long-fingered hand to me once I'm upright. "I'm Christian Grey. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?"

So young—and attractive, very attractive. He's tall, dressed in a fine gray suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper-colored hair and intense, bright gray eyes that regard me shrewdly. It takes a moment for me to find my voice.

"Um. Actually—" I mutter. If this guy is over thirty, then I'm a monkey's uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. Must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my heart rate.

“Miss Kavanagh is indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don’t mind, Mr. Grey.”

“And you are?” His voice is warm, possibly amused, but it’s difficult to tell from his impassive expression. He looks mildly interested but, above all, polite.

“Anastasia Steele. I’m studying English literature with Kate, um … Katherine … um … Miss Kavanagh, at WSU Vancouver.”

“I see,” he says simply. I think I see the ghost of a smile in his expression, but I’m not sure.

“Would you like to sit?” He waves me toward an L-shaped white leather couch.

His office is way too big for just one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, there’s a modern dark wood desk that six people could comfortably eat around. It matches the coffee table by the couch. Everything else is white—ceiling, floors, and walls, except for the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small paintings hang, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. They are exquisite—a series of mundane, forgotten objects painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

“A local artist. Trouton,” says Grey when he catches my gaze.

“They’re lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary,” I murmur, distracted both by him and the paintings. He cocks his head to one side and regards me intently.

“I couldn’t agree more, Miss Steele,” he replies, his voice soft, and for some inexplicable reason I find myself blushing.

Apart from the paintings, the rest of the office is cold, clean, and clinical. I wonder if it reflects the personality of the Adonis who sinks gracefully into one of the white leather chairs opposite me. I shake my head, disturbed at the direction of my thoughts, and retrieve Kate’s questions from my backpack. Next, I set up the digital recorder and am all fingers and thumbs, dropping it twice on the coffee table in front of me. Mr. Grey says nothing, waiting patiently—I hope—as I become increasingly embarrassed and flustered. When I pluck up the courage to look at him, he’s watching me, one hand relaxed in his lap and the other cupping his chin and trailing his long index finger across his lips. I think he’s trying to suppress a smile.

“S-sorry,” I stutter. “I’m not used to this.”

“Take all the time you need, Miss Steele,” he says.

“Do you mind if I record your answers?”

“After you’ve taken so much trouble to set up the recorder, you ask me now?”

I flush. He’s teasing me? I hope. I blink at him, unsure what to say, and I think he takes pity on me because he relents. “No, I don’t mind.”

“Did Kate, I mean, Miss Kavanagh, explain what the interview was for?”

“Yes. To appear in the graduation issue of the student newspaper as I shall be conferring the degrees at this year’s graduation ceremony.”

*Oh!* This is news to me, and I’m temporarily preoccupied by the thought that someone not much older than me—okay, maybe six years or so, and okay, mega-successful, but still—is going to present me with my degree. I frown, dragging my wayward attention back to the task at hand.

“Good.” I swallow nervously. “I have some questions, Mr. Grey.” I smooth a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

“I thought you might,” he says, deadpan. He’s laughing at me. My cheeks heat at the realization, and I sit up and square my shoulders in an attempt to look taller and more intimidating. Pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look professional.

“You’re very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe your success?” I glance up at him. His smile is rueful, but he looks vaguely disappointed.

“Business is all about people, Miss Steele, and I’m very good at judging people. I know how they tick, what makes them flourish, what doesn’t, what inspires them, and how to incentivize them. I employ an exceptional team, and I reward them well.” He pauses and fixes me with his gray stare. “My belief is to achieve success in any scheme one has to make oneself master of that scheme, know it inside and out, know every detail. I work hard, very hard to do that. I make decisions based on logic and facts. I have a natural gut instinct that can spot and nurture a good solid idea and good people. The bottom line is it’s always down to good people.”

“Maybe you’re just lucky.” This isn’t on Kate’s list—but he’s so arrogant. His eyes flare momentarily in surprise.

“I don’t subscribe to luck or chance, Miss Steele. The harder I work the more luck I seem to have. It really is all about having the right people on your team and directing their energies accordingly. I think it was Harvey Firestone who said, ‘The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.’ ”

“You sound like a control freak.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Steele,” he says without a trace of humor in his smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens, and my face flushes again.

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me? His overwhelming good looks maybe? The way his eyes blaze at me? The way he strokes his index finger

against his lower lip? I wish he'd stop doing that.

"Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself in your secret reveries that you were born to control things," he continues, his voice soft.

"Do you feel that you have immense power?" *Control freak.*

"I employ over forty thousand people, Miss Steele. That gives me a certain sense of responsibility—power, if you will. If I were to decide I was no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell, twenty thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so."

My mouth drops open. I am staggered by his lack of humility.

"Don't you have a board to answer to?" I ask, disgusted.

"I own my company. I don't have to answer to a board." He raises an eyebrow at me. Of course, I would know this if I had done some research. But holy crap, he's arrogant. I change tack.

"And do you have any interests outside your work?"

"I have varied interests, Miss Steele." A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Very varied." And for some reason, I'm confounded and heated by his steady gaze. His eyes are alight with some wicked thought.

"But if you work so hard, what do you do to chill out?"

"Chill out?" He smiles, revealing perfect white teeth. I stop breathing. He really is beautiful. No one should be this good-looking.

"Well, to 'chill out,' as you put it—I sail, I fly, I indulge in various physical pursuits." He shifts in his chair. "I'm a very wealthy man, Miss Steele, and I have expensive and absorbing hobbies."

I glance quickly at Kate's questions, wanting to get off this subject.

"You invest in manufacturing. Why, specifically?" I ask. Why does he make me so uncomfortable?

"I like to build things. I like to know how things work: what makes things tick, how to construct and deconstruct. And I have a love of ships. What can I say?"

"That sounds like your heart talking rather than logic and facts."

His mouth quirks up, and he stares appraisingly at me.

"Possibly. Though there are people who'd say I don't have a heart."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because they know me well." His lip curls in a wry smile.

"Would your friends say you're easy to get to know?" And I regret the question as soon as I say it. It's not on Kate's list.

"I'm a very private person, Miss Steele. I go a long way to protect my privacy. I don't often give interviews …"

"Why did you agree to do this one?"

“Because I’m a benefactor of the university, and for all intents and purposes, I couldn’t get Miss Kavanagh off my back. She badgered and badgered my PR people, and I admire that kind of tenacity.”

I know how tenacious Kate can be. That’s why I’m sitting here squirming uncomfortably under his penetrating gaze, when I should be studying for my exams.

“You also invest in farming technologies. Why are you interested in that area?”

“We can’t eat money, Miss Steele, and there are too many people on this planet who don’t have enough to eat.”

“That sounds very philanthropic. Is it something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world’s poor?”

He shrugs noncommittally.

“It’s shrewd business,” he murmurs, though I think he’s being disingenuous. It doesn’t make sense—feeding the world’s poor? I can’t see the financial benefit of this, only the virtue of the ideal. I glance at the next question, confused by his attitude.

“Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?”

“I don’t have a philosophy as such. Maybe a guiding principle—Carnegie’s: ‘A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.’ I’m very singular, driven. I like control—of myself and those around me.”

“So you want to possess things?” *You are a control freak*.

“I want to deserve to possess them, but yes, bottom line, I do.”

“You sound like the ultimate consumer.”

“I am.” He smiles, but the smile doesn’t touch his eyes. Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I can’t help thinking that we’re talking about something else, but I’m mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising, or maybe it’s just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Kate has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

“You were adopted. How much do you think that’s shaped the way you are?” Oh, this is personal. I stare at him, hoping he’s not offended. His brow furrows.

“I have no way of knowing.”

My interest is piqued. “How old were you when you were adopted?”

“That’s a matter of public record, Miss Steele.” His tone is stern. *Crap*. Yes, of course—if I’d known I was doing this interview, I would have done some research. Flustered, I move on quickly.

“You’ve had to sacrifice family life for your work.”

“That’s not a question.” He’s terse.

“Sorry.” I squirm; he’s made me feel like an errant child. I try again. “Have you had to sacrifice family life for your work?”

“I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I’m not interested in extending my family beyond that.”

“Are you gay, Mr. Grey?”

He inhales sharply, and I cringe, mortified. *Crap*. Why didn’t I employ some kind of filter before I read this straight out? How can I tell him I’m just reading the questions? Damn Kate and her curiosity!

“No, Anastasia, I’m not.” He raises his eyebrows, a cool gleam in his eyes. He does not look pleased.

“I apologize. It’s, um … written here.” It’s the first time he’s said my name. My heartbeat has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again. Nervously, I tuck my loosened hair behind my ear.

He cocks his head to one side.

“These aren’t your own questions?”

The blood drains from my head.

“Er … no. Kate—Miss Kavanagh—she compiled the questions.”

“Are you colleagues on the student paper?” *Oh no*. I have nothing to do with the student paper. It’s her extracurricular activity, not mine. My face is aflame.

“No. She’s my roommate.”

He rubs his chin in quiet deliberation, his gray eyes appraising me.

“Did you volunteer to do this interview?” he asks, his voice deadly quiet.

Hang on, who’s supposed to be interviewing whom? His eyes burn into me, and I’m compelled to answer with the truth.

“I was drafted. She’s not well.” My voice is weak and apologetic.

“That explains a great deal.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Blonde Number Two enters.

“Mr. Grey, forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes.”

“We’re not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting.”

Andrea hesitates, gaping at him. She appears lost. He turns his head slowly to face her and raises his eyebrows. She flushes bright pink. *Oh, good. It’s not just me*.

“Very well, Mr. Grey,” she mutters, then exits. He frowns, and turns his attention back to me.

“Where were we, Miss Steele?”

*Oh, we’re back to “Miss Steele” now*.

“Please, don’t let me keep you from anything.”

“I want to know about you. I think that’s only fair.” His eyes are alight with curiosity. *Double crap. Where’s he going with this?* He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeples his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very … distracting. I swallow.

“There’s not much to know.”

“What are your plans after you graduate?”

I shrug, thrown by his interest. *Move to Seattle with Kate, find a job*. I haven’t really thought beyond my finals.

“I haven’t made any plans, Mr. Grey. I just need to get through my final exams.” Which I should be studying for right now, rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

“We run an excellent internship program here,” he says quietly. I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Is he offering me a job?

“Oh. I’ll bear that in mind,” I murmur, confounded. “Though I’m not sure I’d fit in here.” Oh no. I’m musing out loud again.

“Why do you say that?” He tilts his head to one side, intrigued, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” *I’m uncoordinated, scruffy, and I’m not blonde*.

“Not to me.” His gaze is intense, all humor gone, and strange muscles deep in my belly clench suddenly. I tear my eyes away from his scrutiny and stare blindly down at my knotted fingers. *What’s going on?* I have to go—now. I lean forward to retrieve the recorder.

“Would you like me to show you around?” he asks.

“I’m sure you’re far too busy, Mr. Grey, and I do have a long drive.”

“You’re driving back to Vancouver?” He sounds surprised, anxious even. He glances out of the window. It’s begun to rain. “Well, you’d better drive carefully.” His tone is stern, authoritative. Why should he care? “Did you get everything you need?” he adds.

“Yes, sir,” I reply, packing the recorder into my backpack. His eyes narrow, speculatively.

“Thank you for the interview, Mr. Grey.”

“The pleasure’s been all mine,” he says, polite as ever.

As I rise, he stands and holds out his hand.

“Until we meet again, Miss Steele.” And it sounds like a challenge, or a threat, I’m not sure which. I frown. When will we ever meet again? I shake his hand once more, astounded that that odd current between us is still there. It must be my nerves.

“Mr. Grey.” I nod at him. Moving with lithe athletic grace to the door, he

opens it wide.

"Just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Steele." He gives me a small smile. Obviously, he's referring to my earlier less-than-elegant entry into his office. I blush.

"That's very considerate, Mr. Grey," I snap, and his smile widens. *I'm glad you find me entertaining*, I glower inwardly, walking into the foyer. I'm surprised when he follows me out. Andrea and Olivia both look up, equally surprised.

"Did you have a coat?" Grey asks.

"A jacket."

Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which Grey takes from her before she can hand it to me. He holds it up and, feeling ridiculously self-conscious, I shrug it on. Grey places his hands for a moment on my shoulders. I gasp at the contact. If he notices my reaction, he gives nothing away. His long index finger presses the button summoning the elevator, and we stand waiting—awkwardly on my part, coolly self-possessed on his. The doors open, and I hurry in, desperate to escape. *I really need to get out of here*. When I turn to look at him, he's gazing at me and leaning against the doorway beside the elevator with one hand on the wall. He really is very, very good-looking. It's unnerving.

"Anastasia," he says as a farewell.

"Christian," I reply. And mercifully, the doors close.

## CHAPTER TWO

My heart is pounding. The elevator arrives on the first floor, and I scramble out as soon as the doors slide open, stumbling once but fortunately not sprawling onto the immaculate sandstone floor. I race for the wide glass doors, and suddenly I'm free in the bracing, cleansing, damp air of Seattle. Raising my face, I welcome the cool, refreshing rain. I close my eyes and take a deep, purifying breath, trying to recover what's left of my equilibrium.

No man has ever affected me the way Christian Grey has, and I cannot fathom why. Is it his looks? His civility? Wealth? Power? I don't understand my irrational reaction. I breathe an enormous sigh of relief. What in heaven's name was that all about? Leaning against one of the steel pillars of the building, I valiantly attempt to calm down and gather my thoughts. I shake my head. What *was* that? My heart steadies to its regular rhythm, and when I can breathe normally again I head for the car.

AS I LEAVE THE city limits behind, I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely I'm overreacting to something that's imaginary. Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself—but on the flip side, he's arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface. An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. He may be arrogant, but then he has a right to be—he's accomplished so much at such a young age. He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but why should he? Again, I'm irritated that Kate didn't give me a brief biography.

While cruising toward Interstate 5, my mind continues to wander. I'm truly perplexed as to what makes someone so driven to succeed. Some of his answers were so cryptic—as if he had a hidden agenda. And Kate's questions—ugh! The adoption and asking him if he was gay! I shudder. I can't believe I said that. *Ground, swallow me up now!* Every time I think of that question in the future, I will cringe with embarrassment. Damn Katherine Kavanagh!

I check the speedometer. I'm driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion. And I know it's the memory of those penetrating gray eyes gazing at me and a stern voice telling me to drive carefully. Shaking my head, I realize that Grey's more like a man twice his age.

*Forget it, Ana*, I scold myself. I decide that, all in all, it's been a very interesting experience, but I shouldn't dwell on it. *Put it behind you*. I never have to see him again. I'm immediately cheered by the thought. I switch on the stereo and turn the volume up loud, sit back and listen to thumping indie rock music as I press down on the accelerator. As I hit Interstate 5, I realize I can drive as fast as I want.

WE LIVE IN A small community of duplex apartments close to the Vancouver campus of WSU. I'm lucky—Kate's parents bought the place for her, and I pay peanuts for rent. It's been home for four years now. As I pull up outside, I know Kate is going to want a blow-by-blow account, and she is tenacious. Well, at least she has the digital recorder. I hope I won't have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

"Ana! You're back." Kate sits in our living area, surrounded by books. She's clearly been studying for finals—she's still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little rabbits, the ones she reserves for the aftermath of breaking up with boyfriends, for assorted illnesses, and for general moody depression. She bounds up to me and hugs me hard.

"I was beginning to worry. I expected you back sooner."

"Oh, I thought I made good time considering the interview ran over." I wave the digital recorder at her.

"Ana, thank you so much for doing this. I owe you, I know. How was it? What was he like?" Oh no—here we go, the Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition.

I struggle to answer her question. What can I say?

"I'm glad it's over and I don't have to see him again. He was rather intimidating, you know." I shrug. "He's very focused, intense even—and young. Really young."

Kate gazes innocently at me. I frown.

"Don't you look so innocent. Why didn't you give me a biography? He made me feel like such an idiot for skimping on basic research."

Kate clamps a hand to her mouth. "Jeez, Ana, I'm sorry—I didn't think."

I huff.

"Mostly he was courteous, formal, slightly stuffy—like he's old before his time. He doesn't talk like a man of twentysomething. How old *is* he, anyway?"

"Twenty-seven. Jeez, Ana, I'm sorry. I should have briefed you, but I was in such a panic. Let me have the recorder and I'll start transcribing the interview."

"You look better. Did you eat your soup?" I ask, keen to change the subject.

"Yes, and it was delicious as usual. I'm feeling much better." She smiles at me in gratitude. I check my watch.

"I have to run. I can still make my shift at Clayton's."

"Ana, you'll be exhausted."

"I'll be fine. I'll see you later."

I'VE WORKED AT CLAYTON'S since I started at WSU. It's the largest independent hardware store in the Portland area, and over the four years I've worked here, I've come to know a little bit about most everything we sell—although ironically, I'm crap at any DIY. I leave all that to my dad.

I'M GLAD I CAN make my shift as it gives me something to focus on that isn't Christian Grey. We're busy—it's the start of the summer season, and folks are redecorating their homes. Mrs. Clayton looks relieved to see me.

"Ana! I thought you weren't going to make it today."

"My appointment didn't take as long as I thought. I can do a couple of hours."

"I'm real pleased to see you."

She sends me to the storeroom to start restocking shelves, and I'm soon absorbed in the task.

WHEN I ARRIVE HOME later, Katherine is wearing headphones and working on her laptop. Her nose is still pink, but she has her teeth into a story, so she's concentrating and typing furiously. I'm thoroughly drained, exhausted by the long drive, by the grueling interview, and by being swamped at Clayton's. I slump on to the couch, thinking about the essay I have to finish and all the studying I haven't done today because I was holed up with … *him*.

"You've got some good stuff here, Ana. Well done. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you around. He obviously wanted to spend more time with you." She gives me a fleeting quizzical look.

I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases. That wasn't the reason, surely. He just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was lord of all he surveyed. I realize I'm biting my lip, and I hope Kate doesn't notice. But she seems absorbed in her transcription.

"I hear what you mean about formal. Did you take any notes?" she asks.

"Um … no, I didn't."

"That's fine. I can still make a fine article with this. Shame we don't have some original stills. Good-looking son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"I suppose so." I try hard to sound disinterested, and I think I succeed.

"Oh, come on, Ana—even you can't be immune to his looks." She arches a perfect eyebrow at me.

*Crap!* I feel my cheeks heating so I distract her with flattery, always a good

ploy.

"You probably would have got a lot more out of him."

"I doubt that, Ana. Come on—he practically offered you a job. Given that I foisted this on you at the last minute, you did very well." She glances up at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

"So what did you really think of him?" Damn, she's inquisitive. Why can't she just let this go? *Think of something—quick.*

"He's very driven, controlling, arrogant—scary, but very charismatic. I can understand the fascination," I add truthfully, hoping this will shut her up once and for all.

"You, fascinated by a man? That's a first," she snorts.

I start gathering the makings of a sandwich so she can't see my face.

"Why did you want to know if he was gay? Incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question. I was mortified, and he was pissed to be asked, too." I scowl at the memory.

"Whenever he's in the society pages, he never has a date."

"It was embarrassing. The whole thing was embarrassing. I'm glad I'll never have to lay eyes on him again."

"Oh, Ana, it can't have been that bad. I think he sounds quite taken with you."

*Taken with me?* Now Kate's being ridiculous.

"Would you like a sandwich?"

"Please."

WE TALK NO MORE of Christian Grey that evening, much to my relief. Once we've eaten, I'm able to sit at the dining table with Kate and, while she works on her article, I work on my essay on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Damn, that woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century. By the time I finish, it's midnight, and Kate has long since gone to bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've accomplished so much for a Monday.

I curl up in my white iron bed, wrap my mother's quilt around me, close my eyes, and I'm instantly asleep. That night I dream of dark places, bleak, cold white floors, and gray eyes.

FOR THE REST OF the week, I throw myself into my studies and my job at Clayton's. Kate is busy, too, compiling her last edition of the student newspaper before she has to relinquish it to the new editor while also cramming for her finals. By Wednesday, she's much better, and I no longer have to endure the sight of her pink-flannel-with-too-many-rabbits PJs. I call my mom in Georgia to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck on my final exams. She proceeds to tell me

about her latest venture into candlemaking—my mother is all about new business ventures. Fundamentally, she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It'll be something new next week. She worries me. I hope she hasn't mortgaged the house to finance this latest scheme. And I hope Bob—her relatively new but much older husband—is keeping an eye on her now that I'm no longer there. He does seem a lot more grounded than Husband Number Three.

"How are things with you, Ana?"

For a moment, I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention. "I'm fine."

"Ana? Have you met someone?" *Wow … how does she do that?* The excitement in her voice is palpable.

"No, Mom, it's nothing. You'll be the first to know if I do."

"Ana, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me."

"Mom, I'm fine. How's Bob?" As ever, distraction is the best policy.

Later that evening, I call Ray, my stepdad, Mom's Husband Number Two, the man I consider my father and the man whose name I bear. It's a brief conversation. In fact, it's not so much a conversation as a one-sided series of grunts in response to my gentle coaxing. Ray is not a talker. But he's still alive, he's still watching soccer on TV (and going bowling or fly-fishing, or making furniture, when he's not). Ray is a skilled carpenter and the reason I know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw. All seems well with him.

FRIDAY NIGHT, KATE AND I are debating what to do with our evening—we want some time off from our studies, from our work, and from student newspapers—when the doorbell rings. Standing on our doorstep is my good friend José clutching a bottle of champagne.

"José! Great to see you!" I give him a quick hug. "Come in."

José is the first person I met when I arrived at WSU, looking as lost and lonely as I did. We recognized a kindred spirit in each other that day, and we've been friends ever since. Not only do we share a sense of humor, but we also discovered that Ray and José Senior were in the same army unit together. As a result, our fathers have become good friends, too.

José is studying engineering and is the first in his family to make it to college. He's pretty damn bright, but his real passion is photography. José has a great eye for a good picture.

"I have news." He grins, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Don't tell me—you've managed not to get kicked out for another week," I tease, and he scowls playfully at me.

"The Portland Place Gallery is going to exhibit my photos next month."

“That’s amazing—congratulations!” Delighted for him, I hug him again. Kate beams at him, too.

“Way to go, José! I should put this in the paper. Nothing like last-minute editorial changes on a Friday evening.” She feigns annoyance.

“Let’s celebrate. I want you to come to the opening.” José looks intently at me and I flush. “Both of you, of course,” he adds, glancing nervously at Kate.

José and I are good friends, but I know deep down inside he’d like to be more. He’s cute and funny, but he’s just not for me. He’s more like the brother I never had. Katherine often teases me that I’m missing the need-a-boyfriend gene, but the truth is I just haven’t met anyone who … well, whom I’m attracted to, even though part of me longs for the fabled trembling knees, heart-in-my-mouth, butterflies-in-my-belly moments.

Sometimes I wonder if there’s something wrong with me. Perhaps I’ve spent too long in the company of my literary romantic heroes, and consequently my ideals and expectations are far too high. But in reality, nobody’s ever made me feel like that.

*Until very recently*, the unwelcome, still-small voice of my subconscious whispers. NO! I banish the thought immediately. I am not going there, not after that painful interview. *Are you gay, Mr. Grey?* I wince at the memory. I know I’ve dreamed about him most nights since then, but that’s just to purge the awful experience from my system, surely.

I watch José open the bottle of champagne. He’s tall, and in his jeans and T-shirt, he’s all shoulders and muscles, tanned skin, dark hair, and burning dark eyes. Yes, José’s pretty hot, but I think he’s finally getting the message: we’re just friends. The cork makes its loud pop, and José looks up and smiles.

SATURDAY AT THE STORE is a nightmare. We are besieged by do-it-yourselfers wanting to spruce up their homes. Mr. and Mrs. Clayton and John and Patrick—the two other part-timers—and I are besieged by customers. But there’s a lull around lunchtime, and Mrs. Clayton asks me to check on some orders while I’m sitting behind the counter at the register discreetly eating my bagel. I’m engrossed in the task, checking catalog numbers against the items we need and the items we’ve ordered, eyes flicking from the order book to the computer screen and back as I make sure the entries match. Then, for some reason, I glance up … and find myself locked in the bold gray gaze of Christian Grey, who’s standing at the counter, staring at me.

*Heart failure*.

“Miss Steele. What a pleasant surprise.” His gaze is unwavering and intense.

Holy crap. What the hell is *he* doing here, looking all outdoorsy with his

tousled hair and in his cream chunky-knit sweater, jeans, and walking boots? I think my mouth has popped open, and I can't locate my brain or my voice.

"Mr. Grey," I whisper, because that's all I can manage. There's a ghost of a smile on his lips and his eyes are alight with humor, as if he's enjoying some private joke.

"I was in the area," he says by way of explanation. "I need to stock up on a few things. It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Steele." His voice is warm and husky like dark melted chocolate fudge caramel … or something.

I shake my head to gather my wits. My heart is pounding at a frantic tempo, and for some reason I'm blushing furiously under his steady scrutiny. I am utterly thrown by the sight of him standing before me. My memories of him did not do him justice. He's not merely good-looking—he's the epitome of male beauty, breathtaking, and he's here. Here in Clayton's Hardware Store. Go figure. Finally my cognitive functions are restored and reconnected with the rest of my body.

"Ana. My name's Ana," I mutter. "What can I help you with, Mr. Grey?"

He smiles, and again it's like he's privy to some big secret. It is so disconcerting. Taking a deep breath, I put on my professional I've-worked-in-this-shop-for-years façade. *I can do this*.

"There are a few items I need. To start with, I'd like some cable ties," he murmurs, his expression both cool and amused.

*Cable ties?*

"We stock various lengths. Shall I show you?" I mutter, my voice soft and wavering. *Get a grip, Steele*.

A slight frown mars Grey's rather lovely brow. "Please. Lead the way, Miss Steele," he says. I try for nonchalance as I come out from behind the counter, but really I'm concentrating hard on not falling over my own feet—my legs are suddenly the consistency of Jell-O. I'm so glad I decided to wear my best jeans this morning.

"They're with the electrical goods, aisle eight." My voice is a little too bright. I glance up at him and regret it almost immediately. Damn, he's handsome.

"After you," he murmurs, gesturing with his long-fingered, beautifully manicured hand.

With my heart almost strangling me—because it's in my throat trying to escape from my mouth—I head down one of the aisles to the electrical section. *Why is he in Portland? Why is he here at Clayton's?* And from a very tiny, underused part of my brain—probably located at the base of my medulla oblongata near where my subconscious dwells—comes the thought: *He's here to see you*. No way! I dismiss it immediately. Why would this beautiful, powerful,

urbane man want to see me? The idea is preposterous, and I kick it out of my head.

"Are you in Portland on business?" I ask, and my voice is too high, like I've got my finger trapped in a door or something. *Damn! Try to be cool, Ana!*

"I was visiting the WSU farming division. It's based in Vancouver. I'm currently funding some research there in crop rotation and soil science," he says matter-of-factly. *See? Not here to find you at all*, my subconscious sneers at me, loud, proud, and pouty. I flush at my foolish, wayward thoughts.

"All part of your feed-the-world plan?" I tease.

"Something like that," he acknowledges, and his lips quirk up in a half smile.

He gazes at the selection of cable ties we stock at Clayton's. What on Earth is he going to do with those? I cannot picture him as a do-it-yourselfer at all. His fingers trail across the various packages displayed, and for some inexplicable reason, I have to look away. He bends and selects a packet.

"These will do," he says with his oh-so-secret smile.

"Is there anything else?"

"I'd like some masking tape."

*Masking tape?*

"Are you redecorating?" The words are out before I can stop them. Surely he hires laborers or has staff to help him decorate?

"No, not redecorating," he says quickly, then smirks, and I have the uncanny feeling that he's laughing at me.

*Am I that funny? Funny looking?*

"This way," I murmur, embarrassed. "Masking tape is in the decorating aisle."

I glance behind me as he follows.

"Have you worked here long?" His voice is low, and he's gazing at me, concentrating hard. I blush brightly. Why the hell does he have this effect on me? I feel like I'm fourteen years old—gauche, as always, and out of place. *Eyes front, Steele!*

"Four years," I mutter as we reach our goal. To distract myself, I reach down and select the two widths of masking tape that we stock.

"I'll take that one," Grey says softly, pointing to the wider tape, which I pass to him. Our fingers brush very briefly, and the current is there again, zapping through me like I've touched an exposed wire. I gasp involuntarily as I feel it all the way down to somewhere dark and unexplored, deep in my belly. Desperately, I scrabble around for my equilibrium.

"Anything else?" My voice is husky and breathy. His eyes widen slightly.

"Some rope, I think." His voice mirrors mine, husky.

"This way." I duck my head down to hide my recurring blush and move

toward the aisle.

"What sort were you after? We have synthetic and natural filament rope … twine … cable cord …" I halt at his expression, his eyes darkening. *Holy cow*.

"I'll take five yards of the natural filament rope, please."

Quickly, with trembling fingers, I measure out five yards against the fixed ruler, aware that his hot gray gaze is on me. I dare not look at him. Jeez, could I feel any more self-conscious? Taking my Stanley knife from the back pocket of my jeans, I cut it then coil it neatly before tying it in a slipknot. By some miracle, I manage not to remove a finger with my knife.

"Were you a Girl Scout?" he asks, sculptured, sensual lips curled in amusement. *Don't look at his mouth!*

"Organized group activities aren't really my thing, Mr. Grey."

He arches a brow.

"What is your thing, Anastasia?" he asks, his voice soft, and his secret smile is back. I gaze at him, unable to express myself. I'm on shifting tectonic plates. *Try to be cool, Ana,* my tortured subconscious begs on bended knee.

"Books," I whisper, but inside, my subconscious is screaming: *You! You are my thing!* I slap it down instantly, mortified that my psyche is having ideas way out of its league.

"What kind of books?" He cocks his head to one side. *Why is he so interested?*

"Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mainly."

He rubs his chin with his long index finger and thumb as he contemplates my answer. Or perhaps he's just very bored and trying to hide it.

"Anything else you need?" I have to get off this subject—those fingers on that face are beguiling.

"I don't know. What else would you recommend?"

What would I recommend? I don't even know what you're doing.

"For a do-it-yourselfer?"

He nods, his eyes alive with wicked humor. I flush, and my gaze strays to his snug jeans.

"Coveralls," I reply, and I know I'm no longer screening what's coming out of my mouth.

He raises an eyebrow, amused yet again.

"You wouldn't want to ruin your clothing." I gesture vaguely in the direction of his jeans.

"I could always take them off." He smirks.

"Um." I feel the color in my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of *The*

*Communist Manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW.*

"I'll take some coveralls. Heaven forbid I should ruin any clothing," he says dryly.

I try to dismiss the unwelcome image of him without jeans.

"Do you need anything else?" I squeak as I hand him the blue coveralls.

He ignores my inquiry.

"How's the article coming along?"

He's finally asked me an easy question, away from all the innuendo and the confusing double-talk … a question I can answer. I grasp it tightly with two hands as if it were a life raft, and I go for honesty.

"I'm not writing it, Katherine is. Miss Kavanagh. My roommate, she's the writer. She's very happy with it. She's the editor of the newspaper, and she was devastated that she couldn't do the interview in person." I feel like I've come up for air—at last, a normal topic of conversation. "Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photographs of you."

"What sort of photographs does she want?"

Okay. I hadn't factored in this response. I shake my head, because I just don't know.

"Well, I'm around. Tomorrow, perhaps …"

"You'd be willing to do a photo shoot?" My voice is squeaky again. Kate will be in seventh heaven if I can pull this off. *And you might see him again tomorrow,* that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively at me. I dismiss the thought—of all the silly, ridiculous …

"Kate will be delighted—if we can find a photographer." I'm so pleased, I smile at him broadly. His lips part, like he's taking a sharp intake of breath, and he blinks. For a fraction of a second, he looks lost somehow, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position.

*Oh my. Christian Grey's lost look.*

"Let me know about tomorrow." Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet. "My card. It has my cell number on it. You'll need to call before ten in the morning."

"Okay." I grin up at him. Kate is going to be thrilled.

*"Ana!"*

Paul has materialized at the other end of the aisle. He's Mr. Clayton's youngest brother. I'd heard he was home from Princeton, but I wasn't expecting to see him today.

"Er, excuse me for a moment, Mr. Grey." Grey frowns as I turn away from him.

Paul has always been a buddy, and in this strange moment that I'm having

with the rich, powerful, awesomely off-the-charts attractive control freak Grey, it's great to talk to someone who's normal. Paul hugs me hard, taking me by surprise.

"Ana, hi, it's so good to see you!" he gushes.

"Hello, Paul, how are you? You home for your brother's birthday?"

"Yep. You're looking well, Ana, really well." He grins as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I shuffle from foot to foot, embarrassed. It's good to see Paul, but he's always been overfamiliar.

When I glance up at Christian Grey, he's watching us like a hawk, his eyes hooded and speculative, his mouth a hard, impassive line. He's changed from the weirdly attentive customer to someone else—someone cold and distant.

"Paul, I'm with a customer. Someone you should meet," I say, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in Grey's expression. I drag Paul over to meet him, and they size each other up. The atmosphere is suddenly arctic.

"Er, Paul, this is Christian Grey. Mr. Grey, this is Paul Clayton. His brother owns the place." And for some irrational reason, I feel I have to explain a bit more.

"I've known Paul ever since I've worked here, though we don't see each other that often. He's back from Princeton, where he's studying business administration." I'm babbling … *Stop now!*

"Mr. Clayton." Grey holds his hand out, his look unreadable.

"Mr. Grey." Paul returns his handshake. "Wait up—not *the* Christian Grey? Of Grey Enterprises Holdings?" Paul goes from surly to awestruck in less than a nanosecond. Grey gives him a polite smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Wow—is there anything I can get you?"

"Anastasia has it covered, Mr. Clayton. She's been very attentive." His expression is impassive, but his words … it's like he's saying something else entirely. It's baffling.

"Cool," Paul responds. "Catch you later, Ana."

"Sure, Paul." I watch him disappear toward the stockroom. "Anything else, Mr. Grey?"

"Just these items." His tone is clipped and cool. Damn … have I offended him? Taking a deep breath, I turn and head for the register. *What is his problem?*

I ring up the rope, coveralls, masking tape, and cable ties.

"That will be forty-three dollars, please." I glance up at Grey, and I wish I hadn't. He's watching me closely, intently. It's unnerving.

"Would you like a bag?" I ask as I take his credit card.

"Please, Anastasia." His tongue caresses my name, and my heart once again is

frantic. I can hardly breathe. Hurriedly, I place his purchases in a plastic bag.

"You'll call me if you want me to do the photo shoot?" He's all business once more. I nod, rendered speechless yet again, and hand back his credit card.

"Good. Until tomorrow, perhaps." He turns to leave, then pauses. "Oh—and Anastasia, I'm glad Miss Kavanagh couldn't do the interview." He smiles, then strides with renewed purpose out of the store, slinging the plastic bag over his shoulder, leaving me a quivering mass of raging female hormones. I spend several minutes staring at the closed door through which he's just left before I return to planet Earth.

*Okay—I like him*. There, I've admitted it to myself. I cannot hide from my feelings anymore. I've never felt like this before. I find him attractive, very attractive. But it's a lost cause, I know, and I sigh with bittersweet regret. It was just a coincidence, his coming here. But still, I can admire him from afar, surely. No harm can come of that. And if I find a photographer, I can do some serious admiring tomorrow. I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself grinning like a schoolgirl. I need to phone Kate and organize a photo shoot.

## CHAPTER THREE

Kate is ecstatic.

"But what was he doing at Clayton's?" Her curiosity oozes through the phone. I'm in the depths of the stockroom, trying to keep my voice casual.

"He was in the area."

"I think that is one huge coincidence, Ana. You don't think he was there to see you?" My heart lurches at the prospect, but it's a short-lived joy. The dull, disappointing reality is that he was here on business.

"He was visiting the farming division of WSU. He's funding some research," I mutter.

"Oh yes. He's given the department a $2.5 million grant." *Wow*.

"How do you know this?"

"Ana, I'm a journalist, and I've written a profile on the guy. It's my job to know this."

"Okay, Carla Bernstein, keep your hair on. So do you want these photos?"

"Of course I do. The question is, who's going to do them and where."

"We could ask him where. He says he's staying in the area."

"You can contact him?"

"I have his cell phone number."

Kate gasps.

"The richest, most elusive, most enigmatic bachelor in Washington State just gave you his cell phone number?"

"Er … yes."

"Ana! He likes you. No doubt about it." Her tone is emphatic.

"Kate, he's just trying to be nice." But even as I say the words, I know they're not true—Christian Grey doesn't do *nice*. He does polite, maybe. And a small, quiet voice whispers, *Perhaps Kate is right*. My scalp prickles at the idea that maybe, just maybe, he might like me. After all, he did say he was glad Kate didn't do the interview. I hug myself with quiet glee, rocking from side to side, entertaining the possibility that he might like me. Kate brings me back to the now.

"I don't know who we'll get to do the shoot. Levi, our regular photographer, can't. He's home in Idaho Falls for the weekend. He'll be pissed that he blew an

opportunity to photograph one of America's leading entrepreneurs."

"Hmm … What about José?"

"Great idea! You ask him—he'll do anything for you. Then call Grey and find out where he wants us." Kate is irritatingly cavalier about José.

"I think you should call him."

"Who, José?" Kate scoffs.

"No, Grey."

"Ana, you're the one with the relationship."

"Relationship?" I squeak at her, my voice rising several octaves. "I barely know the guy."

"At least you've met him," she says bitterly. "And it looks like he wants to know you better. Ana, just call him," she snaps and hangs up. She is so bossy sometimes. I frown at my cell, sticking my tongue out at it.

I'm just leaving a message for José when Paul enters the stockroom looking for sandpaper.

"We're kind of busy out there, Ana," he says without acrimony.

"Yeah, um, sorry," I mutter, turning to leave.

"So, how come you know Christian Grey?" Paul's voice is unconvincingly nonchalant.

"I had to interview him for our student newspaper. Kate wasn't well." I shrug, trying to sound casual and doing no better than him.

"Christian Grey in Clayton's. Go figure," Paul snorts, amazed. He shakes his head as if to clear it. "Anyway, want to grab a drink or something this evening?"

Whenever he's home he asks me on a date, and I always say no. It's a ritual. I've never considered it a good idea to date the boss's brother, and besides, Paul is cute in a wholesome all-American boy-next-door kind of way, but he's no literary hero, not by any stretch of the imagination. *Is Grey?* my subconscious asks me, her eyebrow figuratively raised. I slap her down.

"Don't you have a family dinner or something for your brother?"

"That's tomorrow."

"Maybe some other time, Paul. I need to study tonight. I have my finals next week."

"Ana, one of these days you'll say yes." He smiles as I escape to the store floor.

"BUT I DO PLACES, Ana, not people," José groans.

"José, please?" I beg. I pace the living room of our apartment, clutching my cell and staring out the window at the fading evening light.

"Give me that phone." Kate grabs the handset from me, tossing her silken

reddish-blond hair over her shoulder.

"Listen here, José Rodriguez, if you want our newspaper to cover the opening of your show, you'll do this shoot for us tomorrow, capiche?" Kate can be awesomely tough. "Good. Ana will call back with the location and the call time. We'll see you tomorrow." She snaps my cell phone off.

"Sorted. All we need to do now is decide where and when. Call him." She holds the phone out to me. My stomach twists. "Call Grey, now!"

I scowl at her and reach into my back pocket for his business card. I take a deep, steadying breath, and with shaking fingers, I dial the number.

He answers on the second ring. His tone is clipped, calm, and cold.

"Grey."

"Er … Mr. Grey? It's Anastasia Steele." I don't recognize my own voice, I'm so nervous. There's a brief pause. Inside I'm quaking.

"Miss Steele. How nice to hear from you." His voice has changed. He's surprised, I think, and he sounds so … warm—*seductive* even. My breath hitches, and I flush. I'm suddenly conscious that Katherine Kavanagh is staring at me, her mouth open, and I dart into the kitchen to avoid her unwanted scrutiny.

"Um—we'd like to go ahead with the photo shoot for the article." *Breathe, Ana, breathe*. My lungs drag in a hasty breath. "Tomorrow, if that's okay. Where would be convenient for you, sir?"

I can almost hear his sphinxlike smile through the phone.

"I'm staying at the Heathman in Portland. Shall we say nine thirty tomorrow morning?"

"Okay, we'll see you there." I am all gushing and breathy—like a child, not a grown woman who can vote and drink legally in the state of Washington.

"I look forward to it, Miss Steele." I visualize the wicked gleam in his eyes. *How can he make seven little words hold so much tantalizing promise?* I hang up. Kate is in the kitchen, and she's staring at me with a look of complete and utter consternation on her face.

"Anastasia Rose Steele. You like him! I've never seen or heard you so … so … affected by anyone before. You're actually blushing."

"Oh, Kate, you know I blush all the time. It's an occupational hazard with me. Don't be ridiculous," I snap. She blinks at me with surprise—I very rarely have hissy fits—and I briefly relent. "I just find him … intimidating, that's all."

"Heathman, that figures," mutters Kate. "I'll give the manager a call and negotiate a space for the shoot."

"I'll make supper. Then I need to study." I cannot hide my irritation with her as I open one of the cupboards to make supper.

I AM RESTLESS THAT night, tossing and turning, dreaming of smoky gray eyes, coveralls, long legs, long fingers, and dark, dark unexplored places. I wake twice in the night, my heart pounding. *Oh, I'm going to look just great tomorrow with so little sleep*, I scold myself. I punch my pillow and try to settle.

THE HEATHMAN IS NESTLED in the heart of downtown Portland. Its impressive brown stone edifice was completed just in time for the crash of the late 1920s. José, Travis, and I are traveling in my Beetle, and Kate is in her CLK, since we can't all fit in my car. Travis is José's friend and gopher, here to help out with the lighting. Kate has managed to acquire the use of a room at the Heathman free of charge for the morning in exchange for a credit in the article. When she explains at reception that we're here to photograph Christian Grey, CEO, we are instantly upgraded to a suite. Just a regular-sized suite, however, as apparently Mr. Grey is already occupying the largest one in the building. An over-keen marketing executive shows us up to the suite—he's terribly young and very nervous for some reason. I suspect Kate's beauty and commanding manner disarm him, because he's putty in her hands. The rooms are elegant, understated, and opulently furnished.

It's nine. We have half an hour to set up. Kate is in full flow.

"José, I think we'll shoot against that wall, do you agree?" She doesn't wait for his reply. "Travis, clear the chairs. Ana, could you ask housekeeping to bring up some refreshments? And let Grey know where we are."

*Yes, mistress*. She is so domineering. I roll my eyes but do as I'm told.

Half an hour later, Christian Grey walks into our suite.

*Holy crap!* He's wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, and gray flannel pants that hang from his hips. His unruly hair is still damp from a shower. My mouth goes dry looking at him … he's so freaking *hot*. Grey is followed into the suite by a man in his mid-thirties, all buzz cut and stubble in a sharp dark suit and tie who stands silently in the corner. His hazel eyes watch us impassively.

"Miss Steele, we meet again." Grey extends his hand, and I shake it, blinking rapidly. Oh my … he really is quite … As I touch his hand, I'm aware of that delicious current running right through me, lighting me up, making me blush, and I'm sure my erratic breathing must be audible.

"Mr. Grey, this is Katherine Kavanagh," I mutter, waving a hand toward Kate, who comes forward, looking him squarely in the eye.

"The tenacious Miss Kavanagh. How do you do?" He gives her a small smile, looking genuinely amused. "I trust you're feeling better? Anastasia said you were unwell last week."

"I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Grey." She shakes his hand firmly without batting

an eyelid. I remind myself that Kate has been to the best private schools in Washington. Her family has money, and she's grown up confident and sure of her place in the world. She doesn't take any crap. I am in awe of her.

"Thank you for taking the time to do this." She gives him a polite, professional smile.

"It's a pleasure," he answers, turning his gaze on me, and I flush again. Damn it.

"This is José Rodriguez, our photographer," I say, grinning at José, who smiles with affection back at me. His eyes cool when he looks from me to Grey.

"Mr. Grey." He nods.

"Mr. Rodriguez." Grey's expression changes, too, as he appraises José.

"Where would you like me?" Grey asks him. His tone sounds vaguely threatening. But Katherine is not about to let José run the show.

"Mr. Grey—if you could sit here, please? Be careful of the lighting cables. And then we'll do a few standing, too." She directs him to a chair set up against the wall.

Travis switches on the lights, momentarily blinding Grey, and mutters an apology. Then Travis and I stand back and watch as José proceeds to snap away. He takes several photographs handheld, asking Grey to turn this way, then that, to move his arm, then put it down again. Moving to the tripod, José takes several more, while Grey sits and poses, patiently and naturally, for about twenty minutes. My wish has come true: I can stand and admire Grey from not so afar. Twice our eyes lock, and I have to tear myself away from his cloudy gaze.

"Enough sitting." Katherine wades in again. "Standing, Mr. Grey?" she asks.

He stands, and Travis scurries in to remove the chair. The shutter on José's Nikon starts clicking again.

"I think we have enough," José announces five minutes later.

"Great," says Kate. "Thank you again, Mr. Grey." She shakes his hand, as does José.

"I look forward to reading the article, Miss Kavanagh," murmurs Grey, and turns to me, standing by the door. "Will you walk with me, Miss Steele?" he asks.

"Sure," I say, completely thrown. I glance anxiously at Kate, who shrugs at me. I notice José scowling behind her.

"Good day to you all," says Grey as he opens the door, standing aside to allow me out first.

*Holy hell … what's this about? What does he want?* I pause in the hotel corridor, fidgeting nervously as Grey emerges from the room followed by Mr. Buzz Cut in his sharp suit.

“I’ll call you, Taylor,” he murmurs to Buzz Cut. Taylor wanders back down the corridor, and Grey turns his burning gray gaze to me. *Crap … have I done something wrong?*

“I wondered if you would join me for coffee this morning.”

My heart slams into my mouth. A date? *Christian Grey is asking me on a date*. He’s asking if you want a coffee. *Maybe he thinks you haven’t woken up yet*, my subconscious whines at me in a sneering mood again. I clear my throat, trying to control my nerves.

“I have to drive everyone home,” I murmur apologetically, twisting my hands and fingers in front of me.

*“Taylor,”* he calls, making me jump. Taylor, who had been retreating down the corridor, turns and heads back toward us.

“Are they based at the university?” Grey asks, his voice soft and inquiring. I nod, too stunned to speak.

“Taylor can take them. He’s my driver. We have a large 4x4 here, so he’ll be able to take the equipment, too.”

“Mr. Grey?” Taylor asks when he reaches us, giving nothing away.

“Please, can you drive the photographer, his assistant, and Miss Kavanagh back home?”

“Certainly, sir,” Taylor replies.

“There. Now can you join me for coffee?” Grey smiles as if it’s a done deal.

I frown.

“Um—Mr. Grey, er—this really … look, Taylor doesn’t have to drive them home.” I flash a brief look at Taylor, who remains stoically impassive. “I’ll swap vehicles with Kate, if you give me a moment.”

Grey smiles a dazzling, unguarded, natural, all-teeth-showing, glorious smile. *Oh my* … He opens the door of the suite so I can go in. I scoot around him to reenter the room, finding Katherine in deep discussion with José.

“Ana, I think he definitely likes you,” she says with no preamble whatsoever. José glares at me with disapproval. “But I don’t trust him,” she adds. I raise my hand up in the hope that she’ll stop talking. By some miracle, she does.

“Kate, if you take Wanda, can I take your car?”

“Why?”

“Christian Grey has asked me to go for coffee with him.”

Her mouth pops open. Speechless Kate! I savor the moment. She grabs me by my arm and drags me into the bedroom that’s off the living area of the suite.

“Ana, there’s something about him.” Her tone is full of warning. “He’s gorgeous, I agree, but I think he’s dangerous. Especially for someone like you.”

“What do you mean, someone like me?” I demand, affronted.

“An innocent like you, Ana. You know what I mean,” she says a little irritated. I flush.

“Kate, it’s just coffee. I’m starting my exams this week, and I need to study, so I won’t be long.”

She purses her lips as if considering my request. Finally, she fishes her car keys out of her pocket and hands them to me. I hand her mine.

“I’ll see you later. Don’t be long, or I’ll send out search and rescue.”

“Thanks.” I hug her.

I emerge from the suite to find Christian Grey waiting, leaning up against the wall, looking like a male model in a pose for some glossy high-end magazine.

“Okay, let’s do coffee,” I murmur, flushing a beet red.

He grins.

“After you, Miss Steele.” He stands up straight, holding his hand out for me to go first. I make my way down the corridor, my knees shaky, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart in my mouth thumping a dramatic, uneven beat. *I am going to have coffee with Christian Grey … and I hate coffee*.

We walk together down the wide hotel corridor to the elevators. *What should I say to him?* My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about? What on Earth do I have in common with him? His soft, warm voice startles me from my reverie.

“How long have you known Katherine Kavanagh?”

Oh, an easy question for starters.

“Since our freshman year. She’s a good friend.”

“Hmm,” he replies noncommittally. What is he thinking?

At the elevators, he presses the call button, and the bell rings almost immediately. The doors slide open, revealing a young couple in a passionate embrace inside. Surprised and embarrassed, they jump apart, staring guiltily in every direction but ours. Grey and I step into the elevator.

I am struggling to maintain a straight face, so I gaze down at the floor, feeling my cheeks turning pink. When I peek up at Grey through my lashes, he has a hint of a smile on his lips, but it’s very hard to tell. The young couple says nothing, and we travel down to the first floor in embarrassed silence. We don’t even have bland piped elevator music to distract us.

The doors open and, much to my surprise, Grey takes my hand, clasping it with his long, cool fingers. I feel the current run through me, and my already rapid heartbeat accelerates. As he leads me out of the elevator, we can hear the suppressed giggles of the couple erupting behind us. Grey grins.

“What is it about elevators?” he mutters.

We cross the expansive, bustling lobby of the hotel toward the entrance, but

Grey avoids the revolving door, and I wonder if that's because he'd have to let go of my hand.

Outside, it's a mild May Sunday. The sun is shining and the traffic is light. Grey turns left and strolls to the corner, where we wait for the crosswalk to change. He's still holding my hand. *I'm in the street, and Christian Grey is holding my hand*. No one has ever held my hand. I feel giddy, and I tingle all over. I attempt to smother the ridiculous grin that threatens to split my face in two. *Try to be cool, Ana*, my subconscious implores me. The green man appears, and we're off again.

We walk four blocks before we reach the Portland Coffee House, where Grey releases me to hold the door open so I can step inside.

"Why don't you choose a table while I get the drinks? What would you like?" he asks, polite as ever.

"I'll have … um—English Breakfast tea, bag out."

He raises his eyebrows.

"No coffee?"

"I'm not keen on coffee."

He smiles.

"Okay, bag out tea. Sugar?"

For a moment, I'm stunned, thinking it's an endearment, but fortunately my subconscious kicks in with pursed lips. *No, stupid—do you take sugar?*

"No thanks." I stare down at my knotted fingers.

"Anything to eat?"

"No thank you." I shake my head, and he heads to the counter.

I surreptitiously gaze at him from beneath my lashes as he stands in line waiting to be served. I could watch him all day … he's tall, broad shouldered, and slim, and the way those pants hang from his hips … *Oh my*. Once or twice he runs his long, graceful fingers through his now dry but still disorderly hair. *Hmm … I'd like to do that*. The thought comes unbidden into my mind, and my face flames. I bite my lip and stare down at my hands again, not liking where my wayward thoughts are headed.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Grey is back, startling me.

I go crimson. *I was just thinking about running my fingers through your hair and wondering if it would feel soft to touch*. I shake my head. He's carrying a tray, which he sets down on the small, round birch-veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate bearing a lone teabag labeled TWININGS ENGLISH BREAKFAST—my favorite. He has a coffee that bears a wonderful leaf pattern imprinted in the milk. *How do they do that?* I wonder idly. He's also bought himself a blueberry muffin. Putting the tray aside, he sits opposite me and

crosses his long legs. He looks so comfortable, so at ease with his body, I envy him. Here's me, all gawky and uncoordinated, barely able to get from A to B without falling flat on my face.

"Your thoughts?" he prompts me.

"This is my favorite tea." My voice is quiet, breathy. I simply can't believe I'm sitting opposite Christian Grey in a coffee shop in Portland. He frowns. He knows I'm hiding something. I pop the teabag into the teapot and almost immediately fish it out again with my teaspoon. As I place the used teabag back on the side plate, he cocks his head, gazing quizzically at me.

"I like my tea black and weak," I mutter as an explanation.

"I see. Is he your boyfriend?"

*Whoa … What?*

"Who?"

"The photographer. José Rodriguez."

I laugh, nervous but curious. What gave him that impression?

"No. José's a good friend of mine, that's all. Why did you think he was my boyfriend?"

"The way you smiled at him, and he at you." His gaze holds mine. He's so unnerving. I want to look away but I'm caught—spellbound.

"He's more like family," I whisper.

Grey nods, seemingly satisfied with my response, and glances down at his blueberry muffin. His long fingers deftly peel back the paper, and I watch, fascinated.

"Do you want some?" he asks, and that amused, secret smile is back.

"No thanks." I frown and stare down at my hands again.

"And the boy I met yesterday, at the store. He's not your boyfriend?"

"No. Paul's just a friend. I told you yesterday." Oh, this is getting silly. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem nervous around men."

Holy crap, that's personal. *I'm just nervous around you, Grey*.

"I find you intimidating." I flush scarlet, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor, and gaze at my hands again. I hear his sharp intake of breath.

"You should find me intimidating." He nods. "You're very honest. Please don't look down. I like to see your face."

Oh. I glance at him, and he gives me an encouraging but wry smile.

"It gives me some sort of clue what you might be thinking," he breathes. "You're a mystery, Miss Steele."

Mysterious? Me?

"There's nothing mysterious about me."

“I think you’re very self-contained,” he murmurs.

Am I? *Wow … how am I managing that?* This is bewildering. *Me, self-contained? No way.*

“Except when you blush, of course, which is often. I just wish I knew what you were blushing about.” He pops a small piece of muffin into his mouth and starts to chew it slowly, not taking his eyes off me. And as if on cue, I blush. *Crap!*

“Do you always make such personal observations?”

“I hadn’t realized I was. Have I offended you?” He sounds surprised.

“No,” I answer truthfully.

“Good.”

“But you’re very high-handed.”

He raises his eyebrows and, if I’m not mistaken, flushes slightly, too.

“I’m used to getting my own way, Anastasia,” he murmurs. “In all things.”

“I don’t doubt it. Why haven’t you asked me to call you by your first name?” I’m surprised by my audacity. Why has this conversation become so serious? This isn’t going the way I thought it was going to go. I can’t believe I’m feeling so antagonistic toward him. It’s like he’s trying to warn me off.

“The only people who use my given name are my family and a few close friends. That’s the way I like it.”

Oh. He still hasn’t said, “Call me Christian.” He *is* a control freak, there’s no other explanation, and part of me is thinking maybe it would have been better if Kate had interviewed him. Two control freaks together. Plus, of course, she’s almost blond—well, strawberry blond—like all the women in his office. *And she’s beautiful*, my subconscious reminds me. I don’t like the idea of Christian and Kate. I take a sip of my tea, and Grey eats another small piece of his muffin.

“Are you an only child?” he asks.

*Whoa* … he keeps changing direction.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about your parents.”

Why does he want to know this? It’s so *dull*.

“My mom lives in Georgia with her new husband, Bob. My stepdad lives in Montesano.”

“Your father?”

“My father died when I was a baby.”

“I’m sorry,” he mutters, and a fleeting, troubled look crosses his face.

“I don’t remember him.”

“And your mother remarried?”

I snort.

“You could say that.”

He frowns at me.

“You’re not giving much away, are you?” he says dryly, rubbing his chin as if in deep thought.

“Neither are you.”

“You’ve interviewed me once already, and I can recollect some quite probing questions then.” He smirks at me.

*Holy shit*. He’s remembering the “gay” question. Once again, I’m mortified. In years to come, I know I’ll need intensive therapy to not feel this embarrassed every time I recall the moment. I start babbling about my mother—anything to block *that* memory.

“My mom is wonderful. She’s an incurable romantic. She’s currently on her fourth husband.”

Christian raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“I miss her,” I continue. “She has Bob now. I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her harebrained schemes don’t go as planned.” I smile fondly. I haven’t seen my mom for so long. Christian is watching me intently, taking occasional sips of his coffee. I really shouldn’t look at his mouth. It’s unsettling.

“Do you get along with your stepfather?”

“Of course. I grew up with him. He’s the only father I know.”

“And what’s he like?”

“Ray? He’s … taciturn.”

“That’s it?” Grey asks, surprised.

I shrug. What does this man expect? My life story?

“Taciturn like his stepdaughter,” Grey prompts.

I refrain from rolling my eyes at him.

“He likes soccer—European soccer especially—and bowling, and fly-fishing, and making furniture. He’s a carpenter. Ex-army.” I sigh.

“You lived with him?”

“Yes. My mom met Husband Number Three when I was fifteen. I stayed with Ray.”

He frowns as if he doesn’t understand.

“You didn’t want to live with your mom?” he asks.

*This really is none of his business*.

“Husband Number Three lived in Texas. My home was in Montesano. And … you know, my mom was newly married.” I stop. My mom never talks about Husband Number Three. Where is Grey going with this? This *is* none of his business. *Two can play at this game*.

“Tell me about your parents,” I ask.

He shrugs.

“My dad’s a lawyer, my mom is a pediatrician. They live in Seattle.”

Oh … he’s had an affluent upbringing. And I wonder about a successful couple who adopts three kids, and one of them turns into a beautiful man who takes on the business world and conquers it single-handed. What drove him to be that way? His folks must be proud.

“What do your siblings do?”

“Elliot’s in construction, and my little sister is in Paris, studying cookery under some renowned French chef.” His eyes cloud with irritation. He doesn’t want to talk about his family or himself.

“I hear Paris is lovely,” I murmur. Why doesn’t he want to talk about his family? Is it because he’s adopted?

“It’s beautiful. Have you been?” he asks, his irritation forgotten.

“I’ve never left mainland USA.” So now we’re back to banalities. What is he hiding?

“Would you like to go?”

“To Paris?” I squeak. This has thrown me—who wouldn’t want to go to Paris? “Of course,” I concede. “But it’s England that I’d really like to visit.”

He cocks his head to one side, running his index finger across his lower lip … *oh my*.

“Because?”

I blink rapidly. *Concentrate, Steele*.

“It’s the home of Shakespeare, Austen, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy. I’d like to see the places that inspired those people to write such wonderful books.”

All this talk of literary greats reminds me that I should be studying. I glance at my watch. “I’d better go. I have to study.”

“For your exams?”

“Yes. They start Tuesday.”

“Where’s Miss Kavanagh’s car?”

“In the hotel parking lot.”

“I’ll walk you back.”

“Thank you for the tea, Mr. Grey.”

He smiles his odd I’ve-got-a-whopping-big-secret smile.

“You’re welcome, Anastasia. It’s my pleasure. Come,” he commands, and holds his hand out to me. I take it, bemused, and follow him out of the coffee shop.

We stroll back to the hotel, and I’d like to say it’s in companionable silence. He at least looks his usual calm, collected self. As for me, I’m desperately trying

to gauge how our little coffee morning has gone. I feel like I've been interviewed for a job, but I'm not sure what for.

"Do you always wear jeans?" he asks out of the blue.

"Mostly."

He nods. We're back at the intersection, across the road from the hotel. My mind is reeling. *What an odd question …* And I'm aware that our time together is limited. This is it. This was it, and I've completely blown it, I know. Perhaps he has someone.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I blurt out. Holy crap—*I just said that out loud?*

His lips quirk up in a half smile, and he peers down at me.

"No, Anastasia. I don't do the girlfriend thing," he says softly.

Oh … *what does that mean?* He's not gay. Oh, maybe he is! He must have lied to me in his interview. And for a moment, I think he's going to follow up with some explanation, some clue to this cryptic statement—but he doesn't. I have to go. I have to try to reassemble my thoughts. I have to get away from him. I walk forward, and I trip, stumbling headlong into the road.

"Shit, Ana!" Grey cries. He tugs the hand that he's holding so hard that I fall back against him just as a cyclist whips past, narrowly missing me, heading the wrong way up this one-way street.

It all happens so fast—one minute I'm falling, the next I'm in his arms and he's holding me tightly against his chest. I inhale his clean, wholesome scent. He smells of freshly laundered linen and some expensive body wash. It's intoxicating. I inhale deeply.

"Are you okay?" he whispers. He has one arm around me, clasping me to him, while the fingers of his other hand softly trace my face, gently probing, examining me. His thumb brushes my lower lip, and his breath hitches. He's staring into my eyes, and I hold his anxious, burning gaze for a moment, or maybe it's forever … but eventually, my attention is drawn to his beautiful mouth. And for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed. I want to feel his mouth on mine.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Kiss me, damn it!* I implore him, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed with a strange, unfamiliar need, completely captivated by him. I'm staring at Christian Grey's mouth, mesmerized, and he's looking down at me, his gaze hooded, his eyes darkening. He's breathing harder than usual, and I've stopped breathing altogether. *I'm in your arms. Kiss me, please*. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gives me a small shake of his head as if in answer to my silent question. When he opens his eyes again, it's with some new purpose, a steely resolve.

"Anastasia, you should steer clear of me. I'm not the man for you," he whispers. *What? Where is this coming from?* Surely I should be the judge of that. I frown, and my head swims with rejection.

"Breathe, Anastasia, breathe. I'm going to stand you up and let you go," he says quietly, and he gently pushes me away.

Adrenaline has spiked through my body, from the near miss with the cyclist or the heady proximity to Christian, leaving me wired and weak. *NO!* my psyche screams as he pulls away, leaving me bereft. He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, carefully watching my reactions. And the only thing I can think is that I wanted to be kissed, made it pretty damned obvious, and he didn't do it. *He doesn't want me*. He really doesn't want me. I have royally screwed up the coffee morning.

"I've got this," I breathe, finding my voice. "Thank you," I mutter, awash with humiliation. How could I have misread the situation between us so utterly? I need to get away from him.

"For what?" He frowns. He hasn't taken his hands off me.

"For saving me," I whisper.

"That idiot was riding the wrong way. I'm glad I was here. I shudder to think what could have happened to you. Do you want to come and sit down in the hotel for a moment?" He releases me, his hands by his sides, and I'm standing in front of him feeling like a fool.

With a shake, I clear my head. I just want to go. All my vague, unarticulated hopes have been dashed. He doesn't want me. *What was I thinking?* I scold myself. *What would Christian Grey want with you?* my subconscious mocks me.

I wrap my arms around myself and turn to face the road and note with relief that the green man has appeared. I quickly make my way across, conscious that Grey is behind me. Outside the hotel, I turn briefly to face him but cannot look him in the eye.

"Thanks for the tea and doing the photo shoot," I murmur.

"Anastasia … I …" He stops, and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, so I peer unwillingly up at him. His gray eyes are bleak as he runs his hand through his hair. He looks torn, frustrated, his expression stark, all his careful control has evaporated.

"What, Christian?" I snap irritably after he says … nothing. I just want to go. I need to take my fragile, wounded pride away and somehow nurse it back to health.

"Good luck with your exams," he murmurs.

*Huh?* This is why he looks so desolate? This is the big sendoff? Just to wish me luck in my exams?

"Thanks." I can't disguise the sarcasm in my voice. "Good-bye, Mr. Grey." I turn on my heel, vaguely amazed that I don't trip, and without giving him a second glance, I disappear down the sidewalk toward the underground garage.

Once underneath the dark, cold concrete of the garage with its bleak fluorescent light, I lean against the wall and put my head in my hands. What was I thinking? Unbidden and unwelcome tears pool in my eyes. *Why am I crying?* I sink to the ground, angry at myself for this senseless reaction. Drawing up my knees, I fold in on myself. I want to make myself as small as possible. Perhaps this nonsensical pain will be smaller the smaller I am. Placing my head on my knees, I let the irrational tears fall unrestrained. I am crying over the loss of something I never had. *How ridiculous*. Mourning something that never was—my dashed hopes, my dashed dreams, and my soured expectations.

I have never been on the receiving end of rejection. Okay … so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball, but I understood that—running and doing something else at the same time like bouncing or throwing a ball is not my thing. I am a serious liability in any sporting field.

Romantically, though, I've never put myself out there, ever. A lifetime of insecurity—I'm too pale, too skinny, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my long list of faults goes on. So I have always been the one to rebuff any would-be admirers. There was that guy in my chemistry class who liked me, but no one has ever sparked my interest—no one except Christian Damn Grey. Maybe I should be kinder to the likes of Paul Clayton and José Rodriguez, though I'm sure neither of them has been found sobbing alone in dark places. Perhaps I just need a good cry.

*Stop! Stop now!* my subconscious is metaphorically screaming at me, arms folded, leaning on one leg and tapping her foot in frustration. *Get in the car, go home, do your studying. Forget about him … Now!* And stop all this self-pitying, wallowing crap.

I take a deep, steadying breath and stand up. *Get it together, Steele*. I head for Kate's car, wiping the tears off my face as I do. I will not think of him again. I can just chalk this incident up to experience and concentrate on my exams.

KATE IS SITTING AT the dining table at her laptop when I arrive. Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me.

"Ana, what's wrong?"

Oh no … not the Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition. I shake my head in a back-off-now-Kavanagh way—but I might as well be dealing with a blind, deaf mute.

"You've been crying." She has an exceptional gift for stating the damned obvious sometimes. "What did that bastard do to you?" she growls, and her face —jeez, she's scary.

"Nothing, Kate." That's actually the problem. The thought brings a wry smile to my face.

"Then why have you been crying? You never cry," she says, her voice softening. She stands, her green eyes brimming with concern. She puts her arms around me and hugs me. I need to say something just to get her to back off.

"I was nearly knocked over by a cyclist." It's the best that I can do, but it distracts her momentarily from … him.

"Jeez, Ana—are you okay? Were you hurt?" She holds me at arm's length and does a quick visual checkup on me.

"No. Christian saved me," I whisper. "But I was quite shaken."

"I'm not surprised. How was coffee? I know you hate coffee."

"I had tea. It was fine, nothing to report really. I don't know why he asked me."

"He likes you, Ana." She drops her arms.

"Not anymore. I won't be seeing him again." Yes, I manage to sound matter-of-fact.

"Oh?"

Damn it. She's intrigued. I head into the kitchen so that she can't see my face.

"Yeah … he's a little out of my league, Kate," I say as dryly as I can manage.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Kate, it's obvious." I whirl around and face her as she stands in the kitchen doorway.

"Not to me," she says. "Okay, he's got more money than you, but then he has

more money than most people in America!"

"Kate he's—" I shrug.

"Ana! For heaven's sake—how many times do I have to tell you? You're a total babe," she interrupts me. Oh no. She's off on this tirade again.

"Kate, please. I need to study." I cut her short. She frowns.

"Do you want to see the article? It's finished. José took some great pictures."

Do I need a visual reminder of the beautiful Christian I-Don't-Want-You Grey?

"Sure." I magic a smile on my face and stroll over to the laptop. And there he is, staring at me in black and white, staring at me and finding me lacking.

I pretend to read the article, all the time meeting his steady gray gaze, searching the photo for some clue as to why he's not the man for me—his own words to me. And it's suddenly blindingly obvious. He's too gloriously good-looking. We are poles apart and from two very different worlds. I have a vision of myself as Icarus flying too close to the sun and crashing and burning as a result. His words make sense. He's not the man for me. This is what he meant, and it makes his rejection easier to accept … almost. I can live with this. I understand.

"Very good, Kate," I manage. "I'm going to study." I am not going to think about him again for now, I vow to myself, and opening my course notes, I start to read.

IT'S ONLY WHEN I'M in bed, trying to sleep, that I allow my thoughts to drift through my strange morning. I keep coming back to the *I don't do the girlfriend thing* quote, and I'm angry that I didn't pounce on this information sooner, before I was in his arms mentally begging him with every fiber of my being to kiss me. He'd said it there and then. He didn't want me as a girlfriend. I turn onto my side. Idly, I wonder if perhaps he's celibate. I close my eyes and begin to drift. Maybe he's saving himself. *Well, not for you*. My sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me before unleashing itself on my dreams.

And that night, I dream of gray eyes and leafy patterns in milk, and I'm running through dark places with eerie strip lighting, and I don't know if I'm running toward something or away from it … it's just not clear.

---

I put my pen down. Finished. My final exam is over. A Cheshire cat grin spreads over my face. It's probably the first time all week that I've smiled. It's Friday, and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating. I might even get drunk! I've never been drunk before. I glance across the hall at Kate, and she's still

scribbling furiously, five minutes to the finish. This is it, the end of my academic career. I shall never have to sit in rows of anxious, isolated students again. Inside I'm doing graceful cartwheels around my head, knowing full well that's the only place I can do graceful cartwheels. Kate stops writing and puts her pen down. She glances across at me, and I catch her Cheshire cat smile, too.

We head back to our apartment together in her Mercedes, refusing to discuss our final paper. Kate is more concerned about what she's going to wear to the bar this evening. I am busily fishing around in my purse for my keys.

"Ana, there's a package for you." Kate is standing on the steps up to the front door holding a brown paper parcel. *Odd*. I haven't ordered anything from Amazon recently. Kate gives me the parcel and takes my keys to open the front door. It's addressed to Miss Anastasia Steele. There's no sender's address or name. Perhaps it's from my mom or Ray.

"It's probably from my folks."

"Open it!" Kate is excited as she heads into the kitchen for our exams-are-finished-hurrah champagne.

I open the parcel, and inside I find a half leather box containing three seemingly identical old cloth-covered books in mint condition and a plain white card. Written on one side, in black ink in neat cursive handwriting, is:

*Why didn't you tell me there was danger? Why didn't you warn me?*

*Ladies know what to guard against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks …*

I recognize the quote from *Tess*. I am stunned by the coincidence as I've just spent three hours writing about the novels of Thomas Hardy in my final examination. Perhaps there is no coincidence … perhaps it's deliberate. I inspect the books closely, three volumes of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I open the front cover of one of the books. Written in an old typeface on the front plate is:

**London: Jack R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1891**.

Holy shit—they are first editions. They must be worth a fortune, and I know immediately who's sent them. Kate is at my shoulder gazing at the books. She picks up the card.

"First editions," I whisper.

"No." Kate's eyes are wide with disbelief. "Grey?"

I nod. "Can't think of anyone else."

"What does this card mean?"

"I have no idea. I think it's a warning—honestly, he keeps warning me off. I have no idea why. It's not like I'm beating his door down." I frown.

"I know you don't want to talk about him, Ana, but he's seriously into you.

Warnings or no."

I have not let myself dwell on Christian Grey for the past week. Okay … so his gray eyes are still haunting my dreams, and I know it will take an eternity to expunge the feel of his arms around me and his wonderful fragrance from my brain. Why has he sent me this? He told me that I wasn't for him.

"I've found one *Tess* first edition for sale in New York for fourteen thousand dollars. But yours look in much better condition. They must have cost more." Kate is consulting her good friend Google.

"This quote—Tess says it to her mother after Alec d'Urberville has had his wicked way with her."

"I know," muses Kate. "What is he trying to say?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I can't accept these from him. I'll send them back with an equally baffling quote from some obscure part of the book."

"The bit where Angel Clare says fuck off?" Kate asks with a completely straight face.

"Yes, that bit." I giggle. I love Kate; she's loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Kate hands me a glass of champagne.

"To the end of exams and our new life in Seattle." She grins.

"To the end of exams, our new life in Seattle, and excellent results." We clink glasses and drink.

THE BAR IS LOUD and hectic, full of soon-to-be graduates out to get trashed. José joins us. He won't graduate for another year, but he's in the mood to party and gets us into the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for us all. As I down my fifth glass, I know this is not a good idea on top of the champagne.

"So what now, Ana?" José shouts at me over the noise.

"Kate and I are moving to Seattle. Kate's parents have bought a condo there for her."

"*Dios mío*, how the other half live. But you'll be back for my show?"

"Of course, José, I wouldn't miss it for the world." I smile, and he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"It means a lot to me that you'll be there, Ana," he whispers in my ear. "Another margarita?"

"José Luis Rodriguez—are you trying to get me drunk? Because I think it's working." I giggle. "I think I'd better have a beer. I'll go get us a pitcher."

"More drink, Ana!" Kate bellows.

Kate has the constitution of an ox. She's got her arm draped over Levi, one of our fellow English students and her usual photographer on the student

newspaper. He's given up taking photos of the drunkenness that surrounds him. He only has eyes for Kate. She's all tiny camisole, tight jeans, and high heels, hair piled high with tendrils hanging down softly around her face, her usual stunning self. Me, I'm more of a Converse and T-shirt kind of girl, but I'm wearing my most flattering jeans. I move out of José's hold and get up from our table.

Whoa. Head spin.

I have to grab the back of the chair. Tequila-based cocktails are not a good idea.

I make my way to the bar and decide that I should visit the bathroom while I am on my feet. *Good thinking, Ana*. I stagger off through the crowd. Of course, there's a line, but at least it's quiet and cool in the corridor. I reach for my cell phone to relieve the boredom of waiting. *Hmm … Who did I last call?* Was it José? Before that, a number I don't recognize. Oh yes. Grey, I think this is his number. I giggle. I have no idea what the time is; maybe I'll wake him. Perhaps he can tell me why he sent me those books and the cryptic message. If he wants me to stay away, he should leave me alone. I suppress a drunken grin and hit the "call" button. He answers on the second ring.

"Anastasia?" He's surprised to hear from me. Well, frankly, I'm surprised to be calling him. Then my befuddled brain registers … how does he know it's me?

"Why did you send me the books?" I slur at him.

"Anastasia, are you okay? You sound strange." His voice is filled with concern.

"I'm not the strange one, you are." There—that told him, my courage fuelled by alcohol.

"Anastasia, have you been drinking?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm … curious. Where are you?"

"In a bar."

"Which bar?" He sounds exasperated.

"A bar in Portland."

"How are you getting home?"

"I'll find a way." This conversation is not going how I expected.

"Which bar are you in?"

"Why did you send me the books, Christian?"

"Anastasia, where are you? Tell me now." His tone is so … so dictatorial, his usual control freak. I imagine him as an old-time movie director wearing jodhpurs, holding an old-fashioned megaphone and a riding crop. The image makes me laugh out loud.

“You’re so … domineering.” I giggle.

“Ana, so help me, where the fuck are you?”

Christian Grey is swearing at me. I giggle again. “I’m in Portland …’s a long way from Seattle.”

“Where in Portland?”

“Good night, Christian.”

“Ana!”

I hang up. Ha! Though he didn’t tell me about the books. I frown. Mission not accomplished. I am really quite drunk—my head swims uncomfortably as I shuffle with the line. Well, the object of the exercise was to get drunk. I have succeeded. This is what it’s like—*probably not an experience to be repeated*. The line has moved, and it’s now my turn. I stare blankly at the poster on the back of the toilet door that extols the virtues of safe sex. Holy crap, did I just call Christian Grey? Shit. My phone rings and it makes me jump. I yelp in surprise.

“Hi,” I bleat timidly in to the phone. I hadn’t reckoned on this.

“I’m coming to get you,” he says, and hangs up. Only Christian Grey could sound so calm and so threatening at the same time.

*Holy crap*. I pull my jeans up. My heart is thumping. Coming to get me? *Oh no*. I’m going to be sick … no … I’m fine. Hang on. He’s just messing with my head. I didn’t tell him where I was. He can’t find me here. Besides, it will take him hours to get here from Seattle, and we’ll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror. I look flushed and slightly unfocused. *Hmm … tequila*.

I wait at the bar for what feels like an eternity for the pitcher of beer and eventually return to the table.

“You’ve been gone so long,” Kate scolds me. “Where were you?”

“I was in line for the restroom.”

José and Levi are having some heated debate about our local baseball team. José pauses in his tirade to pour us all beers, and I take a long sip.

“Kate, I think I’d better step outside and get some fresh air.”

“Ana, you are such a lightweight.”

“I’ll be five minutes.”

I make my way through the crowd again. I am beginning to feel nauseated, my head is spinning uncomfortably, and I’m a little unsteady on my feet. More unsteady than usual.

Drinking in the cool evening air in the parking lot makes me realize how drunk I am. My vision has been affected, and I’m really seeing double of everything like in old reruns of *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. I think I’m going to be sick. Why did I let myself get this messed up?

“Ana,” José has joined me. “You okay?”

“I think I’ve just had a bit too much to drink.” I smile weakly at him.

“Me, too,” he murmurs, and his dark eyes are regarding me intently. “Do you need a hand?” he asks and steps closer, putting his arm around me.

“José, I’m okay. I’ve got this.” I try to push him away rather feebly.

“Ana, please,” he whispers, and now he’s holding me in his arms, pulling me close.

“José, what are you doing?”

“You know I like you Ana, please.” He has one hand at the small of my back holding me against him, the other at my chin tipping back my head. *Holy fuck … he’s going to kiss me*.

“No, José, stop—no.” I push him, but he’s a wall of hard muscle, and I cannot shift him. His hand has slipped into my hair, and he’s holding my head in place.

“Please, Ana, *cariño*,” he whispers against my lips. His breath is soft and smells too sweet—of margarita and beer. He gently trails kisses along my jaw up to the side of my mouth. I feel panicky, drunk, and out of control. The feeling is suffocating.

“José, no,” I plead. *I don’t want this*. You are my friend, and I think I’m going to throw up.

“I think the lady said no,” a voice in the dark says quietly. Holy shit! Christian Grey, he’s here. How? José releases me.

“Grey,” he says tersely. I glance anxiously up at Christian. He’s glowering at José, and he’s furious. Crap. My stomach heaves, and I double over, my body no longer able to tolerate the alcohol, and I vomit spectacularly on to the ground.

“Ugh—*Dios mío*, Ana!” José jumps back in disgust. Grey grabs my hair and pulls it out of the firing line and gently leads me over to a raised flowerbed on the edge of the parking lot. I note, with deep gratitude, that it’s in relative darkness.

“If you’re going to throw up again, do it here. I’ll hold you.” He has one arm around my shoulders—the other is holding my hair in a makeshift ponytail down my back so it’s off my face. I try awkwardly to push him away, but I vomit again … and again. *Oh, shit … how long is this going to last?* Even when my stomach’s empty and nothing is coming up, horrible dry heaves rack my body. I vow silently that I’ll never ever drink again. This is just too appalling for words. Finally, it stops.

My hands are resting on the brick wall of the flowerbed, barely holding me up. Vomiting profusely is exhausting. Grey takes his hands off me and passes me a handkerchief. Only he would have a monogrammed, freshly laundered linen handkerchief. *CTG*. I didn’t know you could still buy these. Vaguely I

wonder what the *T* stands for as I wipe my mouth. I cannot bring myself to look at him. I'm swamped with shame, disgusted with myself. I want to be swallowed up by the azaleas in the flowerbed and be anywhere but here.

José is still hovering by the entrance to the bar, watching us. I groan and put my head in my hands. This has to be the single worst moment of my life. My head is still swimming as I try to remember a worse one—and I can only come up with Christian's rejection—and this is so, so many shades darker in terms of humiliation. I risk a peek at him. He's staring down at me, his face composed, giving nothing away. Turning, I glance at José, who looks pretty shamefaced himself and, like me, intimidated by Grey. I glare at him. I have a few choice words for my so-called friend, none of which I can repeat in front of Christian Grey, CEO. *Ana, who are you kidding? He's just seen you hurl all over the ground and into the local flora. There's no disguising your lack of ladylike behavior*.

"I'll, er … see you inside," José mutters, but we both ignore him, and he slinks off back into the building. I'm on my own with Grey. Double crap. What should I say to him? Apologize for the phone call.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, staring at the handkerchief, which I am furiously worrying with my fingers. *It's so soft*.

"What are you sorry for, Anastasia?"

Damn it, he wants his damned pound of flesh.

"The phone call, mainly. Being sick. Oh, the list is endless," I murmur, feeling my skin coloring up. *Please, please, can I die now?*

"We've all been here, perhaps not quite as dramatically as you," he says dryly. "It's about knowing your limits, Anastasia. I mean, I'm all for pushing limits, but really this is beyond the pale. Do you make a habit of this kind of behavior?"

My head buzzes with excess alcohol and irritation. What the hell has it got to do with him? I didn't invite him here. He sounds like a middle-aged man scolding me like an errant child. Part of me wants to say that if I want to get drunk every night like this, then it's my decision and nothing to do with him—but I'm not brave enough. Not now that I've thrown up in front of him. Why is he still standing there?

"No," I say contritely. "I've never been drunk before and right now I have no desire to ever be again."

I just don't understand why he's here. I begin to feel faint. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to his chest like a child.

"Come on, I'll take you home," he murmurs.

"I need to tell Kate." *I'm in his arms again*.

“My brother can tell her.”

“What?”

“My brother Elliot is talking to Miss Kavanagh.”

“Oh?” I don’t understand.

“He was with me when you phoned.”

“In Seattle?” I’m confused.

“No, I’m staying at the Heathman.”

*Still? Why?*

“How did you find me?”

“I tracked your cell phone, Anastasia.”

Oh, of course he did. How is that possible? Is it legal? *Stalker*, my subconscious whispers at me through the cloud of tequila that’s still floating in my brain, but somehow, because it’s him, I don’t mind.

“Do you have a jacket or a purse?”

“Er … yes, I came with both. Christian, please, I need to tell Kate. She’ll worry.” His mouth presses into a hard line, and he sighs heavily.

“If you must.”

He sets me down and, taking my hand, leads me back into the bar. I feel weak, still drunk, embarrassed, exhausted, mortified, and, on some strange level, absolutely off-the-charts thrilled. He’s clutching my hand—such a confusing array of emotions. I’ll need at least a week to process them all.

It’s noisy, crowded, and the music has started so there is a large crowd on the dance floor. Kate is not at our table, and José has disappeared. Levi looks lost and forlorn on his own.

“Where’s Kate?” I shout at Levi above the noise. My head is beginning to pound in time to the thumping bass line of the music.

“Dancing,” Levi shouts, and I can tell he’s mad. He’s eyeing Christian suspiciously. I struggle into my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head so it sits at my hip. I’m ready to go, once I’ve seen Kate.

I touch Christian’s arm and lean up and shout in his ear, “She’s on the dance floor,” brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh smell. All those forbidden, unfamiliar feelings that I have tried to deny surface and run amok through my drained body. I flush, and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles clench deliciously.

He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He’s served immediately, no waiting for Mr. Control Freak Grey. Does everything come so easily to him? I can’t hear what he orders. He hands me a very large glass of iced water.

“Drink.” He shouts his order at me.

The moving lights are twisting and turning in time to the music, casting strange colored light and shadows all over the bar and the clientele. He's alternately green, blue, white, and a demonic red. He's watching me intently. I take a tentative sip.

"All of it," he shouts.

He's so overbearing. He runs his hand through his unruly hair. He looks frustrated, angry. What is his problem? Apart from a silly drunk girl calling him in the middle of the night so he thinks she needs rescuing. And it turns out she does from her over-amorous friend. Then seeing her being violently ill at his feet. *Oh, Ana … are you ever going to live this down?* My subconscious is figuratively tutting and glaring at me over her half-moon specs. I sway a little, and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. I do as I'm told and drink the entire glass. It makes me feel queasy. Taking the glass from me, he places it on the bar. I notice through a blur what he's wearing: a loose white linen shirt, snug jeans, black Converse sneakers, and a dark pinstriped jacket. His shirt is unbuttoned at the top, and I see a sprinkling of hair in the gap. In my groggy frame of mind, he looks yummy.

He takes my hand once more. *Holy cow*—he's leading me onto the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights I see his amused, sardonic smile. He gives my hand a sharp tug, and I'm in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with him. Boy, he can dance, and I can't believe that I'm following him step for step. Maybe it's because I'm drunk that I can keep up. He's holding me tight against him, his body against mine … if he wasn't clutching me so tightly, I'm sure I would swoon at his feet. In the back of my mind, my mother's often-recited warning comes to me: *Never trust a man who can dance*.

He moves us through the crowded throng of dancers to the other side of the dance floor, and we are beside Kate and Elliot, Christian's brother. The music is pounding away, loud and leery, outside and inside my head. Oh no. *Kate is making her moves*. She's dancing her ass off, and she only ever does that if she likes someone. Really likes someone. It means there'll be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. *Kate!*

Christian leans over and shouts in Elliot's ear. I cannot hear what he says. Elliot is tall with wide shoulders, curly blond hair, and light, wickedly gleaming eyes. I can't tell their color under the pulsating heat of the flashing lights. Elliot grins and pulls Kate into his arms, where she is more than happy to be … *Kate!* Even in my inebriated state, I am shocked. She's only just met him. She nods at whatever Elliot says and grins at me and waves. Christian propels us off the dance floor in double time.

But I never got to talk to her. Is she okay? I can see where things are heading for her and him. *I need to do the safe-sex lecture*. In the back of my mind, I hope she reads one of the posters on the inside of the bathroom door. My thoughts crash through my brain, fighting the drunk, fuzzy feeling. It's so warm in here, so loud, so colorful—too bright. My head begins to swim, oh no … and I can feel the floor coming up to meet my face, or so it feels. The last thing I hear before I pass out in Christian Grey's arms is his harsh epithet.

"Fuck!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

It's very quiet. The light is muted. I am comfortable and warm, in this bed. *Hmm* … I open my eyes, and for a moment I'm tranquil and serene, enjoying the strange, unfamiliar surroundings. I have no idea where I am. The headboard behind me is in the shape of a massive sun. It's oddly familiar. The room is large and airy and plushly furnished in browns and golds and beiges. I have seen it before. Where? My befuddled brain struggles through its recent visual memories. Holy crap. I'm in the Heathman Hotel … in a suite. I have stood in a room similar to this with Kate. This looks bigger. Oh, shit. I'm in Christian Grey's suite. How did I get here?

Fractured memories of the previous night come slowly back to haunt me. The drinking—*oh no, the drinking*—the phone call—*oh no, the phone call*—the vomiting—*oh no, the vomiting*. José and then Christian. *Oh no*. I cringe inwardly. I don't remember coming here. I'm wearing my T-shirt, bra, and panties. No socks. No jeans. *Holy shit.*

I glance at the bedside table. On it is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil. Control freak that he is, he thinks of everything. I sit up and take the tablets. Actually, I don't feel that bad, probably much better than I deserve. The orange juice tastes divine. It's thirst-quenching and refreshing.

There's a knock on the door. My heart leaps into my mouth, and I can't seem to find my voice. He opens the door anyway and strolls in.

Holy hell, he's been working out. He's in gray sweatpants that hang, in that way, off his hips and a gray sleeveless T-shirt which is dark with sweat, like his hair. *Christian Grey's sweat; the notion does odd things to me*. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I feel like a two-year-old; if I close my eyes, then I'm not really here.

"Good morning, Anastasia. How are you feeling?"

"Better than I deserve," I mumble.

I peek up at him. He places a large shopping bag on a chair and grasps each end of the towel that he has around his neck. He's staring at me, gray eyes dark, and as usual, I have no idea what he's thinking. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well.

"How did I get here?" My voice is small, contrite.

He sits down on the edge of the bed. He's close enough for me to touch, for me to smell. Oh my … sweat and body wash and Christian. It's a heady cocktail—so much better than a margarita, and now I can speak from experience.

"After you passed out, I didn't want to risk the leather upholstery in my car taking you all the way to your apartment. So I brought you here," he says phlegmatically.

"Did you put me to bed?"

"Yes." His face is impassive.

"Did I throw up again?" My voice is quieter.

"No."

"Did you undress me?" I whisper.

"Yes." He quirks an eyebrow at me as I blush furiously.

"We didn't—?" I whisper, my mouth drying in mortified horror as I can't complete the question. I stare at my hands.

"Anastasia, you were comatose. Necrophilia is not my thing. I like my women sentient and receptive," he says dryly.

"I'm so sorry."

His mouth lifts slightly in a wry smile.

"It was a very diverting evening. Not one that I'll forget in a while."

Me, neither—oh, he's laughing at me, the bastard. I didn't ask him to come and get me. Somehow I've been made to feel like the villain of the piece.

"You didn't have to track me down with whatever James Bond gadgetry you're developing for the highest bidder," I snap. He stares at me, surprised and, if I'm not mistaken, a little wounded.

"First, the technology to track cell phones is available over the Internet. Second, my company does not invest or manufacture any kind of surveillance devices. And third, if I hadn't come to get you, you'd probably be waking up in the photographer's bed, and from what I can remember, you weren't overly enthused about him pressing his suit," he says acidly.

*Pressing his suit!* I glance up at Christian. He's glaring at me, eyes blazing, aggrieved. I try to bite my lip, but I fail to repress my giggle.

"Which medieval chronicle did you escape from? You sound like a courtly knight."

His mood visibly shifts. His eyes soften and his expression warms, and there's a trace of a smile on his lips.

"Anastasia, I don't think so. Dark knight, maybe." His smile is sardonic, and he shakes his head. "Did you eat last night?" His tone is accusatory. I shake my head. What major transgression have I committed now? His jaw clenches, but his face remains impassive.

“You need to eat. That’s why you were so ill. Honestly, it’s drinking rule number one.” He runs this hand through his hair, and I know it’s because he’s exasperated.

“Are you going to continue to scold me?”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“I think so.”

“You’re lucky I’m just scolding you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you were mine, you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday. You didn’t eat, you got drunk, you put yourself at risk.” He closes his eyes, dread etched briefly on his face, and he shudders. When he opens his eyes, he glares at me. “I hate to think what could have happened to you.”

I scowl back at him. What is his problem? What’s it to him? If I was his … *Well, I’m not*. Though maybe part of me would like to be. The thought pierces through the irritation I feel at his high-handed words. I flush at the waywardness of my subconscious—she’s doing her happy dance in a bright red hula skirt at the thought of being his.

“I would have been fine. I was with Kate.”

“And the photographer?” he snaps at me.

*Hmm … young José*. I’ll need to face him at some point.

“José just got out of line.” I shrug.

“Well, the next time he gets out of line, maybe someone should teach him some manners.”

“You are quite the disciplinarian,” I hiss.

“Oh, Anastasia, you have no idea.” His eyes narrow, and then he grins wickedly. It’s disarming. One minute, I’m confused and angry, the next, I’m gazing at his gorgeous smile. *Wow* … I am entranced, and it’s because his smile is so rare. I quite forget what he’s talking about.

“I’m going to have a shower. Unless you’d like to shower first?” He cocks his head to one side, still grinning. My heartbeat has picked up, and my medulla oblongata has neglected to fire any synapses to make me breathe. His grin widens, and he reaches over and runs his thumb down my cheek and across my lower lip.

“Breathe, Anastasia,” he whispers then stands back up. “Breakfast will be here in fifteen minutes. You must be famished.” He heads into the bathroom and closes the door.

I let out the breath that I’ve been holding. Why is he so damned attractive? Right now I want to go and join him in the shower. I have never felt this way

about anyone. My hormones are racing. My skin tingles where his thumb traced over my face and lower lip. I'm squirming with a needy, achy … discomfort. I don't understand this reaction. *Hmm … Desire*. This is desire. This is what it feels like.

I lie back on the soft feather-filled pillows. *If you were mine*. Oh my—what would I do to be his? He's the only man who has ever set the blood racing through my body. Yet he's so antagonizing, too; he's difficult, complicated, and confusing. One minute he rebuffs me, the next he sends me fourteen-thousand-dollar books, then he tracks me like a stalker. And for all that, I have spent the night in his hotel suite, and I feel safe. Protected. He cares enough to come and rescue me from some mistakenly perceived danger. He's not a dark knight at all but a white knight in shining, dazzling armor—a classic romantic hero—Sir Gawain or Sir Lancelot.

I scramble out of his bed frantically searching for my jeans. He emerges from the bathroom wet and glistening from the shower, still unshaven, with just a towel around his waist, and there am I—all bare legs and awkward gawkiness. He's surprised to see me out of bed.

"If you're looking for your jeans, I've sent them to the laundry." His gaze is dark. "They were spattered with your vomit."

"Oh." I flush scarlet. Why oh why does he always catch me off balance?

"I sent Taylor out for another pair and some shoes. They're in the bag on the chair."

*Clean clothes*. What an unexpected bonus.

"Um … I'll have a shower," I mutter. "Thanks." What else can I say? I grab the bag and dart into the bathroom away from the unnerving proximity of naked Christian. Michelangelo's *David* has nothing on him.

In the bathroom, it's all hot and steamy. I strip off my clothes and quickly clamber into the shower, anxious to be under the cleansing stream of water. It cascades over me, and I hold up my face into the welcoming torrent. I want Christian Grey. I want him badly. Simple fact. For the first time in my life, I want to go to bed with a man. I want to feel his hands and his mouth on me.

He said he likes his women sentient. *He's probably not celibate then*. But he's not made a pass at me, unlike Paul or José. I don't understand. Does he want me? He wouldn't kiss me last week. Am I repellent to him? And yet I'm here and he brought me here. I just don't know what his game is. What's he thinking? *You've slept in his bed all night, and he's not touched you, Ana. You do the math*. My subconscious has reared her ugly, snide head. I ignore her.

The water is warm and soothing. *Hmm …* I could stay under this shower, in his bathroom, forever. I reach for the body wash and it smells of him. It's a

delicious smell. I rub it all over myself, fantasizing that it's him—him rubbing this heavenly scented soap into my body, across my breasts, over my stomach, between my thighs with his long-fingered hands. *Oh my*. My heartbeat picks up again. This feels so … so good.

"Breakfast is here." He knocks on the door, startling me.

"O-okay," I stutter as I'm yanked cruelly out of my erotic daydream.

I climb out of the shower and grab two towels. I put my hair in one and wrap it Carmen Miranda style on my head. Hastily, I dry myself, ignoring the pleasurable feel of the towel rubbing against my oversensitized skin.

I inspect the bag of jeans. Not only has Taylor brought me jeans and new Converse, but also a pale blue shirt, socks, and underwear. Oh my. A clean bra and panties—actually, to describe them in such a mundane, utilitarian way does not do them justice. They are exquisitely designed fancy European lingerie. All pale blue lace and finery. Wow. I am in awe and slightly daunted by this underwear. What's more, they fit perfectly. But of course they do. I flush to think of Buzz Cut in some lingerie store buying this for me. I wonder what else is in his job description.

I dress quickly. The rest of the clothing is a perfect fit. I brusquely towel-dry my hair and try desperately to bring it under control. But, as usual, it refuses to cooperate, and my only option is to restrain it with a hair tie which I don't have. I should have one in my purse, wherever it is. I take a deep breath. Time to face Mr. Confusing.

I'm relieved to find the bedroom empty. I hunt quickly for my purse—but it's not in here. Taking another deep breath, I enter the living area of the suite. It's huge. There's an opulent, plush seating area, all overstuffed couches and soft cushions, an elaborate coffee table with a stack of large glossy books, a study area with the latest-generation iMac, and an enormous plasma screen TV on the wall. Christian is sitting at a dining table on the other side of the room reading a newspaper. It's the size of a tennis court or something, not that I play tennis, though I have watched Kate a few times. *Kate!*

"Crap, Kate," I croak. Christian peers up at me.

"She knows you're here and still alive. I texted Elliot," he says with just a trace of humor.

*Oh no*. I remember her fervent dancing of the night before. All her patented moves used with maximum effect to seduce Christian's brother, no less! What's she going to think about me being here? I've never stayed out before. She's still with Elliot. She's only done this twice before, and both times I've had to endure the hideous pink PJs for a week from the fallout. She's going to think I've had a one-night stand, too.

Christian stares at me imperiously. He's wearing a white linen shirt, collar and cuffs undone.

"Sit," he commands, pointing to a place at the table. I make my way across the room and sit down opposite him as I've been directed. The table is laden with food.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I ordered a selection from the breakfast menu." He gives me a crooked, apologetic smile.

"That's very profligate of you," I murmur, bewildered by the choice, though I am hungry.

"Yes, it is." He sounds guilty.

I opt for pancakes, maple syrup, scrambled eggs, and bacon. Christian tries to hide a smile as he returns to his egg white omelet. The food is delicious.

"Tea?" he asks.

"Yes, please."

He passes me a small teapot of hot water and on the saucer is a Twinings English Breakfast teabag. Jeez, he remembers how I like my tea.

"Your hair's very damp," he scolds.

"I couldn't find the hair dryer," I mutter, embarrassed. Not that I looked.

Christian's mouth presses into a hard line, but he doesn't say anything.

"Thank you for the clothes."

"It's a pleasure, Anastasia. That color suits you."

I blush and stare down at my fingers.

"You know, you really should learn to take a compliment." His tone is castigating.

"I should give you some money for these clothes."

He glares at me as if I have offended him on some level. I hurry on.

"You've already given me the books, which, of course, I can't accept. But these clothes … please let me pay you back." I smile tentatively at him.

"Anastasia, trust me, I can afford it."

"That's not the point. Why should you buy these for me?"

"Because I can." His eyes flash with a wicked gleam.

"Just because you can doesn't mean that you should," I reply quietly as he arches an eyebrow at me, his eyes twinkling, and suddenly I feel that we're talking about something else, but I don't know what it is. Which reminds me …

"Why did you send me the books, Christian?" My voice is soft. He puts down his cutlery and regards me intently, his eyes burning with some unfathomable emotion. Holy crap—my mouth dries.

"Well, when you were nearly run over by the cyclist—and I was holding you and you were looking up at me—all 'kiss me, kiss me, Christian' "—he pauses

and shrugs—"I felt I owed you an apology and a warning." He runs his hand through his hair. "Anastasia, I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of man … I don't do romance. My tastes are very singular. You should steer clear of me." He closes his eyes as if in defeat. "There's something about you, though, and I'm finding it impossible to stay away. But I think you've figured that out already."

My appetite vanishes. *He can't stay away!*

"Then don't," I whisper.

He gasps, his eyes wide. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Enlighten me, then."

We sit gazing at each other, neither of us touching our food.

"You're not celibate, then?" I breathe.

Amusement lights up his eyes.

"No, Anastasia, I'm not celibate." He pauses for this information to sink in, and I flush scarlet. The mouth-to-brain filter is broken again. I can't believe I've just said that out loud.

"What are your plans for the next few days?" he asks, his voice low.

"I'm working today, from midday. What time is it?" I panic suddenly.

"It's just after ten; you've plenty of time. What about tomorrow?" He has his elbows on the table, and his chin is resting on his long, steepled fingers.

"Kate and I are going to start packing. We're moving to Seattle next weekend, and I'm working at Clayton's all this week."

"You have a place in Seattle already?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I can't remember the address. It's in the Pike Market District."

"Not far from me." He smiles. "So what are you going to do for work in Seattle?"

Where is he going with all these questions? The Christian Grey Inquisition is almost as irritating as the Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition.

"I've applied for some internships. I'm waiting to hear."

"Have you applied to my company as I suggested?"

I flush … *Of course not*. "Um … no."

"And what's wrong with my company?"

"Your company or your *company*?" I smirk.

"Are you smirking at me, Miss Steele?" He tilts his head to one side, and I think he looks amused, but it's hard to tell. I flush and glance down at my unfinished breakfast. I can't look him in the eye when he uses that tone of voice.

"I'd like to bite that lip," he whispers darkly.

I gasp, completely unaware that I am chewing my bottom lip and my mouth

pops open. That has to be the sexiest thing anybody has ever said to me. My heartbeat spikes, and I think I'm panting. Jeez, I'm a quivering, mess, and he hasn't even touched me. I squirm in my seat and meet his dark glare.

"Why don't you?" I challenge quietly.

"Because I'm not going to touch you, Anastasia—not until I have your written consent to do so." His lips hint at a smile.

*What?*

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I say." He sighs and shakes his head at me, amused but exasperated, too. "I need to show you, Anastasia. What time do you finish work this evening?"

"About eight."

"Well, we could go to Seattle this evening or next Saturday for dinner at my place, and I'll acquaint you with the facts then. The choice is yours."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Because I'm enjoying my breakfast and your company. Once you're enlightened, you probably won't want to see me again."

*What does that mean?* Does he white-slave small children to some godforsaken part of the planet? Is he part of some underworld crime syndicate? It would explain why he's so rich. Is he deeply religious? Is he impotent? Surely not—he could prove that to me right now. I flush scarlet thinking about the possibilities. This is getting me nowhere. I'd like to solve the riddle that is Christian Grey sooner rather than later. If it means that whatever secret he has is so gross that I don't want to know him anymore, then, quite frankly, it will be a relief. *Don't lie to yourself*—my subconscious yells at me—*it'll have to be pretty damned bad to have you running for the hills*.

"Tonight."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Like Eve, you're so quick to eat from the tree of knowledge." He smirks.

"Are you smirking at me, Mr. Grey?" I ask sweetly. *Pompous ass*.

He narrows his eyes at me and picks up his BlackBerry. He presses one number.

"Taylor. I'm going to need *Charlie Tango*."

*Charlie Tango! Who's he?*

"From Portland at, say, twenty thirty … No, standby at Escala … All night."

*All night!*

"Yes. On call tomorrow morning. I'll pilot from Portland to Seattle."

*Pilot?*

"Standby pilot from twenty-two thirty." He puts the phone down. No please or

thank you.

"Do people always do what you tell them?"

"Usually, if they want to keep their jobs," he says, deadpan.

"And if they don't work for you?"

"Oh, I can be very persuasive, Anastasia. You should finish your breakfast. And then I'll drop you off at home. I'll pick you up at Clayton's at eight when you finish. We'll fly up to Seattle."

I blink at him rapidly.

"Fly?"

"Yes. I have a helicopter."

I gape at him. I have my second date with Christian Oh-So-Mysterious Grey. From coffee to helicopter rides. Wow.

"We'll go by helicopter to Seattle?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He grins wickedly. "Because I can. Finish your breakfast."

How can I eat now? I'm going to Seattle by helicopter with Christian Grey. And he wants to bite my lip … I squirm at the thought.

"Eat," he says more sharply. "Anastasia, I have an issue with wasted food … eat."

"I can't eat all this." I gape at what's left on the table.

"Eat what's on your plate. If you'd eaten properly yesterday, you wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't be declaring my hand so soon." His mouth sets in a grim line. He looks angry.

I frown and return to my now cold food. *I'm too excited to eat, Christian. Don't you understand?* my subconscious explains. But I'm too much of a coward to voice these thoughts aloud, especially when he looks so sullen. *Hmm*, like a small boy. I find the thought amusing.

"What's so funny?" he asks. I shake my head, not daring tell him, and keep my eyes on my food. Swallowing my last piece of pancake, I peek up at him. He's eyeing me speculatively.

"Good girl," he says. "I'll take you home when you've dried your hair. I don't want you getting ill." There's some kind of unspoken promise in his words. *What does he mean?* I leave the table, wondering for a moment if I should ask permission but dismissing the idea. Sounds like a dangerous precedent to set. I head back to his bedroom. A thought stops me.

"Where did you sleep last night?" I turn to gaze at him still sitting in the dining room chair. I can't see any blankets or sheets out here—perhaps he's had them tidied away.

“In my bed,” he says simply, his gaze impassive again.

“Oh.”

“Yes, it was quite a novelty for me, too.” He smiles.

“Not having … sex.” There—I said the word. I blush—of course.

“No.” He shakes his head and frowns as if recalling something uncomfortable. “Sleeping with someone.” He picks up his newspaper and continues to read.

What in heaven’s name does that mean? He’s never slept with anyone? He’s a virgin? Somehow I doubt that. I stand staring at him in disbelief. He is the most mystifying person I’ve ever met. And it dawns on me that I have slept with Christian Grey, and I kick myself—what would I have given to be conscious to watch him sleep? See him vulnerable. Somehow, I find that hard to imagine. Well, allegedly all will be revealed tonight.

In his bedroom, I hunt through a chest of drawers and find the hair dryer. Using my fingers, I dry my hair the best I can. When I’ve finished, I head into the bathroom. I want to brush my teeth. I eye Christian’s toothbrush. It would be like having him in my mouth. *Hmm* … Glancing guiltily over my shoulder at the door, I feel the bristles on the toothbrush. They are damp. He must have used it already. Grabbing it quickly, I squirt toothpaste on it and brush my teeth in double time. I feel so naughty. It’s such a thrill.

Grabbing my T-shirt, bra, and panties from yesterday, I put them in the shopping bag that Taylor brought and head back to the living area to hunt for my bag and jacket. Deep joy, there is a hair tie in my bag. Christian is watching me as I tie my hair back, his expression unreadable. I feel his eyes follow me as I sit down and wait for him to finish. He’s on his BlackBerry talking to someone.

“They want two? … How much will that cost? … Okay, and what safety measures do we have in place? … And they’ll go via Suez? … How safe is Ben Sudan? … And when do they arrive in Darfur? … Okay, let’s do it. Keep me abreast of progress.” He hangs up.

“Ready to go?”

I nod. I wonder what his conversation was about. He slips on a navy pinstriped jacket, picks up his car keys, and heads for the door.

“After you, Miss Steele,” he murmurs, opening the door for me. He looks casually elegant.

I pause, fractionally too long, drinking in the sight of him. And to think I slept with him last night and, after all the tequila and the throwing up, he’s still here. What’s more, he wants to take me to Seattle. Why me? I don’t understand it. I head out the door recalling his words—*There’s something about you*—well, the feeling is entirely mutual, Mr. Grey, and I aim to find out what his secret is.

We walk in silence down the corridor toward the elevator. As we wait, I peek

up at him through my lashes, and he looks out of the corner of his eyes down at me. I smile, and his lips twitch.

The elevator arrives, and we step in. We're alone. Suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, possibly our proximity in such an enclosed space, the atmosphere between us changes, charged with an electric, exhilarating anticipation. My breathing alters as my heart races. His head turns fractionally toward me, his eyes darkest slate. I bite my lip.

"Oh, fuck the paperwork," he growls. He lunges at me, pushing me against the wall of the elevator. Before I know it, he's got both of my hands in one of his in a viselike grip above my head, and he's pinning me to the wall using his hips. Holy shit. His other hand grabs my hair and yanks down, bringing my face up, and his lips are on mine. It's only just not painful. I moan into his mouth, giving his tongue an opening. He takes full advantage, his tongue expertly exploring my mouth. I have never been kissed like this. My tongue tentatively strokes his and joins his in a slow, erotic dance that's all about touch and sensation, all bump and grind. He brings his hand up to grasp my chin and holds me in place. I'm helpless, my hands pinned, my face held, and his hips restraining me. His erection is against my belly. *Oh my* … He wants me. Christian Grey, Greek god, wants me, and I want *him*, here … now, in the elevator.

"You. Are. So. Sweet," he murmurs, each word a staccato.

The elevator stops, the doors open, and he pushes away from me in the blink of an eye, leaving me hanging. Three men in business suits look at both of us and smirk as they climb on board. My heart rate is through the roof, I feel like I've run an uphill race. I want to lean over and grasp my knees … but that's just too obvious.

I glance up at him. He looks so cool and calm, like he's been doing the *Seattle Times* crossword. *How unfair*. Is he totally unaffected by my presence? He glances at me out of the corner of his eyes, and he gently blows out a deep breath. Oh, he's affected all right—and my very small inner goddess sways in a gentle victorious samba. The businessmen exit on the second floor. We have one more floor to travel.

"You've brushed your teeth," he says, staring at me.

"I used your toothbrush."

His lips quirk up in a half smile. "Oh, Anastasia Steele, what am I going to do with you?"

The doors open at the first floor, and he takes my hand and pulls me out.

"What is it about elevators?" he mutters, more to himself than to me as he strides across the lobby. I struggle to keep up with him because my wits have been thoroughly and royally scattered all over the floor and walls of elevator

three in the Heathman Hotel.

## CHAPTER SIX

Christian opens the passenger-side door to the black Audi SUV, and I clamber in. It's a beast of a car. He hasn't mentioned the outburst of passion that exploded in the elevator. Should I? Should we talk about it or pretend that it didn't happen? It hardly seems real, my first proper no-holds-barred kiss. As time ticks on, I assign it mythical, Arthurian legend, Lost City of Atlantis status. It never happened, it never existed. *Perhaps I imagined it all*. No. I touch my lips, swollen from his kiss. It definitely happened. I am a changed woman. I want this man desperately, and he wanted me.

I glance at him. Christian is his usual polite, slightly distant self.

*How confusing*.

He starts the engine and reverses out of his space in the parking lot. He switches on the sound system. The car interior is filled with the sweetest, most magical music of two women singing. Oh wow … all my senses are in disarray, so this is doubly affecting. It sends delicious shivers up my spine. Christian pulls out onto Southwest Park Avenue, and he drives with easy, lazy confidence.

"What are we listening to?"

"It's 'The Flower Duet' by Delibes, from the opera *Lakmé*. Do you like it?"

"Christian, it's wonderful."

"It is, isn't it?" He grins, glancing at me. And for a fleeting moment, he seems his age: young, carefree, and heart-stoppingly beautiful. Is this the key to him? Music? I sit and listen to the angelic voices teasing and seducing me.

"Can I hear that again?"

"Of course." Christian pushes a button, and the music is caressing me once more. It's a gentle, slow, sweet, and sure assault on my aural senses.

"You like classical music?" I ask, hoping for a rare insight into his personal preferences.

"My taste is eclectic, Anastasia, everything from Thomas Tallis to the Kings of Leon. It depends on my mood. You?"

"Me, too. Though I don't know who Thomas Tallis is."

He turns and gazes at me briefly before his eyes are back on the road.

"I'll play it for you sometime. He's a sixteenth-century British composer. Tudor, church choral music." Christian grins at me. "Sounds very esoteric, I

know, but it’s also magical.”

He presses a button and the Kings of Leon start singing. Hmm … this I know. “Sex on Fire.” How appropriate. The music is interrupted by the sound of a cell phone ringing over the sound system speakers. Christian hits a button on the steering wheel.

“Grey,” he snaps. He’s so brusque.

“Mr. Grey, it’s Welch here. I have the information you require.” A rasping, disembodied voice comes over the speakers.

“Good. E-mail it to me. Anything to add?”

“No, sir.”

He presses the button, then the call ceases and the music is back. No good-bye or thanks. I’m so glad that I never seriously entertained the thought of working for him. I shudder at the very idea. He’s just too controlling and cold with his employees. The music cuts off again for the phone.

“Grey.”

“The NDA has been e-mailed to you, Mr. Grey.” A woman’s voice.

“Good. That’s all, Andrea.”

“Good day, sir.”

Christian hangs up by pressing a button on the steering wheel. The music is on very briefly when the phone rings again. Holy hell, is this his life—constant nagging phone calls?

“Grey,” he snaps.

“Hi, Christian, d’you get laid?”

“Hello, Elliot—I’m on speakerphone, and I’m not alone in the car.” Christian sighs.

“Who’s with you?”

Christian rolls his eyes. “Anastasia Steele.”

“Hi, Ana!”

*Ana!*

“Hello, Elliot.”

“Heard a lot about you,” Elliot murmurs huskily. Christian frowns.

“Don’t believe a word Kate says.”

Elliot laughs.

“I’m dropping Anastasia off now.” Christian emphasizes my full name. “Shall I pick you up?”

“Sure.”

“See you shortly.” Christian hangs up, and the music is back.

“Why do you insist on calling me Anastasia?”

“Because it’s your name.”

“I prefer Ana.”

“Do you now?”

We are almost at my apartment. It’s not taken long.

“Anastasia,” he muses. I scowl at him, but he ignores my expression. “What happened in the elevator—it won’t happen again, well, not unless it’s premeditated.”

He pulls up outside my duplex. I belatedly realize he’s not asked me where I live—yet he knows. But then he sent the books; of course he knows where I live. What able, cell phone–tracking, helicopter-owning stalker wouldn’t?

Why won’t he kiss me again? I pout at the thought. I don’t understand. Honestly, his surname should be Cryptic, not Grey. He climbs out of the car, walking with easy, long-legged grace around to my side to open the door, ever the gentleman—except perhaps in rare, precious moments in elevators. I flush at the memory of his mouth on mine, and the thought that I’d been unable to touch him enters my mind. I wanted to run my fingers through his decadent, untidy hair, but I’d been unable to move my hands. I am retrospectively frustrated.

“I liked what happened in the elevator,” I murmur as I climb out of the car. I’m not sure if I hear an audible gasp, but I choose to ignore it and head up the steps to the front door.

Kate and Elliot are sitting at our dining table. The fourteen-thousand-dollar books have disappeared. Thank heavens. I have plans for them. She has the most un-Kate-like ridiculous grin on her face, and she looks mussed up in a sexy kind of way. Christian follows me into the living room, and in spite of her I’ve-been-having-a-good-time-all-night grin, Kate eyes him suspiciously.

“Hi, Ana.” She leaps up to hug me, then holds me at arm’s length so she can examine me. She frowns and turns to Christian.

“Good morning, Christian,” she says, and her tone is a little hostile.

“Miss Kavanagh,” he says in his stiff, formal way.

“Christian, her name is Kate,” Elliot grumbles.

“Kate.” Christian gives her a polite nod and glares at Elliot, who grins and rises to hug me, too.

“Hi, Ana.” He smiles, his blue eyes twinkling, and I like him immediately. He’s obviously nothing like Christian, but then they’re adopted brothers.

“Hi, Elliot.” I smile at him, and I’m aware that I’m biting my lip.

“Elliot, we’d better go,” Christian says mildly.

“Sure.” He turns to Kate and pulls her into his arms and gives her a long, lingering kiss.

*Jeez … get a room*. I stare at my feet, embarrassed. I glance up at Christian, and he’s watching me intently. I narrow my eyes at him. Why can’t you kiss me

like that? Elliot continues to kiss Kate, sweeping her off her feet and dipping her in a dramatic hold so that her hair touches the ground as he kisses her hard.

"Laters, baby." He grins.

Kate just melts. I've never seen her melt before—the words "comely" and "compliant" come to mind. Compliant Kate. Boy, Elliot must be good. Christian rolls his eyes and stares down at me, his expression unreadable, although maybe he's mildly amused. He tucks a stray strand of my hair that has worked its way free from my ponytail behind my ear. My breath hitches at the contact, and I lean my head into his fingers. His eyes soften, and he runs his thumb across my lower lip. My blood sears in my veins. And all too quickly, his touch is gone.

"Laters, baby," he murmurs, and I have to laugh because it's so unlike him. But even though I know he's being irreverent, the endearment tugs at something deep inside me.

"I'll pick you up at eight." He turns to leave, opening the front door and stepping out onto the porch. Elliot follows him to the car but turns and blows Kate another kiss, and I feel an unwelcome pang of jealousy.

"So, did you?" Kate asks as we watch them climb into the car and drive off, the burning curiosity evident in her voice.

"No," I snap irritably, hoping that will halt the questions. We head back into the apartment. "You obviously did, though." I can't contain my envy. Kate always manages to ensnare men. She is irresistible, beautiful, sexy, funny, forward … all the things that I'm not. But her answering grin is infectious.

"And I'm seeing him again this evening." She claps her hands and jumps up and down like a small child. She cannot contain her excitement and happiness, and I can't help but feel happy for her. A happy Kate … this is going to be interesting.

"Christian is taking me to Seattle this evening."

"Seattle?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you will *then*?"

"Oh, I hope so."

"You like him, then?"

"Yes."

"Like him enough to …?"

"Yes."

She raises her eyebrows.

"Wow. Ana Steele, finally falling for a man, and it's Christian Grey—hot, sexy billionaire."

"Oh yeah—it's all about the money." I smirk, and we both fall into a fit of

giggles.

"Is that a new blouse?" she asks, and I let her have all the unexciting details about my night.

"Has he kissed you yet?" she asks as she makes coffee.

I blush.

"Once."

"Once!" she scoffs.

I nod, rather shamefaced. "He's very reserved."

She frowns. "That's odd."

"I don't think odd covers it, really."

"We need to make sure you're simply irresistible for this evening," she says with determination.

*Oh no* … this sounds like it will be time consuming, humiliating, and painful.

"I have to be at work in an hour."

"I can work with that time frame. Come on." Kate grabs my hand and takes me into her bedroom.

THE DAY DRAGS AT Clayton's even though we're busy. We've hit the summer season, so I have to spend two hours restocking the shelves once the shop is closed. It's mindless work, and it gives me too much time to think. I've not really had a chance all day.

Under Kate's tireless and frankly intrusive instruction, my legs and underarms are shaved to perfection, my eyebrows plucked, and I am buffed all over. It has been a most unpleasant experience. But she assures me that this is what men expect these days. What else will he expect? I have to convince Kate that this is what I want to do. For some strange reason, she doesn't trust him, maybe because he's so stiff and formal. She says she can't put her finger on it, but I have promised to text her when I arrive in Seattle. I haven't told her about the helicopter; she'd freak.

I also have the José issue. He's left three messages and seven missed calls on my cell. He's also called home twice. Kate has been very vague as to where I am. He'll know she's covering for me. Kate doesn't do vague. But I have decided to let him stew. I'm still too angry with him.

Christian mentioned some kind of written paperwork, and I don't know if he was joking or if I'm going to have to sign something. It's frustrating trying to guess. And on top of all the angst, I can barely contain my excitement or my nerves. Tonight's the night! After all this time, am I ready for this? My inner goddess glares at me, tapping her small foot impatiently. She's been ready for this for years, and she's ready for anything with Christian Grey, but I still don't

understand what he sees in me … mousey Ana Steele—it makes no sense.

He is punctual, of course, and waiting for me when I leave Clayton's. He climbs out of the back of the Audi to open the door and smiles warmly at me.

"Good evening, Miss Steele," he says.

"Mr. Grey." I nod politely to him as I climb into the backseat of the car. Taylor is sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hello, Taylor," I say.

"Good evening, Miss Steele." His voice is polite and professional. Christian climbs in the other side and clasps my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze that echoes through my body.

"How was work?" he asks.

"Very long," I reply, and my voice is husky, too low, and full of need.

"Yes, it's been a long day for me, too."

"What did you do?" I manage.

"I went hiking with Elliot." His thumb strokes my knuckles, back and forth, and my heart skips a beat as my breathing accelerates. How does he do this to me? He's only touching a very small area of my body, and the hormones are flying.

The drive to the heliport is short and, before I know it, we arrive. I wonder where the fabled helicopter might be. We're in a built-up area of the city, and even I know helicopters need space to take off and land. Taylor parks, climbs out, and opens the door for me. Christian is beside me in an instant and takes my hand again.

"Ready?" he asks. I nod and want to say, *For anything*, but I can't articulate the words as I'm too nervous, too excited.

"Taylor." He nods curtly at his driver, and we head into the building, straight to a set of elevators. *Elevator!* The memory of our kiss this morning comes back to haunt me. I have thought of nothing else all day, daydreaming at the register at Clayton's. Twice Mr. Clayton had to shout my name to bring me back to Earth. To say I've been distracted would be the understatement of the year. Christian glances down at me, a slight smile on his lips. Ha! He's thinking about it, too.

"It's only three floors," he says dryly, his eyes dancing with amusement. He's telepathic, surely. It's spooky.

I try to keep my face impassive as we enter the elevator. The doors close, and it's there, the weird electrical attraction crackling between us, enslaving me. I close my eyes in a vain attempt to ignore it. He tightens his grip on my hand, and five seconds later the doors open onto the roof of the building. And there it is, a white helicopter with the name GREY ENTERPRISES HOLDINGS, INC. written in blue with the

company logo on the side. *Surely this is misuse of company property*.

He leads me to a small office where an old-timer sits behind the desk.

"Here's your flight plan, Mr. Grey. All external checks are done. It's ready and waiting, sir. You're free to go."

"Thank you, Joe." Christian smiles warmly at him.

Oh. Someone deserving of the polite treatment from Christian. Perhaps he's not an employee. I stare at the old guy in awe.

"Let's go," Christian says, and we make our way toward the helicopter. When we're up close, it's much bigger than I thought. I expected it to be a roadster version for two, but it has at least seven seats. Christian opens the door and directs me to one of the seats at the very front.

"Sit—don't touch anything," he orders as he climbs in behind me.

He shuts the door with a slam. I'm glad that the area is floodlit, otherwise I'd find it difficult to see inside the small cockpit. I sit down in my allotted seat, and he crouches beside me to strap me into the harness. It's a four-point harness with all the straps connecting to one central buckle. He tightens both of the upper straps, so I can hardly move. He's so close and intent on what he's doing. If I could only lean forward, my nose would be in his hair. He smells clean, fresh, heavenly, but I'm fastened securely into my seat and effectively immobile. He glances up and smiles, like he's enjoying his usual private joke, his eyes heated. He's so tantalizingly close. I hold my breath as he pulls at one of the upper straps.

"You're secure, no escaping," he whispers. "Breathe, Anastasia," he adds softly. Reaching up, he caresses my cheek, running his long fingers down to my chin, which he grasps between his thumb and forefinger. He leans forward and plants a brief, chaste kiss, leaving me reeling, my insides clenching at the thrilling, unexpected touch of his lips.

"I like this harness," he whispers.

*What?*

He sits down beside me and buckles himself into his seat, then begins a protracted procedure of checking gauges and flipping switches and buttons from the mind-boggling array of dials and lights and switches in front of me. Little lights wink and flash from various dials, and the whole of the instrument panel lights up.

"Put your cans on," he says, pointing to a set of headphones in front of me. I pull them on, and the rotor blades start. They are deafening. He puts his headphones on and continues flipping various switches.

"I'm just going through all the preflight checks." Christian's disembodied voice is in my ears through the headphones. I turn and grin at him.

“Do you know what you are doing?” I ask. He turns and smiles at me.

“I’ve been a fully qualified pilot for four years, Anastasia. You’re safe with me.” He gives me a wolfish grin. “Well, while we’re flying,” he adds, and winks at me.

*Winking … Christian!*

“Are you ready?”

I nod, wide-eyed.

“Okay, tower. PDX, this is *Charlie Tango* Golf–Golf Echo Hotel, cleared for take-off. Please confirm, over.”

“*Charlie Tango*—you are clear. PDX to call, proceed to one four thousand, heading zero one zero, over.”

“Roger, tower, *Charlie Tango* set, over and out. Here we go,” he adds to me, and the helicopter rises slowly and smoothly into the air.

Portland disappears in front of us as we head into U.S. airspace, though my stomach remains firmly in Oregon. Whoa! All the bright lights shrink until they are twinkling sweetly below us. It’s like looking out from inside a fish bowl. Once we’re higher, there really is nothing to see. It’s pitch-black, not even the moon to shed any light on our journey. How can he see where we’re going?

“Eerie, isn’t it?” Christian’s voice is in my ears.

“How do you know you’re going the right way?”

“Here.” He points his long index finger at one of the gauges, and it shows an electronic compass. “This is an EC135 Eurocopter. One of the safest in its class. It’s equipped for night flight.” He glances and grins at me.

“There’s a helipad on top of the building I live in. That’s where we’re heading.”

Of course there’s a helipad where he lives. I am so out of my league here. His face is softly illuminated by the lights on the instrument panel. He’s concentrating hard, and he’s continually glancing at the various dials in front of him. I drink in his features from beneath my lashes. He has a beautiful profile. Straight nose, square jawed—I’d like to run my tongue along his jaw. He hasn’t shaved, and his stubble makes the prospect doubly tempting. Hmm … I’d like to feel how rough it is beneath my tongue, my fingers, against my face.

“When you fly at night, you fly blind. You have to trust the instrumentation,” he says, interrupting my erotic reverie.

“How long will the flight be?” I manage breathlessly. I wasn’t thinking about sex at all, no, no way.

“Less than an hour—the wind is in our favor.”

*Hmm, less than an hour to Seattle* … that’s not bad going. No wonder we’re flying.

I have less than an hour before the big reveal. All the muscles clench deep in my belly. I have a serious case of butterflies. They are flourishing in my stomach. Holy shit, what has he got in store for me?

"You okay, Anastasia?"

"Yes." My answer is short, clipped, squeezed out through my nerves.

I think he smiles, but it's difficult to tell in the darkness. Christian flicks yet another switch.

"PDX, this is *Charlie Tango* now at one four thousand, over." He exchanges information with air traffic control. It all sounds very professional to me. I think we're moving from Portland's airspace to Seattle International Airport's. "Understood, Sea-Tac, standing by, over and out."

"Look, over there." He points to a small pinpoint of light in the far distance. "That's Seattle."

"Do you always impress women this way? 'Come and fly in my helicopter'?" I ask, genuinely interested.

"I've never brought a girl up here, Anastasia. It's another first for me." His voice is quiet, serious.

Oh, that was an unexpected answer. Another first? Oh, the sleeping thing, perhaps?

"Are you impressed?"

"I'm awed, Christian."

He smiles.

"Awed?" And for a brief moment, he's his age again.

I nod. "You're just so … competent."

"Why, thank you, Miss Steele," he says politely. I think he's pleased, but I'm not sure.

We ride in the dark night in silence for a while. The bright spot that is Seattle is slowly getting bigger.

"Sea-Tac tower to *Charlie Tango*. Flight plan to Escala in place. Please proceed. And stand by. Over."

"This is *Charlie Tango*, understood, Sea-Tac. Standing by, over and out."

"You obviously enjoy this," I murmur.

"What?" He glances at me. He looks quizzical in the half light of the instruments.

"Flying," I reply.

"It requires control and concentration … how could I not love it? Though my favorite is soaring."

"Soaring?"

"Yes. Gliding, to the layperson. Gliders and helicopters—I fly them both."

“Oh.” *Expensive hobbies*. I remember him telling me during the interview. I like reading and occasionally going to the movies. I am out of my depth here.

“*Charlie Tango*, come in, please, over.” The disembodied voice of air traffic control interrupts my reverie. Christian answers, sounding in control and confident.

Seattle is getting closer. We are on the very outskirts now. Wow! It looks absolutely stunning. Seattle at night, from the sky …

“Looks good, doesn’t it?” Christian murmurs.

I nod enthusiastically. It looks otherworldly—unreal—and I feel like I’m on a giant film set; José’s favorite film maybe, *Blade Runner*. The memory of José’s attempted kiss haunts me. I’m beginning to feel a bit cruel not calling him back. *He can wait until tomorrow … surely*.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes,” Christian mutters, and suddenly my blood is pounding in my ears as my heartbeat accelerates and adrenaline spikes through my system. He starts talking to air traffic control again, but I am no longer listening. I think I’m going to faint. My fate is in his hands.

We are now flying among the buildings, and up ahead I can see a tall skyscraper with a helipad on top. The word “Escala” is painted in white on top of the building. It’s getting nearer and nearer, bigger and bigger … like my anxiety. *God, I hope I don’t let him down*. He’ll find me lacking in some way. I wish I’d listened to Kate and borrowed one of her dresses, but I like my black jeans, and I’m wearing a soft mint-green shirt and Kate’s black jacket. I look smart enough. I grip the edge of my seat tighter and tighter. *I can do this. I can do this*. I chant this mantra as the skyscraper looms below us.

The helicopter slows and hovers, and Christian sets it down on the helipad on top of the building. My heart is in my mouth. I can’t decide if it’s from nervous anticipation, relief that we’ve arrived alive, or fear that I will fail in some way. He switches the ignition off and the rotor blades slow and quiet until all I hear is the sound of my own erratic breathing. Christian takes his headphones off and reaches across and pulls mine off, too.

“We’re here,” he says softly.

His look is so intense, half in shadow and half in the bright white light from the landing lights. Dark knight and white knight, it’s a fitting metaphor for Christian. He looks strained. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are tight. He unfastens his seatbelt and reaches over to unbuckle mine. His face is inches from mine.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You know that, don’t you?” His tone is so earnest, desperate even, his eyes impassioned. He takes me by surprise.

“I’d never do anything I didn’t want to do, Christian.” And as I say the words, I don’t quite feel their conviction, because at this moment in time, I’d probably do anything for this man seated beside me. But this does the trick. He’s mollified.

He eyes me warily for a moment and somehow, even though he’s so tall, he manages to ease his way gracefully to the door of the helicopter and open it. He jumps out, waiting for me to follow, and takes my hand as I clamber down on to the helipad. It’s very windy on top of the building, and I’m nervous about the fact that I’m standing at least thirty stories high in an unenclosed space. Christian wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

“Come,” he shouts above the noise of the wind. He drags me over to an elevator and, after tapping a number into a keypad, the doors open. It’s warm inside and all mirrored glass. I can see Christian to infinity everywhere I look, and the wonderful thing is he’s holding me to infinity, too. Christian taps another code into the keypad, then the doors close and the elevator descends.

Moments later, we’re in an all-white foyer. In the middle is a round, dark wood table, and on it is an unbelievably huge bunch of white flowers. On the walls there are paintings everywhere. He opens a set of double doors, and the white theme continues across a wide corridor where directly opposite, is the entrance to a palatial room. It’s the main living area, double height. “Huge” is too small a word for it. The far wall is glass and leads onto a balcony that overlooks Seattle.

To the right is an imposing U-shaped sofa that could seat ten adults comfortably. It faces a state-of-the-art stainless-steel—or maybe platinum, for all I know—modern fireplace. The fire is lit and flaming gently. On the left beside us, by the entry way, is the kitchen area. All white with dark wood worktops and a breakfast bar that seats six.

Near the kitchen area, in front of the glass wall, is a dining table surrounded by sixteen chairs. And tucked in the corner is a full-sized, shiny black grand piano. Oh yes … he probably plays the piano, too. There is art of all shapes and sizes on all the walls. In fact, this apartment looks more like a gallery than a place to live.

“Can I take your jacket?” Christian asks. I shake my head. I’m still cold from the wind on the helipad.

“Would you like a drink?” he asks. I blink at him. After last night! *Is he trying to be funny?* For one second, I think about asking for a margarita—but I don’t have the nerve.

“I’m going to have a glass of white wine. Would you like to join me?”

“Yes, please,” I murmur.

I am standing in this enormous room feeling out of place. I walk over to the glass wall, and I realize that the lower half of the wall opens concertina style onto the balcony. Seattle is lit up and lively in the background. I walk back to the kitchen area—it takes a few seconds, it's so far from the glass wall—and Christian is opening a bottle of wine. He's removed his jacket.

"Pouilly Fumé okay with you?"

"I know nothing about wine, Christian. I'm sure it will be fine." My voice is soft and hesitant. My heart is thumping. I want to run. This is seriously rich. Seriously over-the-top Bill Gates–style wealthy. What am I doing here? *You know very well what you're doing here*, my subconscious sneers at me. Yes, I want to be in Christian Grey's bed.

"Here." He hands me a glass of wine. Even the glasses are rich … heavy, contemporary crystal. I take a sip, and the wine is light, crisp, and delicious.

"You're very quiet, and you're not even blushing. In fact, I think this is the palest I've ever seen you, Anastasia," he murmurs. "Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. Not for food. "It's a very big place you have here."

"Big?"

"Big."

"It's big," he agrees, and his eyes glow with amusement. I take another sip of wine.

"Do you play?" I point my chin at the piano.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Yes."

"Of course you do. Is there anything you can't do well?"

"Yes … a few things." He takes a sip of his wine. He doesn't take his eyes off me. I feel them following me as I turn and glance around this vast room. "Room" is the wrong word. It's not a room—it's a mission statement.

"Do you want to sit?"

I nod, and he takes my hand and leads me to the large off-white couch. As I sit, I'm struck by the fact that I feel like Tess Durbeyfield looking at the new house that belongs to the notorious Alec d'Urberville. The thought makes me smile.

"What's so amusing?" He sits down beside me, turning to face me. He rests his head on his right hand, his elbow propped on the back of the couch.

"Why did you give me *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* specifically?" I ask. Christian stares at me for a moment. I think he's surprised by my question.

"Well, you said you liked Thomas Hardy."

"Is that the only reason?" Even I can hear the disappointment in my voice. His

mouth presses into a hard line.

“It seemed appropriate. I could hold you to some impossibly high ideal like Angel Clare or debase you completely like Alec d’Urberville,” he murmurs, and his eyes flash dark and dangerous.

“If there are only two choices, I’ll take the debasement.” I whisper, gazing at him. My subconscious is staring at me in awe. He gasps.

“Anastasia, stop biting your lip, please. It’s very distracting. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

He frowns.

“Yes. Would you excuse me for a moment?” He disappears through a wide doorway on the far side of the room. He’s gone for a couple of minutes and returns with a document.

“This is a nondisclosure agreement.” He shrugs and has the grace to look a little embarrassed. “My lawyer insists on it.” He hands it to me. I’m completely bemused. “If you’re going for option two, debasement, you’ll need to sign this.”

“And if I don’t want to sign anything?”

“Then it’s Angel Clare high ideals, well, for most of the book anyway.”

“What does this agreement mean?”

“It means you cannot disclose anything about us. Anything, to anyone.”

I stare at him in disbelief. Holy shit. It’s bad, really bad, and now I’m very curious to know.

“Okay. I’ll sign.”

He hands me a pen.

“Aren’t you even going to read it?”

“No.”

He frowns.

“Anastasia, you should always read anything you sign,” he admonishes me.

“Christian, what you fail to understand is that I wouldn’t talk about us to anyone anyway. Even Kate. So it’s immaterial whether I sign an agreement or not. If it means so much to you, or your lawyer … whom *you* obviously talk to, then fine. I’ll sign.”

He gazes down at me, and he nods gravely.

“Fair point well made, Miss Steele.”

I lavishly sign on the dotted line of both copies and hand one back to him. Folding the other, I place it my purse and take a large swig of my wine. I’m sounding so much braver than I’m actually feeling.

“Does this mean you’re going to make love to me tonight, Christian?” *Holy shit. Did I just say that?* His mouth drops open slightly, but he recovers quickly.

“No, Anastasia, it doesn’t. First, I don’t make love. I fuck … hard. Second, there’s a lot more paperwork to do. And third, you don’t yet know what you’re in for. You could still run for the hills. Come, I want to show you my playroom.”

My mouth drops open. *Fuck hard!* Holy shit, that sounds so … hot. But why are we looking at a playroom? I am mystified.

“You want to play on your Xbox?” I ask. He laughs loudly.

“No, Anastasia, no Xbox, no Playstation. Come.” He stands, holding out his hand. I let him lead me back out to the corridor. On the right of the double doors, where we came in, another door leads to a staircase. We go up to the second floor and turn right. Producing a key from his pocket, he unlocks yet another door and takes a deep breath.

“You can leave anytime. The helicopter is on standby to take you whenever you want to go; you can stay the night and go home in the morning. It’s fine whatever you decide.”

“Just open the damn door, Christian.”

He opens the door and stands back to let me in. I gaze at him once more. I so want to know what’s in here. Taking a deep breath I walk in.

And it feels like I’ve time-traveled back to the sixteenth century and the Spanish Inquisition.

*Holy fuck.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The first thing I notice is the smell: leather, wood, polish with a faint citrus scent. It's very pleasant, and the lighting is soft, subtle. In fact, I can't see the source, but it's around the cornice in the room, emitting an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are a deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb-like effect to the spacious room, and the floor is old, old varnished wood. There is a large wooden cross like an *X* fastened to the wall facing the door. It's made of high-polished mahogany, and there are restraining cuffs on each corner. Above it is an expansive iron grid suspended from the ceiling, eight-foot square at least, and from it hang all manner of ropes, chains, and glinting shackles. By the door, two long, polished, ornately carved poles, like spindles from a banister but longer, hang like curtain rods across the wall. From them swing a startling assortment of paddles, whips, riding crops, and funny-looking feathery implements.

Beside the door stands a substantial mahogany chest of drawers, each drawer slim as if designed to contain specimens in a crusty old museum. I wonder briefly what the drawers actually *do* hold. *Do I want to know?* In the far corner is an oxblood leather padded bench, and fixed to the wall beside it is a wooden, polished rack that looks like a pool or billiard cue holder, but on closer inspection, it holds canes of varying lengths and widths. There's a stout six-foot-long table in the opposite corner—polished wood with intricately carved legs—and two matching stools underneath.

But what dominates the room is a bed. It's bigger than king sized, an ornately carved rococo four-poster with a flat top. It looks late nineteenth century. Under the canopy, I can see more gleaming chains and cuffs. There is no bedding … just a mattress covered in red leather and red satin cushions piled at one end.

At the foot of the bed, set apart a few feet, is a large oxblood chesterfield couch, just stuck in the middle of the room facing the bed. An odd arrangement … to have a couch facing the bed, and I smile to myself—I've picked on the couch as odd, when really it's the most mundane piece of furniture in the room. I glance up and stare at the ceiling. There are carabiners all over the ceiling at odd intervals. I vaguely wonder what they're for. Weirdly, all the wood, dark walls, moody lighting, and oxblood leather makes the room kind of

soft and romantic … I know it's anything but; this is Christian's version of soft and romantic.

I turn, and he's regarding me intently, as I knew he would be, his expression completely unreadable. I walk farther into the room, and he follows me. The feathery thing has me intrigued. I touch it hesitantly. It's suede, like a small cat-o'-nine-tails but bushier, and there are very small plastic beads on the end.

"It's called a flogger." Christian's voice is quiet and soft.

*A flogger … hmm*. I think I'm in shock. My subconscious has emigrated or been struck dumb or simply keeled over and expired. I am numb. I can observe and absorb but not articulate my feelings about all this, because I'm in shock. What is the appropriate response to finding out a potential lover is a complete freaky sadist or masochist? *Fear* … yes … that seems to be the overriding feeling. I recognize it now. But weirdly not of him—I don't think he'd hurt me, well, not without my consent. So many questions cloud my mind. Why? How? When? How often? Who? I walk toward the bed and run my hands down one of the intricately carved posts. The post is very sturdy, the craftsmanship outstanding.

"Say something," Christian commands, his voice deceptively soft.

"Do you do this to people or do they do it to you?"

His mouth quirks up, either amused or relieved.

"People?" He blinks a couple of times as he considers his answer. "I do this to women who want me to."

I don't understand.

"If you have willing volunteers, why am I here?"

"Because I want to do this with you, very much."

"Oh," I gasp. *Why?*

I wander to the far corner of the room and pat the waist-high padded bench and run my fingers over the leather. *He likes to hurt women*. The thought depresses me.

"You're a sadist?"

"I'm a Dominant." His eyes are a scorching gray, intense.

"What does that mean?" I whisper.

"It means I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me, in all things."

I frown at him as I try to assimilate this idea.

"Why would I do that?"

"To please me," he whispers as he cocks his head to one side, and I see a ghost of a smile.

*Please him! He wants me to please him!* I think my mouth drops open. *Please Christian Grey*. And I realize, in that moment, that yes, that's exactly what I

want to do. I want him to be damned delighted with me. It's a revelation.

"In very simple terms, I want you to want to please me," he says softly. His voice is hypnotic.

"How do I do that?" My mouth is dry, and I wish I had more wine. Okay, I understand the pleasing bit, but I am puzzled by the soft-boudoir Elizabethan-torture setup. Do I want to know the answer?

"I have rules, and I want you to comply with them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I shall reward you. If you don't, I shall punish you, and you will learn," he whispers. I glance at the rack of canes as he says this.

"And where does all this fit in?" I wave my hand in the general direction of the room.

"It's all part of the incentive package. Both reward and punishment."

"So you'll get your kicks by exerting your will over me."

"It's about gaining your trust and your respect, so you'll let me exert my will over you. I will gain a great deal of pleasure, joy even, in your submission. The more you submit, the greater my joy—it's a very simple equation."

"Okay, and what do I get out of this?"

He shrugs and looks almost apologetic.

"Me," he says simply.

*Oh my*. Christian rakes his hand through his hair as he gazes at me.

"You're not giving anything away, Anastasia," he murmurs, exasperated. "Let's go back downstairs where I can concentrate better. It's very distracting having you in here." He holds his hand out to me, and now I'm hesitant to take it.

Kate had said he was dangerous; she was so right. *How did she know?* He's dangerous to my health, because I know I'm going to say yes. And part of me doesn't want to. Part of me wants to run screaming from this room and all it represents. I am so out of my depth here.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Anastasia."

I know he speaks the truth. I take his hand, and he leads me out the door.

"If you do this, let me show you." Rather than going back downstairs, he turns right out of the *playroom*, as he calls it, and down a corridor. We pass several doors until we reach the one at the end. Beyond it is a bedroom with a large double bed, all in white … everything—furniture, walls, bedding. It's sterile and cold but with the most glorious view of Seattle through the glass wall.

"This will be your room. You can decorate it how you like, have whatever you like in here."

"My room? You're expecting me to move in?" I can't hide the horror in my

voice.

“Not full time. Just, say, Friday evening through Sunday. We have to talk about all that, negotiate. If you want to do this,” he adds, his voice quiet and hesitant.

“I’ll sleep here?”

“Yes.”

“Not with you.”

“No. I told you, I don’t sleep with anyone, except you when you’re stupefied with drink.” His voice is reprimanding.

My mouth presses in a hard line. This is what I cannot reconcile. Kind, caring Christian, who rescues me from inebriation and holds me gently while I’m throwing up into the azaleas, and the monster who possesses whips and chains in a special room.

“Where do you sleep?”

“My room is downstairs. Come, you must be hungry.”

“Weirdly, I seem to have lost my appetite,” I murmur petulantly.

“You must eat, Anastasia,” he scolds, and, taking my hand, leads me back downstairs.

Back in the impossibly big room, I am filled with deep trepidation. I am on the edge of a precipice, and I have to decide whether to jump.

“I’m fully aware that this is a dark path I’m leading you down, Anastasia, which is why I really want you to think about this. You must have some questions,” he says as he wanders into the kitchen area, releasing my hand.

*I do. But where to start?*

“You’ve signed your NDA; you can ask me anything you want and I’ll answer.”

I stand at the breakfast bar watching him as he opens the refrigerator and pulls out a plate of different cheeses with two large bunches of green and red grapes. He sets the plate down on the worktop and proceeds to cut up a French baguette.

“Sit.” He points to one of the stools at the breakfast bar, and I obey his command. If I’m going to do this, I’m going to have to get used to it. I realize he’s been this bossy since I met him.

“You mentioned paperwork.”

“Yes.”

“What paperwork?”

“Well, apart from the NDA, a contract saying what we will and won’t do. I need to know your limits, and you need to know mine. This is consensual, Anastasia.”

“And if I don’t want to do this?”

“That’s fine,” he says carefully.

“But we won’t have any sort of relationship?” I ask.

“No.”

“Why?”

“This is the only sort of relationship I’m interested in.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “It’s the way I am.”

“How did you become this way?”

“Why is anyone the way they are? That’s kind of hard to answer. Why do some people like cheese and other people hate it? Do you like cheese? Mrs. Jones—my housekeeper—has left this for supper.” He takes some large white plates from a cupboard and places one in front of me.

*We’re talking about cheese … Holy crap.*

“What are your rules that I have to follow?”

“I have them written down. We’ll go through them once we’ve eaten.”

*Food. How can I eat now?*

“I’m really not hungry,” I whisper.

“You will eat,” he says simply. *Dominating Christian, it all becomes clear.* “Would you like another glass of wine?”

“Yes, please.”

He pours wine into my glass and comes to sit beside me. I take a hasty sip.

“Help yourself to food, Anastasia.”

I take a small bunch of grapes. This I can manage. He narrows his eyes.

“Have you been like this for a while?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Is it easy to find women who want to do this?”

He raises an eyebrow at me.

“You’d be amazed,” he says dryly.

“Then why me? I really don’t understand.”

“Anastasia, I’ve told you. There’s something about you. I can’t leave you alone.” He smiles ironically. “I’m like a moth to a flame.” His voice darkens. “I want you very badly, especially now, when you’re biting your lip again.” He takes a deep breath and swallows.

My stomach somersaults—he wants me … in a weird way, true, but this beautiful, strange, kinky man wants me.

“I think you have that cliché the wrong way around,” I grumble. I am the moth and he is the flame, and I’m going to get burned. I know.

“Eat!”

“No. I haven’t signed anything yet, so I think I’ll hang on to my free will for a

bit longer, if that's okay with you."

His eyes soften, and his lips turn up in a smile.

"As you wish, Miss Steele."

"How many women?" I blurt out the question, but I'm so curious.

"Fifteen."

Oh … not as many as I thought.

"For long periods of time?"

"Some of them, yes."

"Have you ever hurt anyone?"

"Yes."

*Holy shit.*

"Badly?"

"No."

"Will you hurt me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Physically, will you hurt me?"

"I will punish you when you require it, and it will be painful."

I think I feel a little faint. I take another sip of wine. Alcohol—this will make me brave.

"Have you ever been beaten?" I ask.

"Yes."

Oh … that surprises me. Before I can question him on this revelation further, he interrupts my train of thought.

"Let's discuss this in my study. I want to show you something."

This is hard to process. Here I was foolishly thinking that I'd spend a night of unparalleled passion in this man's bed, and we're negotiating this weird arrangement.

I follow him into his study, a spacious room with another floor-to-ceiling window that opens out onto the balcony. He sits on the desk, motions for me to sit on a leather chair in front of him, and hands me a piece of paper.

"These are the rules. They may be subject to change. They form part of the contract, which you can also have. Read these rules and let's discuss."

**RULES**

*Obedience:*

The Submissive will obey any instructions given by the Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities that are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

*Sleep:*

The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of seven hours' sleep a night when she is not with the Dominant.

*Food:*

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.

*Clothes:*

During the Term, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall wear during the Term any adornments the Dominant shall require, in the presence of the Dominant and at any other time the Dominant deems fit.

*Exercise:*

The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and the Submissive. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the Submissive's progress.

*Personal Hygiene/Beauty:*

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of the Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by the Dominant and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit.

*Personal Safety:*

The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

*Personal Qualities:*

The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection on the Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings, and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

**Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by the Dominant.**

*Holy fuck.*

"Hard limits?" I ask.

"Yes. What you won't do, what I won't do, we need to specify in our agreement."

"I'm not sure about accepting money for clothes. It feels wrong." I shift uncomfortably, the word "ho" rattling around my head.

"I want to lavish money on you. Let me buy you some clothes. I may need you to accompany me to functions, and I want you dressed well. I'm sure your salary, when you do get a job, won't cover the kind of clothes I'd like you to wear."

"I don't have to wear them when I'm not with you?"

"No."

"Okay." *Think of them as a uniform.*

"I don't want to exercise four times a week."

"Anastasia, I need you supple, strong, and with stamina. Trust me, you need to exercise."

"But surely not four times a week. How about three?"

"I want you to do four."

"I thought this was a negotiation?"

He purses his lips at me. "Okay, Miss Steele, another point well made. How about an hour on three days and one day half an hour?"

"Three days, three hours. I get the impression you're going to keep me exercised when I'm here."

He smiles wickedly, and his eyes glow as if relieved. "Yes, I am. Okay, agreed. Are you sure you don't want to intern at my company? You're a good negotiator."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea." I stare down at his rules. *Waxing! Waxing what? Everything? Ugh.*

“So, limits. These are mine.” He hands me another piece of paper.

**HARD LIMITS**

No acts involving fire play.

No acts involving urination or defecation and the products thereof.

No acts involving needles, knives, piercing, or blood.

No acts involving gynecological medical instruments.

No acts involving children or animals.

No acts that will leave any permanent marks on the skin.

No acts involving breath control.

No activity that involves the direct contact of electric current (whether alternating or direct), fire, or flames to the body.

*Ugh. He has to write these down!* Of course—they all look very sensible and, frankly, necessary … Any sane person wouldn’t want to be involved in this sort of thing, surely. Though I now feel a little queasy.

“Is there anything you’d like to add?” he asks kindly.

*Crap*. I’ve no idea. I am completely stumped. He gazes at me and furrows his brow.

“Is there anything you won’t do?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

I squirm uncomfortably and bite my lip.

“I’ve never done anything like this.”

“Well, when you’ve had sex, was there anything that you didn’t like doing?”

For the first time in what seems to be ages, I blush.

“You can tell me, Anastasia. We have to be honest with each other or this isn’t going to work.”

I squirm uncomfortably again and stare at my knotted fingers.

“Tell me,” he commands.

“Well … I haven’t had sex before, so I don’t know.” My voice is small. I peek up at him, and he’s gaping at me, frozen, and pale—really pale.

“Never?” he whispers. I shake my head.

“You’re a virgin?” he breathes. I nod, flushing again. He closes his eyes and looks to be counting to ten. When he opens them again, he’s angry, glaring at me.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” he growls.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Christian is running his hands through his hair and pacing up and down his study. Two hands—that's double exasperation. His usual concrete control seems to have slipped a notch.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me," he castigates me.

"The subject never came up. I'm not in the habit of revealing my sexual status to everyone I meet. I mean, we hardly know each other." I'm staring at my hands. Why am I feeling guilty? Why is he so mad? I peek up at him.

"Well, you know a lot more about me now," he snaps, his mouth presses into a hard line. "I knew you were inexperienced, but a *virgin*!" He says it like it's a really dirty word. "Hell, Ana, I just showed you …" he groans. "May God forgive me. Have you ever been kissed, apart from by me?"

"Of course I have." I try my best to look affronted. *Okay … maybe twice*.

"And a nice young man hasn't swept you off your feet? I just don't understand. You're twenty-one, nearly twenty-two. You're beautiful." He runs his hand through his hair again.

*Beautiful*. I flush with pleasure. Christian Grey thinks I'm beautiful. I knot my fingers together, staring at them hard, trying to conceal my goofy grin. *Perhaps he's farsighted*. My subconscious has reared her somnambulant head. Where was she when I needed her?

"And you're seriously discussing what I want to do, when you have no experience." His brows knit together. "How have you avoided sex? Tell me, please."

I shrug.

"No one's really, you know …" Come up to scratch, only you. And you turn out to be some kind of monster. "Why are you so angry with me?" I whisper.

"I'm not angry with you, I'm angry with myself. I just assumed …" He sighs. He regards me shrewdly and then shakes his head. "Do you want to go?" he asks, his voice gentle.

"No, unless you want me to go," I murmur. *Oh no … I don't want to leave*.

"Of course not. I like having you here." He frowns as he says this and then glances at his watch. "It's late." And he turns to look at me. "You're biting your lip." His voice is husky, and he's eyeing me speculatively.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s just that I want to bite it, too, hard.”

I gasp … how can he say things like that to me and not expect me to be affected.

“Come,” he murmurs.

“What?”

“We’re going to rectify the situation right now.”

“What do you mean? What situation?”

“Your situation. Ana, I’m going to make love to you, now.”

“Oh.” The floor has fallen away. *I’m a situation*. I’m holding my breath.

“That’s if you want to, I mean, I don’t want to push my luck.”

“I thought you didn’t make love. I thought you fucked hard.” I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

He gives me a wicked grin, the effects of which travel all the way down *there*.

“I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we’ll see. I really want to make love to you. Please, come to bed with me. I want our arrangement to work, but you really need to have some idea what you’re getting yourself into. We can start your training tonight—with the basics. This doesn’t mean I’ve come over all hearts and flowers; it’s a means to an end, but one that I want, and hopefully you do, too.” His gaze is intense.

I flush … *oh my* … wishes do come true.

“But I haven’t done all the things you require from your list of rules.” My voice is all breathy, hesitant.

“Forget about the rules. Forget about all those details for tonight. I want you. I’ve wanted you since you fell into my office, and I know you want me. You wouldn’t be sitting here calmly discussing punishment and hard limits if you didn’t. Please, Ana, spend the night with me.” He holds his hand out to me, his eyes are bright, fervent … excited, and I put my hand in his. He pulls me up and into his arms so I can feel the length of his body against mine, this swift action taking me by surprise. He runs his fingers around the nape of my neck, winds my ponytail around his wrist, and gently pulls so I’m forced to look up at him. He gazes down at me.

“You are one brave young woman,” he whispers. “I am in awe of you.”

His words are like some kind of incendiary device; my blood flames. He leans down and kisses my lips gently, and he sucks at my lower lip.

“I want to bite this lip,” he murmurs against my mouth, and carefully he tugs at it with his teeth. I moan, and he smiles.

“Please, Ana, let me make love to you.”

“Yes,” I whisper, because that’s why I’m here. His smile is triumphant as he

releases me and takes my hand and leads me through the apartment.

His bedroom is vast. The ceiling-height windows look out on lit-up Seattle high-rises. The walls are white, and the furnishings are pale blue. The enormous bed is ultramodern, made of rough, gray wood like driftwood, four posts but no canopy. On the wall above it is a stunning painting of the sea.

I am quaking like a leaf. This is it. Finally, after all this time, I'm going to do it, with none other than Christian Grey. My breath is shallow, and I can't take my eyes off him. He removes his watch and places it on top of a chest of drawers that matches the bed, and removes his jacket, placing it on a chair. He's dressed in his white linen shirt and jeans. He is heart-stoppingly beautiful. His dark copper hair is a mess, his shirt hanging out—his gray eyes bold and dazzling. He steps out of his Converse shoes and reaches down and takes his socks off individually. Christian Grey's feet … wow … what is it about naked feet? Turning, he gazes at me, his expression soft.

"I assume you're not on the pill."

*What? Shit*.

"I didn't think so." He opens the top drawer of the chest and removes a packet of condoms. He gazes at me intently.

"Be prepared," he murmurs. "Do you want the blinds drawn?"

"I don't mind," I whisper. "I thought you didn't let anyone sleep in your bed."

"Who says we're going to sleep?" he murmurs.

"Oh." *Holy hell*.

He strolls slowly toward me. Confident, sexy, eyes blazing, and my heart begins to pound. My blood's pumping through my body. Desire, thick and hot, pools in my belly. He stands in front of me, staring down into my eyes. *He's so freaking hot*.

"Let's get this jacket off, shall we?" he says softly, and takes hold of the lapels and gently slides my jacket off my shoulders. He places it on the chair.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you, Ana Steele?" he whispers. My breath hitches. I cannot take my eyes off his. He reaches up and gently runs his fingers down my cheek to my chin.

"Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?" he adds, caressing my chin.

The muscles inside the deepest, darkest part of me clench in the most delicious fashion. The pain is so sweet and sharp I want to close my eyes, but I'm hypnotized by his eyes staring fervently into mine. Leaning down, he kisses me. His lips are demanding, firm and slow, molding mine. He starts unbuttoning my shirt while he places feather-like kisses across my jaw, my chin, and the corners of my mouth. Slowly he peels it off me and lets it fall to the floor. He

stands back and gazes at me. I'm in the pale blue lacy perfect-fit bra. *Thank heavens*.

"Oh, Ana," he breathes. "You have the most beautiful skin, pale and flawless. I want to kiss every single inch of it."

I flush. *Oh my* … Why did he say he couldn't make love? I will do anything he wants. He grasps my hair tie, pulls it free, and gasps as my hair cascades down around my shoulders.

"I like brunettes," he murmurs, and both of his hands are in my hair, grasping each side of my head. His kiss is demanding, his tongue and lips coaxing mine. I moan, and my tongue tentatively meets his. He puts his arms around me and hauls me against his body, squeezing me tightly. One hand remains in my hair, the other travels down my spine to my waist and down to my behind. His hand flexes over my backside and squeezes gently. He holds me against his hips, and I feel his erection, which he languidly pushes into me.

I moan once more into his mouth. I can hardly contain the riotous feelings—or are they hormones?—that rampage through my body. I want him so badly. Gripping his upper arms, I feel his biceps. He's surprisingly strong … muscular. Tentatively, I move my hands up to his face and into his hair. It's so soft, unruly. I tug gently, and he groans. He eases me toward the bed, until I feel it behind my knees. I think he's going to push me down on to it, but he doesn't. Releasing me, he suddenly drops to his knees. He grabs my hips with both his hands and runs his tongue around my navel, then gently nips his way to my hipbone, then across my belly to my other hipbone.

"Ah," I groan.

Seeing him on his knees in front of me, feeling his mouth on me, it's so unexpected, and hot. My hands stay in his hair, pulling gently as I try to quiet my too-loud breathing. He gazes up at me through impossibly long lashes, his eyes a scorching smoky gray. His hands reach up and undo the button on my jeans, and he leisurely pulls down the zipper. Without taking his eyes off mine, his hands move beneath the waistband, skimming me and moving to my behind. His hands glide slowly down my backside to my thighs, removing my jeans as they go. I cannot look away. He stops and licks his lips, never breaking eye contact. He leans forward, running his nose up the apex between my thighs. I feel him. *There*.

"You smell so good," he murmurs, and closes his eyes, a look of pure pleasure on his face, and I practically convulse. He reaches up and tugs the duvet off the bed, then pushes me gently so I fall on to the mattress.

Still kneeling, he grasps my foot and undoes my Converse, pulling off my shoe and sock. I raise myself up on my elbows to see what he's doing. I'm

panting … wanting. He lifts my foot by the heel and runs his thumbnail up my instep. It's almost painful, but I feel the movement echoed in my groin. I gasp. Not taking his eyes off mine, again he runs his tongue along my instep and then his teeth. *Shit*. I groan … how can I feel this *there?* I fall back onto the bed, moaning. I hear his soft chuckle.

"Oh, Ana, what I could do to you," he whispers. He removes my other shoe and sock, then stands and removes my jeans completely. I'm lying on his bed dressed only in my bra and panties, and he's staring down at me.

"You're very beautiful, Anastasia Steele. I can't wait to be inside you."

*Holy shit*. His words. He's so seductive. He takes my breath away.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself."

*What?* I frown.

"Don't be coy, Ana, show me," he whispers.

I shake my head. "I don't know what you mean." My voice is hoarse. I hardly recognize it, laced with desire.

"How do you make yourself come? I want to see."

I shake my head.

"I don't," I mumble. He raises his eyebrows, astonished for a moment, and his eyes darken, and he shakes his head in disbelief.

"Well, we'll have to see what we can do about that." His voice is soft, challenging, a delicious sensual threat. He undoes the buttons of his jeans and slowly pulls his jeans down, his eyes on mine the whole time. He leans down over me and, grasping each of my ankles, quickly jerks my legs apart and crawls onto the bed between my legs. He hovers over me. I am squirming with need.

"Keep still," he murmurs, and then he leans down and kisses the inside of my thigh, trailing kisses up, over the thin lacy material of my panties, kissing me.

Oh … I can't keep still. How can I not move? I wriggle beneath him.

"We're going to have to work on keeping you still, baby." He trails kisses up my belly, and his tongue dips into my navel. Still he's heading north, kissing me across my torso. My skin is burning. I'm flushed, too hot, too cold, and I'm clawing at the sheet beneath me. He lies down beside me and his hand trails up from my hip, to my waist, and up to my breast. He gazes down at me, his expression unreadable, and gently cups my breast.

"You fit my hand perfectly, Anastasia," he murmurs, and dips his index finger into the cup of my bra and gently yanks it down, freeing my breast, but the underwire and fabric of the cup force it upward. His finger moves to my other breast and repeats the process. My breasts swell, and my nipples harden under his steady gaze. I am trussed up by my own bra.

"Very nice," he whispers appreciatively, and my nipples harden even more.

He blows very gently on one as his hand moves to my other breast, and his thumb slowly rolls the end of my nipple, elongating it. I groan, feeling the sweet sensation all the way to my groin. I am so wet. *Oh, please,* I beg internally as my fingers clasp the sheet tighter. His lips close around my other nipple, and when he tugs, I nearly convulse.

"Let's see if we can make you come like this," he whispers, continuing his slow, sensual assault. My nipples bear the delicious brunt of his deft fingers and lips, setting alight every single nerve ending so that my whole body sings with sweet agony. He just doesn't stop.

"Oh … please," I beg, and I pull my head back, my mouth open as I groan, my legs stiffening. Holy hell, what's happening to me?

"Let go, baby," he murmurs. His teeth close round my nipple, and his thumb and finger pull hard, and I fall apart in his hands, my body convulsing and shattering into a thousand pieces. He kisses me, deeply, his tongue in my mouth absorbing my cries.

*Oh my*. That was extraordinary. Now I know what all the fuss is about. He gazes down at me, a satisfied smile on his face, while I'm sure there's nothing but gratitude and awe on mine.

"You are very responsive," he breathes. "You're going to have to learn to control that, and it's going to be so much fun teaching you how." He kisses me again.

My breathing is still ragged as I come down from my orgasm. His hand moves down my waist, to my hips, and then cups me, intimately … *Jeez*. His finger slips through the fine lace and slowly circles around me—*there*. Briefly he closes his eyes, and his breathing hitches.

"You're so deliciously wet. God, I want you." He thrusts his finger inside me, and I cry out as he does it again and again. He palms my clitoris, and I cry out once more. He pushes inside me harder and harder still. I groan.

Suddenly, he sits up and tugs my panties off and throws them on the floor. Pulling off his boxer briefs, his erection springs free. *Holy cow* … He reaches over to his bedside table and grabs a foil packet, and then he moves between my legs, spreading them farther apart. He kneels up and pulls a condom onto his considerable length. *Oh no … Will it? How?*

"Don't worry," he breathes, his eyes on mine. "You expand, too." He leans down, his hands on either side of my head, so he's hovering over me, staring down into my eyes, his jaw clenched, eyes burning. It's only now that I register he's still wearing his shirt.

"You really want to do this?" he asks softly.

"Please," I beg.

“Pull your knees up,” he orders softly, and I’m quick to obey. “I’m going to fuck you now, Miss Steele,” he murmurs as he positions the head of his erection at the entrance of my sex. “Hard,” he whispers, and he slams into me.

“Aargh!” I cry as I feel a weird pinching sensation deep inside me as he rips through my virginity. He stills, gazing down at me, his eyes bright with ecstatic triumph.

His mouth is open slightly, and his breathing is harsh. He groans.

“You’re so tight. You okay?”

I nod, my eyes wide, my hands on his forearms. I feel so full. He stays still, letting me acclimatize to the intrusive, overwhelming feeling of him inside me.

“I’m going to move, baby,” he breathes after a moment, his voice tight.

*Oh*.

He eases back with exquisite slowness. And he closes his eyes and groans, and thrusts into me again. I cry out a second time, and he stills.

“More?” he whispers, his voice raw.

“Yes,” I breathe. He does it once more, and stills again.

I groan, my body accepting him … Oh, I want this.

“Again?” he breathes.

“Yes.” It’s a plea.

And he moves, but this time he doesn’t stop. He shifts onto his elbows so I can feel his weight on me, holding me down. He moves slowly at first, easing himself in and out of me. And as I grow accustomed to the alien feeling, my hips move tentatively to meet his. He speeds up. I moan, and he pounds on, picking up speed, merciless, a relentless rhythm, and I keep up, meeting his thrusts. He grasps my head between his hands and kisses me hard, his teeth pulling at my lower lip again. He shifts slightly, and I can feel something building deep inside me, like before. I start to stiffen as he thrusts on and on. My body quivers, bows; a sheen of sweat gathers over me. *Oh my* … I didn’t know it would feel like this … didn’t know it could feel as good as this. My thoughts are scattering … there’s only sensation … only him … only me … oh, please … I stiffen.

“Come for me, Ana,” he whispers breathlessly, and I unravel at his words, exploding around him as I climax and splinter into a million pieces underneath him. And as he comes, he calls out my name, thrusting hard, then stilling as he empties himself into me.

I am still panting, trying to slow my breathing, my thumping heart, and my thoughts are in riotous disarray. *Wow … that was astounding*. I open my eyes, and he has his forehead pressed against mine, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged. Christian’s eyes flicker open and gaze down at me, dark but soft. He’s

still inside me. Leaning down, he gently presses a kiss against my forehead then slowly pulls out of me.

"Ooh." I wince at the unfamiliarity.

"Did I hurt you?" Christian asks as he lies down beside me propped on one elbow. He tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear. And I have to grin, widely.

"You are asking me if you hurt me?"

"The irony is not lost on me," he smiles sardonically. "Seriously, are you okay?" His eyes are intense, probing, demanding even.

I stretch out beside him, feeling loose-limbed, my bones like jelly, but I'm relaxed, deeply relaxed. I grin at him. I can't stop grinning. Now I know what all the fuss is about. Two orgasms … coming apart at the seams, like the spin cycle on a washing machine, wow. I had no idea what my body was capable of, could be wound so tightly and released so violently, so gratifyingly. The pleasure was indescribable.

"You're biting your lip, and you haven't answered me." He's frowning. I grin up at him impishly. He looks glorious with his tousled hair, burning narrowed gray eyes, and serious, dark expression.

"I'd like to do that again," I whisper. For a moment, I think I see a fleeting look of relief on his face, before the shutters come down, and he gazes at me through hooded eyes.

"Would you now, Miss Steele?" he murmurs dryly. He leans down and kisses me very gently at the corner of my mouth. "Demanding little thing, aren't you? Turn on your front."

I blink at him momentarily, and then I turn over. He unhooks my bra and runs his hand down my back to my behind.

"You really have the most beautiful skin," he murmurs. He shifts so that one of his legs pushes between mine, and he's half lying across my back. I can feel the buttons of his shirt pressing into me as he gathers my hair off my face and kisses my bare shoulder.

"Why are you wearing your shirt?" I ask. He stills. After a beat, he shuffles out of his shirt, and he lies back down on me. I feel his warm skin against mine. *Hmm* … it feels heavenly. He has a light dusting of hair across his chest, which tickles my back.

"So you want me to fuck you again?" he whispers in my ear, and he begins to trail featherlight kisses around my ear and down my neck.

His hand moves down, skimming my waist, over my hip, and down my thigh to the back of my knee. He pushes my knee up higher, and my breath hitches … *What's he doing now?* He shifts so he's between my legs, pressed

against my back, and his hand travels up my thigh to my behind. He caresses my cheek slowly, and then trails his fingers down between my legs.

"I'm going to take you from behind, Anastasia," he murmurs, and with his other hand, he grasps my hair at the nape in a fist and pulls gently, holding me in place. I cannot move my head. I am pinioned beneath him, helpless.

"You are mine," he whispers. "Only mine. Don't forget it." His voice is intoxicating, his words heady, seductive. I feel his growing erection against my thigh.

His long fingers reach around to gently massage my clitoris, circling slowly. His breath is soft against my face as he slowly nips me along my jaw.

"You smell divine." He nuzzles behind my ear. His hand rubs against me, around and around. Reflexively, my hips start to circle, mirroring his hand, as excruciating pleasure spikes through my blood like adrenaline.

"Keep still," he orders, his voice soft but urgent, and slowly he inserts his thumb inside me, rotating it around and around, stroking the front wall of my vagina. The effect is mind-blowing—all my energy concentrating on this one small space inside my body. I moan.

"You like this?" he asks softly, his teeth grazing my outer ear, and he starts to flex his thumb slowly, in, out, in, out … his fingers still circling.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the disordered, chaotic sensations that his fingers are unleashing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again.

"You're so wet, so quickly. So responsive. Oh, Anastasia, I like that. I like that a lot," he whispers.

I want to stiffen my legs, but I can't move. He's pinning me down, keeping up a constant, slow, tortuous rhythm. It's absolutely exquisite. I moan again, and he moves suddenly.

"Open your mouth," he commands, and thrusts his thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

"See how you taste," he breathes against my ear. "Suck me, baby." His thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around him, sucking wildly. I taste the saltiness on his thumb and the faint metallic tang of blood. *Holy fuck.* This is wrong, but holy hell is it erotic.

"I want to fuck your mouth, Anastasia, and I will soon," his voice is hoarse, raw, his breathing more disjointed.

*Fuck my mouth!* I moan, and I bite down on him. He gasps, and he pulls my hair tighter, painfully, so I release him.

"Naughty, sweet girl," he whispers, and then reaches over to the bedside table for a foil packet. "Stay still, don't move," he orders as he releases my hair.

He rips the foil while I'm breathing hard, my blood singing in my veins. The anticipation is exhilarating. He leans down, his weight on me again, and he grabs my hair, holding my head immobile. I cannot move. I'm enticingly ensnared by him, and he's poised and ready to take me once more.

"We're going to go real slow this time, Anastasia," he breathes.

And slowly he eases into me, slowly, slowly, until he's buried in me. Stretching, filling, relentless. I groan loudly. It feels deeper this time, delectable. I groan again, and he deliberately circles his hips and pulls back, pauses a beat, and then eases his way back in. He repeats this motion again and again. It's driving me insane—his teasing, deliberately slow thrusts, and the intermittent feeling of fullness is overwhelming.

"You feel so good," he groans, and my insides start to quiver. He pulls back and waits. "Oh no, baby, not yet," he murmurs, and as the quivering ceases, he starts the whole delicious process again.

"Oh, please," I beg. I'm not sure I can take much more. My body is wound so tight, craving release.

"I want you sore, baby," he murmurs, and he continues his sweet, leisurely torment, backward, forward. "Every time you move tomorrow, I want you to be reminded that I've been here. Only me. You are mine."

I groan.

"Please, Christian," I whisper.

"What do you want, Anastasia? Tell me."

I groan again. He pulls out and moves slowly back into me, circling his hips once more.

"Tell me," he murmurs.

"You, please."

He increases the rhythm infinitesimally, and his breathing becomes more erratic. My insides start quickening, and Christian picks up the rhythm.

"You. Are. So. Sweet," he murmurs between each thrust. "I. Want. You. So. Much."

I moan.

"You. Are. Mine. Come for me, baby," he growls.

His words are my undoing, tipping me over the precipice. My body convulses around him, and I come, loudly calling out a garbled version of his name into the mattress. Christian follows with two sharp thrusts, and he freezes, pouring himself into me as he finds his release. He collapses on top of me, his face in my hair.

"Fuck. Ana," he breathes. He pulls out of me immediately and rolls onto his side of the bed. I pull my knees up to my chest, utterly spent, and immediately

drift off or pass out into an exhausted sleep.

WHEN I WAKE, IT'S still dark. I have no idea how long I've slept. I stretch out beneath the duvet, and I feel sore, deliciously sore. Christian is nowhere to be seen. I sit up, staring out at the cityscape in front of me. There are fewer lights on among the skyscrapers, and there's a whisper of dawn in the east. I hear music. The lilting notes of the piano, a sad, sweet lament. Bach, I think, but I'm not sure.

I wrap the duvet around me and quietly pad down the corridor toward the big room. Christian is at the piano, completely lost in the melody he's playing. His expression is sad and forlorn, like the music. His playing is stunning. Leaning against the wall at the entrance, I listen, enraptured. He's such an accomplished musician. He sits naked, his body bathed in the warm light cast by a solitary freestanding lamp beside the piano. With the rest of the large room in darkness, it's like he's in his own isolated little pool of light, untouchable … lonely, in a bubble.

I pad quietly toward him, enticed by the sublime, melancholy music. I'm mesmerized, watching his long, skilled fingers as they find and gently press the keys, thinking how those same fingers have expertly handled and caressed my body. I flush and gasp at the memory and press my thighs together. He glances up, his unfathomable gray eyes bright, his expression unreadable.

"Sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

A frown flits across his face.

"Surely, I should be saying that to you," he murmurs. He finishes playing and puts his hands on his legs.

I notice now that he's wearing PJ pants. He runs his fingers through his hair and stands. His pants hang from his hips, in that way … *oh my*. My mouth goes dry as he casually strolls around the piano toward me. He has broad shoulders, narrow hips, and his abdominal muscles ripple as he walks. He really is stunning.

"You should be in bed," he admonishes.

"That was a beautiful piece. Bach?"

"Transcription by Bach, but it's originally an oboe concerto by Alessandro Marcello."

"It was exquisite, but very sad, such a melancholy melody."

His lips quirk up in a half smile.

"Bed," he orders. "You'll be exhausted in the morning."

"I woke and you weren't there."

"I find it difficult to sleep, and I'm not used to sleeping with anyone," he murmurs. I can't fathom his mood. He seems a little despondent, but it's difficult

to tell in the darkness. Perhaps it was the tone of the piece he was playing. He puts his arm around me and gently walks me back to the bedroom.

"How long have you been playing? You play beautifully."

"Since I was six."

"Oh." Christian as a six-year-old boy … my mind conjures an image of a beautiful, copper-haired little boy with gray eyes and my heart melts—a moppet-haired kid who likes impossibly sad music.

"How are you feeling?" he asks when we are back in the room. He switches on a sidelight.

"I'm good."

We both glance down at the bed at the same time. There's blood on the sheets—evidence of my lost virginity. I flush, embarrassed, pulling the duvet tighter around me.

"Well, that's going to give Mrs. Jones something to think about," Christian mutters as he stands in front of me. He puts his hand under my chin and tips my head back, staring down at me. His eyes are intense as he examines my face. I realize that I've not seen his naked chest before. Instinctively, I reach out to run my fingers through the smattering of dark hair on his chest to see how it feels. Immediately, he steps back out of my reach.

"Get into bed," he says sharply. His voice softens. "I'll come and lie down with you." I drop my hand and frown. I don't think I've ever touched his torso. He opens a chest of drawers and pulls out a T-shirt and quickly slips it on.

"Bed," he orders again. I climb back onto the bed, trying not to think about the blood. He clambers in beside me and pulls me into his embrace, wrapping his arms around me so that I'm facing away from him. He kisses my hair gently, and he inhales deeply.

"Sleep, sweet Anastasia," he murmurs, and I close my eyes, but I can't help feel a residual melancholy either from the music or his demeanor. Christian Grey has a sad side.

## CHAPTER NINE

Light fills the room, coaxing me from deep sleep to wakefulness. I stretch out and open my eyes. It's a beautiful May morning, Seattle at my feet. Wow, what a view. Beside me, Christian Grey is fast asleep. Wow, what a view. I'm surprised he's still in bed. He's facing me, and I have an unprecedented opportunity to study him. His lovely face looks younger, relaxed in sleep. His sculptured, pouty lips are parted slightly, and his shiny, clean hair is a glorious mess. How could anyone look this good and still be legal? I remember his room upstairs … perhaps he's not legal. I shake my head, so much to think about. It's tempting to reach out and touch him, but like a small child, he's so lovely when he's asleep. I don't have to worry about what I'm saying, what he's saying, what plans he has, especially his plans for me.

I could gaze at him all day, but I have needs—bathroom needs. Slipping out of bed, I find his white shirt on the floor and shrug it on. I walk through a door thinking that it might be the bathroom, but I'm in a vast walk-in closet as big as my bedroom. Lines and lines of expensive suits, shirts, shoes, and ties. How can anyone need this many clothes? I tut with disapproval. Actually, Kate's wardrobe probably rivals this. Kate! *Oh no*. I didn't think about her all evening. I was supposed to text her. Crap. I'm going to be in trouble. I wonder briefly how she's getting on with Elliot.

Returning to the bedroom, Christian is still asleep. I try the other door. It's the bathroom, and it's bigger than my bedroom. Why does one man need so much space? Two sinks, I notice with irony. Given he doesn't sleep with anyone, one of them can't have been used.

I stare at myself in the gigantic mirror above the sinks. Do I look different? I feel different. I feel a little sore, if I'm honest, and my muscles—jeez, it's like I've never done any exercise in my life. *You don't do any exercise in your life*. My subconscious has woken. She's staring at me with pursed lips, tapping her foot. *So you've just slept with him, given him your virginity, a man who doesn't love you. In fact, he has very odd ideas about you, wants to make you some sort of kinky sex slave*.

*ARE YOU CRAZY?* She's shouting at me.

I wince as I look in the mirror. I am going to have to process all this.

Honestly, fancy falling for a man who's beyond beautiful, richer than Croesus, and has a Red Room of Pain waiting for me. I shudder. I'm bewildered and confused. My hair is its usual wayward self. Just-fucked hair doesn't suit me. I try to bring order to the chaos with my fingers but fail miserably and give up—maybe I'll find hair ties in my purse.

I'm starving. I head back out to the bedroom. Sleeping beauty is still sleeping, so I leave him and head for the kitchen.

*Oh no … Kate*. I left my purse in Christian's study. I fetch it and reach for my cell phone. Three texts.

*RU OK Ana*
*Where RU Ana*
*Damn it Ana*

I call Kate. When she doesn't answer, I leave her a groveling message to tell her I am alive and have not succumbed to Bluebeard, well, not in the sense she would be worried about—*or perhaps I have*. Oh, this is so confusing. I have to try to categorize and analyze my feelings for Christian Grey. It's an impossible task. I shake my head in defeat. I need alone time, away from here to think.

I find two welcome hair ties at the same time in my bag and quickly tie my hair in pigtails. Yes! The more girly I look perhaps the safer I'll be from Bluebeard. I take my iPod out of the bag and plug my headphones in. There's nothing like music to cook by. I slip it into the breast pocket of Christian's shirt, turn it up loud, and start dancing.

Holy hell, I'm hungry.

I am daunted by his kitchen. It's so sleek and modern, and none of the cupboards has handles. It takes me a few seconds to deduce that I have to push the cupboard doors to open them. Perhaps I should cook Christian breakfast. He was eating an omelet the other day … um, yesterday at the Heathman. Jeez, so much has happened since then. I check in the fridge, where there are plenty of eggs, and decide I want pancakes and bacon. I set about making some batter, dancing my way around the kitchen.

Being busy is good. It allows a bit of time to think but not too deeply. Music blaring in my ears also helps to stave off deep thought. I came here to spend the night in Christian Grey's bed and managed it, even though he doesn't let anyone in his bed. I smile, mission accomplished. Big time. I grin. Big, big time, and I'm distracted by the memory of last night. His words, his body, his lovemaking … I close my eyes as my body hums at the recollection, and my muscles contract deliciously deep in my belly. My subconscious scowls at me … *Fucking—not lovemaking,* she screams at me like a harpy. I ignore her, but deep down I know she has a point. I shake my head to concentrate on the

task at hand.

There is a state-of-the-art range. I think I have the hang of it. I need somewhere to keep the pancakes warm, and I start on the bacon. Amy Studt is singing in my ear about misfits. This song used to mean so much to me; that's because I'm a misfit. I have never fitted in anywhere and now … I have an indecent proposal to consider from King Misfit himself. Why is he this way? Nature or nurture? It's so alien to anything I know.

I put the bacon under the grill, and while it's cooking, I whisk some eggs. I turn, and Christian is sitting on one of the barstools at the breakfast bar, leaning on it, his face supported by his steepled hands. He's still wearing the T-shirt he slept in. Just-fucked hair really, really suits him, as does his designer stubble. He looks both amused and bewildered. I freeze, flush, then gather myself and pull the headphones out of my ears, my knees weak at the sight of him.

"Good morning, Miss Steele. You're very energetic this morning," he says dryly.

"I-I slept well," I stutter my explanation. His lips try to mask his smile.

"I can't imagine why." He pauses and frowns. "So did I after I came back to bed."

"Are you hungry?"

"Very," he says with an intense look, and I don't think he's referring to food.

"Pancakes, bacon, and eggs?"

"Sounds great."

"I don't know where you keep your placemats." I shrug, trying desperately hard not to look flustered.

"I'll do that. You cook. Would you like me to put some music on so you can continue your … er … dancing?"

I stare down at my fingers, knowing that I am turning puce.

"Please, don't stop on my account. It's very entertaining." His tone is one of wry amusement.

I purse my lips. Entertaining, eh? My subconscious has doubled over in laughter at me. I turn and continue to whisk the eggs, probably beating them a little harder than necessary. In a moment, he's beside me. He gently pulls my pigtail.

"I love these," he whispers. "They won't protect you." *Hmm, Bluebeard …*

"How would you like your eggs?" I ask tartly. He smiles.

"Thoroughly whisked and beaten." He smirks.

I turn back to the task at hand, trying to hide my smile. He's hard to stay mad at. Especially when he's being so uncharacteristically playful. He opens a drawer and takes out two slate black placemats for the breakfast bar. I pour the egg mix

into a pan, pull out the bacon, turn it over, and put it back under the grill.

When I turn back around, there is orange juice on the table, and he's making coffee.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please. If you have some."

I find a couple of plates and place them in the warming tray of the range. Christian reaches into a cupboard and pulls out some Twinings English Breakfast tea. I purse my lips.

"Bit of a foregone conclusion, wasn't I?"

"Are you? I'm not sure we've concluded anything yet, Miss Steele," he murmurs.

*What does he mean by that? Our negotiations? Our, er … relationship … whatever that is?* He's still so cryptic. I serve up the breakfast onto the heated plates and lay them on the placemats. I hunt in the refrigerator and find some maple syrup.

I glance up at Christian, and he's waiting for me to sit down.

"Miss Steele." He motions to one of the barstools.

"Mr. Grey." I nod in acknowledgment. I climb up and wince slightly as I sit down.

"Just how sore are you?" he asks as he sits down. I flush. *Why does he ask such personal questions?*

"Well, to be truthful, I have nothing to compare this to," I snap at him. "Did you wish to offer your commiserations?" I ask too sweetly. I think he's trying to stifle a smile, but I can't be sure.

"No. I wondered if we should continue your basic training."

"Oh." I stare at him dumbfounded as I stop breathing and everything inside me clenches tight. *Ooh … that's so nice*. I suppress my groan.

"Eat, Anastasia." My appetite has become uncertain again … more … more sex … yes, please.

"This is delicious, incidentally." He grins at me.

I try a forkful of omelet but can barely taste it. Basic training! *I want to fuck your mouth*. Does that form part of basic training?

"Stop biting your lip. It's very distracting, and I happen to know you're not wearing anything under my shirt, which makes it even more distracting."

I dunk my teabag in the small pot that Christian has provided. My mind is in a whirl.

"What sort of basic training did you have in mind?" I ask, my voice slightly too high, betraying my wish to sound as natural, disinterested, and calm as I can with my hormones wreaking havoc through my body.

“Well, as you’re sore, I thought we could stick to oral skills.”

I choke on my tea, and I stare at him, eyes wide and mouth gaping. He pats me gently on the back and passes me some orange juice. I cannot tell what he’s thinking.

“That’s if you want to stay,” he adds. I glance up at him, trying to recover my equilibrium. His expression is unreadable. It’s so frustrating.

“I’d like to stay for today. If that’s okay. I have to work tomorrow.”

“What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?”

“Nine.”

“I’ll get you to work by nine tomorrow.”

I frown. *Does he want me to stay another night?*

“I’ll need to go home tonight—I need clean clothes.”

“We can get you some here.”

I don’t have spare cash to spend on clothes. His hand comes up, and he grasps my chin, tugging it so my lip is released from the grip of my teeth. I’m not even aware I’ve been biting my lip.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I need to be home this evening.”

His mouth is a hard line.

“Okay, this evening,” he acquiesces. “Now eat your breakfast.”

My thoughts and my stomach are in turmoil. My appetite has vanished. I stare at my half-eaten breakfast. I’m just not hungry.

“Eat, Anastasia. You didn’t eat last night.”

“I’m really not hungry,” I whisper.

His eyes narrow. “I would really like you to finish your breakfast.”

“What is it with you and food?” I blurt out. His brow knits.

“I told you, I have issues with wasted food. Eat,” he snaps. His eyes are dark, pained.

*Holy crap. What is that all about?* I pick up my fork and eat slowly, trying to chew. I must remember not to put so much on my plate if he’s going to be weird about food. His expression softens as I carefully make my way through my breakfast. I note that he cleans his plate. He waits for me to finish, and then he clears my plate.

“You cooked, I’ll clear.”

“That’s very democratic.”

“Yes.” He frowns. “Not my usual style. After I’ve done this, we’ll take a bath.”

“Oh, okay.” *Oh my … I’d much rather have a shower*. My cell rings, interrupting my reverie. It’s Kate.

“Hi.” I wander over to the glass doors of the balcony, away from him.

“Ana, why didn’t you text last night?” She’s angry.

“I’m sorry, I was overtaken by events.”

“You’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Did you?” She’s fishing for information. I roll my eyes at the expectation in her voice.

“Kate, I don’t want to talk over the phone.” Christian glances up at me.

“You did … I can tell.”

How can she tell? She’s bluffing, and I can’t talk about this. I’ve signed a damned agreement.

“Kate, please.”

“What was it like? Are you okay?”

“I’ve told you I’m okay.”

“Was he gentle?”

“Kate, please!” I can’t hide my exasperation.

“Ana, don’t hold out on me, I’ve been waiting for this day for nearly four years.”

“I’ll see you this evening.” I hang up.

That is going to be one difficult square to circle. She’s so tenacious, and she wants to know—in detail, and I can’t tell her because I’ve signed a—what was it called? NDA. She’ll freak and rightly so. I need a plan. I head back to watch Christian move gracefully around his kitchen.

“The NDA, does it cover everything?” I ask tentatively.

“Why?” He turns and gazes at me while putting the Twinings away. I flush.

“Well, I have a few questions, you know, about sex.” I stare down at my fingers. “And I’d like to ask Kate.”

“You can ask me.”

“Christian, with all due respect …” My voice fades. *I can’t ask you*. I’ll get your biased, kinky-as-hell, distorted worldview regarding sex. I want an impartial opinion. “It’s just about mechanics. I won’t mention the Red Room of Pain.”

He raises his eyebrows.

“Red Room of Pain? It’s mostly about pleasure, Anastasia. Believe me,” he says. “Besides,” his tone is harsher, “your roommate is making the beast with two backs with my brother. I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“Does your family know about your … um, predilection?”

“No. It’s none of their business.” He saunters toward me until he’s standing in front of me.

“What do you want to know?” he asks, and raising his hand runs his fingers gently down my cheek to my chin, tilting my head back so he can look directly into my eyes. I squirm inwardly. I cannot lie to this man.

“Nothing specific at the moment,” I whisper.

“Well, we can start with: How was last night for you?” His eyes burn, filled with curiosity. *He’s anxious to know. Wow*.

“Good,” I murmur.

His lips lift slightly.

“Me, too,” he murmurs. “I’ve never had vanilla sex before. There’s a lot to be said for it. But then, maybe it’s because it’s with you.” He runs his thumb across my lower lip.

I inhale sharply. *Vanilla sex?*

“Come, let’s have a bath.” He leans down and kisses me. My heart leaps and desire pools way down low … way down *there*.

THE BATH IS A white stone, deep, egg-shaped affair, very designer. Christian leans over and fills it from the faucet on the tiled wall. He pours some expensive-looking bath oil into the water. It foams as the bath fills and smells of sweet, sultry jasmine. He stands and gazes at me, his eyes dark, then peels his T-shirt off and casts it on the floor.

“Miss Steele.” He holds his hand out.

I’m standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and wary, my arms wrapped around myself. I step forward while surreptitiously admiring his physique. I take his hand, and he bids me to step into the bath while I am still wearing his shirt. I do as I’m told. I’ll have to get used to it if I’m going to take him up on his outrageous offer … *if!* The water is enticingly hot.

“Turn around, face me,” he orders, his voice soft. I do as I’m told. He’s watching me intently.

“I know that lip is delicious, I can attest to that, but will you stop biting it?” he says through clenched teeth. “Your chewing it makes me want to fuck you, and you’re sore, okay?”

I gasp, automatically unlocking my lip, shocked.

“Yeah,” he challenges. “Get the picture?” He glares at me. I nod frantically. *I had no idea I could affect him so.*

“Good.” He reaches forward and takes my iPod out of the breast pocket, and he puts it by the sink.

“Water and iPods—not a clever combination,” he mutters. He reaches down, grasps the hem of my white shirt, lifts it above my head, and discards it on the floor.

He stands back to gaze at me. *I'm naked for heaven's sake*. I flush crimson and stare down at my hands, level with the base of my belly, and I desperately want to disappear into the hot water and foam, but I know he won't want that.

"Hey," he summons me. I peek up at him, and his head is cocked to one side. "Anastasia, you're a very beautiful woman, the whole package. Don't hang your head like you're ashamed. You have nothing to be ashamed of, and it's a real joy to stand here and gaze at you." He takes my chin in his hand and tilts my head up to reach his eyes. They are soft and warm, heated even. He's so close. I could just reach up and touch him.

"You can sit down now." He halts my scattered thoughts, and I scoot down into the warm, welcoming water. Ooh … it stings and that takes me by surprise, but it smells heavenly, too. The initial smarting pain soon ebbs away. I lie back and briefly close my eyes, relaxing in the soothing warmth. When I open them, he is gazing down at me.

"Why don't you join me?" I ask, bravely I think—my voice husky.

"I think I will. Move forward," he orders.

He strips out of his PJ pants and climbs in behind me. The water rises as he sits and pulls me against his chest. He places his long legs over mine, his knees bent and his ankles level with mine, and he pulls his feet apart, opening my legs. I gasp in surprise. His nose is in my hair and he inhales deeply.

"You smell so good, Anastasia."

A tremor runs through my whole body. *I am naked in a bath with Christian Grey. He's naked*. If someone had told me I'd be doing this when I woke up in his hotel suite yesterday, I would not have believed them.

He reaches for a bottle of body wash from the built-in shelf beside the bath and squirts some into his hand. He rubs his hands together, creating a soft, foaming lather, and he closes his hands around my neck and starts to rub the soap into my neck and shoulders, massaging firmly with his long, strong fingers. I groan. His hands on me feel good.

"You like that?" I can almost hear his smile.

"Hmm."

He moves down my arms, then beneath them to my underarms, washing gently. I'm so glad Kate insisted I shave. His hands glide across to my breasts, and I inhale sharply as his fingers encircle them and start kneading gently, taking no prisoners. My body bows instinctively, pushing my breasts into his hands. My nipples are tender. Very tender, no doubt, from his less-than-delicate treatment of them last night. He doesn't linger long and glides his hands down to my stomach and belly. My breathing increases and my heart is racing. His growing erection presses against my behind. It's such a turn-on knowing that it's

my body making him feel this way. *Ha … not your mind*, my subconscious sneers. I shake off the unwelcome thought.

He stops and reaches for a washcloth as I pant against him, wanting … needing. My hands rest on his firm, muscular thighs. Squirting more soap onto the washcloth, he leans down and washes between my legs. I hold my breath. His fingers skillfully stimulating me through the cloth, it's heavenly, and my hips start moving at their own rhythm, pushing against his hand. As the sensations take over, I tilt my head back, my eyes rolling to the back of my head, my mouth slack, and I groan. The pressure is building slowly, inexorably inside me … *oh my*.

"Feel it, baby," Christian whispers in my ear, and very gently grazes my earlobe with his teeth. "Feel it for me." My legs are pinioned by his to the side of the bath, holding me prisoner, giving him easy access to this most private part of myself.

"Oh … please," I whisper. I try to stiffen my legs as my body goes rigid. I am in a sexual thrall to this man, and he doesn't let me move.

"I think you're clean enough now," he murmurs, and he stops. *What! No! No! No!* My breathing is ragged.

"Why are you stopping?" I gasp.

"Because I have other plans for you, Anastasia."

*What … oh my … but … I was … that's not fair*.

"Turn around. I need washing, too," he murmurs.

Oh! Turning to face him, I'm shocked to find he has his erection firmly in his grasp. My mouth drops open.

"I want you to become well acquainted, on first name terms if you will, with my favorite and most cherished part of my body. I'm very attached to this."

*It's so big and growing*. His erection is above the water line, the water lapping at his hips. I glance up at him and come face-to-face with his wicked grin. He's enjoying my astounded expression. I realize that I'm staring. I swallow. *That was inside me!* It doesn't seem possible. He wants me to touch him. *Hmm* … okay, bring it on.

I smile at him and reach for the body wash, squirting some soap onto my hand. I do as he's done, lathering the soap in my hands until they are foamy. I do not take my eyes off his. My lips are parted to accommodate my breathing … very deliberately I gently bite my bottom lip and then run my tongue across it, tracing where my teeth have been. His eyes are serious and dark, and they widen as my tongue skims my lower lip. I reach forward and place one of my hands around him, mirroring how he's holding himself. His eyes close briefly. Wow … feels much firmer than I expected. I squeeze, and he

places his hand over mine.

"Like this," he whispers, and he moves his hand up and down with a firm grip around my fingers, and my fingers tighten around him. He closes his eyes again, and his breath hitches in his throat. When he opens them again, his gaze is scorching molten gray. "That's right, baby."

He releases my hand, leaving me to continue alone, and closes his eyes as I move up and down his length. He flexes his hips slightly into my hand and reflexively I grasp him tighter. A low groan escapes from deep within his throat. *Fuck my mouth … hmm*. I remember him pushing his thumb in my mouth and asking me to suck, hard. His mouth drops open as his breathing increases. I lean forward, while he has his eyes closed, and place my lips around him and tentatively suck, running my tongue over the tip.

"Whoa … Ana." His eyes fly open, and I suck harder.

Hmm … he's hard and soft at once, like steel encased in velvet, and surprisingly tasty—salty and smooth.

"Christ," he groans, and he closes his eyes again.

Moving down, I push him into my mouth. He groans again. *Ha!* My inner goddess is thrilled. I can do this. *I* can fuck *him* with my mouth. I twirl my tongue around the tip again, and he flexes and raises his hips. His eyes are open now, blistering with heat. His teeth are clenched as he flexes again, and I push him deeper into my mouth, supporting myself on his thighs. I feel his legs tense beneath my hands. He reaches up and grabs my pigtails and starts to really move.

"Oh … baby … that feels good," he murmurs. I suck harder, flicking my tongue across the head of his impressive erection. Wrapping my teeth behind my lips, I clamp my mouth around him. His breath hisses between his teeth, and he groans.

"Jesus. How far can you go?" he whispers.

*Hmm* … I pull him deeper into my mouth so I can feel him at the back of my throat and then to the front again. My tongue swirls around the end. He's my very own Christian Grey–flavored popsicle. I suck harder and harder, pushing him deeper and deeper, swirling my tongue around and around. *Hmm* … I had no idea giving pleasure could be such a turn-on, watching him writhe subtly with carnal longing. My inner goddess is doing the merengue with some salsa moves.

"Anastasia, I'm going to come in your mouth," his breathy tone is warning. "If you don't want me to, stop now." He thrusts his hips again, his eyes are wide, wary, and filled with salacious need—need for me. Need for my mouth … *oh my*.

His hands are really gripping my hair. I can do this. I push even harder and, in

a moment of extraordinary confidence, I bare my teeth. It tips him over the edge. He cries out and stills, and I can feel warm, salty liquid oozing down my throat. I swallow quickly. Ugh … I'm not sure about this. But one look at him, and I don't care—he's come apart in the bath because of me. I sit back and watch him, a triumphant, gloating smile tugging at the corners of my lips. His breathing is ragged. Opening his eyes, he glares at me.

"Don't you have a gag reflex?" he asks, astonished. "Christ, Ana … that was … good, really good. Unexpected, though." He frowns. "You know, you never cease to amaze me."

I smile and consciously bite my lip. He eyes me speculatively.

"Have you done that before?"

"No." And I can't help the small tinge of pride in my denial.

"Good," he says complacently and, I think, relieved. "Yet another first, Miss Steele." He looks appraisingly at me. "Well, you get an A in oral skills. Come, let's go to bed, I owe you an orgasm."

*Orgasm! Another one!*

Quickly, he clambers out of the bath, giving me my first full glimpse of the Adonis, divinely formed, that is Christian Grey. My inner goddess has stopped dancing and is staring, too, openmouthed and drooling slightly. His erection tamed but still substantial … wow. He wraps a small towel around his waist, covering the essentials, and holds out a larger fluffy white towel for me. Climbing out of the bath, I take his proffered hand. He wraps me in the towel, pulls me into his arms, and kisses me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I long to reach around and embrace him … touch him … but he has my arms trapped in the towel. I'm soon lost in his kiss. He cradles my head, his tongue exploring my mouth, and I get a sense he's expressing his gratitude—maybe—for my first blow job? *Whoa*.

He pulls away, his hands on either side of my face, staring intently into my eyes. He looks lost.

"Say yes," he whispers fervently.

I frown, not understanding.

"To what?"

"Yes to our arrangement. To being mine. Please, Ana," he whispers pleading, emphasizing the last word and my name. He kisses me again, sweetly, passionately, before he stands back and stares at me, blinking slightly. He takes my hand and leads me back to his bedroom, leaving me reeling, so I follow him meekly. Stunned. *He really wants this*.

In his bedroom, he stares down at me as we stand by his bed.

"Trust me?" he asks suddenly. I nod, wide-eyed with the sudden realization

that I do trust him. *What's he going to do to me now?* An electric thrill hums through me.

"Good girl," he breathes, his thumb brushing my bottom lip. He steps away into his closet and comes back with a silver-gray silk woven tie.

"Hold your hands together in front of you," he orders as he peels the towel off me and throws it on the floor.

I do as he asks, and he binds my wrists together with his tie, knotting it firmly. His eyes are bright with excitement. He tugs at the binding. It's secure. *Some Boy Scout he must have been to learn this knot*. What now? My pulse has gone through the roof, my heart beating a frantic rhythm. He runs his fingers down my pigtails.

"You look so young with these," he murmurs, and moves forward. Instinctively, I move back until I feel the bed against the back of my knees. He drops his towel, but I can't take my eyes off his face. His expression is ardent, full of desire.

"Oh, Anastasia, what shall I do to you?" he whispers as he lowers me onto the bed, lying beside me and raising my hands above my head.

"Keep your hands up here, don't move them, understand?" His eyes burn into mine, and I'm breathless from their intensity. This is not a man I want to cross … ever.

"Answer me," he demands, his voice soft.

"I won't move my hands." I'm breathless.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and deliberately licks his lips slowly. I'm mesmerized by his tongue as it sweeps slowly over his upper lip. He's staring into my eyes, watching me, appraising. He leans down and plants a chaste, swift kiss on my lips.

"I'm going to kiss you all over, Miss Steele," he says softly, and he cups my chin, pushing it up, giving him access to my throat. His lips glide down my throat, kissing, sucking, and nipping, to the small dip at the base of my neck. My body leaps to attention … everywhere. My recent bath experience has made my skin hypersensitive. My heated blood pools low in my belly, between my legs, right down *there*. I groan.

I want to touch him. I move my hands and rather awkwardly, given I'm restrained, feel his hair. He stops kissing me and glares up at me, shaking his head from side to side, tutting as he does. He reaches for my hands and places them above my head again.

"Don't move your hands, or we just have to start all over again," he scolds me mildly. Oh, he's such a tease.

"I want to touch you." My voice is all breathy and out of control.

“I know,” he murmurs. “Keep your hands above your head,” he orders, his voice forceful.

He cups my chin again and starts to kiss my throat as before. Oh … he’s so frustrating. His hands run down my body and over my breasts as he reaches the dip at the base of my neck with his lips. He swirls the tip of his nose around it then begins a very leisurely cruise with his mouth, heading south, following the path of his hands, down my sternum to my breasts. Each one is kissed and nipped gently and my nipples tenderly sucked. *Holy crap*. My hips start swaying and moving of their own accord, grinding to the rhythm of his mouth on me, and I’m desperately trying to remember to keep my hands above my head.

“Keep still,” he warns, his breath warm against my skin. Reaching my navel, he dips his tongue inside, and then gently grazes my belly with his teeth. My body bows off the bed.

“Hmm. You are so sweet, Miss Steele.” His nose glides along the line between my belly and my pubic hair, biting me gently, teasing me with his tongue. Sitting up suddenly, he kneels at my feet, grasping both my ankles and spreading my legs wide.

*Holy shit*. He grabs my left foot, bends my knee, and brings my foot up to his mouth. Watching and assessing my every reaction, he tenderly kisses each of my toes, then bites each one of them softly on the pads. When he reaches my little toe, he bites harder, and I convulse, whimpering. He glides his tongue up my instep—and I can no longer watch him. It’s too erotic. I’m going to combust. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to absorb and manage all the sensations he’s creating. He kisses my ankle and trails kisses up my calf to my knee, stopping just above. He then starts on my right foot, repeating the whole, seductive, mind-blowing process.

“Oh, please,” I moan as he bites my little toe, the action resonating deep in my belly.

“All good things, Miss Steele,” he breathes.

This time he doesn’t stop at my knee, he continues up the inside of my thigh, pushing my thighs apart as he does. And I know what he’s going to do, and part of me wants to push him off because I’m mortified and embarrassed. He’s going to kiss me *there!* I know it. And part of me is glorying in the anticipation. He turns to my other knee and kisses his way up my thigh, kissing, licking, sucking, and then he’s between my legs, running his nose up and down my sex, very softly, very gently. I writhe … *oh my*.

He stops, waiting for me to calm. I do and raise my head to gaze at him, my mouth open as my pounding heart struggles to calm.

“Do you know how intoxicating you smell, Miss Steele?” he murmurs, and

keeping his eyes on mine, he pushes his nose into my pubic hair and inhales.

I flush scarlet everywhere, feeling faint, and I instantly close my eyes. I can't watch him do that!

He blows gently up the length of my sex. *Oh*, *fuck* …

"I like this." He gently tugs at my pubic hair. "Perhaps we'll keep this."

"Oh … please," I beg.

"Hmm, I like it when you beg me, Anastasia."

I groan.

"Tit for tat is not my usual style, Miss Steele," he whispers as he gently blows up and down me. "But you've pleased me today, and you should be rewarded." I hear the wicked grin in his voice, and while my body is singing from his words, his tongue starts to slowly circle my clitoris as his hands hold down my thighs.

"Aargh!" I moan as my body bows and convulses at the touch of his tongue.

He swirls his tongue around and around, again and again, keeping up the torture. I'm losing all sense of self, every atom of my being concentrating hard on that small, potent powerhouse at the apex of my thighs. My legs go rigid, and he slips his finger inside me, and I hear his growling groan.

"Oh, baby. I love that you're so wet for me."

He moves his finger in a wide circle, stretching me, pulling at me, his tongue mirroring his actions, around and around. I groan. It is too much … My body begs for relief, and I can no longer deny it. I let go, losing all cogent thought as my orgasm seizes me, wringing my insides again and again. *Holy fuck*. I cry out, and the world dips and disappears from view as the force of my climax renders everything null and void.

I am panting and vaguely hear the rip of foil. Very slowly he eases into me and starts to move. Oh … my. The feeling is sore and sweet and bold and gentle all at once.

"How's this?" he breathes.

"Fine. Good," I breathe. And he really starts to move, fast, hard, and large, thrusting into me over and over, implacable, pushing me and pushing me until I am close to the edge again. I whimper.

"Come for me, baby." His voice is harsh, hard, raw at my ear, and I explode around him as he pounds rapidly into me.

"Thank fuck," he whispers, and he thrusts hard once more and groans as he reaches his climax, pressing himself into me. Then he stills, his body rigid.

Collapsing on top of me, I feel his full weight forcing me into the mattress. I pull my tied hands over his neck and hold him the best I can. I know in that moment I would do anything for this man. I am his. The wonder that he's introduced me to, it's beyond anything I could have imagined. And he wants to

take it further, so much further, to a place I can't, in my innocence, even imagine. *Oh … what to do?*

He leans up on his elbows and stares down at me, gray eyes intense.

"See how good we are together?" he murmurs. "If you give yourself to me, it will be so much better. Trust me, Anastasia, I can take you places you don't even know exist." His words echo my thoughts. He strokes his nose against mine. I am still reeling from my extraordinary physical reaction to him, and I gaze up at him blankly, grasping for a coherent thought.

Suddenly we both become aware of voices in the hall outside his bedroom door. It takes a moment to process what I can hear.

*"But if he's still in bed, then he must be ill. He's never in bed at this time. Christian never sleeps in."*

*"Mrs. Grey, please."*

*"Taylor. You cannot keep me from my son."*

*"Mrs. Grey, he's not alone."*

*"What do you mean he's not alone?"*

*"He has someone with him."*

*"Oh …"* Even I hear the disbelief in her voice.

Christian blinks rapidly, staring down at me, wide-eyed with humored horror.

"Shit! It's my mother."

## CHAPTER TEN

He pulls out of me suddenly. I wince. He sits up on the bed and throws the used condom in a wastebasket. “Come on, we need to get dressed—that’s if you want to meet my mother.” He grins, leaps up off the bed, and pulls on his jeans —no underwear! I struggle to sit up as I’m still tethered.

“Christian—I can’t move.”

His grin widens, and leaning down, he undoes the tie. The woven pattern has made an indentation around my wrists. It’s … sexy. He gazes at me. He’s amused, his eyes dancing with mirth. He kisses my forehead quickly and beams at me.

“Another first,” he acknowledges, but I have no idea what he’s talking about.

“I have no clean clothes in here.” I am filled with sudden panic, and considering what I’ve just experienced, I’m finding the panic overwhelming. His mother! *Holy crap*. I have no clean clothes, and she’s practically walked in on us in flagrante delicto. “Perhaps I should stay here.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” Christian threatens. “You can wear something of mine.” He’s slipped on a white T-shirt and runs his hand through his just-fucked hair. In spite of my anxiety, I lose my train of thought. His beauty is derailing.

“Anastasia, you could be wearing a sack and you’d look lovely. Please don’t worry. I’d like you to meet my mother. Get dressed. I’ll just go and calm her down.” His mouth presses into a hard line. “I will expect you in that room in five minutes, otherwise I’ll come and drag you out of here myself in whatever you’re wearing. My T-shirts are in this drawer. My shirts are in the closet. Help yourself.” He eyes me speculatively for a moment, then leaves the room.

*Holy shit. Christian’s mother*. This is so much more than I bargained for. Perhaps meeting her will help put a little part of the jigsaw in place. Might help me understand why Christian is the way he is … Suddenly, I want to meet her. I pick up my shirt off the floor, and I’m pleased to discover that it has survived the night well with hardly any creases. I find my blue bra under the bed and dress quickly. But if there’s one thing I hate, it’s not wearing clean panties. I rifle through Christian’s chest of drawers and come across his boxer briefs. After pulling on a pair of tight gray Calvin Kleins, I tug on my jeans and my Converse.

Grabbing my jacket, I dash into the bathroom and stare at my too-bright eyes,

my flushed face—and my hair! Holy crap … just-fucked pigtails do not suit me, either. I hunt in the vanity unit for a brush and find a comb. It will have to do. I quickly tie back my hair while I despair at my clothes. Maybe I should take Christian up on his offer of clothes. My subconscious purses her lips and mouths the word "ho." I ignore her. Struggling into my jacket, pleased that the cuffs cover the telltale patterns from his tie, I take a last anxious glance at myself in the mirror. This will have to do. I make my way into the main living room.

"Here she is." Christian stands from where he's lounging on the couch.

His expression is warm and appreciative. The sandy-haired woman beside him turns and beams at me, a full megawatt smile. She stands, too. She's impeccably attired in a camel-colored fine knit sweater dress with matching shoes. She looks groomed, elegant, beautiful, and inside I die a little, knowing I look such a mess.

"Mother, this is Anastasia Steele. Anastasia, this is Grace Trevelyan-Grey."

Dr. Trevelyan-Grey holds her hand out to me. *T … for Trevelyan? His initial*.

"What a pleasure to meet you," she murmurs. If I'm not mistaken, there is wonder and maybe stunned relief in her voice and a warm glow in her hazel eyes. I grasp her hand, and I can't help but smile, returning her warmth.

"Dr. Trevelyan-Grey," I murmur.

"Call me Grace." She grins, and Christian frowns. "I am usually Dr. Trevelyan, and Mrs. Grey is my mother-in-law." She winks. "So how did you two meet?" She looks questioningly at Christian, unable to hide her curiosity.

"Anastasia interviewed me for the student paper at WSU because I'm conferring the degrees there this week."

*Double crap*. I'd forgotten that.

"So you are graduating this week?" Grace asks.

"Yes."

My cell phone starts ringing. *Kate, I bet*.

"Excuse me." It's in the kitchen. I wander over and lean across the breakfast bar, not checking the number.

"Kate."

"*Dios mío!* Ana!" *Holy crap, it's José*. He sounds desperate. "Where are you? I've been trying to contact you. I need to see you, to apologize for my behavior on Friday. Why haven't you returned my calls?"

"Look, José, now's not a good time." I glance anxiously over at Christian, who's watching me intently, his face impassive as he murmurs something to his mom. I turn my back to him.

"Where are you? Kate is being so evasive," he whines.

"I'm in Seattle."

"What are you doing in Seattle? Are you with him?"

“José, I’ll call you later. I can’t talk to you now.” I hang up.

I walk nonchalantly back to Christian and his mother. Grace is in full flow.

“… and Elliot called to say you were around—I haven’t seen you for two weeks, darling.”

“Did he now?” Christian murmurs, gazing at me, his expression unreadable.

“I thought we might have lunch together, but I can see you have other plans, and I don’t want to interrupt your day.” She gathers up her long cream coat and turns to him, offering him her cheek. He kisses her briefly, sweetly. She doesn’t touch him.

“I have to drive Anastasia back to Portland.”

“Of course, darling. Anastasia, it’s been such a pleasure. I do hope we meet again.” She holds her hand out to me, her eyes glowing, and we shake.

Taylor appears from … *where?*

“Mrs. Grey?” he asks.

“Thank you, Taylor.” He escorts her from the room and through the double doors to the foyer. Taylor was here the whole time? How long has he been here? Where has he been?

Christian glares at me.

“So the photographer called?”

*Crap*.

“Yes.”

“What did he want?”

“Just to apologize, you know—for Friday.”

Christian narrows his eyes.

“I see,” he says simply.

Taylor reappears.

“Mr. Grey, there’s an issue with the Darfur shipment.”

Christian nods curtly at him.

“*Charlie Tango* back at Boeing Field?”

“Yes, sir.”

Taylor nods at me.

“Miss Steele.”

I smile tentatively back at him, and he turns and leaves.

“Does he live here? Taylor?”

“Yes.” His tone is clipped. *What is his problem?*

Christian heads over to the kitchen and picks up his BlackBerry, scrolling through some e-mails, I assume. His mouth presses in a hard line, and he makes a call.

“Ros, what’s the issue?” he snaps. He listens, watching me, eyes speculative,

as I stand in the middle of the huge room wondering what to do with myself, feeling extraordinarily self-conscious and out of place.

"I'm not having either crew put at risk. No, cancel … We'll air-drop instead … Good." He hangs up. The warmth in his eyes has disappeared. He looks forbidding, and with one quick glance at me, he heads into his study and returns a moment later.

"This is the contract. Read it, and we'll discuss it next weekend. May I suggest you do some research, so you know what's involved." He pauses. "That's if you agree, and I really hope you do," he adds, his tone softer, anxious.

"Research?"

"You'll be amazed what you can find on the Internet," he murmurs.

Internet! I don't have access to a computer, only Kate's laptop, and I couldn't use the one at Clayton's, not for this sort of "research" surely.

"What is it?" he asks, cocking his head to one side.

"I don't have a computer. I usually use the computers at school. I'll see if I can use Kate's laptop."

He hands me a manila envelope.

"I'm sure I can … er, lend you one. Get your things, we'll drive back to Portland and grab some lunch on the way. I need to dress."

"I'll just make a call," I murmur. I just want to hear Kate's voice. He frowns.

"The photographer?" His jaw clenches and his eyes burn. I blink at him. "I don't like to share, Miss Steele. Remember that." His quiet, chilling tone is a warning, and with one long, cold look at me, he heads back to the bedroom.

Holy crap. *I just wanted to call Kate*, I want to call after him, but his sudden aloofness has left me paralyzed. What happened to the generous, relaxed, smiling man who was making love to me not half an hour ago?

"READY?" CHRISTIAN ASKS AS we stand by the double doors to the foyer.

I nod uncertainly. He's resumed his distant, polite, uptight persona, his mask back up and on show. He's carrying a leather messenger bag. Why does he need that? Perhaps he's staying in Portland, and then I remember graduation. Oh yes … he'll be there on Thursday. He's wearing a black leather jacket. He certainly doesn't look like the multi-multimillionaire, billionaire, whatever-aire, in these clothes. He looks like a boy from the wrong side of the tracks, maybe a badly behaved rock star or a catwalk model. I sigh inwardly, wishing I had a tenth of his poise. He's so calm and controlled. I frown, recalling his outburst about José … Well, he seems to be.

Taylor is hovering in the background.

"Tomorrow, then," he says to Taylor, who nods.

“Yes, sir. Which car are you taking, sir?”

He looks down at me briefly.

“The R8.”

“Safe trip, Mr. Grey. Miss Steele.” Taylor looks kindly at me, though perhaps there’s a hint of pity hidden in the depths of his eyes.

No doubt he thinks I’ve succumbed to Mr. Grey’s dubious sexual habits. Not yet, just his exceptional sexual habits, or perhaps sex is like that for everyone. I frown at the thought. I have no comparison, and I can’t ask Kate. That’s something I am going to have to address with Christian. It’s perfectly natural that I should talk to someone—and I can’t talk to him if he’s open one minute and standoffish the next.

Taylor holds the door open for us and ushers us through. Christian summons the elevator.

“What is it, Anastasia?” he asks. How does he know I’m chewing something over in my mind? He reaches up and pulls my chin.

“Stop biting your lip, or I will fuck you in the elevator, and I don’t care who gets in with us.”

I blush, but there’s a hint of a smile around his lips. Finally his mood seems to be shifting.

“Christian, I have a problem.”

“Oh?” I have his full attention.

The elevator arrives. We walk in, and Christian presses the button marked “G.”

“Well,” I flush. *How to say this?* “I need to talk to Kate. I’ve so many questions about sex, and you’re too involved. If you want me to do all these things, how do I know—?” I pause, struggling to find the right words. “I just don’t have any terms of reference.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Talk to her if you must.” He sounds exasperated. “Make sure she doesn’t mention anything to Elliot.”

I bristle at his insinuation. *Kate isn’t like that.*

“She wouldn’t do that, and I wouldn’t tell you anything she tells me about Elliot—if she were to tell me anything,” I add quickly.

“Well, the difference is that I don’t want to know about his sex life,” Christian murmurs dryly. “Elliot’s a nosy bastard. But only about what we’ve done so far,” he warns. “She’d probably have my balls if she knew what I wanted to do to you,” he adds so softly I’m not sure I’m supposed to hear it.

“Okay,” I agree readily, smiling up at him, relieved. The thought of Kate with Christian’s balls is not something I want to dwell on.

His lip quirks up at me, and he shakes his head.

"The sooner I have your submission the better, and we can stop all this," he murmurs.

"Stop all what?"

"You, defying me." He reaches down and cups my chin and plants a swift, sweet kiss on my lips as the doors to the elevator open. He grabs my hand and leads me into the underground garage.

*Me, defying him … how?*

Beside the elevator, I can see the black 4x4 Audi, but it's the sleek black sporty number that blips open and lights up when he points the key fob at it. It's one of those cars that should have a very leggy blonde, wearing nothing but a sash, sprawled across the hood.

"Nice car," I murmur dryly.

He glances up and grins.

"I know," he says, and for a split second sweet, young, carefree Christian is back. It warms my heart. He's so excited. *Boys and their toys*. I roll my eyes at him but can't stifle my smile. He opens the door for me and I climb in. Whoa … it's low. He moves around the car with easy grace, and folds his long frame elegantly in beside me. *How does he do that?*

"So what sort of car is this?"

"It's an Audi R8 Spyder. It's a lovely day; we can take the top down. There's a baseball cap in there. In fact there should be two." He points to the glove box. "And sunglasses if you want them."

He starts the ignition, and the engine roars behind us. He places his bag in the space behind our seats, presses a button, and the roof slowly retracts. With the flick of a switch, Bruce Springsteen surrounds us.

"Gotta love Bruce." He grins at me and eases the car out of the parking space and up the steep ramp, where we pause for the gate to lift.

Then we're out into the bright Seattle May morning. I reach into the glove box and retrieve the baseball caps. The Mariners. He likes baseball? I pass him a cap, and he puts it on. I pull my hair through the back of mine and pull the peak down low.

People stare at us as we drive through the streets. For a moment, I think it's at him … and then a very paranoid part thinks everyone is looking at me because they know what I've been doing during the last twelve hours, but finally I realize it's the car. Christian seems oblivious, lost in thought.

The traffic is light and we're soon on Interstate 5 heading south, the wind sweeping over our heads. Bruce is singing about being on fire and his desire. How apt. I flush as I listen to the words. Christian glances at me. He's got his

Ray-Bans on so I can't see what he's feeling. His mouth twitches slightly, and he reaches across and places his hand on my knee, squeezing gently. My breath hitches.

"Hungry?" he asks.

*Not for food*.

"Not particularly."

His mouth tightens into that hard line.

"You must eat, Anastasia," he chides. "I know a great place near Olympia. We'll stop there." He squeezes my knee again, and then returns his hand to the steering wheel as he puts his foot down on the gas. I'm pressed into the back of my seat. Boy, this car can move.

THE RESTAURANT IS SMALL and intimate, a wooden chalet in the middle of a forest. The décor is rustic: random chairs and tables with gingham tablecloths, wild flowers in little vases. CUISINE SAUVAGE, it boasts above the door.

"I've not been here for a while. We don't get a choice—they cook whatever they've caught or gathered." He raises his eyebrows in mock horror, and I have to laugh. The waitress takes our drinks order. She flushes when she sees Christian, avoiding eye contact with him, hiding under her long blond bangs. She likes him! *It's not just me!*

"Two glasses of the Pinot Grigio," Christian says with a voice of authority. I purse my lips, exasperated.

"What?" he snaps.

"I wanted a Diet Coke," I whisper.

His gray eyes narrow, and he shakes his head.

"The Pinot Grigio here is a decent wine. It will go well with the meal, whatever we get," he says patiently.

"Whatever we get?"

"Yes." He smiles his dazzling head-cocked-to-one-side smile, and my stomach pole vaults over my spleen. I can't help but reflect his glorious smile back at him.

"My mother liked you," he says dryly.

"Really?" His words make me flush with pleasure.

"Oh yes. She's always thought I was gay."

My mouth drops open, and I remember *that question … from the interview. Oh no.*

"Why did she think you were gay?" I whisper.

"Because she's never seen me with a girl."

"Oh … not even one of the fifteen?" He smiles.

“You remembered. No, none of the fifteen.”

“Oh.”

“You know, Anastasia, it’s been a weekend of firsts for me, too,” he says quietly.

“It has?”

“I’ve never slept with anyone, never had sex in my bed, never flown a girl in *Charlie Tango*, never introduced a woman to my mother. What are you doing to me?” His eyes burn, their intensity takes my breath away.

The waitress arrives with our glasses of wine, and I immediately take a quick sip. Is he opening up or just making a casual observation?

“I’ve really enjoyed this weekend,” I murmur. He narrows his eyes at me again.

“Stop biting that lip,” he growls. “Me, too,” he adds.

“What’s vanilla sex?” I ask, if anything to distract myself from the intense, burning, sexy look he’s giving me. He laughs.

“Just straightforward sex, Anastasia. No toys, no add-ons.” He shrugs. “You know … well, actually you don’t, but that’s what it means.”

“Oh.” I thought it was chocolate fudge brownie sex that we had, with a cherry on the top. But hey, what do I know?

The waitress brings us soup. We both stare at it rather dubiously.

“Nettle soup,” the waitress informs us before turning and flouncing back into the kitchen. I don’t think she likes to be ignored by Christian. I take a tentative taste. It’s delicious. Christian and I look up at each other at the same time with relief. I giggle, and he cocks his head to one side.

“That’s a lovely sound,” he murmurs.

“Why have you never had vanilla sex before? Have you always done … er, what you’ve done?” I ask, intrigued.

He nods slowly.

“Sort of.” His voice is wary. He frowns for a moment and seems to be engaged in some kind of internal struggle. Then he glances up, a decision made. “One of my mother’s friends seduced me when I was fifteen.”

“Oh.” *Holy shit, that’s young!*

“She had very particular tastes. I was her submissive for six years.” He shrugs.

“Oh.” My brain has frozen, stunned into inactivity by this admission.

“So I do know what it involves, Anastasia.” His eyes glow with insight.

I stare at him, unable to articulate anything—even my subconscious is silent.

“I didn’t really have a run-of-the-mill introduction to sex.”

Curiosity kicks in big time.

“So you never dated anyone at college?”

“No.” He shakes his head to emphasize the point.

The waitress takes our bowls, interrupting us for a moment.

“Why?” I ask when she’s gone.

He smiles sardonically.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t want to. She was all I wanted, needed. And besides, she’d have beaten the shit out of me.” He smiles fondly at the memory.

*Oh, this is way too much information*—but I want more.

“So if she was a friend of your mother’s, how old was she?”

He smirks. “Old enough to know better.”

“Do you still see her?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still … er …?” I flush.

“No.” He shakes his head and smiles indulgently at me. “She’s a very good friend.”

“Oh. Does your mother know?”

He gives me a don’t-be-stupid stare.

“Of course not.”

The waitress returns with venison, but my appetite has vanished. What a revelation. *Christian the submissive … Holy shit*. I take a large slug of Pinot Grigio—he’s right, of course, it’s delicious. Jeez, all these revelations, it’s so much to think about. I need time to process this, when I’m on my own, not when I’m distracted by his presence. He’s so overwhelming, so alpha male, and now he’s thrown this bombshell into the equation. *He knows what it’s like*.

“But it can’t have been full time?” I’m confused.

“Well, it was, though I didn’t see her all the time. It was … difficult. After all, I was still at school and then at college. Eat up, Anastasia.”

“I’m really not hungry, Christian.” *I am reeling from your disclosure*.

His expression hardens. “Eat,” he says quietly, too quietly.

I stare at him. This man—sexually abused as an adolescent—his tone is so threatening.

“Give me a moment,” I mutter quietly. He blinks a couple of times.

“Okay,” he murmurs, and he continues with his meal.

This is what it will be like if I sign, him ordering me around. I frown. *Do I want this?* Reaching for my knife and fork, I tentatively cut into the venison. It’s very tasty.

“Is this what our, er … relationship will be like?” I whisper. “You ordering me around?” I can’t quite bring myself to look at him.

“Yes,” he murmurs.

“I see.”

“And what’s more, you’ll want me to,” he adds, his voice low.

*I sincerely doubt that.* I slice another piece of venison, holding it against my mouth.

“It’s a big step,” I murmur, and eat.

“It is.” He closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them, they are wide and grave. “Anastasia, you have to go with your gut. Do the research, read the contract—I’m happy to discuss any aspect. I’ll be in Portland until Friday if you want to talk about it before then.” His words are coming at me in a rush. “Call me—maybe we can have dinner—say, Wednesday? I really want to make this work. In fact, I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want this to work.”

His burning sincerity, his longing, is reflected in his eyes. This is fundamentally what I don’t grasp. *Why me?* Why not one of the fifteen? Oh no … Will that be me—a number? Sixteen of many?

“What happened to the fifteen?” I blurt out.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise, then looks resigned, shaking his head.

“Various things, but it boils down to …” He pauses, struggling to find the words I think. “Incompatibility.” He shrugs.

“And you think that I might be compatible with you?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re not seeing any of them anymore?”

“No, Anastasia, I’m not. I am monogamous in my relationships.”

Oh … *this is news*.

“I see.”

“Do the research, Anastasia.”

I put my knife and fork down. I cannot eat any more.

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to eat?”

I nod. He scowls at me but chooses not to say anything. I breathe a small sigh of relief. My stomach is churning with all this new information, and I’m feeling a little lightheaded from the wine. I watch as he devours everything on his plate. He eats like a horse. He must work out to stay in such great shape. The memory of the way his pajamas hung from his hips comes unbidden to my mind. The image is totally distracting. I squirm uncomfortably. He glances up at me, and I blush.

“I’d give anything to know what you’re thinking right at this moment,” he murmurs. I blush further.

He smiles a wicked smile at me.

“I can guess,” he teases softly.

“I’m glad you can’t read my mind.”

“Your mind, no, Anastasia, but your body—*that* I’ve gotten to know quite well since yesterday.” His voice is suggestive. How does he switch so quickly from one mood to the next? He’s so mercurial … It’s hard to keep up.

He motions for the waitress and asks for the check. Once he’s paid, he stands and holds out his hand.

“Come.” Taking my hand in his, he leads me back to the car. This contact, flesh to flesh, it’s what is so unexpected from him, normal, intimate. I can’t reconcile this ordinary, tender gesture with what he wants to do in that room … the Red Room of Pain.

We are quiet on the drive from Olympia to Vancouver, both lost in our own thoughts. When he parks outside my apartment, it’s five in the evening. The lights are on—Kate is at home. Packing, no doubt, unless Elliot is still there. He switches off the engine, and I realize I’m going to have to leave him.

“Do you want to come in?” I ask. I don’t want him to go. I want to prolong our time together.

“No. I have work to do,” he says simply, gazing at me, his expression unfathomable.

I stare down at my hands, as I knot my fingers together. Suddenly I feel emotional. He’s leaving. Reaching over, he takes one of my hands and slowly pulls it to his mouth, tenderly kissing the back of my hand, such an old-fashioned, sweet gesture. My heart leaps into my mouth.

“Thank you for this weekend, Anastasia. It’s been … the best. Wednesday? I’ll pick you up from work, from wherever?” he says softly.

“Wednesday,” I whisper.

He kisses my hand again and places it back in my lap. He climbs out of the car, comes around to my side, and opens the passenger-side door. Why do I feel suddenly bereft? A lump forms in my throat. I must not let him see me like this. Fixing a smile on my face, I clamber out of the car and head up the path, knowing I have to face Kate, dreading facing Kate. I turn and gaze at him midway. *Chin up, Steele,* I chide myself.

“Oh … by the way, I’m wearing your underwear.” I give him a small smile and pull up the waistband of the boxer briefs I’m wearing so he can see. Christian’s mouth drops open, shocked. What a great reaction. My mood shifts immediately, and I sashay into the house, part of me wanting to jump and punch the air. *YES!* My inner goddess is thrilled.

Kate is in the living room packing up her books into crates.

“You’re back. Where’s Christian? How are you?” Her voice is fevered, anxious, and she bounds up to me, grabbing my shoulders, minutely analyzing

my face before I've even said hello.

*Crap* … I have to deal with Kate's persistence and tenacity, and I'm in possession of a signed legal document saying I can't talk. It's not a healthy mix.

"Well, how was it? I couldn't stop thinking about you, after Elliot left, that is." She grins mischievously.

I can't help but smile at her concern and her burning curiosity, but suddenly I feel shy. I blush. It was very private. All of it. Seeing and knowing what Christian has to hide. But I have to give her some details, because she won't leave me alone until I do.

"It was good, Kate. Very good, I think," I say quietly, trying to hide my embarrassed tell-all smile.

"You think?"

"I've got nothing to compare it to, do I?" I shrug apologetically.

"Did he make you come?"

Holy crap. She's so blunt. I go scarlet.

"Yes," I mumble, exasperated.

Kate pulls me to the couch and we sit. She clasps my hands.

"That *is* good." Kate looks at me in disbelief. "It was your first time. Wow, Christian must really know what he's doing."

*Oh, Kate, if only you knew*.

"My first time was horrid," she continues, making a sad comedy face.

"Oh?" This has me interested, something she's never divulged before.

"Yes, Steve Patrone. High school, dickless jock." She shudders. "He was rough. I wasn't ready. We were both drunk. You know—typical teenage post-prom disaster. Ugh—it took me months before I decided to have another go. And not with him, the gutless wonder. I was too young. You were right to wait."

"Kate, that sounds awful."

Kate looks wistful.

"Yeah, took almost a year to have my first orgasm through penetrative sex, and here you are … first time?"

I nod shyly. My inner goddess sits in the lotus position looking serene except for the sly, self-congratulatory smile on her face.

"I'm glad you lost it to someone who knows his ass from his elbow." She winks at me. "So when are you seeing him again?"

"Wednesday. We're having dinner."

"So you still like him?"

"Yes. But I don't know about … the future."

"Why?"

"He's complicated, Kate. You know—he inhabits a very different world to

mine." Great excuse. Believable, too. Much better than: *He's got a Red Room of Pain, and he wants to make me his sex slave*.

"Oh, please, don't let this be about money, Ana. Elliot said it's very unusual for Christian to date anyone."

"Did he?" My voice hitches up several octaves.

*Too obvious, Steele!* My subconscious glares at me, wagging her long, skinny finger, then morphs into the scales of justice to remind me he could sue if I disclose too much. *Ha … what's he going to do—take all my money?* I must remember to Google *"penalties for breaching a nondisclosure agreement"* while I'm doing the rest of my "research." It's like I've been given a school assignment. Maybe I'll be graded. I flush, remembering my A for this morning's bath experiment.

"Ana, what is it?"

"I'm just remembering something Christian said."

"You look different," Kate says fondly.

"I feel different. Sore," I confess.

"Sore?"

"A little." I flush.

"Me, too. Men," she says in mock disgust. "They're animals." We both laugh.

"You're sore?" I exclaim.

"Yes … overuse."

I giggle.

"Tell me about Elliot the overuser," I ask when I've stopped giggling. Oh, I can feel myself relaxing for the first time since I was in line at the bar … before the phone call that started all this—when I was admiring Mr. Grey from afar. Happy, uncomplicated days.

Kate blushes. *Oh my* … Katherine Agnes Kavanagh goes all Anastasia Rose Steele on me. She gives me a dewy-eyed look. I've never seen her react this way to a man before. My jaw drops to the floor. *Where's Kate; what have you done with her?*

"Oh, Ana," she gushes. "He's just so … everything. And when we … oh … really good." She can hardly string a sentence together, she's got it so bad.

"I think you're trying to tell me that you like him."

She nods, grinning like a lunatic.

"And I'm seeing him on Saturday. He's going to help us move." She clasps her hands together, leaps up off the couch, and pirouettes to the window. Moving. Crap—I'd forgotten all about that, even with the packing cases surrounding us.

“That’s helpful of him,” I say appreciatively. I can get to know him, too. Perhaps he can give me more insight into his strange, disturbing brother.

“So what did you do last night?” I ask. She cocks her head at me and raises her eyebrows in a what-do-you-think-stupid look.

“Pretty much what you did, though we had dinner first.” She grins at me. “Are you okay really? You look kind of overwhelmed.”

“I feel overwhelmed. Christian is very intense.”

“Yeah, I could see how he could be. But he was good to you?”

“Yes,” I reassure her. “I’m really hungry, shall I cook?”

She nods and picks up two more books to pack.

“What do you want to do with the fourteen-thousand-dollar books?” she asks.

“I’m going to return them to him.”

“Really?”

“It’s a completely over-the-top gift. I can’t accept it, especially now.” I grin at Kate, and she nods.

“I understand. A couple of letters came for you, and José has been calling every hour on the hour. He sounded desperate.”

“I’ll call him,” I mutter evasively. If I tell Kate about José, she’ll have him for breakfast. I collect the letters from the dining table and open them.

“Hey, I have interviews! The week after next, in Seattle, for intern placements!”

“For which publishing house?”

“For both of them!”

“I told you your GPA would open doors, Ana.”

Kate, of course, already has an internship set up at *The Seattle Times*. Her father knows someone who knows someone.

“How does Elliot feel about you going away?” I ask.

Kate wanders into the kitchen, and for the first time this evening, she’s disconsolate.

“He’s understanding. Part of me doesn’t want to go, but it’s tempting to lie in the sun for a couple of weeks. Besides, Mom is hanging in there, thinking this will be our last real family holiday before Ethan and I head off into the world of paid employment.”

I have never left the continental U.S. Kate is off to Barbados with her parents and her brother, Ethan, for two whole weeks. I’ll be Kateless in our new apartment. That will be weird. Ethan has been traveling the world since he graduated last year. I wonder briefly if I’ll see him before they go on vacation. He’s such a lovely guy. The phone rings, jolting me from my reverie.

“That’ll be José.”

I sigh. I know I have to talk to him. I grab the phone.

"Hi."

"Ana, you're back!" José shouts his relief at me.

"Obviously." Sarcasm drips from my voice, and I roll my eyes at the phone.

He's silent for a moment.

"Can I see you? I'm sorry about Friday night. I was drunk … and you … well. Ana—please forgive me."

"Of course, I forgive you José. Just don't do it again. You know I don't feel like that about you."

He sighs heavily, sadly.

"I know, Ana. I just thought if I kissed you, it might change how you feel."

"José, I love you dearly, you mean so much to me. You're like the brother I never had. That's not going to change. You know that." I hate to let him down, but it's the truth.

"So you're with him now?" His tone is full of disdain.

"José, I'm not with anybody."

"But you spent the night with him."

"That's none of your business!"

"Is it the money?"

"José! How dare you!" I shout, staggered by his audacity.

"Ana," he whines and apologizes simultaneously. I cannot deal with his petty jealousy now. I know he's hurt, but my plate is overflowing dealing with Christian Grey.

"Maybe we can have a coffee or something tomorrow. I'll call you." I am conciliatory. He is my friend, and I'm very fond of him. But right now, I don't need this.

"Tomorrow, then. You'll call?" The hope in his voice twists my heart.

"Yes … good night, José." I hang up, not waiting for his response.

"What was that all about?" Katherine demands, her hands on her hips. I decide honesty is the policy. She's looking more intractable than ever.

"He made a pass at me on Friday."

"José? *And* Christian Grey? Ana, your pheromones must be working overtime. What was the stupid fool thinking?" She shakes her head in disgust and returns to packing crates.

Forty-five minutes later, we pause our packing for the house specialty, my lasagna. Kate opens a bottle of wine, and we sit among the boxes eating, quaffing cheap red wine, and watching crap TV. This is normality. It's so grounding and welcome after the last forty-eight hours of … madness. I eat my first unhurried, no-nagging, peaceful meal in that time. *What is it about him and*

*food?* Kate clears the dishes and I finish packing up the living room. We are left with the couch, the TV, and the dining table. What more could we need? Just the kitchen and our bedrooms left to pack up, and we have the rest of the week.

The phone rings again. It's Elliot. Kate winks at me and skips off to her bedroom like she's fourteen. I know that she should be writing her valedictorian speech, but it seems Elliot is more important. What is it about the Grey men? What is it that makes them totally distracting, all-consuming, and irresistible? I take another slug of wine.

I flick through the TV channels, but deep down I know I'm procrastinating. Burning a bright red hole in the side of my purse is that contract. Do I have the strength and the wherewithal to read it tonight?

I put my head in my hands. José and Christian, they both want something from me. José is easy to deal with. But Christian … Christian takes a whole different league of handling, of understanding. Part of me wants to run and hide. What am I going to do? His burning gray eyes and that intense smoldering stare come into my mind's eye, and my body tightens at the thought. I gasp. He's not even here and I'm turned on. It just can't be about sex, can it? I recall his gentle banter this morning at breakfast, his joy at my delight with the helicopter ride, him playing the piano—the sweet, soulful, oh-so-sad music.

He's such a complicated person. And now I have an insight as to why. A young man deprived of his adolescence, sexually abused by some evil Mrs. Robinson figure … no wonder he's old before his time. My heart fills with sadness at the thought of what he must have been through. I'm too naïve to know exactly what, but the research should shed some light. But do I really want to know? Do I want to explore this world I know nothing about? It's such a big step.

If I'd not met him, I'd still be sweetly and blissfully oblivious. My mind drifts to last night and this morning … and the incredible, sensual sexuality I'd experienced. Do I want to say good-bye to that? *No!* screams my subconscious … my inner goddess nods in silent Zen-like agreement with her.

Kate wanders back into the living room, grinning from ear to ear. *Perhaps she's in love*. I gape at her. She's never behaved like this.

"Ana, I'm off to bed. I'm pretty tired."

"Me, too, Kate."

She hugs me.

"I'm glad you're back in one piece. There's something about Christian," she adds quietly, apologetically. I give her a small, reassuring smile—all the while thinking … *How the hell does she know?* This is what will make her a great journalist, her unfaltering intuition.

COLLECTING MY PURSE, I wander listlessly into my bedroom. I am weary from all the carnal exertions of the last day and from the complete and utter dilemma that I'm faced with. I sit on my bed and gingerly extract the manila envelope from my bag, turning it over and over in my hands. Do I really want to know the extent of Christian's depravity? It's so daunting. I take a deep breath, and with my heart in my throat, I rip open the envelope.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

There are several papers inside the envelope. I fish them out, my heart still pounding, and I sit back on my bed and begin to read.

**CONTRACT**

Made this day _____ of 2011 (“The Commencement Date”)

**BETWEEN**

MR. CHRISTIAN GREY of 301 Escala, Seattle, WA 98889

(“The Dominant”)

MISS ANASTASIA STEELE of 1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7, Haven Heights, Vancouver, WA 98888 (“The Submissive”)

**THE PARTIES AGREE AS FOLLOWS**

1 The following are the terms of a binding contract between the Dominant and the Submissive.

**FUNDAMENTAL TERMS**

2 The fundamental purpose of this contract is to allow the Submissive to explore her sensuality and her limits safely, with due respect and regard for her needs, her limits, and her well-being.

3 The Dominant and the Submissive agree and acknowledge that all that occurs under the terms of this contract will be consensual, confidential, and subject to the agreed limits and safety procedures set out in this contract. Additional limits and safety procedures may be agreed in writing.

4 The Dominant and the Submissive each warrant that they suffer from no sexual, serious, infectious, or life-threatening illnesses, including but not limited to HIV, herpes, and hepatitis. If during the Term (as defined below) or any extended term of this contract either party should be diagnosed with or become aware of any such illness, he or she undertakes to inform the other immediately and in any event prior to any form of physical contact between the parties.

5 Adherence to the above warranties, agreements, and undertakings (and any additional limits and safety procedures agreed under clause 3 above) are fundamental to this contract. Any breach shall render it void with immediate effect and each party agrees to be fully responsible to the other for the consequence of any breach.

6 Everything in this contract must be read and interpreted in the light of the fundamental purpose and the fundamental terms set out in clauses 2–5 above.

**ROLES**

7 The Dominant shall take responsibility for the well-being and the proper training, guidance, and discipline of the Submissive. He shall decide the nature of such training, guidance, and discipline and the time and place of its administration, subject to the agreed terms, limitations, and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above.

8 If at any time the Dominant should fail to keep to the agreed terms, limitations, and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above, the Submissive is entitled to terminate this contract forthwith and to leave the service of the Dominant without notice.

9 Subject to that proviso and to clauses 2–5 above, the Submissive is to serve and obey the Dominant in all things. Subject to the agreed terms, limitations, and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above, she shall without query or hesitation offer the Dominant such pleasure as he may require and she shall accept without query or hesitation his training, guidance, and discipline in whatever form it may take.

**COMMENCEMENT AND TERM**

10 The Dominant and Submissive enter into this contract on the Commencement Date fully aware of its nature and undertake to abide by its conditions without exception.

11 This contract shall be effective for a period of three calendar months from the Commencement Date (“the Term”). On the expiry of the Term the parties shall discuss whether this contract and the arrangements they have made under this contract are satisfactory and whether the needs of each party have been met. Either party may propose the extension of this contract subject to adjustments to its terms or to the arrangements they have made under it. In the absence of agreement to such extension this contract shall terminate and both parties shall be free to resume their lives separately.

**AVAILABILITY**

12 The Submissive will make herself available to the Dominant from Friday evenings through to Sunday afternoons each week during the Term at times to be specified by the Dominant (“the Allotted Times”). Further allocated time can be mutually agreed on an ad hoc basis.

13 The Dominant reserves the right to dismiss the Submissive from his service at any time and for any reason. The Submissive may request her release at any time, such request to be granted at the discretion of the Dominant subject only to the Submissive’s rights under clauses 2–5 and 8 above.

**LOCATION**

14 The Submissive will make herself available during the Allotted Times and agreed additional times at locations to be determined by the Dominant. The Dominant will ensure that all travel costs incurred by the Submissive for that purpose are met by the Dominant.

**SERVICE PROVISIONS**

15 The following service provisions have been discussed and agreed and will be adhered to by both parties during the Term. Both parties accept that certain matters may arise that are not covered by the terms of this contract or the service provisions, or that certain matters may be renegotiated. In such circumstances, further clauses may be proposed by way of amendment. Any further clauses or amendments must be agreed, documented, and signed by both parties and shall be subject to the fundamental terms set out under clauses 2–5 above.

**DOMINANT**

15.1 The Dominant shall make the Submissive’s health and safety a priority at all times. The Dominant shall not at any time require, request, allow, or demand the Submissive to participate at the hands of the Dominant in the activities detailed in Appendix 2 or in any act that either party deems to be unsafe. The Dominant will not undertake or permit to be undertaken any action which could cause serious injury or any risk to the Submissive’s life. The remaining subclauses of this clause 15 are to be read subject to this proviso and to the fundamental matters agreed in clauses 2–5 above.

15.2 The Dominant accepts the Submissive as his, to own, control, dominate, and discipline during the Term. The Dominant may use the Submissive's body at any time during the Allotted Times or any agreed additional times in any manner he deems fit, sexually or otherwise.

15.3 The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with all necessary training and guidance in how to properly serve the Dominant.

15.4 The Dominant shall maintain a stable and safe environment in which the Submissive may perform her duties in service of the Dominant.

15.5 The Dominant may discipline the Submissive as necessary to ensure the Submissive fully appreciates her role of subservience to the Dominant and to discourage unacceptable conduct. The Dominant may flog, spank, whip, or corporally punish the Submissive as he sees fit, for purposes of discipline, for his own personal enjoyment, or for any other reason, which he is not obliged to provide.

15.6 In training and in the administration of discipline the Dominant shall ensure that no permanent marks are made upon the Submissive's body nor any injuries incurred that may require medical attention.

15.7 In training and in the administration of discipline the Dominant shall ensure that the discipline and the instruments used for the purposes of discipline are safe, shall not be used in such a way as to cause serious harm, and shall not in any way exceed the limits defined and detailed in this contract.

15.8 In case of illness or injury the Dominant shall care for the Submissive, seeing to her health and safety, encouraging and, when necessary, ordering medical attention when it is judged necessary by the Dominant.

15.9 The Dominant shall maintain his own good health and seek medical attention when necessary in order to maintain a risk-free environment.

15.10 The Dominant shall not loan his Submissive to another Dominant.

15.11 The Dominant may restrain, handcuff, or bind the Submissive at any time during the Allotted Times or any agreed additional times for any reason and for extended periods of time, giving due regard to the health and safety of the Submissive.

15.12 The Dominant will ensure that all equipment used for the purposes of training and discipline shall be maintained in a clean, hygienic, and safe state at all times.

**SUBMISSIVE**

15.13 The Submissive accepts the Dominant as her master, with the understanding that she is now the property of the Dominant, to be dealt with as the Dominant pleases during the Term generally but specifically during the Allotted Times and any additional agreed allotted times.

15.14 The Submissive shall obey the rules ("the Rules") set out in Appendix 1 to this agreement.

15.15 The Submissive shall serve the Dominant in any way the Dominant sees fit and shall endeavor to please the Dominant at all times to the best of her ability.

15.16 The Submissive shall take all measures necessary to maintain her good health and shall request or seek medical attention whenever it is needed, keeping the Dominant informed at all times of any health issues that may arise.

15.17 The Submissive will ensure that she procures oral contraception and ensure that she takes it as and when prescribed to prevent any pregnancy.

15.18 The Submissive shall accept without question any and all disciplinary actions deemed necessary by the Dominant and remember her status and role in regard to the Dominant at all times.

15.19 The Submissive shall not touch or pleasure herself sexually without permission from the Dominant.

15.20 The Submissive shall submit to any sexual activity demanded by the Dominant and shall do so without hesitation or argument.

15.21 The Submissive shall accept whippings, floggings, spankings, canings, paddlings, or any other discipline the Dominant should decide to administer, without hesitation, inquiry, or complaint.

15.22 The Submissive shall not look directly into the eyes of the Dominant except when specifically instructed to do so. The Submissive shall keep her eyes cast down and maintain a quiet and respectful bearing in the presence of the Dominant.

15.23 The Submissive shall always conduct herself in a respectful manner to the Dominant and shall address him only as Sir, Mr. Grey, or such other title as the Dominant may direct.

15.24 The Submissive will not touch the Dominant without his express permission to do so.

**ACTIVITIES**

16 The Submissive shall not participate in activities or any sexual acts that either party deems to be unsafe or any activities detailed in Appendix 2.

17 The Dominant and the Submissive have discussed the activities set out in Appendix 3 and recorded in writing on Appendix 3 their agreement in respect of them.

**SAFEWORDS**

18 The Dominant and the Submissive recognize that the Dominant may make demands of the Submissive that cannot be met without incurring physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other harm at the time the demands are made to the Submissive. In such circumstances related to this, the Submissive may make use of a safeword ("the Safeword[s]"). Two Safewords will be invoked depending on the severity of the demands.

19 The Safeword "Yellow" will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive is close to her limit of endurance.

20 The Safeword "Red" will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive cannot tolerate any further demands. When this word is said, the Dominant's action will cease completely with immediate effect.

**CONCLUSION**

21 We the undersigned have read and understood fully the provisions of this contract. We freely accept the terms of this contract and have acknowledged this by our signatures below.

---

**The Dominant: Christian Grey**
**Date**

---

**The Submissive: Anastasia Steele**
**Date**

---

**APPENDIX 1**

**RULES**

*Obedience:*

The Submissive will obey any instructions given by the Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities that are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

*Sleep:*

The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight hours' sleep a night when she is not with the Dominant.

*Food:*

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.

*Clothes:*

During the Term the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall, during the Term, wear adornments the Dominant shall require, in the presence of the Dominant and at any other time the Dominant deems fit.

*Exercise:*

The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and the Submissive. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the Submissive's progress.

*Personal Hygiene/Beauty:*

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of the Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by the Dominant and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit. All costs will be met by the Dominant.

*Personal Safety:*

The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

*Personal Qualities:*

The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection on the Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings, and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

**Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by the Dominant.**

---

**APPENDIX 2**

Hard Limits

No acts involving fire play.

No acts involving urination or defecation and the products thereof.

No acts involving needles, knives, cutting, piercing, or blood.

No acts involving gynecological medical instruments.

No acts involving children or animals.

No acts that will leave any permanent marks on the skin.

No acts involving breath control.

No activity that involves the direct contact of electric current (whether alternating or direct), fire, or flames to the body.

---

**APPENDIX 3**

Soft Limits

To be discussed and agreed between both parties:

Does the Submissive consent to:

- Masturbation
- Cunnilingus
- Fellatio
- Swallowing Semen
- Vaginal intercourse
- Vaginal fisting
- Anal intercourse
- Anal fisting

Does the Submissive consent to the use of:

- Vibrators
- Butt plugs
- Dildos
- Other vaginal/anal toys

Does the Submissive consent to:

- Bondage with rope
- Bondage with leather cuffs
- Bondage with handcuffs/shackles/manacles

• Bondage with tape
• Bondage with other

Does the Submissive consent to be restrained with:

• Hands bound in front
• Ankles bound
• Elbows bound
• Hands bound behind back
• Knees bound
• Wrists bound to ankles
• Binding to fixed items, furniture, etc.
• Binding with spreaderbar
• Suspension

Does the Submissive consent to be blindfolded?

Does the Submissive consent to be gagged?

How much pain is the Submissive willing to experience?

Where 1 is likes intensely and 5 is dislikes intensely:
1—2—3—4—5

Does the Submissive consent to accept the following forms of pain/punishment/discipline:

• Spanking
• Whipping
• Biting
• Genital clamps
• Hot wax
• Paddling
• Caning
• Nipple clamps
• Ice
• Other types/methods of pain

---

Holy fuck. I can't bring myself to even consider the food list. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, and read it again.

My head is buzzing. How can I possibly agree to all this? And apparently it's for my benefit, *to explore my sensuality, my limits—safely*—oh, please! I scoff angrily. *Serve and obey in all things*. All things! I shake my head in disbelief. Actually, don't the marriage vows use those words … *obey?* This throws me. Do couples still say that? Only three months—is that why there have been so many? He doesn't keep them for long? Or have they had enough after three months? *Every weekend?* That's too much. I'll never see Kate or whatever friends I may make at my new job, provided I get one. Perhaps I should have one weekend a month to myself. Perhaps when I have my period—that sounds … practical. He's my master! I'm to be dealt with as he pleases! *Holy shit*.

I shudder at the thought of being flogged or whipped. Spanking probably

wouldn't be so bad; humiliating, though. And tied up? Well, he did tie my hands together. That was … well, it was hot, really hot, so perhaps that won't be so bad. He won't loan me to another Dominant—damn right he won't. That would be totally unacceptable. *Why am I even thinking about this?*

I can't look him in the eye. *How weird is that?* The only way I ever have any chance to see what he's thinking. Actually, who am I kidding? I never know what he's thinking, but I like looking into his eyes. He has beautiful eyes—captivating, intelligent, deep, and dark, dark with dominant secrets. I recall his burning smoky gaze and press my thighs together, squirming.

And I can't touch him. Well, no surprise there. And these silly rules … No, no, I can't do this. I put my head in my hands. This is no way to have a relationship. I need some sleep. I'm shattered. All the physical shenanigans I've been engaged in over the last twenty-four hours have been, frankly, exhausting. And mentally … oh, man, this is so much to handle. As José would say, a real mind-fuck. Perhaps in the morning this might not read like a bad joke.

I scramble up and change quickly. Perhaps I should borrow Kate's pink flannel pajamas. I want something cuddly and reassuring around me. I head to the bathroom in my T-shirt and sleep shorts and brush my teeth.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. *You can't seriously be considering this* … My subconscious sounds sane and rational, not her usual snarky self. My inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old. *Please, let's do this … otherwise we'll end up alone with lots of cats and your classic novels to keep you company*.

The only man I've ever been attracted to, and he comes with a bloody contract, a flogger, and a whole world of issues. Well, at least I got my way this weekend. My inner goddess stops jumping and smiles serenely. *Oh yes* … she mouths, nodding at me smugly. I flush at the memory of his hands and his mouth on me, his body inside mine. Closing my eyes, I feel the familiar delicious pull of my muscles from deep, deep down. I want to do that again and again. Maybe if I just sign up for the sex … would he go with that? I suspect not.

Am I submissive? Maybe I come across that way. Maybe I misled him in the interview. I'm shy, yes … but submissive? I let Kate bully me—is that the same? And those soft limits, jeez. My mind boggles, but I'm reassured that they are up for discussion.

I wander back to my bedroom. This is too much to think about. I need a clear head—a fresh morning approach to the problem. I put the offending documents in my backpack. Tomorrow … tomorrow is another day. Clambering into bed, I switch off the light and lie staring up at the ceiling. Oh, I wish I'd never met him. My inner goddess shakes her head at me. She and I know it's a lie. I have

never felt as alive as I do now.

I close my eyes, and I drift into a heavy sleep with occasional dreams of four-poster beds and shackles and intense gray eyes.

KATE WAKES ME THE next day.

"Ana, I've been calling you. You must have been out cold."

My eyes reluctantly open. She's not just up—she's been for a run. I glance at my alarm. It's eight in the morning. Holy Moses, I've slept for a solid nine hours.

"What is it?" I mumble sleepily.

"There's a man here with a delivery for you. You have to sign for it."

"What?"

"Come on. It's big. It looks interesting." She hops from foot to foot excitedly and bounds back into the living room. I clamber out of bed and grab my robe hanging on the back of my door. A smart young man with a ponytail is standing in our living room clasping a large box.

"Hi," I mumble.

"I'll make you some tea." Kate scuttles off to the kitchen.

"Miss Steele?"

And I immediately know who the parcel is from.

"Yes," I answer cautiously.

"I have a package for you here, but I have to set it up and show you how to use it."

"Really? At this time?"

"Only following orders, ma'am." He smiles in a charming but professional he's-not-taking-any-crap way.

*Did he just call me ma'am?* Have I aged ten years overnight? If I have, it's that contract. My mouth puckers in disgust.

"Okay, what is it?"

"It's a MacBook Pro."

"Of course it is." I roll my eyes.

"These aren't available in the shops yet, ma'am; the very latest from Apple."

How come that does not surprise me? I sigh heavily.

"Just set it up on the dining table over there."

I wander into the kitchen to join Kate.

"What is it?" she says inquisitively, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. She's slept well, too.

"It's a laptop from Christian."

"Why's he sent you a laptop? You know you can use mine." She frowns.

*Not for what he has in mind.*

"Oh, it's only on loan. He wanted me to try it out." My excuse sounds feeble. But Kate nods her assent. *Oh my …* I have hoodwinked Katherine Kavanagh. A first. She hands me my tea.

The Mac laptop is sleek and silver and rather beautiful. It has a very large screen. Christian Grey likes scale—I think of his living area, in fact, his whole apartment.

"It's got the latest OS and a full suite of programs, plus a one-point-five terabyte hard drive so you'll have plenty of room, thirty-two gigs of RAM—what are you planning to use it for?"

"Uh … e-mail."

"E-mail!" he chokes, raising his eyebrows with a slightly sick look on his face.

"And maybe Internet research?" I shrug apologetically. He sighs.

"Well, this has full wireless N, and I've set it up with your Me account details. This baby is all ready to go, practically anywhere on the planet." He looks longingly at it.

"Me account?"

"Your new e-mail address."

*I have an e-mail address?*

He points to an icon on the screen and continues to talk at me, but it's like white noise. I haven't got a clue what he's saying, and in all honestly, I'm not interested. *Just tell me how to switch it on and off*—I'll figure out the rest. After all, I've been using Kate's for four years. Kate whistles, impressed when she sees it.

"This is next-generation tech." She raises her eyebrows at me. "Most women get flowers or maybe jewelry," she says suggestively, trying to suppress a smile.

I scowl at her but can't keep a straight face. We both burst into a fit of giggles, and computer man gapes at us, bemused. He finishes up and asks me to sign the delivery note.

As Kate shows him out, I sit with my cup of tea and open the e-mail program, and waiting for me is an e-mail from Christian. My heart leaps into my mouth. *I have an e-mail from Christian Grey*. Nervously, I open it.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Your New Computer

**Date**: May 22 2011 23:15

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I trust you slept well. I hope that you put this laptop to good use, as discussed.

I look forward to dinner Wednesday.

Happy to answer any questions before then, via e-mail, should you so desire.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# I hit “reply.”

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Your New Computer (on loan)
**Date**: May 23 2011 08:20
**To**: Christian Grey

I slept very well, thank you—for some strange reason—*Sir*. I understood that this computer was on loan, ergo not mine.

Ana

# Almost instantaneously there is a response.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Your New Computer (on loan)
**Date**: May 23 2011 08:22
**To**: Anastasia Steele

The computer is on loan. Indefinitely, Miss Steele.
I note from your tone that you have read the documentation I gave you.

Do you have any questions so far?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# I can’t help but grin.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Inquiring Minds
**Date**: May 23 2011 08:25
**To**: Christian Grey

I have many questions, but not suitable for e-mail, and some of us have to work for a living.

I do not want or need a computer indefinitely.

Until later, good day. *Sir*.

Ana

His reply again is instant, and it makes me smile.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Your New Computer (again on loan)
**Date**: May 23 2011 08:26
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Laters, baby.

P.S.: I work for a living, too.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I shut the computer down, grinning like an idiot. How can I resist playful Christian? I am going to be late for work. Well, it is my last week—Mr. and Mrs. Clayton will probably cut me some slack. I race into the shower, unable to shake my face-splitting grin. *He e-mailed me*. I'm like a small, giddy child. And all the contract angst fades. As I wash my hair, I try to think of what I could possibly ask him via e-mail. Surely it's better to talk these things through. Suppose someone hacked into his account? I flush at the thought. I dress quickly, shout a hasty good-bye to Kate, and I'm off to work my last week at Clayton's.

**JOSÉ PHONES AT ELEVEN.**

"Hey, are we doing coffee?" He sounds like the old José. José my friend, not a —what did Christian call him? Suitor. Ugh.

"Sure. I'm at work. Can you make it here for, say, twelve?"

"See you then."

He hangs up, and I go back to restocking the paintbrushes and thinking about Christian Grey and his contract.

José is punctual. He comes bounding into the shop like a gamboling dark-eyed puppy.

"Ana." He smiles his dazzling toothy all-Hispanic-American smile, and I can't be angry with him anymore.

"Hi, José." I hug him. "I'm starving. I'll just let Mrs. Clayton know I'm going for lunch."

As we stroll to the local coffee shop, I slip my arm through José's. I'm so grateful for his … normality. Someone I know and understand.

“Hey, Ana,” he murmurs. “You’ve really forgiven me?”
“José, you know I can never stay mad at you for long.”
He grins.

I CAN’T WAIT TO get home, the lure of e-mailing Christian, and maybe I can begin my research project. Kate is out somewhere, so I fire up the new laptop and open my e-mail. Sure enough, there’s a message from Christian sitting in the inbox. I’m practically bouncing out of my seat with glee.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Working for a Living
**Date**: May 23 2011 17:24
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I do hope you had a good day at work.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I hit “reply.”

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Working for Living
**Date**: May 23 2011 17:48
**To**: Christian Grey

*Sir* … I had a very good day at work.

Thank you.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Do the Work!
**Date**: May 23 2011 17:50
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,

Delighted you had a good day.

While you are e-mailing, you are not researching.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Nuisance

**Date**: May 23 2011 17:53

**To**: Christian Grey

Mr. Grey, stop e-mailing me, and I can start my assignment.

I'd like another A.

Ana

I hug myself.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Impatient

**Date**: May 23 2011 17:55

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,

Stop e-mailing me—and do your assignment.

I'd like to award another A.

The first one was so well deserved. ;)

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Christian Grey just sent me a winking smiley … *Oh my*. I fire up Google.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Internet Research

**Date**: May 23 2011 17:59

**To**: Christian Grey

Mr. Grey,

What would you suggest I put into a search engine?

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Internet Research

**Date**: May 23 2011 18:02

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,

Always start with Wikipedia.

No more e-mails unless you have questions.

Understood?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Bossy!
**Date**: May 23 2011 18:04
**To**: Christian Grey

Yes … *Sir*.
You are so bossy.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: In Control
**Date**: May 23 2011 18:06
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia, you have no idea.
Well, maybe an inkling now.

Do the work.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I type “Submissive” into Wikipedia.

Half an hour later, I feel slight queasy and frankly shocked to my core. Do I really want this stuff in my head? Jeez—is this what he gets up to in the Red Room of Pain? I sit staring at the screen, and part of me, a very moist and integral part of me that I’ve only become acquainted with very recently, is seriously turned on. Oh my, some of this stuff is HOT. But is it for me? Holy shit … could I do this? I need space. I need to think.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

For the first time in my life, I voluntarily go for a run. I find my nasty, never-used sneakers, some sweatpants, and a T-shirt. I put my hair in pigtails, blushing at the memories they bring back, and I plug in my iPod. I can't sit in front of that marvel of technology and look at or read any more disturbing material. I need to expend some of this excess, enervating energy. Quite frankly, I have a mind to run to the Heathman Hotel and just demand sex from the control freak. But that's five miles, and I don't think I'll be able to run one mile, let alone five, and, of course, he might turn me down, which would be beyond humiliating.

Kate is walking from her car as I head out of the door. She nearly drops her shopping bags when she sees me. Ana Steele in sneakers. I wave and don't stop for the inquisition. I need some serious alone time. Snow Patrol blaring in my ears, I set off into the opal and aquamarine dusk.

I pace through the park. *What am I going to do?* I want him, but on his terms? I just don't know. Perhaps I should negotiate what I want. Go through that ridiculous contract line by line and say what is acceptable and what isn't. My research has told me that legally it's unenforceable. He must know that. I figure that it just sets up the parameters of the relationship. It illustrates what I can expect from him and what he expects from me—my total submission. Am I prepared to give him that? Am I even capable?

I am plagued by one question—why is he like this? Is it because he was seduced at such a young age? I just don't know. He's still such a mystery.

I stop beside a large spruce and put my hands on my knees, breathing hard, dragging precious air into my lungs. Oh, this feels good, cathartic. I feel my resolve hardening. Yes. I need to tell him what's okay and what isn't. I need to e-mail him my thoughts, and then we can discuss these on Wednesday. I take a deep, cleansing breath, then jog back to the apartment.

Kate has been shopping, as only she can, for clothes for her vacation to Barbados. Mainly bikinis and matching sarongs. She will look fabulous in all of them, yet she still makes me sit and comment while she tries on each and every one. There are only so many ways one can say, "You look fabulous, Kate." She has a curvy, slim figure to die for. She doesn't do it on purpose, I know, but I haul my sorry, perspiration-clad ass into my room on the pretext of packing

more boxes. Could I feel any more inadequate? Taking the awesome free technology with me, I set the laptop up on my desk. I e-mail Christian.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Shocked of WSUV
**Date**: May 23 2011 20:33
**To**: Christian Grey

Okay, I've seen enough.
It was nice knowing you.

Ana

I press "send," hugging myself, laughing at my little joke. Will he find it as funny? *Oh, shit*—probably not. Christian Grey is not famed for his sense of humor. But I know it exists, I've experienced it. Perhaps I've gone too far. I wait for his answer.

I wait … and wait. I glance at my alarm clock. Ten minutes have passed.

To distract myself from the anxiety that blooms in my belly, I start doing what I told Kate I would be doing—packing up my room. I begin by cramming my books into a crate. By nine, I've heard nothing. *Perhaps he's out.* I pout petulantly as I plug my iPod earbuds in, listen to Snow Patrol, and sit down at my small desk to reread the contract and make my comments.

I don't know why I glance up, maybe I catch a slight movement from the corner of my eye, I don't know, but when I do, he's standing in the doorway of my bedroom, watching me intently. He's wearing his gray flannel pants and a white linen shirt, gently twirling his car keys. I pull my earbuds out and freeze. *Fuck!*

"Good evening, Anastasia." His voice is cool, his expression completely guarded and unreadable. The capacity to speak deserts me. Damn Kate for letting him in here with no warning. Vaguely, I'm aware that I'm still in my sweats, unshowered, yucky, and he's just gloriously yummy, his pants doing that hanging from the hips thing, and what's more, he's here in my bedroom.

"I felt that your e-mail warranted a reply in person," he explains dryly.

I open my mouth and then close it again, twice. The joke is on me. Never in this or any alternative universe did I expect him to drop everything and turn up here.

"May I sit?" he asks, his eyes now dancing with humor—*thank heavens—maybe he'll see the funny side?*

I nod. The power of speech remains elusive. *Christian Grey is sitting on my bed.*

“I wondered what your bedroom would look like,” he says.

I glance around it, plotting an escape route. No—there’s still only the door or window. My room is functional but cozy—sparse white wicker furniture and a white iron double bed with a patchwork quilt, made by my mother when she was in her folksy Americana quilting phase. It’s all pale blue and cream.

“It’s very serene and peaceful in here,” he murmurs. *Not at the moment … not with you here*.

Finally, my medulla oblongata recalls its purpose. I breathe. “How …?”

He smiles at me. “I’m still at the Heathman.”

*I know that*.

“Would you like a drink?” Politeness wins out over everything else I’d like to say.

“No thank you, Anastasia.” He smiles a dazzling, crooked smile, his head cocked slightly to one side.

*Well, I might need one*.

“So, it was *nice* knowing me?”

Holy cow, is he *offended*? I stare down at my fingers. How am I going to dig myself out of this? If I tell him it was a joke, I don’t think he’ll be impressed.

“I thought you’d reply by e-mail.” My voice is small, pathetic.

“Are you biting your lower lip deliberately?” he asks darkly.

I blink up at him, gasping, freeing my lip.

“I wasn’t aware I was biting my lip,” I murmur softly.

My heart is pounding. I can feel that pull, that delicious electricity between us charging, filling the space with static. He’s sitting so close to me, his eyes dark smoky gray, his elbows resting on his knees, his legs apart. Leaning forward, he slowly undoes one of my pigtails, his fingers freeing my hair. My breathing is shallow, and I cannot move. I watch hypnotized as his hand moves to my second pigtail, and pulling the hair tie, he loosens the braid with his long, skilled fingers.

“So you decided on some exercise,” he breathes, his voice soft and melodious. His fingers gently tuck my hair behind my ear. “Why, Anastasia?” His fingers circle my ear, and very softly, rhythmically, he tugs my earlobe. It’s so sexual.

“I needed time to think,” I whisper. I’m all deer/headlights, moth/flame, bird/snake … and he knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

“Think about what, Anastasia?”

“You.”

“And you decided that it was nice knowing me? Do you mean knowing me in the biblical sense?”

Oh, shit. I flush.

“I didn’t think you were familiar with the Bible.”

“I went to Sunday school, Anastasia. It taught me a great deal.”

“I don’t remember reading about nipple clamps in the Bible. Perhaps you were taught from a modern translation.”

His lips arch with a trace of a smile, and my eyes are drawn to his mouth.

“Well, I thought I should come and remind you how *nice* it was knowing me.”

Holy crap. I stare at him openmouthed, and his fingers move from my ear to my chin.

“What do you say to that, Miss Steele?”

His eyes blaze at me, his challenge intrinsic in his stare. His lips are parted—he’s waiting, coiled to strike. Desire—acute, liquid, and smoldering—combusts deep in my belly. I take preemptive action and launch myself at him. Somehow he moves, I have no idea how, and in the blink of an eye I’m on the bed, pinned beneath him, my arms stretched out and held above my head, his free hand clutching my face, and his mouth finding mine.

His tongue is in my mouth, claiming and possessing me, and I revel in the force he uses. I feel him against the length of my body. He wants *me*, and this does strange, delicious things to my insides. Not Kate in her little bikinis, not one of the fifteen, not evil Mrs. Robinson. Me. This beautiful man wants me. My inner goddess glows so bright she could light up Portland. He stops kissing me, and opening my eyes, I find him gazing down at me.

“Trust me?” he breathes.

I nod, wide-eyed, my heart bouncing off my ribs, my blood thundering through my body.

He reaches down, and from his pants pocket, he takes out his silver-gray silk tie … *that* silver-gray woven tie that leaves small impressions of its weave on my skin. He moves so quickly, sitting astride me as he fastens my wrists together, but this time, he ties the other end of the tie to one of the spokes of my white iron headboard. He pulls at my binding, checking it’s secure. I’m not going anywhere. I’m tied, literally, to my bed, and I’m so aroused.

He slides off me and stands beside the bed, staring down at me, his eyes dark with want. His look is triumphant mixed with relief.

“That’s better,” he murmurs, and smiles a wicked, knowing smile. He bends and starts undoing one of my sneakers. Oh no … no … my feet. No. I’ve just been running.

“No,” I protest, trying to kick him off.

He stops.

“If you struggle, I’ll tie your feet, too. If you make a noise, Anastasia, I will gag you. Keep quiet. Katherine is probably outside listening right now.”

*Gag me! Kate!* I shut up.

He removes my shoes and my socks efficiently and slowly peels off my sweatpants. Oh—*what panties am I wearing?* He lifts me and pulls the quilt and my duvet out from underneath me and places me back down, this time on the sheets.

"Now then." He licks his bottom lip slowly. "You're biting that lip, Anastasia. You know the effect it has on me." He places his long index finger over my mouth, a warning.

*Oh my*. I can barely contain myself, lying helpless, watching him move gracefully around my room. It's a heady aphrodisiac. Slowly, almost leisurely, he removes his shoes and socks, undoes his pants, and lifts his shirt off over his head.

"I think you've seen too much." He chuckles slyly. He sits astride me again, pulls my T-shirt up, and I think he's going to take it off me, but he rolls it up to my neck and then pulls it up over my head so he can see my mouth and my nose, but it covers my eyes. And because it's folded over, I cannot see a thing through it.

"Mmm," he breathes appreciatively. "This just gets better and better. I'm going to get a drink."

Leaning down, he kisses me, his lips tender against mine, and his weight shifts off the bed. I hear the quiet creak of the bedroom door. Get a drink. *Where? Here? Portland? Seattle?* I strain to hear him. I can make out low rumblings, and I know he's talking to Kate—oh no … *he's practically naked*. What's she going to say? I hear a faint popping sound. What's that? He returns, the door creaking once more, his feet padding across the bedroom floor, and ice tinkling against glass as it swirls in liquid. What kind of drink? He shuts the door and shuffles around removing his pants. They drop to the floor, and I know he's naked. He sits astride me again.

"Are you thirsty, Anastasia?" he asks, his voice teasing

"Yes," I breathe, because my mouth is suddenly parched. I hear the ice clink against the glass, and he leans down and kisses me, pouring a delicious, crisp liquid into my mouth as he does. It's white wine. It's so unexpected, so *hot*, though it's chilled and Christian's lips are cool.

"More?" he whispers.

I nod. It tastes all the more divine because it's been in *his* mouth. He leans down, and I drink another mouthful from his lips … *oh my*.

"Let's not go too far; we know your capacity for alcohol is limited, Anastasia."

I can't help it. I grin, and he leans down to deliver another delicious mouthful. He shifts so he's lying beside me, his erection at my hip. Oh, I want him inside

me.

"Is this *nice*?" he asks, but I hear the edge in his voice.

I tense. He moves the glass again and leans down, kissing me and depositing a small shard of ice in my mouth with a little wine. He slowly and leisurely trails chilled kisses down the center of my body, from the base of my throat to between my breasts, down my torso to my belly. He pops a fragment of ice in my navel in a pool of cool, cold wine. It burns all the way down to the depths of my belly. Wow.

"Now you have to keep still," he whispers. "If you move, Anastasia, you'll get wine all over the bed."

My hips flex automatically.

"Oh no. If you spill the wine, I will punish you, Miss Steele."

I groan and desperately fight the urge to tilt my hips, pulling on my restraint. Oh no … *please*.

With one finger, he pulls down my bra cups in turn, my breasts pushed up, exposed and vulnerable. Leaning down, he kisses and tugs at each of my nipples in turn with cool, cold lips. I fight my body as it tries to arch in response.

"How *nice* is this?" he breathes, blowing on one of my nipples.

I hear another clink of ice, and then I can feel it around my right nipple as he tugs the left one with his lips. I moan, struggling not to move. It's sweet, agonizing torture.

"If you spill the wine, I won't let you come."

"Oh … please … Christian … Sir … Please." He's driving me insane. I *hear* him smile.

The ice in my navel is melting. I am beyond warm—warm and chilled and wanting. Wanting him, inside me. Now.

His cool fingers trail languidly across my belly. My skin is oversensitive, my hips flex automatically, and the now-warmer liquid from my navel seeps over my belly. Christian moves quickly, lapping it up with his tongue, kissing, biting me softly, sucking.

"Oh dear, Anastasia, you moved. What am I going to do to you?"

I'm panting loudly. All I can concentrate on is his voice and his touch. Nothing else is real. Nothing else matters, nothing else registers on my radar. His fingers slip into my panties, and I'm rewarded with his unguarded sharp intake of air.

"Oh, baby," he murmurs, and he pushes two fingers inside me.

I gasp.

"Ready for me so soon," he says. He moves his fingers tantalizingly slowly, in, out, and I push against him, tilting my hips up.

“You are a greedy girl,” he scolds softly, and his thumb circles my clitoris and then presses down.

I groan loudly as my body bucks beneath his expert fingers. He reaches up and pushes the T-shirt over my head so I can see him. I blink in the soft light of my sidelight. I long to touch him.

“I want to touch you,” I breathe.

“I know,” he murmurs. He leans down and kisses me, his fingers still moving rhythmically inside me, his thumb circling and pressing. His other hand scoops my hair off my head and holds my head in place. His tongue mirrors the actions of his fingers, claiming me. My legs begin to stiffen as I push against his hand. He gentles his hand, so I’m brought back from the brink. He does this again and again. It’s so frustrating … *Oh, please, Christian*, I scream in my head.

“This is your punishment, so close and yet so far. Is this *nice*?” he breathes in my ear. I whimper, exhausted, pulling against my restraint. I’m helpless, lost in an erotic torment.

“Please,” I beg, and he finally takes pity on me.

“How shall I fuck you, Anastasia?”

Oh … my body starts to quiver. He stills again.

“Please.”

“What do you want, Anastasia?”

“You … now,” I cry.

“Shall I fuck you this way, or this way, or this way? There’s an endless choice,” he breathes against my lips. He withdraws his hand and reaches over to the bedside table for a foil packet. He kneels up between my legs, and very slowly he pulls my panties off, staring down at me, his eyes gleaming. He puts on the condom. I watch fascinated, mesmerized.

“How *nice* is this?” he says as he strokes himself.

“I meant it as a joke,” I whimper. *Please fuck me, Christian*.

He raises his eyebrows as his hand moves up and down his impressive length.

“A joke?” His voice is menacingly soft.

“Yes. Please, Christian,” I beseech him.

“Are you laughing now?”

“No,” I mewl.

I’m a ball of sexual tense need. He stares down at me for a moment, measuring my need, then he grabs me suddenly and flips me over. It takes me by surprise, and because my hands are tied, I have to support myself on my elbows. He pushes both my knees up the bed so my behind is in the air, and he slaps me hard. Before I can react, he plunges inside me. I cry out—from the slap and from his sudden assault, and I come instantly again and again, falling apart beneath

him as he continues to slam deliciously into me. He doesn't stop. I'm spent. I can't take this … and he pounds on and on and on … then I'm building again … surely not … no …

"Come on, Anastasia, again," he growls through clenched teeth, and unbelievably, my body responds, convulsing around him as I climax anew, calling out his name. I shatter again into tiny fragments, and Christian stills, finally letting go, silently finding his release. He collapses on top of me, breathing hard.

"How *nice* was that?" he asks through his gritted teeth.

*Oh my*.

I lie panting and spent on the bed, eyes closed as he slowly pulls out of me. He rises immediately and dresses. When he's fully clothed, he climbs back on the bed and gently undoes my binding and pulls my T-shirt off. I flex my fingers and rub my wrists, smiling at the woven pattern imprinted on my wrists from the tie. I readjust my bra as he pulls the duvet and quilt over me. I stare up at him completely dazed, and he smirks down at me.

"That was really nice," I whisper, smiling coyly.

"There's that word again."

"You don't like that word?"

"No. It doesn't do it for me at all."

"Oh—I don't know … it seems to have a very beneficial effect on you."

"I'm a beneficial effect, now am I? Could you wound my ego any further, Miss Steele?"

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your ego." But even as I say it, I don't feel the conviction of my words—something elusive crosses my mind, a fleeting thought, but it's lost before I can grasp it.

"You think?" His voice is soft. He's lying beside me, fully clothed, his head propped up on his elbow, and I am only wearing my bra.

"Why don't you like to be touched?"

"I just don't." He reaches over and plants a soft kiss on my forehead. "So, that e-mail was your idea of a joke."

I smile apologetically at him and shrug.

"I see. So you are still considering my proposition?"

"Your indecent proposal … yes, I am. I have issues though."

He grins down at me as if relieved.

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"I was going to e-mail them to you, but you kind of interrupted me."

"Coitus interruptus."

"See, I knew you had a sense of humor somewhere in there." I smile.

“Only certain things are funny, Anastasia. I thought you were saying no, no discussion at all.” His voice drops.

“I don’t know yet. I haven’t made up my mind. Will you collar me?”

He raises his eyebrows. “You have been doing your research. I don’t know, Anastasia. I’ve never collared anyone.”

Oh … should I be surprised by this? I know so little about *the scene* … I don’t know.

“Were you collared?” I whisper.

“Yes.”

“By Mrs. Robinson?”

“Mrs. Robinson!” He laughs loudly, freely, and he looks so young and carefree, his head thrown back, his laughter infectious.

I grin back at him.

“I’ll tell her you said that; she’ll love it.”

“You still talk to her regularly?” I can’t keep the shock out of my voice.

“Yes.” He’s serious now.

Oh … and part of me is suddenly insanely jealous—I’m disturbed by the depth of my feeling.

“I see.” My voice is tight. “So you have someone you can discuss your alternative lifestyle with, but I’m not allowed.”

He frowns.

“I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it like that. Mrs. Robinson was part of that lifestyle. I told you, she’s a good friend now. If you’d like, I can introduce you to one of my former subs. You could talk to her.”

*What? Is he deliberately trying to upset me?*

“Is this *your* idea of a joke?

“No, Anastasia.” He’s bemused as he shakes his head.

“No—I’ll do this on my own, thank you very much,” I snap at him, pulling the duvet up to my chin.

He stares at me, at sea, surprised.

“Anastasia, I …” He’s lost for words. A first, I think. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended. I’m appalled.”

“Appalled?”

“I don’t want to talk to one of your ex-girlfriends … slave … sub … whatever you call them.”

“Anastasia Steele—are you jealous?”

I flush, crimson.

“Are you staying?”

“I have a breakfast meeting tomorrow at the Heathman. Besides, I told you, I don’t sleep with girlfriends, slaves, subs, or anyone. Friday and Saturday were exceptions. It won’t happen again.” I can hear the resolve behind his soft, husky voice.

I purse my lips at him.

“Well, I’m tired now.”

“Are you kicking me out?” He raises his eyebrows, amused and a little dismayed.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s another first.” He eyes me speculatively. “So nothing you want to discuss now? About the contract.”

“No.” I reply petulantly.

“God, I’d like to give you a good hiding. You’d feel a lot better, and so would I.”

“You can’t say things like that … I haven’t signed anything yet.”

“A man can dream, Anastasia.” He leans over me and grasps my chin. “Wednesday?” he murmurs, and he kisses me lightly on my lips.

“Wednesday,” I agree. “I’ll see you out. If you give me a minute.” I sit up and grab my T-shirt, pushing him out of the way. Reluctantly, he gets up off the bed.

“Please pass me my sweatpants.”

He collects them from the floor and hands them to me.

“Yes, ma’am.” He’s trying unsuccessfully to hide his smile.

I narrow my eyes at him as I slip the pants on. My hair is a mess, and I know I’ll have to face the Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition after he’s gone. Grabbing a hair tie, I walk to my bedroom door, opening it to check for Kate. She is not in the living room. I think I can hear her on the phone in her room. Christian follows me out. During the short walk from bedroom to front door, my thoughts and feelings ebb and flow, transforming. I’m no longer angry with him, I feel suddenly unbearably shy. I don’t want him to go. For the first time, I’m wishing he was *normal*—wanting a normal relationship that doesn’t need a ten-page agreement, a flogger, and carabiners in his playroom ceiling.

I open the door for him and stare down at my hands. This is the first time I have ever had sex in my home, and as sex goes, I think it was pretty damn fine. But now I feel like a receptacle—an empty vessel to be filled at his whim. My subconscious shakes her head. *You wanted to run to the Heathman for sex—you had it express delivered*. She crosses her arms and taps her foot with a what-are-you-complaining-about look on her face. Christian stops in the doorway and clasps my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. His brow creases.

“You okay?” he asks tenderly as his thumb lightly caresses my bottom lip.

“Yes,” I reply, though in all honesty I’m just not sure. I feel a paradigm shift. I know that if I do this thing with him, I will get hurt. He’s not capable, interested, or willing to offer me any more … and I want more. *Much more*. The surge of jealousy I felt only moments ago tells me that I have deeper feelings for him than I have admitted to myself.

“Wednesday,” he confirms, and he leans forward and kisses me softly. Something changes while he’s kissing me; his lips grow more urgent against mine, his hand moves up from my chin and he’s holding the side of my head, his other hand on the other side. His breathing accelerates. He deepens the kiss, leaning into me. I put my hands on his arms. I want to run them through his hair, but I resist, knowing that he won’t like it. He leans his forehead against mine, his eyes closed, his voice strained.

“Anastasia,” he whispers. “What are you doing to me?”

“I could say the same to you,” I whisper back.

Taking a deep breath, he kisses my forehead and leaves. He strolls purposefully down the path toward his car as he runs his hand through his hair. Glancing up as he opens his car door, he smiles his breathtaking smile. My answering smile is weak, completely dazzled by him, and I’m reminded once more of Icarus soaring too close to the sun. I close the front door as he climbs into his sports car. I have an overwhelming urge to cry; a sad and lonely melancholy grips and tightens around my heart. Dashing back to my bedroom, I close the door and lean against it, trying to rationalize my feelings. I can’t. Sliding to the floor, I put my head in my hands as my tears begin to flow.

Kate knocks gently.

“Ana?” she whispers. I open the door. She takes one look at me and throws her arms around me.

“What’s wrong? What did that creepy good-looking bastard do?”

“Oh, Kate, nothing I didn’t want him to.”

She pulls me to my bed and we sit.

“You have dreadful sex hair.”

In spite of my poignant sadness, I laugh.

“It was good sex, not dreadful at all.”

Kate smiles.

“That’s better. Why are you crying? You never cry.” She retrieves my brush from the side table and, sitting behind me, very slowly starts brushing out the knots.

“I just don’t think our relationship is going to go anywhere.” I stare down at my fingers.

“I thought you said you were going to see him on Wednesday?”

“I am. That was our original plan.”

“So, why did he turn up here today?”

“I sent him an e-mail.”

“Asking him to drop by?”

“No, saying I didn’t want to see him anymore.”

“And he turns up? Ana, that’s genius.”

“Actually, it was a joke.”

“Oh. Now I’m really confused.”

Patiently, I explain the essence of my e-mail without giving anything away.

“So you thought he’d reply by e-mail.”

“Yes.”

“But instead he turns up here.”

“Yes.”

“I’d say he’s completely smitten with you.”

I frown. *Christian smitten with me? Hardly*. He’s just looking for a new toy—a convenient new toy that he can bed and do unspeakable things to. My heart tightens painfully. This is the reality.

“He came here to fuck me, that’s all.”

“Who said romance was dead?” she whispers, horrified. I’ve shocked Kate. I didn’t think that was possible. I shrug apologetically.

“He uses sex as a weapon.”

“Fuck you into submission?” She shakes her head disapprovingly. I blink rapidly at her, and I feel the blush as it spreads across my face. *Oh … spot on, Katherine Kavanagh, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist.*

“Ana, I don’t understand, you just let him make love to you?”

“No, Kate, we don’t make love—we fuck—Christian’s terminology. He doesn’t do the love thing.”

“I knew there was something weird about him. He has commitment issues.”

I nod, as if in agreement. Inwardly, I pine. Oh, Kate … I wish I could tell you everything, everything about this strange, sad, kinky guy, and you could tell me to forget about him. Stop me from being a fool.

“I guess it’s all a little overwhelming,” I murmur. *That’s the understatement of the year*.

Because I don’t want to talk about Christian anymore, I ask her about Elliot. Katherine’s whole demeanor changes at the mere mention of his name. She lights up from within, beaming at me.

“He’s coming over early Saturday to help load up.” She hugs the hairbrush—boy, has she got it bad—and I feel a familiar faint stab of envy. Kate has found herself a normal man, and she looks so happy.

I turn and hug her.

“Oh, I meant to say. Your dad called while you were … er, occupied. Apparently Bob has sustained some injury, so your mom and he can’t make graduation. But your dad will be here Thursday. He wants you to call.”

“Oh … my mom never called me. Is Bob okay?”

“Yes. Call her in the morning. It’s late now.”

“Thanks, Kate. I’m okay now. I’ll call Ray in the morning, too. I think I’ll just turn in.”

She smiles, but her eyes crinkle at the corners with concern.

After she’s gone, I sit and read the contract again, making more notes as I go. When I’ve finished, I fire up the laptop, ready to respond.

There’s an e-mail from Christian in my inbox.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: This Evening

**Date**: May 23 2011 23:16

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,

I look forward to receiving your notes on the contract.

Until then, sleep well, baby.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Issues

**Date**: May 24 2011 00:02

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

Here is my list of issues. I look forward to discussing them more fully at dinner on Wednesday.

The numbers refer to clauses:

2: Not sure why this is solely for MY benefit—i.e., to explore MY sensuality and limits. I’m sure I wouldn’t need a ten-page contract to do that! Surely this is for YOUR benefit.

4: As you are aware, you are my only sexual partner. I don’t take drugs, and I’ve not had any blood transfusions. I’m probably safe. What about you?

8: I can terminate at any time if I don’t think you’re sticking to the agreed limits. Okay—I like this.

9: Obey you in all things? Accept without hesitation your discipline? We need to talk about this.

11: One-month trial period. Not three.

12: I cannot commit every weekend. I do have a life, or will have. Perhaps three out of four?

15.2: Using my body as you see fit sexually or otherwise—please define “or otherwise.”

15.5: This whole discipline clause. I’m not sure I want to be whipped, flogged, or corporally punished. I am sure this would be in breach of clauses 2–5. And also “for any other reason.” That’s just mean—and you told me you weren’t a sadist.

15.10: Like loaning me out to someone else would ever be an option. But I’m glad it’s here in black and white.

15.14: The Rules. More on those later.

15.19: Touching myself without your permission. What’s the problem with this? You know I don’t do it anyway.

15.21: Discipline—please see clause 15.5 above.

15.22: I can’t look into your eyes? Why?

15.24: Why can’t I touch you?

Rules:

Sleep—I’ll agree to six hours.

Food—I am not eating food from a prescribed list. The food list goes or I do—deal breaker.

Clothes—as long as I only have to wear your clothes when I’m with you … okay.

Exercise—We agreed on three hours, this still says four.

Soft Limits:

Can we go through all of these? No fisting of any kind. What is suspension? Genital clamps—you have got to be kidding me.

Can you please let me know the arrangements for Wednesday? I am working until five p.m. that day.

Good night.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Issues

**Date**: May 24 2011 00:07

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,

That’s a long list. Why are you still up?

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Burning the Midnight Oil

**Date**: May 24 2011 00:10

**To**: Christian Grey

Sir,

If you recall, I was going through this list when I was distracted and bedded by a passing control freak.

Good night.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Stop Burning the Midnight Oil

**Date**: May 24 2011 00:12

**To**: Anastasia Steele

GO TO BED, ANASTASIA.

Christian Grey

CEO & Control Freak, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Oh … shouty capitals!* I switch off. How can he intimidate me when he's six miles away? I shake my head. My heart still heavy, I climb into bed and fall instantly into a deep but troubled sleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following day, I call my mom after I get home from work. It's been a relatively peaceful day at Clayton's, allowing me far too much time to think. I'm restless, nervous about my showdown with Mr. Control Freak tomorrow, and at the back of my mind, I'm worried that perhaps I've been too negative in my response to the contract. Perhaps he'll call the whole thing off.

My mom is oozing contrition, desperately sorry not to make my graduation. Bob has twisted some ligament, which means he's hobbling all over the place. Honestly, he's as accident-prone as I am. He's expected to make a full recovery, but it means he's resting up, and my mother has to wait on him hand and sore foot.

"Ana, honey, I'm so sorry," my mom whines into the phone.

"Mom, it's fine. Ray will be there."

"Ana, you sound distracted—are you okay, baby?"

"Yes, Mom," *Oh, if only you knew*. There's an obscenely rich guy I've met and he wants some kind of strange kinky sexual relationship, in which I don't get a say in things.

"Have you met someone?"

"No, Mom." I am so not going there right now.

"Well, darling, I'll be thinking of you on Thursday. I love you … you know that, honey?"

I close my eyes. Her precious words give me a warm glow inside.

"Love you, too, Mom. Say hi to Bob, and I hope he gets better fast."

"Will do, honey. Bye."

"Bye."

I have strayed into my bedroom with the phone. Idly, I switch the mean machine on and fire up the e-mail program. There's an e-mail from Christian from late last night or very early this morning, depending on your point of view. My heart rate spikes instantly, and I hear the blood pumping in my ears. Holy crap … perhaps he's said no—that's it—maybe he's canceling dinner. The thought is so painful. I dismiss it quickly and open the e-mail.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Your Issues

**Date**: May 24 2011 01:27

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

Following my more thorough examination of your issues, may I bring to your attention the definition of submissive.

submissive [s*uh*b-mis-iv]—*adjective*

1. inclined or ready to submit; unresistingly or humbly obedient: *submissive servants*.

2. marked by or indicating submission: *a submissive reply*.

Origin: 1580–90; submiss + -ive

*Synonyms: 1*. tractable, compliant, pliant, amenable. *2*. passive, resigned, patient, docile, tame, subdued. *Antonyms: 1*. rebellious, disobedient.

Please bear this in mind for our meeting on Wednesday.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

My initial feeling is one of relief. He's willing to discuss my issues at least, and he still wants to meet tomorrow. After some thought, I reply.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: My Issues … What about Your Issues?

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:29

**To**: Christian Grey

Sir,

Please note the date of origin: 1580–90. I would respectfully remind Sir that the year is 2011. We have come a long way since then.

May I offer a definition for *you* to consider for our meeting:

compromise [kom-pr*uh*-mahyz]—*noun*

1. a settlement of differences by mutual concessions; an agreement reached by adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims, principles, etc., by reciprocal modification of demands. 2. the result of such a settlement. 3. something intermediate between different things: *The split-level is a compromise between a ranch house and a multistoried house*. 4. an endangering, esp. of reputation; exposure to danger, suspicion, etc.: *a compromise of one's integrity*.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: What about My Issues?

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:32

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Good point, well made, as ever, Miss Steele. I will collect you from your apartment at 7:00 tomorrow.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: 2011—Women Can Drive

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:40

**To**: Christian Grey

Sir,

I have a car. I can drive.

I would prefer to meet you somewhere.

Where shall I meet you?

At your hotel at 7:00?

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Stubborn Young Women

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:43

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I refer to my e-mail dated May 24, 2011, sent at 1:27 and the definition contained therein.

Do you ever think you'll be able to do what you're told?

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Intractable Men

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:49

**To**: Christian Grey

Mr. Grey,

I would like to drive.

Please.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Exasperated Men

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:52

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Fine.

My hotel at 7:00.

I’ll meet you in the Marble Bar.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

He’s even grumpy by e-mail. Doesn’t he understand that I may need to make a quick getaway? Not that my Beetle is quick … but still—I need a means of escape.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Not So Intractable Men

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:55

**To**: Christian Grey

Thank you.

Ana x

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Exasperating Women

**Date**: May 24 2011 18:59

**To**: Anastasia Steele

You’re welcome.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I call Ray, who is just about to watch the Sounders play some soccer team from Salt Lake City, so our conversation is mercifully brief. He’s driving down on Thursday for graduation. He wants to take me out afterward for a meal. My heart swells talking to Ray, and a huge lump forms in my throat. He has been my constant through all Mom’s romantic ups and downs. We have a special bond that I treasure. Even though he’s my stepdad, he’s always treated me as his own, and I can’t wait to see him. It’s been too long. His quiet fortitude is what I need now, what I miss. Maybe I can channel my inner Ray for my meeting tomorrow.

Kate and I concentrate on packing, sharing a bottle of cheap red wine as we do. When I finally go to bed, having almost finished packing my room, I feel calmer. The physical activity of boxing everything up has been a welcome distraction, and I’m tired. I want a good night’s rest. I snuggle into my bed and am soon asleep.

PAUL IS BACK FROM Princeton before he sets off for New York to start an internship with a financing company. He follows me around the store all day asking me for a date. It's annoying.

"Paul, for the hundredth time, I have a date this evening."

"No, you don't, you're just saying that to avoid me. You're always avoiding me."

*Yes … you'd think you'd take the hint.*

"Paul, I never thought it was a good idea to date the boss's brother."

"You're finishing here on Friday. You're not working tomorrow."

"And I'll be in Seattle as of Saturday and you'll be in New York soon. We couldn't get much farther apart if we tried. Besides, I do have a date this evening."

"With José?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"Paul … oh." My sigh is exasperated. He's not going to let this go. "Christian Grey." I cannot help the annoyance in my voice. But it does the trick. Paul's mouth falls open, and he gapes at me, struck dumb. Humph—even his *name* renders people speechless.

"You have a date with Christian Grey?" he says finally, once he's over the shock. Disbelief is evident in his voice.

"Yes."

"I see." Paul looks positively crestfallen, stunned even, and a very small part of me resents that he should find this a surprise. My inner goddess does, too. She makes a very vulgar and unattractive gesture at him with her fingers.

After that, he ignores me, and at five I am out the door, pronto.

Kate has lent me two dresses and two pairs of shoes for tonight and for graduation tomorrow. I wish I could feel more enthused about clothes and make an extra effort, but clothes are just not my thing. *What is your thing, Anastasia?* Christian's softly spoken question haunts me. Shaking my head and endeavoring to quell my nerves, I decide on the plum-colored sheath dress for this evening. It's demure and vaguely businesslike—after all, I am negotiating a contract.

I shower, shave my legs and underarms, wash my hair, and then spend a good half hour drying it so that it falls in soft waves to my breasts and down my back. I slip a comb in to keep one side off my face and apply mascara and some lip gloss. I rarely wear makeup—it intimidates me. None of my literary heroines had to deal with makeup—maybe I'd know more about it if they had. I slip on the plum-colored stilettos that match the dress, and I'm ready by six thirty.

"Well?" I ask Kate.

She grins.

"Boy, you scrub up well, Ana." She nods with approval. "You look hot."

"Hot! I'm aiming for demure and businesslike."

"That, too, but most of all hot. The dress really suits you and your coloring. The way it clings." She smirks.

"Kate!" I scold.

"Just keeping it real, Ana. The whole package—looks good. Keep the dress. You'll have him eating out of your hand."

My mouth presses in a hard line. *Oh, you so have that the wrong way around.*

"Wish me luck."

"You need luck for a date?" Her brow furrows, puzzled.

"Yes, Kate."

"Well, then—good luck." She hugs me, and I am out the front door.

I have to drive in my bare feet—Wanda, my sea-blue Beetle, wasn't built to be driven by stiletto-wearers. I pull up outside the Heathman at six fifty-eight precisely and hand my car keys to the valet for parking. He looks askance at my Beetle, but I ignore him. Taking a deep breath and mentally girding my loins, I head into the hotel.

Christian is leaning casually against the bar, drinking a glass of white wine. He's dressed in his customary white linen shirt, black jeans, black tie, and black jacket. His hair is as tousled as ever. I sigh. I stand for a few seconds in the entrance of the bar, gazing at him, admiring the view. He glances, nervously I think, toward the entrance and stills when he sees me. Blinking a couple of times, he then smiles a slow, lazy, sexy smile that renders me speechless and all molten inside. Making a supreme effort not to bite my lip, I move forward, aware that I, Anastasia Steele of Clumsyville, am in high stilettos. He walks gracefully over to meet me.

"You look stunning," he murmurs as he leans down to briefly kiss my cheek. "A dress, Miss Steele. I approve." Taking my arm, he leads me to a secluded booth and signals for the waiter.

"What would you like to drink?"

My lips quirk up in a quick, sly smile as I sit and slide into the booth—well, at least he's asking me.

"I'll have what you're having, please." See! I can play nice and behave myself. Amused, he orders another glass of Sancerre and slides in opposite me.

"They have an excellent wine cellar here," he says. Putting his elbows on the table, he steeples his fingers in front of his mouth, his eyes alive with some unreadable emotion. And there it is … that familiar pull and charge from him, it connects somewhere deep inside me. I shift uncomfortably under his scrutiny,

my heart palpitating. I must keep my cool.

"Are you nervous?" he asks softly.

"Yes."

He leans forward.

"Me, too," he whispers conspiratorially. My eyes shoot up to meet his. *Him? Nervous? Never*. I blink, and he smiles his adorable lopsided smile at me. The waiter arrives with my wine, a small dish of mixed nuts, and another of olives.

"So, how are we going to do this?" I ask. "Run through my points one by one?"

"Impatient as ever, Miss Steele."

"Well, I could ask you what you thought of the weather today."

He smiles, and his long fingers reach down to collect an olive. He pops it in his mouth, and my eyes linger on his mouth, that mouth, that's been on me … all parts of me. I flush.

"I thought the weather was particularly unexceptional today." He smirks.

"Are you smirking at me, Mr. Grey?"

"I am, Miss Steele."

"You know this contract is legally unenforceable."

"I am fully aware of that, Miss Steele."

"Were you going to tell me that at any point?"

He frowns. "You'd think I'd coerce you into something you don't want to do, and then pretend that I have a legal hold over you?"

"Well … yes."

"You don't think very highly of me, do you?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Anastasia, it doesn't matter if it's legal or not. It represents an arrangement that I would like to make with you—what I would like from you and what you can expect from me. If you don't like it, then don't sign. If you do sign and then decide you don't like it, there are enough get-out clauses so you can walk away. Even if it were legally binding, do you think I'd drag you through the courts if you did decide to run?"

I take a long sip of my wine. My subconscious taps me hard on the shoulder. You must keep your wits about you. *Don't drink too much*.

"Relationships like this are built on honesty and trust," he continues. "If you don't trust me—trust me to know how I'm affecting you, how far I can go with you, how far I can take you—if you can't be honest with me, then we really can't do this."

*Oh my*, we've cut to the chase quickly. *How far he can take me*. Holy shit. What does that mean?

“So it’s quite simple, Anastasia. Do you trust me or not?” His eyes are burning, fervent.

“Did you have similar discussions with, um … the fifteen?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they were all established submissives. They knew what they wanted out of a relationship with me and generally what I expected. With them, it was just a question of fine-tuning the soft limits, details like that.”

“Is there a store you go to? Submissives ’Я’ Us?”

He laughs. “Not exactly.”

“Then how?”

“Is that what you want to discuss? Or shall we get down to the nitty-gritty? Your issues, as you say.”

I swallow. *Do I trust him?* Is that what this all comes down to—trust? Surely that should be a two-way thing. I remember his snit when I phoned José.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, distracting me from my thoughts.

*Oh no … food.*

“No.”

“Have you eaten today?”

I stare at him. *Honesty …* Holy crap, he’s not going to like my answer.

“No.” My voice is small.

He narrows his eyes.

“You have to eat, Anastasia. We can eat down here or in my suite. What would you prefer?”

“I think we should stay in public, on neutral ground.”

He smiles sardonically.

“Do you think that would stop me?” he says softly, a sensual warning.

My eyes widen, and I swallow again.

“I hope so.”

“Come, I have a private dining room booked. No public.” He smiles at me enigmatically and climbs out of the booth, holding his hand out to me.

“Bring your wine,” he murmurs.

Placing my hand in his, I slide out and stand up beside him. He releases me, and his hand reaches for my elbow. He leads me back through the bar and up the grand stairs to a mezzanine floor. A young man in full Heathman livery approaches us.

“Mr. Grey, this way, sir.”

We follow him through a plush seating area to an intimate dining room. *Just one secluded table.* The room is small but sumptuous. Beneath a shimmering

chandelier, the table is all starched linen, crystal glasses, silver cutlery, and white rose bouquet. An old-world, sophisticated charm pervades the wood-paneled room. The waiter pulls out my chair, and I sit. He places my napkin in my lap. Christian sits opposite me. I peek up at him.

"Don't bite your lip," he whispers.

I frown. Damn it. I don't even know that I'm doing it.

"I've ordered already. I hope you don't mind."

Frankly, I'm relieved. I'm not sure I can make any further decisions.

"No, that's fine," I acquiesce.

"It's good to know that you can be amenable. Now, where were we?"

"The nitty-gritty." I take another large sip of wine. It really is delicious. Christian Grey does wine well. I remember the last sip of wine he gave me, in my bed. I blush at the intrusive thought.

"Yes, your issues." He fishes into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. My e-mail.

"Clause 2. Agreed. This is for the benefit of us both. I shall redraft."

I blink at him. Holy shit … we are going to go through each of these points one at a time. I just don't feel so brave face-to-face. He looks so earnest. I steel myself with another sip of my wine. Christian continues.

"My sexual health. Well, all of my previous partners have had blood tests, and I have regular tests every six months for all the health risks you mention. All my recent tests are clear. I have never taken drugs. In fact, I'm vehemently antidrug. I have a strict no-tolerance policy with regards to drugs for all my employees, and I insist on random drug testing."

Wow … control freakery gone mad. I blink at him, shocked.

"I have never had any blood transfusions. Does that answer your question?"

I nod, impassive.

"Your next point I mentioned earlier. You can walk away any time, Anastasia. I won't stop you. If you go, however—that's it. Just so you know."

"Okay," I answer softly. If I go, that's it. The thought is surprisingly painful.

The waiter arrives with our first course. How can I possibly eat? Holy Moses—he's ordered oysters on a bed of ice.

"I hope you like oysters." Christian's voice is soft.

"I've never had one." Ever.

"Really? Well." He reaches for one. "All you do is tip and swallow. I think you can manage that." He gazes at me, and I know what he's referring to. I blush scarlet. He grins at me, squirts some lemon juice onto his oyster, and then tips it into his mouth.

"Hmm, delicious. Tastes of the sea." He grins at me. "Go on," he encourages.

“So, I don’t chew it?”

“No, Anastasia, you don’t.” His eyes are alight with humor. He looks so young like this.

I bite my lip and his expression changes instantly. He looks sternly at me. I reach across and pick up my first-ever oyster. Okay … here goes nothing. I squirt some lemon juice on it and tip it up. It slips down my throat, all sea water, salt, the sharp tang of citrus, and fleshiness … ooh. I lick my lips, and he’s watching me intently, his eyes hooded.

“Well?”

“I’ll have another,” I say dryly.

“Good girl,” he says proudly.

“Did you choose these deliberately? Aren’t they known for their aphrodisiac qualities?”

“No, they are the first item on the menu. I don’t need an aphrodisiac near you. I think you know that, and I think you react the same way near me,” he says simply. “So where were we?” He glances at my e-mail as I reach for another oyster.

*He reacts the same way. I affect him … wow.*

“Obey me in all things. Yes, I want you to do that. I need you to do that. Think of it as role-play, Anastasia.”

“But I’m worried you’ll hurt me.”

“Hurt you how?”

“Physically.” *And emotionally.*

“Do you really think I would do that? Go beyond any limit you can’t take?”

“You’ve said you’ve hurt someone before.”

“Yes, I have. It was a long time ago.”

“How did you hurt her?”

“I suspended her from my playroom ceiling. In fact, that’s one of your questions. Suspension—that’s what the carabiners are for in the playroom. Rope play. One of the ropes was tied too tightly.”

I hold my hand up, begging him to stop.

“I don’t need to know any more. So you won’t suspend me then?”

“Not if you really don’t want to. You can make that a hard limit.”

“Okay.”

“So obeying, do you think you can manage that?”

He stares at me, his gaze intense. The seconds tick by.

“I could try,” I whisper.

“Good.” He smiles. “Now term. One month instead of three is no time at all, especially if you want a weekend away from me each month. I don’t think I’ll be

able to stay away from you for that length of time. I can barely manage it now." He pauses.

*He can't stay away from me? What?*

"How about one day over one weekend per month you get to yourself—but I get a midweek night that week?"

"Okay."

"And please, let's try it for three months. If it's not for you, then you can walk away anytime."

"Three months?" I'm feeling railroaded. I take another large sip of wine and treat myself to another oyster. I could learn to like these.

"The ownership thing, that's just terminology and goes back to the principle of obeying. It's to get you into the right frame of mind, to understand where I'm coming from. And I want you to know that as soon as you cross my threshold as my submissive, I will do what I like to you. You have to accept that and willingly. That's why you have to trust me. I will fuck you, any time, any way I want—anywhere I want. I will discipline you, because you will screw up. I will train you to please me.

"But I know you've not done this before. Initially, we'll take it slowly, and I will help you. We'll build up to various scenarios. I want you to trust me, but I know I have to earn your trust, and I will. The 'or otherwise'—again it's to help you get into the mindset; it means anything goes."

He's so passionate, mesmerizing. This is obviously his obsession, the way he is … I can't take my eyes off him. He really, really wants this. He stops talking and gazes at me.

"Still with me?" he whispers, his voice rich, warm, and seductive. He takes a sip of his wine, his penetrating stare holding mine.

The waiter comes to the door, and Christian subtly nods, permitting the waiter to clear our table.

"Would you like some more wine?"

"I have to drive."

"Some water then?"

I nod.

"Still or sparkling?"

"Sparkling, please."

The waiter leaves.

"You're very quiet," Christian whispers.

"You're very verbose."

He smiles.

"Discipline. There's a very fine line between pleasure and pain, Anastasia.

They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other. I can show you how pleasurable pain can be. You don't believe me now, but this is what I mean about trust. There will be pain, but nothing that you can't handle. Again, it comes down to trust. *Do* you trust me, Ana?"

*Ana!*

"Yes, I do." I respond spontaneously, not thinking … because it's true—I *do* trust him.

"Well, then," he looks relieved. "The rest of this stuff is just details."

"Important details."

"Okay, let's talk through those."

My head is swimming with all his words. I should have brought Kate's digital recorder so I can listen to this again later. There is so much information, so much to process. The waiter re-emerges with our entrees: black cod, asparagus, and crushed potatoes with a hollandaise sauce. I have never felt less like food.

"I hope you like fish," Christian says mildly.

I make a stab at my food and take a long drink of my sparkling water. I vehemently wish it was wine.

"The rules. Let's talk about them. The food is a deal breaker?"

"Yes."

"Can I modify to say that you will eat at least three meals a day?"

"No." I am so not backing down on this. No one is going to dictate to me what I eat. How I fuck, yes, but eat … no, no way.

He purses his lips. "I need to know that you're not hungry."

I frown. *Why?* "You'll have to trust me."

He gazes at me for a moment, and he relaxes.

"Touché, Miss Steele," he says quietly. "I concede the food and the sleep."

"Why can't I look at you?"

"That's a Dom/sub thing. You'll get used to it."

*Will I?*

"Why can't I touch you?"

"Because you can't."

His mouth sets in a mulish line.

"Is it because of Mrs. Robinson?"

He looks quizzically at me. "Why would you think that?" And immediately he understands. "You think she traumatized me?"

I nod.

"No, Anastasia. She's not the reason. Besides, Mrs. Robinson wouldn't take any of that shit from me."

*Oh … but I have to*. I pout.

“So nothing to do with her.”

“No. And I don’t want you touching yourself, either.”

*What?* Ah yes, the no masturbation clause.

“Out of curiosity … why?”

“Because I want all your pleasure.” His voice is husky but determined.

*Oh* … I have no answer for that. On one level it’s up there with “I want to bite that lip”; on another, it’s so selfish. I frown and take a bite of cod, trying to assess mentally what concessions I’ve gained. The food, the sleep. He’s going to take it slow, and we haven’t discussed soft limits. But I’m not sure I can face that over food.

“I’ve given you a great deal to think about, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go through the soft limits now, too?”

“Not over dinner.”

He smiles. “Squeamish?”

“Something like that.”

“You’ve not eaten very much.”

“I’ve had enough.”

“Three oysters, four bites of cod, and one asparagus stalk, no potatoes, no nuts, no olives, and you’ve not eaten all day. You said I could trust you.”

Jeez. He’s kept an inventory.

“Christian, please, it’s not every day I sit through conversations like this.”

“I need you fit and healthy, Anastasia.”

“I know.”

“And right now, I want to peel you out of that dress.”

I swallow. *Peel me out of Kate’s dress*. I feel the pull deep in my belly. Muscles that I’m now more acquainted with clench at his words. But I can’t have this. His most potent weapon, used against me again. He’s so good at sex—even I’ve figured this out.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I murmur quietly. “We haven’t had dessert.”

“You want dessert?” he snorts.

“Yes.”

“You could be dessert,” he murmurs suggestively.

“I’m not sure I’m sweet enough.”

“Anastasia, you’re deliciously sweet. I know.”

“Christian. You use sex as a weapon. It really isn’t fair,” I whisper, staring down at my hands, and then looking directly at him. He raises his eyebrows, surprised, and I see he’s considering my words. He strokes his chin thoughtfully.

“You’re right. I do. In life you use what you know, Anastasia. Doesn’t change how much I want you. Here. Now.”

How can he seduce me solely with his voice? I’m panting already—my heated blood rushing through my veins, my nerves tingling.

“I’d like to try something,” he breathes.

I frown. He’s just given me a shitload of ideas to process and now this.

“If you were my sub, you wouldn’t have to think about this. It would be easy.” His voice is soft, seductive. “All those decisions—all the wearying thought processes behind them. The ‘is this the right thing to do? Should this happen here? Can it happen now?’ You wouldn’t have to worry about any of that detail. That’s what I’d do as your Dom. And right now, I know you want me, Anastasia.”

My frown deepens. How can he tell?

“I can tell because …”

*Holy shit, he’s answering my unspoken question*. Is he psychic as well?

“… your body gives you away. You’re pressing your thighs together, you’re flushed, and your breathing has changed.”

*Okay, this is too much.*

“How do you know about my thighs?” My voice is low, disbelieving. They’re under the table, for heaven’s sake.

“I felt the tablecloth move, and it’s a calculated guess based on years of experience. I’m right, aren’t I?”

I flush and stare down at my hands. That’s what I’m hindered by in this game of seduction. He’s the only one who knows and understands the rules. I’m just too naïve and inexperienced. My only sphere of reference is Kate, and she doesn’t take any shit from men. My other references are all fictional: Elizabeth Bennet would be outraged, Jane Eyre too frightened, and Tess would succumb, just as I have.

“I haven’t finished my cod.”

“You’d prefer cold cod to me?”

My head jerks up to glare at him, and his eyes burn molten silver with compelling need.

“I thought you liked me to clear my plate.”

“Right now, Miss Steele, I couldn’t give a fuck about your food.”

“Christian. You just don’t fight fair.”

“I know. I never have.”

My inner goddess frowns at me. You can do this, she coaxes—play this sex god at his own game. *Can I?* Okay. What to do? My inexperience is an albatross around my neck. Picking up a spear of asparagus, I gaze at him and bite my lip.

Then very slowly put the tip of my cold asparagus in my mouth and suck it.

Christian's eyes widen infinitesimally, but I notice.

"Anastasia. What are you doing?"

I bite off the tip.

"Eating my asparagus."

Christian shifts in his seat.

"I think you're toying with me, Miss Steele."

I feign innocence. "I'm just finishing my food, Mr. Grey."

The waiter chooses this moment to knock and, unbidden, enter. He glances briefly at Christian, who frowns at him but then nods, so the waiter clears our plates. The waiter's arrival has broken the spell. And I grasp this precious moment of clarity. I have to go. Our meeting will only end one way if I stay, and I need some boundaries after such an intense conversation. As much as my body craves his touch, my mind is rebelling. I need some distance to think about all he's said. I still haven't made a decision, and his sexual allure and prowess doesn't make it any easier.

"Would you like some dessert?" Christian asks, ever the gentleman, but his eyes still blaze.

"No thank you. I think I should go." I stare down at my hands.

"Go?" He can't hide his surprise.

The waiter leaves hastily.

"Yes." It's the right decision. If I stay here, in this room with him, he will fuck me. I stand, purposefully. "We both have the graduation ceremony tomorrow."

Christian stands automatically, revealing years of ingrained civility.

"I don't want you to go."

"Please … I have to."

"Why?"

"Because you've given me so much to consider … and I need some distance."

"I could make you stay," he threatens.

"Yes, you could easily, but I don't want you to."

He runs his hand through his hair, regarding me carefully.

"You know, when you fell into my office to interview me, you were all 'yes, sir,' 'no, sir.' I thought you were a natural-born submissive. But quite frankly, Anastasia, I'm not sure you have a submissive bone in your delectable body." He moves slowly toward me as his speaks, his voice tense.

"You may be right," I breathe.

"I want the chance to explore the possibility that you do," he murmurs, staring down at me. He reaches up and caresses my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip. "I don't know any other way, Anastasia. This is who I am."

“I know.”

He leans down to kiss me but pauses before his lips touch mine, his eyes searching mine, wanting, asking permission. I raise my lips to his, and he kisses me, and because I don’t know if I’ll ever kiss him again, I let go—my hands moving of their own accord and twisting into his hair, pulling him to me, my mouth opening, my tongue stroking his. His hand grasps the nape of my neck as he deepens the kiss, responding to my ardor. His other hand slides down my back and flattens at the base of my spine as he pushes me against his body.

“I can’t persuade you to stay?” he breathes between kisses.

“No.”

“Spend the night with me.”

“And not touch you? No.”

He groans.

“You impossible girl.” He pulls back, gazing down at me. “Why do I think you’re telling me good-bye?”

“Because I’m leaving now.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“Christian, I have to think about this. I don’t know if I can have the kind of relationship you want.”

He closes his eyes and presses his forehead against mine, giving us both the opportunity to slow our breathing. After a moment, he kisses my forehead, inhales deeply, his nose in my hair, and then he releases me, stepping back.

“As you wish, Miss Steele,” he says, his face impassive. “I’ll escort you to the lobby.” He holds out his hand. Leaning down, I grab my purse and place my hand in his. *Holy crap, this could be it*. I follow him meekly down the grand stairs and into the lobby, my scalp prickling, my blood pumping. This could be the last good-bye if I decide to say no. My heart contracts painfully in my chest. What a turnaround. What a difference a moment of clarity can make to a girl.

“Do you have your valet ticket?”

I fish into my clutch purse and hand him the ticket, which he gives to the doorman. I peek up at him as we stand waiting.

“Thank you for dinner,” I murmur.

“It’s a pleasure as always, Miss Steele,” he says politely, though he looks deep in thought, completely distracted.

As I peer up at him, I commit his beautiful profile to memory. The idea that I might not see him again haunts me, unwelcome and too painful to contemplate. He turns suddenly, staring down at me, his expression intense.

“You’re moving this weekend to Seattle. If you make the right decision, can I see you on Sunday?” He sounds hesitant.

“We’ll see. Maybe,” I breathe. Momentarily, he looks relieved, and then he frowns.

“It’s cooler now, don’t you have a jacket?”

“No.”

He shakes his head in irritation and takes off his jacket.

“Here. I don’t want you catching cold.”

I blink up at him as he holds it open, and as I hold my arms out behind me, I’m reminded of the time in his office when he slipped my coat onto my shoulders—the first time I met him—and the effect he had on me then. Nothing’s changed; in fact, it’s more intense. His jacket is warm, far too big, and it smells of him. … delicious.

My car pulls up outside. Christian’s mouth drops open.

“That’s what you drive?” He’s appalled. Taking my hand, he leads me outside. The valet jumps out and hands me my keys, and Christian coolly palms him some money.

“Is this roadworthy?” He’s glaring at me now.

“Yes.”

“Will it make it to Seattle?”

“Yes. She will.”

“Safely?”

“Yes,” I snap, exasperated. “Okay, she’s old. But she’s mine, and she’s roadworthy. My stepdad bought it for me.”

“Oh, Anastasia, I think we can do better than this.”

“What do you mean?” Realization dawns. “You are *not* buying me a car.”

He glowers at me, his jaw tense.

“We’ll see,” he says tightly.

He grimaces as he opens the driver’s-side door and helps me in. I take my shoes off and roll down the window. He’s gazing at me, his expression unfathomable, eyes dark.

“Drive safely,” he says quietly.

“Good-bye, Christian.” My voice is hoarse from unbidden, unshed tears—*jeez, I’m not going to cry*. I give him a small smile.

As I drive away, my chest constricts, my tears start to fall, and I choke back a sob. Soon tears are streaming down my face, and I really don’t understand why I’m crying. I was holding my own. He explained everything. He was clear. He wants me, but the truth is I need more. I need him to want me like I want and need him, and deep down I know that’s not possible. I am just overwhelmed.

I don’t even know how to categorize him. If I do this thing … will he be my boyfriend? Will I be able to introduce him to my friends? Go out to bars, the

cinema, bowling even, with him? The truth is I don't think I will. He won't let me touch him and he won't let me sleep with him. I know I've not had these things in my past, but I want them in my future. And that's not the future he envisages.

What if I do say yes, and in three months' time he says no, he's had enough of trying to mold me into something I'm not? How will I feel? I'll have emotionally invested three months, doing things that I'm not sure I want to do. And if he then says no, agreement over, how could I cope with that level of rejection? Perhaps it's best to back away now with what self-esteem I have reasonably intact.

But the thought of not seeing him again is agonizing. How has he gotten under my skin so quickly? It can't just be the sex … can it? I dash the tears from my eyes. I don't want to examine my feelings for him. I'm frightened what I'll uncover if I do. *What am I going to do?*

I park outside our duplex. No lights on. Kate must be out. I'm relieved. I don't want her to catch me crying again. As I undress, I wake up the mean machine and sitting in my inbox is a message from Christian.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Tonight

**Date**: May 25 2011 22:01

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I don't understand why you ran this evening. I sincerely hope I answered all your questions to your satisfaction. I know I have given you a great deal to contemplate, and I fervently hope that you will give my proposal your serious consideration. I really want to make this work. We will take it slow.

Trust me.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His e-mail makes me weep more. I am not a merger. I am not an acquisition. Reading this, I might as well be. I don't reply. I just don't know what to say to him. I fumble into my PJs and, wrapping his jacket around me, I climb into bed. As I lie staring into the darkness, I think of all the times he warned me to stay away.

*Anastasia, you should steer clear of me.*

*I'm not the man for you.*

*I don't do the girlfriend thing.*

*I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy.*

*I don't make love.*

*This is all I know.*

And as I weep into my pillow silently, it's this last idea I cling to. This is all I know, too. Perhaps together we can chart a new course.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Christian is standing over me grasping a plaited leather riding crop. He's wearing old, faded, ripped Levis and that's all. He flicks the crop slowly into his palm as he gazes down at me. He's smiling, triumphant. I cannot move. I am naked and shackled, spread-eagled on a large four-poster bed. Reaching forward, he trails the tip of the crop from my forehead down the length of my nose, so I can smell the leather, and over my parted, panting lips. He pushes the tip into my mouth so I can taste the smooth, rich leather.

"Suck," he commands, his voice soft. My mouth closes over the tip as I obey.

"Enough," he snaps.

I'm panting once more as he tugs the crop out of my mouth, trails it down and under my chin, on down my neck to the hollow at the base of my throat. He swirls it slowly there and then continues to drag the tip down my body, along my sternum, between my breasts, over my torso, down to my navel. I'm panting, squirming, pulling against my restraints that are biting into my wrists and my ankles. He swirls the tip around my navel then continues to trail the leather tip south, through my pubic hair to my clitoris. He flicks the crop and it hits my sweet spot with a sharp slap, and I come, gloriously, shouting my release.

Abruptly, I wake, gasping for breath, covered in sweat and feeling the aftershocks of my orgasm. Holy hell. I'm completely disorientated. *What the hell just happened?* I'm in my bedroom alone. How? Why? I sit bolt upright, shocked … wow. It's morning. I glance at my alarm clock—eight o'clock. I put my head in my hands. I didn't know I could dream sex. Was it something I ate? Perhaps the oysters and my Internet research manifesting itself in my first wet dream. It's bewildering. I had no idea that I could orgasm in my sleep.

Kate is skipping around the kitchen when I stagger in.

"Ana, are you okay? You look odd. Is that Christian's jacket you're wearing?"

"I'm fine." Damn, should have checked in the mirror. I avoid her piercing green eyes. I'm still reeling from my morning's event. "Yes, this is Christian's jacket."

She frowns. "Did you sleep?"

"Not very well."

I head for the kettle. I need tea.

“How was dinner?”

*So it begins*.

“We had oysters. Followed by cod, so I’d say it was fishy.”

“Ugh … I hate oysters, and I don’t want to know about the food. How was Christian? What did you talk about?”

“He was attentive.” I pause. What can I say? His HIV status is clear, he’s heavily into role-play, wants me to obey his every command, he hurt someone he tied to his playroom ceiling, and he wanted to fuck me in the private dining room. Would that be a good summary? I try desperately to remember something from my encounter with Christian that I can discuss with Kate.

“He doesn’t approve of Wanda.”

“Who does, Ana? That’s old news. Why are you being so coy? Give it up, girlfriend.”

“Oh, Kate, we talked about lots things. You know—how fussy he is about food. Incidentally, he liked your dress.” The kettle has boiled, so I make myself some tea. “Do you want tea? Would you like me to hear your speech for today?”

“Yes, please. I worked on it last night over at Becca’s. I’ll go fetch it. And yes, I’d love some tea.” Kate races out of the kitchen.

Phew, Katherine Kavanagh sidetracked. I slice a bagel and pop it into the toaster. I flush, remembering my vivid dream. What on Earth was that about?

Last night I found it hard to sleep. My head was buzzing with various options. I am so confused. Christian’s idea of a relationship is more like a job offer. It has set hours, a job description, and a rather harsh grievance procedure. It’s not how I envisaged my first romance—but, of course, Christian doesn’t do romance. If I tell him I want more, he may say no … and I could jeopardize what he has offered. And this is what concerns me most, because I don’t want to lose him. But I’m not sure I have the stomach to be his submissive—deep down, it’s the canes and whips that put me off. I’m a physical coward, and I will go a long way to avoid pain. I think of my dream … *is that what it would be like?* My inner goddess jumps up and down with cheerleading pom-poms shouting yes at me.

Kate comes back into the kitchen with her laptop. I concentrate on my bagel and listen patiently as she runs through her valedictorian speech.

I AM DRESSED AND ready when Ray arrives. I open the front door, and he’s standing on the porch in his ill-fitting suit. A warm surge of gratitude and love for this uncomplicated man streaks through me, and I throw my arms around him in an uncharacteristic display of affection. He’s taken aback, bemused.

“Hey, Annie, I’m pleased to see you, too,” he mutters as he hugs me. Setting me back down, his hands on my shoulders, he looks me up and down, his brow

furrowed. “You okay, kid?”

“Of course, Dad. Can’t a girl be pleased to see her old man?”

He smiles, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners, and follows me into the living room.

“You look good,” he says.

“This is Kate’s dress.” I glance down at the gray chiffon halter-neck dress.

He frowns.

“Where is Kate?”

“She’s gone to campus. She’s giving a speech, so she has to be early.”

“Should we head on over?”

“Dad, we have half an hour. Would you like some tea? And you can tell me how everyone in Montesano is getting along. How was the drive down?”

RAY PULLS HIS CAR into the campus parking lot, and we follow the stream of humanity dotted with ubiquitous black and red gowns heading toward the gym.

“Good luck, Annie. You seem awfully nervous. Do you have to do anything?”

Holy crap … why has Ray picked today to be observant?

“No, Dad. It’s a big day.” *And I’m going to see him*.

“Yeah, my baby girl has gotten a degree. I’m proud of you, Annie.”

“Aw … thanks, Dad.” Oh, I love this man.

The gym is crowded. Ray has gone to sit with the other parents and well-wishers in the tiered seating, while I make my way to my seat. I’m wearing my black gown and my cap, and I feel protected by them, anonymous. There is no one on the stage yet, but I can’t seem to steady my nerves. My heart is pounding, and my breathing is shallow. He’s here, somewhere. I wonder if Kate is talking to him, interrogating him maybe. I make my way to my seat amongst fellow students whose surnames also begin with *S*. I am in the second row, affording me yet more anonymity. I glance behind me and spot Ray high up in the bleachers. I give him a wave. He self-consciously gives me a half-wave, half-salute back. I sit and wait.

The auditorium fills quickly, and the buzz of excited voices gets louder and louder. The row of seats in front fills. On either side of me, I am joined by two girls whom I don’t know from a different department. They’re obviously close friends and talk across me excitedly.

At eleven precisely, the chancellor appears from behind the stage, followed by the three vice chancellors and then the senior professors, all decked out in their black and red regalia. We stand and applaud our teaching staff. Some professors nod and wave, others look bored. Professor Collins, my tutor and my favorite teacher, looks like he’s just fallen out of bed, as usual. Last on to the stage are

Kate and Christian. Christian stands out in his bespoke gray suit, copper highlights glinting in his hair under the auditorium lights. He looks so serious and self-contained. As he sits, he undoes his single-breasted jacket, and I glimpse his tie. *Holy shit … that tie!* I rub my wrists reflexively. I cannot take my eyes off him. He's wearing that tie, on purpose no doubt. My mouth presses into a hard line. The audience sits down and the applause ceases.

"Look at him!" one of the girls beside me hisses enthusiastically to her friend.

"He's hot."

I stiffen. I'm sure they're not talking about Professor Collins.

"Must be Christian Grey."

"Is he single?"

I bristle. "I don't think so," I murmur.

"Oh." Both girls look at me in surprise.

"I think he's gay," I mutter.

"What a shame," one of the girls groans.

As the chancellor gets to his feet and kicks off the proceedings with his speech, I watch Christian subtly scanning the hall. I sink into my seat, hunching my shoulders, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I fail miserably as a second later his eyes find mine. He stares at me, his face impassive, completely inscrutable. I squirm uncomfortably, hypnotized by his glare as a slow flush spreads across my face. Unbidden, I recall my dream from this morning, and the muscles in my belly do the delectable clench thing. I inhale sharply. The shadow of a smile crosses his lips, but it's fleeting. He briefly closes his eyes and, on opening them, resumes his indifferent expression. Following a swift glance up at the chancellor, he stares ahead, focusing on the WSUV emblem hung above the entrance. He doesn't turn his eyes toward me again. The chancellor drones on, and Christian still doesn't look at me. He just stares fixedly ahead.

Why won't he look at me? Perhaps he's changed his mind? A wave of unease washes over me. Perhaps walking out on him last night was the end for him, too. He's bored of waiting for me to make up my mind. Oh no, I could have completely blown it. I remember his e-mail last night. Maybe he's mad that I haven't replied.

Suddenly, the room erupts into applause as Miss Katherine Kavanagh has taken the stage. The chancellor sits, and Kate tosses her lovely long hair behind her as she places her papers on the lectern. She takes her time, not intimidated by a thousand people staring at her. She smiles when she's ready, looks up at the captivated throng, and launches eloquently into her speech. She's composed and funny, the girls beside me erupt on cue at her first joke. *Oh, Katherine*

*Kavanagh, you can deliver a good line*. I am so proud of her at that moment, my errant thoughts of Christian pushed to one side. Even though I have heard her speech before, I listen carefully. She commands the room and takes her audience with her.

Her theme is "What Next After College?" Oh, what next indeed. Christian is watching Kate, his eyebrows raised—in surprise, I think. Yes, it could have been Kate who went to interview him. And it could have been Kate who he was now making indecent proposals to. Beautiful Kate and beautiful Christian, together. I could be like the two girls beside me, admiring him from afar. I know Kate wouldn't have given him the time of day. What did she call him the other day? Creepy. The thought of a confrontation between Kate and Christian makes me uncomfortable. I have to say I don't know which of them I would put my money on.

Kate concludes her speech with a flourish, and spontaneously everyone stands, applauding and cheering, her first standing ovation. I beam at her and cheer, and she grins back at me. *Good job, Kate*. She sits, as does the audience, and the chancellor rises and introduces Christian … *Holy shit*, Christian's going to give a speech. The chancellor touches briefly on Christian's achievements: CEO of his own extraordinarily successful company, a real self-made man.

"… and also a major benefactor to our university. Please welcome Mr. Christian Grey."

The chancellor pumps Christian's hand, and there is a swell of polite applause. My heart's in my throat. He approaches the lectern and surveys the hall. He looks so confident standing in front of us all, as Kate did before him. The two girls beside me lean in, enraptured. In fact, I think most of the female members of the audience inch closer and a few of the men. He begins, his voice soft, measured, and mesmerizing.

"I'm profoundly grateful and touched by the great compliment accorded to me by the authorities of WSU today. It offers me a rare opportunity to talk about the impressive work of the environmental science department here at the university. Our aim is to develop viable and ecologically sustainable methods of farming for third world countries; our ultimate goal is to help eradicate hunger and poverty across the globe. Over a billion people, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, live in abject poverty. Agricultural dysfunction is rife within these parts of the world, and the result is ecological and social destruction. I have known what it's like to be profoundly hungry. This is a very personal journey for me …"

My jaw falls to the floor. *What?* Christian was hungry once. *Holy crap*. Well, that explains a great deal. And I recall the interview; he really *does* want to feed

the world. I desperately rack my brains to remember what Kate had written in her article. Adopted at age four, I think. I can't imagine that Grace starved him, so it must have been before then, as a little boy. I swallow, my heart constricting at the thought of a hungry, gray-eyed toddler. *Oh no*. What kind of life did he have before the Greys got hold of him and rescued him?

I'm seized by a sense of raw outrage. Poor, fucked-up, kinky, philanthropic Christian—though I'm sure he wouldn't see himself this way and would repel any thoughts of sympathy or pity. Abruptly, everyone bursts into applause and stands. I follow, though I haven't heard half his speech. He's doing all of these good works, running a huge company, and chasing me at the same time. It's overwhelming. I remember the brief snippets of conversations he's had about Darfur … it all falls into place. *Food*.

He smiles briefly at the warm applause—even Kate is clapping—then he resumes his seat. He doesn't look my way, and I'm off-kilter trying to assimilate this new information about him.

One of the vice chancellors rises, and we begin the long, tedious process of collecting our degrees. There are more than four hundred to be given out, and it takes just over an hour before I hear my name. I make my way up to the stage between the two giggling girls. Christian gazes down at me, his look warm but guarded.

"Congratulations, Miss Steele," he says as he shakes my hand, squeezing it gently. I feel the charge of his flesh on mine. "Do you have a problem with your laptop?"

I frown as he hands me my degree.

"No."

"Then you *are* ignoring my e-mails?"

"I only saw the mergers and acquisitions one."

He looks quizzically at me.

"Later," he says, and I have to move on because I'm holding up the line.

I go back to my seat. E-mails? He must have sent another. What did it say?

The ceremony takes another hour to conclude. It's interminable. Finally, the chancellor leads the faculty members off the stage to yet more rousing applause, preceded by Christian and Kate. Christian does not glance at me, even though I'm willing him to do it. My inner goddess is not pleased.

As I stand and wait for our row to disperse, Kate calls to me. She's heading my way from behind the stage.

"Christian wants to talk to you," she shouts. The two girls who are now standing beside me turn and gape at me.

"He's sent me out here," she continues.

*Oh …*

"Your speech was great, Kate."

"It was, wasn't it?" She beams. "Are you coming? He can be very insistent." She rolls her eyes, and I grin.

"You have no idea. I can't leave Ray for long." I glance up at Ray and hold my fingers up indicating five minutes. He nods, giving me an okay sign, and I follow Kate into the corridor behind the stage. Christian is talking to the chancellor and two of the teaching staff. He looks up when he sees me.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," I hear him murmur. He comes toward me and smiles briefly at Kate.

"Thank you," he says, and before she can reply, he takes my elbow and steers me into what looks like a men's locker room. He checks to see if it's empty, and then he locks the door.

*Holy shit, what does he have in mind?* I blink up at him as he turns on me.

"Why haven't you e-mailed me? Or texted me back?" He glares. I'm nonplussed.

"I haven't looked at my computer today, or my phone." Crap, has he been trying to call? I try my distraction technique that's so effective on Kate. "That was a great speech."

"Thank you."

"Explains your food issues to me."

He runs a hand through his hair, exasperated.

"Anastasia, I don't want to go there at the moment." He closes his eyes, looking pained. "I've been worried about you."

"Worried, why?"

"Because you went home in that deathtrap you call a car."

"What? It's not a deathtrap. It's fine. José regularly services it for me."

"José, the photographer?" Christian's eyes narrow, his face frosting. *Oh, crap*.

"Yes, the Beetle used to belong to his mother."

"Yes, and probably her mother and her mother before her. It's not safe."

"I've been driving it for over three years. I'm sorry you were worried. Why didn't you call?" Jeez, he's completely overreacting.

He takes a deep breath.

"Anastasia, I need an answer from you. This waiting around is driving me crazy."

"Christian, I … look, I've left my stepdad on his own."

"Tomorrow. I want an answer by tomorrow."

"Okay. Tomorrow, I'll tell you then."

He steps back, regarding me coolly, and his shoulders relax.

“Are you staying for drinks?” he asks.

“I don’t know what Ray wants to do.”

“Your stepfather? I’d like to meet him.”

*Oh no … why?*

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Christian unlocks the door, his mouth in a grim line.

“Are you ashamed of me?”

“No!” It’s my turn to sound exasperated. “Introduce you to my dad as what? ‘This is the man who deflowered me and wants us to start a BDSM relationship’? You’re not wearing running shoes.”

Christian glares down at me, and then his lips twitch up in a smile. And in spite of the fact I’m mad at him, my face is unwillingly pulled into an answering grin.

“Just so you know, I can run quite fast. Just tell him I’m your friend, Anastasia.”

He opens the door, and I head out. My mind is whirling. The chancellor, the three vice chancellors, four professors, and Kate stare at me as I walk hastily past them. *Crap*. Leaving Christian with the faculty, I go in search of Ray.

*Tell him I’m your friend*.

*Friend with benefits*, my subconscious scowls. I know, I know. I shake the unpleasant thought away. How will I introduce him to Ray? The hall is still at least half full, and Ray has not moved from his spot. He sees me, waves, and makes his way down.

“Hey, Annie. Congratulations.” He puts his arm around me.

“Would you like to come and have a drink in the marquee?”

“Sure. It’s your day. Lead the way.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to.” *Please say no …*

“Annie, I’ve just sat for two and half hours listening to all kinds of jabbering. I need a drink.”

I put my arm through his, and we stroll out with the throng into the warmth of the early afternoon. We pass the line for the official photographer.

“Oh, that reminds me.” Ray drags a digital camera out of his pocket. “One for the album, Annie.” I roll my eyes at him as he snaps a picture of me.

“Can I take the cap and gown off now? I feel kind of dorky.”

*You look kinda dorky …* My subconscious is at her snarky best. *So are you going to introduce Ray to the man you’re fucking?* She is glaring at me over her wing-shaped spectacles. *He’d be so proud*. God, I hate her sometimes.

The marquee is immense and crowded—students, parents, teachers, and friends, all chattering happily. Ray hands me a glass of champagne, or cheap

fizzy wine, I suspect. It's not chilled, and it tastes sweet. My thoughts turn to Christian … *he won't like this*.

"Ana!" I turn, and Ethan Kavanagh scoops me into his arms. He twirls me around, without spilling my wine—some feat.

"Congratulations!" He beams down at me, green eyes twinkling.

What a surprise. His dirty blond hair is tousled and sexy. He's as beautiful as Kate. The family resemblance is striking.

"Wow—Ethan! How lovely to see you. Dad, this is Ethan, Kate's brother. Ethan, this is my dad, Ray Steele." They shake hands, my dad coolly assessing Mr. Kavanagh.

"When did you get back from Europe?" I ask.

"I've been back for a week, but I wanted to surprise my little sister," he says conspiratorially.

"That's so sweet." I grin.

"She is valedictorian, couldn't miss that." He looks immensely proud of his sister.

"She gave a great speech."

"That she did," Ray agrees.

Ethan has his arm around my waist when I look up into the frosty gray eyes of Christian Grey. Kate is beside him.

"Hello, Ray." Kate kisses Ray on both cheeks, making him blush. "Have you met Ana's boyfriend? Christian Grey."

*Holy shit … Kate! Fuck!* All the blood drains from my face.

"Mr. Steele, it's a pleasure to meet you," Christian says smoothly, warmly, completely unflustered by Kate's introduction. He holds out his hand, which Ray, all credit to him, takes, not showing a hint of the drop-dead surprise he's just had thrust upon him.

*Thank you very much, Katherine Kavanagh*, I fume. I think my subconscious has fainted.

"Mr. Grey," Ray murmurs, his expression indecipherable except perhaps for the slight widening of his big brown eyes. They slide over to my face with a when-were-you-going-to-give-me-this-news look. I bite my lip.

"And this is my brother, Ethan Kavanagh," says Kate to Christian.

Christian turns his arctic glare on Ethan, who still has one arm around me.

"Mr. Kavanagh."

They shake hands. Christian holds his hand out to me.

"Ana, baby," he murmurs, and I nearly expire at the endearment.

I walk out of Ethan's grasp, while Christian smiles icily at him, and I take my place at his side. Kate grins at me. She knows exactly what she's doing, the

vixen!

“Ethan, Mom and Dad wanted a word.” Kate drags Ethan away.

“So how long have you kids known each other?” Ray looks impassively from Christian to me.

The power of speech has deserted me. I want the ground to swallow me up. Christian puts his arm around me, his thumb skimming my naked back in a caress, before his hand clasps my shoulder.

“Couple of weeks or so now,” he says smoothly. “We met when Anastasia came to interview me for the student newspaper.”

“Didn’t know you worked on the student newspaper, Ana.” Ray’s voice is a quiet admonishment, revealing his irritation. *Shit.*

“Kate was ill,” I murmur. It’s all I can manage.

“Fine speech you gave, Mr. Grey.”

“Thank you, sir. I understand that you’re a keen fisherman.”

Ray raises his eyebrows and smiles—a rare, genuine, bona fide Ray Steele smile—and off they go, talking fish. In fact, I soon feel surplus to requirements. He’s charming the pants off my dad … *like he did you,* my subconscious snaps at me. His power knows no bounds. I excuse myself to go and find Kate.

She’s talking to her parents, who are delightful as ever and greet me warmly. We exchange brief pleasantries, mostly about their up and coming vacation to Barbados and about our move.

“Kate, how could you out me to Ray?” I hiss at the first opportunity we won’t be overheard.

“Because I knew you never would, and I want to help with Christian’s commitment issues.” Kate smiles at me sweetly.

I scowl. *It’s me that won’t commit to him, silly!*

“He seems très cool about it, Ana. Don’t sweat it. Look at him now—Christian cannot take his eyes off you.” I glance up, and both Ray and Christian are looking at me. “He’s been watching you like a hawk.”

“I’d better go rescue Ray, or Christian. I don’t know which. You haven’t heard the last of this, Katherine Kavanagh!” I glare at her.

“Ana, I did you a favor,” she calls after me.

“Hi.” I smile at both of them on my return.

They seem okay. Christian is enjoying some private joke, and my dad looks unbelievably relaxed given he’s in a social situation. *What have they been discussing apart from fish?*

“Ana, where are the restrooms?”

“Back out front of the marquee and to the left.”

“See you in a moment. You kids enjoy yourselves.”

Ray heads out. I glance nervously up at Christian. We pause briefly as a photographer takes a picture of both of us.

"Thank you, Mr. Grey." The photographer scurries off. I blink from the flash.

"So you've charmed my father as well?"

"As well?" Christian's eyes burn and he raises a questioning eyebrow. I flush. He lifts his hand and traces my cheek with his fingers.

"Oh, I wish I knew what you were thinking, Anastasia," he whispers darkly, cupping my chin and raising my head so that we gaze intently into each other's eyes.

My breath hitches. How can he have this effect on me, even in this crowded tent?

"Right now, I'm thinking, *Nice tie*," I breathe.

He chuckles. "It's recently become my favorite."

I blush scarlet.

"You look lovely, Anastasia. This halter-neck dress suits you, and I get to stroke your back, feel your beautiful skin."

Suddenly, it's like we're on our own in the room. Just the two of us. My whole body has come alive, every nerve ending singing softly, that electricity pulling me to him, charging between us.

"You know it's going to be good, don't you, baby?" he whispers. I close my eyes as my insides uncoil and melt.

"But I want more," I whisper.

"More?" he looks down at me puzzled, his eyes darkening. I nod and swallow. *Now he knows*.

"More," he says again softly. Testing the word—a small, simple word, but so full of promise. His thumb traces my lower lip. "You want hearts and flowers."

I nod again. He blinks down at me, and I watch his internal struggle played out in his eyes.

"Anastasia." His voice is soft. "It's not something I know."

"Me, either."

He smiles slightly.

"You don't know much," he murmurs.

"You know all the wrong things."

"Wrong? Not to me." He shakes his head. He looks so sincere. "Try it," he whispers. A challenge, daring me, and he cocks his head to one side and smiles his crooked, dazzling smile.

I gasp, and I'm Eve in the Garden of Eden, and he's the serpent, and I cannot resist.

"Okay," I whisper.

"What?" I have his full, undivided attention. I swallow.

"Okay. I'll try."

"You're agreeing?" His disbelief is evident.

"Subject to the soft limits, yes. I'll try." My voice is so small. Christian closes his eyes and pulls me into an embrace.

"Jesus, Ana, you're so unexpected. You take my breath away."

He steps back, and suddenly Ray's returned, and the volume in the marquee gradually rises and fills my ears. We are not alone. *Holy shit, I've just agreed to be his sub*. Christian smiles at Ray and his eyes are dancing with joy.

"Annie, should we get some lunch?"

"Okay." I blink up at Ray, trying to find my equilibrium. *What have you done?* my subconscious screams at me. My inner goddess is doing backflips in a routine worthy of a Russian Olympic gymnast.

"Would you like to join us, Christian?" Ray asks.

*Christian!* I stare up at him, imploring him to refuse. I need space to think … what the fuck have I done?

"Thank you, Mr. Steele, but I have plans. It's been great to meet you, sir."

"Likewise," Ray responds. "Look after my baby girl."

"Oh, I fully intend to."

They shake hands. I feel sick. Ray has no idea how Christian intends to look after me. Christian takes my hand and brings it to his lips and kisses my knuckles tenderly, his scorching eyes intent on mine.

"Later, Miss Steele," he breathes, his voice full of promise.

My belly curls at the thought. *Hang on … later?*

Ray takes my elbow and leads me toward the entrance to the tent.

"Seems a solid young man. Well off, too. You could do a lot worse, Annie. Though why I had to hear about him from Katherine …" he scolds.

I shrug apologetically.

"Well, any man who likes and knows his fly-fishing is okay with me."

Holy cow—Ray approves. If only he knew.

RAY DROPS ME BACK at the house at dusk.

"Call your mom," he says.

"I will. Thanks for coming, Dad."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world, Annie. You make me so proud."

*Oh no*. I'm not going to get emotional. A huge lump forms in my throat, and I hug him, hard. He puts his arms around me, bemused, and I can't help it—tears pool in my eyes.

"Hey, Annie, sweetheart," Ray croons. "Big old day … eh? Want me to come

in and make you some tea?”

I laugh, in spite of my tears. Tea is always the answer, according to Ray. I remember my mother complaining about him, saying that when it came to tea and sympathy, he was always good at the tea, not so hot on the sympathy.

“No, Dad, I’m good. It’s been so great to see you. I’ll visit real soon once I’m settled in Seattle.”

“Good luck with the interviews. Let me know how they go.”

“Sure thing, Dad.”

“Love you, Annie.”

“Love you, too, Dad.”

He smiles, his brown eyes warm, glowing, and he climbs back into his car. I wave him off as he drives into the dusk, and I wander listlessly back into the apartment.

First thing I do is check my cell phone. It needs recharging, so I have to hunt down the charger and plug it in before I can collect my messages. Four missed calls, one voice message, and two texts. Three missed calls from Christian … no messages. One missed call from José and a voice mail from him wishing me all the best for graduation.

I open the texts.

*Are you home safe?*
*Call me*

They are both from Christian. Why didn’t he call the house? I head into my bedroom and fire up the mean machine.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Tonight

**Date**: May 25 2011 23:58

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I hope you made it home in that car of yours.

Let me know if you’re okay.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Jeez … why is he so worried about my Beetle? It has given me three years of loyal service, and José has always been on hand to maintain it for me. Christian’s next e-mail is from today.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Soft Limits

**Date**: May 26 2011 17:22

**To**: Anastasia Steele

What can I say that I haven't already?

Happy to talk these through anytime.

You looked beautiful today.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I want to see him. I hit "reply."

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Soft Limits

**Date**: May 26 2011 19:23

**To**: Christian Grey

I can come over this evening to discuss if you'd like.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Soft Limits

**Date**: May 26 2011 19:27

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I'll come to you. I meant it when I said I wasn't happy about you driving that car.

I'll be with you shortly.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Holy crap* … he's coming over now. I have to get one thing ready for him—the first edition Thomas Hardy books are still on the shelves in the living room. I cannot keep them. I wrap them in brown paper, and I scrawl on the wrapping a direct quote from Tess from the book:

*"I agree to the conditions, Angel; because you know best what my punishment ought to be; only—only—don't make it more than I can bear!"*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hi.” I feel unbearably shy when I open the door. Christian is standing on the porch in his jeans and leather jacket. “Hi,” he says, and his face lights up with his radiant smile. I take a moment to admire the pretty. Oh my, he’s hot in leather.

“Come in.”

“If I may,” he says, amused. He holds up a bottle of champagne as he walks in. “I thought we’d celebrate your graduation. Nothing beats a good Bollinger.”

“Interesting choice of words,” I comment dryly.

He grins. “Oh, I like your ready wit, Anastasia.”

“We only have teacups. We’ve packed all the glasses.”

“Teacups? Sounds good to me.”

I head into the kitchen. Nervous, butterflies flooding my stomach, it’s like having a panther or mountain lion all unpredictable and predatory in my living room.

“Do you want saucers as well?”

“Teacups will be fine, Anastasia,” Christian calls distractedly from the living room.

When I return, he’s staring at the brown parcel of books. I place the cups on the table.

“That’s for you,” I murmur anxiously.

*Crap … this is probably going to be a fight.*

“Hmm, I figured as much. Very apt quote.” His long index finger absently traces the writing. “I thought I was d’Urberville, not Angel. You decided on the debasement.” He gives me a brief wolfish smile. “Trust you to find something that resonates so appropriately.”

“It’s also a plea,” I whisper. *Why am I so nervous?* My mouth is dry.

“A plea? For me to go easy on you?”

I nod.

“I bought these for you,” he says quietly, his gaze impassive. “I’ll go easier on you if you accept them.”

I swallow convulsively.

“Christian, I can’t accept them, they’re just too much.”

“You see, this is what I was talking about, you defying me. I want you to have them, and that’s the end of the discussion. It’s very simple. You don’t have to think about this. As a submissive you would just be grateful for them. You just accept what I buy you because it pleases me for you to do so.”

“I wasn’t a submissive when you bought them for me,” I whisper.

“No … but you’ve agreed, Anastasia.” His eyes turn wary.

I sigh. I am not going to win this, so over to plan B.

“So they are mine to do with as I wish?”

He eyes me suspiciously but concedes.

“Yes.”

“In that case, I’d like to give them to a charity, one working in Darfur since that seems to be close to your heart. They can auction them.”

“If that’s what you want to do.” His mouth sets into a hard line. He’s disappointed.

I flush.

“I’ll think about it,” I murmur. I don’t want to disappoint him, and his words come back to me. *I want you to want to please me*.

“Don’t think, Anastasia. Not about this.” His tone is quiet and serious.

How can I not think? *You can pretend to be a car, like his other possessions*. My subconscious makes an unwelcome vitriolic return. I ignore her. Oh, can’t we rewind? The atmosphere between us is now tense. I don’t know what to do. I stare down at my fingers. How do I retrieve this situation?

He puts the champagne bottle on the table and stands in front of me. Putting his hand under my chin, he tilts my head up. He gazes down at me, his expression grave.

“I will buy you lots of things, Anastasia. Get used to it. I can afford it. I’m a very wealthy man.” He leans down and plants a swift, chaste kiss on my lips. “Please.” He releases me.

*Ho*, my subconscious mouths at me.

“It makes me feel cheap,” I murmur.

Christian runs his hand through his hair, exasperated.

“It shouldn’t. You’re overthinking it, Anastasia. Don’t place some vague moral judgment on yourself based on what others might think. Don’t waste your energy. It’s only because you have reservations about our arrangement; that’s perfectly natural. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

I frown, trying to process his words.

“Hey, stop this,” he commands softly, cupping my chin again and pulling at it gently so I release my lower lip from my teeth. “There is nothing about you that is cheap, Anastasia. I won’t have you thinking that. I just bought you some old

books that I thought might mean something to you, that's all. Have some champagne." His eyes warm and soften, and I smile tentatively up at him. "That's better," he murmurs. He picks up the champagne, takes off the foil top and cage, twists the bottle rather than the cork, and opens it with a small pop and a practiced flourish that doesn't spill a drop. He half fills the cups.

"It's pink," I murmur, surprised.

"Bollinger Grande Année Rosé 1999, an excellent vintage," he says with relish.

"In teacups."

He grins.

"In teacups. Congratulations on your degree, Anastasia." We clink cups, and he takes a drink, but I can't help thinking this is really about my capitulation.

"Thank you," I murmur, and take a sip. Of course it's delicious. "Shall we go through the soft limits?"

He smiles, and I blush.

"Always so eager." Christian takes my hand and leads me to the couch, where he sits and tugs me down beside him.

"Your stepfather's a very taciturn man."

*Oh … not soft limits, then. I just want to get this out of the way; the anxiety is gnawing at me.*

"You managed to get him eating out of your hand." I pout.

Christian laughs softly.

"Only because I know how to fish."

"How did you know he liked fishing?"

"You told me. When we went for coffee."

"Oh … did I?" I take another sip. Wow, he has a memory for detail. Hmm … this champagne really is very good. "Did you try the wine at the reception?"

Christian makes a face.

"Yes. It was foul."

"I thought of you when I tasted it. How did you get to be so knowledgeable about wine?"

"I'm not knowledgeable, Anastasia, I just know what I like." His eyes shine, almost silver, and it makes me flush. "Some more?" he asks, referring to the champagne.

"Please."

Christian rises gracefully and collects the bottle. He fills my cup. Is he getting me tipsy? I eye him suspiciously.

"This place looks pretty bare. Are you ready for the move?"

“More or less.”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yes, my last day at Clayton’s.”

“I’d help you move, but I promised to meet my sister at the airport.”

Oh … this is news.

“Mia arrives from Paris very early Saturday morning. I’m heading back to Seattle tomorrow, but I hear Elliot is giving you two a hand.”

“Yes, Kate is very excited about that.”

Christian frowns. “Yes, Kate and Elliot, who would have thought?” he murmurs, and for some reason he doesn’t look pleased. “So what are you doing about work in Seattle?”

*When are we going to talk about the limits? What’s his game?*

“I have a couple of interviews for intern places.”

“You were going tell me this when?” He arches a brow.

“Er … I’m telling you now.”

He narrows his eyes.

“Where?”

For some reason, possibly because he might use his influence, I don’t want to tell him.

“A couple of publishing houses.”

“Is that what you want to do, something in publishing?” I nod warily.

“Well?” He looks at me patiently wanting more information.

“Well what?”

“Don’t be obtuse, Anastasia, which publishing houses?” he scolds.

“Just small ones,” I murmur.

“Why don’t you want me to know?”

“Undue influence.”

He frowns.

“Oh, now *you’re* being obtuse.”

He laughs. “Obtuse? Me? God, you’re challenging. Drink up, let’s talk about these limits.” He fishes out another copy of my e-mail and the list. Does he wander about with these lists in his pockets? I think there’s one in his jacket that I have. Shit, I’d better not forget that. I drain my cup.

He glances quickly at me.

“More?”

“Please.”

He smiles that oh-so-smug private smile of his, holds the champagne bottle up, and pauses.

“Have you eaten anything?”

Oh no … not this old chestnut.

“Yes. I had a three-course meal with Ray.” I roll my eyes at him. The champagne is making me bold.

He leans forward and holds my chin, staring intently into my eyes.

“Next time you roll your eyes at me, I will take you across my knee.”

*What?*

“Oh,” I breathe, and I can see the excitement in his eyes.

“Oh,” he responds, mirroring my tone. “So it begins, Anastasia.”

My heart slams against my chest, and the butterflies escape from my stomach into my constricting throat. *Why is that hot?*

He fills my cup, and I drink practically all of it. Chastened, I stare up at him.

“Got your attention now, haven’t I?”

I nod.

“Answer me.”

“Yes … you’ve got my attention.”

“Good,” he smiles a knowing smile. “So sexual acts. We’ve done most of this.”

I move closer to him on the couch and glance down at the list.

---

**APPENDIX 3**

Soft Limits

To be discussed and agreed between both parties:

Does the Submissive consent to:

- Masturbation
- Cunnilingus
- Fellatio
- Swallowing Semen
- Vaginal intercourse
- Vaginal fisting
- Anal intercourse
- Anal fisting

“No fisting, you say. Anything else you object to?” he asks softly. I swallow.

“Anal intercourse doesn’t exactly float my boat.”

“I’ll agree to the fisting, but I’d really like to claim your ass, Anastasia. But we’ll wait for that. Besides, it’s not something we can dive into.” He smirks at me. “Your ass will need training.”

“Training?” I whisper.

“Oh yes. It’ll need careful preparation. Anal intercourse can be very pleasurable, trust me. But if we try it and you don’t like it, we don’t have to do it again.” He grins down at me.

I blink up at him. He thinks I'll enjoy it? How does he know it's pleasurable?

"Have you done that?" I whisper.

"Yes."

*Holy crap*. I gasp.

"With a man?"

"No. I've never had sex with a man. Not my scene."

"Mrs. Robinson?"

"Yes."

*Holy shit … how?* I frown. He moves on down the list.

"And … swallowing semen. Well, you get an A in that."

I flush, and my inner goddess smacks her lips together, glowing with pride.

"So." He looks down at me grinning. "Swallowing semen okay?"

I nod, not able to look him in the eye, and drain my cup again.

"More?" he asks.

"More." And I'm suddenly reminded of our conversation earlier today as he refills my cup. Is he referring to that or just the champagne? Is this whole champagne thing more?

"Sex toys?" he asks.

I shrug, glancing down the list.

Does the Submissive consent to the use of:

- Vibrators
- Butt plugs
- Dildos
- Other vaginal/anal toys

"Butt plug? Does it do what it says on the box?" I scrunch my nose up in distaste.

"Yes," he smiles. "And I refer to anal intercourse above. Training."

"Oh … what's in other?"

"Beads, eggs … that sort of stuff."

"Eggs?" I'm alarmed.

"Not real eggs." He laughs loudly, shaking his head.

I purse my lips at him.

"I'm glad you find me funny." I can't keep my injured feelings out of my voice.

He stops laughing.

"I apologize. Miss Steele, I'm sorry," he says, trying to look contrite, but his eyes are still dancing with humor. "Any problem with toys?"

"No," I snap.

“Anastasia,” he cajoles. “I am sorry. Believe me. I don’t mean to laugh. I’ve never had this conversation in so much detail. You’re just so inexperienced. I’m sorry.” His eyes are big and gray and sincere.

I thaw a little and take another sip of champagne.

“Right—bondage,” he says, returning to the list. I examine the list, and my inner goddess bounces up and down like a small child waiting for ice cream.

Does the Submissive consent to:

- Bondage with rope
- Bondage with leather cuffs
- Bondage with handcuffs/shackles/manacles
- Bondage with tape
- Bondage with other

Christian raises his eyebrow. “Well?”

“Fine,” I whisper and quickly look back at the list.

Does the Submissive consent to be restrained with:

- Hands bound in front
- Ankles bound
- Elbows bound
- Hands bound behind back
- Knees bound
- Wrists bound to ankles
- Binding with spreadbar
- Binding to fixed items, furniture, etc.
- Suspension

Does the Submissive consent to be blindfolded?

Does the Submissive consent to be gagged?

“We’ve talked about suspension. And it’s fine if you want to set that up as a hard limit. It takes a great deal of time, and I only have you for short periods of time anyway. Anything else?”

“Don’t laugh at me, but what’s a spreader bar?”

“I promise not to laugh. I’ve apologized twice.” He glares at me. “Don’t make me do it again,” he warns. And I think I visibly shrink … oh, he’s so bossy. “A spreader is a bar with cuffs for ankles and/or wrists. They’re fun.”

“Okay … Well, gagging me. I’d be worried I wouldn’t be able to breathe.”

“*I’d* be worried if you couldn’t breathe. I don’t want to suffocate you.”

“And how will I use safewords if I’m gagged?”

He pauses.

“First of all, I hope you never have to use them. But if you’re gagged, we’ll use hand signals,” he says simply.

I blink up at him. But if I’m trussed up, how’s that going to work? My brain is

beginning to fog … *hmm, alcohol*.

“I’m nervous about the gagging.”

“Okay. I’ll take note.”

I stare up at him, realization dawning.

“Do you like tying your submissives up so they can’t touch you?”

He gazes at me, his eyes widening.

“That’s one of the reasons,” he says quietly.

“Is that why you’ve tied my hands?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t like talking about that,” I murmur.

“No, I don’t. Would you like another drink? It’s making you brave, and I need to know how you feel about pain.”

Holy crap … this is the tricky part. He refills my teacup, and I sip.

“So, what’s your general attitude to receiving pain?” Christian looks expectantly at me. “You’re biting your lip,” he says darkly.

I stop immediately, but I don’t know what to say. I flush and stare down at my hands.

“Were you physically punished as a child?”

“No.”

“So you have no sphere of reference at all?”

“No.”

“It’s not as bad as you think. Your imagination is your worst enemy in this,” he whispers.

“Do you have to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Goes with the territory, Anastasia. It’s what I do. I can see you’re nervous. Let’s go through methods.”

He shows me the list. My subconscious runs, screaming, and hides behind the couch.

- Spanking
- Whipping
- Biting
- Genital clamps
- Hot wax
- Paddling
- Caning
- Nipple clamps
- Ice
- Other types/methods of pain

“Well, you said no to genital clamps. That’s fine. It’s caning that hurts the most.”

I blanch.

“We can work up to that.”

“Or not do it at all,” I whisper.

“This is part of the deal, baby, but we’ll work up to all of this. Anastasia, I won’t push you too far.”

“This punishment thing, it worries me the most.” My voice is very small.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve told me. We’ll keep caning off the list for now. And as you get more comfortable with everything else, we’ll increase intensity. We’ll take it slow.”

I swallow, and he leans forward and kisses me on my lips.

“There, that wasn’t so bad was it?”

I shrug, my heart in mouth again.

“Look, I want to talk about one more thing, then I’m taking you to bed.”

“Bed?” I blink rapidly, and my blood pounds through my body, warming places I didn’t know existed until very recently.

“Come on, Anastasia, talking through all this, I want to fuck you into next week, right now. It must be having some effect on you, too.”

I squirm. My inner goddess is panting.

“See? Besides, there’s something I want to try.”

“Something painful?”

“No—stop seeing pain everywhere. It’s mainly pleasure. Have I hurt you yet?”

I flush. “No.”

“Well, then. Look, earlier today you were talking about wanting more,” he halts, uncertain all of a sudden.

*Oh my … where’s this going?*

He clasps my hand.

“Outside of the time you’re my sub, perhaps we could try. I don’t know if it will work. I don’t know about separating everything. It may not work. But I’m willing to try. Maybe one night a week. I don’t know.”

Holy cow … my mouth drops open, my subconscious is in shock. *Christian Grey is up for more!* He’s willing to try! My subconscious peeks out from behind the couch, still registering shock on her harpy face.

“I have one condition.” He looks warily at my stunned expression.

“What?” I breathe. Anything. I’ll give you anything.

“You graciously accept my graduation present to you.”

“Oh.” And deep down I know what it is. Dread spawns in my gut.

He’s staring down at me, gauging my reaction.

“Come,” he murmurs and rises, dragging me up. Taking his jacket off, he drapes it over my shoulders and heads for the door.

Parked outside is a red hatchback car, a two-door compact Audi.

“It’s for you. Happy graduation,” he murmurs, pulling me into his arms and kissing my hair.

He’s bought me a damned car, brand-new by the looks of it. Jeez … I’ve had enough trouble with the books. I stare at it blankly, trying desperately to determine how I feel about this. I am appalled on one level, grateful on another, shocked that he’s actually done it, but the overriding emotion is anger. Yes, I’m angry, especially after everything I told him about the books … but then he’d already bought this. Taking my hand, he leads me down the path toward this new acquisition.

“Anastasia, that Beetle of yours is old and frankly dangerous. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you when it’s so easy for me to make it right …”

His eyes are on me, but at the moment I cannot bring myself to look at him. I stand silently staring at its awesome bright red newness.

“I mentioned it to your stepfather. He was all for it,” he murmurs.

Turning, I glare at him, my mouth open in horror.

“You mentioned this to Ray? How could you?” I can barely spit the words out. *How dare he?* Poor Ray. I feel sick, mortified for my dad.

“It’s a gift, Anastasia. Can’t you just say thank you?”

“But you know it’s too much.”

“Not to me it isn’t, not for my peace of mind.”

I frown at him, at a loss what to say. He just doesn’t get it! He’s had money all his life. Okay, not all his life—not as a small child—and my worldview shifts. The thought is very sobering, and I soften toward the car, feeling guilty about my fit of pique. His intentions are good, misguided, but not from a bad place.

“I’m happy for you to loan this to me, like the laptop.”

He sighs heavily. “Okay. On loan. Indefinitely.” He looks warily at me.

“No, not indefinitely, but for now. Thank you.”

He frowns. I reach up and kiss him on his cheek.

“Thank you for the car, sir,” I say as sweetly as I can manage.

He grabs me suddenly and yanks me up against him, one hand at my back holding me to him and the other fisting in my hair.

“You are one challenging woman, Ana Steele.” He kisses me passionately, forcing my lips apart with his tongue, taking no prisoners.

My blood heats immediately, and I’m returning his kiss with my own passion.

I want him badly—in spite of the car, the books, the soft limits … the caning … I want him.

"It's taking all my self-control not to fuck you on the hood of this car right now, just to show you that you are mine, and if I want to buy you a fucking car, I'll buy you a fucking car," he growls. "Now let's get you inside and naked." He plants a swift rough kiss on me.

Boy, he's angry. He grabs my hand and leads me back into the apartment and straight into my bedroom … no passing go. My subconscious is behind the sofa again, head hidden under her hands. He switches on the sidelight and halts, staring at me.

"Please don't be angry with me," I whisper.

His gaze is impassive; his eyes cold shards of smoky glass.

"I'm sorry about the car and the books …" I trail off. He remains silent and brooding. "You scare me when you're angry," I breathe, staring at him.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he opens them, his expression has softened. He takes a deep breath and swallows.

"Turn around," he whispers. "I want to get you out of that dress."

Another mercurial mood swing; it's so hard to keep up. Obediently, I turn, and my heart is thumping, desire instantly replacing unease, coursing through my blood and settling dark and yearning, low, low in my belly. He scoops my hair off my back so it hangs down my right side, curling at my breast. He places his index finger at the nape of my neck and achingly slowly drags it down my spine, his fingernail grazing my skin.

"I like this dress," he murmurs. "I like to see your flawless skin."

His finger reaches the back of my halter dress midway down my spine, and hooking his finger beneath the top, he pulls me closer so that I step back against him so that he's flush against my body. Leaning down, he inhales my hair.

"You smell so good, Anastasia. So sweet." His nose skims past my ear down my neck, and he trails soft, featherlight kisses along my shoulder.

My breathing changes, becoming shallow, rushed, full of expectation. His fingers are at my zipper. Achingly slow, once more he eases it down while his lips move, licking and kissing and sucking their way across to my other shoulder. He is so tantalizingly good at this. My body resonates, and I start to squirm languidly beneath his touch.

"You. Are. Going. To. Have. To. Learn. To. Keep. Still," he whispers, kissing me around my nape between each word.

He tugs at the fastening at the halter neck, and the dress drops and pools at my feet.

"No bra, Miss Steele. I like that."

His hands reach around and cup my breasts, and my nipples pucker at his touch.

"Lift your arms and put them around my head," he murmurs against my neck.

I obey immediately, and my breasts rise and push into his hands, my nipples hardening further. My fingers weave into his hair, and very gently I tug his soft, sexy hair. I roll my head to one side to give him easier access to my neck.

"Mmm …" he murmurs into that space behind my ear as he starts to extend my nipples with his long fingers, mirroring my hands in his hair.

I groan as the sensation registers sharp and clear in my groin.

"Shall I make you come this way?" he whispers.

I arch my back to force my breasts into his expert hands.

"You like this, don't you, Miss Steele?"

"Mmm …"

"Tell me." He continues the slow, sensuous torture, pulling gently.

"Yes."

"Yes, what."

"Yes … Sir."

"Good girl." He pinches me hard, and my body writhes convulsively against his front.

I gasp at the exquisite, acute pleasure/pain. I feel him against me. I moan and my hands clench in his hair pulling harder.

"I don't think you're ready to come yet," he whispers, stilling his hands, and he gently bites my earlobe and tugs at it. "Besides, you have displeased me."

*Oh … no, what will this mean?* My brain registers through the fog of needy desire as I groan.

"So perhaps I won't let you come after all." He returns the attention of his fingers to my nipples, pulling, twisting, kneading. I grind my behind against him … moving side to side.

I feel his grin against my neck as his hands move down to my hips. His fingers hook into my panties at the back, stretching them, and he pushes his thumbs through the material, shredding them and tossing them in front of me so I can see … *holy shit*. His hands move down to my sex, and from behind, he slowly inserts his finger.

"Oh yes. My sweet girl is ready," he breathes as he whirls me around so I'm facing him. His breathing has quickened. He puts his finger in his mouth. "You taste so fine, Miss Steele." He sighs.

*Holy shit*. His finger tastes salty … from me.

"Undress me," he commands quietly, staring down at me, eyes hooded.

All I'm wearing are my shoes—well, Kate's high-heeled pumps. I'm taken

aback. I've never undressed a man.

"You can do it," he cajoles softly.

I blink rapidly. Where to start? I reach for his T-shirt, and he grabs my hands, smiling slyly at me.

"Oh no." He shakes his head, grinning. "Not the T-shirt. You may need to touch me for what I have planned." His eyes are alive with excitement.

*Oh … this is news … I can touch with clothes*. He takes one of my hands and places it against his erection.

"This is the effect you have on me, Miss Steele."

I gasp and flex my fingers around his girth, and he grins.

"I want to be inside you. Take my jeans off. You're in charge."

*Holy fuck … me in charge*. My mouth drops open.

"What are you going to do with me?" he teases.

*Oh, the possibilities …* my inner goddess roars, and from somewhere born of frustration, need, and sheer Steele bravery, I push him on to the bed. He laughs as he falls, and I gaze down at him, feeling victorious. My inner goddess is going to explode. I yank off his shoes, quickly, clumsily, and his socks. He's staring up at me, his eyes luminous with amusement and desire. He looks … glorious … *mine*. I crawl up the bed and sit astride him to undo his jeans, sliding my fingers under the waistband, feeling the hair in his oh-so-happy trail. He closes his eyes and flexes his hips.

"You'll have to learn to keep still," I scold, and I tug at the hair under his waistband.

His breath hitches, and he grins at me.

"Yes, Miss Steele," he murmurs, eyes burning bright. "In my pocket, condom," he breathes.

I search in his pocket slowly, watching his face as I feel around. His mouth is open. I fish out both foil packets that I find and lay them on the bed by his hips. *Two!* My over-eager fingers reach for the button of his waistband and undo it, fumbling a little. I am beyond excited.

"So eager, Miss Steele," he murmurs, his voice laced with humor. I tug down the zipper, and now I'm faced with the problem of removing his pants … *hmm*. I shuffle down and pull. They hardly move. I frown. How can this be so difficult?

"I can't keep still if you're going to bite that lip," he warns, then arches his pelvis up off the bed so I'm able to tug down his trousers and his boxers at the same time, whoa … freeing him. He kicks his clothes to the floor.

Holy Moses, he's all mine to play with, and suddenly it's Christmas.

"Now what are you going to do?" he breathes, all trace of humor gone. I reach up and touch him, watching his expression as I do. His mouth shapes like a letter

*O* as he takes a sharp breath. His skin is so smooth and velvety … and hard … hmm, what a delicious combination. I lean forward, my hair falling around me, and he's in my mouth. I suck, hard. He closes his eyes, his hips jerking beneath me.

"Jeez, Ana, steady," he groans.

I feel so powerful; it's such an exhilarating feeling, teasing and testing him with my mouth and tongue. He tenses underneath me as I run my mouth up and down him, pushing him to the back of my throat, my lips tight … again and again.

"Stop, Ana, stop. I don't want to come."

I sit up, blinking at him, and I'm panting like him, but confused. *I thought I was in charge?* My inner goddess looks like someone snatched her ice cream.

"Your innocence and enthusiasm is very disarming," he gasps. "You, on top … that's what we need to do."

*Oh*.

"Here, put this on." He hands me a foil packet.

*Holy crap. How?* I rip the packet open, and the rubbery condom is all tacky in my fingers.

"Pinch the top and then roll it down. You don't want any air in the end of that sucker," he pants.

And very slowly, concentrating hard, I do as I'm told.

"Christ, you're killing me here, Anastasia," he groans.

I admire my handiwork and him. He really is a fine specimen of a man. Looking at him is very, very arousing.

"Now. I want to be buried inside you," he murmurs. I stare down at him, daunted, and he sits up suddenly, so we're nose to nose.

"Like this," he breathes, and he snakes one hand around my hips, lifting me, and with the other he positions himself beneath me and, very slowly, eases me onto him.

I groan as he stretches me open, filling me, my mouth hanging open in surprise at the sweet, sublime, agonizing, over-full feeling. *Oh … please*.

"That's right, baby, feel me, all of me," he growls, and briefly closes his eyes.

And he's inside me, sheathed to the hilt, and he holds me in place, for seconds … minutes … I have no idea, staring intently into my eyes.

"It's deep this way," he murmurs. He flexes and swivels his hips in the same motion, and I groan … oh my—the sensation radiates throughout my belly … everywhere. *Fuck!*

"Again," I whisper. He grins a lazy grin and obliges.

Moaning, I throw my head up, my hair tumbling down my back, and very

slowly, he sinks down on to the bed.

"You move, Anastasia, up and down, how you want. Take my hands," he breathes, his voice hoarse and low and oh-so-sexy.

I clasp his hands, holding on for life. Gently I push off him and back down. His eyes are burning with wild anticipation. His breathing is ragged, matching mine, and he lifts his pelvis as I come down, bouncing me back up. We pick up the rhythm … up, down, up, down … over and over … and it feels so … good. Between my panting breaths, the deep down, brimming fullness … the vehement sensation pulsing through me that's building quickly, I watch him, our eyes locked … and I see wonder there, wonder at me.

I am fucking him. I am in charge. He's mine, and I'm his. The thought pushes me, weighted with concrete, over the edge, and I climax around him … shouting incoherently. He grabs my hips, and closing his eyes, tipping his head back, his jaw strained, he comes quietly. I collapse on to his chest, overwhelmed, somewhere between fantasy and reality, a place where there are no hard or soft limits.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Slowly the outside world invades my senses, and oh my, what an invasion. I am floating, my limbs soft and languid, utterly spent. I'm lying on top of him, my head on his chest, and he smells divine: freshly laundered linen and some expensive body wash and the best, most seductive scent on the planet … Christian. I don't want to move, I want to breathe this elixir for eternity. I nuzzle him, wishing I didn't have the barrier of his T-shirt. And as rhyme and reason return to the rest of my body, I stretch my hand out on his chest. This is the first time I've touched him here. He's firm … strong. His hand swoops up and grabs mine, but he softens the blow by pulling it to his mouth and sweetly kissing my knuckles. He rolls over so he's gazing down at me.

"Don't," he murmurs, then kisses me lightly.

"Why don't you like to be touched?" I whisper, staring up into soft gray eyes.

"Because I'm fifty shades of fucked up, Anastasia."

Oh … his honesty is completely disarming. I blink up at him.

"I had a very tough introduction to life. I don't want to burden you with the details. Just don't." He strokes his nose against mine, and then he pulls out of me and sits up.

"I think that's all the very basics covered. How was that?"

He looks thoroughly pleased with himself and sounds very matter-of-fact at the same time, like he's just marked off another item on a checklist. I'm still reeling from the "tough introduction to life" comment. It's so frustrating—I am desperate to know more. But he won't tell me. I cock my head to one side, like he does, and make an enormous effort to smile at him.

"If you imagine for one minute that I think you ceded control to me, well you haven't taken into account my GPA." I smile shyly at him. "But thank you for the illusion."

"Miss Steele, you are not just a pretty face. You've had six orgasms so far and all of them belong to me," he boasts, playful again.

I flush and blink at the same time, as he stares down at me. *He's keeping count!* His brow furrows.

"Do you have something to tell me?" his voice is suddenly stern.

I frown. *Crap*.

“I had a dream this morning.”

“Oh?” He glares at me.

*Double crap. Am I in trouble?*

“I came in my sleep.” I throw my arm over my eyes. He says nothing. I peek up at him from under my arm, and he looks amused.

“In your sleep?”

“Woke me up.”

“I’m sure it did. What were you dreaming about?”

*Crap*.

“You.”

“What was I doing?”

I throw my arm over my eyes again. And like a small child, I briefly entertain the thought that if I can’t see him, then he can’t see me.

“Anastasia, what was I doing? I won’t ask you again.”

“You had a riding crop.”

He moves my arm.

“Really?”

“Yes.” I am crimson.

“There’s hope for you yet,” he murmurs. “I have several riding crops.”

“Brown plaited leather?”

He laughs. “No, but I’m sure I could get one.”

Leaning down, he gives me a brief kiss, then stands and grabs his boxers. *Oh no … he’s going*. I glance quickly at the time—it’s only nine forty. I scoot out of bed, too, and grab my sweatpants and a cami top, then sit back on the bed, cross-legged, watching him. I don’t want him to go. What can I do?

“When is your period due?” He interrupts my thoughts.

*What?*

“I hate wearing these things,” he grumbles. He holds up the condom, then puts it on the floor and slips on his jeans.

“Well?” he prompts when I don’t reply, and he looks at me expectantly as if he’s waiting for my opinion on the weather. Holy crap … this is personal stuff.

“Next week.” I stare down at my hands.

“You need to sort out some contraception.”

He is so bossy. I stare at him blankly. He sits back on the bed as he puts on his shoes and socks.

“Do you have a doctor?”

I shake my head. We are back to mergers and acquisitions—another 180-degree mood swing.

He frowns. “I can have mine come and see you at your apartment—Sunday

morning before you come and see me. Or he can see you at my place. Which would you prefer?"

*No pressure then*. Something else that he's paying for … but actually this is for his benefit.

"Your place." That means I am guaranteed to see him Sunday.

"Okay. I'll let you know the time."

"Are you leaving?"

*Don't go … stay with me, please*.

"Yes."

*Why?*

"How are you getting back?" I whisper.

"Taylor will pick me up."

"I can drive you. I have a lovely new car."

He gazes at me, his expression warm.

"That's more like it. But I think you've had too much to drink."

"Did you get me tipsy on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you overthink everything, and you're reticent like your stepdad. A drop of wine in you and you start talking, and I need you to communicate honestly with me. Otherwise you clam up and I have no idea what you're thinking. In vino veritas, Anastasia."

"And you think you're always honest with me?"

"I endeavor to be." He looks down at me warily. "This will only work if we're honest with each other."

"I'd like you to stay and use this." I hold up the second condom.

He smiles and his eyes glow with humor.

"Anastasia, I have crossed so many lines here tonight. I have to go. I'll see you on Sunday. I'll have the revised contract ready for you, and then we can really start to play."

"Play?" *Holy shit*. My heart leaps into my mouth.

"I'd like to do a scene with you. But I won't until you've signed, so I know you're ready."

"Oh. So I could stretch this out if I don't sign?"

He gazes at me assessing, and then his lips twitch into a smile. "Well, I suppose you could, but I may crack under the strain."

"Crack? How?" My inner goddess has woken and is paying attention.

He nods slowly, and then he grins, teasing. "Could get really ugly."

His grin is infectious.

“Ugly, how?”

“Oh, you know, explosions, car chases, kidnapping, incarceration.”

“You’d kidnap me?”

“Oh yes.” He grins.

“Hold me against my will?” *Jeez, this is hot.*

“Oh yes.” He nods. “And then we’re talking TPE 24/7.”

“You’ve lost me,” I breathe, my heart is pounding … *is he serious?*

“Total Power Exchange—around the clock.” His eyes are shining, and his excitement is palpable even from where I sit.

*Holy shit.*

“So you have no choice,” he says sardonically.

“Clearly.” I can’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice as my eyes reach for the heavens.

“Oh, Anastasia Steele, did you just roll your eyes at me?”

*Crap.*

“No,” I squeak.

“I think you did. What did I say I’d do to you if you rolled your eyes at me again?”

*Shit.* He sits down on the edge of the bed.

“Come here,” he says softly.

I blanch. Jeez … he’s serious. I sit staring at him, completely immobile.

“I haven’t signed,” I whisper.

“I told you what I’d do. I’m a man of my word. I’m going to spank you, and then I’m going to fuck you very quick and very hard. Looks like we’ll need that condom after all.”

His voice is so soft, menacing, and *it’s damned hot*. My insides practically contort with potent, needy, liquid, desire. He gazes at me, waiting, eyes blazing. Tentatively, I uncurl my legs. *Should I run?* This is it; our relationship hangs in the balance, right here, right now. Do I let him do this or do I say no, and then that’s it? Because I know it will be over if I say no. *Do it!* my inner goddess pleads with me. My subconscious is as paralyzed as I am.

“I’m waiting,” he says. “I’m not a patient man.”

*Oh, for the love of all that’s holy.* I’m panting, afraid, turned on. Blood pounding through my body, my legs like jelly. Slowly, I crawl over to him until I am beside him.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Now stand up.”

Oh, shit … can’t he just get this over with? I’m not sure if I can stand. Hesitantly, I clamber to my feet. He holds his hand out, and I place the condom in his palm. Suddenly he grabs me, tipping me across his lap. With one smooth

movement, he angles his body so my torso is resting on the bed beside him. He throws his right leg over both of mine and plants his left forearm on the small of my back, holding me down so I cannot move. *Oh, fuck.*

"Put your hands up on either side of your head," he orders.

I obey immediately.

"Why am I doing this, Anastasia?" he asks.

"Because I rolled my eyes at you," I can barely speak.

"Do you think that's polite?"

"No."

"Will you do it again?"

"No."

"I will spank you each time you do it, do you understand?"

Very slowly, he pulls down my sweatpants. Oh, how demeaning is this? Demeaning and scary and hot. He's making such a meal of this. My heart is in my mouth. I can barely breathe. *Shit, is this going to hurt?*

He places his hand on my naked behind, softly fondling me, stroking around and around with his flat palm. And then his hand is no longer there … and he hits me—hard. *Ow!* My eyes spring open in response to the pain, and I try to rise, but his hand moves between my shoulder blades, keeping me down. He caresses me again where he's hit me, and his breathing's changed—it's louder, harsher. He hits me again and again, quickly in succession. *Holy fuck it hurts*. I make no sound, my face screwed up against the pain. I try to wriggle away from the blows—spurred on by adrenaline spiking and coursing through my body.

"Keep still," he growls, "or I'll spank you for longer."

He's rubbing me now, and the blow follows. A rhythmic pattern emerges: caress, fondle, hard slap. I have to concentrate to handle this pain. My mind empties as I endeavor to absorb the grueling sensation. He doesn't hit me in the same place twice in succession—he's spreading the pain.

"Aargh!" I cry out on the tenth slap—and I'm unaware that I have been mentally counting the blows.

"I'm just getting warmed up."

He hits me again, then he strokes me softly. The combination of the hard stinging blow and his gentle caress is so mind-numbing. He hits me again … this is getting harder to take. My face hurts, it's screwed up so tight. He strokes me gently and then the blow comes. I cry out again.

"No one to hear you, baby, just me."

And he hits me again and again. From somewhere deep inside, I want to beg him to stop. But I don't. I don't want to give him the satisfaction. He continues the unrelenting rhythm. I cry out six more times. Eighteen slaps in total. My

body is singing, singing from his merciless assault.

"Enough," he breathes hoarsely. "Well done, Anastasia. Now I'm going to fuck you."

He caresses my behind gently, and it burns as he strokes me around and around and down. Suddenly, he inserts two fingers inside me, taking me completely by surprise. I gasp, this new assault breaking through the numbness around my brain.

"Feel this. See how much your body likes this, Anastasia. You're soaking just for me." There is awe in his voice. He moves his fingers in and out in quick succession.

I groan. *No, surely not.* And then his fingers are gone … and I'm left wanting.

"Next time, I will get you to count. Now where's that condom?"

He reaches beside him for the condom and lifts me gently, pushing me face down onto the bed. I hear the sound of his zipper and the rip of the foil. He pulls my sweatpants completely off and then guides me into a kneeling position, gently caressing my now very sore behind.

"I'm going to take you now. You can come," he murmurs.

*What? Like I have a choice.*

And he's inside me, quickly filling me. I moan loudly. He moves, pounding into me, a fast, intense pace against my sore behind. The feeling is beyond exquisite, raw and debasing and mind-blowing. My senses are ravaged, disconnected, solely concentrating on what he's doing to me. How he's making me feel that familiar pull deep in my belly, tightening, quickening. NO … and my traitorous body explodes in an intense, body-shattering orgasm.

"Oh, Ana!" he cries out loudly as he finds his release, holding me in place as he pours himself into me. He collapses, panting hard beside me, and he pulls me on top of him and buries his face in my hair, holding me close.

"Oh, baby," he breathes. "Welcome to my world."

We lie there, panting together, waiting for our breathing to slow. He gently strokes my hair. I'm on his chest again. But this time, I don't have the strength to lift my hand and feel him. *Boy … I survived.* That wasn't so bad. I'm more stoic than I thought. My inner goddess is prostrate … well, at least she's quiet. Christian nuzzles my hair again, inhaling deeply.

"Well done, baby," he whispers, quiet joy in his voice. His words curl around me like a soft, fluffy towel from the Heathman Hotel, and I'm so pleased that he's happy.

He picks at the strap on my camisole.

"Is this what you sleep in?" he asks gently.

"Yes," I breathe sleepily.

“You should be in silks and satins, you beautiful girl. I’ll take you shopping.”

“I like my sweats,” I murmur, trying and failing to sound irritated.

He kisses my head again.

“We’ll see,” he says.

We lie for a few more minutes, hours, who knows, and I think I doze.

“I have to go,” he says, and leaning down, he kisses my forehead gently. “Are you okay?” His voice is soft.

I think about his question. My backside is sore. Well, glowing now, and amazingly I feel, apart from exhausted, radiant. The realization is humbling, unexpected. I don’t understand.

“I’m okay,” I whisper. I don’t want to say more than that.

He rises.

“Where’s your bathroom?”

“Down the hall to the left.”

He scoops up the other condom and heads out of the bedroom. I rise stiffly and put my sweatpants back on. They chafe a little against my still-smarting behind. I’m so confused by my reaction. I remember him saying—I can’t remember when—that I would feel so much better after a good hiding. *How can that be so?* I really don’t get it. But strangely, I do. I can’t say that I enjoyed the experience. In fact, I would still go a long way to avoid it, but now … I have this safe, weird, bathed in afterglow, sated feeling. I put my head in my hands. I just don’t understand.

Christian reenters the room. I can’t look him in the eye. I stare down at my hands.

“I found some baby oil. Let me rub it into your behind.”

*What?*

“No. I’ll be fine.”

“Anastasia,” he warns, and I want to roll my eyes but quickly stop myself. I stand facing the bed. Sitting beside me, he gently pulls my sweatpants down again. *Up and down like whores’ drawers*, my subconscious remarks bitterly. In my head, I tell her where to go. Christian squirts baby oil into his hand and then rubs my behind with careful tenderness—from makeup remover to soothing balm for a spanked ass, who would have thought it was such a versatile liquid.

“I like my hands on you,” he murmurs, and I have to agree; me, too.

“There,” he says when he’s finished, and he pulls my pants up again.

I glance over at my clock. It’s ten thirty.

“I’m leaving now.”

“I’ll see you out.” I still can’t look at him.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the front door. Fortunately, Kate is still not

home. She must still be having dinner with her folks and Ethan. I'm really glad she's not been around to hear my chastisement.

"Don't you have to call Taylor?" I ask, avoiding eye contact.

"Taylor's been here since nine. Look at me," he breathes.

I struggle to meet his eyes, but when I do, he's gazing down at me with wonder.

"You didn't cry," he murmurs, then grabs me suddenly and kisses me fervently. "Sunday," he whispers against my lips, and it's both a promise and a threat.

I watch him walk down the path and climb into the big black Audi. He doesn't look back. I close the door and stand helpless in the living room of an apartment that I shall only spend another two nights in. A place I have lived happily for almost four years … yet today, for the first time ever, I feel lonely and uncomfortable here, unhappy with my own company. Have I strayed so far from who I am? I know that lurking, not very far under my rather numb exterior, is a well of tears. What am I doing? The irony is I can't even sit down and enjoy a good cry. I'll have to stand. I know it's late, but I decide to call my mom.

"Honey, how are you? How was graduation?" she enthuses down the phone. Her voice is a soothing balm.

"Sorry it's so late," I whisper.

She pauses.

"Ana? What's wrong?" She's all seriousness now.

"Nothing, Mom, I just wanted to hear your voice."

She's silent for a moment.

"Ana, what is it? Please tell me." Her voice is soft and comforting, and I know that she cares. Uninvited, my tears begin to flow. I have cried so often in the last few days.

"Please, Ana," she says, and her anguish reflects mine.

"Oh, Mom, it's a man."

"What's he done to you?" Her alarm is palpable.

"It's not like that." *Although it is* … Oh, crap. I don't want to worry her. I just want someone else to be strong for me at the moment.

"Ana, please, you're worrying me."

I take a big breath. "I've kind of fallen for this guy, and he's so different from me, and I don't know if we should be together."

"Oh, darling. I wish I could be with you. I am so sorry I missed your graduation. You've fallen for someone, finally. Oh, honey, men, they are tricky. They're a different species, honey. How long have you known him?"

Christian is definitely a different species … *different planet.*

“Oh, nearly three weeks or so.”

“Ana, darling, that’s no time at all. How can you possibly know someone in that kind of time frame? Just take it easy with him and keep him at arm’s length until you decide whether he’s worthy of you.”

Wow … it’s unnerving when my mother is so insightful, but she’s just too late on this. Is he *worthy* of me? That’s an interesting concept. I always wonder whether I am worthy of him.

“Honey, you sound so unhappy. Come home—visit with us. I miss you, darling. Bob would love to see you, too. You can get some distance and maybe some perspective. You need a break. You’ve been working so hard.”

Oh boy, is this tempting. Run away to Georgia. Grab some sunshine, some cocktails. My mother’s good humor … her loving arms.

“I have two job interviews in Seattle on Monday.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news.”

The door opens and Kate appears, grinning at me. Her face falls when she sees I’ve been crying.

“Mom, I have to go. I’ll think about a visit. Thank you.”

“Honey, please, don’t let a man get under your skin. You’re far too young. Go and enjoy yourself.”

“Yes, Mom, love you.”

“Oh, Ana, I love you, too, so much. Stay safe, honey.” I hang up and face Kate, who glares at me.

“Has that obscenely rich fucker upset you again?”

“No … sort of … er … yes.”

“Just tell him to take a hike, Ana. You’ve been so up and down since you met him. I’ve never seen you like this.”

The world of Katherine Kavanagh is very clear, very black and white. Not the intangible, mysterious, vague hues of gray that color my world. *Welcome to my world.*

“Sit, let’s talk. Let’s have some wine. Oh, you’ve had champagne.” She spies the bottle. “Some good stuff, too.”

I smile ineffectually, looking apprehensively at the couch. I approach it with caution. *Hmm … sitting.*

“Are you okay?”

“I fell over and landed on my behind.”

She doesn’t think to question my explanation, because I am one of the most uncoordinated people in Washington State. I never thought I’d see that as a blessing. I sit down gingerly, pleasantly surprised that I’m okay, and turn my attention to Kate but my mind glazes over and I’m pulled back to the Heathman

*—Well, if you were mine you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday*. He said it then, and all I could concentrate on at the time was being his. All the warning signs were there, I was just too clueless and too enamored to notice.

Kate comes back into the living area with a bottle of red wine and washed teacups.

"Here we go." She hands me a cup of wine. It won't taste as good as the Bolly.

"Ana, if he's a jerk with commitment issues, dump him. Though I don't really understand his commitment issues. He couldn't take his eyes off you in the marquee, watched you like a hawk. I'd say he was completely smitten, but maybe he has a funny way of showing it."

*Smitten? Christian? Funny way of showing it?* I'll say.

"Kate, it's complicated. How was your evening?" I ask.

I can't talk this through with Kate without revealing too much, but one question on her day and Kate is off. It's reassuring to sit and listen to her normal chatter. The hot news is that Ethan may be coming to live with us after their vacation. That will be fun—Ethan is a hoot. I frown. I don't think Christian will approve.

*Well … tough*. He'll just have to suck it up. I have a couple of teacups of wine and decide to call it a night. It's been one very long day. Kate hugs me, and then grabs the phone to call Elliot.

I check the mean machine after I brush my teeth. There's an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: You

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:14

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

You are quite simply exquisite. The most beautiful, intelligent, witty, and brave woman I have ever met. Take some Advil—this is not a request. And don't drive your Beetle again. I will know.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh, not drive my car again! I type out my reply.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Flattery

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:20

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

Flattery will get you nowhere, but since you've been *everywhere* the point is moot.

I will need to drive my Beetle to a garage so I can sell it—so will not graciously accept any of your nonsense over that.

Red wine is always more preferable to Advil.

Ana

P.S.: Caning is a HARD limit for me.

# I hit "send."

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Frustrating Women Who Can't Take Compliments

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:26

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I am not flattering you. You should go to bed.

I accept your addition to the hard limits.

Don't drink too much.

Taylor will dispose of your car and get a good price for it, too.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Taylor—Is He the Right Man for the Job?

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:40

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

I am intrigued that you are happy to risk letting your right-hand man drive my car but not some woman you fuck occasionally. How can I be sure that Taylor is the man to get me the best deal for said car? I have, in the past, probably before I met you, been known to drive a hard bargain.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Careful!

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:44

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I am assuming it is the RED WINE talking, and that you've had a very long day.

Though I am tempted to drive back over there to ensure that you don't sit down for a week, rather than an evening.

Taylor is ex-army and capable of driving anything from a motorcycle to a Sherman tank. Your car does not present a hazard to him.

Now please do not refer to yourself as "some woman I fuck occasionally" because, quite frankly, it makes me MAD, and you really wouldn't like me when I'm angry.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Careful Yourself

**Date**: May 26 2011 23:57

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

I'm not sure I like you anyway, especially at the moment.

Miss Steele

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Careful Yourself

**Date**: May 27 2011 00:03

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Why don't you like me?

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Careful Yourself

**Date**: May 27 2011 00:09

**To**: Christian Grey

Because you never stay with me.

There, that's given him something to think about. I shut the machine down with a flourish I don't really feel and crawl into my bed. I switch off my sidelight and stare up at the ceiling. It's been one long day, one emotional wrench after another. It was heartwarming to spend some time with Ray. He looked well, and weirdly, he approved of Christian. Jeez, Kate and her gargantuan mouth. Hearing Christian speak about being hungry. What the hell is that all about? God, and the car. I haven't even told Kate about the new car. What was Christian thinking?

And then this evening, he actually hit me. I've never been hit in my life. What have I gotten myself into? Very slowly, my tears, halted by Kate's arrival, begin to slide down the side of my face and into my ears. I have fallen for someone who's so emotionally shut down, I will only get hurt—deep down I know this—someone who by his own admission is completely fucked up. *Why* is he so fucked up? It must be awful to be as affected as he is, and the thought that as a toddler he suffered some unbearable cruelty makes me cry harder. *Perhaps if he was more normal he wouldn't want you*, my subconscious contributes snidely to my musings … and in my heart of hearts I know this is true. I turn into my pillow and the sluice gates open … and for the first time in years, I am sobbing uncontrollably into my pillow.

I am momentarily distracted from my dark night of the soul by Kate shouting.

*"What the fuck do you think you're doing here?"*

*"Well, you can't!"*

*"What the fuck have you done to her now?"*

*"Since she's met you she cries all the time."*

*"You can't come in here!"*

Christian bursts into my bedroom and unceremoniously switches on the overhead light, making me squint.

"Jesus, Ana," he mutters. He flicks the switch off again and is at my side in a moment.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp between sobs. Crap. I can't stop crying.

He switches on the sidelight, making me squint again. Kate comes and stands in the doorway.

"Do you want me to throw this asshole out?" she asks, radiating thermonuclear hostility.

Christian raises his eyebrows at her, no doubt surprised by her flattering epithet and her feral antagonism. I shake my head, and she rolls her eyes at me. *Oh … I wouldn't do that near Mr. G.*

"Just holler if you need me," she says more gently. "Grey—you're on my shit list and I'm watching you," she hisses at him. He blinks at her, and she turns and pulls the door closed but doesn't shut it.

Christian gazes down at me, his expression grave, his face ashen. He's wearing his pinstriped jacket, and from his inside pocket he pulls out a handkerchief and hands it to me. I think I still have his other one somewhere.

"What's going on?" he asks quietly.

"Why are you here?" I ask, ignoring his question. My tears have miraculously ceased, but I'm left with dry heaves racking my body.

"Part of my role is to look after your needs. You said you wanted me to stay,

so here I am. And yet I find you like this." He blinks at me, truly bewildered. "I'm sure I'm responsible, but I have no idea why. Is it because I hit you?"

I pull myself up, wincing from my sore behind. I sit and face him.

"Did you take some Advil?"

I shake my head. He narrows his eyes, stands, and leaves the room. I hear him talking to Kate but not what they are saying. He's back a few moments later with pills and a teacup of water.

"Take these," he orders gently as he sits on my bed beside me.

I do as I'm told.

"Talk to me," he whispers. "You told me you were okay. I'd never have left you if I thought you were like this."

I stare down at my hands. What can I say that I haven't said already? I want more. I want him to stay because *he* wants to stay with me, not because I'm a blubbering mess, and I don't want him to beat me, is that so unreasonable?

"I take it that when you said you were okay, you weren't."

I flush. "I thought I was fine."

"Anastasia, you can't tell me what you think I want to hear. That's not very honest," he admonishes me. "How can I trust anything you've said to me?"

I peek up at him, and he's frowning, a bleak look in his eye. He runs both hands through his hair.

"How did you feel while I was hitting you and after?"

"I didn't like it. I'd rather you didn't do it again."

"You weren't meant to like it."

"Why do you like it?" I stare up at him.

My question surprises him.

"You really want to know?"

"Oh, trust me, I'm fascinated." And I can't quite keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He narrows his eyes again.

"Careful," he warns.

I blanch. "Are you going to hit me again?"

"No, not tonight."

Phew … my subconscious and I both breathe a silent sigh of relief.

"So," I prompt.

"I like the control it gives me, Anastasia. I want you to behave in a particular way, and if you don't, I shall punish you, and you will learn to behave the way I desire. I enjoy punishing you. I've wanted to spank you since you asked me if I was gay."

I flush at the memory. *Jeez, I wanted to spank myself after that question*. So

Katherine Kavanagh is responsible for all this, and if she'd gone to that interview and asked her gay question, she'd be sitting here with the sore ass. I don't like that thought. How confusing is this?

"So you don't like the way I am."

He stares at me, bewildered again. "I think you're lovely the way you are."

"So why are you trying to change me?"

"I don't want to change you. I'd like you to be courteous and to follow the set of rules I've given you and not defy me. Simple," he says.

"But you want to punish me?"

"Yes, I do."

"That's what I don't understand."

He sighs and runs his hands through his hair again.

"It's the way I'm made, Anastasia. I need to control you. I need you to behave in a certain way, and if you don't—I love to watch your beautiful alabaster skin pink and warm up under my hands. It turns me on."

Holy shit. Now we're getting somewhere.

"So it's not the pain you're putting me through?"

He swallows.

"A bit, to see if you can take it, but that's not the whole reason. It's the fact that you are mine to do with as I see fit—ultimate control over someone else. And it turns me on. Big time, Anastasia. Look, I'm not explaining myself very well … I've never had to before. I've not really thought about this in any great depth. I've always been with like-minded people." He shrugs apologetically. "And you still haven't answered my question—how did you feel afterward?"

"Confused."

"You were sexually aroused by it, Anastasia." He closes his eyes briefly, and when he reopens them and gazes at me, they are blazing.

His expression pulls at that dark part of me, buried in the depths of my belly—my libido, woken and tamed by him but, even now, insatiable.

"Don't look at me like that," he murmurs.

I frown. *Jeez, what have I done now?*

"I don't have any condoms, Anastasia, and you know, you're upset. Contrary to what your roommate believes, I'm not a priapic monster. So, you felt confused?"

I squirm under his intense gaze.

"You have no problem being honest with me in print. Your e-mails always tell me exactly how you feel. Why can't you do that in conversation? Do I intimidate you that much?"

I pick at an imaginary spot on my mother's blue-and-cream quilt.

“You beguile me, Christian. Completely overwhelm me. I feel like Icarus flying too close to the sun,” I whisper.

He gasps. “Well, I think you’ve got that the wrong way around,” he whispers.

“What?”

“Oh, Anastasia, you’ve bewitched me. Isn’t it obvious?”

No, not to me. *Bewitched* … my inner goddess is staring openmouthed. Even she doesn’t believe this.

“You’ve still not answered my question. Write me an e-mail, please. But right now, I’d really like to sleep. Can I stay?”

“Do you want to stay?” I can’t hide the hope in my voice.

“You wanted me here.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“I’ll write you an e-mail,” he mutters petulantly.

Standing, he empties his jeans pockets of BlackBerry, keys, wallet, and money. Holy cow, men carry a lot of crap in their pockets. He strips off his watch, shoes, socks, and jeans and places his jacket over my chair. He walks around to the other side of the bed and slides in.

“Lie down,” he orders.

I slip slowly under the covers, wincing, staring at him. Jeez … he’s staying. I think I’m numb with elated shock. He leans up on one elbow, staring down at me.

“If you are going to cry, cry in front of me. I need to know.”

“Do you want me to cry?”

“Not particularly. I just want to know how you’re feeling. I don’t want you slipping through my fingers. Switch the light off. It’s late, and we both have to work tomorrow.”

*So here … and still so bossy,* but I can’t complain; he’s in my bed. I don’t quite understand why … maybe I should weep more often in front of him. I switch off the bedside light.

“Lie on your side, facing away from me,” he murmurs in the darkness.

I roll my eyes in the full knowledge that he cannot see me, but I do as I’m told. Gingerly, he moves over and puts his arms around me and pulls me to his chest.

“Sleep, baby,” he whispers, and I feel his nose in my hair as he inhales deeply.

Holy cow. Christian Grey is sleeping with me, and in the comfort and solace of his arms, I drift into a peaceful sleep.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The candle flame is too hot. It flickers and dances in the over-warm breeze, a breeze that brings no respite from the heat. Soft gossamer wings flutter to and fro in the dark, sprinkling dusty scales in the circle of light. I'm struggling to resist, but I'm drawn. And then it's so bright, and I am flying too close to the sun, dazzled by the light, fried and melting from the heat, weary in my endeavors to stay airborne. I am so warm. The heat … it's stifling, overpowering. It wakes me.

I open my eyes, and I'm draped in Christian Grey. He's wrapped around me like a victory flag. He's fast asleep with his head on my chest, his arm over me, holding me close, one of his legs thrown over and hooked around both of mine. He's suffocating me with his body heat, and he's heavy. I take a moment to absorb that he's still in my bed and fast asleep, and it's light outside—morning. He has spent the whole night with me.

My right arm is stretched, no doubt in search of a cool spot, and as I process the fact that he's still with me, the thought occurs that I can touch him. He's asleep. Tentatively, I lift my hand and run the tips of my fingers down his back. Deep in his throat, I hear a faint, distressed groan, and he stirs. He nuzzles my chest, inhaling deeply as he wakes. Sleepy, blinking gray eyes meet mine beneath his tousled mop of hair.

"Good morning," he mumbles, and frowns. "Jesus, even in my sleep I'm drawn to you." He moves slowly, unpeeling his limbs from me as he gets his bearings. I become aware of his erection against my hip. He notices my wide-eyed reaction, and he smiles a slow, sexy smile.

"Hmm … this has possibilities, but I think we should wait until Sunday." He leans down and nuzzles my ear with his nose.

I flush, but then I feel seven shades of scarlet from his heat.

"You're very hot," I murmur.

"You're not so bad yourself," he murmurs, and presses himself against me, suggestively.

I flush some more. *That's not what I meant.* He props himself up on his elbow, gazing down at me, amused. He bends and, to my surprise, plants a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Sleep well?” he asks.

I nod, staring up at him, and I realize that I’ve slept very well except maybe for the last half hour when I was too hot.

“So did I.” He frowns. “Yes, really well.” He raises his eyebrows in confused surprise. “What’s the time?”

I glance at my alarm.

“It’s seven thirty.”

“Seven thirty … shit.” He scrambles out of bed and drags on his jeans.

It is my turn to look amused as I sit up. Christian Grey is late and flustered. This is something I have never seen before. I belatedly realize that my behind is no longer sore.

“You are such a bad influence on me. I have a meeting. I have to go—I have to be in Portland at eight. Are you smirking at me?”

“Yes.”

He grins. “I’m late. I don’t do late. Another first, Miss Steele.” He pulls on his jacket and then bends down and grasps my head, his hands on either side.

“Sunday,” he says, and the word is pregnant with an unspoken promise. Everything deep in my body uncurls and then clenches in delicious anticipation. The feeling is exquisite.

Holy hell, if my mind could just keep up with my body. He leans forward and kisses me quickly. He grabs his stuff from my side table and his shoes—which he doesn’t put on.

“Taylor will come and sort your Beetle. I was serious. Don’t drive it. I’ll see you at my place on Sunday. I’ll e-mail you a time.” And like a whirlwind, he’s gone.

Christian Grey spent the night with me, and I feel rested. And there was no sex, only cuddling. He told me he never slept with anyone—but he’s slept three times with me. I grin and slowly climb out of my bed. I feel more optimistic than I have for the last day or so. I head for the kitchen, needing a cup of tea.

After breakfast, I shower and dress quickly for my last day at Clayton’s. It is the end of an era—good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, WSU, Vancouver, the apartment, my Beetle. I glance at the mean machine—it’s only 7:52. I have time.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Assault and Battery: The After-Effects

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:05

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

You wanted to know why I felt confused after you—which euphemism should we apply—spanked, punished, beat, assaulted me. Well, during the whole alarming process, I felt demeaned, debased, and abused. And much to my mortification, you’re right, I was aroused, and that was unexpected. As you are well aware, all things sexual are new to me—I only wish I was more experienced and therefore more prepared. I was shocked to feel aroused.

What really worried me was how I felt afterward. And that's more difficult to articulate. I was happy that you were happy. I felt relieved that it wasn't as painful as I thought it would be. And when I was lying in your arms, I felt … sated. But I feel very uncomfortable, guilty even, feeling that way. It doesn't sit well with me, and I'm confused as a result. Does that answer your question?

I hope the world of Mergers and Acquisitions is as stimulating as ever … and that you weren't too late.

Thank you for staying with me.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Free Your Mind

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:24

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Interesting … if slightly overstated title heading, Miss Steele.

To answer your points:

• I'll go with spanking—as that's what it was.

• So you felt demeaned, debased, abused, and assaulted—how very Tess Durbeyfield of you. I believe it was you who decided on the debasement, if I remember correctly. Do you really feel like this or do you think you ought to feel like this? Two very different things. If that *is* how you feel, do you think you could just try to embrace these feelings, deal with them, for me? That's what a submissive would do.

• I am grateful for your inexperience. I value it, and I'm only beginning to understand what it means. Simply put … it means that you are mine in every way.

• Yes, you were aroused, which in turn was very arousing, there's nothing wrong with that.

• Happy does not even begin to cover how I felt. Ecstatic joy comes close.

• Punishment spanking hurts far more than sensual spanking—so that's about as hard as it gets, unless, of course, you commit some major transgression, in which case I'll use some implement to punish you with. My hand was very sore. But I like that.

• I felt sated, too—more so than you could ever know.

• Don't waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc. We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between ourselves. You need to free your mind and listen to your body.

• The world of M&A is not nearly as stimulating as you are, Miss Steele.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# Holy crap … *mine in every way*. My breath hitches.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Consenting Adults!

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:26

**To**: Christian Grey

Aren't you in a meeting?

I'm very glad your hand was sore.

And if I listened to my body, I'd be in Alaska by now.

Ana

P.S.: I will think about embracing these feelings.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: You Didn't Call the Cops
**Date**: May 27 2011 08:35
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,
I am in a meeting discussing the futures market, if you're really interested.

For the record, you stood beside me knowing what I was going to do.

You didn't at any time ask me to stop—you didn't use either safeword.

You are an adult—you have choices.

Quite frankly, I'm looking forward to the next time my palm is ringing with pain.

You're obviously not listening to the right part of your body.

Alaska is very cold and no place to run. I would find you.

I can track your cell phone—remember?

Go to work.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I scowl at the screen. He's right, of course. It's my choice. *Hmm*. Is he serious about coming to find me? Should I decide to escape for a while? My mind flits briefly to my mother's offer. I hit "reply."

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Stalker
**Date**: May 27 2011 08:36
**To**: Christian Grey

Have you sought therapy for your stalker tendencies?

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Stalker? Me?
**Date**: May 27 2011 08:38
**To**: Anastasia Steele

I pay the eminent Dr. Flynn a small fortune with regard to my stalker and other tendencies.
Go to work.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Expensive Charlatans

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:40

**To**: Christian Grey

May I humbly suggest you seek a second opinion? I am not sure that Dr. Flynn is very effective.

Miss Steele

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Second Opinions

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:43

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Not that it's any of your business, humble or otherwise, but Dr. Flynn is the second opinion.

You will have to speed, in your new car, putting yourself at unnecessary risk—I think that's against the rules.

GO TO WORK.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: SHOUTY CAPITALS

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:47

**To**: Christian Grey

As the object of your stalker tendencies, I think it is my business, actually.

I haven't signed yet. So rules, schmules. And I don't start until 9:30.

Miss Steele

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Descriptive Linguistics

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:49

**To**: Anastasia Steele

"Schmules"? Not sure where that appears in Webster's Dictionary.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Descriptive Linguistics

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:52

**To**: Christian Grey

It's between control freak and stalker.

And descriptive linguistics is a hard limit for me.

Will you stop bothering me now?

I'd like to go to work in my new car.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Challenging but Amusing Young Women

**Date**: May 27 2011 08:56

**To**: Anastasia Steele

My palm is twitching.

Drive safely, Miss Steele.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

The Audi is a joy to drive. It has power steering. Wanda, my Beetle, has no power in it at all—anywhere—so my daily workout, which was driving my Beetle, will cease. Oh, but I will have a personal trainer to contend with, according to Christian's rules. I frown. I hate exercising.

While I am driving, I try to analyze our e-mail exchange. He's a patronizing son of a bitch sometimes. And then I think of Grace and I feel guilty. But of course, she wasn't his birth mother. *Hmm*, that's a whole world of unknown pain. Well, patronizing son of a bitch works well, then. Yes. I'm an adult, thank you for reminding me, Christian Grey, and it is my choice. The problem is, I just want Christian, not all his … baggage—and right now he has a 747 cargo hold's worth of baggage. Could I just lie back and embrace it? Like a submissive? I've said I'd try. It's an awfully big ask.

I pull into the parking lot at Clayton's. As I make my way in, I can hardly believe it's my last day. Fortunately, the store is busy and time passes quickly. At lunchtime, Mr. Clayton summons me from the stockroom. He's standing beside a motorcycle courier.

"Miss Steele?" the courier asks. I frown questioningly at Mr. Clayton, who shrugs, as puzzled as me. My heart sinks. What has Christian sent me now? I sign for the small package and open it immediately. It's a BlackBerry. My heart

sinks further. I switch it on.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: BlackBerry ON LOAN

**Date**: May 27 2011 11:15

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I need to be able to contact you at all times, and since this is your most honest form of communication, I figured you needed a BlackBerry.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Consumerism Gone Mad

**Date**: May 27 2011 13:22

**To**: Christian Grey

I think you need to call Dr. Flynn right now.

Your stalker tendencies are running wild.

I am at work. I will e-mail you when I get home.

Thank you for yet another gadget.

I wasn't wrong when I said you were the ultimate consumer.

Why do you do this?

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Sagacity from One So Young

**Date**: May 27 2011 13:24

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Fair point well made, as ever, Miss Steele.

Dr. Flynn is on vacation.

And I do this because I can.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I put the thing in my back pocket, hating it already. E-mailing Christian is addictive, but I am supposed to be working. It buzzes once against my behind … *How apt*, I think ironically, but summoning all my willpower, I ignore it.

At four, Mr. and Mrs. Clayton gather all the other employees in the shop and, during a hair-curlingly embarrassing speech, present me with a check for three hundred dollars. In that moment, all the events from the past three weeks well up inside of me: exams, graduation, an intense, fucked-up billionaire, deflowering, hard and soft limits, playrooms with no consoles, helicopter rides, and the fact that I will move tomorrow. Amazingly, I hold myself together. My subconscious is in awe. I hug the Claytons hard.

They have been kind and generous employers, and I will miss them.

KATE IS CLIMBING OUT of her car when I arrive home.

"What's that?" she says accusingly, pointing at the Audi. I can't resist.

"It's a car," I quip. She narrows her eyes, and for a brief moment, I wonder if she's going to put me across her knee, too. "My graduation present." I try to act nonchalant. *Yes, I get expensive cars given to me every day*. Her mouth drops open.

"Generous, over-the-top bastard, isn't he?"

I nod. "I did try not to accept it, but frankly, it's just not worth the fight."

Kate purses her lips. "No wonder you're overwhelmed. I did note that he stayed."

"Yeah." I smile wistfully.

"Shall we finish packing?"

I nod and follow her inside. I check the e-mail from Christian.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Sunday

**Date**: May 27 2011 13:40

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Shall I see you at 1 p.m. Sunday?

The doctor will be at Escala to see you at 1:30.

I'm leaving for Seattle now.

I hope your move goes well, and I look forward to Sunday.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Jeez, he could be discussing the weather. I decide to e-mail him once we've finished packing. He can be such fun one minute, and then he can be so formal and stuffy the next. It's difficult to keep up. Honestly, it's like an e-mail to an employee. I roll my eyes at it defiantly and join Kate to pack.

KATE AND I ARE in the kitchen when there's a knock at the door. Taylor stands on the porch, looking immaculate in his suit. I notice the trace of ex-army in his buzz cut, his trim physique, and his cool stare.

"Miss Steele," he says, "I've come for your car."

"Oh yes, of course. Come in, I'll get the keys."

Surely this is above and beyond the call of duty. I wonder again at Taylor's job description. I hand him the keys, and we walk in an uncomfortable silence—for me—toward the light blue Beetle. I open the door and remove the flashlight from the glove box. That's it. I have nothing else that's personal in Wanda. *Good-bye, Wanda. Thank you*. I caress her roof as I close the passenger door.

"How long have you worked for Mr. Grey?" I ask.

"Four years, Miss Steele."

Suddenly, I have an overwhelming urge to bombard him with questions. What this man must know about Christian, all his secrets. But then he's probably signed an NDA. I look nervously at him. He has the same taciturn expression as Ray, and I warm to him.

"He's a good man, Miss Steele," he says with a smile. Then he gives me a little nod, climbs into my car, and drives away.

Apartment, Beetle, Clayton's—it's all change now. I shake my head as I wander back inside. And the biggest change of all is Christian Grey. Taylor thinks he's a *good man*. Can I believe him?

JOSÉ JOINS US WITH Chinese takeout at eight. We're done. We're packed and ready to go. He brings several bottles of beer, and Kate and I sit on the couch while he's cross-legged on the floor between us. We watch crap TV, drink beer, and, as the evening wears on, we fondly and loudly reminisce as the beer takes effect. It's been a good four years.

The atmosphere between José and me has returned to normal, the attempted kiss forgotten. Well, it's been swept under the rug that my inner goddess is lying on, eating grapes and tapping her fingers, waiting not so patiently for Sunday. There's a knock on the door, and my heart leaps into my throat. Is it …?

Kate answers the door and is nearly knocked off her feet by Elliot. He seizes her in a Hollywood-style clinch that moves quickly into a European art house embrace. *Honestly … get a room*. José and I stare at each other. I'm appalled at their lack of modesty.

"Shall we walk down to the bar?" I ask José, who nods frantically. We are too uncomfortable with the unrestrained sexing unfolding in front of us. Kate looks up at me, flushed and bright-eyed.

"José and I are going for a quick drink." I roll my eyes at her. Ha! I can still

roll my eyes in my own time.

"Okay." She grins.

"Hi, Elliot. Bye, Elliot."

He winks a big blue eye at me, and José and I are out the door, giggling like teenagers.

As we stroll down to the bar, I put my arm through José's. God, he's so uncomplicated—I hadn't really appreciated that before.

"You'll still come to the opening of my show, won't you?"

"Of course, José, when is it?"

"June ninth."

"What day is that?" I suddenly panic.

"It's a Thursday."

"Yeah, I should make that … and you will visit us in Seattle?"

"Try to stop me." He grins.

IT'S LATE WHEN I arrive back from the bar. Kate and Elliot are nowhere to be seen, but boy, can they be heard. *Holy shit.* I hope I'm not that loud. I know Christian isn't. I flush at the thought and escape to my room. After a brief not-at-all-awkward-thank-goodness hug, José has gone. I don't know when I'll see him again, probably his photography show, and once again, I'm blown away that he finally has an exhibition. I shall miss him and his boyish charm. I couldn't bring myself to tell him about the Beetle. I know he'll freak when he finds out, and I can only deal with one man at a time freaking out at me. Once in my room, I check the mean machine, and of course, there's an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Where Are You?

**Date**: May 27 2011 22:14

**To**: Anastasia Steele

"*I am at work. I will e-mail you when I get home*."

Are you still at work or have you packed your phone, BlackBerry, and MacBook?

Call me, or I may be forced to call Elliot.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Crap … *José … shit.*

I grab my phone. Five missed calls and one voice message. Tentatively, I listen to the message. It's Christian.

*"I think you need to learn to manage my expectations. I am not a patient man.*

*If you say you are going to contact me when you finish work, then you should have the decency to do so. Otherwise, I worry, and it's not an emotion I'm familiar with, and I don't tolerate it very well. Call me."*

Double crap. Will he ever give me a break? I scowl at the phone. He is suffocating me. With a deep dread uncurling in my stomach, I scroll down to his number and press "call." My heart is in my mouth as I wait for him to answer. He'd probably like to beat seven shades of shit out of me. The thought is depressing.

"Hi," he says softly, and his response knocks me off balance because I am expecting his anger, but if anything, he sounds relieved.

"Hi," I murmur.

"I was worried about you."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't reply, but I'm fine."

He pauses for a beat.

"Did you have a pleasant evening?" He is crisply polite.

"Yes. We finished packing and Kate and I had Chinese takeout with José." I close my eyes tightly as I say José's name. Christian says nothing.

"How about you?" I ask to fill the sudden deafening chasm of silence. I will not let him make me feel guilty about José.

Eventually, he sighs.

"I went to a fund-raising dinner. It was deathly dull. I left as soon as I could."

He sounds so sad and resigned. My heart clenches. I picture him all those nights ago sitting at the piano in his huge living room and the unbearable bittersweet melancholy of the music he was playing.

"I wish you were here," I whisper, because I have an urge to hold him. Soothe him. Even though he won't let me. I want his proximity.

"Do you?" he murmurs blandly. *Holy shit.* This doesn't sound like him, and my scalp prickles with dawning apprehension.

"Yes," I breathe. After an eternity, he sighs.

"I'll see you Sunday?"

"Yes, Sunday," I murmur, and a thrill courses through my body.

"Good night."

"Good night, Sir."

My address catches him unawares, I can tell by his sharp intake of breath.

"Good luck with your move tomorrow, Anastasia." His voice is soft. And we're both hanging on the phone like teenagers, neither wanting to hang up.

"You hang up," I whisper. Finally, I sense his smile.

"No, you hang up." And I know he's grinning.

"I don't want to."

“Neither do I.”

“Were you very angry with me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you still?”

“No.”

“So you’re not going to punish me?”

“No. I’m an in-the-moment kind of guy.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“You can hang up now, Miss Steele.”

“Do you really want me to, Sir?”

“Go to bed, Anastasia.”

“Yes, Sir.”

We both stay on the line.

“Do you ever think you’ll be able to do what you’re told?” He’s amused and exasperated at once.

“Maybe. We’ll see after Sunday.” And I press “end” on the phone.

---

Elliot stands and admires his handiwork. He has replugged our TV into the satellite system in our Pike Place Market apartment. Kate and I flop onto the couch giggling, impressed by his prowess with a power drill. The flat screen looks odd against the brickwork of the converted warehouse, but no doubt I will get used to it.

“See, baby, easy.” He grins a wide, white-toothed smile at Kate, and she almost literally dissolves into the couch.

I roll my eyes at the pair of them.

“I’d love to stay, baby, but my sister is back from Paris. It’s a compulsory family dinner tonight.”

“Can you come by after?” Kate asks tentatively, all soft and un-Kate-like.

I stand and make my way over to the kitchen area on the pretense of unpacking one of the crates. They are going to get icky.

“I’ll see if I can escape,” he promises.

“I’ll come down with you.” Kate smiles.

“Laters, Ana.” Elliot grins.

“Bye, Elliot. Say hi to Christian from me.”

“Just hi?” His eyebrows shoot up suggestively.

“Yes.” I flush. He winks at me, and I go crimson as he follows Kate out of the apartment.

Elliot is adorable and so different from Christian. He’s warm, open, physical,

very physical, too physical, with Kate. They can barely keep their hands off each other—to be honest it's embarrassing—and I am pea green with envy.

Kate returns about twenty minutes later with pizza, and we sit, surrounded by crates, in our new open space, eating straight from the box. Kate's dad has done us proud. The apartment is not large, but it's big enough, three bedrooms and a large living space that looks out onto Pike Place Market itself. It's all solid wood floors and red brick, and the kitchen tops are smooth concrete, very utilitarian, very now. We both love that we will be in the heart of the city.

At eight, the entry-phone buzzes. Kate leaps up—and my heart leaps into my mouth.

"Delivery, Miss Steele, Miss Kavanagh." Disappointment flows freely and unexpectedly through my veins. It's not Christian.

"Second floor, apartment two."

Kate buzzes the delivery boy in. His mouth falls open when he sees Kate, all tight jeans, T-shirt, and hair piled high with escaping tendrils. She has that effect on men. He holds a bottle of champagne with a helicopter-shaped balloon attached. She gives him a dazzling smile to send him on his way and proceeds to read the card out to me.

*Ladies,*
*Good luck in your new home.*
*Christian Grey*

Kate shakes her head in disapproval.

"Why can't he just write 'from Christian'? And what's with the weird helicopter balloon?"

"*Charlie Tango*."

"What?"

"Christian flew me to Seattle in his helicopter." I shrug.

Kate stares at me openmouthed. I have to say I love these occasions—Katherine Kavanagh, silent and floored—they are so rare. I take a brief and luxurious moment to enjoy it.

"Yep, he has a helicopter, which he flew himself," I state proudly.

"Of course the obscenely rich bastard has a helicopter. Why didn't you tell me?" Kate looks accusingly at me, but she's smiling, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I've had a lot on my mind lately."

She frowns.

"Are you going to be okay while I'm away?"

"Of course," I answer reassuringly. *New city, no job … nut-job boyfriend.*

"Did you give him our address?

“No, but stalking is one of his specialties,” I muse matter-of-factly.

Kate’s brow knits further.

“Somehow I’m not surprised. He worries me, Ana. At least it’s a good champagne and it’s chilled.”

Of course. Only Christian would send chilled champagne, or get his secretary to do it … or maybe Taylor. We open it there and then and find our teacups—they were the last items to be packed.

“Bollinger Grande Année Rosé 1999, an excellent vintage.” I grin at Kate, and we clink teacups.

I WAKE EARLY TO a gray Sunday morning after a surprisingly refreshing night’s sleep and lie awake staring at my crates. *You should really be unpacking these*, my subconscious nags, pursing her harpy lips together. *No … today’s the day*. My inner goddess is beside herself, hopping from foot to foot. Anticipation hangs heavy and portentous over my head like a dark tropical storm cloud. Butterflies flood my belly—as well as a darker, carnal, captivating ache as I try to imagine what he will do to me … and of course, I have to sign that damned contract, or do I? I hear the ping of incoming mail from the mean machine on the floor beside my bed.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: My Life in Numbers

**Date**: May 29 2011 08:04

**To**: Anastasia Steele

If you drive you’ll need this access code for the underground garage at Escala: 146963.

Park in bay five—it’s one of mine.

Code for the elevator: 1880.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: An Excellent Vintage

**Date**: May 29 2011 08:08

**To**: Christian Grey

Yes, Sir. Understood.

Thank you for the champagne and the blow-up *Charlie Tango*, which is now tied to my bed.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Envy

**Date**: May 29 2011 08:11

**To**: Anastasia Steele

You're welcome.

Don't be late.

Lucky *Charlie Tango*.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I roll my eyes at his bossiness, but his last line makes me smile. I head for the bathroom, wondering if Elliot made it back last night and trying hard to rein in my nerves.

I CAN DRIVE THE Audi in high heels! At 12:55 p.m. precisely, I pull into the garage at Escala and park in bay five. How many bays does he own? The Audi SUV and R8 are there, along with two smaller Audi SUVs … *hmm*. I check my seldom-worn mascara in the light-up vanity mirror on my visor. Didn't have one of these in the Beetle.

*Go girl!* My inner goddess has her pom-poms in hand—she's in cheerleading mode. In the infinity mirrors of the elevator, I check out my plum dress—well, Kate's plum dress. The last time I wore this, he wanted to peel it off me. My body clenches at the thought. The feeling is just exquisite, and I catch my breath. I'm wearing the underwear that Taylor bought for me. I flush at the thought of his buzz cut roaming the aisles of Agent Provocateur or wherever he bought it. The doors open, and I'm facing the foyer of apartment number one.

Taylor stands at the double doors as I step out of the elevator.

"Good afternoon, Miss Steele," he says.

"Oh, please, call me Ana."

"Ana." He smiles. "Mr. Grey is expecting you."

*I bet he is*.

Christian is seated on his living room couch reading the Sunday papers. He glances up as Taylor directs me into the living area. The room is exactly as I remember it—it's been a whole week since I've been here, but it feels so much longer. Christian looks cool and calm—actually, he looks heavenly. He's in a loose white linen shirt and jeans, no shoes or socks. His hair is tousled and unkempt, and his eyes twinkle wickedly. He rises and strolls toward me, an amused appraising smile on his beautiful sculptured lips.

I stand immobilized at the entrance of the room, paralyzed by his beauty and the sweet anticipation of what's to come. The familiar charge between us is

there, sparking slowly in my belly, drawing me to him.

"Hmm … that dress," he murmurs approvingly as he gazes down at me. "Welcome back, Miss Steele," he whispers and, clasping my chin, he leans down and proffers a gentle, light kiss on my lips. The touch of his lips to mine reverberates throughout my body. My breath hitches.

"Hi," I whisper as I flush.

"You're on time. I like punctual. Come." He takes my hand and leads me to the couch. "I wanted to show you something," he says as we sit. He hands me the *Seattle Times*. On page eight, there's a photograph of the two of us together at the graduation ceremony. *Holy crap*. I'm in the paper. I check the caption.

*Christian Grey and friend at the graduation ceremony at WSU Vancouver.*

I laugh. "So I'm your 'friend' now."

"So it would appear. And it's in the newspaper, so it must be true." He smirks.

Sitting beside me, his whole body is turned toward me, one of his legs tucked under the other. Reaching over, he tucks my hair behind my ear with his long index finger. My body comes alive at his touch, waiting and needful.

"So, Anastasia, you have a much better idea of what I'm about since you were last here."

"Yes." *Where's he going with this?*

"And yet you've returned."

I nod shyly, and his eyes blaze. He shakes his head as if he's struggling with the idea.

"Have you eaten?" he asks out of the blue.

*Shit*.

"No."

"Are you hungry?" He's really trying not to look annoyed.

"Not for food," I whisper, and his nostrils flare in reaction.

He leans forward and whispers in my ear. "You are as eager as ever, Miss Steele, and just to let you in on a little secret, so am I. But Dr. Greene is due here shortly." He sits up. "I wish you'd eat," he scolds me mildly. My heated blood cools. Holy cow—the doctor. I'd forgotten.

"What can you tell me about Dr. Greene?" I ask to distract us both.

"She's the best ob-gyn in Seattle. What more can I say?" He shrugs.

"I thought I was seeing your doctor, and don't tell me you're really a woman, because I won't believe you."

He gives me a don't-be-ridiculous look.

"I think it's more appropriate that you see a specialist. Don't you?" he says

mildly.

I nod. Holy Moses, if she's the best ob-gyn, he's scheduled her to see me on a Sunday—at lunchtime! I cannot begin to imagine how much that costs. Christian frowns suddenly as if recalling something unpleasant.

"Anastasia, my mother would like you to come to dinner this evening. I believe Elliot is asking Kate, too. I don't know how you feel about that. It will be odd for me to introduce you to my family."

*Odd? Why?*

"Are you ashamed of me?" I can't keep the wounded hurt out of my voice.

"Of course not." He rolls his eyes.

"Why is it odd?"

"Because I've never done it before."

"Why are you allowed to roll your eyes, and I'm not?"

He blinks at me. "I wasn't aware that I was."

"Neither am I, usually," I snap.

Christian glares at me, speechless. Taylor appears at the doorway.

"Dr. Greene is here, sir."

"Show her up to Miss Steele's room."

*Miss Steele's room!*

"Ready for some contraception?" he asks as he stands and holds out his hand to me.

"You're not going to come as well, are you?" I gasp, shocked.

He laughs. "I'd pay very good money to watch, believe me, Anastasia, but I don't think the good doctor would approve."

I take his hand, and he pulls me up into his arms and kisses me deeply. I clutch his arms, taken by surprise. His hand is in my hair, holding my head, and he pulls me against him, his forehead against mine.

"I'm so glad you're here," he whispers. "I can't wait to get you naked."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dr. Greene is tall, blond, and immaculate, dressed in a royal-blue suit. I'm reminded of the women who work in Christian's office. She's like an identikit model—another Stepford blonde. Her long hair is swept up in an elegant chignon. She must be in her early forties.

"Mr. Grey." She shakes Christian's outstretched hand.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Christian says.

"Thank you for making it worth my while, Mr. Grey. Miss Steele." She smiles, her eyes cool and assessing.

We shake hands, and I know she's one of those women who doesn't tolerate fools gladly. Like Kate. I like her immediately. She gives Christian a pointed stare, and after an awkward beat, he takes his cue.

"I'll be downstairs," he mutters, and he leaves what will be my bedroom.

"Well, Miss Steele. Mr. Grey is paying me a small fortune to attend to you. What can I do for you?"

AFTER A THOROUGH EXAMINATION and lengthy discussion, Dr. Greene and I decide on the mini pill. She writes me a prepaid prescription and instructs me to pick the pills up tomorrow. I love her no-nonsense attitude—she has lectured me until she's as blue as her dress about taking it at the same time every day. And I can tell she's burning with curiosity about my so-called relationship with Mr. Grey. I don't give her any details. Somehow I don't think she'd look so calm and collected if she'd seen his Red Room of Pain. I flush as we pass its closed door and head back downstairs to the art gallery that is Christian's living room.

Christian is reading, seated on his couch. A breathtaking aria is playing on the music system, swirling around him, cocooning him, filling the room with a sweet, soulful song. For a moment, he looks serene. He turns and glances at us when we enter and smiles warmly at me.

"Are you done?" he asks as if he's genuinely interested. He points the remote at a sleek white box beneath the fireplace that houses his iPod, and the exquisite melody fades but continues in the background. Standing, he strolls toward us.

"Yes, Mr. Grey. Look after her; she's a beautiful, bright young woman."

Christian is taken aback—as am I. What an inappropriate thing for a doctor to

say. Is she giving him some kind of not-so-subtle warning? Christian recovers himself.

"I fully intend to," he mutters, bemused.

Gazing at him, I shrug, embarrassed.

"I'll send you my bill," she says crisply as she shakes his hand.

"Good day, and good luck to you, Ana." She smiles, her eyes crinkling, as we shake hands.

Taylor appears from nowhere to escort her through the double doors and out to the elevator. How does he do that? Where does he lurk?

"How was that?" Christian asks.

"Fine, thank you. She said that I had to abstain from all sexual activity for the next four weeks."

Christian's mouth drops open in shock, and I cannot keep a straight face any longer and grin at him like an idiot.

"Gotcha!"

He narrows his eyes, and I immediately stop laughing. In fact, he looks rather forbidding. *Oh, shit.* My subconscious quails in the corner as all the blood drains from my face, and I imagine him putting me across his knee again.

"Gotcha!" he says, and smirks. He grabs me around my waist and pulls me up against him. "You are incorrigible, Miss Steele," he murmurs, staring down into my eyes as he weaves his fingers into my hair, holding me firmly in place. He kisses me, hard, and I cling on to his muscular arms for support.

"As much as I'd like to take you here and now, you need to eat and so do I. I don't want you passing out on me later," he murmurs against my lips.

"Is that all you want me for—my body?" I whisper.

"That and your smart mouth," he breathes.

He kisses me again passionately, and then abruptly releases me, taking my hand and leading me to the kitchen. I am reeling. One minute we're joking and the next … I fan my heated face. He's just sex on legs, and now I have to recover my equilibrium and eat something. The aria is still playing in the background.

"What's the music?"

" 'Villa Lobos,' an aria from *Bachianas Brasileiras*. Good, isn't it?"

"Yes," I murmur in total agreement.

The breakfast bar is laid for two. Christian takes a salad bowl from the fridge.

"Chicken caesar salad okay with you?"

*Oh, thank heavens, nothing too heavy.*

"Yes, fine, thank you."

I watch as he moves gracefully through his kitchen. He's so at ease with his

body on one level, but then he doesn't like to be touched … so maybe deep down he isn't. No man is an island, I muse—except perhaps Christian Grey.

"What are you thinking?" he asks, pulling me from my reverie. I flush.

"I was just watching the way you move."

He raises an eyebrow, amused.

"And?" he says dryly.

I flush some more.

"You're very graceful."

"Why thank you, Miss Steele," he murmurs. He sits down beside me, holding a bottle of wine. "Chablis?"

"Please."

"Help yourself to salad," he says, his voice soft. "Tell me—what method did you opt for?"

I am momentarily thrown by his question, when I realize he's talking about Dr. Greene's visit.

"Mini pill."

He frowns.

"And will you remember to take it regularly, at the right time, every day?"

*Jeez … of course I will*. How does he know? I blush at the thought—probably from one or more of the fifteen.

"I'm sure you'll remind me," I murmur dryly.

He glances at me with amused condescension.

"I'll put an alarm on my calendar." He smirks. "Eat."

The chicken caesar is delicious. To my surprise, I'm famished, and for the first time since I've been with him, I finish my meal before he does. The wine is crisp, clean, and fruity.

"Eager as ever, Miss Steele?" he smiles down at my empty plate.

I look at him from beneath my lashes.

"Yes," I whisper.

His breath hitches. And as he stares down at me, the atmosphere between us slowly shifting, evolving … charging. His look goes from dark to smoldering, taking me with him. He stands, closing the distance between us, and tugs me off my barstool into his arms.

"Do you want to do this?" he breathes, looking down at me intently.

"I haven't signed anything."

"I know—but I'm breaking all the rules these days."

"Are you going to hit me?"

"Yes, but it won't be to hurt you. I don't want to punish you right now. If you'd caught me yesterday evening, well, that would have been a different

story."

Holy cow. He *wants* to hurt me … how do I deal with this? I can't hide the horror on my face.

"Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise, Anastasia. One of the reasons people like me do this is because we either like to give or receive pain. It's very simple. You don't, so I spent a great deal of time yesterday thinking about that."

He pulls me against him, and his erection presses into my belly. I should run, but I can't. I'm drawn to him on some deep, elemental level that I can't begin to understand.

"Did you reach any conclusions?" I whisper.

"No, and right now, I just want to tie you up and fuck you senseless. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes," I breathe as everything in my body tightens at once … *wow*.

"Good. Come." He takes my hand and, leaving all the dirty dishes on the breakfast bar, we head upstairs.

My heart starts pounding. This is it. I'm really going to do this. My inner goddess is spinning like a world-class ballerina, pirouette after pirouette. He opens the door to his playroom, standing back for me to walk through, and I am once more in the Red Room of Pain.

It's the same, the smell of leather, citrus-scented polish, and dark wood, all very sensual. My blood is running heated and scared through my system—adrenaline mixed with lust and longing. It's a heady, potent cocktail. Christian's stance has changed completely, subtly altered, harder and meaner. He gazes down at me and his eyes are heated, lustful … hypnotic.

"When you're in here, you are completely mine," he breathes, each word slow and measured. "To do with as I see fit. Do you understand?"

His gaze is so intense. I nod, my mouth dry, my heart feeling as if it will jump out of my chest.

"Take your shoes off," he orders softly.

I swallow, and rather clumsily, I take them off. He bends and picks them up and deposits them beside the door.

"Good. Don't hesitate when I ask you to do something. Now I'm going to peel you out of this dress. Something I've wanted to do for a few days, if I recall. I want you to be comfortable with your body, Anastasia. You have a beautiful body, and I like to look at it. It is a joy to behold. In fact, I could gaze at you all day, and I want you unembarrassed and unashamed of your nakedness. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

“Yes, what?” He leans over me, glaring.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you mean that?” he snaps.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Lift your arms up over your head.”

I do as instructed, and he reaches down and grabs the hem. Slowly, he pulls my dress up over my thighs, my hips, my belly, my breasts, my shoulders, and up over my head. He stands back to examine me and absentmindedly folds my dress, not taking his eyes off me. He places it on the large chest beside the door. Reaching up, he pulls at my chin, his touch searing me.

“You’re biting your lip,” he breathes. “You know what that does to me,” he adds darkly. “Turn around.”

I turn immediately, no hesitation. He unclasps my bra and then, taking both straps, he slowly pulls it down my arms, brushing my skin with his fingers and the tip of his thumbnails as he slides my bra off. His touch sends shivers down my spine, waking every nerve ending in my body. He’s standing behind me, so close that I feel the heat radiating from him, warming me, warming me all over. He pulls my hair so it’s all hanging down my back, grasps a handful at my nape, and angles my head to one side. He runs his nose down my exposed neck, inhaling all the way, then back up to my ear. The muscles in my belly clench, carnal and wanting. Jeez, he’s hardly touched me, and I want him.

“You smell as divine as ever, Anastasia,” he whispers as he places a soft kiss beneath my ear.

I moan.

“Quiet,” he breathes. “Don’t make a sound.”

Pulling my hair behind me, to my surprise, he starts braiding it in one large braid, his fingers fast and deft. He ties it with an unseen hair tie when he’s finished and gives it a quick tug so I’m forced back against him.

“I like your hair braided in here,” he whispers.

*Hmm … why?*

He releases my hair.

“Turn around,” he orders.

I do as I’m bid, my breathing shallow, fear and longing mixed together. It’s an intoxicating mix.

“When I tell you to come in here, this is how you will dress. Just in your panties. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” He glowers at me.

“Yes, Sir.”

A trace of a smile lifts the corner of his mouth.

"Good girl." His eyes burn into mine. "When I tell you to come in here, I expect you to kneel over there." He points to a spot beside the door. "Do it now."

I blink, processing his words, then turn and rather clumsily kneel as directed.

"You can sit back on your heels."

I sit back.

"Place your hands and forearms flat on your thighs. Good. Now part your knees. Wider. Wider. Perfect. Look down at the floor."

He walks over to me, and I can see his feet and shins in my field of vision. Naked feet. I should be taking notes if he wants me to remember. He reaches down and grasps my braid again, then pulls my head back so I am looking up at him. It's only just not painful.

"Will you remember this position, Anastasia?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. Stay here, don't move." He leaves the room.

I'm on my knees, waiting. Where's he gone? What is he going to do to me? Time shifts. I have no idea how long he leaves me like this … a few minutes, five, ten? My breathing becomes shallower; the anticipation is devouring me from the inside out.

And suddenly he's back—and all at once I'm calmer and more excited in the same breath. *Could I be more excited?* I can see his feet. He's changed his jeans. These are older, ripped, soft, and over-washed. Holy cow. These jeans are hot. He shuts the door and hangs something on the back.

"Good girl, Anastasia. You look lovely like that. Well done. Stand up."

I stand, but I keep my face down.

"You may look at me."

I peek up at him, and he's staring at me intently, assessing, but his eyes soften. He's taken off his shirt. Oh my … I want to touch him. The top button of his jeans is undone.

"I'm going to chain you now, Anastasia. Give me your right hand."

I give him my hand. He turns it palm up, and before I know it, he swats the center with a riding crop I hadn't noticed is in his right hand. It happens so quickly that the surprise hardly registers. Even more astonishing—it doesn't hurt. Well, not much, just a slight ringing sting.

"How does that feel?" he asks.

I blink at him, confused.

"Answer me."

"Okay." I frown.

“Don’t frown.”

I blink and try for impassive. I succeed.

“Did that hurt?”

“No.”

“This is not going to hurt. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” My voice is uncertain. *Is it really not going to hurt?*

“I mean it,” he says.

Jeez, my breathing is so shallow. Does he know what I’m thinking? He shows me the crop. It’s brown plaited leather. My eyes jerk up to meet his, and they’re alight with fire and a trace of amusement.

“We aim to please, Miss Steele,” he murmurs. “Come.” He takes my elbow and moves me to beneath the grid. He reaches up and takes down some shackles with black leather cuffs.

“This grid is designed so the shackles move across the grid.”

I glance up. *Holy shit*—it’s like a subway map.

“We’re going to start here, but I want to fuck you standing up. So we’ll end up by the wall over there.” He points with the riding crop to where the large wooden X is on the wall.

“Put your hands above your head.”

I oblige immediately, feeling like I’m exiting my body—a casual observer of events as they unfold around me. This is beyond fascinating, beyond erotic. It’s singularly the most exciting and scary thing I’ve ever done. I’m entrusting myself to a beautiful man who, by his own admission, is fifty shades of fucked up. I suppress the brief thrill of fear. Kate and Elliot, they know I’m here.

He stands very close as he fastens the cuffs. I’m staring at his chest. His proximity is heavenly. He smells of body wash and Christian, an inebriating mix, and that drags me back into the now. I want to run my nose and tongue through that smattering of chest hair. I could just lean forward …

He steps back and gazes at me, his expression hooded, salacious, carnal, and I am helpless, my hands tied, but just looking at his lovely face, reading his need and longing for me, I can feel the dampness between my legs. He walks slowly around me.

“You look mighty fine trussed up like this, Miss Steele. And your smart mouth quiet for now. I like that.”

Standing in front of me again, he hooks his fingers into my panties and, at a most unhurried pace, peels them down my legs, stripping me agonizingly slowly, so that he ends up kneeling in front of me. Not taking his eyes off mine, he scrunches my panties in his hand, holds them up to his nose, and inhales deeply. *Holy fuck. Did he just do that?* He grins wickedly at me and tucks them into the

pocket of his jeans.

Uncoiling from the floor, rising lazily, like a jungle cat, he points the end of the riding crop at my navel, leisurely circling it—tantalizing me. At the touch of the leather, I quiver and gasp. He walks around me again, trailing the crop around the middle of my body. On his second circuit, he suddenly flicks the crop, and it hits me underneath my behind … against my sex. I cry out in surprise as all my nerve endings stand to attention. I pull against the restraints. The shock runs through me, and it's the sweetest, strangest, hedonistic feeling.

"Quiet," he whispers as he walks around me again, the crop slightly higher around the middle of my body. This time when he flicks it against me in the same place, I'm anticipating it. My body convulses at the sweet, stinging bite.

As he makes his way around me, he flicks again, this time hitting my nipple, and I throw my head back as my nerve endings sing. He hits the other … a brief, swift, sweet chastisement. My nipples harden and elongate from the assault, and I moan loudly, pulling on my leather cuffs.

"Does that feel good?" he breathes.

"Yes."

He hits me again across the buttocks. The crop stings this time.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Sir," I whimper.

He comes to a stop … but I can no longer see him. My eyes are closed as I try to absorb the myriad sensations coursing through my body. Very slowly, he rains small, biting licks of the crop down my belly, heading south. I know where this is leading, and I try to psyche myself up for it—but when he hits my clitoris, I cry out loudly.

"Oh … please!" I groan.

"Quiet," he orders, and he hits me again on my behind.

I did not expect this to be like this … I am lost. Lost in a sea of sensation. And suddenly, he's dragging the crop against my sex, through my pubic hair, down to the entrance of my vagina.

"See how wet you are for this, Anastasia. Open your eyes and your mouth."

I do as I'm told, completely seduced. He pushes the tip of the crop into my mouth, like my dream. *Holy shit*.

"See how you taste. Suck. Suck hard, baby."

My mouth closes around the crop as my eyes lock on his. I can taste the rich leather and the saltiness of my arousal. His eyes are blazing. He's in his element.

He pulls the tip from my mouth, and he stands forward and grabs me and kisses me hard, his tongue invading my mouth. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls me against him. His chest crushes mine, and I itch to touch, but I can't,

my hands useless above me.

"Oh, Anastasia, you taste mighty fine," he breathes. "Shall I make you come?"

"Please," I beg.

The crop bites my buttock. *Ow!*

"Please, what?"

"Please, Sir," I whimper.

He smiles at me, triumphant.

"With this?" He holds the crop up so I can see it.

"Yes, Sir."

"Are you sure?" He looks sternly at me.

"Yes, please, Sir."

"Close your eyes."

I shut the room out, him out … the crop out. He starts small, biting licks of the crop against my belly once more. Moving down, soft small licks against my clitoris, once, twice, three times, again and again, until finally, that's it—I can take no more—and I come, gloriously, loudly, sagging weakly. His arms curl around me as my legs turn to jelly. I dissolve in his embrace, my head against his chest, and I'm mewling and whimpering as the aftershocks of my orgasm consume me. He lifts me, and suddenly we're moving, my arms still tethered above my head, and I can feel the cool wood of the polished cross at my back, and he's popping the buttons on his jeans. He puts me down against the cross briefly while he slides on a condom, and then his hands wrap around my thighs as he lifts me again.

"Lift your legs, baby, wrap them around me."

I feel so weak, but I do as he asks as he wraps my legs around his hips and positions himself beneath me. With one thrust, he's inside me, and I cry out again, listening to his muffled moan at my ear. My arms are resting on his shoulders as he thrusts into me. Jeez, it's deep this way. He thrusts again and again, his face at my neck, his harsh breathing at my throat. I feel the build up again. Jeez, no … not again … I don't think my body will withstand another Earth-shattering moment. But I have no choice … and with an inevitability that's becoming familiar, I let go and come again, and it's sweet and agonizing and intense. I lose all sense of self. Christian follows, shouting his release through clenched teeth and holding me hard and close as he does.

He pulls out of me swiftly and sets me down against the cross, his body supporting mine. Unbuckling the cuffs, he frees my hands, and we both sink to the floor. He pulls me into his lap, cradling me, and I lean my head against his chest. If I had the strength, I'd touch him, but I don't. Belatedly, I realize he's

still wearing his jeans.

"Well done, baby," he murmurs. "Did that hurt?"

"No," I breathe. I can barely keep my eyes open. *Why am I so tired?*

"Did you expect it to?" he whispers as he holds me close, his fingers pushing some escaped tendrils of hair off my face.

"Yes."

"You see, most of your fear is in your head, Anastasia." He pauses. "Would you do it again?"

I think for a moment as fatigue clouds my brain … *Again?*

"Yes." My voice is so soft.

He hugs me tightly.

"Good. So would I," he murmurs, then leans down and softly kisses the top of my head.

"And I haven't finished with you yet."

*Not finished with me yet. Holy Moses*. There's no way I can do any more. I am utterly spent and fighting an overwhelming desire to sleep. I'm leaning against his chest, my eyes are closed, and he's wrapped around me—arms and legs—and I feel … safe, and oh so comfortable. Will he let me sleep, perchance to dream? My mouth quirks up at the silly thought, and turning my face into Christian's chest, I inhale his unique scent and nuzzle him, but immediately he tenses … oh crap. I open my eyes and glance up at him. He's staring down at me.

"Don't," he breathes in warning.

I flush and look back at his chest in longing. I want to run my tongue through the hair, kiss him, and for the first time, I notice he has a few random and faint small, round scars dotted around his chest. *Chicken pox? Measles?* I think absently.

"Kneel by the door," he orders as he sits back, putting his hands on his knees, effectively releasing me. No longer warm, the temperature of his voice has dropped several degrees.

I stumble clumsily up into a standing position and scoot over to the door and kneel as instructed. I'm shaky and very, very tired, monumentally confused. Who would have thought I could have found such gratification in this room. Who could have thought it would be so *exhausting*? My limbs are deliciously heavy, sated. My inner goddess has a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside of her room.

Christian is moving about in the periphery of my vision. My eyes start to droop.

"Boring you, am I, Miss Steele?"

I jump awake, and Christian is standing in front of me, his arms crossed,

glaring down at me. Oh, shit, caught napping—this is not going to be good. His eyes soften as I gaze up at him.

"Stand up," he orders.

I climb warily to my feet. He stares at me and his mouth quirks up.

"You're shattered, aren't you?"

I nod shyly, flushing.

"Stamina, Miss Steele." He narrows his eyes at me. "I haven't had my fill of you yet. Hold out your hands in front as if you're praying."

I blink at him. *Praying! Praying for you to go easy on me*. I do as I'm told. He takes a cable tie and fastens it around my wrists, tightening the plastic. Holy hell. My eyes fly to his.

"Look familiar?" he asks, unable to conceal his smile.

Jeez … the plastic cable ties. *Restocking* at Clayton's! It all becomes clear. I gape up at him as adrenaline spikes though my body anew. Okay—that's got my attention—I'm awake now.

"I have scissors here." He holds them up for me to see. "I can cut you out of this in a moment."

I try to pull my wrists apart, testing my bonds, and as I do, the plastic bites into my flesh. It's sore, but if I relax my wrists they're fine—the tie is not cutting into my skin.

"Come." He takes my hands and leads me over to the four-poster bed. I notice now that it has dark red sheets on it and a shackle at each corner.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, "I want more—much, much more."

And my heartbeat starts pounding again. *Oh boy*.

"But I'll make this quick. You're tired. Hold on to the post," he says.

I frown. *Not on the bed then?* I find I can part my hands as I grasp the ornately carved wooden post.

"Lower," he orders. "Good. Don't let go. If you do, I'll spank you. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

He stands behind me and grasps my hips, and then quickly lifts me backward so I'm bending forward, holding the post.

"Don't let go, Anastasia," he warns. "I'm going to fuck you hard from behind. Hold the post to support your weight. Understand?"

"Yes."

He smacks me across my behind with his hand. *Ow* … It stings.

"Yes, Sir," I mutter quickly.

"Part your legs." He puts his leg between mine, and holding my hips, he

pushes my right leg to the side.

"That's better. After this, I'll let you sleep."

Sleep? I'm panting. I'm not thinking of sleep now. He reaches up and gently strokes my back.

"You have such beautiful skin, Anastasia," he breathes as he bends down and kisses me along my spine, gentle featherlight kisses. At the same time, his hands move around to my front, palming my breasts, and as he does this he traps my nipples between his fingers and tugs them gently.

I stifle my moan as I feel my whole body respond, coming alive once more for him.

He gently bites and sucks me at my waist, tugging my nipples, and my hands tighten on the exquisitely carved post. His hands drop away, and I hear the now familiar tear of foil, and he kicks off his jeans.

"You have such a captivating, sexy ass, Anastasia Steele. What I'd like to do to it." His hands smooth and shape each of my buttocks, then his fingers glide down, and he slips two fingers inside me.

"So wet. You never disappoint, Miss Steele," he whispers, and I hear the wonder in his voice. "Hold tight … this is going to be quick, baby."

He grabs my hips and positions himself, and I brace myself for his assault. But he reaches over me and grabs my braid near the end and winds it around his wrist to my nape, holding my head in place. Very slowly he eases into me, pulling my hair at the same time … *Oh, the fullness*. He eases out of me slowly, and his other hand grabs my hip, holding tight, and then he slams into me, jolting me forward.

"Hold on, Anastasia!" he shouts through clenched teeth.

I grip the post harder and push back against him as he continues his merciless onslaught, again and again, his fingers digging into my hip. My arms are aching, my legs feel uncertain, my scalp is getting sore from his tugging my hair … and I can feel a gathering deep inside me. Oh no … and for the first time, I fear my orgasm … if I come … I'll collapse. Christian continues to move roughly against me, in me, his breathing harsh, moaning, groaning. My body is responding … *how?* I feel a quickening. But suddenly, Christian stills, slamming really deep.

"Come on, Ana, give it to me," he groans, and my name on his lips sends me over the edge as I become all body and spiraling sensation and sweet, sweet release, and then completely and utterly mindless.

When sense returns, I'm lying on him. He's on the floor, and I'm lying on top of him, my back to his front, and I'm staring at the ceiling, all postcoital, glowing, shattered. *Oh … the carabiners*, I think absently—I'd forgotten about

those. Christian nuzzles my ear.

"Hold up your hands," he says softly.

My arms feel like they're made of lead, but I hold them up. He wields the scissors and passes one blade under the plastic.

"I declare this Ana open," he breathes, and cuts the plastic.

I giggle and rub my wrists as they're freed. I feel his grin.

"That is such a lovely sound," he says wistfully. He sits suddenly, taking me with him so that I'm once more sitting in his lap.

"That's my fault," he says, and shifts me so that he can rub my shoulders and arms. Gently he massages some life back into my limbs.

*What?*

I glance up at him behind me, trying to understand what he means.

"That you don't giggle more often."

"I'm not a great giggler," I mumble sleepily.

"Oh, but when it happens, Miss Steele, 'tis a wonder and joy to behold."

"Very flowery, Mr. Grey," I mutter, trying to keep my eyes open.

His eyes soften, and he smiles.

"I'd say you're thoroughly fucked and in need of sleep."

"That wasn't flowery at all," I grumble playfully.

He grins and gently lifts me off him and stands, gloriously naked. I wish momentarily that I were more awake to really appreciate him. Picking up his jeans, he slides them back on, commando.

"Don't want to frighten Taylor, or Mrs. Jones for that matter," he mutters.

*Hmm … they must know what a kinky bastard he is*. The thought preoccupies me.

He stoops to help me to my feet and leads me to the door, on the back of which hangs a gray waffle robe. He patiently dresses me as if I'm a small child. I don't have the strength to lift my arms. When I'm covered and respectable, he leans down and kisses me gently, his mouth quirks up in a smile.

"Bed," he says.

*Oh … no …*

"For sleep," he adds reassuringly when he sees my expression.

Suddenly, he scoops me up and carries me curled against his chest to the room down the corridor where earlier today Dr. Greene examined me. My head drops against his chest. I am exhausted. I don't remember ever being this tired. Pulling back the duvet, he lays me down and, even more surprisingly, climbs in beside me and holds me close.

"Sleep now, gorgeous girl," he whispers, and he kisses my hair.

And before I can make a facetious comment, I'm asleep.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Soft lips brush across my temple, leaving sweet tender kisses in their wake, and part of me wants to turn and respond, but mostly I want to stay asleep. I moan and burrow into my pillow.

"Anastasia, wake up." Christian's voice is soft, cajoling.

"No," I moan.

"We have to leave in half an hour for dinner at my parents'." He's amused.

I open my eyes reluctantly. It's dusk outside. Christian is leaning over, gazing at me intently.

"Come on, sleepyhead. Get up." He stoops down and kisses me again.

"I've brought you a drink. I'll be downstairs. Don't go back to sleep, or you'll be in trouble," he threatens, but his tone is mild. He kisses me briefly and exits, leaving me blinking sleep from my eyes in the cool, stark room.

I'm refreshed but suddenly nervous. Holy cow, I am meeting his folks! He's just worked me over with a riding crop and trussed me up using a cable tie which I sold him, for heaven's sake—and I'm going to meet his parents. It will be Kate's first time meeting them, too—at least she'll be there for support. I roll my shoulders. They're stiff. His demands for a personal trainer don't seem so outlandish now. In fact, it's mandatory if I am to have any hope of keeping up with him.

I climb slowly out of bed and note that my dress is hanging outside the wardrobe and my bra is on the chair. Where are my panties? I check beneath the chair. Nothing. Then I remember—he squirreled them away in the pocket of his jeans. I flush at the memory, after he … I can't even bring myself to think about it, he was so—barbarous. I frown. *Why hasn't he given me back my panties?*

I steal into the bathroom, bewildered by my lack of underwear. While drying myself after my enjoyable but far too brief shower, I realize he's done this on purpose. He wants me to be embarrassed and ask for my panties back, and he'll either say yes or no. My inner goddess grins at me. *Hell … two can play that particular game*. Resolving there and then not to ask him for them and not give him that satisfaction, I shall go meet his parents sans culottes. *Anastasia Steele!* my subconscious chides me, but I don't want to listen to her—I almost hug myself with glee because I know this will drive him crazy.

Back in the bedroom, I put on my bra, slip into my dress, and climb into my shoes. I remove the braid and hastily brush out my hair, then glance down at the drink he's left. It's pale pink. What's this? Cranberry and sparkling water. Hmm … it tastes delicious and quenches my thirst.

Dashing back into the bathroom, I check myself in the mirror: eyes bright, cheeks slightly flushed, slightly smug look because of my panty plan, and I head downstairs. Fifteen minutes. Not bad, Ana.

Christian is standing by the panoramic window, wearing the grey flannel pants that I love, the ones that hang in that unbelievably sexy way off his hips, and, of course, a white linen shirt. Doesn't he have any other colors? Frank Sinatra sings softly over the surround-sound speakers.

Christian turns and smiles as I enter. He looks at me expectantly.

"Hi," I say softly, and my sphinxlike smile meets his.

"Hi," he says. "How are you feeling?" His eyes are alight with amusement.

"Good, thanks. You?"

"I feel mighty fine, Miss Steele."

He is so waiting for me to say something.

"Frank. I never figured you for a Sinatra fan."

He raises his eyebrows at me, his look speculative.

"Eclectic taste, Miss Steele," he murmurs, and he paces toward me like a panther until he's standing in front of me. His gaze so intense it takes my breath away.

Frank starts crooning … an old song, one of Ray's favorites, *"Witchcraft"* Christian leisurely traces his fingertips down my cheek, and I feel it all the way down *there*.

"Dance with me," he murmurs, his voice husky.

Taking the remote out of his pocket, he turns up the volume and holds his hand out to me, his gray gaze full of promise and longing and humor. He is totally beguiling, and I'm bewitched. I place my hand in his. He grins lazily down at me and pulls me into his embrace, his arm curling around my waist.

I put my free hand on his shoulder and grin up at him, caught in his infectious, playful mood. He sways once, then we're off. Boy, can he dance. We cover the floor, from the window to the kitchen and back again, whirling and turning in time to the music. And he makes it so effortless for me to follow.

We glide around the dining table, over to the piano, and backward and forward in front of the glass wall, Seattle twinkling outside, a dark and magical mural to our dance. I can't help my carefree laugh. He grins down at me as the song comes to a close.

"There's no nicer witch than you," he murmurs, then kisses me sweetly.

“Well, that’s brought some color to your cheeks, Miss Steele. Thank you for the dance. Shall we go and meet my parents?”

“You’re welcome, and yes, I can’t wait to meet them,” I answer breathlessly.

“Do you have everything you need?”

“Oh yes,” I respond sweetly.

“Are you sure?”

I nod as nonchalantly as I can manage under his intense, amused scrutiny. His face splits into a huge grin, and he shakes his head.

“Okay. If that’s the way you want to play it, Miss Steele.”

He grabs my hand, collects his jacket, which is hanging on one of the barstools, and leads me through the foyer to the elevator. Oh, the many faces of Christian Grey. *Will I ever be able to understand this mercurial man?*

I peek up at him in the elevator. He’s enjoying a private joke, a trace of a smile flirting with his lovely mouth. I fear that it may be at my expense. *What was I thinking?* I’m going to see his parents, and I’m not wearing any underwear. My subconscious gives me an unhelpful I-told-you-so expression. In the relative safety of his apartment, it seemed like a fun, teasing idea. Now, I’m almost outside with *no panties*! He peers down at me, and it’s there, the charge building between us. The amused look disappears from his face and his expression clouds, his eyes dark … *oh my*.

The elevator doors open on the ground floor. Christian shakes his head as if to clear his thoughts and gestures for me to exit before him in a most gentlemanly manner. *Who’s he kidding?* He’s no gentleman. He has my panties.

Taylor pulls up in the large Audi. Christian opens the rear door for me, and I climb inside as elegantly as I can, considering my state of wanton undress. I’m grateful that Kate’s plum dress is so clingy and hangs to the top of my knees.

We speed up Interstate 5, both of us quiet, no doubt inhibited by Taylor’s steady presence in the front. Christian’s mood is almost tangible and seems to shift, the humor dissipating slowly as we head north. He’s brooding, staring out the window, and I know he’s slipping away from me. What is he thinking? I can’t ask him. What can I say in front of Taylor?

“Where did you learn to dance?” I ask tentatively. He turns to gaze at me, his eyes unreadable beneath the intermittent light of the passing street lamps.

“Do you really want to know?” he replies softly.

My heart sinks, and now I don’t because I can guess.

“Yes,” I murmur reluctantly.

“Mrs. Robinson was fond of dancing.”

Oh, my worst suspicions confirmed. She has taught him well, and the thought depresses me—there’s nothing I can teach him. I have no special skills. “She

must have been a good teacher."

"She was."

My scalp prickles. Did she have the best of him? Before he became so closed? Or did she bring him out of himself? He has such a fun, playful side. I smile involuntarily as I recall being in his arms as he spun me around his living room, so unexpected, and he has my panties somewhere.

And then there's the Red Room of Pain. I rub my wrists reflexively—thin strips of plastic will do that to a girl. She taught him all that, too, or ruined him, depending on one's point of view. Or perhaps he would have found his way there anyway in spite of Mrs. R. I realize, in that moment, that I hate her. I hope that I never meet her because I will not be responsible for my actions if I do. I can't remember ever feeling this passionately about anyone, especially someone I've never met. Gazing unseeing out the window, I nurse my irrational anger and jealousy.

My mind drifts back to the afternoon. Given what I understand of his preferences, I think he's been easy on me. *Would I do it again?* I can't even pretend to put up an argument against that. Of course I would, if he asked me—as long as he didn't hurt me and if it's the only way to be with him.

That's the bottom line. I want to be with him. My inner goddess sighs with relief. I reach the conclusion that she rarely uses her brain to think but another vital part of her anatomy, and at the moment, it's a rather exposed part.

"Don't," he murmurs.

I frown and turn to look at him.

"Don't what?" I haven't touched him.

"Overthink things, Anastasia." Reaching out, he grasps my hand, draws it up to his lips, and kisses my knuckles gently. "I had a wonderful afternoon. Thank you."

And he's back with me again. I blink up at him and smile shyly. He's so confusing. I ask a question that's been bugging me.

"Why did you use a cable tie?"

He grins at me.

"It's quick, it's easy, and it's something different for you to feel and experience. I know they're quite brutal, and I do like that in a restraining device." He smiles at me mildly. "Very effective at keeping you in your place."

I flush and glance nervously at Taylor, who remains impassive, eyes on the road. *What am I supposed to say to that?* Christian shrugs innocently.

"All part of my world, Anastasia." He squeezes my hand and lets go, staring out the window again.

His world, indeed, and I want to belong in it, but on his terms? I just don't

know. He hasn't mentioned that damned contract. My inner musings do nothing to cheer me. I stare out the window and the landscape has changed. We're crossing one of the bridges, surrounded by inky darkness. The somber night reflects my introspective mood, closing in, suffocating.

I glance briefly at Christian, and he's staring at me.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he asks.

I sigh and frown.

"That bad, huh?" he says.

"I wish I knew what you were thinking."

He smirks. "Ditto, baby," he says as Taylor whisks us into the night toward Bellevue.

IT IS JUST BEFORE eight when the Audi turns into the driveway of a colonial-style mansion. It's breathtaking, even down to the roses around the door. Picture-book perfect.

"Are you ready for this?" Christian asks as Taylor pulls up outside the impressive front door.

I nod, and he gives my hand another reassuring squeeze.

"First for me, too," he whispers, then smiles wickedly. "Bet you wish you were wearing your underwear right now," he teases.

I flush. I'd forgotten my missing panties. Fortunately, Taylor has climbed out of the car and is opening my door so he can't hear our exchange. I scowl at Christian, who grins broadly as I turn and climb out of the car.

Dr. Grace Trevelyan-Grey is on the doorstep waiting for us. She looks elegantly sophisticated in a pale blue silk dress. Behind her stands Mr. Grey, I presume, tall, blond, and as handsome in his own way as Christian.

"Anastasia, you've met my mother, Grace. This is my dad, Carrick."

"Mr. Grey, what a pleasure to meet you." I smile and shake his outstretched hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, Anastasia."

"Please, call me Ana."

His blue eyes are soft and gentle.

"Ana, how lovely to see you again." Grace wraps me in a warm hug. "Come in, my dear."

"Is she here?" I hear a screech from within the house. I glance nervously at Christian.

"That would be Mia, my little sister," he says almost irritably, but not quite.

There's an undercurrent of affection in his words, the way his voice grows softer and his eyes crinkle as he mentions her name. Christian obviously adores

her. It's a revelation. And she comes barreling down the hall, raven haired, tall, and curvaceous. She's about my age.

"Anastasia! I've heard so much about you." She hugs me hard.

*Holy cow*. I can't help but smile at her boundless enthusiasm.

"Ana, please," I murmur as she drags me into the large vestibule. It's all dark wood floors and antique rugs with a sweeping staircase to the second floor.

"He's never brought a girl home before," says Mia, dark eyes bright with excitement.

I glimpse Christian rolling his eyes, and I raise an eyebrow at him. He narrows his eyes at me.

"Mia, calm down," Grace admonishes softly. "Hello, darling," she says as she kisses Christian on both cheeks. He smiles down at her warmly, and then shakes hands with his father.

We all turn and head into the living room. Mia has not let go of my hand. The room is spacious, tastefully furnished in creams, browns, and pale blues—comfortable, understated, and very stylish. Kate and Elliot are cuddled together on a couch, clutching champagne flutes. Kate bounces up to embrace me, and Mia finally releases my hand.

"Hi, Ana!" She beams. "Christian." She nods curtly to him.

"Kate." He is equally formal with her.

I frown at their exchange. Elliot grasps me in an all-embracing hug. What is this, Hug Ana Week? This dazzling display of affection—I'm just not used to it. Christian stands at my side, wrapping his arm around me. Placing his hand on my hip, he spreads out his fingers and pulls me close. Everyone is staring at us. It's unnerving.

"Drinks?" Mr. Grey seems to recover himself. "Prosecco?"

"Please," Christian and I speak in unison.

Oh … this is beyond weird. Mia claps her hands.

"You're even saying the same things. I'll get them." She scoots out of the room.

I flush scarlet, and seeing Kate sitting with Elliot, it occurs to me suddenly that the only reason Christian invited me was because Kate is here. Elliot probably freely and happily asked Kate to meet his parents. Christian was trapped—knowing that I would have found out via Kate. I frown at the thought. He's been forced into the invitation. The realization is bleak and depressing. My subconscious nods sagely, a you've-finally-worked-it-out-stupid look on her face.

"Dinner's almost ready," Grace says as she follows Mia out of the room.

Christian frowns as he gazes at me.

“Sit,” he commands, pointing to the plush couch, and I do as I’m told, carefully crossing my legs. He sits down beside me but doesn’t touch me.

“We were just talking about vacations, Ana,” Mr. Grey says kindly. “Elliot has decided to follow Kate and her family to Barbados for a week.”

I glance at Kate, and she grins, her eyes bright and wide. She’s delighted. Katherine Kavanagh, show some dignity!

“Are you taking a break now that you’ve finished your degree?” Mr. Grey asks.

“I’m thinking about going to Georgia for a few days,” I reply.

Christian gapes at me, blinking a couple of times, his expression unreadable. *Oh, shit*. I haven’t mentioned this to him.

“Georgia?” he murmurs.

“My mother lives there, and I haven’t seen her for a while.”

“When were you thinking of going?” His voice is low.

“Tomorrow, late evening.”

Mia saunters back into the living room and hands us champagne flutes filled with pale pink prosecco.

“Your good health!” Mr. Grey raises his glass. An appropriate toast from a doctor’s husband, it makes me smile.

“For how long?” Christian asks, his voice deceptively soft.

*Holy crap … he’s angry*.

“I don’t know yet. It will depend how my interviews go tomorrow.”

His jaw clenches, and Kate gets that interfering look on her face. She smiles over-sweetly.

“Ana deserves a break,” she says pointedly at Christian. Why is she so antagonistic toward him? What is her problem?

“You have interviews?” Mr. Grey asks.

“Yes, for internships at two publishers, tomorrow.”

“I wish you the best of luck.”

“Dinner is ready,” Grace announces.

We all stand. Kate and Elliot follow Mr. Grey and Mia out of the room. I go to follow, but Christian clutches my elbow, bringing me to an abrupt halt.

“When were you going to tell me you were leaving?” he asks urgently. His tone is soft, but he’s masking his anger.

“I’m not leaving, I’m going to see my mother, and I was only thinking about it.”

“What about our arrangement?”

“We don’t have an arrangement yet.”

He narrows his eyes, and then seems to remember himself. Releasing my

hand, he takes my elbow and leads me out of the room.

"This conversation is not over," he whispers threateningly as we enter the dining room.

Oh, crapola. Don't get your panties in such a twist … *and give me back mine*. I glare at him.

The dining room reminds me of our private dinner at the Heathman. A crystal chandelier hangs over the dark wood table and there's a massive, ornately carved mirror on the wall. The table, covered with a crisp white linen tablecloth, is set, with a bowl of pale pink peonies as the centerpiece. It's stunning.

We take our places. Mr. Grey is at the head of the table, while I sit at his right hand, and Christian is seated beside me. Mr. Grey reaches for the opened bottle of red wine and offers some to Kate. Mia takes her seat beside Christian and, grabbing his hand, squeezes it tightly. Christian smiles warmly at her.

"Where did you meet, Ana?" Mia asks him.

"She interviewed me for the WSU student newspaper."

"Which Kate edits," I add, hoping to steer the conversation away from me.

Mia beams at Kate, seated opposite next to Elliot, and they start talking about the student newspaper.

"Wine, Ana?" Mr. Grey asks.

"Please." I smile at him. Mr. Grey rises to fill the rest of the glasses.

I peek up at Christian, and he turns to look at me, his head cocked to one side.

"What?" he asks.

"Please don't be mad at me," I whisper.

"I'm not mad at you."

I stare at him. He sighs.

"Yes, I am mad at you." He closes his eyes briefly.

"Palm-twitchingly mad?" I ask nervously.

"What are you two whispering about?" Kate interjects.

I flush, and Christian glares at her in a butt-out-of-this-Kavanagh kind of way. Even Kate wilts under his stare.

"Just about my trip to Georgia," I say sweetly, hoping to diffuse their mutual hostility.

Kate smiles, a wicked gleam in her eye.

"How was José when you went to the bar with him on Friday?"

*Holy fuck, Kate*. I widen my eyes at her. What is she doing? She widens her eyes back at me, and I realize she's trying to make Christian jealous. *How little she knows*. I thought I'd got away with this.

"He was fine," I murmur.

Christian leans over.

“Palm-twitchingly mad,” he whispers. “Especially now.” His tone is quiet and deadly.

*Oh no*. I squirm.

Grace reappears carrying two plates, followed by a pretty young woman with blond pigtails, dressed smartly in pale blue, carrying a tray of plates. Her eyes immediately find Christian’s in the room. She blushes and gazes at him from under her long mascara-covered lashes. *What?*

Somewhere in the house the phone starts ringing.

“Excuse me.” Mr. Grey rises again and exits.

“Thank you, Gretchen,” Grace says gently, frowning as Mr. Grey exits. “Just leave the tray on the console.” Gretchen nods, and with another furtive glance at Christian, she leaves.

So the Greys have staff, and the staff are eyeing up *my* would-be Dominant. Can this evening get any worse? I scowl at my hands in my lap.

Mr. Grey returns.

“Call for you, darling. It’s the hospital,” he says to Grace.

“Please start, everyone.” Grace smiles as she hands me a plate and leaves.

It smells delicious—chorizo and scallops with roasted red peppers and shallots, sprinkled with flat-leaf parsley. And in spite of the fact that my stomach is churning from Christian’s veiled threats, the surreptitious glances from pretty little Miss Pigtails, and the debacle of my missing underwear, I am starving. I flush as I realize it’s the physical effort of this afternoon that’s given me such an appetite.

Moments later Grace returns, her brow furrowed. Mr. Grey cocks his head to one side … like Christian.

“Everything okay?”

“Another measles case.” Grace sighs.

“Oh no.”

“Yes, a child. The fourth case this month. If only people would get their kids vaccinated.” She shakes her head sadly, and then smiles. “I’m so glad our children never went through that. They never caught anything worse than chicken pox, thank goodness. Poor Elliot,” she says as she sits down, smiling indulgently at her son. Elliot frowns mid-chew and squirms uncomfortably. “Christian and Mia were lucky. They got it so mildly, only a spot to share between them.”

Mia giggles, and Christian rolls his eyes.

“So, did you catch the Mariners game, Dad?” Elliot’s clearly keen to move the conversation on.

The hors d’oeuvres are delicious, and I concentrate on eating while Elliot, Mr.

Grey, and Christian talk baseball. Christian seems relaxed and calm talking to his family. My mind is working furiously. Damn Kate, what game is she playing? *Will he punish me?* I quail at the thought. I haven't signed that contract yet. Perhaps I won't. Perhaps I'll stay in Georgia where he can't reach me.

"How are you settling into your new apartment, dear?" Grace asks politely.

I'm grateful for her question, distracting me from my discordant thoughts, and I tell her about our move.

As we finish our starters, Gretchen appears, and not for the first time, I wish I felt able to put my hands freely on Christian just to let her know—he may be fifty shades of fucked up, but he's mine. She proceeds to clear the table, brushing rather too closely to Christian for my liking. Fortunately, he seems oblivious to her, but my inner goddess is smoldering and not in a good way.

Kate and Mia are waxing lyrical about Paris.

"Have you been to Paris, Ana?" Mia asks innocently, distracting me from my jealous reverie.

"No, but I'd love to go." I know I'm the only one at the table who has never left the USA.

"We honeymooned in Paris." Grace smiles at Mr. Grey, who grins back at her.

It's almost embarrassing to witness. They obviously love each other deeply, and I wonder for a brief moment what it must be like to grow up with both one's parents in situ.

"It's a beautiful city," Mia agrees. "In spite of the Parisians. Christian, you should take Ana to Paris," Mia states firmly.

"I think Anastasia would prefer London," Christian says softly.

*Oh … he remembered*. He places his hand on my knee—his fingers traveling up my thigh. My whole body tightens in response. *No … not here, not now*. I flush and shift, trying to pull away from him. His hand clamps down on my thigh, stilling me. I reach for my wine in desperation.

Little Miss European Pigtails returns, all coy glances and swaying hips, with our entrées: beef Wellington, I think. Fortunately, she gives us our plates and then leaves, although she lingers handing Christian his. He looks quizzically at me as I watch her close the dining room door.

"So what was wrong with the Parisians?" Elliot asks his sister. "Didn't they take to your winsome ways?"

"Ugh, no they didn't. And Monsieur Floubert, the ogre I was working for, he was such a domineering tyrant."

I splutter into my wine.

"Anastasia, are you okay?" Christian asks solicitously, taking his hand off my thigh.

Humor has returned to his voice. *Oh, thank heavens*. When I nod, he pats my back gently and only removes his hand when he knows I've recovered.

The beef is delicious and served with roasted sweet potatoes, carrots, parsnips, and green beans. It is even more palatable since Christian manages to retain his good humor for the rest of the meal. I suspect that it's because I'm eating so heartily. The conversation flows freely among the Greys, warm and caring, gently teasing one another. Over our dessert of lemon syllabub, Mia regales us with her exploits in Paris, lapsing at one point into fluent French. We all stare at her, and she stares back puzzled, until Christian tells her in equally fluent French what she's done, whereupon she bursts into a fit of giggles. She has a very infectious laugh, and soon we're all in stitches.

Elliot holds forth about his latest building project, a new eco-friendly community to the north of Seattle. I glance up at Kate, and she's hanging on every word Elliot says, her eyes glowing with lust or love. I haven't quite worked out which yet. He grins down at her, and it's as if an unspoken promise passes between them. *Laters, baby*, he's saying, and it's hot, freaking hot. I flush just watching them.

I sigh and peek up at Fifty Shades. I could stare at him forever. He has light stubble over his chin, and my fingers itch to scratch it and feel it against my face, against my breasts … between my thighs. I blush at the direction of my thoughts. He peers down at me and raises his hand to pull at my chin.

"Don't bite your lip," he murmurs huskily. "I want to do that."

Grace and Mia clear our dessert glasses and head to the kitchen, while Mr. Grey, Kate, and Elliot discuss the merits of solar panels in Washington State. Christian, feigning interest in their conversation, puts his hand once more on my knee, and his fingers travel up my thigh. My breathing hitches and I press my thighs together in a bid to halt his progress. I can see him smirk.

"Shall I give you a tour of the grounds?" he asks me quite openly.

I know I'm meant to say yes, but I don't trust him. Before I can answer, however, he's on his feet and holding his hand out to me. I place my hand in his, and I feel all the muscles clench deep in my belly, responding to his dark, hungry gaze.

"Excuse me," I say to Mr. Grey, and follow Christian out of the dining room.

He leads me through the hallway and into the kitchen, where Mia and Grace are stacking the dishwasher. European Pigtails is nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to show Anastasia the backyard," Christian says innocently to his mother. She waves us out with a smile as Mia heads back to the dining room.

We step out onto a gray flagstone patio area lit by recessed lights in the rock. There are shrubs in gray stone tubs and a chic metal table and chairs set up in

one corner. Christian walks past those, up some steps, and onto a vast lawn that leads down to the bay … oh my—it's beautiful. Seattle twinkles on the horizon and the cool, bright May moon etches a sparkling silver path across the water toward a jetty where two boats are moored. Beside the jetty stands a boathouse. It is so picturesque, so peaceful. I stand and gape for a moment.

Christian pulls me behind him, and my heels sink into the soft grass.

"Stop, please." I am stumbling in his wake.

He stops and gazes at me, his expression unfathomable.

"My heels. I need to take my shoes off."

"Don't bother," he says, and he bends down and scoops me over his shoulder. I squeal loudly with shocked surprise, and he gives me a ringing slap on my behind.

"Keep your voice down," he growls.

*Oh no … this is not good*. My subconscious is quaking at the knees. He's mad about something—could be José, Georgia, no panties, biting my lip. Jeez, he's easy to rile.

"Where are we going?" I breathe.

"Boathouse," he snaps.

I hang on to his hips as I'm tipped upside down, and he strides purposefully in the moonlight across the lawn.

"Why?" I sound breathless, bouncing on this shoulder.

"I need to be alone with you."

"What for?"

"Because I'm going to spank and then fuck you."

"Why?" I whimper softly.

"You know why," he hisses.

"I thought you were an in-the-moment guy?" I plead breathlessly.

"Anastasia, I'm in the moment, trust me."

*Holy fuck.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Christian bursts through the wooden door of the boathouse and pauses to flick on some switches. Fluorescents ping and buzz in sequence as harsh white light floods the large wooden building. From my upside-down view, I can see an impressive cruiser in the dock floating gently on the dark water, but I only get a brief look before he's carrying me up some wooden stairs to the room above.

He pauses at the doorway and flips another switch—halogens, this time, that are softer, on a dimmer—and we're in an attic room with sloping ceilings. It's decorated with a nautical New England theme: navy blues and creams with dashes of red. The furnishings are sparse, just a couple of couches are all I can see.

Christian sets me on my feet on the wooden floor. I don't have time to examine my surroundings—my eyes can't leave him. I am mesmerized … watching him like one would watch a rare and dangerous predator, waiting for him to strike. His breathing is harsh, but then he's just carried me across the lawn and up a flight of stairs. Gray eyes blaze with anger, need, and pure unadulterated lust.

*Holy shit*. I could spontaneously combust from his look alone.

"Please don't hit me," I whisper, pleading.

His brow furrows, his eyes widening. He blinks twice.

"I don't want you to spank me, not here, not now. Please don't."

His mouth drops open in surprise, and beyond brave, I tentatively reach up and run my fingers down his cheek, along the edge of his sideburn, to the stubble on his chin. It's a curious mixture of soft and prickly. Slowly closing his eyes, he leans his face into my touch, and his breath hitches in his throat. Reaching up with my other hand, I run my fingers into his hair. I love his hair. His soft moan is barely audible, and when he opens his eyes, his look is wary, like he doesn't understand what I'm doing.

Stepping forward so I am flush against him, I pull gently on his hair, bringing his mouth down to mine, and I kiss him, forcing my tongue between his lips and into his mouth. He groans, and his arms embrace me, pulling me to him. His hands find their way into my hair, and he kisses me back, hard and possessive. His tongue and my tongue twist and turn together, consuming each other. He

tastes divine.

He pulls back suddenly, our collective breathing ragged and mingling. My hands drop to his arms, and he glares down at me.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispers, confused.

"Kissing you."

"You said no."

"What?" *No to what?*

"At the dinner table, with your legs."

*Oh … that's what this is all about.*

"But we were at your parents' dining table." I stare up at him, completely bewildered.

"No one's ever said no to me before. And it's so—hot."

His eyes widen, filled with wonder and lust. It's a heady mix. I swallow instinctively. His hand moves down to my behind. He pulls me sharply against him, against his erection.

*Oh my …*

"You're mad and turned on because I said no?" I breathe, astonished.

"I'm mad because you never mentioned Georgia to me. I'm mad because you went drinking with that guy who tried to seduce you when you were drunk and who left you when you were ill with an almost complete stranger. What kind of friend does that? And I'm mad and aroused because you closed your legs on me." His eyes glitter dangerously, and he's slowly inching up the hem of my dress.

"I want you, and I want you now. And if you're not going to let me spank you —which you deserve—I'm going to fuck you on the couch this minute, quickly, for my pleasure, not yours."

My dress is now barely covering my naked behind. He moves suddenly so that his hand is cupping my sex, and one of his fingers sinks slowly into me. His other arm holds me firmly in place around my waist. I suppress my moan.

"This is mine," he whispers aggressively. "All mine. Do you understand?" He eases his finger in and out as he gazes down at me, gauging my reaction, his eyes burning.

"Yes, yours," I breathe as my desire, hot and heavy, surges through my bloodstream, affecting … everything. My nerve endings, my breathing. My heart is pounding, trying to leave my chest, the blood thrumming in my ears.

Abruptly, he moves, doing several things at once: withdrawing his fingers, leaving me wanting, unzipping his fly, and pushing me down onto the couch so he's lying on top of me.

"Hands on your head," he commands through gritted teeth as he kneels,

forcing my legs wider, and reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket. He takes out a foil packet, gazing down at me, his expression dark, before shrugging off his jacket so it falls to the floor. He rolls the condom down over his impressive length.

I place my hands on my head, and I know it's so I won't touch him. I'm so turned on. I feel my hips moving already up to meet him—wanting him inside me, like this—rough and hard. Oh … the anticipation.

"We don't have long. This will be quick, and it's for me, not you. Do you understand? Don't come, or I will spank you," he says through clenched teeth.

*Holy crap … how do I stop?*

With one swift thrust, he's fully inside me. I groan loudly, gutturally, and revel in the fullness of his possession. He puts his hands on mine on top of my head, his elbows hold my arms out and down, and his legs pinion me. I am trapped. He's everywhere, overwhelming me, almost suffocating. But it's heavenly, too; this is my power, this is what I do to him, and it's a hedonistic, triumphant feeling. He moves quickly and furiously inside me, his breathing harsh at my ear, and my body responds, melting around him. *I mustn't come*. No. But I'm meeting him thrust for thrust, a perfect counterpoint. Abruptly, and all too soon, he rams into me and stills as he finds his release, air hissing through his teeth. He relaxes momentarily, so I feel his entire, delicious weight on me. I'm not ready to let him go, my body craving relief, but he's so heavy, and in that moment, I can't push against him. All of a sudden, he withdraws, leaving me aching and hungry for more. He glares down at me.

"Don't touch yourself. I want you frustrated. That's what you do to me by not talking to me, by denying me what's mine." His eyes blaze anew, angry again.

I nod, panting. He stands and removes the condom, knotting it at the end, and puts it in his pants pocket. I gaze at him, my breathing still erratic, and involuntarily I squeeze my thighs together, trying to find some relief. Christian does up his fly and runs his hand through his hair as he reaches down to collect his jacket. He turns back to gaze down at me, his expression softer.

"We'd better get back to the house."

I sit up, a little unsteadily, dazed.

"Here. You may put these on."

From his inside pocket, he produces my panties. I don't grin as I take them from him, but inside I know—I've taken a punishment fuck but gained a small victory over the panties. My inner goddess nods in agreement, a satisfied grin over her face: *You didn't have to ask for them*.

"*Christian!*" Mia shouts from the floor below.

He turns and raises his eyebrows at me. "Just in time. Christ, she can be really

irritating."

I scowl back at him, hastily restore my panties to their rightful place, and stand with as much dignity as I can muster in my just-fucked state. Quickly, I attempt to smooth my just-fucked hair.

"Up here, Mia," he calls down. "Well, Miss Steele, I feel better for that—but I still want to spank you," he says softly.

"I don't believe I deserve it, Mr. Grey, especially after tolerating your unprovoked attack."

"Unprovoked? You kissed me." He tries his best to look wounded.

I purse my lips. "It was attack as the best form of defense."

"Defense against what?"

"You and your twitchy palm."

He cocks his head to one side and smiles at me as Mia comes clattering up the stairs. "But it was tolerable?" he asks softly.

I flush. "Barely," I whisper, but I can't help my smirk.

"Oh, there you are." She beams at us.

"I was showing Anastasia around." Christian holds his hand out to me, his gray eyes intense.

I put my hand into his, and he gives it a soft squeeze.

"Kate and Elliot are about to leave. Can you believe those two? They can't keep their hands off each other." Mia feigns disgust and looks from Christian to me. "What have you been doing in here?"

Jeez, she's forward. I blush scarlet.

"Showing Anastasia my rowing trophies," Christian says without missing a beat, completely poker-faced. "Let's go say good-bye to Kate and Elliot."

*Rowing trophies?* He pulls me gently in front of him, and as Mia turns to go, he swats my behind. I gasp in surprise.

"I will do it again, Anastasia, and soon," he threatens quietly close to my ear, then he pulls me into an embrace, my back to his front, and kisses my hair.

BACK IN THE HOUSE, Kate and Elliot are making their farewells to Grace and Mr. Grey. Kate hugs me hard.

"I need to speak to you about antagonizing Christian," I hiss quietly in her ear as she embraces me.

"He needs antagonizing; then you can see what he's really like. Be careful, Ana—he's so controlling," she whispers. "See you later."

*I KNOW WHAT HE'S REALLY LIKE—YOU DON'T!* I scream at her in my head. I'm fully aware that her actions come from a good place, but sometimes she just oversteps boundaries, and right now she's so far over that she's in the

neighboring state. I scowl at her, and she pokes her tongue out at me, making me smile unwillingly. Playful Kate is novel; must be Elliot's influence. We wave them off at the doorway, and Christian turns to me.

"We should go, too—you have interviews tomorrow."

Mia embraces me warmly as we say our good-byes.

"We never thought he'd find anyone!" she gushes.

I flush, and Christian rolls his eyes again. I purse my lips. Why can he do that when I can't? I want to roll my eyes back at him, but I do not dare, not after his threat in the boathouse.

"Take care of yourself, Ana dear," Grace says kindly.

Christian, embarrassed or frustrated by the lavish attention I'm receiving from the remaining Greys, grabs my hand and pulls me to his side.

"Let's not frighten her away or spoil her with too much affection," he grumbles.

"Christian, stop teasing," Grace scolds him indulgently, her eyes glowing with love and affection for him.

Somehow, I don't think he's teasing. I surreptitiously watch their interaction. It's obvious Grace adores him with a mother's unconditional love. He bends and kisses her stiffly.

"Mom," he says, and there's an undercurrent in his voice—reverence maybe?

"Mr. Grey—good-bye and thank you." I hold out my hand to him, and he hugs me, too!

"Please, call me Carrick. I do hope we see you again very soon, Ana."

Our farewells said, Christian leads me to the car, where Taylor is waiting. *Has he been waiting here the whole time?* Taylor opens my door, and I slide into the back of the Audi.

I feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders. Jeez, what a day. I am exhausted, physically and emotionally. After a brief conversation with Taylor, Christian clambers into the car beside me. He turns to face me.

"Well, it seems my family likes you, too," he murmurs.

*Too?* The depressing thought about how I came to be invited pops unbidden and very unwelcome into my head. Taylor starts the car and heads away from the circle of light in the driveway to the darkness of the road. I gaze at Christian, and he's staring at me.

"What?" he asks, his voice quiet.

I flounder momentarily. No—I'll tell him. He's always complaining that I don't talk to him.

"I think that you felt trapped into bringing me to meet your parents." My voice is soft and hesitant. "If Elliot hadn't asked Kate, you'd never have asked

me.” I can’t see his face in the dark, but he tilts his head, gaping at me.

“Anastasia, I’m delighted that you’ve met my parents. Why are you so filled with self-doubt? It never ceases to amaze me. You’re such a strong, self-contained young woman, but you have such negative thoughts about yourself. If I hadn’t wanted you to meet them, you wouldn’t be here. Is that how you were feeling the whole time you were there?”

*Oh!* He wanted me there—and it’s a revelation. He doesn’t seem uncomfortable answering me as he would if he were hiding the truth. He seems genuinely pleased that I’m here … a warm glow spreads slowly through my veins. He shakes his head and reaches for my hand. I glance nervously at Taylor.

“Don’t worry about Taylor. Talk to me.”

I shrug.

“Yes. I thought that. And another thing, I only mentioned Georgia because Kate was talking about Barbados. I haven’t made up my mind.”

“Do you want to go and see your mother?”

“Yes.”

He looks oddly at me, like he’s having some internal struggle.

“Can I come with you?” he asks eventually.

*What!*

“Erm … I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I was hoping for a break from all this … intensity to try to think things through.”

He stares at me.

“I’m too intense?”

I burst out laughing. “That’s putting it mildly!”

In the light of the passing street lamps, I see his lips quirk up.

“Are you laughing at me, Miss Steele?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Mr. Grey,” I reply with mock seriousness.

“I think you dare, and I think you do laugh at me, frequently.”

“You are quite funny.”

“Funny?”

“Oh yes.”

“Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?”

“Oh … a lot of one and some of the other.”

“Which way more?”

“I’ll leave you to figure that out.”

“I’m not sure if I can figure anything out around you, Anastasia,” he says sardonically, and then continues quietly, “What do you need to think about in

Georgia?”

“Us,” I whisper.

He stares at me, impassive.

“You said you’d try,” he murmurs.

“I know.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“Possibly.”

He shifts as if uncomfortable.

“Why?”

*Holy crap*. How did this suddenly become such an intense and meaningful conversation? It’s been sprung on me, like an exam that I’m not prepared for. What do I say? Because I think I love you, and you just see me as a toy. Because I can’t touch you, because I’m too frightened to show you any affection in case you flinch or tell me off or worse—beat me? What can I say?

I stare momentarily out of the window. The car is heading back across the bridge. We are both shrouded in darkness, masking our thoughts and feelings, but we don’t need the night for that.

“Why, Anastasia?” Christian presses me for an answer.

I shrug, trapped. I don’t want to lose him. In spite of all his demands, his need to control, his scary vices, I have never felt as alive as I do now. It’s a thrill to be sitting here beside him. He’s so unpredictable, sexy, smart, and funny. But his moods … oh—and he wants to hurt me. He says he’ll think about my reservations, but it still scares me. I close my eyes. What can I say? Deep down I would just like more, more affection, more playful Christian, more … love.

He squeezes my hand.

“Talk to me, Anastasia. I don’t want to lose you. This last week …”

We’re coming near to the end of the bridge, and the road is once more bathed in the neon light of the street lamps so his face is intermittently in the light and the dark. And it’s such a fitting metaphor. This man, whom I once thought of as a romantic hero, a brave shining white knight—or the dark knight, as he said. He’s not a hero; he’s a man with serious, deep emotional flaws, and he’s dragging me into the dark. Can I not guide him into the light?

“I still want more,” I whisper.

“I know,” he says. “I’ll try.”

I blink up at him, and he relinquishes my hand and pulls at my chin, releasing my trapped lip.

“For you, Anastasia, I will try.” He’s radiating sincerity.

And that’s my cue. I unbuckle my seatbelt, reach across, and clamber into his lap, taking him completely by surprise. Wrapping my arms around his head, I

kiss him, long and hard, and in a nanosecond, he's responding.

"Stay with me, tonight," he breathes. "If you go away, I won't see you all week. Please."

"Yes," I acquiesce. "And I'll try, too. I'll sign your contract." And it's a spur-of-the-moment decision.

He gazes down at me.

"Sign after Georgia. Think about it. Think about it hard, baby."

"I will." And we sit in silence for a mile or two.

"You really should wear your seat belt," Christian whispers disapprovingly into my hair, but he makes no move to shift me from his lap.

I nuzzle up against him, eyes closed, my nose at his throat, drinking in his sexy Christian-and-spiced-musky-bodywash fragrance, my head on his shoulder. I let my mind drift, and I allow myself to fantasize that he loves me. Oh, and it's so real, tangible almost, and a small part of my nasty harpy subconscious acts completely out of character and *dares to hope*. I'm careful not to touch his chest but just snuggle in his arms as he holds me tightly.

All too soon, I'm torn from my impossible daydream.

"We're home," Christian murmurs, and it's such a tantalizing sentence, full of so much potential.

*Home, with Christian.* Except his apartment is an art gallery, not a home.

Taylor opens the door for us, and I thank him shyly, aware that he's been within earshot of our conversation, but his kind smile is reassuring and gives nothing away. Once out of the car, Christian assesses me critically. *Oh no … what have I done now?*

"Why don't you have a jacket?" he frowns as he shrugs out of his and drapes it over my shoulders.

Relief washes through me.

"It's in my new car," I reply sleepily, yawning.

He smirks at me.

"Tired, Miss Steele?"

"Yes, Mr. Grey." I feel bashful under his teasing scrutiny. Nevertheless I feel an explanation is in order. "I've been prevailed upon in ways I never thought possible today."

"Well, if you're really unlucky, I may prevail upon you some more," he promises as he takes my hand and leads me into the building. *Holy shit … Again!*

I gaze up at him in the elevator. I have assumed he'd like me to sleep with him, and then I remember that he doesn't sleep with anyone, although he has with me a few times. I frown, and abruptly his gaze darkens. He reaches up and grasps my chin, freeing my lip from teeth.

“One day I will fuck you in this elevator, Anastasia, but right now you’re tired—so I think we should stick to a bed.”

Bending down, he clamps his teeth around my lower lip and pulls gently. I melt against him, and my breathing stops as my insides unfurl with longing. I reciprocate, fastening my teeth over his top lip, teasing him, and he groans. When the elevator doors open, he grabs my hand and tugs me into the foyer, through the double doors, and into the hallway.

“Do you need a drink or anything?”

“No.”

“Good. Let’s go to bed.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re going to settle for plain old vanilla?”

He cocks his head to one side. “Nothing plain or old about vanilla—it’s a very intriguing flavor,” he breathes.

“Since when?”

“Since last Saturday. Why? Were you hoping for something more exotic?”

My inner goddess pops her head above the parapet.

“Oh no. I’ve had enough exotic for one day.” My inner goddess pouts at me, failing miserably to hide her disappointment.

“Sure? We cater for all tastes here—at least thirty-one flavors.” He grins at me lasciviously.

“I’ve noticed,” I reply dryly.

He shakes his head. “Come on, Miss Steele, you have a big day tomorrow. Sooner you’re in bed, sooner you’ll be fucked, and sooner you can sleep.”

“Mr. Grey, you are a born romantic.”

“Miss Steele, you have a smart mouth. I may have to subdue it some way. Come.” He leads me down the hallway into his bedroom and kicks the door closed.

“Hands in the air,” he commands.

I oblige, and in one breathtakingly swift move he removes my dress like a magician, grasping it at the hem and pulling it smoothly and fleetly over my head.

“Ta-da!” he says playfully.

I giggle and applaud politely. He bows gracefully, grinning. *How can I resist him when he’s like this?* He places my dress on the lone chair beside his chest of drawers.

“And for your next trick?” I prompt, teasing.

“Oh, my dear Miss Steele. Get into my bed,” he growls, “and I’ll show you.”

“Do you think that for once I should play hard to get?” I ask coquettishly.

His eyes widen with surprise, and I see a glimmer of excitement. “Well … the

door's closed. Not sure how you're going to avoid me," he says sardonically. "I think it's a done deal."

"But I'm a good negotiator."

"So am I." He stares down at me, but as he does, his expression changes, confusion washes over him and the atmosphere in the room shifts abruptly, tensing. "Don't you want to fuck?" he asks.

"No," I breathe.

"Oh." He frowns.

*Okay, here goes … deep breath.*

"I want you to make love to me."

He stills and stares at me blankly. His expression darkens. Oh, shit, this doesn't look good. *Give him a minute!* My subconscious snaps.

"Ana, I …" He runs his hands through his hair. Two hands. Jeez, he's really bewildered. "I thought we did?" he says eventually.

"I want to touch you."

He takes an involuntary step back from me, his expression for a moment fearful, and then he reins it in.

"Please," I whisper.

He recovers himself. "Oh no, Miss Steele, you've had enough concessions from me this evening. And I'm saying no."

"No?"

"No."

*Oh … I can't argue with that … can I?*

"Look, you're tired, I'm tired. Let's just go to bed," he says, watching me carefully.

"So touching is a hard limit for you?"

"Yes. This is old news."

"Please tell me why."

"Oh, Anastasia, please. Just drop it for now," he mutters exasperated.

"It's important to me."

Again he runs both hands through his hair, and he utters an oath beneath his breath. Turning on his heel, he heads for the chest of drawers, pulls out a T-shirt, and throws it at me. I catch it, bemused.

"Put that on and get into bed," he snaps, irritated.

I frown but decide to humor him. Turning my back, I quickly remove my bra, pulling the T-shirt on as hastily as I can to cover my nakedness. I leave my panties on; I haven't worn them for most of the evening.

"I need the bathroom." My voice is a whisper.

He frowns, bemused.

“Now you’re asking permission?”

“Er … no.”

“Anastasia, you know where the bathroom is. Today, at this point in our strange arrangement, you don’t need my permission to use it.” He cannot hide his irritation. He shrugs out of his shirt, and I scoot into the bathroom.

I stare at myself in the over-large mirror, shocked that I still look the same. After all that I’ve done today, it’s still the same ordinary girl gaping back at me. *What did you expect—that you’d grow horns and a little pointy tail?* my subconscious snaps at me. *And what the hell are you doing? Touching is his hard limit. Too soon, you idiot. He needs to walk before he can run.* My subconscious is furious, Medusa-like in her anger, hair flying, her hands clenched around her face like in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. I ignore her, but she won’t climb back into her box. *You are making him mad—think about all that’s he’s said, all he’s conceded*. I scowl at my reflection. I need to be able to show him affection—then perhaps he can reciprocate.

I shake my head, resigned, and grasp Christian’s toothbrush. My subconscious is right, of course. I’m rushing him. He’s not ready and neither am I. We are balanced on the delicate seesaw that is our strange arrangement—at different ends, vacillating, and it tips and sways between us. We both need to edge closer to the middle. I just hope neither of us falls off in our attempt to do so. This is all so quick. Maybe I need some distance. Georgia seems more appealing than ever. As I begin brushing my teeth, he knocks.

“Come in,” I splutter through a mouthful of toothpaste.

Christian stands in the doorway, his PJs hanging off his hips in that way that makes every little cell in my body stand up and take notice. He’s bare-chested, and I drink him in like I’m crazed with thirst and he’s clear, cool mountain spring water. He gazes at me impassively, then smirks and comes to stand beside me. Our eyes lock in the mirror, gray to blue. I finish with his toothbrush, rinse it off, and hand it to him, my look never leaving his. Wordlessly, he takes the toothbrush from me and puts it in his mouth. I smirk back at him, and his eyes are suddenly dancing with humor.

“Do feel free to borrow my toothbrush.” His tone is gently mocking.

“Thank you, Sir,” I smile sweetly, and I leave, heading back to bed.

A few minutes later he joins me.

“You know this is not how I saw tonight panning out,” he mutters petulantly.

“Imagine if I said to you that you couldn’t touch me.”

He clambers onto the bed and sits cross-legged.

“Anastasia, I’ve told you. Fifty shades. I had a rough start in life—you don’t want that shit in your head. Why would you?”

“Because I want to know you better.”

“You know me well enough.”

“How can you say that?” I struggle up onto my knees, facing him.

He rolls his eyes at me, frustrated.

“You’re rolling your eyes. Last time I did that, I ended up over your knee.”

“Oh, I’d like to put you there again.”

Inspiration hits me.

“Tell me and you can.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re bargaining with me?” His voice resonates with astonished disbelief.

I nod. *Yes … this is the way.*

“Negotiating.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Anastasia.”

“Okay. Tell me, and I’ll roll my eyes at you.”

He laughs, and I get a rare glimpse of carefree Christian. I’ve not seen him for a while. He sobers.

“Always so keen and eager for information.” He gazes at me speculatively. After a moment, he gracefully climbs off the bed. “Don’t go away,” he says and exits the room.

Trepidation lances through me, and I hug myself. What’s he doing? Does he have some evil plan? *Crap.* Suppose he returns with a cane, or some weird kinky implement? *Holy shit, what will I do then?* When he does return, he’s holding something small in his hands. I can’t see what it is, and I’m burning with curiosity.

“When’s your first interview tomorrow?” he asks softly.

“Two.”

A slow, wicked grin spreads across his face.

“Good.” And before my eyes, he subtly changes. He’s harder, intractable … hot. This is Dominant Christian.

“Get off the bed. Stand over here.” He points to beside the bed, and I scramble up and off in double time. He stares intently down at me, his eyes glittering with promise. “Trust me?” he asks.

I nod. He holds out his hand, and in his palm are two shiny silver balls linked with a thick black thread.

“These are new,” he says emphatically.

I look questioningly up at him.

“I am going to put these inside you, and then I’m going to spank you, not for punishment, but for your pleasure and mine.” He pauses, gauging my wide-eyed

reaction.

*Inside me!* I gasp, and all the muscles deep in my belly clench. My inner goddess is doing the dance of the seven veils.

"Then we'll fuck, and if you're still awake, I'll impart some information about my formative years. Agreed?"

He's asking my permission! Breathlessly, I nod. I'm incapable of speech.

"Good girl. Open your mouth."

*Mouth?*

"Wider."

Very gently, he puts the balls in my mouth.

"They need lubrication. Suck," he orders, his voice soft.

The balls are cold, smooth, surprisingly heavy, and metallic tasting. My dry mouth pools with saliva as my tongue explores the unfamiliar objects. Christian's gaze does not leave mine. Holy hell, this is turning me on. I squirm.

"Keep still, Anastasia," he warns.

"Stop." He tugs them from my mouth. Moving toward the bed, he throws the duvet aside and sits down on the edge.

"Come here."

I stand in front of him.

"Now turn around, bend down, and grab your ankles."

I blink at him, and his expression darkens.

"Don't hesitate," he admonishes me softly, an undercurrent in his voice, and he pops the balls in his mouth.

*Fuck, this is sexier than the toothbrush*. I follow his orders immediately. Jeez, can I touch my ankles? I find I can, with ease. The T-shirt slides up my back, exposing my behind. Thank heavens I have retained my panties, but I suspect I won't for long.

He places his hand reverently on my backside and very softly caresses it with his whole hand. With my eyes open, I can see his legs through mine, nothing else. I close my eyes tightly as he gently moves my panties to the side and slowly runs his finger up and down my sex. My body braces itself in a heady mix of wild anticipation and arousal. He slides one finger inside me, and he circles it deliciously slowly. Oh, it feels good. I moan.

His breathing halts and I hear him gasp as he repeats the motion. He withdraws his finger and very slowly inserts the objects, one slow, delicious ball at a time. *Oh my*. They're body temperature, warmed by our collective mouths. It's a curious feeling. Once they're inside me, I can't really feel them—but then again I know they're *there*.

He straightens my panties and leans forward, and his lips softly kiss my

behind.

"Stand up," he orders, and shakily I get to my feet.

*Oh!* Now I can feel them … sort of. He grasps my hips to steady me while I reestablish my equilibrium.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice stern.

"Yes."

"Turn around." I turn and face him.

The balls pull downward and involuntarily I clench around them. The feeling startles me but not in a bad way.

"How does that feel?" he asks.

"Strange."

"Strange good or strange bad?"

"Strange good," I confess, blushing.

"Good." There's a trace of humor lurking in his eyes.

"I want a glass of water. Go and fetch one for me please."

*Oh*.

"And when you come back, I shall put you across my knee. Think about that, Anastasia."

*Water? He wants water—now—why?*

As I leave the bedroom, it becomes abundantly clear why he wants me to walk around—as I do, the balls weigh down inside me, massaging me internally. It's such a weird feeling and not entirely unpleasant. In fact, my breathing accelerates as I stretch up for a glass from the kitchen cabinet, and I gasp. *Oh my* … I may have to keep these. They make me needy, needy for sex.

He's watching me carefully when I return.

"Thank you," he says as he takes the glass from me.

Slowly, he takes a sip, then places the glass on his bedside table. There's a foil packet, ready and waiting, like me. And I know he's doing this to build the anticipation. My heart has picked up a beat. He turns his bright gray gaze to mine.

"Come. Stand beside me. Like last time."

I sidle up to him, my blood thrumming through my body, and this time … I'm excited. Aroused.

"Ask me," he says softly.

I frown. Ask him what?

"Ask me," his voice is slightly harder.

What? How was your water? What does he want?

"Ask me, Anastasia. I won't say it again." And there's such a threat implicit in his words, and it dawns on me. He wants me to ask him to spank me.

*Holy shit*. He's looking at me expectantly, his eyes growing colder. *Shit*.

"Spank me, please … Sir," I whisper.

He closes his eyes momentarily, savoring my words. Reaching up, he grasps my left hand and he tugs me over his knees. I fall instantly, and he steadies me as I land in his lap. My heart is in my mouth as his hand gently strokes my behind. I'm angled across his lap again so that my torso rests on the bed beside him. This time he doesn't throw his leg over mine but smoothes my hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear. Once he's done, he clasps my hair at the nape to hold me in place. He tugs gently and my head shifts back.

"I want to see your face while I spank you, Anastasia," he murmurs, all the while softly rubbing my backside.

His hand moves down between the cheeks of my behind, and he pushes against my sex, and the full feeling is … I moan. Oh, the sensation is exquisite.

"This is for pleasure, Anastasia, mine and yours," he whispers.

He lifts his hand and brings it down in a resounding slap against the junction of my thighs, my behind, and my sex. The balls are forced forward inside me, and I'm lost in a quagmire of sensation. The stinging across my behind, the fullness of the balls inside me, and the fact that he's holding me down. I screw my face up as my faculties attempt to absorb all these foreign feelings. I note somewhere in my brain that he's not smacked me as hard as last time. He caresses my backside again, trailing his palm across my skin and over my underwear.

*Why's he not removed my panties?* Then his palm disappears, and he brings it down again. I groan as the sensation spreads. He starts a pattern: left to right and then down. The down ones are the best. Everything moving forward, inside me … and in between each smack he caresses me, kneads me—so I am massaged inside and out. It's such a stimulating, erotic feeling, and for some reason, because this is on my terms, I don't mind the pain. It's not painful as such—well, it is, but not unbearable. It's somehow manageable and, yes, pleasurable … even. I groan. *Yes, I can do this*.

He pauses as he slowly peels my panties down my legs. I writhe on his legs, not because I want to escape the blows, but I want more … release, something. His touch against my sensitized skin is all sensuous tingle. It's overwhelming, and he starts again. A few soft slaps, then building up, left to right and down. Oh, the downs. I groan.

"Good girl, Anastasia," he groans, and his breathing is ragged.

He spanks me twice more, and then he pulls at the small threads attached to the balls and jerks them out of me suddenly. I almost climax—the feeling is out of this world. Moving swiftly, he gently turns me over. I hear rather than see the

rip of the foil packet, and then he's lying beside me. He seizes my hands, hoists them over my head, and eases himself onto me, into me, sliding slowly, filling me where the silver globes have been. I groan loudly.

"Oh, baby," he whispers as he moves back, forward, a slow sensual tempo, savoring me, feeling me.

It is the most gentle he has ever been, and it takes no time at all for me to fall over the edge, spiraling into a delicious, violent, exhausting orgasm. As I clench around him, it ignites his release, and he slides into me, stilling, gasping out my name in desperate wonder.

*"Ana!"*

He's silent and panting on top of me, his hands still entwined in mine above my head. Finally, he leans back and stares down at me.

"I enjoyed that," he whispers, and then kisses me sweetly.

He doesn't linger for more sweet kisses but rises, covers me with the duvet, and disappears into the bathroom. On his return, he's carrying a bottle of white lotion. He sits beside me on the bed.

"Roll over," he orders, and begrudgingly I move onto my front.

Honestly, all this fuss. I feel very sleepy.

"Your ass is a glorious color," he says approvingly, and he tenderly massages the cooling lotion into my pink behind.

"Spill the beans, Grey." I yawn.

"Miss Steele, you know how to ruin a moment."

"We had a deal."

"How do you feel?"

"Shortchanged."

He sighs, slides in beside me, and pulls me into his arms. Careful not to touch my stinging behind, we are spooning again. He kisses me very softly beside my ear.

"The woman who brought me into this world was a crack whore, Anastasia. Go to sleep."

*Holy fuck* … what does that mean?

"Was?"

"She's dead."

"How long?"

He sighs.

"She died when I was four. I don't really remember her. Carrick has given me some details. I only remember certain things. Please go to sleep."

"Good night, Christian."

"Good night, Ana."

And I slip into a dazed and exhausted sleep, dreaming of a four-year-old gray-eyed boy in a dark, scary, miserable place.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There is light everywhere. Bright, warm, piercing light, and I endeavor to keep it at bay for a few more precious minutes. I want to hide, just a few more minutes. But the glare is too strong, and I finally succumb to wakefulness. A glorious Seattle morning greets me—sunshine pouring through the full-height windows and flooding the room with too-bright light. Why didn't we close the blinds last night? I am in Christian Grey's vast bed minus one Christian Grey.

I lie back for a moment staring through the windows at the lofty vista of Seattle's skyline. Life in the clouds sure feels unreal. A fantasy—a castle in the air, adrift from the ground, safe from the realities of life—far away from neglect, hunger, and crack-whore mothers. I shudder to think what he went through as a small child, and I understand why he lives here, isolated, surrounded by beautiful, precious works of art—so far removed from where he started … mission statement indeed. I frown because it still doesn't explain why I can't touch him.

Ironically, I feel the same up here in his lofty tower. I'm adrift from reality. I'm in this fantasy apartment, having fantasy sex with my fantasy boyfriend, when the grim reality is he wants a special arrangement, though he's said he'll try more. What does that actually mean? This is what I need to clarify between us to see if we are still at opposite ends on the seesaw or if we are inching closer together.

I clamber out of bed feeling stiff and, for want of a better expression, well used. *Yes, that would be all the sex then*. My subconscious purses her lips in disapproval. I roll my eyes at her, grateful that a certain twitchy-palmed control freak is not in the room, and resolve to ask him about the personal trainer. That's if I sign. My inner goddess glares at me in desperation. *Of course you'll sign*. I ignore them both, and after a quick trip to the bathroom, I go in search of Christian.

He's not in the art gallery, but an elegant middle-aged woman is cleaning in the kitchen area. The sight of her stops me in my tracks. She has short blond hair and clear blue eyes; she wears a plain white tailored shirt and a navy-blue pencil skirt. She smiles broadly when she sees me.

"Good morning, Miss Steele. Would you like some breakfast?" Her tone is

warm but businesslike, and I am stunned. Who is this attractive blonde in Christian's kitchen? I'm only wearing Christian's T-shirt. I feel self-conscious and embarrassed by my lack of clothing.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage." My voice is quiet, unable to hide the anxiety in my voice.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry—I'm Mrs. Jones, Mr. Grey's housekeeper."

*Oh.*

"How do you do?" I manage.

"Would you like some breakfast, ma'am?"

*Ma'am!*

"Just some tea would be lovely, thank you. Do you know where Mr. Grey is?"

"In his study."

"Thank you."

I scuttle off toward the study, mortified. Why does Christian only have attractive blondes working for him? And a nasty thought comes involuntarily into my mind: *Are they all ex-subs?* I refuse to entertain that hideous idea. I poke my head shyly round the door. He's on the phone, facing the window, in black pants and a white shirt. His hair is still wet from the shower, and I'm completely distracted from my negative thoughts.

"Unless that company's P&L improves, I'm not interested, Ros. We're not carrying deadweight … I don't need any more lame excuses … Have Marco call me, it's shit or bust time … Yes, tell Barney that the prototype looks good, though I'm not sure about the interface … No, it's just missing something … I want to meet him this afternoon to discuss … In fact, him and his team, we can brainstorm.… Okay. Transfer me back to Andrea …" He waits, staring out the window, master of his universe, looking down at the little people below from this castle in the sky. "Andrea …"

Glancing up, he notices me at the door. A slow, sexy smile spreads across his lovely face, and I'm rendered speechless as my insides melt. He is without a doubt the most beautiful man on the planet, too beautiful for the little people below, too beautiful for me. *No,* my inner goddess scowls at me, not too beautiful for me. *He is sort of mine,* for now. The idea sends a thrill through my blood and dispels my irrational self-doubt.

He continues his conversation, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Clear my schedule this morning, but get Bill to call me. I'll be in at two. I need to talk to Marco this afternoon, that will need at least half an hour … Schedule Barney and his team in after Marco or maybe tomorrow, and find time for me to see Claude every day this week … Tell him to wait … Oh … No, I don't want publicity for Darfur … Tell Sam to deal with

it … No … Which event? … That's next Saturday? … Hold on."

"When will you be back from Georgia?" he asks.

"Friday."

He resumes his phone conversation.

"I'll need an extra ticket because I have a date … Yes Andrea, that's what I said, a date, Miss Anastasia Steele will accompany me … That's all." He hangs up. "Good morning, Miss Steele."

"Mr. Grey." I smile shyly.

He walks around his desk with his usual grace and stands in front of me. He gently strokes my cheek with the back of his fingers.

"I didn't want to wake you, you looked so peaceful. Did you sleep well?"

"I am very well rested, thank you. I just came to say hi before I had a shower."

I gaze up at him, drinking him in. He leans down and gently kisses me, and I can't help myself. I throw my arms around his neck and my fingers twist in his still-damp hair. Pushing my body flush against his, I kiss him back. I want him. My attack takes him by surprise, but after a beat, he responds, a low groan in his throat. His hands slip into my hair and down my back to cup my naked behind, his tongue exploring my mouth. He pulls back, his eyes hooded.

"Well, sleep seems to agree with you," he murmurs. "I suggest you go and have your shower, or shall I lay you across my desk now?"

"I choose the desk," I whisper recklessly as desire sweeps like adrenaline through my system, waking everything in its path.

He stares bewildered down at me for a millisecond.

"You've really got a taste for this, haven't you, Miss Steele? You're becoming insatiable," he murmurs.

"I've only got a taste for you," I whisper.

His eyes widen and darken while his hands knead my naked backside.

"Damn right, only me," he growls, and suddenly, with one fluid movement, he clears all the plans and papers off his desk so that they scatter on the floor, sweeps me up in his arms, and lays me down across the short end of his desk so that my head is almost off the edge.

"You want it, you got it, baby," he mutters, producing a foil packet from his pants pocket while he unzips his pants. *Oh, Mr. Boy Scout*. He rolls the condom over his erection and gazes down at me. "I sure hope you're ready," he breathes, a salacious smile across his face. And in a moment, he's filling me, holding my wrists tightly by my side, and thrusting into me deeply.

I groan … *oh yes*.

"Christ, Ana. You're *so* ready," he whispers in veneration.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I hold him the only way I can as he stays

standing, staring down at me, gray eyes glowing, passionate and possessive. He starts to move, really move. This is not making love, this is fucking—and I love it. I groan. It's so raw, so carnal, making me so wanton. I revel in his possession, his lust slaking mine. He moves with ease, luxuriating in me, enjoying me, his lips slightly parted as his breathing increases. He twists his hips from side to side, and the feeling is exquisite.

I close my eyes, feeling the build up—that delicious, slow, step-climbing build. Pushing me higher, higher to the castle in the air. Oh yes … his stroke increases fractionally. I moan loudly. I am all sensation … all him, enjoying every thrust, every push that fills me. And he picks up the pace, thrusting faster … harder … and my whole body is moving to his rhythm, and I can feel my legs stiffening, and my insides quivering and quickening.

"Come on, baby, give it up for me," he cajoles through gritted teeth, and the fervent need in his voice—the strain—sends me over the edge.

I cry out a wordless, passionate plea as I touch the sun and burn, falling around him, falling down, back to a breathless, bright summit on Earth. He slams into me and stops abruptly as he reaches his climax, pulling at my wrists and sinking gracefully and wordlessly onto me.

*Wow … that was unexpected*. I slowly materialize back on Earth.

"What the hell are you doing to me?" he breathes as he nuzzles my neck. "You completely beguile me, Ana. You weave some powerful magic."

He releases my wrists, and I run my fingers through his hair, coming down from my high. I tighten my legs around him.

"I'm the one beguiled," I whisper.

He gazes at me. His expression is disconcerted, alarmed even. Placing his hands on either side of my face, he holds my head in place.

"You. Are. Mine," he says, each word a staccato. "Do you understand?"

He's so earnest, so impassioned—a zealot. The force of his plea is so unexpected and disarming. I wonder why he's feeling like this. "Yes, yours," I whisper, derailed by his fervor.

"Are you sure you have to go to Georgia?"

I nod slowly. And in that brief moment, I watch his expression change and the shutters coming down. Abruptly he withdraws, making me wince.

"Are you sore?" he asks, leaning over me.

"A little," I confess.

"I like you sore." His eyes smolder. "Reminds you where I've been, and only me."

He grabs my chin and kisses me roughly, then stands and holds his hand out to help me up. I glance down at the foil packet beside me.

“Always prepared,” I murmur.

He looks at me confused as he redoes his fly. I hold up the empty packet.

“A man can hope, Anastasia, dream even, and sometimes his dreams come true.”

He sounds so odd, his eyes burning. I just don’t understand. My postcoital glow is fading fast. *What is his problem?*

“So, on your desk, that’s been a dream?” I ask dryly, trying humor to lighten the atmosphere between us.

He smiles an enigmatic smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, and I know immediately this is not the first time he’s had sex on his desk. The thought is unwelcome. I squirm uncomfortably as my postcoital glow evaporates.

“I’d better go and have a shower.” I stand and start to move past him.

He frowns and runs a hand through his hair.

“I’ve got a couple more calls to make. I’ll join you for breakfast once you’re out of the shower. I think Mrs. Jones has laundered your clothes from yesterday. They’re in the closet.”

*What?* When the hell did she do that? Jeez, could she hear us? I flush.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

“You’re most welcome,” he replies automatically, but there’s an edge to his voice.

*I’m not saying thank you for fucking me*. Although, it was very …

“What?” he asks, and I realize I’m frowning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well … you’re being more weird than usual.”

“You find me weird?” He tries to stifle a smile.

“Sometimes.”

He regards me for a moment, his eyes speculative. “As ever, I’m surprised by you, Miss Steele.”

“Surprised how?”

“Let’s just say that was an unexpected treat.”

“We aim to please, Mr. Grey.” I cock my head to one side like he often does to me and give his words back to him.

“And please me you do,” he says, but he looks uneasy. “I thought you were going to have a shower.”

Oh, he’s dismissing me.

“Yes … um, I’ll see you in a moment.” I scurry out of his office completely dumbfounded.

He seemed confused. *Why?* I have to say as physical experiences go, that was

very satisfying. But emotionally—well, I'm rattled by his reaction, and that was about as emotionally enriching as cotton candy is nutritious.

Mrs. Jones is still in the kitchen. "Would you like your tea now, Miss Steele?"

"I'll have a shower first, thank you," I mutter and take my blazing face quickly out of the room.

In the shower, I try to figure out what's up with Christian. He is the most complicated person I know, and I cannot understand his ever-changing moods. He seemed fine when I went into his study. We had sex … and then he wasn't. No, I don't get it. I look to my subconscious. She's whistling with her hands behind her back and looking anywhere but at me. She hasn't got a clue, and my inner goddess is still basking in a remnant of postcoital glow. No—we're all clueless.

I towel-dry my hair, comb it through with Christian's one and only hair implement, and put my hair up in bun. Kate's plum dress hangs laundered and ironed in the closet along with my clean bra and panties. Mrs. Jones is a marvel. Slipping on Kate's shoes, I straighten my dress, take a deep breath, and head back out to the great room.

Christian is still nowhere to be seen, and Mrs. Jones is checking the contents of the pantry.

"Tea now, Miss Steele?" she asks.

"Please." I smile at her. I feel slightly more confident now that I'm dressed.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No, thank you."

"Of course you'll have something to eat," Christian snaps, glowering. "She likes pancakes, bacon, and eggs, Mrs. Jones."

"Yes, Mr. Grey. What would you like, sir?"

"Omelet, please, and some fruit." He doesn't take his eyes off me, his expression unfathomable. "Sit," he orders, pointing to one of the barstools.

I oblige, and he sits beside me while Mrs. Jones busies herself with breakfast. Gosh, it's unnerving having someone else listen to our conversation.

"Have you bought your air ticket?"

"No, I'll buy it when I get home—over the Internet."

He leans on his elbow, rubbing his chin.

"Do you have the money?"

*Oh no*.

"Yes," I say with mock patience as if I'm talking to a small child.

He raises a censorious eyebrow at me. *Crap*.

"Yes, I do, thank you," I amend rapidly.

"I have a jet. It's not scheduled to be used for three days; it's at your

disposal."

I gape at him. Of course he has a jet, and I have to resist my body's natural inclination to roll my eyes at him. I want to laugh. But I don't, as I can't read his mood.

"We've already made serious misuse of your company's aviation fleet. I wouldn't want to do it again."

"It's my company, it's my jet." He sounds almost wounded. *Oh, boys and their toys!*

"Thank you for the offer. But I'd be happier taking a scheduled flight."

He looks like he wants to argue further but decides against it.

"As you wish." He sighs. "Do you have much preparation to do for your interview?"

"No."

"Good. You're still not going to tell me which publishing houses?"

"No."

His lips curl up in a reluctant smile. "I am a man of means, Miss Steele."

"I am fully aware of that, Mr. Grey. Are you going to track my phone?" I ask innocently.

"Actually, I'll be quite busy this afternoon, so I'll have to get someone else to do it." He smirks.

*Is he joking?*

"If you can spare someone to do that, you're obviously overstaffed."

"I'll send an e-mail to the head of human resources and have her look into our head count." His lips twitch to hide his smile.

*Oh, thank the Lord, he's recovered his sense of humor.*

Mrs. Jones serves us breakfast and we eat quietly for a few moments. After clearing the pans, tactfully, she heads out of the living area. I peek up at him.

"What is it, Anastasia?"

"You know, you never did tell me why you don't like to be touched."

He blanches, and his reaction makes me feel guilty for asking.

"I've told you more than I've ever told anybody." His voice is quiet as he gazes at me impassively.

And it's clear to me that he's never confided in anyone. Doesn't he have any close friends? Perhaps he told Mrs. Robinson? I want to ask him, but I can't—I can't pry that invasively. I shake my head at the realization. He really is an island.

"Will you think about our arrangement while you're away?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Will you miss me?"

I gaze at him, surprised by his question.

"Yes," I answer honestly.

How could he mean so much to me in such a short time? He's got right under my skin … literally. He smiles and his eyes light up.

"I'll miss you, too. More than you know," he breathes.

My heart warms at his words. He really is trying hard. He gently strokes my cheek, bends down, and kisses me softly.

---

It is late afternoon, and I sit nervous and fidgeting in the lobby waiting for Mr. J. Hyde of Seattle Independent Publishing. This is my second interview today, and the one I'm most anxious about. My first interview went well, but it was for a larger conglomerate with offices based throughout the United States, and I would be one of many editorial assistants there. I can imagine being swallowed up and spat out pretty quickly in such a corporate machine. SIP is where I want to be. It's small and unconventional, championing local authors, and has an interesting and quirky roster of clients.

My surroundings are sparse, but I think it's a design statement rather than frugality. I am seated on one of two dark green chesterfield couches made of leather—not unlike the couch that Christian has in his playroom. I stroke the leather appreciatively and wonder idly what Christian does on that couch. My mind wanders as I think of the possibilities … no—I must not go there now. I flush at my wayward and inappropriate thoughts. The receptionist is a young African-American woman with large silver earrings and long straightened hair. She has a bohemian look about her, the sort of woman I could be friendly with. The thought is comforting. Every few moments she glances up at me, away from her computer, and smiles reassuringly. I tentatively return her smile.

My flight is booked, my mother is in seventh heaven that I am visiting, I am packed, and Kate has agreed to drive me to the airport. Christian has ordered me to take my BlackBerry and the Mac. I roll my eyes at the memory of his overbearing bossiness, but I realize now that's just the way he is. He likes control over everything, including me. Yet he's so unpredictably and disarmingly agreeable, too. He can be tender, good-humored, even sweet. And when he is, it's so left field and unexpected. He insisted on accompanying me all the way down to my car in the garage. Jeez, I'm only going for a few days; he's acting like I'm going for weeks. He always keeps me off balance.

"Ana Steele?" A woman with long, black, pre-Raphaelite hair standing by the reception desk distracts me from my introspection. She has the same bohemian, floaty look as the receptionist. She could be in her late thirties, maybe in her

forties. It's so difficult to tell with older women.

"Yes," I reply, standing awkwardly.

She gives me a polite smile, her cool hazel eyes assessing me. I am wearing one of Kate's dresses, a black pinafore over a white blouse, and my black pumps. Very interview, I think. My hair is restrained in a tight bun, and for once the tendrils are behaving themselves. She holds her hand out to me.

"Hello, Ana, my name's Elizabeth Morgan. I'm head of human resources here at SIP."

"How do you do?" I shake her hand. She looks very casual to be the head of HR.

"Please follow me."

We go through the double doors behind the reception area into a large brightly decorated open-plan office, and from there head into a small meeting room. The walls are pale green, lined with pictures of book covers. At the head of the maple conference table sits a young man with red hair tied in a ponytail. Small silver hooped earrings glint in both his ears. He wears a pale blue shirt, no tie, and stone chinos. As I approach him, he stands and gazes at me with fathomless dark blue eyes.

"Ana Steele, I'm Jack Hyde, the acquisitions editor here at SIP, and I'm very pleased to meet you."

We shake hands, and his dark expression is unreadable, though friendly enough, I think.

"Have you traveled far?" he asks pleasantly.

"No, I've recently moved to the Pike Street Market area."

"Oh, not far at all then. Please, take a seat."

I sit, and Elizabeth takes a seat beside him.

"So why would you like to intern for us at SIP, Ana?" he asks.

He says my name softly and cocks his head to one side, like someone I know—it's unnerving. Doing my best to ignore the irrational wariness he inspires, I launch into my carefully prepared speech, conscious that a rosy flush is spreading across my cheeks. I look at both of them, remembering the Katherine Kavanagh Successful Interviewing Technique lecture: *Maintain eye contact, Ana!* Boy, that woman can be bossy, too, sometimes. Jack and Elizabeth both listen attentively.

"You have a very impressive GPA. What extracurricular activities did you indulge in at WSU?"

*Indulge?* I blink at him. What an odd choice of word. I launch into details of my librarianship at the campus central library and my one experience of interviewing an obscenely rich despot for the student newspaper. I gloss over the

fact that I didn't actually write the article. I mention the two literary societies that I belonged to and conclude with working at Clayton's and all the useless knowledge I now possess about hardware and DIY. They both laugh, which is the response I'd hoped for. Slowly, I relax and begin to enjoy myself.

Jack Hyde asks sharp, intelligent questions, but I'm not thrown—I keep up, and when we discuss my reading preferences and my favorite books, I think I hold my own. Jack, on the other hand, appears to only favor American literature written after 1950. Nothing else. No classics—not even Henry James or Upton Sinclair or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Elizabeth says nothing, just nods occasionally and takes notes. Jack, though argumentative, is charming in his way, and my initial wariness dissipates the longer we talk.

"And where do you see yourself in five years' time?" he asks.

*With Christian Grey,* the thought comes involuntarily into my head. My errant mind makes me frown.

"Copyediting, perhaps? Maybe a literary agent, I'm not sure. I am open to opportunities."

He grins. "Very good, Ana. I don't have any further questions. Do you?" he directs his question at me.

"When would you like someone to start?" I ask.

"As soon as possible," Elizabeth pipes up. "When could you start?"

"I'm available from next week."

"That's good to know," Jack says.

"If that's all everyone has to say"—Elizabeth glances at the two of us—"I think that concludes the interview." She smiles kindly.

"It's been a pleasure to meet you, Ana," Jack says softly as he takes my hand. He squeezes it gently, so that I blink up at him as I say good-bye.

I feel unsettled as I make my way to my car, though I'm not sure why. I think the interview went well, but it's so hard to say. Interviews seem such artificial situations; everyone on their best behavior trying desperately to hide behind a professional façade. Did my face fit? I shall have to wait and see.

I climb into my Audi A3 and head back to the apartment, though I take my time. I'm on the red-eye with a stopover in Atlanta, but my flight doesn't leave until 10:25 this evening, so I have plenty of time.

Kate is unpacking boxes in the kitchen when I return.

"How did they go?" she asks, excited. Only Kate can look gorgeous in an oversized shirt, tattered jeans, and a dark blue bandana.

"Good, thanks, Kate. Not sure this outfit was cool enough for the second interview."

"Oh?"

“Boho chic might have done it.”

Kate raises an eyebrow.

“You and boho chic.” She cocks her head to one side—gah! Why is everyone reminding me of my favorite Fifty Shades? “Actually, Ana, you’re one of the few people who could really pull that look off.”

I grin. “I really liked the second place. I think I could fit in there. The guy who interviewed me was unnerving, though …” I trail off—shit, I’m talking to Megaphone Kavanagh here. *Shut up, Ana!*

“Oh?” The Katherine Kavanagh radar for an interesting tidbit of information swoops into action—a tidbit that will only resurface at some inopportune and embarrassing moment, which reminds me.

“Incidentally, will you please stop winding Christian up? Your comment about José at dinner yesterday was out of line. He’s a jealous guy. It doesn’t do any good, you know.”

“Look, if he wasn’t Elliot’s brother I’d have said a lot worse. He’s a real control freak. I don’t know how you stand it. I was trying to make him jealous—give him a little help with his commitment issues.” She holds her hands up defensively. “But if you don’t want me to interfere, I won’t,” she says hastily at my scowl.

“Good. Life with Christian is complicated enough, trust me.”

*Jeez, I sound like him.*

“Ana.” She pauses, staring at me. “You’re okay, aren’t you? You’re not running to your mother’s to escape?”

I flush. “No, Kate. It was you who said I needed a break.”

She closes the distance between us and takes my hands—a most un-Kate thing to do. *Oh no* … tears threaten.

“You’re just, I don’t know … different. I hope you’re okay, and whatever issues you’re having with Mr. Moneybags, you can talk to me. And I will try not to wind him up, though frankly it’s like shooting fish in a barrel with him. Look, Ana, if something’s wrong, tell me, I won’t judge. I’ll try to understand.”

I blink back tears. “Oh, Kate.” I hug her. “I think I’ve really fallen for him.”

“Ana, anyone can see that. And he’s fallen for you. He’s mad about you. Won’t take his eyes off you.”

I laugh uncertainly. “Do you think so?”

“Hasn’t he told you?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Have you told him?”

“Not in so many words.” I shrug apologetically.

“Ana! Someone has to make the first move, otherwise you’ll never get

anywhere.”

*What … tell him how I feel?*

“I’m just afraid I’ll frighten him away.”

“And how do you know he’s not feeling the same?”

“Christian, afraid? I can’t imagine him being frightened of anything.” But as I say the words, I imagine him as a small child. Maybe fear was all he knew then. Sorrow grips and squeezes my heart at the thought.

Kate gazes at me with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, rather like my subconscious—all she needs are the half-moon specs.

“You two need to sit down and talk to each other.”

“We haven’t been doing much talking lately.” I blush. Other stuff. Nonverbal communication and that’s okay. Well, much more than okay.

She grins. “That’ll be the sexing! If that’s going well, then that’s half the battle, Ana. I’ll grab some Chinese takeout. Are you ready to go?”

“I will be. We don’t have to leave for a couple of hours or so.”

“No—I’ll see you in twenty.” She grabs her jacket and leaves, forgetting to close the door. I shut it behind her and head off to my bedroom, mulling over her words.

Is Christian afraid of his feelings for me? Does he even have feelings for me? He seems very keen, says I’m his—but that’s just part of his I-must-own-and-have-everything-now control freak Dominant self, surely. I realize that while I’m away, I will have to run through all our conversations again and see if I can pick out telltale signs.

*I’ll miss you, too … more than you know …*

*You’ve completely beguiled me …*

I shake my head. I don’t want to think about it now. I am charging the BlackBerry, so I haven’t had it with me all afternoon. I approach it with caution, and I’m disappointed that there are no messages. I switch on the mean machine, and there are no messages there, either. *Same e-mail address, Ana*—my subconscious rolls her eyes at me, and for the first time I understand why Christian wants to spank me when I do that.

Okay. Well, I’ll write him an e-mail.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Interviews

**Date**: May 30 2011 18:49

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

My interviews went well today.

Thought you might be interested.

How was your day?

Ana

I sit and glare at the screen. Christian's responses are usually instantaneous. I wait … and wait, and finally I hear the welcome ping from my inbox.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: My Day
**Date**: May 30 2011 19:03
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,
Everything you do interests me. You are the most fascinating woman I know.

I'm glad your interviews went well.

My morning was beyond all expectations.

My afternoon was very dull in comparison.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Fine Morning
**Date**: May 30 2011 19:05
**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,
The morning was exemplary for me, too, in spite of you weirding out on me after the impeccable desk sex. Don't think I didn't notice.

Thank you for breakfast. Or thank Mrs. Jones.

I'd like to ask you questions about her—without you weirding out on me again.

Ana

My finger hovers over the "send" button, and I am reassured that I'll be on the other side of the continent this time tomorrow.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Publishing and You?
**Date**: May 30 2011 19:10

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia,

“Weirding” is not a verb and should not be used by anyone who wants to go into publishing. Impeccable? Compared to what, pray tell? And what do you need to ask about Mrs. Jones? I’m intrigued.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: You and Mrs. Jones

**Date**: May 30 2011 19:17

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

Language evolves and moves on. It is an organic thing. It is not stuck in an ivory tower, hung with expensive works of art and overlooking most of Seattle with a helipad stuck on its roof.

Impeccable—compared to the other times we have … what’s your word … oh yes … fucked. Actually the fucking has been pretty impeccable, period, in my humble opinion—but then, as you know, I have very limited experience.

Is Mrs. Jones an ex-sub of yours?

Ana

# My finger hovers once more over the “send” button, and I press it.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Language. Watch Your Mouth!

**Date**: May 30 2011 19:22

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia,

Mrs. Jones is a valued employee. I have never had any relationship with her beyond our professional one. I do not employ anyone I’ve had any sexual relations with. I am shocked that you would think so. The only person I would make an exception to this rule is you—because you are a bright young woman with remarkable negotiating skills. Though, if you continue to use such language, I may have to reconsider taking you on here. I am glad you have limited experience. Your experience will continue to be limited—just to me. I shall take impeccable as a compliment—though with you, I’m never sure if that’s what you mean or if your sense of irony is getting the better of you—as usual.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc., from His Ivory Tower

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Not for All the Tea in China

**Date**: May 30 2011 19:27

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

I think I have already expressed my reservations about working for your company. My views on this have not changed, are not changing, and will not change, ever. I must leave you now, as Kate has returned with food. My sense of irony and I bid you good night.

I will contact you once I’m in Georgia.

Ana

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Even Twinings English Breakfast Tea?

**Date**: May 30 2011 19:29

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Good night, Anastasia.

I hope you and your sense of irony have a safe flight.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Kate and I pull up outside the drop-off area at Sea-Tac Airport departure terminal. Leaning across, she hugs me.

"Enjoy Barbados, Kate. Have a wonderful vacation."

"I'll see you when I get back. Don't let old moneybags grind you down."

"I won't."

We hug again—and then I'm on my own. I head over to check-in and stand in line, waiting with my carry-on luggage. I haven't bothered with a suitcase, just a smart rucksack that Ray gave me for my last birthday.

"Ticket, please?" The bored young man behind the desk holds up his hand without looking at me.

Mirroring his boredom, I hand over my ticket and my driver's license as ID. I am hoping for a window seat if at all possible.

"Okay, Miss Steele. You've been upgraded to first class."

"What?"

"Ma'am, if you'd like to go through to the first class lounge and wait for your flight there …" He seems to have woken up and is beaming at me like I'm Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny rolled into one.

"Surely there's some mistake."

"No, no." He checks his computer screen again. "Anastasia Steele—upgrade." He simpers.

*Ugh*. I narrow my eyes. He hands me my boarding pass, and I head toward the first class lounge muttering under my breath. Damn Christian Grey, interfering control freak—he just can't leave well enough alone.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I am manicured, massaged, and I've had two glasses of champagne. The first class lounge has many redeeming features. With each sip of Moet, I feel slightly more inclined to forgive Christian and his intervention. I open up my MacBook, hoping to test the theory that it works anywhere on the planet.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Over-Extravagant Gestures
**Date**: May 30 2011 21:53
**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

What really alarms me is how you knew which flight I was on.

Your stalking knows no bounds. Let's hope that Dr. Flynn is back from vacation.

I have had a manicure, a back massage, and two glasses of champagne—a very nice start to my vacation.

Thank you.

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: You're Most Welcome
**Date**: May 30 2011 21:59
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

Dr. Flynn is back, and I have an appointment this week.

Who was massaging your back?

Christian Grey
CEO with friends in the right places,
Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Aha! Payback time. Our flight has been called, so I shall e-mail him from the plane. It will be safer. I almost hug myself with mischievous glee.

THERE IS SO MUCH room in first class. Champagne cocktail in hand, I settle myself into the sumptuous leather window seat as the cabin slowly fills. I call Ray to tell him where I am—a mercifully brief call, as it's so late for him. "Love you, Dad," I murmur.

"You, too, Annie. Say hi to your mom. Good night."

"Good night." I hang up.

Ray is in good form. I stare at my Mac, and with the same childish glee building, I open my laptop and open up my e-mail.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Strong Able Hands

**Date**: May 30 2011 22:22

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

A very pleasant young man massaged my back. Yes. Very pleasant indeed. I wouldn't have encountered Jean-Paul in the ordinary departure lounge—so thank you again for that treat. I'm not sure if I'll be allowed to e-mail once we take off, and I need my beauty sleep since I've not been sleeping so well recently.

Pleasant dreams, Mr. Grey … thinking of you.

Ana

Oh, he's going to flip out—and I shall be airborne and out of reach. Serves him right. If I'd been in the ordinary departure lounge, then Jean-Paul wouldn't have gotten his hands on me. He was a very nice young man, in a blond, perma-tanned way—honestly, who has a tan in Seattle? It's just so wrong. I think he was gay—but I'll just keep that detail to myself. I stare at my e-mail. Kate is right. It is like shooting fish in a barrel with him. My subconscious stares at me with an ugly twist to her mouth; *Do you really want to wind him up?* What he's done is sweet, you know! He cares about you and wants you to travel in style. Yes, but he could have asked me or told me. Not made me look like a complete klutz at check-in. I press "send" and wait, feeling like a very naughty girl.

"Miss Steele, you'll need to stow your laptop for takeoff," the over-made-up flight attendant says politely. She makes me jump. My guilty conscience is at work.

"Oh, sorry."

*Crap*. Now I'll have to wait to know if he's replied. She hands me a soft blanket and pillow, showing her perfect teeth. I drape the blanket over my knees. It's nice to feel pampered sometimes.

First class has filled up, except for the seat beside me, which is still unoccupied. *Oh no* … a disturbing thought crosses my mind. *Perhaps the seat is Christian's*. Oh, shit … no … he wouldn't do that. Would he? I told him I didn't

want him to come with me. I glance anxiously at my watch, and then the disembodied voice from the flight deck announces, “Cabin crew, doors to automatic and cross check.”

What does that mean? Are they closing the doors? My scalp prickles as I sit in palpitating anticipation. The seat next to me is the only unoccupied one in the sixteen-seat cabin. The plane jolts as it pulls away from the gate, and I breathe a sigh of relief but feel a faint tingle of disappointment too … no Christian for four days. I take a sneak peek at my BlackBerry.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Enjoy It While You Can

**Date**: May 30 2011 22:25

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I know what you’re trying to do—and trust me, you’ve succeeded. Next time you’ll be in the cargo hold, bound and gagged in a crate. Believe me when I say that attending to you in that state will give me so much more pleasure than merely upgrading your ticket.

I look forward to your return.

Christian Grey

Palm-Twitching CEO,

Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Holy crap*. That’s the problem with Christian’s humor—I can never be sure if he’s joking or if he’s seriously angry. I suspect on this occasion he’s seriously angry. Surreptitiously, so the flight attendant can’t see, I type a reply under the blanket.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Joking?

**Date**: May 30 2011 22:30

**To**: Christian Grey

You see—I have no idea if you’re joking—and if you’re not, then I think I’ll stay in Georgia. Crates are a hard limit for me. Sorry I made you mad. Tell me you forgive me.

A

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Joking

**Date**: May 30 2011 22:31

**To**: Anastasia Steele

How can you be e-mailing? Are you risking the life of everyone on board, including yourself, by using your BlackBerry? I think that contravenes one of the rules.

Christian Grey

Two Palms Twitching CEO,

Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Two palms!* I put my BlackBerry away, sit back while the plane taxis to the runway, and pull out my tattered copy of Tess—some light reading for the journey. Once we're airborne, I tip my seat back, and soon I'm drifting off to sleep.

The flight attendant wakes me as we start our descent into Atlanta. Local time is 5:45 a.m., but I've only had four hours' sleep or so … I feel groggy but grateful for the glass of orange juice she hands me. I glance nervously at my BlackBerry. There are no further e-mails from Christian. Well, it's nearly three in the morning in Seattle, and he probably wants to discourage me from screwing up the avionics system or whatever prevents planes from flying if mobile phones are switched on.

• • •

THE WAIT IN ATLANTA is only an hour. And again I'm luxuriating in the confines of the first class lounge. I am tempted to curl up and go to sleep on one of the plush, inviting couches that sink softly under my weight. But it will just not be long enough. To keep myself awake, I start a long stream-of-consciousness e-mail to Christian on my laptop.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Do you like to scare me?

**Date**: May 31 2011 06:52 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

You know how much I dislike you spending money on me. Yes, you're very rich, but still it makes me uncomfortable, like you're paying me for sex. However, I like traveling first class, it's so much more civilized than coach. So thank you. I mean it—and I did enjoy the massage from Jean Paul. He was very gay. I omitted that bit in my e-mail to you to wind you up, because I was annoyed with you, and I'm sorry about that.

But as usual you overreact. You can't write things like that to me—bound and gagged in a crate. (Were you serious or was it a joke?) That scares me … you scare me … I am completely caught up in your spell, considering a lifestyle with you that I didn't even know existed until last week, and then you write something like that and I want to run screaming into the hills. I won't, of course, because I'd miss you. Really miss you. I want us to work, but I am terrified of the depth of feeling I have for you and the dark path you're leading me down. What you are offering is erotic and sexy, and I'm curious, but I'm also scared you'll hurt me—physically and emotionally. After three months you could say good-bye, and where will that leave me if you do? But then I suppose that risk is there in any relationship. This just isn't the sort of relationship I ever envisaged having, especially as my first. It's a huge leap of faith for me.

You were right when you said I didn't have a submissive bone in my body … and I agree with you now. Having said that, I want to be with you, and if that's what I have to do, I would like to try, but I think I'll suck at it and end up black and blue—and I don't relish that idea at all.

I am so happy that you have said that you will try more. I just need to think about what "more" means to me, and that's one of the reasons why I wanted some distance. You dazzle me so much I find it very difficult to think clearly when we're together.

They are calling my flight. I have to go.

More later.

I press “send” and make my way sleepily to the departure gate to board a different plane. This one has only six seats in first class, and once we are in the air, I curl up under my soft blanket and fall asleep.

All too soon, I’m woken by the flight attendant offering me more orange juice as we begin our approach to Savannah International. I sip slowly, beyond fatigued, and I allow myself to feel a modicum of excitement. I’m going to see my mother for the first time in six months. Sneaking another covert look at my BlackBerry, I remember vaguely that I sent a long, rambling e-mail to Christian—but there’s nothing in response. It’s five in the morning in Seattle; hopefully he’s still asleep and not up playing mournful laments on his piano.

• • •

THE BEAUTY OF CARRY-ON rucksacks is that one can breeze out of the airport and not wait endlessly for baggage at the carousels. The beauty of traveling first class is that they let you off the plane first.

My mom is waiting with Bob, and it is so good to see them. I don’t know if it’s because of exhaustion, the long journey, or the whole Christian situation, but as soon as I’m in my mother’s arms, I burst into tears.

“Oh, Ana, honey. You must be so tired.” She glances anxiously at Bob.

“No, Mom, it’s just—I’m so pleased to see you.” I hug her tightly.

She feels so good and welcoming, like home. Reluctantly, I relinquish her, and Bob gives me an awkward one-armed hug. He seems unsteady on his feet, and I remember that he’s hurt his leg.

“Welcome back, Ana. Why you cryin’?” he asks.

“Aw, Bob, I’m just pleased to see you, too.” I stare up into his handsome square-jawed face and his twinkling blue eyes that gaze at me fondly. I like this husband, Mom. You can keep him. He takes my backpack.

“Jeez, Ana, what have you got in here?”

That would be the Mac, and they both put their arms around me as we head for the parking lot.

I always forget how unbearably hot it is in Savannah. Leaving the cool air-conditioned confines of the arrival terminal, we step into the Georgia heat like we’re wearing it. *Whoa!* It saps everything. I have to struggle out of Mom and Bob’s embrace so I can remove my hoodie. I am so glad I packed shorts. I miss the dry heat of Las Vegas sometimes, where I lived with Mom and Bob when I was seventeen, but this wet heat, even at 8:30 in the morning, takes some getting used to. By the time I’m in the back of Bob’s wonderfully air-conditioned Tahoe

SUV, I feel limp, and my hair has started a frizzy protest at the heat. In the back of the SUV, I quickly text Ray, Kate, and Christian:

*Arrived safely in Savannah. A :)*

My thoughts stray briefly to José as I press "send," and through the fog of my fatigue, I remember that his show is next week. Should I invite Christian, knowing how he feels about José? Will Christian still want to see me after that e-mail? I shudder at the thought, and then put it out of my mind. I'll deal with that later. Right now I am going to enjoy my mom's company.

"Honey, you must be tired. Would you like to sleep when we get home?"

"No, Mom. I'd like to go to the beach."

I AM IN MY blue halter-neck tankini, sipping a Diet Coke, on a sun bed facing the Atlantic Ocean, and to think that only yesterday I was staring out at the Sound toward the Pacific. My mother lounges beside me in a ridiculously large floppy sun hat and Jackie O shades, sipping a Coke of her own. We are on Tybee Island Beach, just three blocks from home. She holds my hand. My fatigue has waned, and as I soak up the sun, I feel comfortable, safe, and warm. For the first time in forever, I start to relax.

"So, Ana … tell me about this man who has you in such a spin."

*Spin!* How can she tell? What to say? I can't talk about Christian in any great detail because of the NDA, but even then, would I choose to talk to my mother about it? I blanch at the thought.

"Well?" she prompts, and squeezes my hand.

"His name's Christian. He's beyond handsome. He's wealthy … too wealthy. He's very complicated and mercurial."

Yes—I feel inordinately pleased with my concise, accurate summary. I turn on my side to face her, just as she makes the same move. She gazes at me with her crystal-clear blue eyes.

"Complicated and mercurial are the two pieces of information I want to concentrate on, Ana."

*Oh no* …

"Oh, Mom, his mood swings make me dizzy. He's had a grim upbringing, so he's very closed, difficult to gauge."

"Do you like him?"

"I more than like him."

"Really?" She gapes at me.

"Yes, Mom."

"Men aren't really complicated, Ana, honey. They are very simple, literal

creatures. They usually mean what they say. And we spend hours trying to analyze what they've said, when really it's obvious. If I were you, I'd take him literally. That might help."

I gape at her. This sounds like good advice. Take Christian literally. Immediately some of the things he's said spring into my mind.

*I don't want to lose you …*

*You've bewitched me …*

*You've completely beguiled me …*

*I'll miss you, too … more than you know …*

I gaze at my mom. She *is* on her fourth marriage. Maybe she does know something about men after all.

"Most men are moody, darling, some more than others. Take your father, for instance …" Her eyes soften and sadden whenever she thinks of my dad. My real dad, this mythical man I never knew, snatched so cruelly from us in a combat training accident when he was a marine. Part of me thinks my mom has been looking for someone like my dad all this time … maybe she's finally found what she's looking for in Bob. Pity she couldn't find it with Ray.

"I used to think your father was moody. But now when I look back, I just think he was too caught up in his job and trying to make a life for us." She sighs. "He was so young, we both were. Maybe that was the issue."

Hmm … Christian is not exactly old. I smile fondly at her. She can become very soulful thinking about my father, but I'm sure he had nothing on Christian's moods.

"Bob wants to take us out tonight for dinner. To his golf club."

"Oh no! Bob's started playing golf?" I scoff in disbelief.

"Tell me about it," groans my mother, rolling her eyes.

AFTER A LIGHT LUNCH back at the house, I start to unpack. I am going to treat myself to a siesta. My mother has disappeared to mold some candles or whatever she does with them, and Bob is at work, so I have time to catch up on some sleep. I open the Mac and fire it up. It's two in the afternoon in Georgia, eleven in the morning in Seattle. I wonder if I have a reply from Christian. Nervously, I open up my e-mail.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Finally!

**Date**: May 31 2011 07:30

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia,

I am annoyed that as soon as you put some distance between us, you communicate openly and honestly with me. Why can't you do that when we're together?

Yes, I'm rich. Get used to it. Why shouldn't I spend money on you? We've told your father I'm your boyfriend, for heaven's sake. Isn't that what boyfriends do? As your Dom, I would expect you to accept whatever I spend on you with no argument. Incidentally, tell your mother, too.

I don't know how to answer your comment about feeling like a whore. I know that's not what you've written, but it's what you imply. I don't know what I can say or do to eradicate these feelings. I'd like you to have the best of everything. I work exceptionally hard so I can spend my money as I see fit. I could buy you your heart's desire, Anastasia, and I want to. Call it redistribution of wealth, if you will. Or simply know that I would not, could not *ever* think of you in the way you described, and I'm angry that's how you perceive yourself. For such a bright, witty, beautiful young woman, you have some real self-esteem issues, and I have half a mind to make an appointment for you with Dr. Flynn.

I apologize for frightening you. I find the thought of instilling fear in you abhorrent. Do you really think I'd let you travel in the hold? I offered you my private jet, for heaven's sake. Yes, it was a joke, a poor one obviously. However, the fact is the thought of you bound and gagged turns me on (this is not a joke—it's true). I can lose the crate—crates do nothing for me. I know you have issues with gagging—we've talked about that—and if/when I do gag you, we'll discuss it. What I think you fail to realize is that in Dom/sub relationships it is the sub who has all the power. That's you. I'll repeat this—you are the one with all the power. Not I. In the boathouse you said no. I can't touch you if you say no—that's why we have an agreement—what you will and won't do. If we try things and you don't like them, we can revise the agreement. It's up to you—not me. And if you don't want to be bound and gagged in a crate, then it won't happen.

I want to share my lifestyle with you. I have never wanted anything so much. Frankly, I'm in awe of you, that one so innocent would be willing to try. That says more to me than you could ever know. You fail to see I am caught in your spell, too, even though I have told you this countless times. I don't want to lose you. I am nervous that you've flown three thousand miles to get away from me for a few days, because you can't think clearly around me. It's the same for me, Anastasia. My reason vanishes when we're together—that's the depth of my feeling for you.

I understand your trepidation. I did try to stay away from you; I knew you were inexperienced, though I would never have pursued you if I had known exactly how innocent you were—and yet you still manage to disarm me completely in a way that nobody has before. Your e-mail for example: I have read and reread it countless times trying to understand your point of view. Three months is an arbitrary amount of time. We could make it six months, a year? How long do you want it to be? What would make you comfortable? Tell me.

I understand that this is a huge leap of faith for you. I have to earn your trust, but by the same token, you have to communicate with me when I am failing to do this. You seem so strong and self-contained, and then I read what you've written here, and I see another side to you. We have to guide each other, Anastasia, and I can only take my cues from you. You have to be honest with me, and we have to both find a way to make this arrangement work.

You worry about not being submissive. Well, maybe that's true. Having said that, the only time you do assume the correct demeanor for a sub is in the playroom. It seems that's the one place where you let me exercise proper control over you and the only place you do as you're told. "Exemplary" is the term that comes to mind. And I'd never beat you black and blue. I aim for pink. Outside the playroom, I like that you challenge me. It's a very novel and refreshing experience, and I wouldn't want to change that. So yes, tell me what you want in terms of more. I will endeavor to keep an open mind, and I shall try to give you the space you need and stay away from you while you are in Georgia. I look forward to your next e-mail.

In the meantime, enjoy yourself. But not too much.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Holy crap*. He's written an essay like we're back at school—*and most of it's good*. My heart is in my mouth as I reread his epistle, and I huddle on the spare bed practically hugging my Mac. Make our agreement a year? I have the power! Jeez, I'm going to have to think about that. *Take him literally*, that's what my mother says. He doesn't want to lose me. He's said that twice! He wants to make this work, too. *Oh, Christian, so do I!* He's going to try to stay away! Does this mean he might fail to stay away? Suddenly, I hope so. I want to see him. We've been apart less than twenty-four hours, and knowing that I can't see him for four days, I realize how much I miss him. How much I love him.

---

"Ana, honey." The voice is soft and warm, full of love and sweet memories of

times gone by.

A gentle hand brushes my face. My mom wakes me, and I'm wrapped around my laptop, hugging it to me.

"Ana, sweetheart," she continues in her soft, singsong voice while I surface from sleep, blinking in the pale pink light of dusk.

"Hi, Mom." I stretch out and smile.

"We're going out for dinner in thirty minutes. You still want to come?" she asks kindly.

"Oh yes, Mom, of course." I try very hard but fail to stifle my yawn.

"Now that's an impressive piece of technology." She points to my laptop.

*Oh, crap.*

"Oh … this?" I strive for casual, surprised nonchalance.

Will Mom notice? She seems to have grown more astute since I acquired a "boyfriend."

"Christian lent it to me. I think I could pilot the space shuttle with it, but I just use it for e-mails and Internet access."

*Really, it's nothing*. Eyeing me suspiciously, she sits down on the bed and tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"Has he e-mailed you?"

*Oh, double crap.*

"Yeah." My nonchalance is wearing thin, and I flush.

"Perhaps he's missing you, huh?"

"I hope so, Mom."

"What does he say?"

*Oh, triple crap*. I frantically try to think of something acceptable from that e-mail I can tell my mother. I'm sure she doesn't want to hear about Doms and bondage and gagging, but then I can't tell her because there's the NDA.

"He's told me to enjoy myself but not too much."

"Sounds reasonable. I'll leave you to get ready, honey." Leaning over, she kisses my forehead. "I'm so glad you're here, Ana. It's wonderful to see you." And with that loving statement, she leaves.

*Hmm, Christian and reasonable* … two concepts that I thought were mutually exclusive, but after his e-mail, maybe all things are possible. I shake my head. I will need time to digest his words. Probably after dinner—and I can reply to him then. I climb out of bed and quickly slip out of my T-shirt and shorts and head to the shower.

I have brought Kate's gray halter-neck dress that I wore for my graduation. It's the only dressy item I have. One good thing about the heat is that the creases have dropped out, so I think it will do for the golf club. As I dress, I open up the

laptop. There is nothing new from Christian, and I feel a stab of disappointment. Very quickly, I type him an e-mail.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Verbose?

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:08 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Sir, you are quite the loquacious writer. I have to go to dinner at Bob's golf club, and just so you know, I am rolling my eyes at the thought. But you and your twitchy palm are a long way from me so my behind is safe, for now. I loved your e-mail. Will respond when I can. I miss you already.

Enjoy your afternoon.

Your Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Your Behind

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:10

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I am distracted by the title of this e-mail. Needless to say it *is* safe—for now.

Enjoy your dinner, and I miss you, too, especially your behind and your smart mouth.

My afternoon will be dull, brightened only by thoughts of you and your eye rolling. I think it was you who so judiciously pointed out to me that I, too, suffer from that nasty habit.

Christian Grey

CEO & Eye Roller,

Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Eye Rolling

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:14 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

Stop e-mailing me. I am trying to get ready for dinner. You are very distracting, even when you are on the other side of the continent. And yes—who spanks you when you roll your eyes?

Your Ana

I press "send," and immediately the image of that evil witch Mrs. Robinson comes into my mind. I just can't picture it. Christian being beaten by someone as old as my mother, it's just so wrong. Again I wonder what damage she's wrought. My mouth sets in a hard, grim line. I need a doll to stick pins in, maybe that way I can vent some of the anger I feel at this stranger.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Your Behind

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:18

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I still prefer my title to yours, in so many different ways. It is lucky that I am master of my own destiny and no one castigates me. Except my mother, occasionally, and Dr. Flynn, of course. And you.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Chastising … Me?

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:22 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

When have I ever plucked up the nerve to chastise you, Mr. Grey? I think you are mixing me up with someone else … which is very worrying. I really do have to get ready.

Your Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Your Behind

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:25

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

You do it all the time in print. Can I zip up your dress?

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

For some unknown reason, his words leap off the screen and make me gasp. Oh … he wants to play games.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: NC-17

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:28 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

I would rather you unzipped it.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Careful what you wish for …

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:31

**To**: Anastasia Steele

SO WOULD I.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Panting

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:33 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Slowly …

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Groaning

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:35

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Wish I were there.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Moaning

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:37 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

SO DO I.

"Ana!" My mother calls me, making me jump. *Shit*. Why do I feel so guilty?

"Just coming, Mom."

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Moaning

**Date**: May 31 2011 19:39 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Gotta go.

Laters, baby.

I dash into the hall, where Bob and my mother are waiting. My mother frowns.

"Darling—are you feeling okay? You look a bit flushed."

"Mom, I'm fine."

"You look lovely, dear."

"Oh, this is Kate's dress. You like it?"

Her frown deepens.

“Why are you wearing Kate’s dress?”

*Oh … no*.

“Well, I like this one and she doesn’t,” I improvise quickly.

She regards me shrewdly while Bob oozes impatience with his hangdog, hungry look.

“I’ll take you shopping tomorrow,” she says.

“Oh, Mom, you don’t need to do that. I have plenty of clothes.”

“Can’t I do something for my own daughter? Come on, Bob’s starving.”

“Too right,” moans Bob, rubbing his stomach and assuming a fake pained expression.

I giggle as he rolls his eyes, and we head out the door.

Later when I’m in the shower, cooling under the lukewarm water, I reflect on how much my mother has changed. Seeing her at dinner, she was in her element: funny and flirty and among many friends at the golf club. Bob was warm and attentive … they seem so good for each other. I’m really pleased for her. It means I can stop worrying about her and second-guessing her decisions and put the dark days of Husband Number Three behind us both. Bob is a keeper. And she’s giving me good advice. *When did that start happening?* Since I met Christian. *Why is that?*

When I’m done, I dry myself quickly, keen to get back to Christian. There’s an e-mail waiting for me, sent just after I left for dinner a few hours ago.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Plagiarism

**Date**: May 31 2011 16:41

**To**: Anastasia Steele

You stole my line.

And left me hanging.

Enjoy your dinner.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Who are you to cry thief?

**Date**: May 31 2011 22:18 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Sir, I think you’ll find it was Elliot’s line originally.

Hanging how?

Your Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Unfinished Business
**Date**: May 31 2011 19:22
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele,
You're back. You left so suddenly—just when things were getting interesting.

Elliot's not very original. He must have stolen that line from someone.

How was dinner?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Unfinished Business?
**Date**: May 31 2011 22:26 EST
**To**: Christian Grey

Dinner was filling—you'll be very pleased to hear I ate far too much.

Getting interesting? How?

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Unfinished Business—Definitely
**Date**: May 31 2011 19:30
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Are you being deliberately obtuse? I think you'd just asked me to unzip your dress.

And I was looking forward to doing just that. I am also glad to hear you are eating.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Well … There's Always the Weekend
**Date**: May 31 2011 22:36 EST
**To**: Christian Grey

Of course I eat … It's only the uncertainty I feel around you that puts me off my food.

And I would never be unwittingly obtuse, Mr. Grey.

Surely you've worked that out by now. ;)

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Can't Wait
**Date**: May 31 2011 19:40
**To**: Anastasia Steele

I shall remember that, Miss Steele, and no doubt use the knowledge to my advantage.

I'm sorry to hear that I put you off your food. I thought I had a more concupiscent effect on you. That has been my experience, and most pleasurable it has been, too.

I very much look forward to the next time.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Gymnastic Linguistics
**Date**: May 31 2011 22:36 EST
**To**: Christian Grey

Have you been playing with the thesaurus again?

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Rumbled
**Date**: May 31 2011 19:40
**To**: Anastasia Steele

You know me so well, Miss Steele.

I am having dinner with an old friend now so I will be driving.

Laters, baby©.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Which old friend?* I didn't think Christian had any old friends, except … her. I frown at the screen. Why does he have to still see her? Searing, green, bilious jealousy courses through me unexpectedly. I want to hit something, preferably Mrs. Robinson. Switching the laptop off in a temper, I clamber into bed.

I should really respond to his long e-mail from this morning, but I'm suddenly too angry. Why can't he see her for what she is—a child molester? I switch off the light, seething, staring into the darkness. How dare she? How dare she pick on a vulnerable adolescent? Is she still doing it? Why did they stop? Various

scenarios filter through my mind: If he had had enough, then why is he still friends with her? Ditto her—is she married? Divorced? Jeez—does she have children of her own? *Does she have Christian's children?* My subconscious rears her ugly head, leering, and I'm shocked and nauseated at the thought. Does Dr. Flynn know about her?

I struggle out of bed and fire the mean machine up again. I am on a mission. I drum my fingers impatiently waiting for the blue screen to appear. I hit Google images and enter "Christian Grey" into the search engine. The screen is suddenly littered with images of Christian: in black tie, be-suited, jeez—José's pictures from the Heathman, in his white shirt and flannel trousers. How did they get on the Internet? Boy, he looks good.

I move quickly on: some with business associates, then picture after glorious picture of the most photogenic man I know intimately. *Intimately? Do I know Christian intimately?* I know him sexually, and I figure there's a lot more to discover there. I know he's moody, difficult, funny, cold, warm … jeez, the man is a walking mass of contradictions. I click to the next page. He's still on his own in all these photographs, and I remember Kate mentioning that she couldn't find any photographs of him with a date, prompting her gay question. Then, on the third page, there's a picture of me, with him, at my graduation. His only picture with a woman, and it's me.

*Holy cow! I'm on Google!* I stare at us together. I look surprised by the camera, nervous, off balance. This was just before I agreed to try. For his part, Christian looks impossibly handsome, calm and collected, and he's wearing *that tie*. I gaze at him, such a beautiful face, a beautiful face that could be staring at Mrs. Damned Robinson right now. I save the picture in my favorites and click through all eighteen pages of search results … nothing. I won't find Mrs. Robinson on Google. But I have to know if he's with her. I type a quick e-mail to Christian.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Suitable Dinner Companions

**Date**: May 31 2011 23:58 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

I hope you and your friend had a very pleasant dinner.

Ana

P.S. Was it Mrs. Robinson?

I press "send" and climb despondently back into bed, resolving to ask

Christian about his relationship with that woman. Part of me is desperate to know more, and another part wants to forget he ever told me. And my period has started, so I must remember to take my pill in the morning. I quickly program an alarm into the calendar on my BlackBerry. Setting it aside on the bedside table, I lie down and eventually drift into an uneasy sleep, wishing that we were in the same city, not twenty-five hundred miles apart.

---

After a morning of shopping and an afternoon back at the beach, my mother has decreed we should spend the evening in a bar. Abandoning Bob to the TV, we find ourselves in the upscale bar of Savannah's most exclusive hotel. I am on my second Cosmopolitan. My mother is on her third. She is offering more insights into the fragile male ego. It's very disconcerting.

"You see, Ana, men think that anything that comes out of a woman's mouth is a problem to be solved. Not some vague idea that we'd like to kick around and talk about for a while and then forget. Men prefer action."

"Mom, why are you telling me this?" I ask, failing to hide my exasperation. She's been like this all day.

"Darling, you sound so lost. You've never brought a boy home. You never even had a boyfriend when we were in Vegas. I thought something might develop with that guy you met in college, José."

"Mom, José's just a friend."

"I know, sweetheart. But something's up, and I don't think you're telling me everything." She gazes at me, her face etched with motherly concern.

"I just needed some distance from Christian to get my thoughts straight … that's all. He tends to overwhelm me."

"Overwhelm?"

"Yeah. I miss him, though." I frown.

I have not heard from Christian all day. No e-mails, nothing. I am tempted to call him to see if he's okay. My worst fear is that he's been in a car accident; my second worst fear is that Mrs. Robinson has gotten her evil claws into him again. I know it's irrational, but where she's concerned, I seem to have lost all sense of perspective.

"Darling, I have to visit the restroom."

My mother's brief absence allows me another chance to check my BlackBerry. I have been trying surreptitiously to check my e-mail all day. Finally—a response from Christian!

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Dinner Companions

**Date**: June 1 2011 21:40 EST

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Yes, I had dinner with Mrs. Robinson. She is just an old friend, Anastasia.

Looking forward to seeing you again. I miss you.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

He *was* having dinner with her. My scalp prickles as adrenaline and fury lance through my body, all my worst fears realized. *How could he?* I am away for two days, and he runs off to that evil bitch.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: OLD Dinner Companions

**Date**: June 1 2011 21:42 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

She's not just an old friend.

Has she found another adolescent boy to sink her teeth into?

Did you get too old for her?

Is that the reason your relationship finished?

I press "send" as my mother returns.

"Ana, you're so pale. What's happened?"

I shake my head.

"Nothing. Let's have another drink," I mutter mulishly.

Her brow furrows, but she glances up and attracts the attention of one of the waiters, pointing to our glasses. He nods. He understands the universal language of "another round, please." As she does, I quickly glance at my BlackBerry.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Careful …

**Date**: June 1 2011 21:45 EST

**To**: Anastasia Steele

This is not something I wish to discuss via e-mail.

How many Cosmopolitans are you going to drink?

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Holy fuck, he’s here.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I glance nervously around the bar but cannot see him.

"Ana, what is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"It's Christian, he's here."

"What? Really?" She glances around the bar, too.

I have neglected to mention Christian's stalker tendencies to my mom.

I see him. My heart leaps, beginning a jittery thumping beat as he makes his way toward us. *He's really here—for me*. My inner goddess leaps up cheering from her chaise longue. Moving smoothly through the crowd, his hair glints burnished copper and red under the recessed halogens. His bright gray eyes are shining with—anger? Tension? His mouth is set in a grim line, jaw tense. *Oh, holy shit … no*. I am so mad at him right now, and here he is. How can I be angry with him in front of my mother?

He arrives at our table, gazing at me warily. He's dressed in his customary white linen shirt and jeans.

"Hi," I squeak, unable to hide my shock and awe at seeing him here in the flesh.

"Hi," he replies, and leaning down, he kisses my cheek, taking me by surprise.

"Christian, this is my mother, Carla." My ingrained manners take over.

He turns to greet my mom. "Mrs. Adams, I am delighted to meet you."

*How does he know her name?* He gives her the heart-stopping, Christian Grey–patented, full-blown, no-prisoners smile. She doesn't have a hope. My mother's lower jaw practically hits the table. *Jeez, get a grip, Mom*. She takes his proffered hand, and they shake. My mother hasn't replied. Oh, complete dumbfounded speechlessness is genetic—I had no idea.

"Christian," she manages finally, breathlessly.

He smiles knowingly at her, his gray eyes twinkling. I narrow my eyes at them both.

"What are you doing here?" My question sounds more brittle than I mean, and his smile disappears, his expression now guarded. I am thrilled to see him but completely thrown off balance, my anger about Mrs. Robinson simmering through my veins. I don't know if I want to shout at him or throw myself into his arms—but I don't think he'd like either—and I want to know how long he has

been watching us. I'm also a little anxious about the e-mail I just sent him.

"I came to see you, of course." He gazes down at me impassively. *Oh, what is he thinking?* "I'm staying in this hotel."

"You're staying here?" I sound like a sophomore on amphetamines, too high pitched even for my own ears.

"Well, yesterday you said you wished I was here." He pauses, trying to gauge my reaction. "We aim to please, Miss Steele." His voice is quiet with no trace of humor.

*Crap—is he mad?* Maybe the Mrs. Robinson comments? Or the fact that I am on my third, soon to be fourth, Cosmo? My mother is glancing anxiously at the two of us.

"Won't you join us for a drink, Christian?" She waves to the waiter, who is at her side in a nanosecond.

"I'll have a gin and tonic," Christian says. "Hendricks if you have it, or Bombay Sapphire. Cucumber with the Hendricks, lime with the Bombay."

*Holy hell* … only Christian could make a meal out of ordering a drink.

"And two more Cosmos, please," I add, looking anxiously at Christian. I am drinking with my mother—no way can he be angry about that.

"Please pull up a chair, Christian."

"Thank you, Mrs. Adams."

Christian pulls a nearby chair over and sits gracefully down beside me.

"So you just happen to be staying in the hotel where we're drinking?" I ask, trying hard to keep my tone light.

"Or you just happen to be drinking in the hotel where I'm staying," Christian replies. "I just finished dinner, came in here, and saw you. I was distracted, thinking about your most recent e-mail, and I glance up and there you are. Quite a coincidence, eh?" He cocks his head to one side, and I see a trace of a smile. *Thank heavens*—we may be able to save the evening after all.

"My mother and I were shopping this morning and on the beach this afternoon. We decided on a few cocktails this evening," I mutter, feeling that I owe him some sort of explanation.

"Did you buy that top?" He nods at my brand-new green silk camisole. "The color suits you. And you've caught some sun. You look lovely."

I flush, speechless at his compliment.

"Well, I was going to pay you a visit tomorrow. But here you are."

He reaches over, takes my hand, and squeezes it gently, running his thumb across my knuckles to and fro … and I feel the familiar pull. The electric charge zapping beneath my skin under the gentle pressure from his thumb, firing into my bloodstream and pulsing around my body, heating everything in its path. It's

been more than two days since I saw him. *Oh my* … I want him. My breath hitches. I blink at him, smiling shyly, and see a smile play on his lips.

"I thought I'd surprise you. But as ever, Anastasia, you surprise me by being here."

I glance quickly at Mom, who is staring at Christian … yes staring! *Stop it, Mom*. As if he's some exotic creature, never seen before. I mean, I know I've never had a boyfriend, and Christian only qualifies as such for ease of reference —but is it so unbelievable that I could attract a man? *This man? Yes, frankly—look at him!* my subconscious snaps. Oh, shut up! Who invited you to the party? I scowl at my mom—but she doesn't seem to notice.

"I don't want to interrupt the time you have with your mother. I'll have a quick drink and then retire. I have work to do," he states earnestly.

"Christian, it's lovely to meet you finally," Mom interjects, finally finding her voice. "Ana has spoken very fondly of you."

He smiles at her. "Really?" He raises an eyebrow at me, an amused expression on his face, and I flush again.

The waiter arrives with our drinks.

"Hendricks, sir," he says with a triumphant flourish.

"Thank you," Christian murmurs in acknowledgment.

I sip my latest Cosmo nervously.

"How long are you in Georgia, Christian?" Mom asks.

"Until Friday, Mrs. Adams."

"Will you have dinner with us tomorrow evening? And please, call me Carla."

"I'd be delighted to, Carla."

"Excellent. If you two will excuse me, I need to visit the restroom."

*Mom … you've just been*. I look at her desperately as she stands and walks off, leaving us alone together.

"So, you're mad at me for having dinner with an old friend." Christian turns his burning, wary gaze to me, lifting my hand to his lips and kissing each knuckle gently.

*Jeez, he wants to do this now?*

"Yes," I murmur as my heated blood courses through me.

"Our sexual relationship was over long ago, Anastasia," he whispers. "I don't want anyone but you. Haven't you worked that out yet?"

I blink at him. "I think of her as a child molester, Christian." I hold my breath waiting for his reaction.

Christian blanches. "That's very judgmental. It wasn't like that," he whispers, shocked. He releases my hand.

*Judgmental?*

“Oh, how was it then?” I ask. The Cosmos are making me brave.

He frowns at me, bewildered. I continue. “She took advantage of a vulnerable fifteen-year-old boy. If you had been a fifteen-year-old girl and Mrs. Robinson was a Mr. Robinson, tempting you into a BDSM lifestyle, that would have been okay? If it was Mia, say?”

He gasps and scowls at me. “Ana, it wasn’t like that.”

I glare at him.

“Okay, it didn’t feel like that to me,” he continues quietly. “She was a force for good. What I needed.”

“I don’t understand.” It’s my turn to look bewildered.

“Anastasia, your mother will be back shortly. I’m not comfortable talking about this now. Later, maybe. If you don’t want me here, I have a plane on standby at Hilton Head. I can go.”

*He’s angry with me … no*.

“No—don’t go. Please. I’m thrilled you’re here. I’m just trying to make you understand. I’m angry that as soon as I left, you had dinner with her. Think about how you are when I get anywhere near José. José is a good friend. I have never had a sexual relationship with him. Whereas you and her …” I trail off, unwilling to take that thought further.

“You’re jealous?” He stares at me, dumbfounded, and his eyes soften slightly, warming.

“Yes, and angry about what she did to you.”

“Anastasia, she helped me. That’s all I’ll say about that. And as for your jealousy, put yourself in my shoes. I haven’t had to justify my actions to anyone in the last seven years. Not one person. I do as I wish, Anastasia. I like my autonomy. I didn’t go and see Mrs. Robinson to upset you. I went because every now and then we have dinner. She’s a friend and a business partner.”

*Business partner? Holy crap. This is news*.

He gazes at me, assessing my expression. “Yes, we’re business partners. The sex is over between us. It has been for years.”

“Why did your relationship end?”

His mouth narrows and his eyes gleam. “Her husband found out.”

*Holy shit!*

“Can we talk about this some other time—somewhere more private?” he growls.

“I don’t think you’ll ever convince me that she’s not some kind of pedophile.”

“I don’t think of her that way. I never have. Now that’s enough!” he snaps.

“Did you love her?”

“How are you two getting on?” My mother has returned, unseen by either of

us.

I plaster a fake smile on my face as both Christian and I lean back hastily … guiltily. She gazes at me.

“Fine, Mom.”

Christian sips his drink, watching me closely, his expression guarded. What is he thinking? Did he love her? I think if he did, I will lose it, big time.

“Well, ladies, I shall leave you to your evening.”

*No … no … he can’t leave me hanging like this*.

“Please, put these drinks on my tab, room number 612. I’ll call you in the morning, Anastasia. Until tomorrow, Carla.”

“Oh, it’s so nice to hear someone use your full name.”

“Beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” Christian murmurs, shaking her outstretched hand, and she actually simpers.

*Oh, Mom—et tu, Brute?* I stand, gazing up at him, imploring him to answer my question, and he kisses my cheek chastely.

“Laters, baby,” he whispers in my ear. Then he’s gone.

*Damned control freak bastard*. My anger returns in full force. I slump into my chair and turn to face my mother.

“Well, strike me down with a feather, Ana. He’s a catch. I don’t know what’s going on between you two though. I think you need to talk to each other. Phew—the UST in here, it’s unbearable.” She fans herself theatrically.

“MOM!”

“Go talk to him.”

“I can’t. I came here to see you.”

“Ana, you came here because you’re confused about that boy. It’s obvious you two are crazy about each other. You need to talk to him. He’s just flown three-thousand-odd miles to see you, for heaven’s sake. And you know how awful it is to fly.”

I flush. I haven’t told her about his private plane.

“What?” she snaps.

“He has his own plane,” I mumble, embarrassed, “and it’s only two and a half thousand miles, Mom.”

*Why am I embarrassed?* Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Wow,” she mutters. “Ana, there’s something going on between you two. I’ve been trying to fathom it since you arrived here. But the only way you are going to sort the problem, whatever it is, is to talk it through with him. You can do all the thinking you like—but until you actually talk, you’re not going to get anywhere.”

I frown at my mother.

“Ana, honey, you’ve always had a tendency to overanalyze everything. Go with your gut. What does that tell you, sweetheart?”

I stare at my fingers.

“I think I’m in love with him,” I mutter.

“I know darling. And he with you.”

“No!”

“Yes, Ana. Hell—what do you need? A neon sign flashing on his forehead?”

I gape at her and tears prick the corner of my eyes.

“Ana, darling. Don’t cry.”

“I don’t think he loves me.”

“I don’t care how rich you are, you don’t drop everything and get in your private plane to cross a whole continent just for afternoon tea. Go to him! This is a beautiful location, very romantic. It’s also neutral territory.”

I squirm under her gaze. I want to go and I don’t.

“Darling, don’t feel you have to come back with me. I want you happy—and right now I think the key to your happiness is upstairs in room 612. If you need to come home later, the key is under the yucca plant on the front porch. If you stay—well … you’re a big girl now. Just be safe.”

I flush Stars and Stripes red. *Jeez, Mom.*

“Let’s finish our Cosmos first.”

“That’s my girl, Ana.” She grins.

I KNOCK TIMIDLY ON room 612 and wait. Christian opens the door. He’s on his cell. He blinks at me in complete surprise, then holds the door open wide and beckons me into his room.

“All the redundancy packages concluded? … And the cost? …” Christian whistles between his teeth. “Sheesh … that was one expensive mistake … And Lucas? …”

I glance around the room. He’s in a suite, like the one at the Heathman. The furnishings here are ultramodern, very now. All muted dark purples and golds with bronze starbursts on the walls. Christian walks over to a dark wood unit and pulls open a door to reveal a minibar. He indicates that I should help myself, then wanders into the bedroom. I assume it’s so I can no longer hear his conversation. I shrug. He didn’t stop his call when I entered his study that time. I hear water running … he’s filling a bath. I help myself to an orange juice. He ambles back into the room.

“Have Andrea send me the schematics. Barney said he’d cracked the problem …” Christian laughs. “No, Friday … There’s a plot of land here that I’m interested in … Yeah, get Bill to call … No, tomorrow … I want to see what

Georgia will offer if we move in." Christian doesn't take his eyes off me. Handing me a glass, he points to an ice bucket.

"If their incentives are attractive enough … I think we should consider it, though I'm not sure about the damned heat here … I agree, Detroit has its advantages, too, and it's cooler …" His face darkens momentarily. *Why?* "Get Bill to call. Tomorrow … Not too early." He hangs up and stares at me, his face unreadable, and the silence stretches between us.

Okay … my turn to talk.

"You didn't answer my question," I murmur.

"No. I didn't," he says quietly, his gray eyes wide and cautious.

"No, you didn't answer my question, or no, you didn't love her?"

He folds his arms and leans against the wall, and a small smile plays upon his lips.

"What are you doing here, Anastasia?"

"I've just told you."

He takes a deep breath.

"No. I didn't love her." He frowns at me, amused yet puzzled.

I can't believe I'm holding my breath. I sag like an old cloth sack as I release it. *Well, thank heavens for that*. How would I feel if he actually loved the witch?

"You're quite the green-eyed goddess, Anastasia. Who would have thought?"

"Are you making fun of me, Mr. Grey?"

"I wouldn't dare." He shakes his head solemnly, but he has a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Oh, I think you would, and I think you do—often."

He smirks as I give him back the words he's said to me before. His eyes darken.

"Please stop biting your lip. You're in my room, I haven't set eyes on you for nearly three days, and I've flown a long way to see you." His tone has changed to soft, sensual.

His BlackBerry buzzes, distracting us both, and he switches it off without glancing to see who it is. My breath hitches. I know where this is going … *but we're supposed to talk*. He takes a step toward me wearing his sexy predatory look.

"I want you, Anastasia. Now. And you want me. That's why you're here."

"I really did want to know," I whisper as a defense.

"Well, now that you do, are you coming or going?"

I flush as he comes to a halt in front of me.

"Coming," I murmur, staring anxiously up at him.

"Oh, I hope so." He gazes down at me. "You were so mad at me," he breathes.

“Yes.”

“I don’t remember anyone but my family ever being mad at me. I like it.”

He runs the tips of fingers down my cheek. *Oh my*, his proximity, his delicious Christian smell. We’re supposed to be talking, but my heart is pounding, my blood singing as it courses through my body, desire pooling, unfurling … everywhere. Christian bends and runs his nose along my shoulder and up to the base of my ear, his fingers slipping into my hair.

“We should talk,” I whisper.

“Later.”

“There’s so much I want to say.”

“Me, too.”

He plants a soft kiss under my earlobe while his fingers tighten in my hair. Pulling my head back, he exposes my throat to his lips. His teeth skim my chin, and he kisses my throat.

“I want you,” he breathes.

I moan and reach up and grasp his arms.

“Are you bleeding?” He continues to kiss me.

*Holy fuck*. Does nothing slip by him?

“Yes,” I whisper, embarrassed.

“Do you have cramps?”

“No.” I flush. *Jeez* …

He stops and looks down at me.

“Did you take your pill?”

“Yes.” How mortifying is this?

“Let’s go have a bath.”

*Oh?*

He takes my hand and leads me into the bedroom. It’s dominated by a super-king-sized bed with elaborate drapes. But we don’t stop there. He takes me into the bathroom, which is two rooms, all aquamarines and white limestone. It’s huge. In the second room a sunken bath, big enough for four people with stone steps that lead into it, is slowly filling with water. Steam rises gently above the foam, and I notice a stone bench that runs all the way around the bath. Candles flicker to the side. Wow … he’s done all this while on the phone.

“Do you have a hair tie?”

I blink at him, fish into my jeans pocket, and pull out a hair elastic.

“Put your hair up,” he orders softly. I do as he asks.

It’s warm and sultry beside the bath, and my camisole starts to stick. He leans over and shuts off the faucet. Leading me back into the first part of the bathroom, he stands behind me as we face the wall-sized mirror above the two

glass sinks.

"Take your sandals off," he murmurs and I oblige quickly dropping them to the sandstone floor.

"Lift up your arms," he breathes. I do as I'm told, and he lifts my camisole over my head so that I'm topless standing in front of him. Not taking his eyes off mine, he reaches around and undoes the top button on my jeans and the zipper.

"I'm going to have you in the bathroom, Anastasia."

Leaning down, he kisses my neck. I move my head to one side to give him easier access. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans, he slowly slides them down my legs, sinking down behind me as he pulls them and my panties to the floor.

"Step out of your jeans."

Grasping the edge of the sink, I do just that. I am now naked, staring at myself, and he's kneeling behind me. He kisses and then softly bites my behind, making me gasp. He stands and stares at me once more in the mirror. I try hard to stay still, ignoring my natural inclination to cover myself. He splays his hand across my belly, the span of his hand almost reaching from hip to hip.

"Look at you. You are so beautiful," he murmurs. "See how you feel." He clasps both my hands in his, his palms against the backs of my hands, his fingers in between mine so that my fingers are splayed. He places my hands on my belly. "Feel how soft your skin is." His voice is soft and low. He moves my hands in a slow circle, then upward toward my breasts. "Feel how full your breasts are." He holds my hands so that they cup my breasts. He gently strokes my nipples with his thumbs over and over.

I moan between parted lips and arch my back so my breasts fill my palms. He squeezes my nipples between our thumbs, pulling gently so that they elongate further. I watch in fascination at the wanton creature writhing in front of me. *Oh, this feels good.* I groan and close my eyes, no longer wanting to see that libidinous woman in the mirror falling apart under her own hands … his hands … feeling my skin as he would, experiencing how arousing it is—just his touch and his calm, soft commands. "That's right, baby," he murmurs.

He guides my hands down the sides of my body, past my waist to my hips, and across to my pubic hair. He slides his leg in between mine, pushing my feet farther apart, widening my stance, and runs my hands over my sex, one hand at a time in turn, setting up a rhythm. It is so erotic. Truly I am a marionette and he is the master puppeteer.

"Look at you glow, Anastasia," he whispers as he trails kisses and soft bites along my shoulder. I groan. Suddenly he lets go.

"Carry on," he orders, and stands back watching me.

I rub myself. *No*. I want him to do it. It doesn't feel the same. I'm lost without

him. He pulls his shirt over his head and quickly takes off his jeans.

"You'd rather I do this?" His gray gaze scorches mine in the mirror.

"Oh yes … please," I breathe.

He wraps his arms around me again and takes my hands once more, continuing the sensual caress across my sex, over my clitoris. His chest hair scrapes against me, his erection presses against me. *Oh, soon … please*. He bites the nape of my neck, and I close my eyes, enjoying the myriad sensations: my neck, my groin … the feel of him behind me. He stops abruptly and spins me around, circling my wrists with one hand, imprisoning my hands behind me, and pulling at my ponytail with the other. I am flush against him, and he kisses me wildly, ravaging my mouth with his. Holding me in place.

His breathing is ragged, matching mine.

"When did you start your period, Anastasia?" he asks out of the blue, gazing down at me.

"Er … yesterday," I mumble in my highly aroused state.

"Good." He releases me and turns me around.

"Hold on to the sink," he orders, and drags my hips back again, like he did in the playroom, so I'm bending down.

He reaches between my legs and pulls on the blue string—*what?!*—and gently takes my tampon out and tosses it into the nearby toilet. *Holy fuck*. Sweet mother of all … Jeez. And then he's inside me … ah! Skin against skin … moving slowly at first … easily, testing me, pushing me … *oh my*. I grip on to the sink, panting, forcing myself back on him, feeling him inside me. Oh, the sweet agony … his hands clasp my hips. He sets a punishing rhythm—in, out, and he reaches around and finds my clitoris, massaging me … oh jeez. I can feel myself quicken.

"That's right, baby," he rasps as he grinds into me, angling his hips, and it's enough to send me flying, flying high.

*Whoa* … and I come, loudly, gripping for dear life onto the sink as I spiral down through my orgasm, everything spinning and clenching at once. He follows, clasping me tightly, his front on my back as he climaxes and calls my name like it's a litany or a prayer.

*"Oh, Ana!"* His breathing is ragged in my ear, in perfect synergy with mine. "Oh, baby, will I ever get enough of you?" he whispers.

We sink slowly to the floor, and he wraps his arms around me, imprisoning me. Will it always be like this? So overwhelming, so all-consuming, so bewildering and beguiling. I wanted to talk, but now I'm spent and dazed from his lovemaking and wondering if *I* will ever get enough of him?

I am curled on his lap, my head against his chest, as we both calm. Very

subtly, I inhale his sweet, intoxicating Christian scent. *I must not nuzzle. I must not nuzzle*. I repeat the mantra in my head—though I am so tempted to do so. I want to lift my hand and draw patterns in his chest hair with my fingertips … but I resist, knowing that he'll hate it if I do. We are both quiet, lost in our thoughts. I am lost in him … lost to him.

I remember that I have my period.

"I'm bleeding," I murmur.

"Doesn't bother me," he breathes.

"I noticed." I can't keep the dryness out of my voice.

He tenses. "Does it bother you?" he asks softly.

Does it bother me? Maybe it should … should it? No, it doesn't. I lean back and look up at him, and he gazes down at me, his eyes a soft cloudy gray.

"No, not at all."

He smirks. "Good. Let's have a bath."

He uncurls from around me, placing me on the floor as he makes to stand. As he does, I notice again the small, round white scars on his chest. They are not chicken pox, I muse absentmindedly. Grace said he was hardly affected. *Holy shit* … they must be burns. Burns from what? I blanch at the realization, shock and revulsion coursing through me. From cigarettes? Mrs. Robinson, his birth mother, who? Who did this to him? Maybe there's a reasonable explanation, and I'm overreacting—wild hope blossoms in my chest, hope that I am wrong.

"What is it?" Christian's face is wide-eyed with alarm.

"Your scars," I whisper. "They're not from chicken pox."

I watch as in a split second he closes down, his stance changing from relaxed, calm, and at ease to defensive—angry even. He frowns, his face darkening, and his mouth presses into a thin, hard line.

"No, they're not," he snaps, but he does not elaborate further. He stands, holds his hand out for me, and hauls me to my feet.

"Don't look at me like that." His voice is colder and scolding as he lets go of my hand.

I flush, chastened, and stare down at my fingers, and I know, I know that someone stubbed cigarettes out on Christian. I feel sick.

"Did she do that?" I whisper before I can stop myself.

He says nothing, so I'm forced to look at him. He's glaring at me.

"She? Mrs. Robinson? She's not an animal, Anastasia. Of course she didn't. I don't understand why you feel you have to demonize her."

He's standing there, naked, gloriously naked, with my blood on him … and we're finally having this conversation. And I'm naked, too—neither of us has anywhere to hide, except perhaps the bath. I take a deep breath, move past him,

and step down into the water. It is deliciously warm, soothing, and deep. I melt into the fragrant foam and stare up at him, hiding among the bubbles.

"I just wonder what you would be like if you hadn't met her. If she hadn't introduced you to your … um, lifestyle."

He sighs and steps down into the bath opposite me, his jaw clenched with tension, his eyes frosty. As he gracefully submerges his body beneath the water, he's careful not to touch me. *Jeez—have I made him that mad?*

He stares impassively at me, his face unreadable, saying nothing. Again the silence stretches between us, but I hold my counsel. It's your turn, Grey—I am not caving this time. My subconscious is nervous, anxiously biting her nails—this could go either way. Christian and I stare at each other, but I am not backing down. Eventually, after what seems like a millennium, he shakes his head, and he smirks.

"I would probably have gone the way of my birth mother, had it not been for Mrs. Robinson."

Oh! I blink at him. Crack addict or whore? Possibly both?

"She loved me in a way I found … acceptable," he adds with a shrug.

*What the hell does that mean?*

"Acceptable?" I whisper.

"Yes." He stares intently at me. "She distracted me from the destructive path I found myself following. It's very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you're not perfect."

*Oh no*. My mouth dries as I digest his words. He gazes at me, his expression unfathomable. He's not going to tell me any more. How frustrating. Inside, I'm reeling—he sounds so full of self-loathing.

And Mrs. Robinson loved him. *Holy shit* … does she still? I feel like I've been kicked in the stomach.

"Does she still love you?"

"I don't think so, not like that." He frowns as if he hasn't thought about the idea. "I keep telling you it was a long time ago. It's in the past. I couldn't change it even if I wanted to, which I don't. She saved me from myself." He's exasperated and runs a wet hand through his hair. "I've never discussed this with anyone." He pauses. "Except Dr. Flynn, of course. And the only reason I'm talking about this now, to you, is because I want you to trust me."

"I do trust you, but I do want to know you better, and whenever I try to talk to you, you distract me. There's so much I want to know."

"Oh, for pity's sake, Anastasia. What do you want to know? What do I have to do?" His eyes blaze, and though he doesn't raise his voice, I know he's trying to rein in his temper.

I glance down at my hands, clear beneath the water as the bubbles have started to disperse.

"I'm just trying to understand; you're such an enigma. Unlike anyone I've met before. I'm glad you're telling me what I want to know."

Jeez—maybe it's the Cosmopolitans making me brave, but suddenly I cannot bear the distance between us. I move through the water to his side and lean against him so we're touching, skin to skin. He tenses and eyes me warily, as if I might bite. *Well, that's a turnaround*. My inner goddess gazes at him in quiet, surprised speculation.

"Please don't be angry with me," I whisper.

"I am not angry with you, Anastasia. I'm just not used to this kind of talking—this probing. I only have this with Dr. Flynn and with—" He stops and frowns.

"With her. Mrs. Robinson. You talk to her?" I prompt, trying to rein in my own temper.

"Yes, I do."

"What about?"

He shifts in the bath so that he's facing me, causing the water to lap over the sides onto the floor. He places his arm around my shoulders, resting on the ledge of the bath.

"Persistent aren't you?" he murmurs, a trace of irritation in his voice. "Life, the universe—business. Anastasia, Mrs. R and I go way back. We can discuss anything."

"Me?" I whisper.

"Yes." Gray eyes watch me carefully.

I bite my bottom lip, trying to curb the sudden rush of anger that surfaces.

"Why do you talk about me?" I endeavor not to sound whiney and petulant, but I don't succeed. I know I should stop. I am pushing him too hard. My subconscious has her Munch's *Scream* face on again.

"I've never met anyone like you, Anastasia."

"What does that mean? Anyone who just didn't automatically sign your paperwork, no questions asked?"

He shakes his head. "I need advice."

"And you take advice from Mrs. Pedo?" I snap. The hold on my temper is more tentative than I thought.

"Anastasia—enough," he snaps back sternly, his eyes narrowing.

I'm skating on thin ice, and I'm heading into danger. "Or I'll put you across my knee. I have no sexual or romantic interest in her whatsoever. She's a dear, valued friend and a business partner. That's all. We have a past, a shared history,

which was monumentally beneficial for me, though it fucked up her marriage—but that side of our relationship is over."

Jeez—another part I just can't understand. She was married as well. How did they get away with it for so long?

"And your parents never found out?"

"No," he growls. "I've told you this."

And I know that's it. I cannot ask him any further questions about her because he will lose it with me.

"Are you done?" he snaps.

"For now."

He takes a deep breath and visibly relaxes in front of me, like a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders or something.

"Right—my turn," he mutters, and his glare turns steely, speculative. "You haven't responded to my e-mail."

I flush. Oh, I hate the spotlight on me, and it seems he's going to get angry every time we have a discussion. I shake my head. Perhaps that's how he feels about my questions; he's not used to being challenged. The thought is revelatory, distracting, and unnerving.

"I was going to respond. But now you're here."

"You'd rather I wasn't?" he breathes, his expression impassive again.

"No, I'm pleased," I murmur.

"Good." He gives me a genuine, relieved smile. "I'm pleased I'm here, too—in spite of your interrogation. So, while it's acceptable to grill me, you think you can claim some kind of diplomatic immunity just because I've flown all this way to see you? I'm not buying it, Miss Steele. I want to know how you feel."

*Oh no* …

"I told you. I am pleased you're here. Thank you for coming all this way," I say feebly.

"It's my pleasure." His eyes shine as he leans down and kisses me gently. I feel myself responding automatically. The water is still warm, the bathroom still steamy. He stops and pulls back, gazing down at me.

"No. I think I want some answers first before we do any more."

*More?* There's that word again. And he wants answers … answers to what? I don't have a secret past—I don't have a harrowing childhood. What could he possibly want to know about me that he doesn't already know?

I sigh, resigned. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, how you feel about our would-be arrangement, for starters."

I blink at him. Truth or dare time—my subconscious and inner goddess glance nervously at each other. *Hell, let's go for truth.*

“I don’t think I can do it for an extended period of time. A whole weekend being someone I’m not.” I flush and stare at my hands.

He tips my chin up, and he’s smirking at me, amused.

“No, I don’t think you could, either.”

And part of me feels slightly affronted and challenged. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes, but in a good way,” he says with a small smile.

He leans down and kisses me softly, briefly.

“You’re not a great submissive,” he breathes as he holds my chin, his eyes dancing with humor.

I stare at him, shocked, then I burst out laughing—and he joins me.

“Maybe I don’t have a good teacher.”

He snorts. “Maybe. Perhaps I should be stricter with you.” He cocks his head to one side and gives me an artful smile.

I swallow. Jeez, no. But at the same time, my muscles clench deliciously deep inside. It is his way of showing that he cares. Perhaps the only way he can show he cares—I realize that. He’s staring at me, gauging my reaction.

“Was it that bad when I spanked you the first time?”

I gaze back at him, blinking. *Was it that bad?* I remember feeling confused by my reaction. It hurt, but not that much in retrospect. He’s said over and over again it’s more in my head. And the second time … Well, that was good … hot.

“No, not really,” I whisper.

“It’s more the idea of it?” he prompts.

“I suppose. Feeling pleasure, when one isn’t supposed to.”

“I remember feeling the same. Takes a while to get your head around it.”

*Holy hell*. This was when he was a kid.

“You can always use the safeword, Anastasia. Don’t forget that. And, as long as you follow the rules, which fulfill a deep need in me for control and to keep you safe, then perhaps we can find a way forward.”

“Why do you need to control me?”

“Because it satisfies a need in me that wasn’t met in my formative years.”

“So it’s a form of therapy?”

“I’ve not thought of it like that, but yes, I suppose it is.”

This I can understand. This will help.

“But, here’s the thing—one moment you say ‘don’t defy me,’ the next you say you like to be challenged. That’s a very fine line to tread successfully.”

He gazes at me for a moment, then frowns.

“I can see that. But you seem to be doing fine so far.”

“But at what personal cost? I’m tied up in knots here.”

“I like you tied up in knots.” He smirks.

“That’s not what I meant!” I splash him in exasperation.

He gazes down at me, arching an eyebrow.

“Did you just splash me?”

“Yes.” *Holy shit … that look.*

“Oh, Miss Steele.” He grabs me and pulls me onto his lap, sloshing water all over the floor. “I think we’ve done enough talking for now.”

He clasps his hands on either side of my head and kisses me. Deeply. Possessing my mouth. Angling my head … controlling me. I moan against his lips. This is what he likes. This is what he’s so good at. Everything ignites inside me and my fingers are in his hair, holding him to me, and I’m kissing him back and saying I want you, too, the only way I know how. He groans, shifting me so I’m astride him, kneeling over him, his erection beneath me. He pulls back and looks at me, his eyes hooded, glowing and lustful. I drop my hands to grab on to the edge of the bath, but he grips both my wrists and pulls my hands behind my back, holding them together in one hand.

“I’m going to have you now,” he whispers, and lifts me so that I’m hovering over him. “Ready?” he breathes.

“Yes,” I whisper, and he eases me on to him, slowly, exquisitely slowly … filling me … watching me as he takes me.

I groan, closing my eyes, and I revel in the sensation, the stretching fullness. He flexes his hips, and I gasp, leaning forward, resting my forehead against his.

“Please, let my hands go,” I whisper.

“Don’t touch me,” he pleads, and releasing my wrists, he grabs my hips.

Clasping the bath ledge, I move up and then down slowly, opening my eyes to gaze at him. He’s watching me, his mouth open, his breathing halted, stilted—his tongue between his teeth. He looks so … hot. We’re wet and slippery and moving against each other. I lean down and kiss him. He closes his eyes. Tentatively, I bring my hands up to his head and run my fingers through his hair, not taking my lips from his mouth. This is allowed. He likes this. I like this. And we move together. I tug his hair, tipping his head back and deepening the kiss, riding him—faster, picking up the rhythm. I moan against his mouth. He starts to lift me faster, faster … holding my hips. Kissing me back. We are wet mouths and tongues, tangled hair, and moving hips. All sensation … all consuming again. I am close … I am starting to recognize this delicious tightening … quickening. And the water … it’s swirling around us, our own whirlpool, a stirring vortex as our movements become more frantic … sloshing everywhere, mirroring what’s happening inside me … and I just don’t care.

I love this man. I love his passion, the effect I have on him. I love that he’s

flown so far to see me. I love that he cares about me … he cares. It's so unexpected, so fulfilling. He is mine, and I am his.

"That's right, baby," he breathes.

And I come, my orgasm ripping through me, a turbulent, passionate apogee that devours me whole. And suddenly Christian crushes me to him … his arms wrapped around my back as he finds his release.

"Ana, baby!" he cries, and it's a wild invocation, stirring and touching the depths of my soul.

• • •

WE LIE STARING AT each other, gray eyes into blue, face-to-face, in the super king bed, both hugging our pillows on our fronts. Naked. Not touching. Just looking and admiring, covered by the sheet.

"Do you want to sleep?" Christian asks, his voice soft and full of concern.

"No. I'm not tired." I feel strangely energized. It's been so good to talk—I don't want to stop.

"What do you want to do?" he asks.

"Talk."

He smiles. "About what?"

"Stuff."

"What stuff?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"What's your favorite film?"

He grins. "Today, it's *The Piano*."

His grin is infectious.

"Of course. Silly me. Such a sad, exciting score, which no doubt you can play? So many accomplishments, Mr. Grey."

"And the greatest one is you, Miss Steele."

"So I am number seventeen."

He frowns at me not comprehending.

"Seventeen?"

"Number of women you've, um … had sex with."

His lips quirk up, his eyes shining with incredulity.

"Not exactly."

"You said fifteen." My confusion is obvious.

"I was referring to the number of women in my playroom. I thought that's what you meant. You didn't ask me how many women I'd had sex with."

“Oh.” *Holy shit … there’s more … How many?* I gape at him. “Vanilla?”

“No. You are my one vanilla conquest.” He shakes his head, still grinning at me.

Why does he find this funny? And why am I grinning back at him like an idiot?

“I can’t give you a number. I didn’t put notches in the bedpost or anything.”

“What are we talking—tens, hundreds … thousands?” My eyes grow wilder as the numbers get larger.

“Tens. We’re in the tens, for pity’s sake.”

“All submissives?”

“Yes.”

“Stop grinning at me,” I scold him mildly, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

“I can’t. You’re funny.”

“Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?”

“A bit of both I think.” His words mirror mine.

“That’s damned cheeky, coming from you.”

He leans across and kisses the tip of my nose. “This will shock you, Anastasia. Ready?”

I nod, wide-eyed, still with the stupid grin on my face.

“All submissives in training, when I was training. There are places in and around Seattle that one can go and practice. Learn to do what I do,” he says.

*What?*

“Oh.” I blink at him.

“Yep, I’ve paid for sex, Anastasia.”

“That’s nothing to be proud of,” I mutter haughtily. “And you’re right … I am deeply shocked. And cross that I can’t shock you.”

“You wore my underwear.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yes.”

My inner goddess pole-vaults over the fifteen-foot bar.

“You didn’t wear your panties to meet my parents.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yes.”

Jeez, the bar’s moved to sixteen feet.

“It seems I can only shock you in the underwear department.”

“You told me you were a virgin. That’s the biggest shock I’ve ever had.”

“Yes, your face was a picture, a Kodak moment.” I giggle.

“You let me work you over with a riding crop.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yep.”

I grin. “Well, I may let you do it again.”

“Oh, I do hope so, Miss Steele. This weekend?”

“Okay,” I agree shyly.

“Okay?”

“Yes. I’ll go to the Red Room of Pain again.”

“You say my name.”

“That shocks you?”

“The fact that I like it shocks me.”

“Christian.”

He grins. “I want to do something tomorrow.” His eyes glow with excitement.

“What?”

“A surprise. For you.” His voice is low and soft.

I raise an eyebrow and stifle a yawn at the same time.

“Am I boring you, Miss Steele?” His tone is sardonic.

“Never.”

He leans across and kisses me gently on my lips.

“Sleep,” he commands, then switches off the light.

And in this quiet moment as I close my eyes, spent and sated, I think I’m in the eye of the storm. And in spite of all he’s said, and what he hasn’t said, I don’t think I have ever been so happy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Christian stands in a steel-barred cage. Wearing his soft, ripped jeans, his chest and feet are mouthwateringly naked, and he's staring at me. His private-joke smile is etched on his beautiful face and his eyes a molten gray. In his hands he holds a bowl of strawberries. He ambles with athletic grace to the front of the cage, gazing intently at me. Holding up a plump ripe strawberry, he extends his hand through the bars.

"Eat," he says, his tongue caressing the front of his palate as he enunciates the *t*.

I try to move toward him, but I'm tethered, held back by some unseen force around my wrist, holding me. *Let me go*.

"Come, eat," he says, smiling his delicious crooked smile.

I pull and pull … *let me go!* I want to scream and shout, but no sound emerges. I am mute. He stretches a little farther, and the strawberry is at my lips.

"Eat, Anastasia." His mouth forms my name, lingering sensually on each syllable.

I open my mouth and bite, the cage disappears, and my hands are free. I reach up to touch him, graze my fingers through his chest hair.

"Anastasia."

*No*. I moan.

"Come on, baby."

*No. I want to touch you*.

"Wake up."

*No. Please*. My eyes flicker unwillingly open for a split second. I'm in bed and someone is nuzzling my ear.

"Wake up, baby," he whispers, and the effect of his sweet voice spreads like warm melted caramel through my veins.

It's Christian. Jeez, it's still dark, and the images of him from my dream persist, disconcerting and tantalizing in my head.

"Oh … no," I groan. I want back at his chest, back to my dream. Why is he waking me? It's the middle of the night, or so it feels. *Holy shit*. Does he want sex—now?

"Time to get up, baby. I'm going to switch on the sidelight." His voice is

quiet.

"No," I groan.

"I want to chase the dawn with you," he says, kissing my face, my eyelids, the tip of my nose, my mouth, and I open my eyes. The sidelight is on. "Good morning, beautiful," he murmurs.

I groan, and he smiles. "You are not a morning person," he murmurs.

Through the haze of light, I squint and see Christian leaning over me, smiling. Amused. Amused at me. Dressed! In black.

"I thought you wanted sex," I grumble.

"Anastasia, I always want sex with you. It's heartwarming to know that you feel the same," he says dryly.

I gaze at him as my eyes adjust to the light, but he still looks amused … thank heavens.

"Of course I do, just not when it's so late."

"It's not late, it's early. Come on—up you go. We're going out. I'll take a rain check on the sex."

"I was having such a nice dream," I whine.

"Dream about what?" he asks patiently.

"You." I blush.

"What was I doing this time?"

"Trying to feed me strawberries."

His lips twitch with a trace of a smile. "Dr. Flynn could have a field day with that. Up—get dressed. Don't bother to shower, we can do that later."

*We!*

I sit up, and the sheet pools at my waist, revealing my body. He stands to give me room, his eyes dark.

"What time is it?"

"Five thirty in the morning."

"Feels like three a.m."

"We don't have much time. I let you sleep as long as possible. Come."

"Can't I have a shower?"

He sighs.

"If you have a shower, I'll want one with you, and you and I know what will happen then—the day will just go. Come."

He's excited. Like a small boy, he's iridescent with anticipation and excitement. It makes me smile.

"What are we doing?'

"It's a surprise. I told you."

I can't help but grin up at him. "Okay." I clamber off the bed and search for

my clothes. Of course they are neatly folded on the chair beside my bed. He's laid out a pair of his jersey boxer briefs, too—Ralph Lauren, no less. I slip them on, and he grins at me. Hmm, another piece of Christian Grey's underwear—a trophy to add to my collection—along with the car, the BlackBerry, the Mac, his black jacket, and a set of valuable old first editions. I shake my head at his largesse, and I frown as a scene from *Tess* crosses my mind: the strawberry scene. It evokes my dream. To hell with Dr. Flynn—Freud would have a field day—and then he'd probably die trying to deal with Fifty Shades.

"I'll give you some room now that you're up." Christian exits toward the living area, and I wander into the bathroom. I have needs to attend to, and I want a quick wash. Seven minutes later, I am in the living area, scrubbed, brushed, and dressed in jeans, my camisole, and Christian Grey's underwear. Christian glances up from the small dining table where he's eating breakfast. Breakfast! Jeez, at this time.

"Eat," he says.

*Holy crap … my dream*. I gape at him, thinking about his tongue on his palate. *Hmm, his expert tongue*.

"Anastasia," he says sternly, pulling me out of my reverie.

It really is too early for me. How to handle this?

"I'll have some tea. Can I take a croissant for later?"

He eyes me suspiciously, and I smile very sweetly.

"Don't rain on my parade, Anastasia," he warns softly.

"I will eat later when my stomach's woken up. About seven thirty a.m.… okay?"

"Okay." He peers down at me.

*Honestly*. I have to concentrate hard on not making a face at him.

"I want to roll my eyes at you."

"By all means, do, and you will make my day," he says sternly.

I gaze up at the ceiling.

"Well, a spanking would wake me up, I suppose." I purse my lips in quiet contemplation.

Christian's mouth drops open.

"On the other hand, I don't want you to be all hot and bothered; the climate here is warm enough." I shrug nonchalantly.

Christian closes his mouth and tries very hard to look displeased, but fails hopelessly. I can see the humor lurking in the back of his eyes.

"You are, as ever, challenging, Miss Steele. Drink your tea."

I notice the Twinings label, and inside, my heart sings. *See, he does care*, my subconscious mouths at me. I sit and face him, drinking in his beauty. Will I ever

get enough of this man?

AS WE LEAVE THE room, Christian throws a sweatshirt at me.

"You'll need this."

I look at him, puzzled.

"Trust me." He grins, leans over, and kisses me quickly on the lips, then grabs my hand and we head out.

Outside, in the relative cool of the half light of predawn, the valet hands Christian a set of keys to a flashy sports car with a soft top. I raise an eyebrow at Christian, who smirks back at me.

"You know, sometimes it's great being me," he says with a conspiratorial but smug grin that I simply can't help emulating. He's so lovable when he's playful and carefree. He opens my car door with an exaggerated bow, and in I climb. He is in such a good mood.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He grins as he slips the car into drive, and we head out on Savannah Parkway. He programs the GPS and presses a switch on the steering wheel, and a classical orchestral piece fills the car.

"What's this?" I ask as the sweet, sweet sound of a hundred violin strings assails us.

"It's from *La Traviata*. An opera by Verdi."

Oh, my … it's lovely.

"*La Traviata*? I've heard of that. I can't think where. What does it mean?"

Christian glances at me and smirks.

"Well, literally, 'the woman led astray.' It's based on Alexandre Dumas's book, *La Dame aux Camélias*."

"Ah. I've read it."

"I thought you might've."

"The doomed courtesan." I squirm uncomfortably in the plush leather seat. *Is he trying to tell me something?* "Hmm, it's a depressing story," I mutter.

"Too depressing? Do you want to choose some music? This is on my iPod." Christian has that secret smile again.

I can't see his iPod anywhere. He taps the screen on the console between us, and behold—there is a playlist.

"You choose." His lips twitch up into a smile, and I know it's a challenge.

Christian Grey's iPod, this should be interesting. I scroll through the touch screen and find the perfect song. I press "play." I wouldn't have figured him for a Britney fan. The club-mix, techno beat assaults us both, and Christian turns the volume down. Maybe it's too early for this: Britney's at her most sultry.

“ ‘*Toxic*,’ eh?” Christian grins.

“I don’t know what you mean.” I feign innocence.

He turns the music down a little more, and inside I am hugging myself. My inner goddess is standing on the podium awaiting her gold medal. He turned the music down. Victory!

“I didn’t put that song on my iPod,” he says casually, and puts his foot down so that I am thrown back into my seat as the car accelerates along the freeway.

*What?* He knows what he’s doing, the bastard. *Who did?* And I have to listen to Britney going on and on. *Who … who?*

The song ends and the iPod shuffles to Damien Rice being mournful. *Who? Who?* I stare out the window, my stomach churning. Who?

“It was Leila,” he answers my unspoken thoughts. *How does he do that?*

“Leila?”

“An ex, who put the song on my iPod.”

Damien warbles away in the background as I sit stunned. An ex … ex-submissive? An ex—

“One of the fifteen?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“What happened to her?”

“We finished.”

“Why?”

Oh jeez. It’s too early for this kind of conversation. But he looks relaxed, happy even, and, what’s more, talkative.

“She wanted more.” His voice is low, introspective even, and he leaves the sentence hanging between us, ending it with that powerful little word again.

“And you didn’t?” I ask before I can employ my brain-to-mouth filter. Shit, do I want to know?

He shakes his head. “I’ve never wanted more, until I met you.”

I gasp, reeling. Isn’t this what I want? He wants more. *He wants it, too!* My inner goddess has backflipped off the podium and is doing cartwheels around the stadium. It’s not just me.

“What happened to the other fourteen?” I ask.

*Jeez, he’s talking—take advantage*.

“You want a list? Divorced, beheaded, died?”

“You’re not Henry VIII.”

“Okay. In no particular order, I’ve only had long-term relationships with four women, apart from Elena.”

“Elena?”

“Mrs. Robinson to you.” He half smiles his secret-private-joke smile.

Elena! Holy fuck. The evil one has a name and it's all foreign sounding. A vision of a glorious, pale-skinned vamp with raven hair and ruby-red lips comes to mind, and I know that she's beautiful. *I must not dwell. I must not dwell.*

"What happened to the four?" I ask to distract myself.

"So inquisitive, so eager for information, Miss Steele," he scolds playfully.

"Oh, Mr. When Is Your Period Due?"

"Anastasia—a man needs to know these things."

"Does he?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to get pregnant."

"Neither do I! Well, not for a few years yet."

Christian blinks, startled, then visibly relaxes. Okay. Christian doesn't want children. Now or never? I am reeling from his sudden, unprecedented attack of candor. Perhaps it's the early morning? Something in the Georgia water? The Georgia air? What else do I want to know? Carpe diem.

"So the other four, what happened?" I ask.

"One met someone else. The other three wanted—more. I wasn't in the market for more then."

"And the others?" I press.

He glances at me briefly and just shakes his head.

"Just didn't work out."

Whoa, a bucketload of information to process. I glance in the side mirror of the car, and I notice the soft swell of pink and aquamarine in the sky behind the car. Dawn is following us.

"Where are we headed?" I ask, perplexed, gazing out at Interstate 95. We're heading south, that's all I know.

"An airfield."

"We're not going back to Seattle, are we?" I gasp, alarmed. I haven't said good-bye to my mom. Jeez, she's expecting us for dinner.

He laughs. "No, Anastasia, we're going to indulge in my second favorite pastime."

"Second?" I frown at him.

"Yep. I told you my favorite this morning."

I glance at his glorious profile, frowning, racking my brain.

"Indulging in you, Miss Steele. That's got to be top of my list. Any way I can get you."

*Oh.*

"Well, that's quite high up on my list of diverting, kinky priorities, too," I

mutter, blushing.

"I'm pleased to hear it," he mutters dryly.

"So, airfield?"

He grins at me. "Soaring."

The term rings a vague bell. He's mentioned it before.

"We're going to chase the dawn, Anastasia." He turns and grins at me as the GPS urges him to turn right into what looks like an industrial complex. He pulls up outside a large white building with a sign reading BRUNSWICK SOARING ASSOCIATION.

*Gliding! We're going gliding?*

He switches off the engine.

"You up for this?" he asks.

"You're flying?"

"Yes."

"Yes, please!" I don't hesitate. He grins and leans forward and kisses me.

"Another first, Miss Steele," he says as he climbs out of the car.

First? What sort of first? First time flying a glider … shit! No—he said that he's done it before. I relax. He walks around and opens my door. The sky has turned to a subtle opal, shimmering and glowing softly behind the sporadic childlike clouds. Dawn is upon us.

Taking my hand, Christian leads me around the building to a large stretch of tarmac where several planes are parked. Waiting beside them is a man with a shaved head and a wild look in his eye, accompanied by Taylor.

*Taylor!* Does Christian go anywhere without that man? I beam at him, and he smiles kindly back at me.

"Mr. Grey, this is your tow pilot, Mr. Mark Benson," says Taylor. Christian and Benson shake hands and strike up a conversation that sounds very technical about wind speed, directions, and the like.

"Hello, Taylor," I murmur shyly.

"Miss Steele." He nods a greeting at me, and I frown. "Ana," he corrects himself. "He's been hell on wheels the last few days. Glad we're here," he says conspiratorially.

*Oh, this is news. Why? Surely not because of me!* Revelation Thursday! Must be something in the Savannah water that makes these men loosen up a bit.

"Anastasia," Christian summons me. "Come." He holds out his hand.

"See you later." I smile at Taylor, and giving me a quick salute, he heads back to the parking lot.

"Mr. Benson, this is my girlfriend, Anastasia Steele."

"Pleased to meet you," I murmur as we shake hands.

Benson gives me a dazzling smile.

“Likewise,” he says, and I can tell from his accent that he’s British.

As I take Christian’s hand, there’s a mounting excitement in my belly. *Wow … gliding!* We follow Mark Benson out across the tarmac toward the runway. He and Christian keep up a running conversation. I catch the gist. We will be in a Blanik L-23, which is apparently better than the L-13, although this is open to debate. Benson will be flying a Piper Pawnee. He’s been flying tail draggers for about five years now. It all means nothing to me, but glancing up at Christian, he is so animated, so in his element, it’s a pleasure to watch him.

The plane itself is long, sleek, and white with orange stripes. It has a small cockpit with two seats, one in front of the other. It’s attached by a long white cable to a small, conventional singlepropeller plane. Benson opens the large, clear Perspex dome that frames the cockpit, allowing us to climb in.

“First we need to strap on your parachute.”

*Parachute!*

“I’ll do that,” Christian interrupts him and takes the harness from Benson, who smiles amenably at him.

“I’ll fetch some ballast,” Benson says, and heads toward the plane.

“You like strapping me into things,” I observe dryly.

“Miss Steele, you have no idea. Here, step into the straps.”

I do as I’m told, placing my arm on his shoulder. Christian stiffens slightly but doesn’t move. Once my feet are in the loops, he pulls the parachute up, and I place my arms through the shoulder straps. Deftly he fastens the harness and tightens all the straps.

“There, you’ll do,” he says mildly, but his eyes are gleaming. “Do you have your hair tie from yesterday?”

I nod.

“You want me to put my hair up?”

“Yes.”

I quickly do as I’m asked.

“In you go,” Christian commands. He’s still so bossy. I go to climb into the back.

“No, front. The pilot sits in the back.”

“But won’t you be able to see?”

“I’ll see plenty.” He grins.

I don’t think I have ever seen him so happy—bossy, but happy. I clamber in, settling down into the leather seat. It is surprisingly comfortable. Christian leans over, pulls the harness over my shoulders, reaches between my legs for the lower belt, and slots it into the fastener that rests against my belly. He tightens all the restraining straps.

“Hmm, twice in one morning, I am a lucky man,” he whispers, and kisses me quickly. “This won’t take long—twenty, thirty minutes at most. Thermals aren’t great this time of the morning, but it’s so breathtaking up there at this hour. I hope you’re not nervous.”

“Excited.” I beam.

Where did this ridiculous grin come from? Actually, part of me is terrified. My inner goddess—she’s under a blanket behind the sofa.

“Good.” He grins back, stroking my face, then disappears from view.

I hear and feel his movements as he climbs in behind me. Of course he’s strapped me in so tightly I can’t move around to see him … typical! We are very low on the ground. In front of me is a panel of dials and levers and a big stick thing. I leave everything alone.

Mark Benson appears with a cheerful grin as he checks my straps and leans in and checks the cockpit floor. I think it’s the ballast.

“Yep, that’s secure. First time?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

“You’ll love it.”

“Thanks, Mr. Benson.”

“Call me Mark.” He turns to Christian. “Okay?”

“Yep. Let’s go.”

I am so glad I haven’t eaten anything. I am beyond excited, and I don’t think my stomach would be game for food, excitement, and leaving the ground. Once again, I am putting myself into this beautiful man’s skilled hands. Mark shuts the cockpit lid, strolls over to the plane in front, and climbs in.

The Piper’s single propeller starts, and my nervous stomach relocates itself to my throat. *Jeez … I’m really doing this*. Mark taxis slowly down the runway, and as the cable takes the strain, we suddenly jolt forward. We’re off. I hear chatter over the radio set behind me. I think it’s Mark talking to the tower—but I can’t make out what he’s saying. As the Piper picks up speed, so do we. It’s very bumpy, and in front of us the single prop plane is still on the ground. Jeez, will we ever get up? And suddenly, my stomach disappears from my throat and free-falls through my body to the ground—we’re airborne.

“Here we go, baby!” Christian shouts from behind me. And we are in our own bubble, just us two. All I hear is the sound of the wind ripping past and the distant hum of the Piper’s engine.

I’m gripping the edge of my seat with both hands, so tightly my knuckles are white. We head west, inland, away from the rising sun, gaining height, crossing over fields and woods and homes and Interstate 95.

*Oh my*. This is amazing, above us only sky. The light is extraordinary, diffuse

and warm in hue, and I remember José rambling on about "magic hour," a time of day that photographers adore—this is it … just after dawn, and I'm in it, with Christian.

Abruptly, I'm reminded of José's show. Hmm. I need to tell Christian. I wonder briefly how he'll react. But I won't worry about that, not now—I'm enjoying the ride. My ears pop as we gain height, and the ground slips farther and farther away. It is so peaceful. I completely get why he likes to be up here. Away from his BlackBerry and all the pressures of his job.

The radio crackles into life, and Mark mentions three thousand feet. Jeez, that sounds high. I check the ground, and I can no longer clearly distinguish anything down there.

"Release," Christian says into the radio, and suddenly the Piper disappears and the pulling sensation provided by the small plane ceases. We're floating, floating over Georgia.

*Holy fuck—it's exciting*. The plane banks and turns as the wing dips, and we spiral toward the sun. *Icarus. This is it*. I am flying close to the sun, but he's with me, leading me. I gasp at the realization. We spiral and spiral, and the view in this morning light is spectacular.

"Hold on tight!" he shouts, and we dip again—only this time he doesn't stop. Suddenly, I am upside down, looking at the ground through the top of the cockpit canopy.

I squeal loudly, my arms automatically lashing out, my hands splayed on the Perspex to stop me from falling. I can hear him laughing. *Bastard!* But his joy is infectious, and I am laughing, too, as he rights the plane.

"I'm glad I didn't have breakfast!" I shout at him.

"Yes, in hindsight, it's good you didn't, because I'm going to do that again."

He dips the plane once more until we are upside down. This time, because I'm prepared, I hang on to the harness, but it makes me grin and giggle like a fool. He levels the plane once more.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he calls.

"Yes."

We fly, swooping majestically through the air, listening to the wind and the silence, in the early morning light. Who could ask for more?

"See the joystick in front of you?" he shouts again.

I look at the stick that is jerking between my legs. *Oh no*, where's he going with this?

"Grab hold."

*Oh, shit*. He's going to make me fly the plane. *No!*

"Go on, Anastasia. Grab it," he urges more vehemently.

Tentatively, I grasp it and feel the pitch and yaw of what I assume are rudders and paddles or whatever keeps this thing in the air.

"Hold tight … keep it steady. See the middle dial in front? Keep the needle dead center."

My heart is in my mouth. *Holy shit*. I am flying a glider … I'm soaring.

"Good girl." Christian sounds delighted.

"I am amazed you let me take control," I shout.

"You'd be amazed what I'd let you do, Miss Steele. Back to me now."

I feel the joystick move suddenly, and I let go as we spiral down several feet, my ears starting to pop again. The ground is getting closer, and it feels like we could be hitting it shortly. Jeez, that's scary.

"BMA, this is BG N Papa Three Alpha, entering left downwind runway seven to the grass, BMA." Christian sounds his usual authoritative self. The tower squawks back at him over the radio, but I don't understand what they say. We sail around again in a wide circle, sinking slowly to the ground. I can see the airport, the landing strips, and we're flying back over Interstate 95.

"Hang on, baby. This can get bumpy."

After another circle we dip, and suddenly we are on the ground with a brief thump, racing along the grass—*holy shit*. My teeth chatter as we bump at an alarming speed along the ground, until we finally come to a stop. The plane sways then dips to the right. I take a deep lungful of air while Christian leans over and opens the cockpit lid, clambering out and stretching.

"How was that?" he asks, and his eyes are a shining, dazzling silver gray. He leans down to unbuckle me.

"That was extraordinary. Thank you," I whisper.

"Was it more?" he asks, his voice tinged with hope.

"Much more," I breathe, and he grins.

"Come." He holds out his hand for me, and I clamber out of the cockpit.

As soon as I'm out, he grabs me and holds me flush against his body. Suddenly his hand is in my hair, tugging it so my head tips back, and his other hand travels down to the base of my spine. He kisses me, long, hard, and passionately, his tongue in my mouth. His breathing is mounting, his ardor … *Holy* cow—his erection … we're in a field. But I don't care. My hands twist in his hair, anchoring him to me. I want him, here, now, on the ground. He breaks away and gazes down at me, his eyes now dark and luminous in the early morning light, full of raw, arrogant sensuality. Wow. He takes my breath away.

"Breakfast," he whispers, making it sound deliciously erotic.

How can he make bacon and eggs sound like forbidden fruit? It's an extraordinary skill. He turns, clasping my hand, and we head back toward the

car.

"What about the glider?"

"Someone will take care of that," he says dismissively. "We'll eat now." His tone is unequivocal.

*Food!* He's talking food, when really all I want is him.

"Come." He smiles.

I have never seen him like this, and it's a joy to behold. I find myself walking beside him, hand in hand, with a stupid, goofy grin plastered on my face. It reminds me of when I was ten and spent the day at Disneyland with Ray. It was a perfect day, and this is sure shaping out to be the same.

BACK IN THE CAR, as we head back along Interstate 95 toward Savannah, my phone alarm goes off. Oh yes … my pill.

"What's that?" Christian asks, curious, glancing at me.

I fumble in my purse for the packet.

"Alarm for my pill," I mutter as my cheeks flush.

His lips quirk up.

"Good, well done. I hate condoms."

I flush some more. He's as patronizing as ever.

"I like that you introduced me to Mark as your girlfriend," I murmur.

"Isn't that what you are?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Am I? I thought you wanted a submissive."

"So did I, Anastasia, and I do. But I've told you, I want more, too."

*Oh my*. He's coming around, and hope surges through me, leaving me breathless.

"I'm very happy that you want more," I whisper.

"We aim to please, Miss Steele." He smirks as we pull into the International House of Pancakes.

"IHOP." I grin back at him. I don't believe it. Who would have thought …? Christian Grey at IHOP.

IT'S 8:30 A.M. BUT quiet in the restaurant. It smells of sweet batter, fried food, and disinfectant. *Hmm … not such an enticing aroma*. Christian leads me to a booth.

"I would never have pictured you here," I say as we slide into a booth.

"My dad used to bring us to one of these whenever my mom went away to a medical conference. It was our secret." He smiles at me, eyes dancing, then picks up a menu, running a hand through his wayward hair.

*Oh, I want to run my hands through that hair*. I pick up a menu and examine it. I realize I'm starving.

“I know what I want,” he breathes, his voice low and husky.

I glance up at him, and he’s staring at me in that way that tightens all the muscles in my belly and takes my breath away, his eyes dark and smoldering. *Holy shit*. I gaze at him, my blood singing in my veins, answering his call.

“I want what you want,” I whisper.

He inhales sharply.

“Here?” he asks suggestively, raising an eyebrow at me, smiling wickedly, his teeth trapping the tip of his tongue.

*Oh my … sex in IHOP*. His expression changes, growing darker.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he orders. “Not here, not now.” His eyes harden momentarily, and for a moment, he looks so deliciously dangerous. “If I can’t have you here, don’t tempt me.”

“Hi, my name’s Leandra. What can I get for you … er … folks … er … today, this mornin’ …?” Her voice trails off, stumbling over her words as she gets an eyeful of Mr. Beautiful opposite me. She flushes scarlet, and a small ounce of sympathy for her bubbles unwelcome into my consciousness because he still does that to me. Her presence allows me to escape briefly from his sensual glare.

“Anastasia?” he prompts me, ignoring her, and I don’t think anyone could squeeze as much carnality into my name as he does at that moment.

I swallow, praying that I don’t turn the same color as poor Leandra.

“I told you, I want what you want.” I keep my voice soft, low, and he looks at me hungrily. *Jeez*, my inner goddess swoons. *Am I up to this game?*

Leandra looks from me to him and back again. She’s practically the same color as her shiny red hair.

“Shall I give you folks another minute to decide?”

“No. We know what we want.” Christian’s mouth twitches with a small, sexy smile.

“We’ll have two portions of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, one black coffee with skim milk, and one English breakfast tea, if you have it,” says Christian, not taking his eyes off me.

“Thank you, sir. Will that be all?” Leandra whispers, looking anywhere but at the two of us. We both turn to stare at her, and she flushes crimson again and scuttles away.

“You know, it’s really not fair.” I glance down at the Formica tabletop, tracing a pattern on it with my index finger, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What’s not fair?”

“How you disarm people. Women. Me.”

“Do I disarm you?”

I snort. “All the time.”

“It’s just looks, Anastasia,” he says mildly.

“No, Christian, it’s much more than that.”

His brow creases. “You disarm me totally, Miss Steele. Your innocence. It cuts through all the crap.”

“Is that why you’ve changed your mind?”

“Changed my mind?”

“Yes—about … er … us?”

He strokes his chin thoughtfully with his long, skilled fingers. “I don’t think I’ve changed my mind per se. We just need to redefine our parameters, redraw our battle lines, if you will. We can make this work, I’m sure. I want you submissive in my playroom. I will punish you if you digress from the rules. Other than that … well, I think it’s all up for discussion. Those are my requirements, Miss Steele. What say you to that?”

“So I get to sleep with you? In your bed?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

“I agree then. Besides, I sleep very well when you’re in my bed. I had no idea.” His brow creases as his voice fades.

“I was frightened you’d leave me if I didn’t agree to all of it,” I whisper.

“I’m not going anywhere, Anastasia. Besides …” He trails off, and after some thought, he adds, “We’re following your advice, your definition: compromise. You e-mailed it to me. And so far, it’s working for me.”

“I love that you want more,” I murmur shyly.

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me. I just do.” He smirks at me. He’s hiding something. *What?*

At that moment, Leandra arrives with breakfast and our conversation ceases. My stomach rumbles, reminding me how ravenous I am. Christian watches with annoying approval as I devour everything on my plate.

“Can I treat you?” I ask Christian.

“Treat me how?”

“Pay for this meal.”

Christian snorts.

“I don’t think so,” he scoffs.

“Please. I want to.”

He frowns at me.

“Are you trying to completely emasculate me?”

“This is probably the only place that I’ll be able to afford to pay.”

“Anastasia, I appreciate the thought. I do. But no.”

I purse my lips.

“Don’t scowl,” he threatens, his eyes glinting ominously.

OF COURSE HE DOESN’T ask me for my mother’s address. He knows it already, stalker that he is. When he pulls up outside the house, I don’t comment. What’s the point?

“Do you want to come in?” I ask shyly.

“I need to work, Anastasia, but I’ll be back this evening. What time?”

I ignore the unwelcome stab of disappointment. Why do I want to spend every single minute with this controlling sex god? Oh yes, I’ve fallen in love with him, and he can fly.

“Thank you … for the more.”

“My pleasure, Anastasia.” He kisses me, and I inhale his sexy Christian smell.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Try to stop me,” he whispers.

I wave good-bye as he drives off into the Georgia sunshine. I’m still wearing his sweatshirt and his underwear, and I’m too warm.

In the kitchen, my mom is in a complete flap. It’s not every day she has to entertain a multi-zillionaire, and it’s stressing her out.

“How are you, darling?” she asks, and I flush because she must know what I was doing last night.

“I’m good. Christian took me gliding this morning.” I hope the new information will distract her.

“Gliding? As in a small plane with no engine? That sort of gliding?”

I nod.

“Wow.”

She’s speechless—a novel concept for my mother. She gapes at me, but eventually recovers herself and resumes her original line of questioning.

“How was last night? Did you talk?”

*Jeez*. I flush bright scarlet.

“We talked—last night and today. It’s getting better.”

“Good.” She turns her attention back to the four cookbooks she has open on the kitchen table.

“Mom … if you like, I’ll cook this evening.”

“Oh, honey, that’s kind of you, but I want to do it.”

“Okay.” I grimace, knowing full well that my mother’s cooking is pretty hit or miss. Perhaps she’s improved since she moved to Savannah with Bob. There was a time I wouldn’t subject anyone to her cooking … even—who do I hate? Oh yes—Mrs. Robinson—Elena. Well, maybe her. *Will I ever meet this damned*

*woman?*

I decide to send a quick thank-you to Christian.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Soaring as Opposed to Sore-ing

**Date**: June 2 2011 10:20 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Sometimes, you really know how to show a girl a good time.

Thank you

Ana x

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Soaring vs Sore-ing

**Date**: June 2 2011 10:24 EST

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I'll take either of those over your snoring. I had a good time, too.

But I always do when I'm with you.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: SNORING

**Date**: June 2 2011 10:26 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

I DO NOT SNORE. And if I do, it's very ungallant of you to point it out.

You are no gentleman, Mr. Grey! And you are in the Deep South, too!

Ana

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Somniloquy

**Date**: June 2 2011 10:28 EST

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I have never claimed to be a gentleman, Anastasia, and I think I have demonstrated that point to you on numerous occasions. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I will confess to a small white lie: no—you don't snore, but you do talk. And it's fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Christian Grey

Cad & CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Holy shit*. I know I talk in my sleep. Kate has told me enough times. What the hell have I said? *Oh no*.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Spill the Beans
**Date**: June 2 2011 10:32 EST
**To**: Christian Grey

You are a cad and a scoundrel—definitely no gentleman.

So, what did I say? No kisses for you until you talk!

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Sleeping Talking Beauty
**Date**: June 2 2011 10:35 EST
**To**: Anastasia Steele

It would be most ungallant of me to say, and I have already been chastised for that.

But if you behave yourself, I may tell you this evening. I do have to go into a meeting now.

Laters, baby.

Christian Grey
CEO, Cad & Scoundrel, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Right!* I shall maintain radio silence until this evening. I fume. *Jeez*. Suppose I've said I hate him, or worse still, that I love him, in my sleep. Oh, I hope not. I am not ready to tell him that, and I'm sure he's not ready to hear it, if he ever wants to hear it. I scowl at my computer and decide that whatever Mom cooks, I will make bread to vent my frustrations while kneading the dough.

MY MOM HAS DECIDED on gazpacho soup and a barbecue with steaks marinated in olive oil, garlic, and lemon. Christian likes meat, and it's simple to do. Bob has volunteered to man the BBQ grill. *What is it about men and fire?* I ponder as I trail after my mother through the supermarket with the shopping cart.

As we browse the raw meat cabinet, my phone rings. I scramble for it, thinking it may be Christian. I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?" I answer breathlessly.

"Anastasia Steele?"

"Yes."

"It's Elizabeth Morgan from SIP."

“Oh—hi.”

“I’m calling to offer you the job of assistant to Mr. Jack Hyde. We’d like you to start on Monday.”

“Wow. That’s great. Thank you!”

“You know the salary details?”

“Yes. Yes … that’s—I mean, I accept your offer. I’d love to come and work for you.”

“Excellent. We’ll see you Monday at 8:30 a.m.?”

“See you then. Good-bye. And thank you.”

I beam at my mom.

“You have a job?”

I nod gleefully, and she squeals and hugs me in the middle of Publix supermarket.

“Congratulations, darling! We have to buy some champagne!” She’s clapping her hands and jumping up and down. *Is she forty-two or twelve?*

I glance down at my phone and frown; there’s a missed call from Christian. He never phones me. I call him straight back.

“Anastasia,” he answers immediately.

“Hi,” I murmur shyly.

“I have to return to Seattle. Something’s come up. I am on my way to Hilton Head now. Please apologize to your mother—I can’t make dinner.” He sounds very businesslike.

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“I have a situation that I have to deal with. I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll send Taylor to collect you from the airport if I can’t come myself.” He sounds cold. Angry even. But for the first time, I don’t immediately think it’s me.

“Okay. I hope you sort out your situation. Have a safe flight.”

“You too, baby,” he breathes, and with those words, my Christian is back. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last “situation” he had was my virginity. *Jeez, I hope it’s nothing like that*. I gaze at my mom. Her earlier jubilation has metamorphosed into concern.

“It’s Christian. He’s had to go back to Seattle. He apologizes.”

“Oh! That’s a shame, darling. We can still have our barbecue, and now we have something to celebrate—your new job! You have to tell me all about it.”

IT’S LATE AFTERNOON, AND Mom and I are lying beside the pool. My mother has relaxed to the point where she is literally horizontal now that Mr. Megabucks is not coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun, endeavoring to lose the pale, I think about

yesterday evening and breakfast today. I think about Christian, and my ridiculous grin refuses to subside. It keeps creeping across my face, unbidden and disconcerting, as I recall our various conversations and what we did … what he did.

There seems to be a tidal shift in Christian's attitude. He denies it, but he admits he's trying for more. What could have changed? What has altered since he sent his long e-mail and when I saw him yesterday? What has he done? I sit up suddenly, almost spilling my soda. He had dinner with … her. Elena.

*Holy fuck!*

My scalp prickles at the realization. Did she say something to him? Oh … to have been a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup or on her wine glass and choked her.

"What is it, Ana, honey?" Mom asks, startled from her torpor.

"I'm just having a moment, Mom. What time is it?"

"About six thirty p.m., darling."

Hmm … he wouldn't have landed yet. Can I ask him? Should I ask him? Or perhaps she has nothing to do with it. I fervently hope so. What did I say in my sleep? *Crap* … some unguarded remark while dreaming about him, I bet. Whatever it is, or was, I hope the sea change is coming from within him and not because of *her*.

I am sweltering in this damned heat. I need another dip in the pool.

AS I GET READY for bed, I switch on my computer. I have heard nothing from Christian. Not even a word that he's arrived safely.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele
**Subject**: Safe Arrival?
**Date**: June 2 2011 22:32 EST
**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Sir,

Please let me know that you have arrived safely. I am starting to worry. Thinking of you.

Your Ana x

Three minutes later, I hear the ping from my e-mail inbox.

---

**From**: Christian Grey
**Subject**: Sorry
**Date**: June 2 2011 19:36
**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I have arrived safely, and please accept my apologies for not letting you know. I don't want to cause you any worry. It's heartwarming to know that you care for me. I am thinking of you, too, and as ever looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# I sigh. Christian is back to formality.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: The Situation

**Date**: June 2 2011 22:40 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

I think it is very evident that I care for you deeply. How could you doubt that?

I hope your "situation" is under control.

Your Ana x

P.S.: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep?

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Pleading the Fifth

**Date**: June 2 2011 19:45

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I like very much that you care for me. The "situation" here is not yet resolved.

With regard to your P.S., the answer is no.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Pleading Insanity

**Date**: June 2 2011 22:48 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

I hope it was amusing. But you should know I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am unconscious. In fact—you probably misheard me.

A man of your advanced years is surely a little deaf.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Pleading Guilty

**Date**: June 2 2011 19:52

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

Sorry, could you speak up? I can't hear you.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Pleading Insanity Again

**Date**: June 2 2011 22:54 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

You are driving me crazy.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: I Hope So …

**Date**: June 2 2011 19:59

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Dear Miss Steele,

I intend to do exactly that on Friday evening. Looking forward to it.

;)

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Grrrrrr

**Date**: June 2 2011 23:02 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

I am officially pissed at you.

Good night.

Miss A. R. Steele

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Wild Cat

**Date**: June 2 2011 20:05

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Are you growling at me, Miss Steele?

I possess a cat of my own for growlers.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Cat of his own? I've never seen a cat in his apartment. No, I am not going to answer him. Oh, he can be so exasperating sometimes. Fifty shades of exasperating. I clamber into bed and lie glaring at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the dark. I hear another ping from my computer. I am not going to look. No, definitely not. No, I am not going to look. Gah! Like the fool I am, I cannot resist the lure of Christian Grey's words.

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: What You Said in Your Sleep

**Date**: June 2 2011 20:20

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia,

I'd rather hear you say the words that you uttered in your sleep when you're conscious, that's why I won't tell you. Go to sleep. You'll need to be rested with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh no … What have I said? It's as bad as I think, I'm sure.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

My mother hugs me tightly.

"Follow your heart, darling, and please, please—try not to overthink things. Relax and enjoy yourself. You are so young, sweetheart. You have so much of life to experience yet, just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything." She whispers in my ear, her heartfelt words comforting. She kisses my hair.

"Oh, Mom." Hot, unwelcome tears prick my eyes as I cling to her.

"Darling, you know what they say. You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince."

I give her a lopsided, bittersweet smile.

"I think I've kissed a prince, Mom. I hope he doesn't turn into a frog."

She gives me her most endearing, motherly, absolute-unconditional-love smile, and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman as we hug again.

"Ana—they're calling your flight," Bob's voice is anxious.

"Will you visit, Mom?"

"Of course, darling—soon. Love you."

"Me, too."

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug Bob and, turning, head to the gate—I do not have time for the first class lounge today. I will myself not to glance back. But I do … and Bob is holding my mom, and tears are streaming down her face. I can no longer hold mine back. I put my head down and proceed to the gate, keeping my eyes on the shiny white floor, blurred through my watery tears.

Once on board, in the luxury of first class, I curl up in my seat and try to compose myself. It is always painful to wrench myself away from Mom … she is scatty, disorganized, but newly insightful, and she loves me. Unconditional love—what every child deserves from its parents. I frown at my wayward thoughts and, pulling out my BlackBerry, stare at it despondently.

What does Christian know of love? Seems he didn't get the unconditional love he was entitled to during his very early years. My heart twists, and my mother's words waft like a zephyr through my mind: *Yes, Ana. Hell, what do you need? A neon sign flashing on his forehead?* She thinks Christian loves me, but then she's my mother, of course she'd think that. She thinks I deserve the best of

everything. I frown. It's true, and in a moment of startling clarity, I see it. It's very simple: I want his love. I *need* Christian Grey to love me. This is why I am so reticent about our relationship—because on some basic, fundamental level, I recognize within me a deep-seated compulsion to be loved and cherished.

And because of his fifty shades, I am holding myself back. The BDSM is a distraction from the real issue. The sex is amazing, he's wealthy, he's beautiful, but this is all meaningless without his love, and the real heart-fail is that I don't know if he's capable of love. He doesn't even love himself. I recall his self-loathing, *her* love being the only form he found *acceptable*. Punished—whipped, beaten, whatever their relationship entailed—he feels undeserving of love. Why does he feel like that? How can he feel like that? His words haunt me: *It's very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you're not perfect.*

I close my eyes, imagining his pain, and I can't begin to comprehend it. I shudder as I remember that I may have divulged too much. What have I confessed to Christian in my sleep? What secrets have I revealed?

I stare at the BlackBerry in the vague hope that it will give me some answers. Rather unsurprisingly, it is not very forthcoming. As we haven't taken off yet, I decide to e-mail my Fifty Shades.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Homeward Bound

**Date**: June 3 2011 12:53 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey,

I am once again ensconced in first class, for which I thank you. I am counting the minutes until I see you this evening and perhaps torturing the truth out of you about my nocturnal admissions.

Your Ana x

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Homeward Bound

**Date**: June 3 2011 09:58

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia, I look forward to seeing you.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His response makes me frown. It sounds clipped and formal, not his usual witty, pithy style.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Homeward Bound

**Date**: June 3 2011 13:01 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dearest Mr. Grey,

I hope everything is okay re “the situation.” The tone of your e-mail is worrying.

Ana x

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Homeward Bound

**Date**: June 3 2011 10:04

**To**: Anastasia Steele

Anastasia,

The situation could be better. Have you taken off yet? If so you should not be e-mailing. You are putting yourself at risk, in direct contravention of the rule regarding your personal safety. I meant what I said about punishments.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Crap. Okay*. Jeez. What is eating him? Perhaps “the situation”? Maybe Taylor’s gone AWOL, maybe he’s dropped a few million on the stock market—whatever the reason.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Overreaction

**Date**: June 3 2011 13:06 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grumpy,

The aircraft doors are still open. We are delayed but only by ten minutes. My welfare and that of the passengers around me is vouchsafed. You may stow your twitchy palm for now.

Miss Steele

---

**From**: Christian Grey

**Subject**: Apologies—Twitchy Palm Stowed

**Date**: June 3 2011 10:08

**To**: Anastasia Steele

I miss you and your smart mouth, Miss Steele.

I want you safely home.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From**: Anastasia Steele

**Subject**: Apology Accepted

**Date**: June 3 2011 13:10 EST

**To**: Christian Grey

They are shutting the doors. You won't hear another peep from me, especially given your deafness.

Laters.

Ana x

I switch off the BlackBerry, unable to shake my anxiety. Something is up with Christian. Perhaps "the situation" is out of hand. I sit back, glancing up at the overhead bin where my bags are stowed. I managed this morning, with my mother's help, to buy Christian a small gift to say thank you for first class and for the gliding. I smile at the memory of the soaring—that was something else. I don't know yet if I'll give my silly gift to him. He might think it's childish—and if he's in a strange mood, maybe not. I am both eager to return and apprehensive of what awaits me at my journey's end. As I mentally flick through all the scenarios that could be "the situation," I become aware that once again the only empty seat is beside me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that Christian might have purchased the adjacent seat so that I couldn't talk to anyone. I dismiss the idea as ridiculous—no one could be that controlling, that jealous, surely. I close my eyes as the plane taxis toward the runway.

I EMERGE INTO THE Sea-Tac arrivals terminal eight hours later to find Taylor waiting and holding up a sign that reads MISS A. STEELE. *Honestly!* But it's good to see him.

"Hello, Taylor."

"Miss Steele," he greets me formally, but I see a hint of a smile in his sharp brown eyes. He looks his usual immaculate self—smart charcoal suit, white shirt, and charcoal tie.

"I do know what you look like, Taylor, you don't need a sign, and I do wish you'd call me Ana."

"Ana. Can I take your bags, please?"

"No, I can manage. Thank you."

His lips tighten perceptibly.

"B-but, if you'd be more comfortable taking them," I stammer.

"Thank you." He grabs my backpack and my newly acquired wheelie case for the clothes my mother has bought me. "This way, ma'am."

I sigh. He's so polite. I remember, though I would like to erase it from my memory, that this man has bought me underwear. In fact—and the thought unsettles me—he's the only man who's ever bought me underwear. Even Ray's

never had to endure that hardship. We walk in silence to the black Audi SUV outside in the airport parking lot, and he holds the door open for me. I clamber in, wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return to Seattle was a good idea. It was cool and welcome in Georgia. Here I feel exposed. Once Taylor has stowed my bags in the trunk, we set off for Escala.

The journey is slow, caught up in rush-hour traffic. Taylor keeps his eyes on the road ahead. Taciturn does not begin to describe him.

I can bear the silence no longer.

"How's Christian, Taylor?"

"Mr. Grey is preoccupied, Miss Steele."

Oh, this must be "the situation." I am mining a seam of gold.

"Preoccupied?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I frown at Taylor, and he glances at me in the rearview mirror, our eyes meeting. He's saying no more. Jeez, he can be as tight lipped as the control freak himself.

"Is he okay?"

"I believe so, ma'am."

"Are you more comfortable calling me Miss Steele?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, okay."

Well, that curtails our conversation, and we continue in silence. I begin to think that Taylor's recent slip, when he told me that Christian had been hell on wheels, was an anomaly. Perhaps he's embarrassed about it, worried that he's been disloyal. The silence is suffocating.

"Could you put some music on, please?"

"Certainly, ma'am. What would you like to hear?"

"Something soothing."

I see a smile play on Taylor's lips as our eyes meet briefly again in the mirror.

"Yes, ma'am."

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel, and the gentle strains of Pachelbel's Canon fills the space between us. *Oh yes* … this is what I need.

"Thank you." I sit back as we drive slowly but steadily along Interstate 5 into Seattle.

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER HE drops me outside the impressive façade that is the entrance to Escala.

"In you go, ma'am," he says, holding the door open for me. "I'll bring up your luggage." His expression is soft, warm, avuncular even.

*Jeez* … Uncle Taylor, what a thought.

"Thank you for meeting me."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Steele." He smiles, and I head into the building. The doorman nods and waves.

As I ride up to the thirtieth floor, a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and flutter erratically in my stomach. *Why am I so nervous?* And I know it's because I have no idea what kind of mood Christian's going to be in when I arrive. My inner goddess is hopeful for one type of mood; my subconscious, like me, is fraught with nerves.

The elevator doors open, and I'm in the foyer. It is so strange not to be met by Taylor. Of course, he's parking the car. In the great room, Christian is on his BlackBerry, talking quietly as he stares through the glass doors at the early evening Seattle skyline. He's wearing a gray suit with the jacket undone, and he's running his hand through his hair. He's agitated, tense even. *Oh no—what's wrong?* Agitated or not, he's still a fine sight. How can he look so … arresting?

"No trace … Okay … Yes." He turns and sees me, and his whole demeanor changes. From tension to relief to something else: a look that calls directly to my inner goddess, a look of sensual carnality, his eyes scorching.

My mouth goes dry and desire blooms in my body … *whoa*.

"Keep me informed," he snaps, and shuts off his phone as he strides purposefully toward me. I stand paralyzed as he closes the distance between us, devouring me with his eyes. *Holy shit* … something's amiss—the strain in his jaw, the anxiety around his eyes. He shrugs out of his jacket, undoes his dark tie, and slings them both onto the couch en route to me. Then his arms are wrapped around me, and he's pulling me to him, hard, fast, gripping my ponytail to tilt my head up, kissing me like his life depends on it. *What the hell?* He drags the hair tie painfully out of my hair, but I don't care. There's a desperate, primal quality to his kiss. He needs me, for whatever reason, at this point in time, and I have never felt so desired and coveted. It's dark and sensual and alarming all at the same time. I kiss him back with equal fervor, my fingers twisting and fisting in his hair. Our tongues entwine, our passion and ardor erupting between us. He tastes divine, hot, sexy, and his scent—all body wash and Christian—is arousing. He drags his mouth away from mine, and he's staring down at me, gripped by some unnamed emotion. "What's wrong?" I breathe.

"I'm so glad you're back. Shower with me—now."

I can't decide if it's a request or a command.

"Yes," I whisper, and he grabs my hand, leading me out of the big room into his bedroom to his bathroom.

Once there, he releases me and turns the water on in the far-too-spacious

shower. Spinning around slowly, he gazes at me, eyes hooded.

"I like your skirt. It's very short," he says, his voice low. "You have great legs."

He steps out of his shoes and reaches down to take off each of his socks, never taking his eyes off me. I am rendered speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. *Wow* … to be this wanted by this Greek god. I mirror his actions and step out of my black flats. Suddenly, he reaches for me, backing me up against the wall. Kissing me, my face, my throat, my lips … running his hands through my hair. I feel the cool, smooth tiled wall at my back as he pushes himself against me, so that I'm flattened between his heat and the chill of the ceramic. Tentatively, I place my arms on his upper arms, and he groans as I squeeze tightly.

"I want you now. Here … fast, hard," he breathes, and his hands are on my thighs, pushing up my skirt. "Are you still bleeding?"

"No." I flush.

"Good."

His thumbs hook over my white cotton panties, and abruptly he drops to his knees as he tugs them off. My skirt is now rucked up so that I'm naked from the waist down and panting, wanting. He grabs my hips, pushing me against the wall again, and kisses me at the apex of my thighs. Grabbing my upper thighs, he forces my legs apart. I groan loudly, feeling his tongue circling my clitoris. *Oh my*. Tipping my head back involuntarily, I moan as my fingers find their way into his hair.

His tongue is relentless, strong and insistent, washing over me—swirling around and around, again and again—nonstop. It's exquisite, the intensity of feeling—it's almost painful. My body starts to quicken, and he releases me. *What? No!* My breathing is ragged as I pant, gazing at him with delicious anticipation. He grabs my face with both hands, holding me firmly, and he kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal. Unzipping his fly, he frees himself, grabs the backs of my thighs, and lifts me.

"Wrap your legs around me, baby," he commands, his voice urgent, strained.

I do as I'm told and wrap my arms around his neck, and he moves quickly and sharply, filling me. *Ah!* He gasps, and I groan. Holding my behind, his fingers digging into my soft flesh, he begins to move, slowly at first—a steady even tempo … but as his control unravels, he speeds up … faster and faster. *Ahhh!* I tip my head back and concentrate on the invading, punishing, heavenly sensation … pushing me, pushing me … onward, higher, up … and when I can take no more, I explode around him, spiraling into an intense, all-consuming orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl, and he buries his head in my neck as he

buries himself inside me, groaning loudly and incoherently as he finds his release.

His breathing is erratic, but he kisses me tenderly, not moving, still inside me, and I blink, unseeing, into his eyes. As he comes into focus, he gently pulls out of me, holding me steady while I place my feet on the floor. The bathroom is now cloudy with steam … and hot. I feel overdressed.

"You seem pleased to see me," I murmur with a shy smile.

His lips quirk up. "Yes, Miss Steele, I think my pleasure is pretty self-evident. Come—let me get you in the shower."

He undoes the next three buttons of his shirt, removes the cuff links, tugs it over his head, and discards it on the floor. Taking off his suit pants and boxer briefs, he kicks them to one side. He begins to undo the buttons on my blouse while I watch him, yearning to reach out and stroke his chest, but I contain myself.

"How was your journey?" he asks mildly. He seems so much calmer now, his apprehension gone, dissolved by sexual congress.

"Fine, thank you," I murmur, still breathless. "Thanks once again for first class. It really is a much nicer way to travel." I smile shyly at him. "I have some news," I add nervously.

"Oh?" He looks down at me as he undoes the last button, slips my blouse down my arms, and throws it on top of his discarded clothes.

"I have a job."

He stills, then smiles at me, his eyes warm and soft.

"Congratulations, Miss Steele. Now will you tell me where?" he teases.

"You don't know?"

He shakes his head, frowning. "Why would I know?"

"With your stalking capabilities, I thought you might have …" I trail off as his face falls.

"Anastasia, I wouldn't dream of interfering in your career, unless you ask me to, of course." He looks wounded.

"So you have no idea which company?"

"No. I know there are four publishing companies in Seattle—so I am assuming it's one of them."

"SIP."

"Oh, the small one, good. Well done." He leans forward and kisses my forehead. "Clever girl. When do you start?"

"Monday."

"That soon, eh? I'd better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around."

I am thrown by his casual command but do as I'm bid, and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down, cupping my behind as he does and kissing my shoulder. He leans against me and his nose nuzzles my hair, inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

"You intoxicate me, Miss Steele, and you calm me. Such a heady combination." He kisses my hair. Grabbing my hand, he tugs me into the shower.

"Ow," I squeal. The water is practically scalding. Christian grins down at me as the water cascades over him.

"It's only a little hot water."

And actually he's right. It feels heavenly, washing off the sticky Georgia morning and the stickiness from our lovemaking.

"Turn around," he orders, and I comply, turning to face the wall. "I want to wash you," he murmurs, and reaches for the body wash. He squirts a little into his hand.

"I have something else to tell you," I murmur as his hands start on my shoulders.

"Oh yes?" he asks mildly.

I steel myself with a deep breath. "My friend José's photography show is opening Thursday in Portland."

He stills, his hands hovering over my breasts. I have emphasized the word "friend."

"Yes, what about it?" he asks sternly.

"I said I would go. Do you want to come with me?"

After what feels like a monumental amount of time, he slowly starts washing me again.

"What time?"

"The opening is at seven thirty p.m."

He kisses my ear.

"Okay."

Inside my subconscious relaxes and then collapses, slumped into an old battered armchair.

"Were you nervous about asking me?"

"Yes. How can you tell?"

"Anastasia, your whole body's just relaxed," he says dryly.

"Well, you just seem to be, um … on the jealous side."

"Yes, I am," he says darkly. "And you'd do well to remember that. But thank you for asking. We'll take *Charlie Tango*."

Oh, the helicopter of course, silly me. More flying … cool! I grin.

“Can I wash you?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” he murmurs, and he kisses me gently on my neck to take the sting out of his refusal. I pout at the wall as he caresses my back with soap.

“Will you ever let me touch you?” I ask boldly.

He stills again, his hand on my behind.

“Put your hands on the wall, Anastasia. I’m going to take you again,” he murmurs in my ear as he grabs my hips, and I know that the discussion is over.

LATER, WE ARE SEATED at the breakfast bar, dressed in bathrobes, having consumed Mrs. Jones’s rather excellent pasta alle vongole.

“More wine?” Christian asks, gray eyes glowing.

“A small glass, please.” The Sancerre is crisp and delicious. Christian pours one for me and one for himself.

“How’s the, um … situation that brought you to Seattle?” I ask tentatively.

He frowns. “Out of hand,” he murmurs bitterly. “But nothing for you to worry about, Anastasia. I have plans for you this evening.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I want you ready and waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes.” He stands and gazes down at me.

“You can get ready in your room. Incidentally, the walk-in closet is now full of clothes for you. I don’t want any arguments about them.” He narrows his eyes, daring me to say something. When I don’t, he stalks off to his study.

*Me! Argue?* With you, Fifty Shades? It’s more than my backside’s worth. I sit on the barstool, momentarily stupefied, trying to assimilate this morsel of information. He’s bought me clothes. I roll my eyes in an exaggerated fashion, knowing full well he can’t see me. Car, phone, computer … clothes, it’ll be a damn condo next, and then I really will be his mistress.

*Ho!* My subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her and make my way upstairs toward *my* room. So, it is still mine … why? I thought he’d agreed to let me sleep with him. I suppose he’s not used to sharing his personal space, but then, neither am I. I console myself with the thought that at least I have somewhere to escape from him.

Examining the door, I find that it has a lock but no key. I wonder briefly if Mrs. Jones has a spare. I’ll ask her. I open the closet door and close it again quickly. *Holy crap—he’s spent a fortune*. It resembles Kate’s—so many clothes hanging neatly on the rail. Deep down, I know that they’ll all fit. But I have no time to think about that—I have to get kneeling in the Red Room of … Pain … or Pleasure, hopefully—this evening.

KNEELING BY THE DOOR, I am naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Jeez, I thought after the bathroom he would have had enough. The man is insatiable, or maybe all men are like him. I have no idea, no one to compare him to. Closing my eyes, I try to calm myself down, to connect with my inner sub. She's there somewhere, hiding behind my inner goddess.

Anticipation runs bubbling like soda through my veins. What will he do? I take a deep, steadying breath, but I cannot deny it, I'm excited, aroused, wet already. This is so … I want to think *wrong*, but somehow it's not. It's right for Christian. It's what he wants—and after the last few days … after all he's done, I have to man up and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs.

The memory of his look when I came in this evening, the longing in his face, his determined stride toward me like I was an oasis in the desert. I'd do almost anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious memory, and it reminds me that I need to spread my knees. I shuffle them apart. How long will he make me wait? The wait is crippling me, crippling me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I glance quickly around the subtly lit room: the cross, the table, the couch, the bench … that bed. It looms so large, and it's made up with red satin sheets. Which piece of apparatus will he use?

The door opens and Christian breezes in, ignoring me completely. I glance down quickly, staring at my hands, positioned with care on my spread thighs. Placing something on the large chest beside the door, he strolls casually toward the bed. I indulge myself in a quick glimpse at him, and my heart almost lurches to a stop. He's naked except for those soft ripped jeans, top button casually undone. *Jeez, he looks so freaking hot.* My subconscious is frantically fanning herself, and my inner goddess is swaying and writhing to some primal carnal rhythm. She's so ready. I lick my lips instinctively. My blood pounds through my body, thick and heavy with salacious hunger. *What is he going to do to me?*

Turning, he nonchalantly walks back to the chest of drawers. Opening one, he begins to remove items and place them on the top. My curiosity burns, blazes even, but I resist the overwhelming temptation to sneak a quick peek. When he finishes what he's doing, he comes to stand in front of me. I can see his naked feet, and I want to kiss every inch of them … run my tongue over his instep, suck each of his toes. *Holy shit.*

"You look lovely," he breathes.

I keep my head down, conscious that he's staring at me while I am practically naked. I feel the flush as it slowly spreads over my face. He bends down and cups my chin, forcing my face up to meet his gaze.

"You are one beautiful woman, Anastasia. And you're all mine," he murmurs.

“Stand up.” His command is soft, full of sensual promise.

Shakily, I get to my feet.

“Look at me,” he breathes, and I stare up into his smoldering gaze. It is his Dom gaze—cold, hard, and sexy as hell, seven shades of sin in one enticing look. My mouth dries, and I know I will do anything he asks. An almost cruel smile plays across his lips.

“We don’t have a signed contract, Anastasia. But we’ve discussed limits. And I want to reiterate we have safewords, okay?”

*Holy fuck* … what has he got planned that I need safewords?

“What are they?” he asks authoritatively.

I frown slightly at his question, and his face hardens perceptibly.

“What are the safewords, Anastasia?” he says slowly and deliberately.

“ ‘Yellow,’ ” I mumble.

“And?” he prompts, his mouth setting in a hard line.

“ ‘Red,’ ” I breathe.

“Remember those.”

And I can’t help it … I raise my eyebrow at him and am about to remind him of my GPA, but the sudden frosty glint in his icy gray eyes stops me in my tracks.

“Don’t start with your smart mouth in here, Miss Steele. Or I will fuck it with you on your knees. Do you understand?”

I swallow instinctively. *Okay*. I blink rapidly, chastened. Actually, it’s his tone of voice, rather than the threat, that intimidates me.

“Well?”

“Yes, Sir,” I mumble hastily.

“Good girl,” he pauses as he stares at me. “My intention is not that you should use the safeword because you’re in pain. What I intend to do to you will be intense. Very intense, and you have to guide me. Do you understand?”

*Not really. Intense? Wow*.

“This is about touch, Anastasia. You will not be able to see me or hear me. But you’ll be able to feel me.”

I frown—*not hear him?* How is that going to work? He turns, and I hadn’t noticed that above the chest is a sleek, flat, matte black box. As he waves his hand in front, the box splits in half: two doors slide open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. Christian presses several of these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens, but he seems satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me again, he wears his small I-have-a-secret smile.

“I am going to tie you to that bed, Anastasia. But I’m going to blindfold you first and,” he reveals his iPod in his hand, “you will not be able to hear me. All

you will hear is the music I am going to play for you."

Okay. A musical interlude. Not what I was expecting. Does he ever do what I expect? *Jeez, I hope it's not rap*.

"Come." Taking my hand, he leads me over to the antique four-poster bed. There are shackles attached at each corner, fine metal chains with leather cuffs, glinting against the red satin.

Oh boy, I think my heart is going to jump out of my chest, and I'm melting from the inside out, desire coursing through me. Could I be any more excited?

"Stand here."

I am facing the bed. He leans down and whispers in my ear.

"Wait here. Keep your eyes on the bed. Picture yourself lying here bound and totally at my mercy."

*Oh my*.

He moves away for a moment, and I can hear him near the door fetching something. All my senses are hyperalert, my hearing more acute. He's picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles by the door. *Holy cow. What is he going to do?*

I feel him behind me. He takes my hair, pulls it into a ponytail behind me, and starts to braid it.

"While I like your pigtails, Anastasia, I am impatient to have you right now. So one will have to do." His voice is low, soft.

His deft fingers skim my back occasionally as they work down my hair, and each casual touch is like a sweet, electric shock against my skin. He fastens the end with a hair tie, then gently tugs the braid so that I'm forced to step back flush against him. He pulls again to the side so that I angle my head, giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning down, he nuzzles my neck, tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder. He hums softly as he does, and the sound resonates through me. Right down … right down *there*, inside me. Unbidden, I groan quietly.

"Hush now," he breathes against my skin. He holds up his hands in front of me, his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a flogger. I remember the name from my first introduction to this room.

"Touch it," he whispers, and he sounds like the devil himself. My body flames in response. Tentatively, I reach out and brush the long strands. It has many long fronds, all soft suede with small beads at the end.

"I will use this. It will not hurt, but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you very sensitive."

Oh, he says it won't hurt.

"What are the safewords, Anastasia?"

“Um … ‘yellow’ and ‘red,’ Sir,” I whisper.

“Good girl. Remember, most of your fear is in your mind.”

He drops the flogger on the bed, and his hands move to my waist.

“You won’t be needing these,” he murmurs, and hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step unsteadily out of them, supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

“Stand still,” he orders, and he kisses my behind and then gently nips me twice, making me tense. “Now lie down. Face up,” he adds as he smacks me hard on the behind, making me jump.

Hastily, I crawl onto the bed’s hard, unyielding mattress and lie down, looking up at him. The satin of the sheet beneath me is soft and cool against my skin. His face is impassive, except for his eyes, which glow with a barely leashed excitement.

“Hands above your head,” he orders, and I do as I’m bid.

*Jeez*, my body hungers for him. I want him already.

He turns, and out of the corner of my eyes, I watch him saunter back over to the chest of drawers, returning with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask, similar to the one I used on my flight to Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile, but I can’t quite make my lips cooperate. I am too consumed with anticipation. I just know my face is completely immobile, my eyes huge, as I gaze at him.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he shows me the iPod. It has a strange antenna device as well as headphones. How odd. I frown as I try to figure this out.

“This transmits what’s playing on the iPod to the system in the room,” Christian answers my unspoken query as he taps the small antenna. “I can hear what you’re hearing, and I have a remote control unit for it.” He smirks his private-joke smile and holds up a small, flat device that looks like a very hip calculator. He leans across me, inserting the earbuds gently into my ears, and puts the iPod down somewhere on the bed above my head.

“Lift your head,” he commands, and I do so immediately.

Slowly, he slides the mask on, pulling the elastic over the back of my head, and I’m blind. The elastic on the mask holds the earbuds in place. I can still hear him, though the sound is muffled as he rises from the bed. I’m deafened by my own breathing—it’s shallow and erratic, reflecting my excitement. Christian takes my left arm, stretches it gently to the left-hand corner, and attaches the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he’s finished. *Oh!* His touch elicits a delicious, tickly shiver. I hear him move slowly around to the other side, where he takes my right arm and cuffs it. Again,

his long fingers linger along my arm. *Oh my* … I am fit to burst already. Why is this so erotic?

He moves to the bottom of the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

"Lift your head again," he orders.

I comply, and he drags me down the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost straining at the cuffs. Holy cow, I cannot move my arms. A frisson of trepidation mixed with tantalizing exhilaration sweeps through my body, making me wetter. I groan. Parting my legs, he cuffs first my right ankle and then my left so I am staked out, spread-eagled, and totally vulnerable to him. It's so unnerving that I can't see him. I listen hard … what's he doing? And I hear nothing, just my breathing and the pounding thud of my heart as blood pulses furiously against my eardrums.

Abruptly, the soft silent hiss and pop of the iPod springs into life. From inside my head, a lone angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long sweet note, and it's joined almost immediately by another voice, and then more voices—holy cow, a celestial choir—singing a capella in my head, an ancient, ancient hymnal. *What in heaven's name is this?* I have never heard anything like it. Something almost unbearably soft brushes against my neck, running languidly down my throat, slowly across my chest, over my breasts, caressing me … pulling at my nipples, it's so soft, skimming underneath. It's so *unexpected. It's fur! A fur glove?*

Christian trails his hand, unhurried and deliberate, down to my belly, circling my navel, then carefully from hip to hip, and I'm trying to anticipate where he's going next … but the music … it's in my head … transporting me … the fur across the line of my pubic hair … between my legs, along my thighs, down one leg … up the other … it almost tickles … but not quite … more voices join … the heavenly choir all singing different parts, their voices blending blissfully and sweetly together in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I've ever heard. I catch one word—*"deus"*—and I realize they are singing in Latin. And still, the fur is moving down my arms and around my waist … back up across my breasts. My nipples harden beneath the soft touch … and I'm panting … wondering where his hand will go next. Suddenly, the fur is gone, and I can feel the fronds of the flogger flowing over my skin, following the same path as the fur, and it's so hard to concentrate with the music in my head—it sounds like a hundred voices singing, weaving an ethereal tapestry of fine, silken gold and silver through my head, mixed with the feel of the soft suede against my skin … trailing over me … *oh my* … abruptly, it disappears. Then suddenly, sharply, it bites down on my belly.

"Aagghh!" I cry out. It takes me by surprise, but it doesn't exactly hurt and tingles all over, and he hits me again. Harder.

“Aaah!”

I want to move, to writhe … to escape, or to welcome, each blow … I don’t know—it’s so overwhelming … I can’t pull my arms … my legs are stuck … I am held very firmly in place … and again he strikes across my breasts—I cry out. And it’s a sweet agony—bearable, just … pleasant—no, not immediately, but as my skin sings with each blow in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head, I am dragged into a dark, dark part of my psyche that surrenders to this most erotic sensation. *Yes—I get this.* He hits me across my hip, then moves in swift blows over my pubic hair, on my thighs, and down my inner thighs … and back up my body … across my hips. He keeps going as the music reaches a climax, and then suddenly the music stops. And so does he. Then the singing starts again … building and building, and he rains down blows on me … and I groan and writhe. Once again, it ceases and all is quiet … except my wild breathing … and wild yearning. For … oh … what’s happening? What’s he going to do now? The excitement is almost unbearable. I’ve entered a very dark, carnal place.

The bed moves and shifts as I feel him clamber over me, and the song starts again. He’s got it on repeat … this time it’s his nose and lips that take the place of the fur … running down my neck and throat, kissing, sucking … trailing down to my breasts … Ah! Taunting each of my nipples in turn … his tongue swirling around one while his fingers relentlessly tease the other … I groan, loudly I think, though I can’t hear. I am lost. Lost in him … lost in the astral, seraphic voices … lost to all the sensations I cannot escape … I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

He moves down to my belly—his tongue circling my navel—following the path of the flogger and the fur … I moan. He’s kissing and sucking and nibbling … moving south … and then his tongue is *there*. At the junction of my thighs. I throw my head back and cry out as I almost detonate into orgasm … I’m on the brink, and he stops.

*No!* The bed shifts, and he kneels between my legs. He leans toward the bedpost, and the cuff on my ankle is suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed … resting it against him. He leans over to the opposite post and frees my other leg. His hands travel quickly down both my legs, squeezing and kneading, bringing life back into them. Then, grasping my hips, he lifts me so that my back is no longer on the bed. I am arched, resting on my shoulders. *What?* He’s kneeling up between my legs … and in one swift, slamming move he’s inside me … *oh*, *fuck* … and I cry out again. The quiver of my impending orgasm begins, and he stills. The quiver dies … *oh no* … he’s going to torture me further.

“Please!” I wail.

He grips me harder … in warning? I don’t know, his fingers digging into the flesh of my behind as I lay panting … so I purposefully still. Very slowly, he starts to move again … out and then in … agonizingly slowly. *Holy fuck—please!* I’m screaming inside … And as the number of voices in the choral piece increases, so does his pace, infinitesimally, he’s so controlled … so in time with the music. And I can no longer bear it.

“Please,” I beg, and in one swift move, he lowers me back onto the bed, and he’s lying on top of me, his hands on the bed beside my breasts as he supports his weight, and he thrusts into me. As the music reaches its climax, I fall … free-fall … into the most intense, agonizing orgasm I have ever had, and Christian follows me … thrusting hard into me three more times … finally stilling, then collapsing on top of me.

As my consciousness returns from wherever it’s been, Christian pulls out of me. The music has stopped, and I can feel him stretch across my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I groan as my hand is freed. He quickly frees my other hand, gently pulls the mask from my eyes, and removes the earbuds. I blink in the dim soft light and stare up into his intense gray gaze.

“Hi,” he murmurs.

“Hi, yourself,” I breathe shyly back at him. His lips quirk up into a smile, and he leans down and kisses me softly.

“Well done, you,” he whispers. “Turn over.”

*Holy fuck*—what’s he going to do now? His eyes soften.

“I’m just going to rub your shoulders.”

“Oh … okay.”

I roll stiffly onto my front. I am so tired. Christian sits astride me and starts to massage my shoulders. I groan loudly—he has such strong, knowing fingers. Leaning down, he kisses my head.

“What was that music?” I mumble almost inarticulately.

“It’s called *Spem in Alium*, a forty-part motet by Thomas Tallis.”

“It was … overwhelming.”

“I’ve always wanted to fuck to it.”

“Not another first, Mr. Grey?”

“Indeed, Miss Steele.”

I groan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve fucked to it, too,” I murmur sleepily.

“Hmm … you and I, we’re giving each other many firsts.” His voice is matter-of-fact.

“What did I say to you in my sleep, Chris—er, Sir?”

His hands pause their ministrations for a moment.

"You said lots of things, Anastasia. You talked about cages and strawberries … that you wanted more … and that you missed me."

Oh, thank heavens for that.

"Is that all?" The relief in my voice is evident.

Christian stops his heavenly massage and shifts so that he's lying beside me, his head propped up on his elbow. He's frowning.

"What did you think you'd said?"

*Oh crap.*

"That I thought you were ugly, conceited, and that you were hopeless in bed."

The crease on his brow deepens.

"Well, naturally I am all those things, and now you've got me really intrigued. What are you hiding from me, Miss Steele?"

I blink at him innocently. "I'm not hiding anything."

"Anastasia, you are a hopeless liar."

"I thought you were going to make me giggle after sex; this isn't doing it for me."

His lips quirk up. "I can't tell jokes."

"Mr. Grey! Something you can't do?" I grin at him, and he grins back.

"No, hopeless joke teller." He looks so proud of himself that I start to giggle.

"I'm a hopeless joke teller, too."

"That is such a lovely sound," he murmurs, and he leans forward and kisses me.

"And you are hiding something, Anastasia. I may have to torture it out of you."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I wake with a jolt. I think I've just fallen down some stairs in a dream, and I bolt upright, momentarily disoriented. It is dark, and I'm in Christian's bed alone. Something has woken me, some nagging thought. I glance over at the alarm clock on his bedside. It is five in the morning, but I feel rested. Why is that? Oh—it's the time difference—it would be eight a.m. in Georgia. *Holy crap … I need to take my pill*. I clamber out of bed, grateful for whatever it is that has woken me. I can hear faint notes from the piano. Christian is playing. This I must see. I love watching him play. Naked, I grab my bathrobe from the chair and wander quietly down the corridor, slipping on my robe and listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament that's coming from the great room.

Shrouded in darkness, Christian sits in a bubble of light as he plays, and his hair glints with burnished copper highlights. He looks naked, though I know he's wearing his PJ bottoms. He's concentrating, playing beautifully, lost in the melancholy of the music. I hesitate, watching from the shadows, not wanting to interrupt him. I want to hold him. He looks lost, sad even, and achingly lonely—or maybe it's just the music that's so full of poignant sorrow. He finishes the piece, pauses for a split second, then starts to play it again. I move cautiously toward him, drawn as the moth to the flame … the idea makes me smile. He glances up at me and frowns before his gaze returns to his hands.

Oh, crap, is he pissed off that I am disturbing him?

"You should be asleep," he scolds mildly.

I can tell he's preoccupied with something.

"So should you," I retort not quite as mildly.

He glances up again, his lips twitching with a trace of a smile.

"Are you scolding me, Miss Steele?"

"Yes, Mr. Grey, I am."

"Well, I can't sleep." He frowns once more as a trace of irritation or anger flashes across his face. With me? Surely not.

I ignore his facial expression and very bravely sit down beside him on the piano stool, placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his deft, agile fingers caress the keys. He pauses fractionally, and then continues to the end of the piece.

“What was that?” I ask softly.

“Chopin. Prelude opus twenty-eight, number four. In E minor, if you’re interested,” he murmurs.

“I’m always interested in what you do.”

He turns and softly presses his lips against my hair.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. Play the other one.”

“Other one?”

“The Bach piece that you played the first night I stayed.”

“Oh, the Marcello.”

He starts to play slowly and deliberately. I feel the movement of his hands in his shoulders as I lean against him and close my eyes. The sad, soulful notes swirl slowly and mournfully around us, echoing off the walls. It is a hauntingly beautiful piece, sadder even than the Chopin, and I lose myself to the beauty of the lament. To a certain extent, it reflects how I feel. The deep poignant longing I have to know this extraordinary man better, to try to understand *his* sadness. All too soon, the piece is at an end.

“Why do you only play such sad music?”

I sit upright and gaze up at him as he shrugs in answer to my question, his expression wary.

“So you were just six when you started to play?” I prompt.

He nods, his wary look intensifying. After a moment he volunteers. “I threw myself into learning the piano to please my new mother.”

“To fit into the perfect family?”

“Yes, so to speak,” he says evasively. “Why are you awake? Don’t you need to recover from yesterday’s exertions?”

“It’s eight in the morning for me. And I need to take my pill.”

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Well remembered,” he murmurs, and I can tell he’s impressed. “Only you would start a course of time-specific birth control pills in a different time zone. Perhaps you should wait half an hour and then another half hour tomorrow morning. So eventually you can take them at a reasonable time.”

“Good plan,” I breathe. “So what shall we do for half an hour?” I blink innocently at him.

“I can think of a few things.” He grins salaciously. I gaze back impassively as my insides clench and melt under his knowing look.

“On the other hand, we could talk,” I suggest quietly.

His brow creases.

“I prefer what I have in mind.” He scoops me onto his lap.

“You’d always rather have sex than talk.” I laugh, steadying myself by holding on to his upper arms.

“True. Especially with you.” He nuzzles my hair and starts a steady trail of kisses from below my ear to my throat. “Maybe on my piano,” he whispers.

*Oh my*. My whole body tightens at the thought. *Piano. Wow*.

“I want to get something straight,” I whisper as my pulse starts to accelerate, and my inner goddess closes her eyes, reveling in the feel of his lips on me.

He pauses momentarily before continuing his sensual assault.

“Always so eager for information, Miss Steele. What needs straightening out?” he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck, continuing his soft gentle kisses.

“Us,” I whisper as I close my eyes.

“Hmm. What about us?” He pauses his trail of kisses along my shoulder.

“The contract.”

He lifts his head to gaze down at me, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and sighs. He strokes his fingertips down my cheek.

“Well, I think the contract is moot, don’t you?” His voice is low and husky, his eyes soft.

“Moot?”

“Moot.” He smiles. I gape at him quizzically.

“But you were so keen.”

“Well, that was before. Anyway, the Rules aren’t moot, they still stand.” His expression hardens slightly.

“Before? Before what?”

“Before …” He pauses, and the wary expression is back. “More.” He shrugs.

“Oh.”

“Besides, we’ve been in the playroom twice now, and you haven’t run screaming for the hills.”

“Do you expect me to?”

“Nothing you do is expected, Anastasia,” he says dryly.

“So, let me be clear. You just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract all the time but not the rest of the contract?”

“Except in the playroom. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the playroom, and yes, I want you to follow the Rules—all the time. Then I know you’ll be safe, and I’ll be able to have you anytime I wish.”

“And if I break one of the Rules?”

“Then I’ll punish you.”

“But won’t you need my permission?”

“Yes, I will.”

“And if I say no?”

He gazes at me for a moment, with a confused expression.

“If you say no, you’ll say no. I’ll have to find a way to persuade you.”

I pull away from him and stand. I need some distance. He frowns as I stare down at him. He looks puzzled and wary again.

“So the punishment aspect remains.”

“Yes, but only if you break the Rules.”

“I’ll need to reread them,” I say, trying to recall the detail.

“I’ll fetch them for you.” His tone is suddenly businesslike.

*Whoa*. This has gotten serious so quickly. He rises from the piano and walks lithely to his study. My scalp prickles. Jeez, I need some tea. The future of our so-called relationship is being discussed at 5:45 in the morning when he’s preoccupied with something else—is this wise? I head into the kitchen, which is still shrouded in darkness. Where are the light switches? I find them, flick them on, and pour water into the kettle. *My pill!* I rummage in my purse, which I left on the breakfast bar, and find them quickly. One swallow and I’m done. By the time I finish, Christian is back, sitting on one of the barstools, watching me intently.

“Here you go.” He pushes a typed piece of paper toward me, and I notice that he’s crossed some things out.

**RULES**

*Obedience:*

The Submissive will obey any instructions given by the Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities that are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

*Sleep:*

The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of ~~eight~~ seven hours’ sleep a night when she is not with the Dominant.

*Food:*

~~The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.~~

*Clothes:*

While with the Dominant, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.

*Exercise:*

The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with a personal trainer ~~four~~ three times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon by the personal trainer and the Submissive. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the Submissive’s progress.

*Personal Hygiene/Beauty:*

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of the Dominant’s choosing at times to be decided by the Dominant and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit.

*Personal Safety:*

The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

*Personal Qualities:*

The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection on the Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

**Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by the Dominant.**

“So the obedience thing still stands?”

“Oh yes.” He grins.

I shake my head amused, and before I realize it, I roll my eyes at him.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me, Anastasia?” he breathes.

*Oh, fuck.*

“Possibly, depends what your reaction is.”

“Same as always,” he says, shaking his head, his eyes alight with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a frisson of exhilaration runs through me.

“So …” *Holy shit. What am I going to do?*

“Yes?” He licks his lower lip.

“You want to spank me now.”

“Yes. And I will.”

“Oh, really, Mr. Grey?” I challenge, grinning back at him. Two can play this game.

“Are you going to stop me?”

“You’re going to have to catch me first.”

His eyes widen a fraction, and he grins, slowly getting to his feet.

“Oh, really, Miss Steele?”

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been more grateful for its existence than in this moment.

“And you’re biting your lip,” he breathes, moving slowly to his left as I move to mine.

“You wouldn’t,” I tease. “After all, you roll your eyes.” I try reasoning with him. He continues to move toward his left, as do I.

“Yes, but you’ve just raised the bar on the excitement stakes with this game.” His eyes blaze, and wild anticipation emanates from him.

“I’m quite fast, you know.” I try for nonchalance.

“So am I.”

He’s stalking me in his own kitchen.

“Are you going to come quietly?” he asks.

“Do I ever?”

“Miss Steele, what do you mean?” He smirks. “It’ll be worse for you if I have to come and get you.”

“That’s only if you catch me, Christian. And right now, I have no intention of letting you catch me.”

“Anastasia, you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct contravention of rule number seven, now six.”

“I have been in danger since I met you, Mr. Grey, rules or no rules.”

“Yes, you have.” He pauses, and his brow furrows.

Suddenly, he lunges for me, making me squeal and run for the dining room

table. I manage to escape, putting the table between us. My heart is pounding and adrenaline has spiked through my body … boy … this is thrilling. I'm a child again, though that's not right. I watch him carefully as he paces deliberately toward me. I inch away.

"You certainly know how to distract a man, Anastasia."

"We aim to please, Mr. Grey. Distract you from what?"

"Life. The universe." He waves one of his hands vaguely.

"You did seem very preoccupied as you were playing."

He stops and folds his arms, his expression amused.

"We can do this all day, baby, but I will get you, and it will just be worse for you when I do."

"No, you won't." I must not be overconfident. I repeat this as a mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes, and she's on the starting blocks.

"Anyone would think you didn't want me to catch you."

"I don't. That's the point. I feel about punishment the way you feel about my touching you."

His entire demeanor changes in a nanosecond. Gone is playful Christian, and he stands staring at me as if I've slapped him. He's ashen.

"That's how you feel?" he whispers.

Those four words, and the way he utters them, speak volumes. *Oh no*. They tell me so much more about him and how he feels. They tell me about his fear and loathing. I frown. No, I don't feel *that* bad. No way. Do I?

"No. It doesn't affect me quite as much as that, but it gives you an idea," I murmur, staring anxiously at him.

"Oh," he says.

*Crap*. He looks completely and utterly lost, like I've pulled the rug from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath, I move around the table until I am standing in front of him, gazing into his apprehensive eyes.

"You hate it that much?" he breathes, his eyes filled with horror.

"Well … no," I reassure him. *Jeez—that's how he feels about people touching him?* "No. I feel ambivalent about it. I don't like it, but I don't hate it."

"But last night, in the playroom, you …"

"I do it for you, Christian, because you need it. I don't. You didn't hurt me last night. That was in a different context, and I can rationalize that internally, and I trust you. But when you want to punish me, I worry that you'll hurt me."

His eyes darken like a turbulent storm. Time moves and expands and slips away before he answers softly.

"I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything that you couldn't take."

*Fuck!*

"Why?"

He runs his hand through his hair, and he shrugs.

"I just need it." He pauses, gazing at me with anguish, and he closes his eyes and shakes his head. "I can't tell you," he whispers.

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

"So you know why."

"Yes."

"But you won't tell me."

"If I do, you will run screaming from this room, and you'll never want to return." He stares at me warily. "I can't risk that, Anastasia."

"You want me to stay."

"More than you know. I couldn't bear to lose you."

*Oh my*.

He gazes down at me, and suddenly, he pulls me into his arms and he's kissing me, kissing me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise, and I sense his panic and desperate need in his kiss.

"Don't leave me. You said you wouldn't leave me, and you begged me not to leave you, in your sleep," he murmurs against my lips.

*Oh … my nocturnal confessions*.

"I don't want to go." And my heart clenches, turning itself inside out.

This is a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious, but he's lost … somewhere in his darkness. His eyes are wide and bleak and tortured. I can soothe him, join him briefly in the darkness and bring him into the light.

"Show me," I whisper.

"Show you?"

"Show me how much it can hurt."

"What?"

"Punish me. I want to know how bad it can get."

Christian steps back away from me, completely confused.

"You would try?"

"Yes. I said I would." But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for him, maybe he will let me touch him.

He blinks. "Ana, you're so confusing."

"I'm confused, too. I'm trying to work this out. And you and I will know, once and for all, if I can do this. If I can handle this, then maybe you—" My words fail me, and his eyes widen again. He knows I am referring to the touch thing. For a moment, he looks torn, but then a steely resolve settles on his

features, and he narrows his eyes, gazing at me speculatively as if weighing up alternatives.

Abruptly, he clasps my arm in a firm grip and turns, leading me out of the great room, up the stairs, and to the playroom. Pleasure and pain, reward and punishment—his words from so long ago echo through my mind.

"I'll show you how bad it can be, and you can make your own mind up." He pauses by the door. "Are you ready for this?"

I nod, my mind made up, and I'm vaguely lightheaded, faint as all the blood leaves my face.

He opens the door and, still grasping my arm, grabs what looks like a belt from the rack beside the door, then leads me over to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

"Bend over the bench," he murmurs softly.

Okay. I can do this. I bend over the smooth soft leather. He's left my bathrobe on. In a quiet part of my brain, I'm vaguely surprised that he hasn't made me take it off. *Holy fuck, this is going to hurt … I know*.

"We're here because you said yes, Anastasia. And you ran from me. I am going to hit you six times, and you will count with me."

Why the hell doesn't he just get on with it? He always makes such a meal of punishing me. I roll my eyes, knowing full well he can't see me.

He lifts the hem of my bathrobe, and for some reason, this feels more intimate than being naked. He gently caresses my behind, running his warm hand all over both cheeks and down to the tops of my thighs.

"I am doing this so that you remember not to run from me, and as exciting as it is, I never want you to run from me," he whispers.

And the irony is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he'd opened his arms, I'd run to him, not away from him.

"And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about that." Suddenly, it's gone—that nervous edgy fear in his voice. He's back from wherever he's been. I hear it in his tone, in the way he places his fingers on my back, holding me—and the atmosphere in the room changes.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for the blow. It comes hard, snapping across my backside, and the bite of the belt is everything I feared. I cry out involuntarily and take a huge gulp of air.

"Count, Anastasia!" he commands.

"One!" I shout at him, and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again, and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt. *Holy shit … that smarts*.

"Two!" I scream. It feels so good to scream.

His breathing is ragged and harsh, whereas mine is almost nonexistent as I desperately scrabble around my psyche looking for some internal strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

"Three!" Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez—this is harder than I thought—so much harder than the spanking. He's not holding anything back.

"Four!" I yell as the belt bites me again, and now the tears are streaming down my face. I don't want to cry. It angers me that I am crying. He hits me again.

"Five." My voice is more a choked, strangled sob, and in this moment I think I hate him. One more, I can do one more. My backside feels as if it's on fire.

"Six," I whisper as the blistering pain cuts across me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me, and he's pulling me into his arms, all breathless and compassionate … and I want none of him.

"Let go … no …" And I find myself struggling out of his grasp, pushing him away. Fighting him.

"Don't touch me!" I hiss. I straighten and stare at him, and he's watching me as if I might bolt, eyes wide, bemused. I dash the tears angrily out of my eyes with the backs of my hands, glaring at him.

"This is what you really like? Me, like this?" I use the sleeve of the bathrobe to wipe my nose.

He gazes at me warily.

"Well, you are one fucked-up son of a bitch."

"Ana," he pleads, shocked.

"Don't you dare 'Ana' me! You need to sort your shit out, Grey!" And with that, I turn stiffly, and I walk out of the playroom, closing the door quietly behind me.

I clasp the door handle behind me and briefly lean back against the door. Where to go? Do I run? Do I stay? I am so mad, scalding tears spill down my cheeks, and I brush them furiously aside. I just want to curl up. Curl up and recuperate in some way. Heal my shattered faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course it hurts.

Tentatively, I rub my backside. Aah! It's sore. Where to go? Not his room. My room, or the room that will be mine, no, *is* mine … *was* mine. This is why he wanted me to keep it. He knew I would need distance from him.

I launch myself stiffly in that direction, conscious that Christian may follow me. It is still dark in the bedroom, dawn only a whisper in the skyline. I climb awkwardly into bed, careful not to sit on my aching and tender backside. I keep the bathrobe on, wrapping it around me, and curl up and really let go—sobbing hard into my pillow.

*What was I thinking?* Why did I let him do that to me? I wanted the dark, to

explore how bad it could be—but it's too dark for me. I cannot do this. Yet, this is what he does; this is how he gets his kicks.

What a monumental wake-up call. And to be fair to him, he warned me and warned me, time and again. He's not normal. He has needs that I cannot fulfill. I realize that now. I don't want him to hit me like that again, ever. I think of the couple of times he has hit me, and how easy he was on me by comparison. Is that enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I am going to lose him. He won't want to be with me if I can't give him this. Why, why, why have I fallen in love with Fifty Shades? Why? Why can't I love José, or Paul Clayton, or someone like me?

Oh, his distraught look as I left. I was so cruel, shocked by the savagery … will he forgive me … will I forgive him? My thoughts are all haywire and jumbled, echoing and bouncing off the inside of my skull. My subconscious is shaking her head sadly, and my inner goddess is nowhere to be seen. Oh, this is a dark morning of the soul for me. I'm so alone. I want my mom. I remember her parting words at the airport:

*Follow your heart, darling, and please, please—try not to overthink things. Relax and enjoy. You are so young, sweetheart, you have so much to experience, just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.*

I did follow my heart, and I have a sore ass and an anguished, broken spirit to show for it. I have to go. That's it … I have to leave. He's no good for me, and I am no good for him. How can we possibly make this work? And the thought of not seeing him again practically chokes me … my Fifty Shades.

I hear the door click open. *Oh no—he's here*. He puts something down on the bedside table, and the bed shifts under his weight as he climbs in behind me.

"Hush," he breathes, and I want to pull away from him, move to the other side of the bed, but I'm paralyzed. I cannot move and lie stiffly, not yielding at all. "Don't fight me, Ana, please," he whispers. Gently, he pulls me into his arms, burying his nose in my hair, kissing my neck.

"Don't hate me," he breathes softly against my skin, his voice achingly sad. My heart clenches anew and releases a fresh wave of silent sobbing. He continues to kiss me softly, tenderly, but I remain aloof and wary.

We lie together like this, neither saying anything for ages. He just holds me, and very gradually, I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes, and the soft light gets brighter as morning moves on, and still we lie quietly.

"I brought you some Advil and some arnica cream," he says after a long while.

I turn very slowly in his arms so I can face him. I am resting my head on his arm. His eyes are flinty gray and guarded.

I gaze at his beautiful face. He's giving nothing away, but he keeps his eyes on mine, hardly blinking. Oh, he is so breathtakingly good-looking. In such a short time, he's become so, so dear to me. Reaching up, I caress his cheek and run the tips of my fingers through his stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled.

"What for?"

"What I said."

"You didn't tell me anything I didn't know." And his eyes soften with relief. "I am sorry I hurt you."

I shrug. "I asked for it." And now I know. I swallow. Here goes. I need to say my piece. "I don't think I can be everything you want me to be," I whisper. His eyes widen, and he blinks, his fearful expression returning.

"You are everything I want you to be."

*What?*

"I don't understand. I'm not obedient, and you can be as sure as hell I'm not going to let you do *that* to me again. And that's what you need, you said so."

He closes his eyes again, and I can see myriad emotions cross his face. When he reopens them, his expression is bleak. *Oh no*.

"You're right. I should let you go. I am no good for you."

My scalp prickles as every single hair follicle on my body stands to attention, and the world falls away from me, leaving a wide, yawning abyss for me to fall into. *Oh no*.

"I don't want to go," I whisper. Fuck—this is it. Pay or play. Tears swim in my eyes once more.

"I don't want you to go, either," he whispers, his voice raw. He reaches up and gently strokes my cheek and wipes away a falling tear with his thumb. "I've come alive since I met you." His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

"Me, too," I whisper. "I've fallen in love with you, Christian."

His eyes widen again, but this time with pure, undiluted fear.

"No," he breathes as if I've knocked the wind out of him.

*Oh no*.

"You can't love me, Ana. No … that's wrong." He's horrified.

"Wrong? Why's it wrong?"

"Well, look at you. I can't make you happy." His voice is anguished.

"But you do make me happy." I frown.

"Not at the moment, not doing what I want to do."

*Holy fuck*. This really is it. This is what it boils down to—incompatibility—and all those poor subs come to mind.

“We’ll never get past that, will we?” I whisper, my scalp prickling in fear.

He shakes his head bleakly. I close my eyes. I cannot bear to look at him.

“Well … I’d better go, then,” I murmur, wincing as I sit up.

“No, don’t go.” He sounds panicked.

“There’s no point in me staying.” Suddenly, I feel tired, really dog-tired, and I want to go now. I climb out of bed, and Christian follows.

“I’m going to get dressed. I’d like some privacy,” I say, my voice flat and empty as I leave him standing in the bedroom.

Heading downstairs, I glance at the great room, thinking how only hours before I had rested my head on his shoulder as he played the piano. So much has happened since then. I have had my eyes opened and glimpsed the extent of his depravity, and I now know he’s not capable of love—of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have been realized. And strangely, it’s liberating.

The pain is such that I refuse to acknowledge it. I feel numb. I have somehow escaped from my body and am now a casual observer to this unfolding tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically, thinking only of each second in front of me. Now squeeze body wash bottle. Put body wash bottle back in rack. Rub cloth on face, on shoulders … on and on, all simple, mechanical actions, requiring simple, mechanical thoughts.

I finish my shower—and as I haven’t washed my hair, I can dry myself quickly. I dress in the bathroom, taking my jeans and T-shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans chafe against my backside, but quite frankly, it’s a pain I welcome as it distracts my mind from what’s happening to my splintering, shattered heart.

I stoop to shut my suitcase and the bag holding Christian’s gift catches my eye, a model kit for a Blanik L23 glider, something for him to build. Tears threaten. *Oh no* … happier times, when there was hope of more. I take it out of the case, knowing that I need to give it to him. Quickly, I rip a small piece of paper from my notebook, hastily scribble a note for him, and leave it on top of the box.

*This reminded me of a happy time.*

*Thank you.*

*Ana*

I gaze at myself in the mirror. A pale and haunted ghost stares back at me. I scoop my hair into a bun and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from the crying. My subconscious nods with approval. Even she knows not to be snarky right now. I cannot believe that my world is crumbling around me into a sterile

pile of ashes, all my hopes and dreams cruelly dashed. No, no, don't think about it. Not now, not yet. Taking a deep breath, I pick up my case, and after placing the glider kit and my note on his pillow, I head for the great room.

Christian is on the phone. He's dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt. His feet are bare.

"He said what?" he shouts, making me jump. "Well, he could have told us the fucking truth. What's his number? I need to call him … Welch, this is a real fuckup." He glances up and doesn't take his dark and brooding eyes off me. "Find her," he snaps and presses the off switch.

I walk over to the couch and collect my backpack, doing my best to ignore him. I take the Mac out of it and walk back toward the kitchen, placing it carefully on the breakfast bar, along with the BlackBerry and the car key. When I turn to face him, he's staring at me, stupefied with horror.

"I need the money that Taylor got for my Beetle." My voice is clear and calm, devoid of emotion … *extraordinary*.

"Ana, I don't want those things, they're yours," he says in disbelief. "Take them."

"No, Christian. I only accepted them under sufferance—and I don't want them anymore."

"Ana, be reasonable," he scolds me, even now.

"I don't want anything that will remind me of you. I just need the money that Taylor got for my car." My voice is quite monotone.

He gasps. "Are you really trying to wound me?"

"No." I frown, staring at him. Of course not … I love you. "I'm not. I'm trying to protect myself," I whisper. Because you don't want me the way I want you.

"Please, Ana, take that stuff."

"Christian, I don't want to fight—I just need the money."

He narrows his eyes, but I'm no longer intimidated by him. Well, only a little. I gaze impassively back, not blinking or backing down.

"Will you take a check?" he says acidly.

"Yes. I think you're good for it."

He doesn't smile; he just turns on his heel and stalks into his study. I take a last, lingering look around his apartment—at the art on the walls—all abstracts, serene, cool … cold, even. *Fitting*, I think absently. My eyes stray to the piano. Jeez—if I'd kept my mouth shut, we'd have made love on the piano. No, fucked, we would have fucked on the piano. Well, I would have made love. The thought lies heavy and sad in my mind and what's left of my heart. He has never made love to me, has he? It's always been fucking to him.

Christian returns and hands me an envelope.

"Taylor got a good price. It's a classic car. You can ask him. He'll take you home." He nods in the direction over my shoulder. I turn, and Taylor is standing in the doorway, wearing his suit, as impeccable as ever.

"That's fine. I can get myself home, thank you."

I turn to stare at Christian, and I see the barely contained fury in his eyes.

"Are you going to defy me at every turn?"

"Why change a habit of a lifetime?" I give him a small, apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

"Please, Ana, let Taylor take you home."

"I'll get the car, Miss Steele," Taylor announces authoritatively. Christian nods at him, and when I glance around, Taylor has gone.

I turn back to face Christian. We are four feet apart. He steps forward, and instinctively I step back. He stops, and the anguish in his expression is palpable, his gray eyes burning.

"I don't want you to go," he murmurs, his voice full of longing.

"I can't stay. I know what I want and you can't give it to me, and I can't give you what you need."

He takes another step forward, and I hold up my hands.

"Don't, please." I recoil from him. There's no way I can tolerate his touch now, it will slay me. "I can't do this."

Grabbing my suitcase and my backpack, I head for the foyer. He follows me, keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button, and the doors open. I climb in.

"Good-bye, Christian," I murmur.

"Ana, good-bye," he says softly, and he looks utterly, utterly broken, a man in agonizing pain, reflecting how I feel inside. I tear my gaze away from him before I change my mind and try to comfort him.

The elevator doors close and it whisks me down to the bowels of the basement and to my own personal hell.

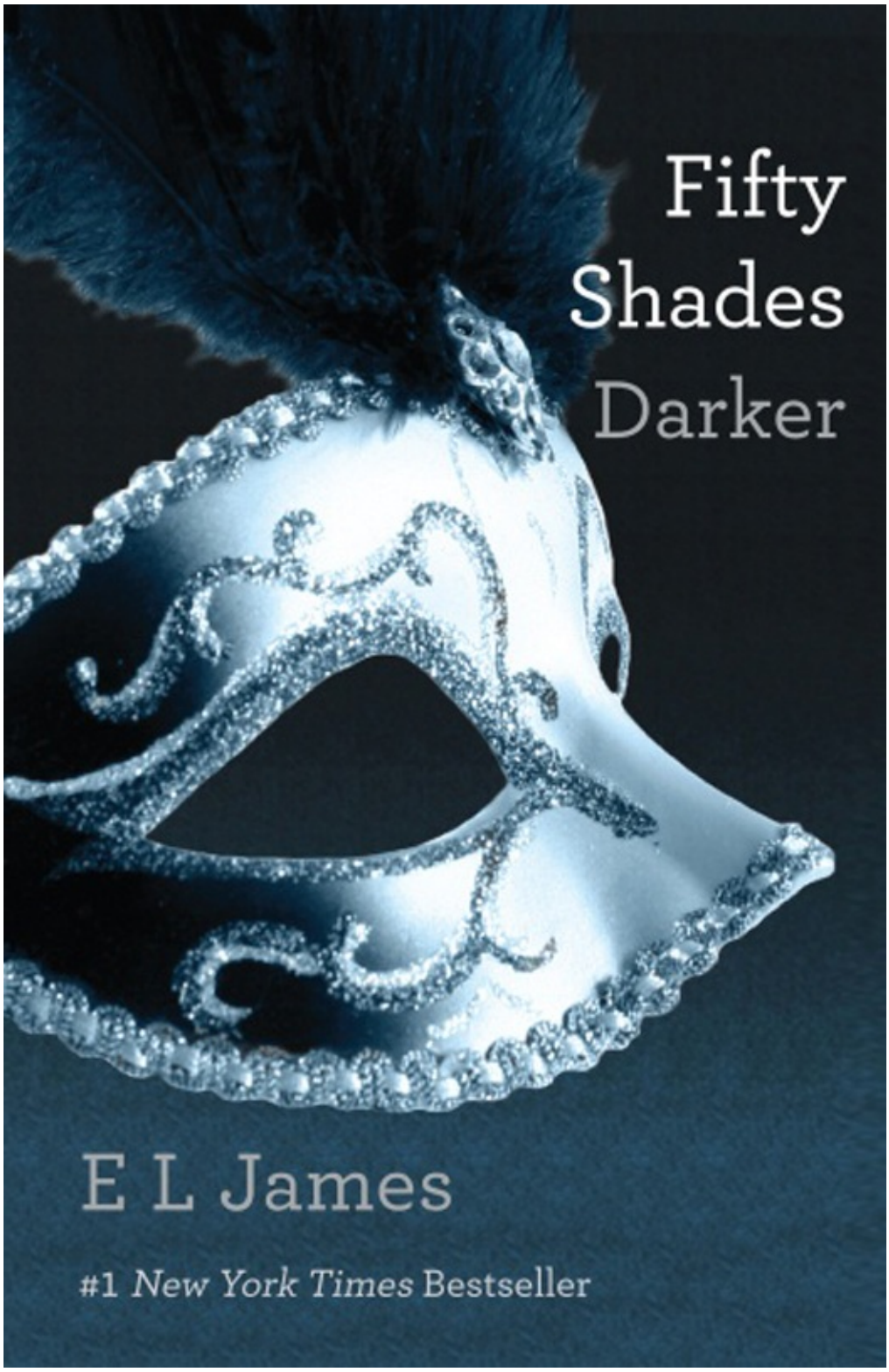
TAYLOR HOLDS THE DOOR open for me, and I climb into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact. Embarrassment and shame wash over me. I'm a complete failure. I had hoped to drag my Fifty Shades into the light, but it's proved a task beyond my meager abilities. Desperately, I try to keep my emotions banked and at bay. As we head out onto Fourth Avenue, I stare blankly out the window, and the enormity of what I've done slowly washes over me. *Shit—I've left him*. The only man I've ever loved. The only man I've ever slept with. I gasp, as crippling pain slices through me, and the levees burst. Tears course unbidden and unwelcome

down my cheeks, and I wipe them away hurriedly with my fingers, scrambling in my bag for my sunglasses. As we pause at some traffic light, Taylor holds out a linen handkerchief for me. He says nothing and doesn't look in my direction, and I take it with gratitude.

"Thank you," I mutter, and this small discreet act of kindness is my undoing. I sit back in the luxurious leather seat and weep.

THE APARTMENT IS ACHINGLY empty and unfamiliar. I have not lived here long enough for it to feel like home. I head straight to my room, and there, hanging limply at the end of my bed, is a very sad, deflated helicopter balloon. *Charlie Tango*, looking and feeling exactly like me. I grab it angrily off my bedrail, snapping the tie, and hug it to me. *Oh—what have I done?*

I fall onto my bed, shoes and all, and howl. The pain is indescribable … physical, mental … metaphysical … it is everywhere, seeping into the marrow of my bones. Grief. This is grief—and I've brought it on myself. Deep down, a nasty, unbidden thought comes from my inner goddess, her lips contorted in a snarl … the physical pain from the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation. I curl up, desperately clutching the flat foil balloon and Taylor's handkerchief, and surrender myself to my grief.


Fifty
Shades
Darker
E L James
#1 New York Times Bestseller

# FIFTY SHADES DARKER

E L James

*Vintage Books*
*A Division of Random House, Inc. | New York*

First published by The Writer's Coffee Shop Publishing House, Australia, 2011

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, APRIL 2012

*Copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.*

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The author published an earlier serialized version of this story online with different characters as "Master of the Universe" under the pseudonym Snowqueen's Icedragon.

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress.

eISBN: 978-1-61213-059-0

*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by E. Spek*

www.vintagebooks.com

v3.1

*For Z and J*
*You have my unconditional love, always*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Sarah, Kay, and Jada. Thank you for all that you have done for me.

Also, HUGE thanks to Kathleen and Kristi, who stepped into the breach and sorted stuff out.

Thank you, too, to Niall, my husband, my lover, and my best friend (most of the time).

And a big shout-out to all the wonderful, wonderful women from all over the world whom I have had the pleasure of meeting since I started all this, and whom I now consider friends, including: Ale, Alex, Amy, Andrea, Angela, Azucena, Babs, Bee, Belinda, Betsy, Brandy, Britt, Caroline, Catherine, Dawn, Gwen, Hannah, Janet, Jen, Jenn, Jill, Kathy, Katie, Kellie, Kelly, Liz, Mandy, Margaret, Natalia, Nicole, Nora, Olga, Pam, Pauline, Raina, Raizie, Rajka, Rhian, Ruth, Steph, Susi, Tasha, Taylor, and Una. And also to the many talented, funny, warm women (and men) I have met online. You know who you are.

Thanks to Morgan and Jenn for all things Heathman.

And finally, thank you to Janine, my editor. You rock. That is all.

# Contents

*Master - Table of Contents*

*Fifty Shades Darker*
*Title Page*
*Copyright*
*Dedication*
*Acknowledgments*

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two

# PROLOGUE

He’s come back. Mommy’s asleep or she’s sick again.

I hide and curl up small under the table in the kitchen. Through my fingers I can see Mommy. She is asleep on the couch. Her hand is on the sticky green rug, and he’s wearing his big boots with the shiny buckle and standing over Mommy shouting.

He hits Mommy with a belt. *Get up! Get up! You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch.*

Mommy makes a sobbing noise. *Stop. Please stop*. Mommy doesn’t scream. Mommy curls up small.

I have my fingers in my ears, and I close my eyes. The sound stops.

He turns and I can see his boots as he stomps into the kitchen. He still has the belt. He is trying to find me.

He stoops down and grins. He smells nasty. Of cigarettes and drink. *There you are, you little shit.*

A chilling wail wakes him. *Christ!* He’s drenched in sweat and his heart is pounding. *What the fuck?* He sits bolt upright in bed and puts his head in hands. *Fuck. They’re back. The noise was me*. He takes a deep steadying breath, trying to rid his mind and nostrils of the smell of cheap bourbon and stale Camel cigarettes.

# CHAPTER ONE

I have survived Day Three Post-Christian, and my first day at work. It has been a welcome distraction. The time has flown by in a haze of new faces, work to do, and Mr. Jack Hyde. Mr. Jack Hyde … he smiles down at me, his blue eyes twinkling, as he leans against my desk.

"Excellent work, Ana. I think we're going to make a great team."

Somehow, I manage to curl my lips upward in a semblance of a smile.

"I'll be off, if that's okay with you," I murmur.

"Of course, it's five thirty. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night, Jack."

"Good night, Ana."

Collecting my bag, I shrug on my jacket and head for the door. Out in the early evening air of Seattle, I take a deep breath. It doesn't begin to fill the void in my chest, a void that's been present since Saturday morning, a painful hollow reminder of my loss. I walk toward the bus stop with my head down, staring at my feet and contemplating being without my beloved Wanda, my old Beetle … or the Audi.

I shut the door on that thought immediately. No. Don't think about him. Of course, I can afford a car—a nice, new car. I suspect he has been overgenerous in his payment, and the thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I dismiss it and try to keep my mind as numb and as blank as possible. I can't think about him. I don't want to start crying again—not out on the street.

The apartment is empty. I miss Kate, and I imagine her lying on a beach in Barbados sipping a cool cocktail. I turn on the flat-screen television so there's noise to fill the vacuum and provide some semblance of company, but I don't listen or watch. I sit and stare blankly at the brick wall. I am numb. I feel nothing but the pain. How long must I endure this?

The door buzzer startles me from my anguish, and my heart skips a beat. Who could that be? I press the intercom.

"Delivery for Ms. Steele." A bored, disembodied voice answers, and disappointment crashes through me. I listlessly make my way downstairs and find a young man noisily chewing gum, holding a large cardboard box, and

leaning against the front door. I sign for the package and take it upstairs. The box is huge and surprisingly light. Inside are two dozen long-stemmed, white roses and a card.

*Congratulations on your first day at work.*
*I hope it went well.*
*And thank you for the glider. That was very thoughtful.*
*It has pride of place on my desk.*
*Christian*

I stare at the typed card, the hollow in my chest expanding. No doubt, his assistant sent this. Christian probably had very little to do with it. It's too painful to think about. I examine the roses—they are beautiful, and I can't bring myself to throw them in the trash. Dutifully, I make my way into the kitchen to hunt down a vase.

AND SO A PATTERN develops: wake, work, cry, sleep. Well, try to sleep. I can't even escape him in my dreams. Gray burning eyes, his lost look, his hair burnished and bright all haunt me. And the music … so much music—I cannot bear to hear any music. I am careful to avoid it at all costs. Even the jingles in commercials make me shudder.

I have spoken to no one, not even my mother or Ray. I don't have the capacity for idle talk now. No, I want none of it. I have become my own island state. A ravaged, war-torn land where nothing grows and the horizons are bleak. Yes, that's me. I can interact impersonally at work, but that's it. If I talk to Mom, I know I will break even further—and I have nothing left to break.

I AM FINDING IT difficult to eat. By lunchtime on Wednesday, I manage a cup of yogurt, and it's the first thing I've eaten since Friday. I am surviving on a newfound tolerance for lattes and Diet Coke. It's the caffeine that keeps me going, but it's making me anxious.

Jack has started to hover over me, irritating me, asking me personal questions. What does he want? I'm polite, but I need to keep him at arm's length.

I sit and begin trawling through a pile of correspondence addressed to him, and I'm pleased with the distraction of menial work. My e-mail pings, and I quickly check to see who it's from.

Holy shit. An e-mail from Christian. *Oh no, not here … not at work.*

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Tomorrow

**Date:** June 8 2011 14:05

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear Anastasia

Forgive this intrusion at work. I hope that it's going well. Did you get my flowers?

I note that tomorrow is the gallery opening for your friend's show, and I'm sure you've not had time to purchase a car, and it's a long drive. I would be more than happy to take you—should you wish.

Let me know.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Tears swim in my eyes. I hastily leave my desk and bolt to the restroom to escape into one of the stalls. José's show. I'd forgotten all about it, and I promised him I'd go. Shit, Christian is right; how am I going to get there?

I clutch my forehead. Why hasn't José phoned? Come to think of it—why hasn't anyone phoned? I've been so absentminded I haven't noticed that my cell phone has been silent.

*Shit!* I am such an idiot! I still have it set to forward calls to the BlackBerry. Holy hell. Christian's been getting my calls—unless he's just thrown the BlackBerry away. How did he get my e-mail address?

He knows my shoe size; an e-mail address is hardly going to present him with many problems.

Can I see him again? Could I bear it? Do I want to see him? I close my eyes and tilt my head back as grief and longing lance through me. Of course I do.

Perhaps—perhaps I can tell him I've changed my mind … No, no, no. I cannot be with someone who takes pleasure in inflicting pain on me, someone who can't love me.

Torturous memories flash through my mind—the gliding, holding hands, kissing, the bathtub, his gentleness, his humor, and his dark, brooding, sexy stare. I miss him. It's been five days, five days of agony that has felt like an eternity. I cry myself to sleep at night, wishing I hadn't walked out, wishing that he could be different, wishing that we were together. How long will this hideous overwhelming feeling last? I am in purgatory.

I wrap my arms around my body, hugging myself tightly, holding myself together. I miss him. I really miss him … I love him. Simple.

*Anastasia Steele, you are at work!* I must be strong, but I want to go to José's show, and deep down, the masochist in me wants to see Christian. Taking a deep

breath, I head back to my desk.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Tomorrow
**Date:** June 8 2011 14:25
**To:** Christian Grey

Hi Christian

Thank you for the flowers; they are lovely.

Yes, I would appreciate a lift.

Thank you.

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

Checking my phone, I find that it is still set to forward calls to the BlackBerry. Jack is in a meeting, so I quickly call José.

"Hi, José. It's Ana."

"Hello, stranger." His tone is so warm and welcoming it's almost enough to push me over the edge again.

"I can't talk long. What time should I be there tomorrow for your show?"

"You're still coming?" He sounds excited.

"Yes, of course." I smile my first genuine smile in five days as I picture his broad grin.

"Seven thirty."

"See you then. Good-bye, José."

"Bye, Ana."

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Tomorrow
**Date:** June 8 2011 14:27
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear Anastasia

What time shall I pick you up?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Tomorrow
**Date:** June 8 2011 14:32
**To:** Christian Grey

José's show starts at 7:30. What time would you suggest?

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Tomorrow
**Date:** June 8 2011 14:34
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear Anastasia

Portland is some distance away. I shall pick you up at 5:45.

I look forward to seeing you.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Tomorrow
**Date:** June 8 2011 14:38
**To:** Christian Grey

See you then.

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

Oh my. I'm going to see Christian, and for the first time in five days, my spirits lift a fraction and I allow myself to wonder how he's been.

Has he missed me? Probably not like I've missed him. Has he found a new submissive? The thought is so painful that I dismiss it immediately. I look at the pile of correspondence I need to sort for Jack and tackle it as I try to push Christian out of my mind once more.

That night in bed, I toss and turn, trying to sleep and it's the first time in a while I haven't cried myself to sleep.

In my mind's eye, I visualize Christian's face the last time I saw him as when I left. His tortured expression haunts me. I remember he didn't want me to go, which was odd. Why would I stay when things had reached such an impasse? We were each skirting around our own issues—my fear of punishment, his fear of … what? Love?

Turning on my side, I hug my pillow, filled with an overwhelming sadness. He thinks he doesn't deserve to be loved. Why does he feel that way? Does it have to do with his upbringing? His birth mom, the crack whore? My thoughts plague me into the early hours until eventually I fall into a fitful, exhausted sleep.

THE DAY DRAGS AND drags and Jack is unusually attentive. I suspect it's due to Kate's plum dress and the black high-heeled boots I've stolen from her closet, but I don't dwell on the thought. I resolve to go clothes shopping with my first paycheck. The dress is looser on me than it was, but I pretend not to notice.

Finally it's five thirty, and I collect my jacket and purse, trying to quell my nerves. *I'm going to see him!*

"Do you have a date tonight?" Jack asks as he strolls past my desk on his way out.

"Yes. No. Not really."

He raises an eyebrow, his interest clearly piqued. "Boyfriend?"

I flush. "No, a friend. An ex-boyfriend."

"Maybe tomorrow you'd like to come for a drink after work. You've had a stellar first week, Ana. We should celebrate." He smiles and an unknown, unsettling emotion flits across his face, making me uneasy.

Putting his hands in his pockets, he saunters through the double doors. I frown at his retreating back. Drinks with the boss, is that a good idea?

I shake my head. I have an evening of Christian Grey to get through first. How am I going to do this? I hurry into the restroom to make last-minute adjustments.

In the large mirror on the wall, I take a long, hard look at my face. I'm my usual pale self, dark circles around my too-large eyes. I look gaunt, haunted. I wish I knew how to use makeup. I apply some mascara and eyeliner and pinch my cheeks, hoping for some color. Tidying my hair so that it hangs artfully down my back, I take a deep breath. This will have to do.

Nervously I walk through the foyer with a smile and a wave to Claire at Reception. I think she and I could become friends. Jack is talking to Elizabeth as I head for the doors. Smiling broadly, he hurries over to open them for me.

"After you, Ana," he murmurs.

“Thank you.” I smile, embarrassed.

Outside on the curb, Taylor is waiting. He opens the rear door of the car. I glance hesitantly at Jack, who has followed me out. He’s looking toward the Audi SUV in dismay.

I turn and climb into the back, and there he sits—Christian Grey—wearing his gray suit, no tie, white shirt open at the collar. His gray eyes are glowing.

My mouth dries. He looks glorious except he’s scowling at me. *Why?*

“When did you last eat?” he snaps as Taylor closes the door behind me.

*Crap*. “Hello, Christian. Yes, it’s nice to see you, too.”

“I don’t want your smart mouth now. Answer me.” His eyes blaze.

*Holy shit*. “Um … I had a yogurt at lunchtime. Oh—and a banana.”

“When did you last have a real meal?” he asks acidly.

Taylor slips into the driver’s seat, starts the car, and pulls out into the traffic.

I glance up and Jack is waving at me, though how he can see me through the dark glass, I don’t know. I wave back.

“Who’s that?” Christian snaps.

“My boss.” I peek up at the beautiful man beside me, and his mouth is pressed into a hard line.

“Well? Your last meal?”

“Christian, that really is none of your concern,” I murmur, feeling extraordinarily brave.

“Whatever you do concerns me. Tell me.”

*No, it doesn’t*. I groan in frustration, rolling my eyes heavenward, and Christian narrows his eyes. And for the first time in a long time, I want to laugh. I try hard to stifle the giggle that threatens to bubble up. Christian’s face softens as I struggle to keep a straight face, and a trace of a smile kisses his lovely sculptured lips.

“Well?” he asks, his voice softer.

“Pasta *alla vongole*, last Friday,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes as fury, and possibly regret, sweeps across his face. “I see,” he says, his voice expressionless. “You look like you’ve lost at least five pounds, possibly more since then. Please eat, Anastasia,” he scolds.

I stare down at the knotted fingers in my lap. Why does he always make me feel like an errant child?

He shifts and turns toward me. “How are you?” he asks, his voice still soft.

*Well, I’m shit, really* … I swallow. “If I told you I was fine, I’d be lying.”

He inhales sharply. “Me, too,” he murmurs and reaches over and clasps my hand. “I miss you,” he adds.

Oh no. Skin against skin.

“Christian, I—”

“Ana, please. We need to talk.”

*I’m going to cry*. No. “Christian, I … please … I’ve cried so much,” I whisper, trying to keep my emotions in check

“Oh, baby, no.” He tugs my hand, and before I know it I’m on his lap. He has his arms around me, and his nose is in my hair. “I’ve missed you so much, Anastasia,” he breathes.

I want to struggle out of his hold, to maintain some distance, but his arms are wrapped around me. He’s pressing me to his chest. I melt. Oh, this is where I want to be.

I rest my head against him, and he kisses my hair repeatedly. This is home. He smells of linen, fabric softener, body wash, and my favorite smell—Christian. For a moment, I allow myself the illusion that all will be well, and it soothes my ravaged soul.

A few minutes later Taylor pulls to a stop at the curb, even though we’re still in the city.

“Come”—Christian shifts me off his lap—“we’re here.”

What?

“Helipad—on the top of this building.” Christian glances toward the building by way of explanation.

Of course. *Charlie Tango*. Taylor opens the door and I slide out. He gives me a warm, avuncular smile that makes me feel safe. I smile back.

“I should give you back your handkerchief.”

“Keep it, Miss Steele, with my best wishes.”

I blush as Christian comes around the car and takes my hand. He looks quizzically at Taylor, who stares impassively back at him, revealing nothing.

“Nine?” Christian says to him.

“Yes, sir.”

Christian nods as he turns and leads me through the double doors into the grandiose foyer. I revel in the feel of his hand and his long, skilled fingers curled around mine. The familiar pull is there—I’m drawn, Icarus to his sun. I’ve been burned already, and yet here I am again.

Reaching the elevators, he presses the “call” button. I peek up at him, and he’s wearing his enigmatic half smile. As the doors open, he releases my hand and ushers me in.

The doors close and I risk a second peek. He glances down at me, and it’s there in the air between us, that electricity. It’s palpable. I can almost taste it, pulsing between us, drawing us together.

“Oh my,” I gasp as I bask briefly in the intensity of this visceral, primal

attraction.

“I feel it, too,” he says, his eyes clouded and intense.

Desire pools dark and deadly in my groin. He clasps my hand and grazes my knuckles with his thumb, and all my muscles clench tightly, deliciously, deep inside me.

*How can he still do this to me?*

“Please don’t bite your lip, Anastasia,” he whispers.

I gaze up at him, releasing my lip. I want him. Here, now, in the elevator. How could I not?

“You know what it does to me,” he murmurs.

Oh, I still affect him. My inner goddess stirs from her five-day sulk.

Abruptly the doors open, breaking the spell, and we’re on the roof. It’s windy, and despite my black jacket, I’m cold. Christian puts his arm around me, pulling me into his side, and we hurry across to where *Charlie Tango* stands in the center of the helipad, with its rotor blades slowly spinning.

A tall, blond, square-jawed man in a dark suit leaps out and, ducking low, runs toward us. Shaking hands with Christian, he shouts above the noise of the rotors.

“Ready to go, sir. She’s all yours!”

“All checks done?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll collect her around eight thirty?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Taylor’s waiting for you out front.”

“Thank you, Mr. Grey. Safe flight to Portland. Ma’am.” He salutes me. Without releasing me, Christian nods, ducks down, and leads me to the helicopter door.

Once inside he buckles me firmly into my harness, cinching the straps tight. He gives me a knowing look and his secret smile.

“This should keep you in your place,” he murmurs. “I must say I like this harness on you. Don’t touch anything.”

I flush a deep crimson, and he runs his index finger down my cheek before handing me the headphones. *I’d like to touch you, too, but you won’t let me*. I scowl. Besides, he’s pulled the straps so tight I can barely move.

He sits in his seat and buckles himself in, then starts running through all his preflight checks. He’s just so competent. It’s very alluring. He puts on his headphones and flips a switch and the rotors speed up, deafening me.

Turning, he gazes at me. “Ready, baby?” His voice echoes through the headphones.

“Yes.”

He grins his boyish grin. Wow—I've not seen it for so long.

"Sea-Tac tower, this is *Charlie Tango* Golf—Golf Echo Hotel, cleared for takeoff to Portland via PDX. Please confirm, over."

The disembodied voice of the air traffic controller answers, issuing instructions.

"Roger, tower, *Charlie Tango* set, over and out." Christian flips two switches, grasps the stick, and the helicopter rises slowly and smoothly into the evening sky.

Seattle and my stomach drop away from us, and there's so much to see.

"We've chased the dawn, Anastasia, now the dusk," his voice comes through on the headphones. I turn and gape at him in surprise.

What does this mean? How is it that he can say the most romantic things? He smiles, and I can't help my shy smile.

"As well as the evening sun, there's more to see this time," he says.

The last time we flew to Seattle it was dark, but this evening the view is spectacular, literally out of this world. We're up among the tallest buildings, going higher and higher.

"Escala's over there." He points toward the building. "Boeing there, and you can just see the Space Needle."

I crane my head. "I've never been."

"I'll take you—we can eat there."

"Christian, we broke up."

"I know. I can still take you there and feed you." He glares at me.

I shake my head and decide not to antagonize him. "It's very beautiful up here, thank you."

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"Impressive that you can do this."

"Flattery from you, Miss Steele? But I'm a man of many talents."

"I'm fully aware of that, Mr. Grey."

He turns and smirks at me, and for the first time in five days, I relax a little. Perhaps this won't be so bad.

"How's the new job?"

"Good, thank you. Interesting."

"What's your boss like?"

"Oh, he's okay." How can I tell Christian that Jack makes me uncomfortable? Christian glances at me.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Aside from the obvious, nothing."

"The obvious?"

“Oh, Christian, you really are very obtuse sometimes.”

“Obtuse? Me? I’m not sure I appreciate your tone, Miss Steele.”

“Well, don’t, then.”

His lips twitch into a smile. “I have missed your smart mouth, Anastasia.”

I gasp and I want to shout, *I’ve missed you—all of you—not just your mouth*! But I keep quiet and gaze out the glass fishbowl that is *Charlie Tango*’s windshield as we continue south. The dusk is to our right, the sun low on the horizon—large, blazing fiery orange—and I am Icarus again, flying far too close.

THE DUSK FOLLOWS US from Seattle, and the sky is awash with opal, pinks, and aquamarines woven seamlessly together as only Mother Nature knows how. It’s a clear, crisp evening, and the lights of Portland twinkle and wink, welcoming us as Christian sets the helicopter down on the helipad. We are on top of the strange brown brick building in Portland we left less than three weeks ago.

It’s been hardly any time at all. Yet I feel like I’ve known Christian for a lifetime. He powers down *Charlie Tango*, flipping various switches so the rotors stop, and eventually all I hear is my own breathing through the headphones. Hmm. Briefly it reminds me of the Thomas Tallis experience. I blanch. I don’t want to go there right now.

Christian unbuckles his harness and leans across to undo mine.

“Good trip, Miss Steele?” he asks, his voice mild, his eyes glowing.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Grey,” I reply politely.

“Well, let’s go see the boy’s photos.” He holds his hand out to me and taking it, I climb out of *Charlie Tango*.

A gray-haired man with a beard walks over to meet us, grinning broadly, and I recognize him as the old-timer from the last time we were here.

“Joe.” Christian smiles and releases my hand to shake Joe’s warmly.

“Keep her safe for Stephan. He’ll be along around eight or nine.”

“Will do, Mr. Grey. Ma’am,” he says, nodding at me. “Your car’s waiting downstairs, sir. Oh, and the elevator’s out of order; you’ll need to use the stairs.”

“Thank you, Joe.”

Christian takes my hand, and we head to the emergency stairs.

“Good thing for you this is only three floors, in those heels,” he mutters in disapproval.

No kidding.

“Don’t you like the boots?”

“I like them very much, Anastasia.” His gaze darkens and I think he might say something else, but he stops. “Come. We’ll take it slow. I don’t want you falling

and breaking your neck."

WE SIT IN SILENCE as our driver takes us to the gallery. My anxiety has returned full force, and I realize that our time in *Charlie Tango* has been the eye of the storm. Christian is quiet and brooding … apprehensive even; our lighter mood from earlier has dissipated. There's so much I want to say, but this journey is too short. Christian stares pensively out the window.

"José is just a friend," I murmur.

Christian turns and gazes at me, his eyes dark and guarded, giving nothing away. His mouth—oh, his mouth is distracting, and unbidden. I remember it on me—everywhere. My skin heats. He shifts in his seat and frowns.

"Those beautiful eyes look too large in your face, Anastasia. Please tell me you'll eat."

"Yes, Christian, I'll eat," I answer automatically, a platitude.

"I mean it."

"Do you, now?" I cannot keep the disdain out of my voice. Honestly, the audacity of this man—this man who has put me through hell over the last few days. No, that's wrong. I've put myself through hell. No. It's him. I shake my head, confused.

"I don't want to fight with you, Anastasia. I want you back, and I want you healthy," he says.

"But nothing's changed." *You're still fifty shades*.

"Let's talk on the way back. We're here."

The car pulls up in front of the gallery, and Christian climbs out, leaving me speechless. He opens the car door for me, and I clamber out.

"Why do you do that?" My voice is louder than I expected.

"Do what?" Christian is taken aback.

"Say something like that and then just stop."

"Anastasia, we're here. Where you want to be. Let's do this and then talk. I don't particularly want a scene in the street."

I glance around. He's right. It's too public. I press my lips together as he glares down at me.

"Okay," I mutter sulkily. Clasping my hand, he takes me into the building.

We are in a converted warehouse—brick walls, dark wood floors, white ceilings, and white pipe work. It's airy and modern, and there are several people wandering across the gallery floor, sipping wine and admiring José's work. For a moment, my troubles melt away as I grasp that José has realized his dream. *Way to go, José!*

"Good evening and welcome to José Rodriguez's show." A young woman

dressed in black with very short brown hair, bright red lipstick, and large hooped earrings greets us. She glances briefly at me, then much longer than is strictly necessary at Christian, then turns back to me, blinking as she blushes.

My brow creases. *He's mine*—or was. I try hard not to scowl at her. As her eyes regain their focus, she blinks again.

"Oh, it's you, Ana. We'll want your take on all this, too." Grinning, she hands me a brochure and directs me to a table laden with drinks and snacks.

"You know her?" Christian frowns.

I shake my head, equally puzzled.

He shrugs, distracted. "What would you like to drink?"

"I'll have a glass of white wine, thank you."

His brow furrows, but he holds his tongue and heads for the open bar.

"Ana!"

José comes barreling through a throng of people.

*Holy cow!* He's wearing a suit. He looks good and he's beaming at me. He enfolds me in his arms, hugging me hard. And it's all I can do not to burst into tears. My friend, he's my only friend while Kate is away. Tears pool in my eyes.

"Ana, I'm so glad you made it," he whispers in my ear. Abruptly he holds me at arm's length, examining me.

"What?"

"Hey are you okay? You look, well, odd. *Dios mío*, have you lost weight?"

I blink back my tears—*not him too*. "José, I'm fine. I'm just so happy for you. Congratulations on the show." My voice wavers as I see the concern etched on his oh-so-familiar face, but I have to hold myself together.

"How did you get here?" he asks.

"Christian brought me," I say, suddenly apprehensive.

"Oh." José's face falls and he releases me. "Where is he?" His expression darkens.

"Over there, fetching drinks." I nod in Christian's direction and notice that he's exchanging pleasantries with someone waiting in line. Christian glances up and our eyes lock. And in that brief moment, I'm paralyzed, staring at the impossibly handsome man who gazes at me with some unfathomable emotion. His gaze hot, burning into me, and we're lost for a moment staring at each other.

*Holy cow* … This beautiful man wants me back, and deep down inside me sweet joy slowly unfurls like a morning glory in the early dawn.

"Ana!" José distracts me, and I'm dragged back to the here and now. "I am so glad you came—listen, I should warn you—"

Suddenly, Miss Very Short Hair and Red Lipstick cuts him off. "José, the journalist from the *Portland Printz* is here to see you. Come on." She gives me a

polite smile.

"How cool is this? The fame." He grins, and I can't help but grin back—he's so happy. "Catch you later, Ana." He kisses my cheek, and I watch him stroll over to a young woman standing by a tall, lanky photographer.

José's photographs are everywhere, and in some cases, blown up onto huge canvases. There are both monochromes and colors. There's an ethereal beauty to many of the landscapes. In one taken near the lake at Vancouver, it's early evening and pink clouds are reflected in the stillness of the water. Briefly, I'm transported by the tranquility and the peace. It's stunning.

Christian joins me, and hands me my glass of white wine.

"Does it come up to scratch?" My voice sounds more normal.

He looks quizzically at me.

"The wine."

"No. Rarely does at these kinds of events. The boy's quite talented, isn't he?" Christian is admiring the lake photo.

"Why else do you think I asked him to take your portrait?" The pride is obvious in my voice. His eyes glide impassively from the photograph to me.

"Christian Grey?" The photographer from the *Portland Printz* approaches Christian. "Can I have a picture, sir?"

"Sure." Christian hides his scowl. I step back, but he grabs my hand and pulls me to his side. The photographer looks at both of us and can't hide his surprise.

"Mr. Grey, thank you." He snaps a couple of photos. "Miss …?" he asks.

"Ana Steele," I reply.

"Thank you, Miss Steele." He scurries off.

"I looked for pictures of you with dates on the Internet. There aren't any. That's why Kate thought you were gay."

Christian's mouth twitches into a smile. "That explains your inappropriate question. No, I don't do dates, Anastasia—only with you. But you know that." His voice is quiet with sincerity.

"So you never took your"—I glance around nervously to check no one can overhear us—"subs out?"

"Sometimes. Not on dates. Shopping, you know." He shrugs, his eyes not leaving mine.

Oh, so just in the playroom—his Red Room of Pain and his apartment. I don't know what to feel about that.

"Just you, Anastasia," he whispers.

I blush and stare down at my fingers. In his own way, he does care about me.

"Your friend here seems more of a landscape man, not portraits. Let's look around." I take his outstretched hand.

We wander past a few more prints, and I notice a couple nodding at me, smiling broadly as if they know me. It must be because I'm with Christian, but one young man is blatantly staring. *Odd*.

We turn the corner, and I see why I've been getting strange looks. Hanging on the far wall are seven huge portraits—of me.

I stare blankly at them, stupefied, the blood draining from my face. Me: pouting, laughing, scowling, serious, amused. All in super close up, all in black and white.

*Holy shit!* I remember José messing with the camera on a couple of occasions when he was visiting and when I'd been out with him as driver and photographer's assistant. He took snapshots, or so I thought. Not these invasive candid shots.

Christian is staring, transfixed, at each of the pictures in turn.

"Seems I'm not the only one," he mutters cryptically, his mouth settling into a hard line.

I think he's angry.

"Excuse me," he says, pinning me with his bright gaze for a moment. He heads to the reception desk.

What's his problem now? I watch mesmerized as he talks animatedly with Miss Very Short Hair and Red Lipstick. He fishes out his wallet and produces his credit card.

*Shit*. He must have bought one of them.

"Hey. You're the muse. These photographs are terrific." A young man with a shock of bright blond hair startles me. I feel a hand at my elbow and Christian is back.

"You're a lucky guy." Blond Shock says to Christian, who gives him a cold stare.

"That I am," he mutters darkly, as he pulls me over to one side.

"Did you just buy one of these?"

"One of these?" he snorts, not taking his eyes off them.

"You bought more than one?"

He rolls his eyes. "I bought them all, Anastasia. I don't want some stranger ogling you in the privacy of their home."

My first inclination is to laugh. "You'd rather it was you?" I scoff.

He glares down at me, caught off guard by my audacity, I think, but he's trying to hide his amusement.

"Frankly, yes."

"Pervert," I mouth at him and bite my lower lip to prevent my smile.

His mouth drops open, and now his amusement is obvious. He strokes his chin

thoughtfully.

“Can’t argue with that assessment, Anastasia.” He shakes his head, and his eyes soften with humor.

“I’d discuss it further with you, but I’ve signed an NDA.”

He sighs, gazing at me, and his eyes darken. “What I’d like to do to your smart mouth,” he murmurs.

I gasp, knowing full well what he means. “You’re very rude.” I try to sound shocked and succeed. Has he no boundaries?

He smirks, amused then frowns.

“You look very relaxed in these photographs, Anastasia. I don’t see you like that very often.”

What? Whoa! Change of subject—talk about non sequitur—from playful to serious.

I flush and glance down at my fingers. He tilts my head back, and I inhale sharply at the contact with his fingers.

“I want you that relaxed with me,” he whispers. All trace of humor has gone.

Deep inside me that joy stirs again. *But how can this be?* We have issues.

“You have to stop intimidating me if you want that,” I snap.

“You have to learn to communicate and tell me how you feel,” he snaps back, eyes blazing.

I take a deep breath. “Christian, you wanted me as a submissive. That’s where the problem lies. It’s in the definition of a submissive—you e-mailed it to me once.” I pause, trying to recall the wording. “I think the synonyms were, and I quote, ‘compliant, pliant, amenable, passive, tractable, resigned, patient, docile, tame, subdued.’ I wasn’t supposed to look at you. Not talk to you unless you gave me permission to do so. What do you expect?” I hiss at him.

His frown deepens as I continue.

“It’s very confusing being with you. You don’t want me to defy you, but then you like my ‘smart mouth.’ You want obedience, except when you don’t, so you can punish me. I just don’t know which way is up when I’m with you.”

He narrows his eyes. “Good point well made, as usual, Miss Steele.” His voice is frigid. “Come, let’s go eat.”

“We’ve only been here for half an hour.”

“You’ve seen the photos; you’ve spoken to the boy.”

“His name is José.”

“You’ve spoken to José—the man who, the last time I met him, was trying to push his tongue into your reluctant mouth while you were drunk and sick,” he snarls.

“He’s never hit me,” I spit at him.

Christian scowls, fury emanating from every pore. “That’s a low blow, Anastasia,” he whispers menacingly.

I pale, and Christian runs his hands through his hair, bristling with barely contained anger. I glare back at him.

“I’m taking you for something to eat. You’re fading away in front of me. Find the boy, say good-bye.”

“Please, can we stay longer?”

“No. Go. Now. Say good-bye.”

I glower at him, my blood boiling. Mr. Damned Control Freak. Angry is good. Angry is better than tearful.

I drag my gaze away from him and scan the room for José. He’s talking to a group of young women. I stalk off toward him and away from Fifty. Just because he brought me here, I have to do as he says? Who the hell does he think he is?

The girls are hanging on José’s every word. One of them gasps as I approach, no doubt recognizing me from the portraits.

“José.”

“Ana. Excuse me, girls.” José grins at them and puts his arm around me, and on some level I’m amused—José all smooth, impressing the ladies.

“You look mad,” he says.

“I have to go,” I mutter mulishly.

“You just got here.”

“I know but Christian needs to get back. The pictures are fantastic, José—you’re very talented.”

He beams. “It was so cool seeing you.”

Jose sweeps me into a big bear hug, spinning me so I can see Christian across the gallery. He’s scowling, and I realize it’s because I’m in José’s arms. So in a very calculating move, I wrap my arms around José’s neck. I think Christian is going to expire. His glare darkens to something quite sinister, and slowly he makes his way toward us.

“Thanks for the warning about the portraits of me,” I mumble.

“Shit. Sorry, Ana. I should have told you. D’you like them?”

“Um … I don’t know,” I answer truthfully, momentarily knocked off balance by his question.

“Well, they’re all sold, so somebody likes them. How cool is that? You’re a poster girl.” He hugs me tighter as Christian reaches us, glowering at me now, though fortunately José doesn’t see.

José releases me. “Don’t be a stranger, Ana. Oh, Mr. Grey, good evening.”

“Mr. Rodriguez, very impressive.” Christian sounds icily polite. “I’m sorry we can’t stay longer, but we need to head back to Seattle. Anastasia?” He subtly

stresses *we*, and takes my hand as he does so.

"Bye, José. Congratulations again." I give him a quick kiss on the cheek, and before I know it Christian is dragging me out of the building. I know he's boiling with silent wrath, but so am I.

He looks quickly up and down the street then heads left and suddenly sweeps me into a side alley, abruptly pushing me up against a wall. He grabs my face between his hands, forcing me to look up into his ardent, determined eyes.

I gasp, and his mouth swoops down. He's kissing me, violently. Briefly our teeth clash, then his tongue is in my mouth.

Desire explodes like the Fourth of July throughout my body, and I'm kissing him back, matching his fervor, my hands knotting in his hair, pulling it, hard. He groans, a low sexy sound in the back of his throat that reverberates through me, and his hand moves down my body to the top of my thigh, his fingers digging into my flesh through the plum dress.

I pour all the angst and heartbreak of the last few days into our kiss, binding him to me, and it hits me—in this moment of blinding passion—he's doing the same, he feels the same.

He breaks off the kiss, panting. His eyes are luminous with desire, firing the already heated blood that is pounding through my body. My mouth is slack as I try to drag precious air into my lungs.

"You. Are. Mine," he snarls, emphasizing each word. He pushes away from me and bends, hands on his knees as if he's run a marathon. "For the love of God, Ana."

I lean against the wall, panting, trying to control the riotous reaction in my body, trying to find my equilibrium.

"I'm sorry," I whisper once my breath has returned.

"You should be. I know what you were doing. Do you want the photographer, Anastasia? He obviously has feelings for you."

I shake my head, guiltily. "No. He's just a friend."

"I have spent all my adult life trying to avoid any extreme emotion. Yet you … you bring out feelings in me that are completely alien. It's very …" He frowns, grasping for the word. "Unsettling.

"I like control, Ana, and around you that just"—he stands, his gaze intense—"evaporates." He waves his hand vaguely, then runs it through his hair and takes a deep breath. He clasps my hand.

"Come, we need to talk, and you need to eat."

## CHAPTER TWO

He whisks me into a small, intimate restaurant.

"This place will have to do," Christian grumbles. "We don't have much time."

The restaurant looks fine to me. Wooden chairs, linen tablecloths, and walls the same color as Christian's playroom—deep bloodred—with randomly placed small gilt mirrors, white candles, and small vases of white roses. Ella Fitzgerald croons softly in the background about this thing called love. It's very romantic.

The waiter leads us to a table for two in a small alcove, and I sit, apprehensive and wondering what he's going to say.

"We don't have long," Christian says to the waiter as we sit. "So we'll each have sirloin steak cooked medium, béarnaise sauce if you have it, fries, and green vegetables, whatever the chef has; and bring me the wine list."

"Certainly, sir." The waiter, taken aback by Christian's cool, calm efficiency, scuttles off. Christian places his BlackBerry on the table. Jeez, don't I get a choice?

"And if I don't like steak?"

He sighs. "Don't start, Anastasia."

"I am not a child, Christian."

"Well, stop acting like one."

It's as if he's slapped me. So this is how it will be, an agitated, fraught conversation, albeit in a very romantic setting, but certainly no hearts and flowers.

"I'm a child because I don't like steak?" I mutter, trying to conceal my hurt.

"For deliberately making me jealous. It's a childish thing to do. Have you no regard for your friend's feelings, leading him on like that?" Christian presses his lips together in a thin line and scowls as the waiter returns with the wine list.

I blush—I hadn't thought of that. Poor José—I certainly don't want to encourage him. Suddenly I'm mortified. Christian has a point; it was a thoughtless thing to do. He glances at the wine list.

"Would you like to choose the wine?" he asks, raising his eyebrows at me expectantly, arrogance personified. He knows I know nothing about wine.

"You choose," I answer, sullen but chastened.

“Two glasses of the Barossa Valley Shiraz, please.”

“Er … we only sell that wine by the bottle, sir.”

“A bottle, then,” Christian snaps.

“Sir.” He retreats, subdued, and I don’t blame him. I frown at Fifty. What’s eating him? Oh, myself probably, and somewhere in the depths of my psyche, my inner goddess rises sleepily, stretches, and smiles. She’s been asleep for a while.

“You’re very grumpy.”

He gazes at me impassively. “I wonder why that is?”

“Well, it’s good to set the right tone for an intimate and honest discussion about the future, wouldn’t you say?” I smile at him sweetly.

His mouth presses into a hard line, but then, almost reluctantly, his lips lift, and I know he’s trying to stifle his smile.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Apology accepted, and I’m pleased to inform you I haven’t decided to become a vegetarian since we last ate.”

“Since that was the last time you ate, I think that’s a moot point.”

“There’s that word again, ‘moot.’ ”

“Moot,” he mouths and his eyes soften with humor. He runs his hand through his hair, and he’s serious again. “Ana, the last time we spoke, you left me. I’m a little nervous. I’ve told you I want you back, and you’ve said … nothing.” His gaze is intense and expectant while his candor is totally disarming. What the hell do I say to this?

“I’ve missed you … really missed you, Christian. The past few days have been … difficult.” I swallow, and a lump in my throat swells as I recall my desperate anguish since I left him.

This last week has been the worst in my life, the pain almost indescribable. Nothing has come close. But reality hits home, winding me.

“Nothing’s changed. I can’t be what you want me to be.” I squeeze the words out past the lump in my throat.

“You are what I want you to be,” he says, his voice emphatic.

“No, Christian, I’m not.”

“You’re upset because of what happened last time. I behaved stupidly, and you … So did you. Why didn’t you safe-word, Anastasia?” His tone changes, becomes accusatory.

*What? Whoa—change of direction.*

“Answer me.”

“I don’t know. I was overwhelmed. I was trying to be what you wanted me to be, trying to deal with the pain, and it went out of my mind. You know … I

forgot," I whisper, ashamed, and I shrug apologetically.

*Perhaps we could have avoided all this heartache*.

"You forgot!" he gasps with horror, grabbing the sides of the table and glaring. I wither under his stare.

*Shit!* He's furious again. My inner goddess glares at me, too. *See, you brought all this on yourself!*

"How can I trust you?" His voice is low. "Ever?"

The waiter arrives with our wine as we sit staring at each other, blue eyes to gray. Both of us filled with unspoken recriminations, while the waiter removes the cork with an unnecessary flourish and pours a little wine into Christian's glass. Automatically Christian reaches out and takes a sip.

"That's fine." His voice is curt.

Gingerly the waiter fills our glasses, placing the bottle on the table before beating a hasty retreat. Christian has not taken his eyes off me the whole time. I am the first to crack, breaking eye contact, picking up my glass and taking a large gulp. I barely taste it.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, suddenly feeling stupid. I left because I thought we were incompatible, but he's saying I could have stopped him?

"Sorry for what?" he says alarmed.

"Not using the safeword."

He closes his eyes, as if in relief.

"We might have avoided all this suffering," he mutters.

"You look fine." More than fine. You look like you.

"Appearances can be deceptive," he says quietly. "I'm anything but fine. I feel like the sun has set and not risen for five days, Ana. I'm in perpetual night here."

I'm winded by his admission. *Oh my, like me*.

"You said you'd never leave, yet the going gets tough and you're out the door."

"When did I say I'd never leave?"

"In your sleep. It was the most comforting thing I'd heard in so long, Anastasia. It made me relax."

My heart constricts and I reach for my wine.

"You said you loved me," he whispers. "Is that now in the past tense?" His voice is low, laced with anxiety.

"No, Christian, it's not."

He looks so vulnerable as he exhales. "Good," he murmurs.

I'm shocked by his admission. He's had a change of heart. When I told him I loved him before, he was horrified. The waiter is back. Briskly he places our plates in front of us and scuttles away.

*Holy hell. Food*.

"Eat," Christian commands.

Deep down I know I'm hungry, but right now, my stomach is in knots. Sitting across from the only man I have ever loved and debating our uncertain future does not promote a healthy appetite. I look dubiously at my food.

"So help me God, Anastasia, if you don't eat, I will take you across my knee here in this restaurant, and it will have nothing to do with my sexual gratification. Eat!"

*Keep your hair on, Grey*. My subconscious stares at me over her half-moon specs. She is wholeheartedly in agreement with Fifty Shades.

"Okay, I'll eat. Stow your twitching palm, please."

He doesn't smile but continues to glare at me. Reluctantly I lift my knife and fork and slice into my steak. Oh, it's mouthwateringly good. I am hungry, really hungry. I chew and he visibly relaxes.

We eat our supper in silence. The music's changed. A soft-voiced woman sings in the background, her words echoing my thoughts. I'll never be the same since he came into my life.

I glance at Fifty. He's eating and watching me. Hunger, longing, anxiety combined in one hot look.

"Do you know who's singing?" I try for some normal conversation.

Christian pauses and listens. "No … but she's good, whoever she is."

"I like her, too."

Finally he smiles his private enigmatic smile. What's he planning?

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Eat up," he says mildly.

I have eaten half the food on my plate. I cannot eat any more. How can I negotiate this?

"I can't manage any more. Have I eaten enough for Sir?"

He stares at me impassively, not answering, then glances at his watch.

"I'm really full," I add, taking a sip of the delicious wine.

"We have to go shortly. Taylor's here, and you have to be up for work in the morning."

"So do you."

"I function on a lot less sleep than you do, Anastasia. At least you've eaten something."

"Aren't we going back via *Charlie Tango*?"

"No, I thought I might have a drink. Taylor will pick us up. Besides, this way I have you in the car all to myself for a few hours, at least. What can we do but talk?"

Oh, that's his plan.

Christian summons the waiter to ask for the check, then picks up his BlackBerry and makes a call.

"We're at Le Picotin, Southwest Third Avenue." He hangs up.

He's still curt over the phone.

"You're very brusque with Taylor, in fact, with most people."

"I just get to the point quickly, Anastasia."

"You haven't gotten to the point this evening. Nothing's changed, Christian."

"I have a proposition for you."

"This started with a proposition."

"A different proposition."

The waiter returns, and Christian hands over his credit card without checking the bill. He gazes at me speculatively while the waiter swipes his card. Christian's phone buzzes once, and he peers at it.

He has a proposition? What now? A couple of scenarios run through my mind: kidnapping, working for him. No, nothing makes sense. Christian finishes paying.

"Come. Taylor's outside."

We stand and he takes my hand.

"I don't want to lose you, Anastasia." He kisses my knuckles tenderly, and the touch of his lips on my skin resonates through my body.

Outside the Audi is waiting. Christian opens my door. Climbing in, I sink into the plush leather. He heads to the driver's side; Taylor steps out of the car and they talk briefly. This isn't their usual protocol. I'm curious. What are they talking about? Moments later, they are both back in the car, and I glance at Christian, who's wearing his impassive face as he stares ahead.

I allow myself a brief moment to examine his profile: straight nose, sculpted full lips, hair falling deliciously over his forehead. This divine man is surely not meant for me.

Soft music fills the rear of the car, a grand orchestral piece that I don't know, and Taylor pulls into the light traffic, heading for I-5 and Seattle.

Christian shifts to face me. "As I was saying, Anastasia, I have a proposition for you."

I glance nervously at Taylor.

"Taylor can't hear you," Christian reassures me.

"How?"

"Taylor," Christian calls. Taylor doesn't respond. He calls again, still no response. Christian leans over and taps his shoulder. Taylor removes an earbud I hadn't noticed.

“Yes, sir?”

“Thank you, Taylor. It’s okay; resume your listening.”

“Sir.”

“Happy now? He’s listening to his iPod. Puccini. Forget he’s here. I do.”

“Did you deliberately ask him to do that?”

“Yes.”

Oh. “Okay, your proposition?”

Christian looks suddenly determined and businesslike. *Holy shit*. We’re negotiating a deal. I listen attentively.

“Let me ask you something first. Do you want a regular vanilla relationship with no kinky fuckery at all?”

My mouth drops open. “Kinky fuckery?” I squeak.

“Kinky fuckery.”

“I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well, I did. Answer me,” he says calmly.

I flush. My inner goddess is down on bended knee with her hands clasped in supplication, begging me.

“I like your kinky fuckery,” I whisper.

“That’s what I thought. So what don’t you like?”

*Not being able to touch you. Your enjoying my pain, the bite of the belt …*

“The threat of cruel and unusual punishment.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you have all those canes and whips and stuff in your playroom, and they frighten the living daylights out of me. I don’t want you to use them on me.”

“Okay, so no whips or canes—or belts, for that matter,” he says sardonically.

I gaze at him puzzled. “Are you attempting to redefine the hard limits?”

“Not as such, I’m just trying to understand you, get a clearer picture of what you do and don’t like.”

“Fundamentally, Christian, it’s your joy in inflicting pain on me that’s difficult for me to handle. And the idea that you’ll do it because I have crossed some arbitrary line.”

“But it’s not arbitrary; the rules are written down.”

“I don’t want a set of rules.”

“None at all?”

“No rules.” I shake my head, but my heart is in my mouth. Where is he going with this?

“But you don’t mind if I spank you?”

“Spank me with what?”

“This.” He holds up his hand.

I squirm uncomfortably. “No, not really. Especially with those silver balls …” Thank heavens it’s dark; my face is burning and my voice trails off as I recall that night. *Yeah … I’d do that again*.

He smirks. “Yes, that was fun.”

“More than fun,” I mutter.

“So you can deal with some pain.”

I shrug. “Yes, I suppose.” Oh, where is he going with this? My anxiety level has shot up several magnitudes on the Richter scale.

He strokes his chin, deep in thought. “Anastasia, I want to start again. Do the vanilla thing and then maybe, once you trust me more and I trust you to be honest and to communicate with me, we could move on and do some of the things that I like to do.”

I stare at him, stunned, with no thoughts in my head at all—like a computer crash. I think he’s anxious, but I can’t see him clearly, as we’re shrouded in the Oregon darkness. It occurs to me, finally, this is it.

He wants the light, but can I ask him to do this for me? And don’t I like the dark? Some dark, sometimes. Memories of the Thomas Tallis night drift invitingly through my mind.

“But what about punishments?”

“No punishments.” He shakes his head. “None.”

“And the rules?”

“No rules.”

“None at all? But you have needs.”

“I need you more, Anastasia. These last few days have been hell. All my instincts tell me to let you go, tell me I don’t deserve you.

“Those photos the boy took … I can see how he sees you. You look untroubled and beautiful, not that you’re not beautiful now, but here you sit. I see your pain. It’s hard, knowing that I’m the one who has made you feel this way.

“But I’m a selfish man. I’ve wanted you since you fell into my office. You are exquisite, honest, warm, strong, witty, beguilingly innocent; the list is endless. I’m in awe of you. I want you, and the thought of anyone else having you is like a knife twisting in my dark soul.”

My mouth goes dry. *Holy shit*. If that isn’t a declaration of love, I don’t know what is. And the words tumble out of me—a dam breached.

“Christian, why do you think you have a dark soul? I would never say that. Sad maybe, but you’re a good man. I can see that … you’re generous, you’re kind, and you’ve never lied to me. And I haven’t tried very hard.

“Last Saturday was such a shock to my system. It was my wake-up call. I realized that you’d been easy on me and that I couldn’t be the person you wanted me to be. Then, after I left, it dawned on me that the physical pain you inflicted was not as bad as the pain of losing you. I do want to please you, but it’s hard.”

“You please me all the time,” he whispers. “How often do I have to tell you that?”

“I never know what you’re thinking. Sometimes you’re so closed off … like an island state. You intimidate me. That’s why I keep quiet. I don’t know which way your mood is going to go. It swings from north to south and back again in a nanosecond. It’s confusing and you won’t let me touch you, and I want so much to show you how much I love you.”

He blinks in the darkness, warily I think, and I can resist him no longer. I unbuckle my seat belt and scramble into his lap, taking him by surprise, and take his head in my hands.

“I love you, Christian Grey. And you’re prepared to do all this for me. I’m the one who is undeserving, and I’m just sorry that I can’t do all those things for you. Maybe with time … I don’t know … but yes, I accept your proposition. Where do I sign?”

He snakes his arms around me and crushes me to him.

“Oh, Ana,” he breathes as he buries his nose in my hair.

We sit with our arms wrapped around each other, listening to the music—a soothing piano piece—mirroring the emotions in the car, the sweet tranquil calm after the storm. I snuggle into his arms, resting my head in the crook of his neck. He gently strokes my back.

“Touching is a hard limit for me, Anastasia,” he whispers.

“I know. I wish I understood why.”

After a while, he sighs, and in a soft voice he says, “I had a horrific childhood. One of the crack whore’s pimps …” His voice trails off, and his body tenses as he recalls some unimaginable horror. “I can remember that,” he whispers, shuddering.

Abruptly, my heart constricts as I remember the burn scars marring his skin. *Oh, Christian*. I tighten my arms around his neck.

“Was she abusive? Your mother?” My voice is low and soft with unshed tears.

“Not that I remember. She was neglectful. She didn’t protect me from her pimp.” He snorts. “I think it was me who looked after her. When she finally killed herself, it took four days for someone to raise the alarm and find us … I remember that.”

I cannot contain my gasp of horror. Holy mother fuck. Bile rises in my throat.

“That’s pretty fucked-up,” I whisper.

“Fifty shades,” he murmurs.

I press my lips against his neck, seeking and offering solace as I imagine a small, dirty, gray-eyed boy lost and lonely beside the body of his dead mother.

*Oh*, *Christian*. I breathe in his scent. He smells heavenly, my favorite fragrance in the entire world. He tightens his arms around me and kisses my hair, and I sit wrapped in his embrace as Taylor speeds into the night.

WHEN I WAKE, WE'RE driving through Seattle.

“Hey,” Christian says softly.

“Sorry,” I murmur as I sit up, blinking and stretching. I am still in his arms, on his lap.

“I could watch you sleep forever, Ana.”

“Did I say anything?”

“No. We’re nearly at your place.”

Oh? “We’re not going to yours?”

“No.”

I sit up and gaze at him. “Why not?”

“Because you have work tomorrow.”

“Oh.” I pout.

“Why, did you have something in mind?”

I squirm. “Well, maybe.”

He chuckles. “Anastasia, I am not going to touch you again, not until you beg me to.”

“What!”

“So that you’ll start communicating with me. Next time we make love, you’re going to have to tell me exactly what you want in fine detail.”

“Oh.” He shifts me off his lap as Taylor pulls up outside my apartment. Christian climbs out and holds the car door open for me.

“I have something for you.” He moves to the back of the car, opens the trunk, and pulls out a large gift-wrapped box. What the hell is this?

“Open it when you get inside.”

“You’re not coming in?”

“No, Anastasia.”

“So when will I see you?”

“Tomorrow.”

“My boss wants me to go for a drink with him tomorrow.”

Christian’s face hardens. “Does he, now?” His voice is laced with latent menace.

“To celebrate my first week,” I add quickly.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“I could pick you up from there.”

“Okay … I’ll e-mail or text you.”

“Good.”

He walks me to the lobby door and waits while I dig my keys out of my purse. As I unlock the door, he leans forward and cups my chin, tilting my head back. His mouth hovers over mine, and closing his eyes, he runs a trail of kisses from the corner of my eye to the corner of my mouth.

A small moan escapes my mouth as my insides melt and unfurl.

“Until tomorrow,” he breathes.

“Good night, Christian.” I hear the need in my voice.

He smiles.

“In you go,” he orders, and I walk through the lobby carrying my mysterious parcel.

“Laters, baby,” he calls, then turns and with his easy grace, heads back to the car.

Once in the apartment, I open the gift box and find my MacBook Pro laptop, the BlackBerry, and another rectangular box. What is this? I unwrap the silver paper. Inside is a black slim leather case.

Opening the case, I find an iPad. *Holy shit … an iPad*. A white card is resting on the screen with a message written in Christian’s handwriting:

*Anastasia—this is for you.*

*I know what you want to hear.*

*The music on here says it for me.*

*Christian*

I have a Christian Grey mix tape in the guise of a high-end iPad. I shake my head in disapproval because of the expense, but deep down I love it. Jack has one at the office, so I know how they work.

I switch it on and gasp as the wallpaper image appears: a small model glider. *Oh my*. It’s the Blanik L-23 I gave him, mounted on a glass stand and sitting on what I think is Christian’s desk at his office. I gape at it.

*He built it!* He really did build it. I remember now he mentioned it in the note with the flowers. I’m reeling, and I know in that instant that he’s put a great deal of thought into this gift.

I slide the arrow at the bottom of the screen to unlock it and gasp again. The background photograph is of Christian and me at my graduation in the tent. It’s the one that appeared in the *Seattle Times*. Christian looks so handsome and I

can't help my face-splitting grin—*Yes, and he's mine!*

With a swipe of my finger, the icons shift, and several new ones appear on the next screen. A Kindle app, iBooks, Words—whatever that is.

*The British Library?* I touch the icon and a menu appears: HISTORICAL COLLECTION. Scrolling down, I select NOVELS OF THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY. Another menu. I tap on a title: *The American* BY HENRY JAMES. A new window opens, offering me a scanned copy of the book to read. Holy crap—it's an early edition, published in 1879, and it's on my iPad! He's bought me the British Library at a touch of a button.

I exit quickly, knowing that I could be lost in this app for an eternity. I notice a "good food" app that makes me roll my eyes and smile at the same time, a news app, a weather app, but his note mentioned music. I go back to the main screen, hit the iPod icon, and a playlist appears. I scroll through the songs, and the list makes me smile. Thomas Tallis—I'm not going to forget that in a hurry. I heard it twice, after all, while he flogged and fucked me.

"Witchcraft." My grin gets wider—dancing around the great room. The Bach Marcello piece—*oh no, that's way too sad for my mood right now. Hmm*. Jeff Buckley—*yeah, I've heard of him*. Snow Patrol—my favorite band—and a song called "Principles of Lust" by Enigma. How Christian. Another called "Possession" … *oh yes, very Fifty Shades*. And a few more I have never heard.

Selecting a song that catches my eye, I press play. It's called "Try" by Nelly Furtado. She starts to sing, and her voice is a silken scarf wrapping around me, enveloping me. I lie down on my bed.

Does this mean Christian's going to try? Try this new relationship? I drink in the lyrics, staring at the ceiling, trying to understand his turnaround. He missed me. I missed him. He must have some feelings for me. He must. This iPad, these songs, these apps—he cares. He really cares. My heart swells with hope.

The song ends and tears spring to my eyes. I quickly scroll to another—"The Scientist" by Coldplay—one of Kate's favorite bands. I know the track, but I've never really listened to the lyrics before. I close my eyes and let the words wash over and through me.

My tears start to flow. I can't stem them. If this isn't an apology, what is it? *Oh, Christian*.

Or is this an invitation? Will he answer my questions? *Am I reading too much into this? I am probably reading too much into this*.

I dash my tears away. I have to e-mail him to thank him. I leap off my bed to fetch the mean machine.

Coldplay continues as I sit cross-legged on my bed. The Mac powers up and I log in.

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** IPAD
**Date:** June 9 2011 23:56
**To:** Christian Grey

You've made me cry again.

I love the iPad.

I love the songs.

I love the British Library App.

I love you.

Thank you.

Good night.

Ana xx

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** iPad
**Date:** June 10 2011 00:03
**To:** Anastasia Steele

I'm glad you like it. I bought one for myself.

Now, if I were there, I would kiss away your tears.

But I'm not—so go to sleep.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His response makes me smile—still so bossy, still so Christian. Will that change, too? And I realize in that moment that I hope not. I like him like this—commanding—as long as I can stand up to him without fear of punishment.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Mr. Grumpy
**Date:** June 10 2011 00:07
**To:** Christian Grey

You sound your usual bossy and possibly tense, possibly grumpy self, Mr. Grey.

I know something that could ease that. But then, you're not here—you wouldn't let me stay, and you expect me to beg …

Dream on, Sir.

Ana xx

PS: I also note that you included the Stalker's Anthem, "Every Breath You Take." I do enjoy your sense of humor, but does Dr. Flynn know?

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Zen-Like Calm

**Date:** June 10 2011 00:10

**To:** Anastasia Steele

My Dearest Miss Steele

Spanking occurs in vanilla relationships, too, you know. Usually consensually and in a sexual context … but I am more than happy to make an exception.

You'll be relieved to know that Dr. Flynn also enjoys my sense of humor.

Now, please go to sleep, as you won't get much tomorrow.

Incidentally—you will beg, trust me. And I look forward to it.

Christian Grey

Tense CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Good Night, Sweet Dreams

**Date:** June 10 2011 00:12

**To:** Christian Grey

Well, since you ask so nicely, and I like your delicious threat, I shall curl up with the iPad that you have so kindly given me and fall asleep browsing in the British Library, listening to the music that says it for you.

A xxx

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** One more request

**Date:** June 10 2011 00:15

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dream of me.

x

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Dream of you, Christian Grey? Always.

I change quickly into my pajamas, brush my teeth, and slip into bed. Putting my earbuds in, I pull the flattened *Charlie Tango* balloon from underneath my pillow and hug it to me.

I am brimming with joy, a stupid, widemouthed grin on my face. What a difference a day can make. How am I ever going to sleep?

José Gonzalez starts to sing a soothing melody with a hypnotic guitar riff, and I drift slowly into sleep, marveling how the world has righted itself in one evening and wondering idly if I should make a playlist for Christian.

# CHAPTER THREE

The one good thing about being carless is that on the bus on my way to work, I can plug my headphones into my iPad while it's safely in my purse and listen to all the wonderful tunes Christian has given me. By the time I arrive at the office, I have the most ludicrous grin on my face.

Jack glances up at me and does a double take.

"Good morning, Ana. You look … radiant." His remark flusters me. *How inappropriate!*

"I slept well, thank you, Jack. Good morning."

His brow crinkles.

"Can you read these for me and have reports on them by lunchtime, please?" He hands me four manuscripts. At my horrified expression, he adds, "Just first chapters."

"Sure." I smile with relief, and he gives me a broad smile in return.

I switch on the computer to start work, finishing my latte and eating a banana. There's an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** So Help Me …

**Date:** June 10 2011 08:05

**To:** Anastasia Steele

I do hope you've had breakfast.

I missed you last night.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Old books …

**Date:** June 10 2011 08:33

**To:** Christian Grey

I am eating a banana as I type. I have not had breakfast for several days, so it is a step forward. I love the British Library App—I started rereading Robinson Crusoe … and of course, I love you.

Now leave me alone—I am trying to work.

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Is that all you've eaten?

**Date:** June 10 2011 08:36

**To:** Anastasia Steele

You can do better than that. You're going to need your energy for begging.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Pest

**Date:** June 10 2011 08:39

**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey—I am trying to work for a living—and it's you that will be begging.

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Bring It On!

**Date:** June 10 2011 08:42

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Why, Miss Steele, I love a challenge …

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I sit grinning at the screen like an idiot. But I need to read these chapters for Jack and write reports on all of them. Placing the manuscripts on my desk, I begin.

At lunchtime I head to the deli for a pastrami sandwich and listen to the playlist on my iPad. First up there's Nitin Sawhney, some world music called "Homelands"—it's good. Mr. Grey has eclectic taste in music. I wander back

listening to a classical piece, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* by Ralph Vaughn Williams. Oh, Fifty has a sense of humor, and I love him for it. Will this stupid grin ever leave my face?

The afternoon drags. I decide, in an unguarded moment, to e-mail Christian.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Bored …
**Date:** June 10 2011 16:05
**To:** Christian Grey

Twiddling my thumbs.

How are you?

What are you doing?

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Your thumbs
**Date:** June 10 2011 16:15
**To:** Anastasia Steele

You should have come to work for me.

You wouldn't be twiddling your thumbs.

I am sure I could put them to better use.

In fact I can think of a number of options …

I am doing the usual humdrum mergers and acquisitions.

It's all very dry.

Your e-mails at SIP are monitored.

Christian Grey
Distracted CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh, shit. I had no idea. How the hell does he know? I scowl at the screen and quickly check the e-mails we've sent, deleting them as I do.

Promptly at five thirty, Jack is at my desk. It is Casual Friday so he's wearing jeans and a black shirt..

"Drink, Ana? We usually like to go for a quick one at the bar across the street."

"We?" I ask, hopeful.

"Yeah, most of us go … you coming?"

For some unknown reason, which I don't want to examine too closely, relief floods through me.

"I'd love to. What's the bar called?"

"Fifty's."

"You're kidding."

He looks at me oddly. "No. Some significance for you?"

"No, sorry. I'll join you over there."

"What would you like to drink?"

"A beer, please."

"Cool."

I make my way to the powder room and e-mail Christian from the BlackBerry.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** You'll Fit Right In

**Date:** June 10 2011 17:36

**To:** Christian Grey

We are going to a bar called Fifty's.

The rich seam of humor that I could mine from this is endless.

I look forward to seeing you there, Mr. Grey.

A. x

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Hazards

**Date:** June 10 2011 17:38

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Mining is a very, very dangerous occupation.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Hazards?

**Date:** June 10 2011 17:40

**To:** Christian Grey

And your point is?

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Merely …

**Date:** June 10 2011 17:42

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Making an observation, Miss Steele.

I'll see you shortly.

Sooners rather than laters, baby.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I check myself in the mirror. What a difference a day can make. I have more color in my cheeks, and my eyes are shining. It's the Christian Grey effect. A little e-mail sparring with him will do that to a girl. I grin at the mirror and straighten my pale blue shirt—the one Taylor bought me. I am wearing my favorite jeans today, too. Most of the women in the office wear either jeans or floaty skirts. I will need to invest in a floaty skirt or two. Perhaps I'll do that this weekend and bank the check Christian gave me for Wanda, my Beetle.

As I head out of the building, I hear my name called.

"Miss Steele?"

I turn expectantly, and an ashen young woman approaches me cautiously. She looks like a ghost—so pale and strangely blank.

"Miss Anastasia Steele?" she repeats, and her features stay static even though she's speaking.

"Yes?"

She stops, staring at me from about three feet away on the sidewalk, and I stare back, immobilized. Who is she? What does she want?

"Can I help you?" I ask. How does she know my name?

"No … I just wanted to look at you." Her voice is eerily soft. Like me, she has dark hair that starkly contrasts with her fair skin. Her eyes are brown, like bourbon, but flat. There's no life in them at all. Her beautiful face is pale, and etched with sorrow.

“Sorry—you have me at a disadvantage,” I say, trying to ignore the warning tingle up my spine. On closer inspection, she looks odd, disheveled, and uncared for. Her clothes are two sizes too big, including her designer trench coat.

She laughs, a strange, discordant sound that only feeds my anxiety.

“What do you have that I don’t?” she asks sadly.

My anxiety turns to fear. “I’m sorry—who are you?”

“Me? I’m nobody.” She lifts her arm to drag her hand through her shoulder length hair, and as she does, the sleeve of her trench coat rides up, revealing a soiled bandage around her wrist.

*Holy fuck.*

“Good day, Miss Steele.” Turning, she walks up the street as I stand rooted to the spot. I watch as her slight frame disappears from view, lost among the workers pouring out of their various offices.

*What was that about?*

Confused, I cross the street to the bar, trying to assimilate what has just happened, while my subconscious rears her ugly head and hisses at me—*She has something to do with Christian*.

Fifty’s is a cavernous, impersonal bar with baseball pennants and posters hanging on the wall. Jack is at the bar with Elizabeth; Courtney, the other Editor; two guys from Finance; and Claire from Reception. She is wearing her trademark silver hoop earrings.

“Hi, Ana!” Jack hands me a bottle of Bud.

“Cheers … thank you,” I murmur, still shaken by my encounter with Ghost Girl.

“Cheers.” We clink bottles, and he continues his conversation with Elizabeth. Claire smiles sweetly at me.

“So, how has your first week been?” she asks.

“Good, thank you. Everyone seems very friendly.”

“You seem much happier today.”

“It’s Friday,” I mutter quickly. “So—do you have any plans this weekend?”

MY PATENTED DISTRACTION TECHNIQUE works and I’m saved. Claire turns out to be one of seven kids, and she’s going to a big family get-together in Tacoma. She becomes quite animated, and I realize I haven’t spoken to any women my own age since Kate left for Barbados.

Absently I wonder how Kate is … and Elliot. I must remember to ask Christian if he’s heard from him. Oh, and Ethan, Kate’s brother, will be back next Tuesday, and he’ll be staying in our apartment. I can’t imagine Christian is going to be happy about that. My earlier encounter with strange Ghost Girl slips

further from my mind.

During my conversation with Claire, Elizabeth hands me another beer.

"Thanks." I smile at her.

Claire is very easy to talk to—she likes to talk—and before I know it, I am on my third beer, courtesy of one of the guys from Finance.

When Elizabeth and Courtney leave, Jack joins Claire and me. Where is Christian? One of the finance guys engages Claire in conversation.

"Ana, think you made the right decision coming here?" Jack's voice is soft, and he's standing a bit too close. But I've noticed that he has a tendency to do this with everyone, even at the office.

"I've enjoyed myself this week, thank you, Jack. Yes, I think I made the right decision."

"You're a very bright girl, Ana. You'll go far."

I blush. "Thank you," I mutter, because I don't know what else to say.

"Do you live far?"

"The Pike Market district."

"Not far from me." Smiling, he moves even closer and leans against the bar, effectively trapping me. "Do you have any plans this weekend?"

"Well … um—"

I feel him before I see him. It's as if my whole body is highly attuned to his presence. It relaxes and ignites at the same time—a weird, internal duality—and I sense that strange pulsing electricity.

Christian drapes his arm around my shoulder in a seemingly casual display of affection—but I know differently. He is staking a claim, and on this occasion, it's very welcome. Softly he kisses my hair.

"Hello, baby," he murmurs.

I feel relieved, safe, and excited with his arm around me. He draws me to his side, and I glance up at him while he stares at Jack, his expression impassive. Turning his attention to me, he gives me a brief crooked smile followed by a swift kiss. He's wearing his navy pinstriped jacket over jeans and an open white shirt. He looks edible.

Jack shuffles back uncomfortably.

"Jack, this is Christian," I mumble apologetically. Why am I apologizing? "Christian, Jack."

"I'm the boyfriend," Christian says with a small, cool smile that doesn't reach his eyes as he shakes Jack's hand. I glance up at Jack who is mentally assessing the fine specimen of manhood in front of him.

"I'm the boss," Jack replies arrogantly. "Ana did mention an ex-boyfriend."

*Oh, shit. You don't want to play this game with Fifty.*

“Well, no-longer-ex,” Christian replies calmly. “Come on, baby, time to go.”

“Please, stay and join us for a drink,” Jack says smoothly.

I don’t think that’s a good idea. Why is this so uncomfortable? I glance at Claire, who is, of course staring, openmouthed and with frankly carnal appreciation, at Christian. When will I stop caring about the effect he has on other women?

“We have plans,” Christian replies with his enigmatic smile.

We do? And a frisson of anticipation runs through my body.

“Another time, perhaps,” he adds. “Come,” he says to me as he takes my hand.

“See you Monday.” I smile at Jack, Claire, and the guys from Finance, trying hard to ignore Jack’s less-than-pleased expression, and follow Christian out of the door.

Taylor is at the wheel of the Audi waiting at the curb.

“Why did that feel like a pissing contest?” I ask Christian as he opens the car door for me.

“Because it was,” he murmurs and gives me his enigmatic smile then shuts my door.

“Hello, Taylor,” I say and our eyes meet in the rearview mirror.

“Miss Steele,” Taylor acknowledges with a genial smile.

Christian slides in beside me, clasps my hand, and gently kisses my knuckles. “Hi,” he says softly.

My cheeks turn pink, knowing that Taylor can hear us, grateful that he can’t see the scorching, panty-combusting look that Christian is giving me. It takes all my self-restraint not to leap on him right here, in the backseat of the car.

*Oh, the backseat of the car … hmm*.

“Hi,” I breathe, my mouth dry.

“What would you like to do this evening?”

“I thought you said we had plans.”

“Oh, I know what I’d like to do, Anastasia. I’m asking you what you want to do.”

I beam at him.

“I see,” he says with a wickedly salacious grin. “So … begging it is, then. Do you want to beg at my place or yours?” He tilts his head to one side and smiles his oh-so-sexy smile at me.

“I think you’re being very presumptuous, Mr. Grey. But by way of a change, we could go to my apartment.” I bite my lip deliberately, and his expression darkens.

“Taylor, Miss Steele’s, please.”

“Sir,” Taylor acknowledges and he heads off into the traffic.

“So how has your day been?” he asks.

“Good. Yours?”

“Good, thank you.”

His ridiculously broad grin reflects mine, and he kisses my hand again.

“You look lovely,” he says.

“As do you.”

“Your boss, Jack Hyde, is he good at his job?”

Whoa! That’s a sudden change in direction. I frown. “Why? This isn’t about your pissing contest?”

Christian smirks. “That man wants into your panties, Anastasia,” he says dryly.

I go crimson as my mouth drops open, and I glance nervously at Taylor.

“Well, he can want all he likes … why are we even having this conversation? You know I have no interest in him whatsoever. He’s just my boss.”

“That’s the point. He wants what’s mine. I need to know if he’s good at his job.”

I shrug. “I think so.” Where is he going with this?

“Well, he’d better leave you alone, or he’ll find himself on his ass on the sidewalk.”

“Oh, Christian, what are you talking about? He hasn’t done anything wrong.” … *Yet*. He just stands too close.

“He makes one move, you tell me. It’s called gross moral turpitude—or sexual harassment.”

“It was just a drink after work.”

“I mean it. One move and he’s out.”

“You don’t have that kind of power.” Honestly! And before I roll my eyes at him, the realization hits me with the force of a speeding freight truck. “Do you, Christian?”

Christian gives me his enigmatic smile.

“You’re buying the company,” I whisper in horror.

His smile slips in response to the panic in my voice. “Not exactly,” he says.

“You’ve bought it. SIP. Already.”

He blinks at me, warily. “Possibly.”

“You have or you haven’t?”

“Have.”

*What the hell?* “Why?” I gasp, appalled. Oh, this just is too much.

“Because I can, Anastasia. I need you safe.”

“But you said you wouldn’t interfere in my career!”

“And I won’t.”

I snatch my hand out of his. “Christian …” Words fail me.

“Are you mad at me?”

“Yes. Of course I’m mad at you.” I seethe. “I mean, what kind of responsible business executive makes decisions based on who he is currently fucking?” I blanch and glance nervously once more at Taylor, who is stoically ignoring us.

Shit. What a time to have a brain-to-mouth filter malfunction.

Christian opens his mouth then closes it again and scowls at me. I glare at him. The atmosphere in the car plunges from warm with sweet reunion to frigid with unspoken words and potential recriminations as we glower at each other.

Fortunately, our uncomfortable car journey doesn’t last long, and Taylor pulls up outside my apartment.

I scramble out of the car quickly, not waiting for anyone to open the door.

I hear Christian mutter to Taylor, “I think you’d better wait here.”

I sense him standing close behind me as I struggle to find the front door keys in my purse.

“Anastasia,” he says calmly as if I’m some cornered wild animal.

I sigh and turn to face him. I am so mad at him, my anger is palpable—a dark entity threatening to choke me.

“First, I haven’t fucked you for a while—a long while, it feels—and second, I wanted to get into publishing. Of the four companies in Seattle, SIP is the most profitable, but it’s on the cusp and it’s going to stagnate—it needs to branch out.”

I stare frigidly at him. His eyes are intense, threatening even, but sexy as hell. I could get lost in their steely depths.

“So you’re my boss now,” I snap.

“Technically, I’m your boss’s boss’s boss.”

“And, technically, it’s gross moral turpitude—the fact that I am fucking my boss’s boss’s boss.”

“At the moment, you’re arguing with him.” Christian scowls.

“That’s because he’s such an ass,” I hiss.

Christian steps back in stunned surprise. *Oh, shit*. Have I gone too far?

“An ass?” he murmurs as his expression changes to one of amusement.

*Goddamn it! I am mad at you, do not make me laugh!*

“Yes.” I struggle to maintain my look of moral outrage.

“An ass?” Christian says again. This time his lips twitch with a repressed smile.

“Don’t make me laugh when I am mad at you!” I shout.

And he smiles, a dazzling, full-toothed, all-American-boy smile, and I can’t

help it. I am grinning and laughing, too. How could I not be affected by the joy I see in his smile?

"Just because I have a stupid damn grin on my face doesn't mean I'm not mad as hell at you," I mutter breathlessly, trying to suppress my high-school-cheerleader giggling. *Though I was never cheerleader*—the bitter thought crosses my mind.

He leans in, and I think he's going to kiss me but he doesn't. He nuzzles my hair and inhales deeply.

"As ever, Miss Steele, you are unexpected." He leans back gazing at me, his eyes dancing with humor. "So are you going to invite me in, or am I to be sent packing for exercising my democratic right as an American citizen, entrepreneur, and consumer to purchase whatever I damn well please?"

"Have you spoken to Dr. Flynn about this?"

He laughs. "Are you going to let me in or not, Anastasia?"

I try for a grudging look—biting my lip helps—but I'm smiling as I open the door. Christian turns and waves to Taylor, and the Audi pulls away.

IT'S ODD HAVING CHRISTIAN Grey in the apartment. The place feels too small for him.

I am still mad at him—his stalking knows no bounds, and it dawns on me that this is how he knew about the e-mail being monitored at SIP. He probably knows more about SIP than I do. The thought is unsavory.

What can I do? Why does he have this need to keep me safe? I am a grown-up —*sort of*—for heaven's sake. What can I do to reassure him?

I gaze at his face as he paces the room like a caged predator, and my anger subsides. Seeing him here in my space when I thought we were over is heartwarming. More than heartwarming, I love him, and my heart swells with a nervous, heady elation. He glances around, assessing his surroundings.

"Nice place," he says.

"Kate's parents bought it for her."

He nods distractedly, and his bold gray eyes come to rest on mine, staring at me.

"Er … would you like a drink?" I mutter, flushing with nerves.

"No thank you, Anastasia." His eyes darken.

Why am I so nervous?

"What would you like to do, Anastasia?" he asks softly as he walks toward me, all feral and hot. "I know what I want to do," he adds in a low voice.

I back up until I bump against the concrete kitchen island.

"I'm still mad at you."

"I know." He smiles a lopsided apologetic smile and I melt … Well, maybe

not so mad.

"Would you like something to eat?" I ask.

He nods slowly. "Yes. You," he murmurs. Everything south of my waistline clenches. I'm seduced by his voice alone, but that look, that hungry I-want-you-now look—oh my.

He's standing in front of me, not quite touching, staring down into my eyes and bathing me in the heat that's radiating off his body. I'm stiflingly hot, flustered, and my legs are like jelly as dark desire courses through me. I want him.

"Have you eaten today?" he murmurs.

"I had a sandwich at lunch," I whisper. I don't want to talk food.

He narrows his eyes. "You need to eat."

"I'm really not hungry right now … for food."

"What are you hungry for, Miss Steele?"

"I think you know, Mr. Grey."

He leans down, and again I think he's going to kiss me, but he doesn't.

"Do you want me to kiss you, Anastasia?" he whispers softly in my ear.

"Yes," I breathe.

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"You're going to have to be a bit more specific than that. I told you I am not going to touch you until you beg me and tell me what to do."

I am lost; he's not playing fair.

"Please," I whisper.

"Please what?"

"Touch me."

"Where, baby?"

He is so tantalizingly close, his scent intoxicating. I reach up, and immediately he steps back.

"No, no," he chides, his eyes suddenly wide and alarmed.

"What?" *No … come back*.

"No." He shakes his head.

"Not at all?" I can't keep the longing out of my voice.

He looks at me uncertainly, and I'm emboldened by his hesitation. I step toward him, and he steps back, holding up his hands in defense, but smiling.

"Look, Ana." It's a warning, and he runs his hand through his hair, exasperated.

"Sometimes you don't mind," I observe plaintively. "Perhaps I should find a marker pen, and we could map out the no-go areas."

He raises an eyebrow. “That’s not a bad idea. Where’s your bedroom?”

I nod in the direction. Is he deliberately changing the subject?

“Have you been taking your pill?”

*Oh shit. My pill.*

His face falls at my expression.

“No,” I squeak.

“I see,” he says, and his lips press into a thin line. “Come, let’s have something to eat.”

“I thought we were going to bed! I want to go to bed with you.”

“I know, baby.” He smiles, and suddenly darting toward me, he grabs my wrists and pulls me into his arms so that his body is pressed against mine.

“You need to eat and so do I,” he murmurs, burning eyes gazing down at me. “Besides … anticipation is the key to seduction, and right now, I’m really into delayed gratification.”

*Huh, since when?*

“I’m seduced and I want my gratification now. I’ll beg, please.” I sound whiny.

He smiles at me tenderly. “Eat. You’re too slender.” He kisses my forehead and releases me.

This is a game, part of some evil plan. I scowl at him.

“I’m still mad that you bought SIP, and now I am mad at you because you’re making me wait.” I pout.

“You are one angry little madam, aren’t you? You’ll feel better after a good meal.”

“I know what I’ll feel better after.”

“Anastasia Steele, I’m shocked.” His tone is gently mocking.

“Stop teasing me. You don’t fight fair.”

He stifles his grin by biting his lower lip. He looks simply adorable … playful Christian toying with my libido. If only my seduction skills were better, I’d know what to do, but not being able to touch him does hamper me.

My inner goddess narrows her eyes and looks thoughtful. We need to work on this.

As Christian and I gaze at each other—me hot, bothered and yearning and him, relaxed and amused at my expense—I realize I have no food in the apartment.

“I could cook something—except we’ll have to go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“For groceries.”

“You have no food here?” His expression hardens.

I shake my head. Crap, he looks quite angry.

"Let's go shopping, then," he says sternly as he turns on his heel and heads for the door, opening it wide for me.

"WHEN WAS THE LAST time you were in a supermarket?"

Christian looks out of place, but he follows me dutifully, holding a shopping basket.

"I can't remember."

"Does Mrs. Jones do all the shopping?"

"I think Taylor helps her. I'm not sure."

"Are you happy with a stir-fry? It's quick."

"Stir-fry sounds good." Christian grins, no doubt figuring out my ulterior motive for a speedy meal.

"Have they worked for you long?"

"Taylor, four years, I think. Mrs. Jones, about the same. Why didn't you have any food in the apartment?"

"You know why," I murmur, flushing.

"It was you who left me," he mutters disapprovingly.

"I know," I reply in a small voice, not wanting that reminder.

We reach the checkout and silently stand in line.

*If I hadn't left, would he have offered the vanilla alternative?* I wonder idly.

"Do you have anything to drink?" He pulls me back to the present.

"Beer … I think."

"I'll get some wine."

Oh dear. I'm not sure what sort of wine is available in Ernie's Supermarket. Christian remerges empty-handed, grimacing with a look of disgust.

"There's a good liquor store next door," I say quickly.

"I'll see what they have."

Maybe we should just go to his place; then we wouldn't have all this hassle. I watch as he strolls purposefully and with easy grace out of the door. Two women coming in stop and stare. *Oh yes, eye my Fifty Shades*, I think despondently.

I want the memory of him in my bed, but he's playing hard to get. Maybe I should, too. My inner goddess nods frantically in agreement. And as I stand in line, we come up with a plan. Hmm …

CHRISTIAN CARRIES THE GROCERY bags into the apartment. He's carried them as we've walked back to the apartment from the store. He looks odd. Not his usual CEO demeanor at all.

“You look very—domestic.”

“No one has ever accused me of that before,” he says dryly. He places the bags on the kitchen island. As I start to unload them, he takes out a bottle of white wine and searches for a corkscrew.

“This place is still new to me. I think the opener is in that drawer there.” I point with my chin.

This feels so … normal. Two people, getting to know each other, having a meal. Yet it’s so strange. The fear that I’d always felt in his presence has gone. We’ve already done so much together, I blush just thinking about it, and yet I hardly know him.

“What are you thinking about?” Christian interrupts my reverie as he shrugs out of his pinstripe jacket and places it on the couch.

“How little I know you.”

His eyes soften. “You know me better than anyone.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Mrs. Robinson comes unbidden, and very unwelcome, into my mind.

“It is, Anastasia. I’m a very, very private person.”

He hands me a glass of white wine.

“Cheers,” he says.

“Cheers,” I respond taking a sip as he puts the bottle in the fridge.

“Can I help you with that?” he asks.

“No, it’s fine … sit.”

“I’d like to help.” His expression is sincere.

“You can chop the vegetables.”

“I don’t cook,” he says, regarding the knife I hand him with suspicion.

“I imagine you don’t need to.” I place a chopping board and some red peppers in front of him. He stares down at them in confusion.

“You’ve never chopped a vegetable?”

“No.”

I smirk at him.

“Are you smirking at me?”

“It appears this is something that I can do and you can’t. Let’s face it, Christian, I think this is a first. Here, I’ll show you.”

I brush up against him and he steps back. My inner goddess sits up and takes notice.

“Like this.” I slice the red pepper, careful to remove the seeds.

“Looks simple enough.”

“You shouldn’t have any trouble with it,” I mutter ironically.

He gazes at me impassively for a moment then sets about his task as I

continue to prepare the diced chicken. He starts to slice, carefully, slowly. *Oh my, we'll be here all night.*

I wash my hands and hunt for the wok, the oil, and the other ingredients I need, repeatedly brushing against him—my hip, my arm, my back, my hands. Small, seemingly innocent touches. He stills each time I do.

"I know what you're doing, Anastasia," he murmurs darkly, still preparing the first pepper.

"I think it's called cooking," I say, fluttering my eyelashes. Grabbing another knife, I join him at the chopping board, peeling and slicing garlic, shallots, and French beans, continually bumping against him.

"You're quite good at this," he mutters as he starts on his second red pepper.

"Chopping?" I bat my eyelashes at him. "Years of practice." I brush against him again, this time with my behind. He stills once more.

"If you do that again, Anastasia, I am going to take you on the kitchen floor."

Oh wow. It's working. "You'll have to beg me first."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe."

He puts down his knife and saunters slowly over to me, his eyes burning. Leaning past me, he switches the gas off. The oil in the wok quiets almost immediately.

"I think we'll eat later," he says. "Put the chicken in the fridge."

This is not a sentence I had ever expected to hear from Christian Grey, and only he can make it sound hot, really hot. I pick up the bowl of diced chicken, rather shakily place a plate on top of it, and stow it in the fridge. When I turn back, he's beside me.

"So you're going to beg?" I whisper, bravely gazing into his darkening eyes.

"No, Anastasia." He shakes his head. "No begging." His voice is soft, seductive.

And we stand staring at each other, drinking each other in—the atmosphere charging between us, almost crackling, neither saying anything, just looking. I bite my lip as desire for this man seizes me with a vengeance, igniting my blood, shallowing my breath, pooling below my waist. I see my reactions reflected in his stance, in his eyes.

In a beat, he grabs me by my hips and pulls me to him as my hands reach for his hair and his mouth claims me. He pushes me against the fridge, and I hear the vague protesting rattle of bottles and jars from within as his tongue finds mine. I moan into his mouth and one of his hands moves into my hair, pulling my head back as we kiss savagely.

"What do you want, Anastasia?" he breathes.

“You,” I gasp.

“Where?”

“Bed.”

He breaks free, scoops me into his arms, and carries me quickly and seemingly without any strain into my bedroom. Setting me on my feet beside my bed, he leans down and switches on my bedside lamp. He glances quickly around the room and hastily closes the pale cream curtains.

“Now what?” he says softly.

“Make love to me.”

“How?”

*Jeez*.

“You have got to tell me, baby.”

*Holy crap*. “Undress me.” I am panting already.

He smiles and hooks his index finger into my open shirt, pulling me toward him.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and without taking his blazing eyes off mine, slowly starts to unbutton my shirt.

Tentatively I put my hands on his arms to steady myself. He doesn’t complain. His arms are a safe area. When he’s finished with the buttons, he pulls my shirt over my shoulders, and I let go of him to let the shirt fall to the floor. He reaches down to the waistband of my jeans, pops the button, and pulls down the zipper.

“Tell me what you want, Anastasia.” His eyes smolder and his lips part as he takes quick shallow breaths.

“Kiss me from here to here,” I whisper trailing my finger from the base of my ear, down my throat. He smoothes my hair out of the line of fire and bends, leaving sweet soft kisses along the path my finger took and then back again.

“My jeans and panties,” I murmur, and he smiles against my throat before he drops to his knees in front of me. Oh, I feel so powerful. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans, he gently pulls them and my panties down my legs. I step out of my flats and my clothes so that I’m left wearing only my bra. He stops and looks up at me expectantly, but he doesn’t get up.

“What now, Anastasia?”

“Kiss me,” I whisper.

“Where?”

“You know where.”

“Where?”

Oh, he’s taking no prisoners. Embarrassed, I quickly point at the apex of my thighs, and he grins wickedly. I close my eyes, mortified, but at the same time

beyond aroused.

"Oh, with pleasure," he chuckles. He kisses me and unleashes his tongue, his joy-inspiring expert tongue. I groan and fist my hands into his hair. He doesn't stop, his tongue circling my clitoris, driving me insane, on and on, around and around. *Ahhh … it's only been … how long …? Oh …*

"Christian, please," I beg. I don't want to come standing up. I don't have the strength.

"Please what, Anastasia?"

"Make love to me."

"I am," he murmurs, gently blowing against me.

"No. I want you inside me."

"Are you sure?"

"Please."

He doesn't stop his sweet, exquisite torture. I moan loudly.

"Christian … please."

He stands and gazes down at me, and his lips glisten with the evidence of my arousal.

*It's so hot …*

"Well?" he asks.

"Well what?" I pant, staring up at him in frantic need.

"I'm still dressed."

I gape at him in confusion.

Undress him? Yes, I can do this. I reach for his shirt and he steps back.

"Oh no," he admonishes. Shit, he means his jeans.

Oh, and this gives me an idea. My inner goddess cheers loudly to the rafters, and I drop to my knees in front of him. Rather clumsily and with shaking fingers, I undo his waistband and fly, then yank down his jeans and boxers, and he springs free. *Wow.*

I peek up at him through my lashes, and he's gazing at me with … what? Trepidation? Awe? Surprise?

He steps out of his jeans and pulls off his socks, and I take hold of him in my hand and squeeze tightly, pushing my hand back like he's shown me before. He groans and tenses, and his breath hisses through clenched teeth. Very tentatively, I put him in my mouth and suck—hard. Mmm, he tastes good.

"Ahh. Ana … whoa, gently."

He cups my head tenderly, and I push him deeper into my mouth, pressing my lips together as tightly as I can, sheathing my teeth, and sucking hard.

"Fuck," he hisses.

Oh, that's a good, inspiring, sexy sound, so I do it again, pulling his length

deeper, swirling my tongue around the end. *Hmm* … I feel like Aphrodite.

"Ana, that's enough. No more."

I do it again—*Beg, Grey, beg*—and again.

"Ana, you've made your point," he grunts through gritted teeth. "I do not want to come in your mouth."

I do it once more, and he bends down, grasps me by my shoulders, hauls me to my feet, and tosses me on the bed. Dragging his shirt over his head, he then reaches down to his discarded jeans, and like a good Boy Scout, produces a foil packet. He's panting, like me.

"Take your bra off," he orders.

I sit up and do as I'm told.

"Lie down. I want to look at you."

I lie down, gazing up at him as he slowly rolls the condom on. I want him so badly. He stares down at me and licks his lips.

"You are a fine sight, Anastasia Steele." He bends over the bed and slowly crawls up and over me, kissing me as he goes. He kisses each of my breasts and teases my nipples in turn, while I groan and writhe beneath him, and he doesn't stop.

*No … Stop. I want you*.

"Christian, please."

"Please what?" he murmurs between my breasts. "I want you inside me."

"Do you now?"

"Please."

Gazing at me, he pushes my legs apart with his and moves so that he's hovering above me. Without taking his eyes off mine, he sinks into me at a deliciously slow pace.

I close my eyes, relishing the fullness, the exquisite feeling of his possession, instinctively tilting my pelvis up to meet him, to join with him, groaning loudly. He eases back and very slowly fills me again. My fingers find their way into his silken unruly hair, and he oh-so-slowly moves in and out again.

"Faster, Christian, faster … please."

He gazes down at me in triumph and kisses me hard, then really starts to move —*a punishing, relentless … oh fuck*—and I know it will not be long. He sets a pounding rhythm. I start to quicken, my legs tensing beneath him.

"Come on, baby," he gasps. "Give it to me."

His words are my undoing, and I explode, magnificently, mind-numbingly, into a million pieces around him, and he follows, calling out my name.

"Ana! Oh fuck, Ana!" He collapses on top of me, his head buried in my neck.

## CHAPTER FOUR

As sanity returns, I open my eyes and gaze up into the face of the man I love. Christian's expression is soft, tender. He strokes his nose against mine, bearing his weight on his elbows, his hands holding mine by the side of my head. Sadly, I suspect that's so I don't touch him. He plants a gentle kiss on my lips as he eases himself out of me.

"I've missed this," he breathes.

"Me, too," I whisper.

He takes hold of my chin and kisses me hard. A passionate, beseeching kiss, asking for what? I don't know. It leaves me breathless.

"Don't leave me again," he implores, looking deep into my eyes, his face serious.

"Okay," I whisper and smile at him. His answering smile is dazzling; relief, elation, and boyish delight combined into one enchanting look that would melt the coldest of hearts. "Thank you for the iPad."

"You are most welcome, Anastasia."

"What's your favorite song on there?"

"Now, that would be telling." He grins. "Come cook me some food, wench. I'm famished," he adds, sitting up suddenly and dragging me with him.

"Wench?" I giggle.

"Wench. Food, now, please."

"Since you ask so nicely, sire, I'll get right on it."

As I scramble out of bed, I dislodge my pillow, revealing the deflated helicopter balloon underneath. Christian reaches for it and gazes up at me, puzzled.

"That's my balloon," I say, feeling proprietary as I reach for my robe and wrap it around myself. *Oh jeez … why did he have to find that?*

"In your bed?" he murmurs.

"Yes." I flush. "It's been keeping me company."

"Lucky *Charlie Tango*," he says, in surprise.

*Yes, I'm sentimental, Grey, because I love you*.

"My balloon," I say again and turn on my heel and head out to the kitchen,

leaving him grinning from ear to ear.

CHRISTIAN AND I SIT on Kate's Persian rug, eating stir-fry chicken and noodles from white china bowls with chopsticks and sipping chilled white Pinot Grigio. Christian leans against the couch with his just-fucked hair, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He's wearing his jeans and his shirt, and that's all. The Buena Vista Social Club croons softly in the background from Christian's iPod.

"This is good," he says appreciatively as he digs into his food.

I sit cross-legged beside him, eating greedily, beyond hungry, and admire his naked feet.

"I usually do all the cooking. Kate isn't a great cook."

"Did your mother teach you?"

"Not really," I scoff. "By the time I was interested in learning how to, my mom was living with Husband Number Three in Mansfield, Texas. And Ray, well, he would've lived on toast and takeout if it weren't for me."

Christian gazes down at me. "Why didn't you stay in Texas with your mom?"

"Her husband, Steve, and I … we didn't get along. And I missed Ray. Her marriage to Steve didn't last long. She came to her senses, I think. She never talks about him," I add quietly. I think that's a dark part of her life, which we've never discussed.

"So you stayed in Washington with your stepfather."

"I lived very briefly in Texas. Then went back to Ray."

"Sounds like you looked after him," he says softly.

"I suppose." I shrug.

"You're used to taking care of people."

The edge in his voice attracts my attention, and I glance up at him.

"What is it?" I ask, startled by his wary expression.

"I want to take care of you." His eyes glow with some unnamed emotion.

My heart rate spikes.

"I've noticed," I whisper. "You just go about it in a strange way."

His brow creases. "It's the only way I know how."

"I'm still mad at you for buying SIP."

He smiles. "I know, but you being mad, baby, wouldn't stop me."

"What am I going to say to my work colleagues, to Jack?"

He narrows his eyes. "That fucker better watch himself."

"Christian!" I admonish. "He's my boss." Christian's mouth presses into a hard line. He looks like a recalcitrant schoolboy.

"Don't tell them," he says.

"Don't tell them what?"

“That I own it. The heads of agreement was signed yesterday. The news is embargoed for four weeks while the management at SIP makes some changes.”

“Oh … will I be out of a job?” I ask, alarmed.

“I sincerely doubt it,” Christian says wryly, trying to stifle his smile.

I scowl. “If I leave and find another job, will you buy that company, too?”

“You’re not thinking of leaving, are you?” His expression alters, wary once more.

“Possibly. I’m not sure you’ve given me a great deal of choice.”

“Yes, I will buy that company, too.” He is adamant.

I scowl at him again. I am in a no-win situation here.

“Don’t you think you’re being a tad overprotective?”

“Yes. I am fully aware of how this looks.”

“Paging Dr. Flynn,” I murmur.

He puts down his empty bowl and gazes at me impassively. I sigh. I don’t want to fight. Standing up, I reach for his bowl.

“Would you like dessert?”

“Now you’re talking!” he says, giving me a lascivious grin.

“Not me.” *Why not me?* My inner goddess wakes from her doze and sits upright, all ears. “We have ice cream. Vanilla.” I snicker.

“Really?” Christian’s grin gets bigger. “I think we could do something with that.”

*What?* I stare at him dumbfounded as he gracefully gets to his feet.

“Can I stay?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“The night.”

“I assumed that you would.”

“Good. Where’s the ice cream?”

“In the oven.” I smile sweetly at him.

He cocks his head to one side, sighs, and shakes his head at me. “Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Miss Steele.” His eyes glitter.

*Oh, shit. What’s he planning?*

“I could still take you across my knee.”

I place the bowls in the sink. “Do you have those silver ball things?”

He pats his hands down his chest, belly, and the pockets of his jeans. “Funnily enough, I don’t carry a spare set around with me. Not much call for them in the office.”

“I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Grey, and I thought you said that sarcasm was the lowest form of wit.”

“Well, Anastasia, my new motto is, ‘If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.’ ”

I gape at him—*I can't believe he just said that*—and he looks sickeningly pleased with himself as he grins at me. Turning, he opens the freezer and takes out a pint of Ben & Jerry's finest vanilla.

"This will do just fine." He looks up at me, eyes dark. "Ben & Jerry's & Ana." He says each word slowly, enunciating every syllable clearly.

*Oh fucking my*. I think my lower jaw is on the floor. He opens the cutlery drawer and grabs a spoon. When he looks up, his eyes hooded, and his tongue skims his top teeth. Oh, that tongue.

I feel winded. Desire, dark, sleek, and wanton runs hot through my veins. We're going to have fun, with food.

"I hope you're warm," he whispers. "I'm going to cool you down with this. Come." He holds out his hand, and I place mine in his.

In my bedroom he places the ice cream on my bedside table, pulls the duvet off the bed, and removes both the pillows, placing them all in a pile on the floor.

"You have a change of sheets, don't you?"

I nod, watching him, fascinated. He holds up *Charlie Tango*.

"Don't mess with my balloon," I warn.

His lips quirk upward in a half smile. "Wouldn't dream of it, baby, but I do want to mess with you and these sheets."

My body practically convulses.

"I want to tie you up."

*Oh*. "Okay," I whisper.

"Just your hands. To the bed. I need you still."

"Okay," I whisper again, incapable of anything more.

He strolls over to me, not taking his eyes off mine.

"We'll use this." He takes hold of my robe sash and with delicious, teasing slowness, releases the bow, and gently pulls it free of the garment.

My robe falls open while I stand paralyzed under his heated gaze. After a moment, he pushes the robe off my shoulders. It falls and pools at my feet so that I'm standing naked before him. He strokes my face with the backs of his knuckles, and his touch resonates in the depths of my groin. Bending, he kisses my lips briefly.

"Lie on the bed, faceup," he murmurs, his eyes darkening, burning into mine.

I do as I'm told. My room is shrouded in darkness except for the soft, insipid light from my lamp.

Normally I hate energy-saving bulbs—they are so dim—but being naked here, with Christian, I'm grateful for the muted light. He stands by the bed gazing down at me.

"I could look at you all day, Anastasia," he says, and with that crawls on to

the bed, up my body, and straddles me.

"Arms above your head," he commands.

I comply and he fastens the end of my robe sash around my left wrist and threads the end through the metal bars at the head of my bed. He pulls it tight so my left arm is flexed above me. He then secures my right hand, tying the sash tightly.

When I'm tied up, staring at him, he visibly relaxes. He likes me tethered. I can't touch him this way. It occurs to me that none of his subs would have touched him either—and what's more, they would never have the opportunity to. He would have always been in control and at a distance. That's why he likes his rules.

He climbs off me and bends to give me a quick peck on the lips. Then he stands and lifts his shirt over his head. He undoes his jeans and drops them to the floor.

He is gloriously naked. My inner goddess is doing a triple axel dismount off the uneven bars, and abruptly my mouth is dry. He has a physique drawn on classical lines: broad muscular shoulders, narrow hips, the inverted triangle. He obviously works out. I could look at him all day. He moves to the end of the bed and grasps my ankles, pulling me swiftly and sharply downward so that my arms are stretched out and unable to move.

"That's better," he mutters.

Picking up the pint of ice cream, he climbs smoothly back onto the bed to straddle me once more. Very slowly, he peels off the lid and dips the spoon in.

"Hmm … it's still quite hard," he says with a raised brow. Scooping out a spoonful of the vanilla, he pops it into his mouth. "Delicious," he murmurs, licking his lips. "Amazing how good plain old vanilla can taste." He gazes down at me. "Want some?" he teases.

He looks so freaking hot, young, and carefree—sitting on me and eating ice cream—eyes bright, face luminous. Oh, what the hell is he going to do to me? As if I can't tell. I nod, shyly.

He scoops out another spoonful and offers me the spoon, so I open my mouth; then he quickly pops it in his mouth again.

"This is too good to share," he says, smiling wickedly.

"Hey," I start in protest.

"Why, Miss Steele, do you like your vanilla?"

"Yes," I say more forcefully than I mean and try in vain to buck him off.

He laughs. "Getting feisty, are we? I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Ice cream," I plead.

"Well, as you've pleased me so much today, Miss Steele." He relents and

offers me another spoonful. This time he lets me eat it.

I want to giggle. He's really enjoying himself, and his good humor is infectious. He scoops another spoonful and feeds me some more; then he does it again. *Okay, enough.*

"Hmm, well, this is one way to ensure you eat—force-feed you. I could get used to this."

Taking another spoonful, he offers me more. This time I keep my mouth shut and shake my head, and he lets it slowly melt on the spoon so that the melted ice cream drips onto my throat, onto my chest. He dips down and very slowly licks it off. My body lights up with longing.

"Mmm. Tastes even better off you, Miss Steele."

I pull against my restraints and the bed creaks ominously, but I don't care—I'm burning with desire, it's consuming me. He takes another spoonful and lets the ice cream dribble onto my breasts. Then with the back of the spoon, he spreads it over each breast and nipple.

*Oh … it's cold*. Each nipple peaks and hardens beneath the cool of the vanilla.

"Cold?" Christian asks softly and bends to lick and suckle all the ice cream off me once more, his mouth hot compared to the cool of the ice.

It's torture. As it starts to melt, the ice cream runs off me in rivulets onto the bed. His lips continue their slow torture, sucking hard, nuzzling, softly—*Oh please!*—I'm panting.

"Want some?" And before I can confirm or deny his offer, his tongue is in my mouth, and it's cold and skilled and tastes of Christian and vanilla. Delicious.

And just as I am getting used to the sensation, he sits up again and trails a spoonful of ice cream down the center of my body, across my stomach, and into my navel where he deposits a large dollop of ice cream. *Oh, this is chillier than before, but weirdly it burns.*

"Now, you've done this before." Christian's eyes shine. "You're going to have to stay still, or there will be ice cream all over the bed." He kisses each of my breasts and sucks each of my nipples hard, then follows the line of ice cream down my body, sucking and licking as he goes.

And I try; I try to stay still despite the heady combination of cold and his inflaming touch. But my hips start to move involuntarily, gyrating to their own rhythm, caught up in his cool vanilla spell. He shifts lower and starts eating the ice cream in my belly, swirling his tongue into and around my navel.

I moan. *Holy cow.* It's cold, it's hot, it's tantalizing, but he doesn't stop. He trails the ice cream farther down my body, into my pubic hair, on to my clitoris. I cry out, loudly.

"Hush now," Christian says softly as his magical tongue sets to work lapping

up the vanilla, and now I'm keening quietly.

"Oh … please … Christian."

"I know, baby, I know," he breathes as his tongue works its magic. He doesn't stop, just doesn't stop, and my body is climbing—higher, higher. He slips one finger inside me, then another, and he moves them with agonizing slowness in and out.

"Just here," he murmurs, and he rhythmically strokes the front wall of my vagina while he continues the exquisite, relentless licking and sucking.

I erupt unexpectedly into a mind-blowing orgasm that stuns all my senses, obliterating all that's happening outside my body as I writhe and groan. *Holy fucking cow*, that was so quick.

I am vaguely aware that he has stopped his ministrations. He's hovering over me, sliding on a condom, and then he's inside me, hard and fast.

"Oh yes!" he groans as he slams into me. He's sticky—the residual melted ice cream spreading between us. It's a strangely distracting sensation, but one I can't dwell on for more than a few seconds as Christian suddenly pulls out of me and flips me over.

"This way," he murmurs and abruptly is inside me once more, but he doesn't start his usual punishing rhythm straight away. He leans over, releases my hands, and pulls me upright so I am practically sitting on him. His hands move up to my breasts, and he palms them both, tugging gently on my nipples. I groan, tossing my head back against his shoulder. He nuzzles my neck, biting down, as he flexes his hips, deliciously slowly, filling me again and again.

"Do you know how much you mean to me?" he breathes against my ear.

"No," I gasp.

He smiles against my neck, and his fingers curl around my jaw and throat, holding me fast for a moment.

"Yes, you do. I'm not going to let you go."

I groan as he picks up speed.

"You are mine, Anastasia."

"Yes, yours," I pant.

"I take care of what's mine," he hisses and bites my ear.

I cry out.

"That's right, baby, I want to hear you." He snakes one hand around my waist while his other hand grasps my hip, and he pushes into me harder, making me cry out again. And the punishing rhythm starts. His breathing grows harsher and harsher, ragged, matching mine. I feel the familiar quickening deep inside. *Again!*

I am just sensation. This is what he does to me—takes my body and possesses

it wholly so that I think of nothing but him. His magic is powerful, intoxicating. I'm a butterfly caught in his net, unable and unwilling to escape. *I'm his … totally his*.

"Come on, baby," he growls through gritted teeth and on cue, like the sorcerer's apprentice I am, I let go, and we find our release together.

I AM LYING CURLED up in his arms on sticky sheets. His front is pressed to my back, his nose in my hair.

"What I feel for you frightens me," I whisper.

He stills. "Me too, baby," he says quietly.

"What if you leave me?" The thought is horrific.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't think I could ever have my fill of you, Anastasia."

I turn and gaze at him. His expression is serious, sincere. I lean over and kiss him gently. He smiles and reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I've never felt the way I felt when you left, Anastasia. I would move heaven and earth to avoid feeling like that again." He sounds so sad, dazed even.

I kiss him again. I want to lighten our mood somehow, but Christian does it for me.

"Will you come with me to my father's summer party tomorrow? It's an annual charity thing. I said I'd go."

I smile, feeling suddenly shy.

"Of course I'll come." Oh, shit. I have nothing to wear.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me," he insists.

"I have nothing to wear."

Christian looks momentarily uncomfortable.

"Don't be mad, but I still have all those clothes for you at home. I am sure there are a couple of dresses in there."

I purse my lips. "Do you, now?" I mutter, my voice sardonic. I don't want to fight with him tonight. I need a shower.

THE GIRL WHO LOOKS like me is standing outside SIP. Hang on—she is me. I am pale and unwashed, and all my clothes are too big; I'm staring at her, and she's wearing my clothes—happy, healthy.

"What do you have that I don't?" I ask her.

"Who are you?"

"I'm nobody … Who are you? Are you nobody, too …?"

“Then there’s a pair of us—don’t tell, they’d banish us, you know …” She smiles, a slow, evil grimace that spreads across her face, and it’s so chilling that I start to scream.

“JESUS, ANA!” CHRISTIAN IS shaking me awake.

I am so disoriented. *I’m at home … in the dark … in bed with Christian.* I shake my head, trying to clear my mind.

“Baby, are you okay? You were having a bad dream.”

“Oh.”

He switches on the lamp so we’re bathed in its dim light. He gazes down at me, his face etched with concern.

“The girl,” I whisper.

“What is it? What girl?” he asks soothingly.

“There was a girl outside SIP when I left this evening. She looked like me … but not really.”

Christian stills, and as the light from the bedside lamp warms up, I see his face is ashen.

“When was this?” he whispers, dismayed. He sits up, staring down at me.

“When I left work this evening,” I repeat. “Do you know who she is?”

“Yes.” He runs a hand through his hair.

“Who?”

His mouth presses into a hard line, but he says nothing.

“Who?” I press.

“It’s Leila.”

I swallow. The ex-sub! I remember Christian talking about her before we went gliding. Suddenly, he’s radiating tension. Something is going on.

“The girl who put ‘Toxic’ on your iPod?”

He glances at me anxiously.

“Yes,” he says. “Did she say anything?”

“She said, ‘What do you have that I don’t have?’ and when I asked who she was, she said, ‘Nobody.’ ”

Christian closes his eyes as if in pain. What’s happened? What does she mean to him?

My scalp prickles as adrenaline spikes through my body. *What if she means a lot to him? Perhaps he misses her? I know so little about his past … um, relationships*. She must have had a contract, and she would have done what he wanted, given him what he needed gladly.

*Oh no—when I can’t.* The thought makes me nauseous.

Climbing out of bed, Christian drags on his jeans and heads into the main

room. A glance at my alarm clock shows it's five in the morning. I roll out of bed, putting his white shirt on, and follow him.

Holy shit, he's on the phone.

"Yes, outside SIP, yesterday … early evening," he says quietly. He turns to me as I move toward the kitchen and asks me directly, "What time, exactly?"

"About ten to six?" I mumble. Who on earth is he calling at this hour? What's Leila done? He relays the information to whoever's on the line, not taking his eyes off me, his expression dark and earnest.

"Find out how … Yes … I wouldn't have said so, but then I wouldn't have thought she could do this." He closes his eyes as if he's in pain. "I don't know how that will go down … Yes, I'll talk to her … Yes … I know … Follow it up and let me know. Just find her, Welch—she's in trouble. Find her." He hangs up.

"Do you want some tea?" I ask. Tea, Ray's answer to every crisis and the only thing he does well in the kitchen. I fill the kettle with water.

"Actually, I'd like to go back to bed." His look tells me that it's not to sleep.

"Well, I need some tea. Would you like to join me for a cup?" I want to know what's going on. I will not be sidetracked by sex.

He runs his hand through his hair in exasperation. "Yes, please," he says, but I can tell he's irritated.

I put the kettle on the stove and busy myself with teacups and the teapot. My anxiety level has shot to DEFCON 1. Is he going to tell me the problem? Or am I going to have to dig?

I sense his eyes on me—sense his uncertainty, and his anger is palpable. I glance up, and his eyes glitter with apprehension.

"What is it?" I ask softly.

He shakes his head.

"You're not going to tell me?"

He sighs and closes his eyes. "No."

"Why?"

"Because it shouldn't concern you. I don't want you tangled up in this."

"It shouldn't concern me, but it does. She found me and accosted me outside my office. How does she know about me? How does she know where I work? I think I have a right to know what's going on."

He runs a hand through his hair again, radiating frustration as if waging some internal battle.

"Please?" I ask softly.

His mouth sets into a hard line, and he rolls his eyes at me.

"Okay," he says, resigned. "I have no idea how she found you. Maybe the photograph of us in Portland, I don't know." He sighs again, and I sense his

frustration is directed at himself.

I wait patiently, pouring boiling water into the teapot as he paces back and forth. After a beat he continues.

"While I was with you in Georgia, Leila turned up at my apartment unannounced and made a scene in front of Gail."

"Gail?"

"Mrs. Jones."

"What do you mean, 'made a scene'?"

He glares at me, appraising.

"Tell me. You're keeping something back." My tone is more forceful than I feel.

He blinks at me, surprised. "Ana, I—" he stops.

"Please?"

He sighs in defeat. "She made a haphazard attempt to open a vein."

"Oh no!" That explains the bandage on her wrist.

"Gail got her to hospital. But Leila discharged herself before I could get there."

Crap. What does this mean? Suicidal? Why?

"The shrink who saw her called it a typical cry for help. He didn't believe her to be truly at risk—one step from suicidal ideation, he called it. But I'm not convinced. I've been trying to track her down since then to get her some help."

"Did she say anything to Mrs. Jones?"

He gazes at me. He looks really uncomfortable.

"Not much," he says eventually, but I know he's not telling me everything.

I distract myself with pouring tea into teacups. So Leila wants back into Christian's life and chooses a suicide attempt to attract his attention? *Whoa … scary*. But effective. Christian left Georgia to be at her side, but she disappears before he gets there? How odd.

"You can't find her? What about her family?"

"They don't know where she is. Neither does her husband."

"Husband?"

"Yes," he says distractedly, "she's been married for about two years."

*What?* "So she was with you while she was married?" *Holy fuck*. He really has no boundaries.

"No! Good God, no. She was with me nearly three years ago. Then she left and married this guy shortly afterward."

*Oh*. "So why is she trying to get your attention now?"

He shakes his head sadly. "I don't know. All we've managed to find out is that she ran out on her husband about four months ago."

"Let me get this straight. She hasn't been your submissive for three years?"

"About two and a half years."

"And she wanted more."

"Yes."

"But you didn't?"

"You know this."

"So she left you."

"Yes."

"So why is she coming to you now?"

"I don't know." And the tone of this voice tells me that he at least has a theory.

"But you suspect …"

His eyes narrow perceptibly with anger. "I suspect it has something to do with you."

Me? What would she want with me? *"What do you have that I don't?"*

I stare at Fifty, magnificently naked from the waist up. I have him; he's mine. That's what I have, and yet she looked like me: same dark hair and pale skin. I frown at the thought. *Yes … what do I have that she doesn't?*

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?" he asks softly.

"I forgot about her." I shrug apologetically. "You know, drinks after work, at the end of my first week. You turning up at the bar and your … testosterone rush with Jack, and then when we were here. It slipped my mind. You have a habit of making me forget things."

"Testosterone rush?" His lips twitch.

"Yes. The pissing contest."

"I'll show you a testosterone rush."

"Wouldn't you rather have a cup of tea?"

"No, Anastasia, I wouldn't."

His eyes burn into me, scorching me with his I-want-you-and-I-want-you-now look. *Fuck … it's so hot.*

"Forget about her. Come." He holds out his hand.

My inner goddess does three back flips over the gym floor as I grasp his hand.

---

I WAKE, TOO WARM, and I'm wrapped around a naked Christian Grey. Even though he's fast asleep, he's holding me close. Soft morning light filters through the curtains. My head is on his chest, my leg tangled with his, my arm across his stomach.

I raise my head, scared that I might wake him. He looks young and relaxed in sleep and he's mine.

*Hmm* … Reaching up, I tentatively stroke his chest, running my fingertips through the smattering of hair, and he doesn't stir. I can't quite believe it. He's really mine—for a few more precious moments. I lean over and tenderly kiss one of his scars. He moans softly but doesn't wake, and I smile. I kiss another and his eyes open.

"Hi." I grin at him, guiltily.

"Hi," he answers warily. "What are you doing?"

"Looking at you." I run my fingers down his happy trail. He captures my hand, narrows his eyes, then smiles a brilliant Christian-at-ease smile, and I relax. My secret touching stays secret.

*Oh … why won't you let me touch you?*

Suddenly he moves on top of me, pressing me into the mattress, his hands on mine, warning me. He strokes my nose with his.

"I think you're up to no good, Miss Steele," he accuses, but his smile remains.

"I like being up to no good near you."

"You do?" he asks and kisses me lightly on the lips. "Sex or breakfast?" he asks, his eyes dark but full of humor. His erection is digging into me, and I tilt my pelvis up to meet him.

"Good choice," he murmurs against my throat, as he trails kisses down to my breast.

I STAND AT MY chest of drawers, staring at my mirror, trying to coax my hair into some semblance of style—really, it's just too long. I'm in jeans and a T-shirt, and Christian, freshly showered, is dressing behind me. I gaze at his body hungrily.

"How often do you work out?" I ask.

"Every weekday," he says, buttoning his fly.

"What do you do?"

"Run, weights, kickboxing." He shrugs.

"Kickboxing?"

"Yes, I have a personal trainer, an ex-Olympic contender who teaches me. His name is Claude. He's very good. You'd like him."

I turn to gaze at him as he starts to button up his white shirt.

"What do you mean, I'd like him?"

"You'd like him as a trainer."

"Why would I need a personal trainer? I have you to keep me fit."

He saunters over and wraps his arms around me, his darkening eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

"But I want you fit, baby, for what I have in mind. I'll need you to keep up."

I flush as memories of the playroom flood my mind. Yes … the Red Room of

Pain is exhausting. Is he going to let me back in there? Do I want to go back in?

*Of course you do!* My inner goddess screams.

I stare into his unfathomable, mesmerizing gray eyes.

"You know you want to," he mouths at me.

I flush, and the undesirable thought that Leila could probably keep up slithers invidious and unwelcome into my mind. I press my lips together and Christian frowns at me.

"What?" he asks, concerned.

"Nothing." I shake my head at him. "Okay, I'll meet Claude."

"You will?" Christian's face lights up in astounded disbelief. His expression makes me smile. He looks like he's won the lottery, though Christian's probably never even bought a ticket—he has no need.

"Yes, jeez—if it makes you that happy," I scoff.

He tightens his arms around me and kisses my cheek. "You have no idea," he whispers. "So—what would you like to do today?" He nuzzles me, sending delicious tingles through my body.

"I'd like to get my hair cut, and um … I need to bank a check and buy a car."

"Ah," he says knowingly and bites his lip. Taking one hand off me, he reaches into his jeans pocket and holds up the key to my little Audi.

"It's here," he says quietly, his expression uncertain.

"What do you mean, it's here?" Boy. I sound angry. Crap. I *am* angry. *How dare he!*

"Taylor brought it back yesterday."

I open my mouth then close it and repeat the process twice, but I have been rendered speechless. He's giving me back the car. Double crap. Why didn't I foresee this? Well, two can play at that game. I fish in the back pocket of my jeans and pull out the envelope with his check.

"Here, this is yours."

Christian looks at me quizzically; then, recognizing the envelope, raises both his hands and steps away

"Oh no. That's your money."

"No, it isn't. I'd like to buy the car from you."

His expression changes completely. Fury—yes, fury—sweeps across his face.

"No, Anastasia. Your money, your car," he snaps.

"No, Christian. My money, your car. I'll buy it from you."

"I gave you that car for your graduation present."

"If you'd given me a pen—that would be a suitable graduation present. You gave me an Audi."

"Do you really want to argue about this?"

“No.”

“Good—here are the keys.” He puts them on the chest of drawers.

“That’s not what I meant!”

“End of discussion, Anastasia. Don’t push me.”

I scowl at him, then inspiration hits me. Taking the envelope, I rip it in two, then two again and drop the contents into my wastebasket. Oh, that feels good.

Christian gazes at me impassively, but I know I’ve just lit the fuse and should stand well back. He strokes his chin.

“You are, as ever, challenging, Miss Steele,” he says dryly. He turns on his heel and stalks into the other room. That is not the reaction I expected. I was anticipating full-scale Armageddon. I stare at myself in the mirror and shrug, deciding on a ponytail.

My curiosity is piqued. What is Fifty doing? I follow him into the room, and he’s on the phone.

“Yes, twenty-four thousand dollars. Directly.”

He glances up at me, still impassive.

“Good … Monday? Excellent … No that’s all, Andrea.”

He snaps the phone shut.

“Deposited in your bank account, Monday. Don’t play games with me.” He’s boiling mad, but I don’t care.

“Twenty-four thousand dollars!” I’m almost screaming. “And how do you know my account number?”

My ire takes Christian by surprise.

“I know everything about you, Anastasia,” he says quietly.

“There’s no way my car was worth twenty-four thousand dollars.”

“I would agree with you, but it’s about knowing your market, whether you’re buying or selling. Some lunatic out there wanted that death trap and was willing to pay that amount of money. Apparently it’s a classic. Ask Taylor if you don’t believe me.”

I glower at him and he glowers back, two angry stubborn fools glaring at each other.

And I feel it, the pull—the electricity between us—tangible, drawing us together. Suddenly he grabs me and pushes me up against the door, his mouth on mine, claiming me hungrily, one hand on my behind pressing me to his groin and the other in the nape of my hair, tugging my head back. My fingers are in his hair, twisting hard, holding him to me. He grinds his body into mine, imprisoning me, his breathing ragged. I feel him. He wants me, and I’m heady and reeling with excitement as I acknowledge his need for me.

“Why, why do you defy me?” he mumbles between his heated kisses.

My blood sings in my veins. Will he always have this effect on me? And I on him?

"Because I can." I'm breathless. I feel rather than see his smile against my neck, and he presses his forehead to mine.

"Lord, I want to take you now, but I'm out of condoms. I can never get enough of you. You're a maddening, maddening woman."

"And you make me mad," I whisper. "In every way."

He shakes his head. "Come. Let's go out for breakfast. And I know a place you can get your hair cut."

"Okay," I acquiesce and just like that, our fight is over.

"I'LL GET THIS." I pick up the tab for breakfast before he does.

He scowls.

"You have to be quick around here, Grey."

"You're right, I do," he says sourly, though I think he's teasing.

"Don't look so cross. I'm twenty-four thousand dollars richer than I was this morning. I can afford"—I glance at the check—"twenty-two dollars and sixty-seven cents for breakfast."

"Thank you," he says grudgingly. Oh, the sulky schoolboy is back.

"Where to now?"

"You really want your hair cut?"

"Yes, look at it."

"You look lovely to me. You always do."

I blush and stare down at my fingers knotted in my lap. "And there's your father's function this evening."

"Remember, it's black tie."

"Where is it?"

"At my parents' house. They have a tent. You know, the works."

"What's the charity?"

Christian rubs his hands down his thighs, looking uncomfortable.

"It's a drug rehab program for parents with young kids called Coping Together."

"Sounds like a good cause," I say softly.

"Come, let's go." He stands, effectively halting that topic of conversation and holds out his hand. As I take it, he tightens his fingers around mine.

It's strange. He's so demonstrative in some ways and yet so closed in others. He leads me out of the restaurant, and we walk down the street. It is a lovely, mild morning. The sun is shining, and the air smells of coffee and freshly baked bread.

“Where are we going?”

“Surprise.”

Oh, okay. I don’t really like surprises.

We walk for two blocks, and the stores become decidedly more exclusive. I haven’t yet had an opportunity to explore, but this really is just around the corner from where I live. Kate will be pleased. There are plenty of small boutiques to feed her fashion passion. Actually, I need to buy some floaty skirts for work.

Christian stops outside a large, slick-looking beauty salon and opens the door for me. It’s called Esclava. The interior is all white and leather. At the stark white reception desk sits a young blonde woman in a crisp white uniform. She glances up as we enter.

“Good morning, Mr. Grey,” she says brightly, color rising in her cheeks as she bats her eyelashes at him. It’s the Grey effect, but she knows him! How?

“Hello, Greta.”

And he knows her. What is this?

“Is this the usual, sir?” she asks politely. She’s wearing very pink lipstick.

“No,” he says quickly, with a nervous glance at me.

The usual? What does that mean?

*Holy fuck! It’s Rule Number Six, the damned beauty salon. All the waxing nonsense … shit!*

This is where he brought all his subs? Maybe Leila, too? What the hell am I supposed to make of this?

“Miss Steele will tell you what she wants.”

I glare at him. He’s introducing the Rules by stealth. I’ve agreed to the personal trainer—and now this?

“Why here?” I hiss at him.

“I own this place, and three more like it.”

“You own it?” I gasp in surprise. Well, that’s unexpected.

“Yes. It’s a sideline. Anyway—whatever you want, you can have it here, on the house. All sorts of massage: Swedish, shiatsu; hot stones, reflexology, seaweed baths, facials, all that stuff that women like—everything. It’s done here.” He waves his long-fingered hand dismissively.

“Waxing?”

He laughs. “Yes waxing, too. Everywhere,” he whispers conspiratorially, enjoying my discomfort.

I blush and glance at Greta, who is looking at me expectantly.

“I’d like a haircut, please.”

“Certainly, Miss Steele.”

Greta is all pink lipstick and bustling Germanic efficiency as she checks her

computer screen.

“Franco is free in five minutes.”

“Franco’s fine,” says Christian reassuringly to me. I am trying to wrap my head around this. Christian Grey, CEO, owns a chain of beauty salons.

I peek up at him, and suddenly he blanches—something, or someone, has caught his eye. I turn to see where he’s looking, and right at the back of the salon a sleek platinum blonde has appeared, closing a door behind her and speaking to one of the hair stylists.

Platinum Blonde is tall, tanned, lovely, and in her late thirties or early forties—it’s difficult to tell. She’s wearing the same uniform as Greta, but in black. She looks stunning. Her hair shines like a halo, cut in a sharp bob. As she turns, she catches sight of Christian and smiles at him, a dazzling smile of warm recognition.

“Excuse me,” Christian mumbles hurriedly.

He strides quickly through the salon, past the hair stylists all in white, past the apprentices at the sinks, and over to her, too far away for me to hear their conversation. Platinum Blonde greets him with obvious affection, kissing both his cheeks, her hands resting on his upper arms, and they talk animatedly together.

“Miss Steele?”

Greta the receptionist is trying to get my attention.

“Hang on a moment, please.” I watch Christian, fascinated.

Platinum Blonde turns and looks at me, and gives me the same dazzling smile, as if she knows me. I smile politely back.

Christian looks upset about something. He’s reasoning with her, and she’s acquiescing, holding her hands up and smiling at him. He’s smiling at her—clearly they know each other well. Perhaps they’ve worked together for a long time? Maybe she runs the place; after all, she has a certain look of authority.

Then it hits me like a wrecking ball, and I know, deep down in my gut on a visceral level, I know who it is. It’s her. *Stunning, older, beautiful.*

It’s Mrs. Robinson.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Greta, who is Mr. Grey talking to?" My scalp is trying to leave the building. It's prickling with apprehension, and my subconscious is screaming at me to follow it. But I sound nonchalant enough.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Lincoln. She owns the place with Mr. Grey." Greta seems more than happy to share.

"Mrs. Lincoln?" I thought Mrs. Robinson was divorced. Perhaps she's remarried to some poor sap.

"Yes. She's not usually here, but one of our technicians is sick today so she's filling in."

"Do you know Mrs. Lincoln's first name?"

Greta looks up at me, frowning, and purses her bright pink lips, questioning my curiosity. Shit, perhaps this is a step too far. "Elena," she says, almost reluctantly.

I'm swamped by a strange sense of relief that my spidey sense has not let me down.

*Spidey sense?* my subconscious snorts. *Pedo sense*.

They are still deep in discussion. Christian is talking rapidly to Elena, and she looks worried, nodding, grimacing, and shaking her head. Reaching out, she rubs his arm soothingly while biting her lip. Another nod, and she glances at me and offers me a small, reassuring smile.

I can only stare at her, stone-faced. I think I'm in shock. How could he bring me here?

She murmurs something to Christian; he looks my way briefly, then turns back to her and replies. She nods, and I think she's wishing him luck, but my lip-reading skills aren't highly developed.

Fifty strides back to me, anxiety etched on his face. *Damn right*. Mrs. Robinson returns to the back room, closing the door behind her.

Christian frowns. "Are you okay?" he asks, but his voice is strained, cautious.

"Not really. You didn't want to introduce me?" My voice sounds cold, hard.

His mouth drops open, he looks as if I've pulled the rug from under his feet.

"But I thought—"

“For a bright man, sometimes …” Words fail me. “I’d like to go, please.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” I roll my eyes.

He gazes down at me, his eyes burning.

“I’m sorry, Ana. I didn’t know she’d be here. She’s never here. She’s opened a new branch at the Bravern Center, and that’s where she’s normally based. Someone was sick today.”

I turn on my heel and head for the door.

“We won’t need Franco, Greta,” Christian snaps as we head out of the door. I have to suppress the impulse to run. I want to run fast and far away. I have an overwhelming urge to cry. I just need to get away from all this fucked-upness.

Christian walks wordlessly beside me as I try to mull all this over in my head. Wrapping my arms protectively around myself, I keep my head down, avoiding the trees on Second Avenue. Wisely, he makes no move to touch me. My mind is boiling with unanswered questions. Will Mr. Evasive fess up?

“You used to take your subs there?” I snap.

“Some of them, yes,” he says quietly, his tone clipped.

“Leila?”

“Yes.”

“The place looks very new.”

“It’s been refurbished recently.”

“I see. So Mrs. Robinson met all your subs.”

“Yes.”

“Did they know about her?”

“No. None of them did. Only you.”

“But I’m not your sub.”

“No, you most definitely are not.”

I stop and face him. His eyes are wide, fearful. His lips are pressed into a hard, uncompromising line.

“Can you see how fucked-up this is?” I glare up at him, my voice low.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” And he has the grace to look contrite.

“I want to get my hair cut, preferably somewhere where you haven’t fucked either the staff or the clientele.”

He flinches.

“Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“You’re not running. Are you?” he asks.

“No, I just want a damn haircut. Somewhere I can close my eyes, have someone wash my hair, and forget about all this baggage that accompanies you.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “I can have Franco come to the apartment,

or your place," he says quietly.

"She's very attractive."

He blinks. "Yes, she is."

"Is she still married?"

"No. She divorced about five years ago."

"Why aren't you with her?"

"Because that's over between us. I've told you this." His brow creases suddenly. Holding his finger up, he fishes his BlackBerry out of his jacket pocket. It must be vibrating because I don't hear it ring.

"Welch," he snaps, then listens. We are standing on Second Avenue, and I gaze in the direction of the larch sapling in front of me, its leaves the newest green.

People bustle past us, lost in their Saturday morning chores, no doubt contemplating their own personal dramas. I wonder if they include stalker ex-submissives, stunning ex-Dommes, and a man who has no concept of privacy under US law.

"Killed in a car crash? When?" Christian interrupts my reverie.

Oh no. Who? I listen more closely.

"That's twice that bastard's not been forthcoming. He must know. Does he have no feelings for her whatsoever?" Christian shakes his head in disgust. "This is beginning to make sense … no … explains why, but not where." Christian glances around us as if searching for something, and I find myself mirroring his actions. Nothing catches my eye. There are just the shoppers, the traffic, and the trees.

"She's here," Christian continues. "She's watching us … Yes … No. Two or four, twenty-four seven … I haven't broached that yet." Christian looks at me directly.

*Broached what?* I frown and he regards me warily.

"What …," he whispers and pales, his eyes widening. "I see. When? … That recently? But how? … No background checks? … I see. E-mail the name, address, and photos if you have them … twenty-four seven, from this afternoon. Establish liaison with Taylor." Christian hangs up.

"Well?" I ask, exasperated. Is he going to tell me?

"That was Welch."

"Who's Welch?"

"My security adviser."

"Okay. So what's happened?"

"Leila left her husband about three months ago and ran off with a guy who was killed in a car accident four weeks ago."

“Oh.”

“The asshole shrink should have found that out,” he says angrily. “Grief, that’s what this is. Come.” He holds out his hand, and I automatically place mine in his before I snatch it away again.

“Wait a minute. We were in the middle of a discussion about ‘us.’ About her, your Mrs. Robinson.”

Christian’s face hardens. “She’s not my Mrs. Robinson. We can talk about it at my place.”

“I don’t want to go to your place. I want to get my hair cut!” I shout. If I can just focus on this one thing …

He grabs his BlackBerry from his pocket again and dials a number. “Greta, Christian Grey. I want Franco at my place in an hour. Ask Mrs. Lincoln … Good.” He puts his phone away. “He’s coming at one.”

“Christian …!” I splutter, exasperated.

“Anastasia, Leila is obviously suffering a psychotic break. I don’t know if it’s you or me she’s after, or what lengths she’s prepared to go to. We’ll go to your place, pick up your things, and you can stay with me until we’ve tracked her down.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“So I can keep you safe.”

“But—”

He glares at me. “You are coming back to my apartment if I have to drag you there by your hair.”

I gape at him … this is beyond belief. Fifty Shades in Glorious Technicolor.

“I think you’re overreacting.”

“I don’t. We can continue our discussion back at my place. Come.”

I cross my arms and glare at him. This has gone too far.

“No,” I state stubbornly. I have to make a stand.

“You can walk or I can carry you. I don’t mind either way, Anastasia.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” I scowl at him. Surely he wouldn’t make a scene on Second Avenue?

He half smiles at me, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Oh, baby, we both know that if you throw down the gauntlet, I’ll be only too happy to pick it up.”

We glare at each other—and abruptly he sweeps down, clasps me around my thighs, and lifts me. Before I know it, I am over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I scream. Oh, it feels good to scream.

He starts striding along Second Avenue, ignoring me. Clasping his arm firmly around my thighs, he swats my behind with his free hand.

“Christian!” I shout. People are staring. Could this be any more humiliating? “I’ll walk! I’ll walk.”

He puts me down, and before he’s even stood upright, I stomp off in the direction of my apartment, seething, ignoring him. Of course, he’s by my side in moments, but I continue to ignore him. What am I going to do? I am so angry, but I’m not even sure what I am angry about—there’s so much.

As I stalk back home, I make a mental list:

1. Over-the-shoulder carrying—unacceptable for anyone over the age of six.
2. Taking me to the salon that he owns with his ex-lover—how stupid can he be?
3. The same place he took his submissives—same stupidity at work here.
4. Not even realizing that this was a bad idea—and he’s supposed to be a bright guy.
5. Having crazy ex-girlfriends. Can I blame him for that? I am so furious; yes, I can.
6. Knowing my bank account number—that’s just too stalkery by half.
7. Buying SIP—he’s got more money than sense.
8. Insisting I stay with him—the threat from Leila must be worse than he feared … he didn’t mention that yesterday.

Realization dawns. Something’s changed. What could that be? I halt, and Christian halts with me. “What’s happened?” I demand.

He knits his brow. “What do you mean?”

“With Leila.”

“I’ve told you.”

“No, you haven’t. There’s something else. You didn’t insist that I go to your place yesterday. So what’s happened?”

He shifts uncomfortably.

“Christian! Tell me!” I snap.

“She managed to obtain a concealed weapons permit yesterday.”

*Oh, shit.* I gaze at him, blinking, and feel the blood drain from my face as I absorb this news. I may faint. Suppose she wants to kill him? *No!*

“That means she can just buy a gun,” I whisper.

“Ana,” he says, his voice full of concern. He places his hands on my shoulders, pulling me close to him. “I don’t think she’ll do anything stupid, but—I just don’t want to take that risk with you.”

“Not me … what about you?” I whisper.

He frowns down at me, and I wrap my arms around him and hug him hard, my face against his chest. He doesn’t seem to mind.

“Let’s get back,” he murmurs, and he reaches down and kisses my hair, and that’s it. All my fury is gone, but not forgotten. Dissipated under the threat of some harm coming to Christian. The thought is unbearable.

SOLEMNLY I PACK A small case and place my Mac, the BlackBerry, my iPad, and the *Charlie Tango* balloon in my backpack.

"*Charlie Tango*'s coming, too?" Christian asks.

I nod and he gives me a small, indulgent smile.

"Ethan is back Tuesday," I mutter.

"Ethan?"

"Kate's brother. He's staying here until he finds a place in Seattle."

Christian gazes at me blankly, but I notice the frostiness creep into his eyes.

"Well, it's good that you'll be staying with me. Give him more room," he says quietly.

"I don't know that he's got keys. I'll need to be back then."

Christian says nothing.

"That's everything."

He grabs my case, and we head out the door. As we walk around to the back of the building to the parking lot, I'm aware that I am looking over my shoulder. I don't know if my paranoia has taken over or if someone really is watching me. Christian opens the passenger door of the Audi and looks at me expectantly.

"Are you getting in?" he asks.

"I thought I was driving."

"No. I'll drive."

"Something wrong with my driving? Don't tell me you know what I scored on my driving test … I wouldn't be surprised with your stalking tendencies." Maybe he knows that I just scraped through the written test.

"Get in the car, Anastasia," he snaps angrily.

"Okay." I hastily climb in. *Honestly, chill, will you?*

Perhaps he has the same uneasy feeling, too. Some dark sentinel watching us —well, a pale brunette with brown eyes who has an uncanny resemblance to yours truly and, quite possibly, a concealed firearm.

Christian sets off into traffic.

"Were all your submissives brunettes?"

He frowns. "Yes," he mutters. He sounds uncertain, and I imagine him thinking, *Where's she going with this?*

"I just wondered."

"I told you. I prefer brunettes."

"Mrs. Robinson isn't a brunette."

"That's probably why," he mutters. "She put me off blondes forever."

"You're kidding," I gasp.

"Yes. I'm kidding," he replies, exasperated.

I stare impassively out the window, spying brunettes everywhere, none of them Leila, though.

So, he only likes brunettes. I wonder why? Did Mrs. Extraordinarily

Glamorous in Spite of Being Old Robinson really put him off blondes? I shake my head—Christian Mindfuck Grey.

"Tell me about her."

"What do you want to know?" Christian's brow furrows, and his tone of voice tries to warn me off.

"Tell me about your business arrangement."

He visibly relaxes, happy to talk about work. "I am a silent partner. I'm not particularly interested in the beauty business, but she's built it into a successful venture. I just invested and helped get her started."

"Why?"

"I owed it to her."

"Oh?"

"When I dropped out of Harvard, she loaned me a hundred grand to start my business."

*Holy fuck … she's rich, too.*

"You dropped out?"

"It wasn't my thing. I did two years. Unfortunately, my parents were not so understanding."

I frown. Mr. Grey and Dr. Grace Trevelyan disapproving; I can't picture it.

"You don't seem to have done too badly dropping out. What was your major?"

"Politics and Economics."

Hmm … figures.

"So, she's rich?" I murmur.

"She was a bored trophy wife, Anastasia. Her husband was wealthy—big in timber." He gives me a wolfish grin. "He wouldn't let her work. You know, he was controlling. Some men are like that." He gives me a quick sideways smile.

"Really? A controlling man, surely a mythical creature?" I don't think I can squeeze any more sarcasm into my response.

Christian's grin gets bigger.

"She lent you her husband's money?"

He nods and a small mischievous smile appears on his lips.

"That's terrible."

"He got his own back," Christian says darkly as he pulls into the underground garage at Escala.

*Oh?*

"How?"

Christian shakes his head, as if recalling a particularly sour memory, and parks beside the Audi Quattro SUV. "Come—Franco will be here shortly."

IN THE ELEVATOR CHRISTIAN peers down at me. “Still mad at me?” he asks matter-of-factly.

“Very.”

He nods. “Okay,” he says, and stares straight ahead. Taylor is waiting for us when we arrive in the foyer. How does he always know? He takes my case.

“Has Welch been in touch?” Christian asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“And?”

“Everything’s arranged.”

“Excellent. How’s your daughter?”

“She’s fine, thank you, sir.”

“Good. We have a hairdresser arriving at one—Franco De Luca.”

“Miss Steele,” Taylor nods at me.

“Hi, Taylor. You have a daughter?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s seven.”

Christian gazes at me impatiently.

“She lives with her mother,” Taylor clarifies.

“Oh, I see.”

Taylor smiles. This is unexpected. Taylor’s a father? I follow Christian into the great room, intrigued by this information.

I glance around. I haven’t been here since I walked out.

“Are you hungry?”

I shake my head. Christian gazes at me for a beat and decides not to argue.

“I have to make a few calls. Make yourself at home.”

“Okay.”

Christian disappears into his study, leaving me standing in the huge art gallery he calls home and wondering what to do with myself.

*Clothes!* Picking up my backpack, I wander upstairs to my bedroom and check out the walk-in closet. It’s still full of clothes—all brand-new with price tags still attached. Three long evening dresses, three cocktail dresses, and three more for everyday wear. All this must have cost a fortune.

I check the tag on one of the evening dresses: $2,998. *Holy fuck*. I sink to the floor.

This isn’t me. I put my head in my hands and try to process the last few hours. It’s exhausting. Why, oh why, have I fallen for someone who is plain crazy—beautiful, sexy as fuck, richer than Croesus, and crazy with a capital *K*?

I fish my BlackBerry out of my backpack and call my mom.

“Ana, honey! It’s been so long. How are you, darling?”

“Oh, you know …”

“What’s wrong? Still not worked it out with Christian?”

“Mom, it’s complicated. I think he’s nuts. That’s the problem.”

“Tell me about it. Men, there’s just no reading them sometimes. Bob’s wondering if our move to Georgia was a good one.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he’s talking about going back to Vegas.”

Oh, someone else has problems. I’m not the only one.

Christian appears in the doorway. “There you are. I thought you’d run off.” His relief is obvious.

I hold my hand up to indicate that I’m on the phone. “Sorry, Mom, I have to go. I’ll call again soon.”

“Okay, honey—take care of yourself. Love you!”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

I hang up and gaze at Fifty. He frowns, looking strangely awkward.

“Why are you hiding in here?” he asks.

“I’m not hiding. I’m despairing.”

“Despairing?”

“Of all this, Christian.” I wave my hand in the general direction of the clothes.

“Can I come in?”

“It’s your closet.”

He frowns again and sits down, cross-legged, facing me.

“They’re just clothes. If you don’t like them, I’ll send them back.”

“You’re a lot to take on, you know?”

He scratches his chin … his stubbly chin. My fingers itch to touch him.

“I know. I’m trying,” he murmurs.

“You’re very trying.”

“As are you, Miss Steele.”

“Why are you doing this?”

His eyes widen and his wary look returns. “You know why.”

“No, I don’t.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “You are one frustrating female.”

“You could have a nice brunette submissive. One who’d say, ‘How high?’ every time you said jump, provided of course she had permission to speak. So why me, Christian? I just don’t get it.”

He gazes at me for a moment, and I have no idea what he’s thinking.

“You make me look at the world differently, Anastasia. You don’t want me for my money. You give me … hope,” he says softly.

What? Mr. Cryptic is back. “Hope for what?”

He shrugs. “More.” His voice is low and quiet. “And you’re right. I am used to women doing exactly what I say, when I say, doing exactly what I want. It gets old quickly. There’s something about you, Anastasia, which calls to me on some deep level I don’t understand. It’s a siren’s call. I can’t resist you, and I don’t want to lose you.” He reaches forward and takes my hand. “Don’t run, please—have a little faith in me and a little patience. Please.”

He looks so vulnerable … *It’s disturbing*. Leaning up on my knees, I bend forward and kiss him gently on his lips.

“Okay. Faith and patience, I can live with that.”

“Good. Because Franco’s here.”

FRANCO IS SMALL, DARK, and gay. I love him.

“Such beautiful hair!” he gushes with an outrageous, probably fake Italian accent. I bet he’s from Baltimore or somewhere, but his enthusiasm is infectious. Christian leads us both into his bathroom, exits hurriedly, and reenters carrying a chair from his room.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” he mutters.

“*Grazie*, Mr. Grey.” Franco turns to me. “*Bene*, Anastasia, what shall we do with you?”

CHRISTIAN IS SITTING ON his couch, plowing through what look like spreadsheets. Soft, mellow, classical music drifts through the great room. A woman sings passionately, pouring her soul into the song. It’s breathtaking. Christian glances up and smiles, distracting me from the music.

“See! I tell you he like it,” Franco enthuses.

“You look lovely, Ana,” Christian says appreciatively.

“My work ’ere is done,” Franco exclaims.

Christian rises and strolls toward us. “Thank you, Franco.”

Franco turns, grasps me in an overwhelming bear hug, and kisses both my cheeks. “Never let anyone else be cutting your hair, *bellissima* Ana!”

I laugh, embarrassed by his familiarity. Christian shows him to the foyer door and returns moments later.

“I’m glad you kept it long,” he says as he walks toward me, his eyes bright. He takes a strand between his fingers.

“So soft,” he murmurs, gazing down at me. “Are you still mad at me?”

I nod and he smiles.

“What precisely are you mad at me about?”

I roll my eyes. “You want the list?”

“There’s a list?”

“A long one.”

“Can we discuss it in bed?”

“No.” I pout at him childishly.

“Over lunch, then. I’m hungry, and not just for food,” he gives me a salacious smile.

“I am not going to let you dazzle me with your sexpertise.”

He stifles a smile. “What is bothering you specifically, Miss Steele? Spit it out.”

*Okay*.

“What’s bothering me? Well, there’s your gross invasion of my privacy, the fact that you took me to some place where your ex-mistress works and you used to take all your lovers to have their bits waxed, you manhandled me in the street like I was six years old—and to cap it all, you let your Mrs. Robinson touch you!” My voice has risen to a crescendo.

He raises his eyebrows, and his good humor vanishes.

“That’s quite a list. But just to clarify once more—she’s not *my* Mrs. Robinson.”

“She can touch you,” I repeat.

He purses his lips. “She knows where.”

“What does that mean?”

He runs both hands through his hair and closes his eyes briefly, as if he’s seeking divine guidance of some kind. He swallows.

“You and I don’t have any rules. I have never had a relationship without rules, and I never know where you’re going to touch me. It makes me nervous. Your touch completely—” He stops, searching for the words. “It just means more … so much more.”

*More?* His answer is completely unexpected, throwing me, and there’s that little word with the big meaning hanging between us again.

My touch means … more. How am I supposed to resist when he says this stuff? Gray eyes search mine, watching, apprehensive.

Tentatively I reach out and apprehension shifts to alarm. Christian steps back and I drop my hand.

“Hard limit,” he whispers, a pained, panicked look on his face.

I can’t help but feel a crushing disappointment. “How would you feel if you couldn’t touch me?”

“Devastated and deprived,” he says immediately.

*Oh, my Fifty Shades*. Shaking my head, I offer him a small, reassuring smile and he relaxes.

“You’ll have to tell me exactly why this is a hard limit, one day, please.”

“One day,” he murmurs and seems to snap out of his vulnerability in a nanosecond.

How can he switch so quickly? He’s the most capricious person I know.

“So, the rest of your list. Invading your privacy.” His mouth twists as he contemplates this. “Because I know your bank account number?”

“Yes, that’s outrageous.”

“I do background checks on all my submissives. I’ll show you.” He turns and heads for his study.

I dutifully follow him, dazed. From a locked filing cabinet, he pulls a manila folder. Typed on the tab: ANASTASIA ROSE STEELE.

Holy fucking shit. I glare at him.

He shrugs apologetically. “You can keep it,” he says quietly.

“Well, gee, thanks,” I snap. I flick through the contents. He has a copy of my birth certificate, for heaven’s sake, my hard limits, the non-disclosure agreement, the contract—*Jeez*—my Social Security number, résumé, employment records.

“So, you knew I worked at Clayton’s?”

“Yes.”

“It wasn’t a coincidence. You didn’t just drop by?”

“No.”

I don’t know whether to be angry or flattered.

“This is fucked-up. You know that?”

“I don’t see it that way. What I do, I have to be careful.”

“But this is private.”

“I don’t misuse the information. Anyone can get hold of it if they have half a mind to, Anastasia. To have control—I need information. It’s how I’ve always operated.” He gazes at me, his expression guarded and unreadable.

“You do misuse the information. You deposited twenty-four thousand dollars that I didn’t want into my account.”

His mouth presses in a hard line. “I told you. That’s what Taylor managed to get for your car. Unbelievable, I know, but there you go.”

“But the Audi …”

“Anastasia, do you have any idea how much money I make?”

I flush. “Why should I? I don’t need to know the bottom line of your bank account, Christian.”

His eyes soften. “I know. That’s one of the things I love about you.”

I gaze at him, shocked. *Love about me?*

“Anastasia, I earn roughly one hundred thousand dollars an hour.”

My mouth drops open. That is an obscene amount of money.

“Twenty-four thousand dollars is nothing. The car, the Tess books, the

clothes, they're nothing." His voice is soft.

I gaze at him. He really has no idea. Extraordinary.

"If you were me, how would you feel about all this … largesse coming your way?" I ask.

He stares at me blankly, and there it is, his problem in a nutshell—empathy or the lack thereof. The silence stretches between us.

Finally, he shrugs. "I don't know," he says, and he looks genuinely bemused.

My heart swells. This is it, the crux of his Fifty Shades, surely. He can't put himself in my shoes. Well, now I know.

"It doesn't feel great. I mean, you're very generous, but it makes me uncomfortable. I have told you this enough times."

He sighs. "I want to give you the world, Anastasia."

"I just want you, Christian. Not all the add-ons."

"They're part of the deal. Part of what I am."

Oh, this is going nowhere.

"Shall we eat?" I ask. This tension between us is draining.

He frowns. "Sure."

"I'll cook."

"Good. Otherwise, there's food in the fridge."

"Mrs. Jones is off on the weekends? So you eat cold cuts most weekends?"

"No."

"Oh?"

He sighs. "My submissives cook, Anastasia."

"Oh, of course." I flush. How could I be so stupid? I smile sweetly at him. "What would Sir like to eat?"

"Whatever Madam can find," he says darkly.

INSPECTING THE IMPRESSIVE CONTENTS of the fridge, I decide on a Spanish omelet. There are even cold potatoes—perfect. It's quick and easy. Christian is still in his study, no doubt invading some poor, unsuspecting fool's privacy and compiling information. The thought is unpleasant and leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. My mind is reeling. He really knows no bounds.

I need music if I'm going to cook, and I'm going to cook non-submissively! I wander over to the iPod dock beside the fireplace and pick up Christian's iPod. I bet there are more of Leila's choices on here—I dread the very idea.

*Where is she?* I wonder. *What does she want?*

I shudder. What a legacy. I can't wrap my head around it.

I scroll through the extensive list. I want something upbeat. Hmm, Beyoncé—doesn't sound like Christian's taste. "Crazy in Love." Oh *yes*! How apt. I hit the

“repeat” button and put it on loud.

I sashay back to the kitchen and find a bowl, open the fridge, and take out the eggs. I crack them open and begin to whisk, dancing the whole time.

Raiding the fridge once more, I gather potatoes, ham, and—*yes*!—peas from the freezer. All of these will do. Finding a pan, I place it on the stove, put in a little olive oil, and go back to whisking.

*No empathy*, I muse. Is this unique to Christian? Maybe all men are like this, baffled by women. I just don’t know. Perhaps it’s not such a revelation.

I wish Kate were home; she would know. She’s been in Barbados far too long. She should be back at the end of the week after her additional vacation with Elliot. I wonder if it’s still lust at first sight for them.

*One of the things I love about you*.

I stop whisking. He said it. Does that mean there are other things? I smile for the first time since seeing Mrs. Robinson—a genuine, heartfelt, face-splitting smile.

Christian slips his arms around me, making me jump.

“Interesting choice of music,” he purrs as he kisses me below my ear. “Your hair smells good.” He nuzzles my hair and inhales deeply.

Desire uncurls in my belly. *No*. I shrug out of his embrace.

“I’m still mad at you.”

He frowns. “How long are you going to keep this up?” he asks, dragging a hand through his hair.

I shrug. “At least until I’ve eaten.”

His lips twitch with amusement. Turning, he picks up the remote control from the counter and switches off the music.

“Did you put that on your iPod?” I ask.

He shakes his head, his expression somber, and I know it was her—Ghost Girl.

“Don’t you think she was trying to tell you something back then?”

“Well, with hindsight, probably,” he says quietly.

QED. No empathy. My subconscious crosses her arms and smacks her lips in disgust.

“Why’s it still on there?”

“I quite like the song. But if it offends you, I’ll remove it.”

“No, it’s fine. I like to cook to music.”

“What would you like to hear?”

“Surprise me.”

He heads over to the iPod dock while I go back to my whisking.

Moments later the heavenly sweet, soulful voice of Nina Simone fills the

room. It's one of Ray's favorites: "I Put a Spell on You."

I flush, turning to gape at Christian. What is he trying to tell me? He put a spell on me a long time ago. Oh my … his look has changed, the levity gone, his eyes darker, intense.

I watch him, enthralled as slowly, like the predator he is, he stalks me in time to the slow sultry beat of the music. He's barefoot, wearing just an untucked white shirt, jeans, and a smoldering look.

Nina sings "you're mine" as Christian reaches me, his intention clear.

"Christian, please," I whisper, the whisk redundant in my hand.

"Please what?"

"Don't do this."

"Do what?"

"This."

He's standing in front of me, gazing down at me.

"Are you sure?" he breathes and reaching over, he takes the whisk from my hand and places it back in the bowl with the eggs. My heart is in my mouth. I don't want this—I do want this—badly. He's so frustrating, so hot and desirable. I tear my gaze away from his spellbinding look.

"I want you, Anastasia," he murmurs. "I love and I hate, and I love arguing with you. It's very new. I need to know that we're okay. It's the only way I know how."

"My feelings for you haven't changed," I whisper.

His proximity is overwhelming, exhilarating. The familiar pull is there, all my synapses goading me toward him, my inner goddess at her most libidinous. Staring at the patch of hair in the V of his shirt, I bite my lip, helpless, driven by desire—I want to taste him there.

He's so close, but he doesn't touch me. His heat is warming my skin.

"I'm not going to touch you until you say yes," he says softly. "But right now, after a really shitty morning, I want to bury myself in you and just forget everything but us."

*Oh my … Us*. A magical combination, a small, potent pronoun that clinches the deal. I raise my head to stare at his beautiful yet serious face.

"I'm going to touch your face," I breathe, and see his surprise reflected briefly in his eyes before his acceptance registers.

Lifting my hand, I caress his cheek, and run my fingertips across his stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales, leaning his face into my touch.

He leans down slowly, and my lips automatically lift to meet his. He hovers over me.

"Yes or no, Anastasia?" he whispers.

“Yes.”

His mouth softly closes on mine, coaxing, coercing my lips apart as his arms enfold me, pulling me to him. His hand moves up my back, fingers tangling in the hair at the back of my head and tugging gently, while his other hand flattens on my behind, forcing me against him. I moan softly.

“Mr. Grey.” Taylor coughs, and Christian releases me immediately.

“Taylor,” he says, his voice frigid.

I whirl around to see an uncomfortable Taylor standing on the threshold of the great room. Christian and Taylor stare at each other, some unspoken communication passing between them.

“My study,” Christian snaps, and Taylor walks briskly across the room.

“Rain check,” Christian whispers to me before following Taylor out of the room.

I take a deep, steadying breath. Can I not resist him for one minute? I shake my head, disgusted at myself, grateful for Taylor’s interruption, embarrassing though it is.

I wonder what Taylor has had to interrupt in the past. What’s he seen? I don’t want to think about that. Lunch. I’ll make lunch. I busy myself slicing potatoes. What does Taylor want? My mind races—is this about Leila?

Ten minutes later, they emerge, just as the omelet is ready. Christian looks preoccupied as he glances at me.

“I’ll brief them in ten,” he says to Taylor.

“We’ll be ready,” Taylor answers and leaves the great room.

I produce two warmed plates and place them on the kitchen island.

“Lunch?”

“Please,” Christian says as he perches on one of the barstools. Now he’s watching me carefully.

“Problem?”

“No.”

I scowl. He’s not telling me. I dish out lunch and sit down beside him, resigned to staying in the dark.

“This is good,” Christian murmurs appreciatively as he takes a bite. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you.” *I need to keep a clear head around you, Grey.*

It does taste good, even though I’m not that hungry. But I eat, knowing Christian will nag if I don’t. Eventually Christian disrupts our brooding silence and switches on the classical piece I heard earlier.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Canteloube, *Songs of the Auvergne*. This is called ‘Bailero.’ ”

“It’s lovely. What language is it?”

“It’s in old French—Occitan, in fact.”

“You speak French; do you understand it?” Memories of the flawless French he spoke at his parents’ dinner come to mind …

“Some words, yes.” Christian smiles, visibly relaxing. “My mother had a mantra: ‘musical instrument, foreign language, martial art.’ Elliot speaks Spanish; Mia and I speak French. Elliot plays guitar, I play piano, and Mia the cello.”

“Wow. And the martial arts?”

“Elliot does Judo. Mia put her foot down at age twelve and refused.” He smiles at the memory.

“I wish my mother had been that organized.”

“Dr. Grace is formidable when it comes to the accomplishments of her children.”

“She must be very proud of you. I would be.”

A dark thought flashes across Christian’s face, and he looks momentarily uncomfortable. He regards me warily, as if he’s in uncharted territory.

“Have you decided what you’ll wear this evening? Or do I need to come and pick something for you?” His tone is suddenly brusque.

*Whoa!* He sounds angry. *Why? What have I said?*

“Um … not yet. Did you choose all those clothes?”

“No, Anastasia, I didn’t. I gave a list and your size to a personal shopper at Neiman Marcus. They should fit. Just so that you know, I have ordered additional security for this evening and the next few days. With Leila unpredictable and unaccounted for somewhere on the streets of Seattle, I think it’s a wise precaution. I don’t want you going out unaccompanied. Okay?”

I blink at him. “Okay.” What happened to I-must-have-you-now Grey?

“Good. I’m going to brief them. I shouldn’t be long.”

“They’re here?”

“Yes.”

*Where?*

Collecting his plate, Christian places it in the sink and disappears from the room. What the hell was that about? He’s like several different people in one body. Isn’t that a symptom of schizophrenia? I must Google that.

I clear my plate, wash up quickly, and head back up to *my* bedroom carrying the ANASTASIA ROSE STEELE dossier. Back in the walk-in closet, I pull out the three long evening dresses. Now, which one?

LYING DOWN ON THE bed, I gaze at my Mac, my iPad, and my BlackBerry. I am

overwhelmed with technology. I set about transferring Christian's playlist from my iPad to the Mac, then fire up Google to surf the Net.

I'M LYING ACROSS THE bed looking at my Mac as Christian enters.

"What are you doing?" he inquires softly.

I panic briefly, wondering if I should let him see the Web site I'm on—Multiple Personality Disorder: The Symptoms.

Stretching out beside me, he eyes the Web page with amusement.

"On this site for a reason?" he asks nonchalantly.

Brusque Christian has gone—playful Christian is back. How the hell am I supposed to keep up with this?

"Research. Into a difficult personality." I give him my most deadpan look.

His lips twitch with a suppressed smile. "A difficult personality?"

"My own pet project."

"I'm a pet project now? A sideline. Science experiment maybe. When I thought I was everything. Miss Steele, you wound me."

"How do you know it's you?"

"Wild guess."

"It's true that you are the only fucked-up, mercurial, control freak that I know intimately."

"I thought I was the only person you know intimately." He arches a brow.

I flush. "Yes. That, too."

"Have you reached any conclusions yet?"

I turn and gaze at him. He's on his side stretched out beside me with his head resting on his elbow, his expression soft, amused.

"I think you're in need of intense therapy."

He reaches up and gently tucks my hair behind my ears.

"I think I'm in need of you. Here." He hands me a tube of lipstick.

I frown at him, perplexed. It's harlot red, not my color at all.

"You want me to wear this?" I squeak.

He laughs. "No, Anastasia, not unless you want to. Not sure it's your color," he finishes dryly.

He sits up on the bed cross-legged and drags his shirt off over his head. *Oh my*. "I like your road map idea."

I stare at him blankly. Road map?

"The no-go areas," he says by way of explanation.

"Oh. I was kidding."

"I'm not."

"You want me to draw on you, with lipstick?"

“It washes off. Eventually.”

This means I could touch him freely. A small smile of wonder plays on my lips.

“What about something more permanent, like a Sharpie?”

“I could get a tattoo.” His eyes are alight with humor.

Christian Grey with a tat? Marring his lovely body, when it’s marked in so many ways already? No way!

“No to the tattoo!” I laugh to hide my horror.

“Lipstick, then.” He grins.

Shutting the Mac, I push it to the side. This could be fun.

“Come.” He holds his hands out to me. “Sit on me.”

I push my flats off my feet, scramble into a sitting position, and crawl over to him. He lies down on the bed but keeps his knees flexed.

“Lean against my legs.”

I clamber over him and sit astride as instructed. His eyes are wide and cautious. But he’s amused, too.

“You seem—enthusiastic for this,” he comments wryly.

“I’m always eager for information, Mr. Grey, and it means you’ll relax, because I’ll know where the boundaries lie.”

He shakes his head, as if he can’t quite believe that he’s about to let me draw all over his body.

“Open the lipstick,” he orders.

Oh, he’s in überbossy mode, but I don’t care.

“Give me your hand.”

I give him my other hand.

“The one with the lipstick.” He rolls his eyes at me.

“Are you rolling your eyes at me?”

“Yep.”

“That’s very rude, Mr. Grey. I know some people who get positively violent at eye-rolling.”

“Do you, now?” His tone is ironic.

I give him my hand with the lipstick, and suddenly he sits up so we are nose to nose.

“Ready?” he asks in a low, soft murmur that makes everything tighten and tense inside me. *Oh, wow*.

“Yes,” I whisper. His proximity is alluring, his toned flesh close, his Christian-smell mixed with my body wash. He guides my hand up to the curve of his shoulder.

“Press down,” he breathes, and my mouth goes dry as he directs my hand

down, from the top of his shoulder, around his arm socket then down the side of his chest. The lipstick leaves a broad, livid red streak in its wake. He stops at the bottom of his rib cage, and then directs me across his stomach. He tenses and stares, seemingly impassive, into my eyes, but beneath his careful blank look, I see his restraint.

His aversion is held in strict check, the line of his jaw is strained, and there's tension around his eyes. Midway across his stomach he murmurs, "And up the other side." He releases my hand.

I mirror the line I've drawn on his left side. The trust he's giving me is heady, but tempered by the fact that I can I count his pain. Seven small, round white scars dot his chest, and it's deep, dark purgatory to see this hideous, evil desecration of his beautiful body. Who would do this to a child?

"There, done," I whisper, containing my emotion.

"No, you're not," he replies and traces a line with his long index finger around the base of his neck. I follow the line of his finger with a scarlet streak. Finishing, I gaze into the gray depths of his eyes.

"Now my back," he murmurs. He shifts so I have to climb off him, then he turns around on the bed and sits cross-legged with his back to me.

"Follow the line from my chest, all the way around to the other side." His voice is low and husky.

I do as he says until a crimson line runs across the middle of his back, and as I do, I count more scars marring his beautiful body. Nine in all.

*Holy fuck.* I have to fight the overwhelming need to kiss each one and stop the tears pooling in my eyes. What kind of animal would do this? His head is down, and his body tense as I complete the circuit around his back.

"Around your neck, too?" I whisper.

He nods, and I draw another line joining the first around the base of his neck beneath his hair.

"Finished," I murmur, and it looks like he's wearing a bizarre skin-colored vest with a harlot-red trim.

His shoulders slump as he relaxes, and he turns slowly to face me once again.

"Those are the boundaries," he says quietly, his eyes dark and pupils dilated … from fear? From lust? I want to hurl myself at him, but I restrain myself and gaze at him in wonder.

"I can live with those. Right now I want to launch myself at you," I whisper.

He gives me a wicked smile and holds out his hands, a silent gesture of consent.

"Well, Miss Steele, I'm all yours."

I squeal with childish delight and catapult myself into his arms, knocking him

flat. He twists, letting out a boyish laugh filled with relief that the ordeal is over. Somehow, I end up beneath him on the bed.

"Now, about that rain check," he breathes and his mouth claims mine once more.

## CHAPTER SIX

My hands fist in his hair while my mouth is feverish against Christian's, consuming him, relishing the feel of his tongue against mine. And he's the same, devouring me. It's heavenly.

Suddenly he drags me up and grasps the hem of my T-shirt, whipping it over my head and throwing it on the floor.

"I want to feel you," he says greedily against my mouth as his hands move behind me to undo my bra. In one smooth move, it's off and he pitches it aside.

He pushes me back down onto the bed, pressing me into the mattress, and his mouth and hand move to my breasts. My fingers curl into his hair as he takes one of my nipples between his lips and tugs hard.

I cry out as the sensation sweeps through my body, spikes, and tightens all the muscles around my groin.

"Yes, baby, let me hear you," he murmurs against my overheated skin.

Boy, I want him inside me now. With his mouth he toys with my nipple, pulling at it, making me squirm and writhe and yearn for him. I sense his longing mixed with—what? Veneration. It's as if he's worshipping me.

He teases me with his fingers, my nipple growing hard and elongating under his skillful touch. His hand moves to my jeans, and he deftly undoes the button, tugs the zipper down, and slips his hand inside my panties, sliding his fingers against my sex.

His breath hisses out as his finger glides into me. I push my pelvis up into the heel of his hand, and he responds, rubbing against me.

"Oh, baby," he breathes as he hovers over me, staring intently into my eyes. "You're so wet." His voice is filled with wonder.

"I want you," I murmur.

His mouth joins with mine again, and I feel his hungry desperation, his need for me.

This is new—it's never been like this except perhaps when I came back from Georgia—and his words from earlier drift back to me … *I need to know we're okay. This is the only way I know how*.

The thought unravels me. To know that I have such an effect on him, that I

can offer him solace, doing this … He sits up, grasps the hem of my jeans, and tugs them off, followed by my panties.

Keeping his eyes fixed on mine, he stands, takes a foil packet out of his pocket, and tosses it at me, then removes his jeans and boxers in one swift motion.

I rip the packet open greedily, and when he lies beside me again, I slowly roll the condom onto him. He grabs both my hands and rolls on to his back.

"You. On top," he orders, pulling me astride him. "I want to see you."

*Oh*.

He guides me, and hesitantly I ease myself down onto him. He closes his eyes and flexes his hips to meet me, filling me, stretching me, his mouth forming a perfect *O* as he exhales.

Oh, that feels so good—possessing him, possessing me.

He holds my hands, and I don't know if it's to steady me or keep me from touching him, even though I have my road map.

"You feel so good," he murmurs.

I rise again, heady with the power I have over him, watching Christian Grey slowly coming apart beneath me. He lets go of my hands and grabs my hips, and I place my hands on his arms. He thrusts into me sharply, causing me to cry out.

"That's right, baby, feel me," he says, his voice strained.

I tip my head back and do exactly that. This is what he does so well.

I move—countering his rhythm in perfect symmetry—numbing all thought and reason. I am just sensation lost in this void of pleasure. *Up and down … again and again … Oh yes* … Opening my eyes, I stare down at him, my breathing ragged, and he's staring back at me, eyes blazing.

"My Ana," he mouths.

"Yes," I rasp. "Always."

He groans loudly, closing his eyes again, tipping his head back. Seeing Christian undone is enough to seal my fate, and I come audibly, exhaustingly, spinning down and around, collapsing on top of him.

"Oh, baby," he groans as he finds his release, holding me still and letting go.

MY HEAD IS ON his chest in the no-go area, my cheek nestled against the springy hair on his sternum. I am panting, glowing, and I resist the urge to pucker my lips and kiss him.

I just lie on top of him, catching my breath. He smoothes my hair, and his hand runs down my back, caressing me as his breathing calms.

"You are so beautiful."

I lift my head to gaze at him, my expression skeptical. He frowns in response

and sits up quickly, taking me by surprise, his arm sweeping around to hold me in place. I clutch his biceps as we are nose to nose.

"You. Are. Beautiful," he says again, his tone emphatic.

"And you're amazingly sweet sometimes." I kiss him gently.

He lifts me and eases out of me. I wince as he does. Leaning forward, he kisses me softly.

"You have no idea how attractive you are, do you?"

I flush. Why's he going on about this?

"All those boys pursuing you—that isn't enough of a clue?"

"Boys? What boys?"

"You want the list?" Christian frowns. "The photographer, he's crazy about you, that boy in the hardware store, your roommate's older brother. Your boss," he adds bitterly.

"Oh, Christian, that's just not true."

"Trust me. They want you. They want what's mine." He pulls me against him, and I lift my arms to his shoulders, my hands in his hair, regarding him with amusement.

"Mine," he repeats, his eyes glowing possessively.

"Yes, yours." I reassure him, smiling. He looks mollified, and I feel perfectly comfortable naked in his lap on a bed in the full light of a Saturday afternoon. Who would have thought? The lipstick marks remain on his exquisite body. I note some smears on the duvet cover, though, and wonder briefly what Mrs. Jones will make of them.

"The line is still intact," I murmur and bravely trace the mark on his shoulder with my index finger. He stiffens, blinking suddenly. "I want to go exploring."

He regards me skeptically.

"The apartment?"

"No. I was thinking of the treasure map that we've drawn on you." My fingers itch to touch him.

His eyebrows lift in surprise, and he blinks with uncertainty. I rub my nose against his.

"And what would that entail exactly, Miss Steele?"

I lift my hand from his shoulder and run my fingertips down his face.

"I just want to touch you everywhere I'm allowed."

Christian catches my index finger in his teeth, biting down gently.

"Ow," I protest and he grins, a low growl coming from his throat.

"Okay," he says, releasing my finger, but his voice is laced with apprehension. "Wait." He leans behind me, lifting me again, and removes his condom, dropping it unceremoniously on the floor beside the bed.

“I hate those things. I’ve a good mind to call Dr. Greene around to give you a shot.”

“You think the top ob-gyn in Seattle is going to come running?”

“I can be very persuasive,” he murmurs, hooking my hair behind my ear. “Franco’s done a great job on your hair. I like these layers.”

*What?*

“Stop changing the subject.”

He shifts me back so I’m straddling him, leaning on his propped-up knees, my feet on either side of his hips. He leans back on his arms.

“Touch away,” he says without humor. He looks nervous, but he’s trying to hide it.

Keeping my eyes on his, I reach down and trace my finger underneath the lipstick line, across his finely sculptured abdominal muscles. He flinches and I stop.

“I don’t have to,” I whisper.

“No, it’s fine. Just takes some … readjustment on my part. No one’s touched me for a long time,” he murmurs.

“Mrs. Robinson?” The words pop unbidden out of my mouth, and amazingly, I manage to keep all bitterness and rancor out of my voice.

He nods, his discomfort obvious. “I don’t want to talk about her. It will sour your good mood.”

“I can handle it.”

“No, you can’t, Ana. You see red whenever I mention her. My past is my past. It’s a fact. I can’t change it. I’m lucky that you don’t have one, because it would drive me crazy if you did.”

I frown at him, but I don’t want to fight. “Drive you crazy? More than you are already?” I smile, hoping to lighten the atmosphere between us.

His lips twitch. “Crazy for you,” he whispers.

My heart swells with joy.

“Shall I call Dr. Flynn?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” he says dryly.

Shifting back so he drops his legs, I place my fingers back on his stomach and let them drift across his skin. He stills once more.

“I like touching you.” My fingers skate down to his navel then southward along his happy, happy trail. His lips part as his breathing changes, his eyes darken, and his erection stirs and twitches beneath me. *Holy cow. Round two.*

“Again?” I murmur.

He smiles. “Oh yes, Miss Steele, again.”

WHAT A DELICIOUS WAY to spend a Saturday afternoon. I stand beneath the shower, absentmindedly washing myself, careful not to wet my tied-back hair, contemplating the last couple of hours. Christian and vanilla seem to be going well.

He's revealed so much today. It's staggering, trying to assimilate all the information and to reflect on what I've learned: his salary details—*whoa, he's stinking rich, and for someone so young, it's just extraordinary*—and the dossiers he has on me and on all his brunette submissives. I wonder if they are all in that filing cabinet?

My subconscious purses her lips at me and shakes her head—*Don't even go there*. I frown. *Just a quick peek?*

And there's Leila—with a gun, potentially, somewhere—and her crap taste in music still on his iPod. But even worse, Mrs. *Pedo* Robinson; I cannot wrap my head around her, and I don't want to. I don't want her to be a shimmering-haired specter in our relationship. He's right, I do go off the deep end when I think of her, so perhaps it's best if I don't.

I step out of the shower and dry myself, and I'm suddenly seized by unexpected anger.

But who wouldn't go off the deep end? What normal, sane person would do that to a fifteen-year-old boy? How much has she contributed to his fucked-upness? I don't understand her. And worse still, he says she helped him. How?

I think of his scars, the stark physical embodiment of a horrific childhood and a sickening reminder of what mental scars he must bear. My sweet, sad Fifty Shades. He's said such loving things today. *He's crazy for me*.

Staring at my reflection, I smile at the memory of his words, my heart brimming once more, and my face transforms with a ridiculous smile. Perhaps we can make this work. But how long will he want to do this without wanting to beat the crap out of me because I cross some arbitrary line?

My smile dissolves. This is what I don't know. This is the shadow that hangs over us. Kinky fuckery, yes, I can do that, but more?

My subconscious stares at me blankly, for once offering no snarky words of wisdom. I head back to my bedroom to dress.

Christian is downstairs getting ready, doing whatever he's doing, so I have the bedroom to myself. As well as all the dresses in the closet, I have drawers full of new underwear. I select a black bustier corset creation with a price tag of $540. It has silver trim like filigree and the briefest of panties to match. Thigh-high stockings, too, in a natural color, so fine, pure silk. *Wow, they feel … slinky … and kind of hot …*

I am reaching for the dress when Christian enters unannounced. *Whoa, you*

*could knock!* He stands immobilized, staring at me, eyes glimmering, hungrily. I blush crimson everywhere, it feels. He is wearing a white shirt and black suit pants; the neck of his shirt is open. I can see the lipstick line still in place, and he's still staring.

"Can I help you, Mr. Grey? I assume there is some purpose to your visit other than to gawk mindlessly at me."

"I am rather enjoying my mindless gawk, thank you, Miss Steele," he murmurs darkly, stepping farther into the room and drinking me in. "Remind me to send a personal note of thanks to Caroline Acton."

I frown. *Who the hell is she?*

"The personal shopper at Neiman's," he says, spookily answering my unspoken question.

"Oh."

"I'm quite distracted."

"I can see that. What do you want, Christian?" I give him my no-nonsense stare.

He retaliates with his crooked smile and pulls the silver ball things from his pocket, stopping me in my tracks. Holy shit! He wants to spank me? Now? Why?

"It's not what you think," he says quickly.

"Enlighten me," I whisper.

"I thought you could wear these tonight."

And the implications of that sentence hang between us as the idea sinks in.

"To this event?" I'm shocked.

He nods slowly, his eyes darkening.

*Oh my*.

"Will you spank me later?"

"No."

For a moment, I feel a tiny fleeting stab of disappointment.

He chuckles. "You want me to?"

I swallow. I just don't know.

"Well, rest assured I am not going to touch you like that, not even if you beg me."

*Oh! This is news*.

"Do you want to play this game?" he continues, holding up the balls. "You can always take them out if it's too much."

I gaze at him. He looks so wickedly tempting—unkempt, recently fucked hair, dark eyes dancing with erotic thoughts, his lips raised in a sexy, amused smile.

"Okay," I acquiesce softly. *Hell, yes!* My inner goddess has found her voice

and is shouting from the rooftops.

"Good girl," Christian grins. "Come here, and I'll put them in, once you've put your shoes on."

My shoes? I turn and glance at the dove gray suede stilettos that match the dress I've chosen to wear.

*Humor him!*

He holds out his hand to support me while I step into the Christian Louboutin shoes, a steal at $3,295. I must be at least five inches taller now.

He leads me to the bedside and doesn't sit, but walks over to the only chair in the room. Picking it up, he carries it over and places it in front of me.

"When I nod, you bend down and hold on to the chair. Understand?" His voice is husky.

"Yes."

"Good. Now open your mouth," he orders, his voice still low.

I do as I'm told, thinking that he's going to put the balls in my mouth to lubricate them. No, he slips his index finger in.

*Oh …*

"Suck," he says. I reach up and clasp his hand, holding him steady, and do as I'm told—see, I can be obedient, when I want.

*He tastes of soap … hmm*. I suck hard, and I'm rewarded when his eyes widen and his lips part as he inhales. I'm not going to need any lubricant at this rate. He puts the balls in his mouth as I fellate his finger, twirling my tongue around it. When he tries to withdraw it, I clamp my teeth down.

He grins then shakes his head, admonishing me, so I let go. He nods, and I bend down and grasp the sides of the chair. He moves my panties to one side and very slowly slides a finger into me, circling leisurely, so I feel him, on all sides. I can't help the moan that escapes from my lips.

He withdraws his finger briefly and with tender care, inserts the balls one at a time, pushing them deep inside me. Once they are in position, he smoothes my panties back into place and kisses my backside. Running his hands up each of my legs from ankle to thigh, he gently kisses the top of each thigh where my thigh-highs end.

"You have fine, fine legs, Miss Steele," he murmurs.

Standing, he grasps my hips and pulls my behind against him so I feel his erection.

"Maybe I'll have you this way when we get home, Anastasia. You can stand now."

I feel giddy, beyond aroused as the weight of the balls push and pull inside me. Leaning down from behind me Christian kisses my shoulder.

“I bought these for you to wear to last Saturday’s gala.” He puts his arm around me and holds out his hand. In his palm rests a small red box with *Cartier* inscribed on the lid. “But you left me, so I never had the opportunity to give them to you.”

*Oh!*

“This is my second chance,” he murmurs, his voice stiff with some unnamed emotion. He’s nervous.

Tentatively I reach for the box, and open it. Inside shines a pair of drop earrings. Each has four diamonds, one at the base, then a gap, then three perfectly spaced diamonds hanging one after the other. They’re beautiful, simple, and classic. What I would choose myself, if I were ever given the opportunity to shop at Cartier.

“They’re lovely,” I whisper, and because they are second-chance earrings, I love them. “Thank you.”

He relaxes against me as the tension leaves his body, and he kisses my shoulder again.

“You’re wearing the silver satin dress?” he asks.

“Yes. Is that okay?”

“Of course. I’ll let you get ready.” He heads out the door without a backward glance.

I HAVE ENTERED AN alternate universe. The young woman staring back at me looks worthy of a red carpet. Her strapless, floor-length, silver satin gown is simply stunning. Maybe I’ll write to Caroline Acton myself. It’s fitted, and flatters what few curves I have.

My hair falls in soft waves around my face, spilling over my shoulders to my breasts. I tuck one side behind my ear, revealing my second-chance earrings. I have kept my makeup to a minimum, a natural look. Eyeliner, mascara, a little pink blush, and pale pink lipstick.

I don’t really need the blush. I am a little flushed from the constant movement of the silver balls. Yes, they’ll guarantee I have some color in my cheeks tonight. Shaking my head at the audacity of Christian’s erotic ideas, I lean down to collect my satin wrap and silver clutch purse, and go in search of my Fifty Shades.

He is talking to Taylor and three other men in the hallway, his back to me. Their surprised, appreciative expressions alert Christian to my presence. He turns as I stand and wait awkwardly.

My mouth dries. He looks stunning … Black dinner suit, black bow tie, and his expression as he gazes at me is one of awe. He strolls toward me and kisses

my hair.

"Anastasia. You look breathtaking."

I flush at this compliment in front of Taylor and the other men.

"A glass of champagne before we go?"

"Please," I murmur, far too quickly.

Christian nods to Taylor who heads into the foyer with his three cohorts.

In the great room, Christian retrieves a bottle of champagne from the fridge.

"Security team?" I ask.

"Close protection. They're under Taylor's control. He's trained in that, too." Christian hands me a champagne flute.

"He's very versatile."

"Yes, he is." Christian smiles. "You look lovely, Anastasia. Cheers." He raises his glass, and I clink it with mine. The champagne is a pale rose color. It tastes deliciously crisp and light.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, his eyes heated.

"Fine, thank you." I smile sweetly, giving nothing away, knowing full well he's referring to the silver balls.

He smirks.

"Here, you're going to need this." He hands me a large velvet pouch that was resting on the kitchen island. "Open it," he says between sips of champagne. Intrigued, I reach into the bag and pull out an intricate silver masquerade mask with cobalt blue feathers in a plume crowning the top.

"It's a masked ball," he states matter-of-factly.

"I see." The mask is beautiful. A silver ribbon is threaded around the edges, and exquisite silver filigree is etched around the eyes.

"This will show off your beautiful eyes, Anastasia."

I grin at him shyly.

"Are you wearing one?"

"Of course. They're very liberating in a way," he adds, raising an eyebrow.

*Oh. This is going to be fun*.

"Come. I want to show you something." Holding out his hand, he leads me out into the hallway and to a door beside the stairs. He opens it, revealing a large room roughly the same size as his playroom, which must be directly above us. This one is filled with books. *Wow*, a library, every wall crammed floor to ceiling. In the center is a full-sized billiard table illuminated by a long, triangular-prism-shaped Tiffany lamp.

"You have a library!" I squeak in awe, overwhelmed with excitement.

"Yes, the balls room, as Elliot calls it. The apartment is quite spacious. I realized today, when you mentioned exploring, that I've never given you a tour.

We don’t have time now, but I thought I’d show you this room, and maybe challenge you to a game of billiards in the not-too-distant future.”

I grin.

“Bring it on.” I secretly hug myself with glee. José and I bonded over pool. We’ve been playing for the last three years. I am ace with a cue. José has been a good teacher.

“What?” Christian asks, amused.

*Oh! I really must stop expressing every emotion I feel the instant I feel it,* I scold myself.

“Nothing,” I say quickly.

Christian narrows his eyes.

“Well, maybe Dr. Flynn can uncover your secrets. You’ll meet him this evening.”

“The expensive charlatan?” *Holy shit.*

“The very same. He’s dying to meet you.”

CHRISTIAN TAKES MY HAND and gently skims his thumb across my knuckles as we sit in the back of the Audi heading north. I squirm, and feel the sensation in my groin. I resist the urge to moan, as Taylor is in the front, not wearing his iPod, with one of the security guys whose name I think is Sawyer.

I am beginning to feel a dull, pleasurable ache deep in my belly, caused by the balls. Idly I wonder how long I will be able to manage without some, um … relief? I cross my legs. As I do, something that’s been gnawing at me in the back of my mind suddenly surfaces.

“Where did you get the lipstick?” I ask Christian quietly.

He smirks at me and points toward the front. “Taylor,” he mouths.

I burst out laughing. “Oh.” And stop quickly—the balls.

I bite my lip. Christian smiles at me, his eyes gleaming wickedly. He knows exactly what he’s doing, sexy beast that he is.

“Relax,” he breathes. “If it’s too much …” His voice trails off, and he gently kisses each knuckle in turn, then gently sucks the tip of my little finger.

Now I know he’s doing this on purpose. I close my eyes as dark desire unfolds throughout my body. I surrender briefly to the sensation, my muscles clenching deep inside me.

When I open my eyes again, Christian is regarding me closely, a dark prince. It must be the dinner jacket and bow tie, but he looks older, sophisticated, a devastatingly handsome roué with licentious intent. He simply takes my breath away. I’m in his sexual thrall, and if I’m to believe him, he’s in mine. The thought brings a smile to my face, and his answering grin is blinding.

“So what can we expect at this event?”

“Oh, the usual stuff,” Christian says breezily.

“Not usual for me,” I remind him.

Christian smiles fondly and kisses my hand again. “Lots of people flashing their cash. Auction, raffle, dinner, dancing—my mother knows how to throw a party.” He smiles and for the first time all day, I allow myself to feel a little excited about this party.

There is a line of expensive cars heading up the driveway of the Grey mansion. Long, pale pink paper lanterns hang over the drive, and as we inch closer in the Audi, I can see they are everywhere. In the early evening light they look magical, as if we’re entering an enchanted kingdom. I glance at Christian. How suitable for my prince—and my childish excitement blooms, eclipsing all other feelings.

“Masks on,” Christian grins, and as he dons his simple black mask, my prince becomes something darker, more sensual.

All I can see of his face is his beautiful mouth and strong *jaw*. My heartbeat lurches at the sight of him. I fasten my mask and ignore the hunger deep in my body.

Taylor pulls into the driveway, and a valet opens Christian’s door. Sawyer leaps out to open mine.

“Ready?” Christian asks.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“You look beautiful, Anastasia.” He kisses my hand and exits the car.

A dark green carpet runs along the lawn to one side of the house, leading to the impressive grounds at the rear. Christian has a protective arm around me, resting his hand on my waist, as we follow the green carpet with a steady stream of Seattle’s elite dressed in their finery and wearing all manner of masks, the lanterns lighting the way. Two photographers marshal guests to pose for pictures against the backdrop of an ivy-strewn arbor.

“Mr. Grey!” one of the photographers calls. Christian nods in acknowledgment and pulls me close as we pose quickly for a photo. How do they know it’s him? His trademark unruly copper hair, no doubt.

“Two photographers?” I ask Christian.

“One is from the *Seattle Times;* the other is for a souvenir. We’ll be able to buy a copy later.”

Oh, my picture in the press again. Leila briefly enters my mind. This is how she found me, posing with Christian. The thought is unsettling, though it’s comforting that I am unrecognizable beneath my mask.

At the end of the line, white-suited servers hold trays of glasses brimming

with champagne, and I'm grateful when Christian passes me a glass—effectively distracting me from my dark thoughts.

We approach a large white pergola hung with smaller versions of the paper lanterns. Beneath it shines a black-and-white checkered dance floor surrounded by a low fence with entrances on three sides. Standing at each entrance are two elaborate ice sculptures of swans. The fourth side of the pergola is occupied by a stage where a string quartet is playing softly, a haunting, ethereal piece I don't recognize. The stage looks set for a big band but as there's no sign of the musicians, I figure this must be for later. Taking my hand, Christian leads me between swans onto the dance floor where the other guests are congregating, chatting over glasses of champagne.

Toward the shoreline stands an enormous tent, open on the side nearest to us so I can glimpse the formally arranged tables and chairs. *There are so many!*

"How many people are coming?" I ask Christian, thrown by the scale of the tent.

"I think about three hundred. You'll have to ask my mother." He smiles down at me.

"Christian!"

A young woman appears out of the throng and throws her arms around his neck, and immediately I know she's Mia. She's dressed in a sleek, pale pink, full-length chiffon gown with a stunning, delicately detailed Venetian mask to match. She looks amazing. And for a moment, I have never felt so grateful for the dress that Christian has given me.

"Ana! Oh, darling, you look gorgeous!" She gives me a quick hug. "You must come and meet my friends. None of them can believe that Christian finally has a girlfriend."

I shoot a quick panicked glance at Christian, who shrugs in a resigned, I-know-she's-impossible-I-had-to-live-with-her-for-years way, and let Mia lead me over to a group of four young women, all expensively attired and impeccably groomed.

Mia makes hasty introductions. Three of them are sweet and kind, but Lily, I think her name is, regards me sourly from beneath her red mask.

"Of course, we all thought Christian was gay," she says snidely, concealing her rancor with a large, fake smile.

Mia pouts at her.

"Lily, behave yourself. It's obvious he has excellent taste in women. He was waiting for the right one to come along, and it wasn't you!"

Lily blushes the same color as her mask, as do I. Could this be any more uncomfortable?

“Ladies, if I could claim my date back, please?” Snaking his arm around my waist, Christian pulls me to his side. All four women flush, grin, and fidget, his dazzling smile doing what it always does. Mia glances at me and rolls her eyes, and I have to laugh.

“Lovely to meet you,” I say as he drags me away.

“Thank you,” I mouth at Christian when we’re some distance away.

“I saw that Lily was with Mia. She is one nasty piece of work.”

“She likes you,” I mutter dryly.

He shudders. “Well, the feeling is not mutual. Come, let me introduce you to some people.”

I spend the next half hour in a whirlwind of introductions. I meet two Hollywood actors, two more CEOs, and several eminent physicians. *There is no way I am going to remember everyone’s name*.

Christian keeps me close at his side, and I’m grateful. Frankly, the wealth, the glamour, and the sheer lavish scale of the event intimidate me. I have never been to anything like this in my life.

The white-suited servers move effortlessly through the growing crowd of guests with bottles of champagne, topping off my glass with worrying regularity. *I must not drink too much. I must not drink too much,* I repeat to myself, but I’m beginning to feel light-headed, and I don’t know if it’s the champagne, the charged atmosphere of mystery and excitement created by the masks, or the secret silver balls. The dull ache below my waist is becoming impossible to ignore.

“So you work at SIP?” asks a balding gentleman in a bear—or is it a dog?—half mask. “Heard rumors of a hostile takeover.”

I flush. There *is* a hostile takeover, from a man who has more money than sense and is a stalker par excellence.

“I’m just a lowly assistant, Mr. Eccles. I wouldn’t know about these things.”

Christian says nothing and smiles blandly at Eccles.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The master of ceremonies, wearing an impressive black-and-white harlequin mask, interrupts us. “Please take your seats. Dinner is served.”

Christian takes my hand, and we follow the chattering crowd to the large tent.

The interior is stunning. Three enormous, shallow chandeliers throw rainbow-colored sparkles over the ivory silk lining of the ceiling and walls. There must be at least thirty tables, and they remind me of the private dining room at the Heathman Hotel—crystal glasses, crisp white linen covering the tables and chairs, and in the center an exquisite display of pale pink peonies gathered around a silver candelabra. Wrapped in gossamer silk beside it is a basket of

goodies.

Christian consults the seating plan and leads me to a table in the center. Mia and Grace Trevelyan-Grey are already in situ, deep in conversation with a young man I don't know. Grace is wearing a shimmering mint green gown with a Venetian mask to match. She looks radiant, not stressed at all, and she greets me warmly.

"Ana, how delightful to see you again! And looking so beautiful, too."

"Mother," Christian greets her stiffly and kisses her on both cheeks.

"Oh, Christian, so formal!" she scolds him teasingly.

Grace's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Trevelyan, join us at our table. They seem exuberant and youthful, though it's difficult to tell beneath their matching bronze masks. They are delighted to see Christian.

"Grandmother, Grandfather, may I introduce Anastasia Steele?"

Mrs. Trevelyan is all over me like a rash. "Oh, he's finally found someone, how wonderful, and so pretty! Well, I do hope you make an honest man of him," she gushes, shaking my hand.

*Holy cow*. I thank the heavens for my mask.

"Mother, don't embarrass Ana." Grace comes to my rescue.

"Ignore the silly old coot, m'dear." Mr. Trevelyan shakes my hand. "She thinks because she's so old, she has a God-given right to say whatever nonsense pops into that woolly head of hers."

"Ana, this is my date, Sean." Mia shyly introduces her young man. He gives me a wicked grin, and his brown eyes dance with amusement as we shake hands.

"Pleased to meet you, Sean."

Christian shakes Sean's hand as he regards him shrewdly. Don't tell me that poor Mia suffers from her overbearing brother, too. I smile at Mia in sympathy.

Lance and Janine, Grace's friends, are the last couple at our table, but there is still no sign of Mr. Carrick Grey.

Abruptly there's the hiss of a microphone, and Mr. Grey's voice booms over the PA system, causing the babble of voices to die down. Carrick stands on a small stage at one end of the tent, wearing an impressive gold Punchinello mask.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to our annual charity ball. I hope that you enjoy what we have laid out for you tonight and that you'll dig deep into your pockets to support the fantastic work that our team does with Coping Together. As you know, it's a cause that is very close to my wife's heart, and mine."

I peek nervously at Christian, who is staring impassively, I think, at the stage. He glances at me and smirks.

"I'll hand you over now to our master of ceremonies. Please be seated, and enjoy," Carrick finishes.

Polite applause follows; then the babble in the tent starts again. I am seated between Christian and his grandfather. I admire the small white place card with fine silver calligraphy that bears my name as a waiter lights the candelabra with a long taper. Carrick joins us, kissing me on both cheeks, surprising me.

"Good to see you again, Ana," he murmurs. He really looks very striking in his extraordinary gold mask.

"Ladies and gentlemen: please nominate a table head," the MC calls out.

"Oooh—me, me!" says Mia immediately, bouncing enthusiastically in her seat.

"In the center of the table you will find an envelope," the MC continues. "Would everyone find, beg, borrow, or steal a bill of the highest denomination you can manage, write your name on it, and place it inside the envelope? Table heads, please guard these envelopes carefully. We will need them later."

*Crap*. I haven't brought any money with me. *How stupid—it's a charity event!*

Fishing out his wallet, Christian produces two $100 bills.

"Here," he says.

*What?*

"I'll pay you back," I whisper.

His mouth twists, and I know he's not happy, but he doesn't comment. I sign my name using his fountain pen—it's black, with a white flower motif on the cap—and Mia passes the envelope around.

In front of me I find another card inscribed with silver calligraphy—our menu.

*A MASKED BALL IN AID OF COPING TOGETHER MENU*

SALMON TARTARE WITH CRÈME FRAICHE AND
CUCUMBER ON TOASTED BRIOCHE
ALBAN ESTATE ROUSSANNE 2006

ROASTED MUSCOVY DUCK BREAST
CREAMY JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE PURÉE,
THYME-ROASTED BING CHERRIES, FOIE GRAS
CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE VIEILLES VIGNES 2006
DOMAINE DE LA JANASSE

SUGAR-CRUSTED WALNUT CHIFFON
CANDIED FIGS, SABAYON, MAPLE ICE CREAM
VIN DE CONSTANCE 2004 KLEIN CONSTANTIA

SELECTION OF LOCAL CHEESES AND BREADS
ALBAN ESTATE GRENACHE 2006

COFFEE AND PETITS FOURS

Well, that accounts for the number of crystal glasses in every size that crowd

my place setting. Our waiter is back, offering wine and water. Behind me, the sides of the tent through which we entered are being closed, while at the front, two servers pull back the canvas, revealing the sunset over Seattle and Meydenbauer Bay.

It's an absolutely breathtaking view, the twinkling lights of Seattle in the distance and the orange, dusky calm of the bay reflecting the opal sky. Wow. It's so calm and peaceful.

Ten servers, each holding a plate, come to stand between us. On a silent cue, they serve us our starters in complete synchronization, then vanish again. The salmon looks delicious, and I realize I am famished.

"Hungry?" Christian murmurs so only I can hear. I know he's not referring to the food, and the muscles deep in my belly respond.

"Very," I whisper, boldly meeting his gaze, and Christian's lips part as he inhales.

*Ha! See … two can play at this game.*

Christian's grandfather engages me in conversation immediately. He's a wonderful old man, so proud of his daughter and three grandchildren.

It is weird to think of Christian as a child. The memory of his burn scars come unbidden to my mind, but quickly I quash it. I don't want to think about that now, though ironically it's the reason behind this party.

I wish Kate were here, with Elliot. She would fit in so well—the sheer number of forks and knives laid out before her wouldn't daunt Kate—and she would command the table. I imagine her duking it out with Mia over who should be table head. The thought makes me smile.

The conversation at the table ebbs and flows. Mia is entertaining, as usual, and quite eclipses poor Sean, who mostly stays quiet, like me. Christian's grandmother is the most vocal. She, too, has a biting sense of humor, usually at the expense of her husband. I begin to feel a little sorry for Mr. Trevelyan.

Christian and Lance talk animatedly about a device Christian's company is developing inspired by E. F. Schumacher's Small Is Beautiful principle. It's hard to keep up. Christian seems intent on empowering impoverished communities all over the world with windup technology—devices that need no electricity or batteries, and minimal maintenance.

Watching him in full flow is astonishing. He's passionate and committed to improving the lives of the less fortunate. Through his telecommunications company he's intent on being first to market with a windup mobile phone.

Whoa. I had no idea. I mean, I knew about his passion about feeding the world, but this …

Lance seems unable to comprehend Christian's plan to give the technology

away and not patent it. I wonder vaguely how Christian made all his money if he's so willing to give it all away.

Throughout dinner a steady stream of men in smartly tailored dinner jackets and dark masks stop by the table, keen to meet Christian, shake his hand, and exchange pleasantries. He introduces me to some but not others. I'm intrigued to know how and why he makes the distinction.

During one such conversation, Mia leans across and smiles.

"Ana, will you help in the auction?"

"Of course," I respond, only too willing.

By the time dessert is served, night has fallen, and I'm really uncomfortable. I need to get rid of the balls. Before I can excuse myself, the master of ceremonies appears at our table, and with him—if I'm not mistaken—is Miss European Pigtails.

*What's her name? Hansel, Gretel … Gretchen.*

She's masked, of course, but I know it's her when her gaze doesn't move beyond Christian. She blushes, and selfishly I'm beyond pleased that Christian doesn't acknowledge her at all.

The MC asks for our envelope and with a very practiced and eloquent flourish, asks Grace to pull out the winning bill. It's Sean's, and the silk-wrapped basket is awarded to him.

I applaud politely, but I'm finding it impossible to concentrate on any more of the proceedings.

"If you'll excuse me," I murmur to Christian.

He looks at me intently.

"Do you need the powder room?"

I nod.

"I'll show you," he says darkly.

When I stand, all the other men around the table stand with me. *Oh, such manners*.

"No, Christian! You're not taking Ana—I will."

Mia is on her feet before Christian can protest. His jaw tenses; I know he's not pleased. Quite frankly, neither am I. *I have … needs*. I shrug apologetically at him, and he sits down quickly, resigned.

On our return, I feel a little better, though the relief of removing the balls has not been as instantaneous as I'd hoped. They're now stashed safely in my clutch purse.

Why did I think I could last the whole evening? I am still yearning—perhaps I can persuade Christian to take me to the boathouse later. I flush at the thought and glance at him as I take my seat. He stares at me, the ghost of a smile

crossing his lips.

*Phew … he's no longer mad at a missed opportunity, though maybe I am*. I feel frustrated—irritable even. Christian squeezes my hand, and we both listen attentively to Carrick, who is back on stage talking about Coping Together. Christian passes me another card—a list of the auction prizes. I scan them quickly.

*AUCTION GIFTS AND GRACIOUS DONORS FOR COPING TOGETHER*

SIGNED BASEBALL BAT FROM THE MARINERS—DR. EMILY MAINWARING

GUCCI PURSE, WALLET & KEY RING—ANDREA WASHINGTON

ONE-DAY VOUCHER FOR TWO AT ESCLAVA, BRAVERN CENTER—ELENA LINCOLN

LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN DESIGN—GIA MATTEO

COCO DE MER COFFRET & PERFUME BEAUTY SELECTION—ELIZABETH AUSTIN

VENETIAN MIRROR—MR. AND MRS. J. BAILEY

TWO CASES OF WINE OF YOUR CHOICE FROM ALBAN ESTATES—ALBAN ESTATES

TWO VIP TICKETS FOR XTY IN CONCERT—MRS. L. YESYOV

RACE DAY AT DAYTONA—EMC BRITT INC.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE BY JANE AUSTEN, FIRST EDITION—DR. A. F. M. LACE-FIELD

DRIVE AN ASTON MARTIN DB7 FOR A DAY—MR. & MRS. L. W. NORA

OIL PAINTING, INTO THE BLUE BY J. TROUTON—KELLY TROUTON

GLIDING LESSON—SEATTLE AREA SOARING SOCIETY

WEEKEND BREAK FOR TWO AT THE HEATHMAN HOTEL, PORTLAND—THE HEATHMAN HOTEL

ONE-WEEKEND STAY IN ASPEN, COLORADO (SLEEPS SIX)—MR. C. GREY

ONE-WEEK STAY ABOARD THE SUSIECUE YACHT (SIX BERTHS), MOORED IN ST. LUCIA—DR. & MRS. LARIN

ONE WEEK AT LAKE ADRIANA, MONTANA (SLEEPS EIGHT)—MR. & DR. GREY



*Holy shit*. I blink up at Christian.

"You own property in Aspen?" I hiss. The auction is under way, and I have to keep my voice down.

He nods, surprised at my outburst and irritated, I think. He puts his finger to his lips to silence me.

"Do you have property elsewhere?" I whisper.

He nods again and inclines his head to one side in a warning.

The whole room erupts with cheering and applause; one of the prizes has gone for $12,000.

"I'll tell you later," Christian says quietly. "I wanted to come with you," he adds rather sulkily.

*Well, you didn't.* I pout and I realize that I'm still querulous, and no doubt, it's the frustrating effect of the balls. My mood darkens after seeing Mrs. Robinson on the list of generous donors.

I glance around the tent to see if I can spot her, but I can't see her telltale hair. Surely Christian would have warned me if she was invited tonight. I sit and stew, applauding when necessary, as each lot is sold for astonishing amounts of money.

The bidding moves to Christian's place in Aspen and reaches $20,000.

"Going once, going twice," the MC calls.

And I don't know what possesses me, but I suddenly hear my own voice ringing out clearly over the throng.

"Twenty-four thousand dollars!"

Every mask at the table turns to me in shocked amazement, the biggest reaction of all coming from beside me. I hear his sharp intake of breath and feel his wrath washing over me like a tidal wave.

"Twenty-four thousand dollars, to the lovely lady in silver, going once, going twice … Sold!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Holy shit, did I really just do that? It must be the alcohol. I've had champagne plus four glasses of four different wines. I glance up at Christian, who's busy applauding.

Crap, he's going to be so angry, and we've been getting along so well. My subconscious has finally decided to make an appearance, and she's wearing her Edvard Munch *The Scream* face.

Christian leans over to me, a large, fake smile plastered across his face. He kisses my cheek and then moves closer to whisper in my ear in a very cold, controlled voice.

"I don't know whether to worship at your feet or spank the living shit out of you."

Oh, I know what I want right now. I gaze up at him, blinking through my mask. I just wish I could read what's in his eyes.

"I'll take option two, please," I whisper frantically as the applause dies down. His lips part as he inhales sharply. *Oh, that chiseled mouth—I want it on me, now*. I ache for him. He gives me a radiant sincere smile that leaves me breathless.

"Suffering, are you? We'll have to see what we can do about that," he murmurs as he runs his fingers along my jaw.

His touch resonates deep, deep inside where that ache has spawned and grown. I want to jump him right here, right now, but we sit back to watch the auction of the next lot.

I can barely sit still. Christian drapes an arm around my shoulders, his thumb rhythmically stroking my back, sending delicious tingles down my spine. His free hand clasps mine, bringing it to his lips, then letting it rest on his lap.

Slowly and surreptitiously, so I don't realize his game until it's too late, he eases my hand up his leg and against his erection. I gasp, and my eyes dart in panic around the table, but all eyes are fixed on the stage. *Thank heavens for my mask*.

Taking full advantage, I slowly caress him, letting my fingers explore. Christian keeps his hand over mine, hiding my bold fingers, while his thumb

skates softly over the nape of my neck. His mouth opens as he gasps softly, and it's the only reaction I can see to my inexperienced touch. But it means so much. He wants me. Everything south of my navel contracts. This is becoming unbearable.

A week by Lake Adriana in Montana is the final lot for auction. Of course Mr. and Dr. Grey have a house in Montana, and the bidding escalates rapidly, but I am barely aware of it. I feel him growing beneath my fingers, and it makes me feel so powerful.

"Sold, for one hundred ten thousand dollars!" the MC declares victoriously. The whole room bursts into applause, and reluctantly I follow as does Christian, ruining our fun.

He turns to me and his lips twitch. "Ready?" he mouths over the rapturous cheering.

"Yes," I mouth back.

"Ana!" Mia calls. "It's time!"

*What? No. Not again!* "Time for what?"

"The First Dance Auction. Come on!" She stands and holds out her hand.

I glance at Christian, who is, I think, scowling at Mia, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry, but it's laughter that wins. I succumb to a cathartic bubble of schoolgirl giggles, as we are thwarted once more by the tall, pink powerhouse that is Mia Grey. Christian peers at me, and after a beat, there's a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"The first dance will be with me, okay? And it won't be on the dance floor," he murmurs lasciviously into my ear. My giggles subside as anticipation fans the flames of my need. *Oh yes!* My inner goddess performs a perfect triple Salchow in her ice skates.

"I look forward to it." I lean over and plant a soft, chaste kiss on his mouth. Glancing around, I realize that our fellow guests at the table are astonished. Of course, they've never seen Christian with a date before.

He smiles broadly. And he looks … happy.

"Come on, Ana," Mia nags. Taking her outstretched hand, I follow her onto the stage, where ten more young women have assembled, and I note with vague unease that Lily is one of them.

"Gentlemen, the highlight of the evening!" the MC booms over the babble of voices. "The moment you've all been waiting for! These twelve lovely ladies have all agreed to auction their first dance to the highest bidder!"

*Oh no*. I blush from head to toe. I hadn't realized what this meant. How humiliating!

"It's for a good cause," Mia hisses at me, sensing my discomfort. "Besides,

Christian will win." She rolls her eyes. "I can't imagine him letting anyone outbid him. He hasn't taken his eyes off you all evening."

Yes, focus on the good cause, and Christian is bound to win. Let's face it, he's not short of a dime or two.

*But it means spending more money on you!* my subconscious snarls at me. But I don't want to dance with anyone else—I can't dance with anyone else—and it's not spending money on me, he's donating it to the charity. *Like the $24,000 he's already spent?* My subconscious narrows her eyes.

Shit. I seem to have gotten away with my impulsive bid. Why am I arguing with myself?

"Now, gentlemen, pray gather around, and take a good look at what could be yours for the first dance. Twelve comely and compliant wenches."

*Jeez!* I feel like I'm in a meat market. I watch, horrified, as at least twenty men make their way to the stage area, Christian included, moving with easy grace between the tables and pausing to say a few hellos on the way. Once the bidders are assembled, the MC begins.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in the tradition of the masquerade we shall maintain the mystery behind the masks and stick to first names only. First up we have the lovely Jada."

Jada is giggling like a schoolgirl, too. Maybe I won't be so out of place. She's dressed head to foot in navy taffeta with a matching mask. Two young men step forward expectantly. Lucky Jada.

"Jada speaks fluent Japanese, is a qualified fighter pilot, and an Olympic gymnast … hmm." The MC winks. "Gentlemen, what am I bid?"

Jada gapes, astounded at the MC; obviously, he's talking complete garbage. She grins shyly back at the two contenders.

"A thousand bucks!" one calls.

Very quickly the bidding escalates to $5,000.

"Going once … going twice … sold!" the MC declares loudly, "to the gentleman in the mask!" And of course, all the men are wearing masks so there are hoots of laughter, applause, and cheering. Jada beams at her purchaser and quickly exits the stage.

"See? This is fun!" whispers Mia. "I hope Christian wins you, though … We don't want a brawl," she adds.

"Brawl?" I answer horrified.

"Oh yes. He was very hotheaded when he was younger." She shudders.

Christian brawling? Refined, sophisticated, likes-Tudor-choral-music Christian? I can't see it. The MC distracts me with his next introduction—a young woman in red, with long jet-black hair.

“Gentlemen, may I present the wonderful Mariah. What are we going to do about Mariah? She’s an experienced matador, plays the cello to concert standard, and she’s a champion pole-vaulter … how about that, gentlemen? What am I bid, please, for a dance with the delightful Mariah?”

Mariah glares at the MC and someone yells, very loudly, “Three thousand dollars!” It’s a masked man with blond hair and beard.

There is one counterbid, but Mariah sells for $4,000.

Christian is watching me like a hawk. Brawler Trevelyan-Grey—who would have known?

“How long ago?” I ask Mia.

She glances at me, nonplussed.

“How long ago was Christian brawling?”

“Early teens. Drove my parents crazy, coming home with cut lips and black eyes. He was expelled from two schools. He inflicted some serious damage on his opponents.”

I gape at her.

“Hasn’t he told you?” She sighs. “He got quite a bad rep among my friends. He was really persona non grata for a few years. But it stopped when he was about fifteen or sixteen.” She shrugs.

*Holy fuck.* Another piece of the jigsaw falls into place.

“So, what am I bid for the gorgeous Jill?”

“Four thousand dollars,” a deep voice calls from the left side. Jill squeals in delight.

I stop paying attention to the auction. So Christian was in that kind of trouble at school, fighting. I wonder why. I stare at him. Lily is watching us closely.

“And now, allow me to introduce the beautiful Ana.”

*Oh, shit, that’s me*. I glance nervously at Mia, and she shoos me center stage. Fortunately I don’t fall over, but stand embarrassed as hell on display for everyone. When I look at Christian, he’s smirking at me. The bastard.

“Beautiful Ana plays six musical instruments, speaks fluent Mandarin, and is keen on yoga … well, gentlemen—” Before he can even finish his sentence Christian interrupts him, glaring at the MC through his mask.

“Ten thousand dollars.” I hear Lily’s gasp of disbelief behind me.

*Oh, fuck.*

“Fifteen.”

What? We all turn as one to a tall, impeccably dressed man standing to the left of the stage. I blink at Fifty. Shit, what will he make of this? But he’s scratching his chin and giving the stranger an ironic smile. It’s obvious Christian knows him. The stranger nods politely at Christian.

“Well, gentlemen! We have high rollers in the house this evening.” The MC’s excitement emanates through his harlequin mask as he turns to beam at Christian. This is a great show, but it’s at my expense. I want to wail.

“Twenty,” counters Christian quietly.

The babble of the crowd has died. Everyone is staring at me, Christian, and Mr. Mysterious by the stage.

“Twenty-five,” the stranger says.

Could this be any more embarrassing?

Christian stares at him impassively, but he’s amused. All eyes are on Christian. What’s he going to do? My heart is in my mouth. I feel sick.

“One hundred thousand dollars,” he says, his voice ringing clear and loud through the tent.

“What the fuck?” Lily hisses audibly behind me, and a general gasp of dismay and amusement ripples through the crowd. The stranger holds his hands up in defeat, laughing, and Christian smirks at him. From the corner of my eye, I can see Mia bouncing up and down with glee.

“One hundred thousand dollars for the lovely Ana! Going once … going twice …” The MC stares at the stranger, who shakes his head with mock regret and bows chivalrously.

“Sold!” the MC cries out triumphantly.

In a deafening round of applause and cheering, Christian steps forward to take my hand and help me from the stage. He gazes at me with an amused grin as I make my way down, kisses the back of my hand then tucks it into the crook of his arm, and leads me toward the tent’s exit.

“Who was that?” I ask.

He gazes down at me. “Someone you can meet later. Right now, I want to show you something. We have about thirty minutes until the First Dance Auction finishes. Then we have to be back on the dance floor so that I can enjoy that dance I’ve paid for.”

“A very expensive dance,” I mutter disapprovingly.

“I’m sure it’ll be worth every single cent.” He smiles down at me wickedly. Oh, he has a glorious smile, and the ache is back, blossoming in my body.

We’re out on the lawn. I thought we would be heading to the boathouse, but disappointingly we seem to be heading for the dance floor where the big band is now setting up. There are at least twenty musicians, and a few guests are milling about, furtively smoking—but since most of the action is back in the tent, we don’t attract too much attention.

Christian leads me to the rear of the house and opens a French window leading into a large comfortable sitting room that I’ve not seen before. He walks

through the deserted hall toward the sweeping staircase with its elegant, polished wooden balustrade. Taking my hand from the crook of his arm, he leads me up to the second floor and up another flight of stairs to the third. Opening a white door, he ushers me into one of the bedrooms.

"This was my room," he says quietly, standing by the door and locking it behind him.

It's large, stark, and sparsely furnished. The walls are white, as is the furniture; a double bed, a desk and chair, shelves crammed with books and lined with various trophies for kickboxing, by the look of them. The walls are hung with movie posters: *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *The Truman Show*, and two framed posters featuring kickboxers. One is named Guiseppe DeNatale—I've never heard of him.

But what catches my eye is the white bulletin board above the desk, studded with myriad photographs, Mariners pennants, and ticket stubs. It's a slice of young Christian. My eyes come back to the magnificent man now standing in the center of the room. He looks at me darkly, brooding and sexy.

"I've never brought a girl in here," he murmurs.

"Never?" I whisper.

He shakes his head.

I swallow convulsively, and the ache that has been bothering me for the last couple of hours is roaring now, raw and wanting. Seeing him standing there on the royal blue carpet in that mask … it's beyond erotic. I want him. Now. Any way I can get him. I have to resist launching myself at him and ripping his clothes off. He waltzes over to me slowly.

"We don't have long, Anastasia, and the way I'm feeling right this moment, we won't need long. Turn around. Let me get you out of that dress."

I turn and stare at the door, grateful that he's locked it. Bending down he whispers softly in my ear, "Keep the mask on."

I groan as my body clenches in response. He's not even touched me yet.

He grasps the top of my dress, his fingers sliding against my skin, and the touch reverberates through my body. In one swift move, he opens the zipper. Holding my dress, he helps me to step out of it, then turns and drapes it artfully over the back of a chair. Removing his jacket, he places it over my dress. He pauses, and stares at me for a moment, drinking me in. I'm in the basque and matching panties, and I revel in his sensuous gaze.

"You know, Anastasia," he says softly as he stalks toward me, undoing his bow tie so it hangs from either side of his neck, then undoing the top three buttons of his shirt. "I was so mad when you bought my auction lot. All manner of ideas ran through my head. I had to remind myself that punishment is off the

menu. But then you volunteered." He gazes down at me through his mask. "Why did you do that?" he whispers.

"Volunteer? I don't know. Frustration … too much alcohol … worthy cause," I mutter meekly, shrugging. Maybe to get his attention?

I needed him then. I need him more now. The ache is worse, and I know he can soothe it, calm this roaring, salivating beast in me with the beast in him. His mouth presses into a line, and he slowly licks his upper lip. I want that tongue on me.

"I vowed to myself I would not spank you again, even if you begged me."

"Please," I beg.

"But then I realized you're probably very uncomfortable at the moment, and it's not something you're used to." He smirks knowingly at me, arrogant bastard, but I don't care because he's absolutely right.

"Yes," I breathe.

"So, there might be a certain … latitude. If I do this, you must promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"You will safe-word if you need to, and I will just make love to you, okay?"

"Yes." I'm panting. I want his hands on me.

He swallows, then takes my hand, and moves toward the bed. Throwing the duvet aside, he sits down, grabs a pillow, and places it beside him. He gazes up at me standing beside him and suddenly tugs hard on my hand so that I fall across his lap. He shifts slightly so my body is resting on the bed, my chest on the pillow, my face to one side. Leaning over, he sweeps my hair over my shoulder and runs his fingers through the plume of feathers on my mask.

"Put your hands behind your back," he murmurs.

*Oh!* He removes his bow tie and uses it to quickly bind my wrists so that my hands are tied behind me, resting in the small of my back.

"You really want this, Anastasia?"

I close my eyes. This is the first time since I met him that I really want this. I need it.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Why?" he asks softly as he caresses my behind with his palm.

I groan as soon as his hand makes contact with my skin. *I don't know why … You tell me not to overthink. After a day like today—arguing about the money, Leila, Mrs. Robinson, the dossier on me, the road map, this lavish party, the masks, the alcohol, the silver balls, the auction … I want this.*

"Do I need a reason?"

"No, baby, you don't," he says. "I'm just trying to understand you." His left

hand curls around my waist, holding me in place as his palm leaves my behind and lands hard, just above the junction of my thighs. The pain connects directly with the ache in my belly

*Oh, man* … I moan loudly. He hits me again, in exactly the same place. I groan again.

"Two," he murmurs. "We'll go with twelve."

*Oh my!* This feels different than the last time—so carnal, so … necessary. He caresses my behind with his long-fingered hands, and I'm helpless, trussed up and pressed into the mattress, at his mercy, and of my own free will. He hits me again, slightly to the side, and again, to the other side, then pauses as he slowly peels my panties down and pulls them off. He gently trails his palm across my behind again before continuing my spanking—each stinging smack taking the edge off my need—or fueling it—I don't know. I surrender myself to the rhythm of blows, absorbing each one, savoring each one.

"Twelve," he murmurs his voice low and harsh. He caresses my behind again and trails his fingers down toward my sex and slowly sinks two fingers inside me, moving them in a circle, around and around and around, torturing me.

I moan loudly as my body takes over, and I come and come, convulsing around his fingers. It's so intense, unexpected, and quick.

"That's right, baby," he murmurs appreciatively. He unties my wrists, keeping his fingers inside me as I lie panting and spent over him.

"I've not finished with you yet, Anastasia," he says and shifts without removing his fingers. He eases my knees onto the floor so that now I'm leaning over the bed. He kneels on the floor behind me and undoes his zipper. He slides his fingers out of me, and I hear the familiar tear of a foil packet. "Open your legs," he growls, and I comply. He strokes my behind and eases into me.

"This is going to be quick, baby," he murmurs and grabbing my hips, he eases out then slams into me.

"Ah!" I cry out, but the fullness is heavenly. He's hitting the bellyache square on, again and again, eradicating it with each sharp, sweet thrust. The feeling is mind-blowing, just what I need. I push back to meet him, thrust for thrust.

"Ana, no," he grunts, trying to still me. But I want him too much, and I grind against him, matching him thrust for thrust.

"Ana, shit," he hisses as he comes, and the tortured sound sets me off again, spiraling into a healing orgasm that goes on and on and wrings me out and leaves me spent and breathless.

Christian bends and kisses my shoulder, then pulls out of me. Placing his arms around me, he rests his head in the middle of my back, and we lie like this, both kneeling at the bedside, for what? Seconds? Minutes, even, as our breathing

calms. My bellyache has disappeared, and all I feel is a soothing, satisfying serenity.

Christian stirs and kisses my back. “I believe you owe me a dance, Miss Steele,” he murmurs.

“Hmm,” I respond, savoring the absence of achiness and basking in the afterglow.

He sits back on his heels and pulls me off the bed onto his lap. “We don’t have long. Come on.” He kisses my hair and forces me to stand.

I grumble but sit back down on the bed and collect my panties from the floor and scoop them on. Lazily I walk to the chair to retrieve my dress. I note with dispassionate interest that I did not remove my shoes during our illicit tryst. Christian is tying his bow tie, having finished straightening himself and the bed.

As I slip my dress back on, I check out the photographs on the bulletin board. Christian as a sullen teen was gorgeous even then: with Elliot and Mia on the ski slopes; on his own in Paris, the Arc de Triomphe serving as a giveaway to his location; in London; New York; the Grand Canyon; Sydney Opera House; even the Great Wall of China. Master Grey was well traveled at a young age.

There are ticket stubs to various concerts: U2, Metallica, the Verve, Sheryl Crow, the New York Philharmonic performing Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*—what an eclectic mix! And in the corner, there’s a passport-sized photograph of a young woman. It’s in black and white. She looks familiar, but for the life of me, I can’t place her. Not Mrs. Robinson, thank heavens.

“Who’s this?” I ask.

“No one of consequence,” he mutters as he slips on his jacket and straightens his bow tie. “Shall I zip you up?”

“Please. Then why is she on your bulletin board?”

“An oversight on my part. How’s my tie?” He raises his chin like a small boy, and I grin and straighten it for him.

“Now it’s perfect.”

“Like you,” he murmurs and grabs me, kissing me passionately. “Feeling better?”

“Much, thank you, Mr. Grey.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Miss Steele.”

THE GUESTS ARE ASSEMBLING on the dance floor. Christian grins at me—we’ve made it just in time—and he leads me onto the checkered floor.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for the first dance. Mr. and Dr. Grey, are you ready?” Carrick nods in agreement, his arms around Grace.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the First Dance Auction, are you ready?” We all

nod in agreement. Mia is with someone I don't recognize. I wonder what happened to Sean?

"Then we shall begin. Take it away, Sam!"

A young man strolls onto the stage amid warm applause, turns to the band behind him, and snaps his fingers. The familiar strains of "I've Got You Under My Skin" fill the air.

Christian smiles down at me, takes me in his arms, and starts to move. Oh, he dances so well, making it easy to follow. We grin at each other like idiots as he whirls me around the dance floor.

"I love this song," Christian murmurs, gazing down at me. "Seems very fitting." He's no longer grinning, but serious.

"You're under my skin, too," I respond. "Or you were in your bedroom."

He purses his lips but he's unable to hide his amusement.

"Miss Steele," he admonishes me teasingly, "I had no idea you could be so crude."

"Mr. Grey, neither did I. I think it's all my recent experiences. They've been an education."

"For both of us." Christian is serious again, and it could just be the two of us and the band. We are in our own private bubble.

As the song finishes we both applaud. Sam the singer bows graciously and introduces his band.

"May I cut in?"

I recognize the man who bid on me at the auction. Christian grudgingly lets me go, but he's amused, too.

"Be my guest. Anastasia, this is John Flynn. John, Anastasia."

*Shit!*

Christian grins and wanders off to one side of the dance floor.

"How do you do, Anastasia?" Dr. Flynn says smoothly, and I realize he's British.

"Hello," I stutter.

The band strikes up another song, and Dr. Flynn pulls me into his arms. He's much younger than I imagined, though I can't see his face. He's wearing a mask similar to Christian's. He's tall, but not as tall as Christian, and he doesn't move with Christian's easy grace.

What do I say to him? Why is Christian so fucked-up? Why did he bid on me? It's the only thing I want to ask him, but somehow that seems rude.

"I'm glad to finally meet you, Anastasia. Are you enjoying yourself?" he asks.

"I was," I whisper.

"Oh. I hope I'm not responsible for your change of heart." He gives me a

brief, warm smile that puts me a little more at ease.

"Dr. Flynn, you're the shrink. You tell me."

He grins. "That's the problem, isn't it? The shrink bit?"

I giggle. "I'm worried what I might reveal, so I'm a little self-conscious and intimidated. And really I only want to ask you about Christian."

He smiles. "First, this is a party so I'm not on duty," he whispers conspiratorially. "And second, I really can't talk to you about Christian. Besides," he teases, "we'd need until Christmas."

I gasp in shock.

"That's a doctor's joke, Anastasia."

I flush, embarrassed, and then feel slightly resentful. He's making a joke at Christian's expense. "You've just confirmed what I've been saying to Christian … that you're an expensive charlatan," I admonish him.

Dr. Flynn snorts with laughter. "You could be on to something there."

"You're British?"

"Yes. Originally from London."

"How did you find yourself here?"

"Happy circumstance."

"You don't give much away, do you?"

"There's not much to give away. I'm really a very dull person."

"That's very self-deprecating."

"It's a British trait. Part of our national character."

"Oh."

"And I could accuse you of the same, Anastasia."

"That I'm a dull person, too, Dr. Flynn?"

He snorts. "No, Anastasia. That you don't give much away."

"There's not much to give away." I smile.

"I sincerely doubt that." He unexpectedly frowns.

I flush, but the music finishes and Christian is once more by my side. Dr. Flynn releases me.

"It's been a pleasure to meet you, Anastasia." He gives me his warm smile again, and I feel that I've passed some kind of hidden test.

"John." Christian nods at him.

"Christian." Dr. Flynn returns his nod, turns on his heel, and disappears through the crowd.

Christian pulls me into his arms for the next dance.

"He's much younger than I expected," I murmur to him. "And terribly indiscreet."

Christian cocks his head to one side. "Indiscreet?"

“Oh yes, he told me everything,” I tease.

Christian tenses. “Well, in that case, I’ll get your bag. I’m sure you want nothing more to do with me,” he says softly.

I stop. “He didn’t tell me anything!” My voice fills with panic.

Christian blinks before relief floods his face. He pulls me into his arms again. “Then let’s enjoy this dance.” He beams down at me, reassuring me, and then spins me around.

Why would he think that I’d want to leave? It makes no sense.

We dance for two more numbers, and I realize I need the restroom.

“I won’t be long.”

As I make my way to the powder room, I remember I have left my purse on the dinner table, so I head down to the tent. When I enter, it’s still lit but quite deserted, except for a couple at the other end, who really ought to get a room! I reach for my bag.

“Anastasia?”

A soft voice startles me, and I turn to see a woman dressed in a long, tight, black velvet gown. Her mask is unique. It covers her face to her nose but also covers her hair. It’s stunning, with elaborate gold filigree.

“I’m so glad you’re on your own,” she says softly. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you all evening.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are.”

She pulls the mask from her face and releases her hair.

Shit! It’s Mrs. Robinson.

“I’m sorry, I startled you.”

I gape at her. *Holy cow—what the fuck does this woman want?*

I don’t know what the social conventions are for meeting known molesters of children. She’s smiling sweetly and gesturing for me to sit at the table. And because I am lacking any sphere of reference, I do as she asks out of stunned politeness, grateful that I am still wearing my mask.

“I’ll be brief, Anastasia. I know what you think of me … Christian’s told me.”

I gaze at her impassively, giving nothing away, but I’m pleased that she knows. It saves me telling her, and she’s cutting to the chase. Part of me is beyond intrigued as to what she could have to say.

She pauses, glancing over my shoulder. “Taylor’s watching us.”

I peek around to see him scanning the tent by the doorway. Sawyer is with him. They are looking anywhere but at us.

“Look, we don’t have long,” she says hurriedly. “It must be obvious to you that Christian is in love with you. I have never seen him like this, *ever*.” She emphasizes the last word.

*What? Loves me?* No. Why is she telling me? To reassure me? I don't understand.

"He won't tell you because he probably doesn't realize it himself, notwithstanding what I've said to him, but that's Christian. He's not very attuned to any positive feelings and emotions he may have. He dwells far too much on the negative. But then, you've probably worked that out for yourself. He doesn't think he's worthy."

I am reeling. *Christian loves me?* He hasn't said it, and this woman has told him that's how he feels? How bizarre.

A hundred images dance through my head: the iPad, the gliding, flying to see me, all his actions, his possessiveness, $100,000 for a dance. Is this love?

And hearing it from this woman, having her confirm it for me is, frankly, unwelcome. I'd rather hear it from him.

My heart constricts. He feels unworthy? Why?

"I've never seen him so happy, and it's obvious that you have feelings for him, too." A brief smile flits across her lips. "That's great, and I wish you both the best of everything. But what I wanted to say is if you hurt him again, I will find you, lady, and it won't be pleasant when I do."

She stares at me, ice-cold blue eyes boring into my skull, trying to get under my mask. Her threat is so astonishing, so off the wall, that an involuntary, disbelieving giggle escapes me. Of all the things she could say to me, this is the least expected.

"You think this is funny, Anastasia?" she splutters in dismay. "You didn't see him last Saturday."

My face falls and darkens. The thought of Christian unhappy is not a palatable one, and last Saturday I left him. He must have gone to her. The idea makes me queasy. Why am I sitting here, listening to this shit from her, of all people? I slowly rise, gazing at her intently.

"I'm laughing at your audacity, Mrs. Lincoln. Christian and I have nothing to do with you. And if I do leave him and you come looking for me, I'll be waiting —don't doubt it. And maybe I'll give you a taste of your own medicine on behalf of the fifteen-year-old child you molested and probably fucked up even more than he already was."

Her mouth falls open.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do than waste my time with you." I turn on my heel, adrenaline and anger coursing through my body, and stalk toward the entrance of the tent where Taylor is standing just as Christian arrives, looking flustered and worried.

"There you are," he mutters, then frowns when he sees Elena.

I stride past him, saying nothing, giving him the opportunity to choose—her or me. He makes the right choice.

"Ana," he calls. I stop and face him as he catches up with me. "What's wrong?" He gazes down at me, concern etched on his face.

"Why don't you ask your ex?" I hiss acidly.

His mouth twists and his eyes frost. "I'm asking you," he says, his voice soft but with an undertone of something far more menacing.

We glare at each other.

Okay, I can see this will end in a fight if I don't tell him. "She's threatening to come after me if I hurt you again—probably with a whip," I snap at him.

Relief flashes across his face, his mouth softening with humor. "Surely the irony of that isn't lost on you?" he says, and I can tell he's trying hard to stifle his amusement.

"This isn't funny, Christian!"

"No, you're right. I'll talk to her." He adopts his serious face, though he's still suppressing his amusement.

"You will do no such thing." I cross my arms, my anger spiking again.

He blinks at me, surprised by my outburst.

"Look, I know you're tied up with her financially, forgive the pun, but—" I stop. What am I asking him to do? Give her up? Stop seeing her? Can I do that? "I need the restroom." I glare up at him, my mouth set in a grim line.

He sighs and cocks his head to one side. Could he look any hotter? Is it the mask or just him?

"Please don't be mad. I didn't know she was here. She said she wasn't coming." His tone is placating as if he's talking to a child. Reaching up he runs his thumb along my pouting bottom lip. "Don't let Elena ruin our evening, please, Anastasia. She's really old news."

*"Old" being the operative word*, I think uncharitably, as he tips my chin up and gently grazes his lips against mine. I sigh in agreement, blinking up at him. He straightens and takes my elbow.

"I'll accompany you to the powder room so you don't get interrupted again."

He leads me across the lawn toward the luxurious temporary restrooms. Mia said they had been delivered for the occasion, but I had no idea they came in deluxe versions.

"I'll wait here for you, baby," he murmurs.

When I come out, my mood has moderated. I have decided not to let Mrs. Robinson blight my evening because that's probably what she wants. Christian is on the phone some distance away and out of earshot of the few people laughing and chatting nearby. As I get closer, I can hear him. He's very terse.

“Why did you change your mind? I thought we’d agreed. Well, leave her alone … This is the first regular relationship I’ve ever had, and I don’t want you jeopardizing it through some misplaced concern for me. Leave. Her. Alone. I mean it, Elena.” He pauses, listening. “No, of course not.” He frowns deeply as he says this. Glancing up, he sees me regarding him. “I have to go. Good night.” He presses the off button.

I cock my head to one side and raise an eyebrow at him. Why is he phoning her?

“How’s the old news?”

“Cranky,” he replies sardonically. “Do you want to dance some more? Or would you like to go?” He glances at his watch. “The fireworks start in five minutes.”

“I love fireworks.”

“We’ll stay and watch them, then.” He puts his arms around me and pulls me close. “Don’t let her come between us, please.”

“She cares about you,” I mutter.

“Yes, and I her … as a friend.”

“I think it’s more than a friendship to her.”

His brow furrows. “Anastasia, Elena and I … it’s complicated. We have a shared history. But it is just that, history. As I’ve said to you time and time again, she’s a good friend. That’s all. Please, forget about her.” He kisses my hair, and in the interest of not ruining our evening, I let it go. I am just trying to understand.

We wander hand in hand back to the dance floor. The band is still in full swing.

“Anastasia.”

I turn to find Carrick standing behind us.

“I wondered if you’d do me the honor of the next dance.” Carrick holds his hand out to me. Christian shrugs and smiles, releasing my hand, and I let Carrick lead me onto the dance floor. Sam the bandleader launches into “Come Fly with Me,” and Carrick puts his arm around my waist and gently whirls me into the throng.

“I wanted to thank you for the generous contribution to our charity, Anastasia.”

From his tone, I suspect this is his roundabout way of asking whether I can afford it.

“Mr. Grey—”

“Call me Carrick, please, Ana.”

“I’m delighted to be able to contribute. I unexpectedly came into some money.

I don’t need it. And it’s such a worthy cause.”

He smiles down at me, and I seize the opportunity for some innocent inquiries. *Carpe diem*, my subconscious hisses from behind her hand.

“Christian told me a little about his past, so I think it’s appropriate to support your work,” I add, hoping that this might encourage Carrick to give me a small insight into the mystery that is his son.

Carrick is surprised. “Did he? That’s unusual. You certainly have had a very positive effect on him, Anastasia. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so, so … buoyant.”

I flush.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Well, in my limited experience, he’s a very unusual man,” I murmur.

“He is,” Carrick agrees quietly.

“Christian’s early childhood sounds hideously traumatic, from what he’s told me.”

Carrick frowns, and I worry if I’ve overstepped the mark.

“My wife was the doctor on duty when the police brought him in. He was skin and bones, and badly dehydrated. He wouldn’t speak.” Carrick frowns again, lost in the awful memory, despite the up-tempo music surrounding us. “In fact, he didn’t speak for nearly two years. It was playing the piano that eventually brought him out of himself. Oh, and Mia’s arrival, of course.” He smiles down at me fondly.

“He plays beautifully. And he’s accomplished so much, you must be very proud of him.” I sound distracted. *Holy Shit. Didn’t speak for two years*.

“Immensely so. He’s a very determined, very capable, very bright young man. But between you and me, Anastasia, it’s seeing him like he is this evening—carefree, acting his age—that’s the real thrill for his mother and me. We were both commenting on it today. I believe we have you to thank for that.”

I think I blush to my roots. What am I supposed to say to this?

“He’s always been such a loner. We never thought we’d see him with anyone. Whatever you’re doing, please don’t stop. We’d like to see him happy.” He stops suddenly, as if *he’s* overstepped the mark. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I shake my head. “I’d like to see him happy, too,” I mutter, unsure of what else to say.

“Well, I’m very glad you came this evening. It’s been a real pleasure seeing the two of you together.”

As the final strains of “Come Fly with Me” fade away, Carrick releases me and bows, and I curtsy, mirroring his civility.

“That’s enough dancing with old men.” Christian is at my side again. Carrick laughs.

“Less of the ‘old,’ son. I’ve been known to have my moments.” Carrick winks at me playfully and saunters into the crowd.

“I think my dad likes you,” Christian mutters as he watches his father mingle with the crowd.

“What’s not to like?” I peek coquettishly up at him through my lashes.

“Good point well made, Miss Steele.” He pulls me into an embrace as the band starts to play “It Had to Be You.”

“Dance with me,” he whispers seductively.

“With pleasure, Mr. Grey.” I smile in response, and he sweeps me across the dance floor once more.

AT MIDNIGHT WE STROLL down toward the shore between the tent and the boathouse where the other partygoers are gathered to watch the fireworks. The MC, back in charge, has permitted the removal of masks, the better to see the display. Christian has his arm around me, but I’m aware that Taylor and Sawyer are close by, probably because we’re in the crowd now. They are looking anywhere but at the dockside where two technicians dressed in black are making their final preparations. Seeing Taylor reminds me of Leila. Perhaps she’s here. *Shit*. The thought chills my blood, and I huddle closer to Christian. He gazes down at me as he pulls me closer.

“You okay, baby? Cold?”

“I’m fine.” I glance quickly behind us and see the other two security guys, whose names I forget, standing close by. Moving me in front of him, Christian puts both his arms around me over my shoulders.

Suddenly a stirring classical soundtrack booms over the dock and two rockets soar into the air, exploding with a deafening *bang* over the bay, lighting it all in a dazzling canopy of sparkling orange and white that’s reflected in a glittering shower over the still calm water of the bay. My jaw drops as several more rockets fire into the air and explode in a kaleidoscope of color.

I can’t recall ever seeing a display this impressive, except perhaps on television, and it never looks this good on TV. It’s all in time to the music. Volley after volley, bang after bang, and light after light as the crowd answers with gasps and oohs and ahs. It is out of this world.

On the pontoon in the bay several silver fountains of light shoot up twenty feet in the air, changing color through blue, red, orange, and back to silver—and yet more rockets explode as the music reaches its crescendo.

My face is beginning to ache from the ridiculous grin of wonder plastered

across it. I glance at Fifty, and he's the same, marveling like a child at the sensational show. For the finale a volley of six rockets shoot into the dark and explode simultaneously, bathing us in a glorious golden light as the crowd erupts into frantic, enthusiastic applause.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the MC calls out as the cheers and whistles fade. "Just one note to add at the end of this wonderful evening; your generosity has raised a total of one million eight hundred and fifty-three thousand dollars!"

Spontaneous applause erupts again, and out on the pontoon, a message lights up in silver streams of sparks forming the words "Thank You from Coping Together," sparkling and shimmering over the water.

"Oh, Christian … that was wonderful." I grin up at him and he bends down to kiss me.

"Time to go," he murmurs, a broad smile on his beautiful face, and his words hold so much promise.

Suddenly, I feel very tired.

He glances up again, and Taylor is close, the crowd dispersing around us. They don't speak but something passes between them.

"Stay with me a moment. Taylor wants us to wait while the crowd disperses."

*Oh*.

"I think that fireworks display probably aged him a hundred years," he adds.

"Doesn't he like fireworks?"

Christian gazes down at me fondly and shakes his head but doesn't elaborate.

"So, Aspen," he says, and I know he's trying to distract me from something. It works.

"Oh … I haven't paid for my bid," I gasp.

"You can send a check. I have the address."

"You were really mad."

"Yes, I was."

I grin. "I blame you and your toys."

"You were quite overcome, Miss Steele. A most satisfactory outcome if I recall." He smiles salaciously. "Incidentally, where are they?"

"The silver balls? In my bag."

"I'd like them back. They are far too potent a device to be left in your innocent hands."

"Worried I might be quite overcome again, maybe with somebody else?"

His eyes glitter dangerously. "I hope that's not going to happen," he says, a cool edge to his voice. "But no, Ana. I want all your pleasure."

Whoa. "Don't you trust me?"

"Implicitly. Now, can I have them back?"

“I’ll think about it.”

He narrows his eyes at me.

There’s music once more from the dance floor but it’s a DJ playing a thumping dance number, the bass pounding out a relentless beat.

“Do you want to dance?”

“I’m really tired, Christian. I’d like to go, if that’s okay.”

Christian glances at Taylor, who nods, and we set off toward the house, following a couple of drunken guests. I’m grateful when Christian takes my hand—my feet are aching from the dizzying height and tight confinement of my shoes.

Mia comes bounding up to us. “You’re not going, are you? The real music’s just beginning. Come on, Ana.” She grabs my hand.

“Mia,” Christian admonishes her. “Anastasia’s tired. We’re going home. Besides, we have a big day tomorrow.”

*We do?*

Mia pouts but surprisingly doesn’t push Christian.

“You must come by sometime next week. Maybe we can hit the mall?”

“Sure, Mia.” I grin, though in the back of my mind I’m wondering how since I have to work for a living.

She gives me a quick kiss then hugs Christian fiercely, taking us both by surprise. More astoundingly still, she places her hands directly on the lapels of his jacket, and he just gazes down at her, indulgently.

“I like seeing you this happy,” she says sweetly and kisses him on the cheek. “Bye. You guys have fun.” She skips off toward her waiting friends—among them Lily, who looks even more sour-faced without her mask.

I wonder idly where Sean is.

“We’ll say good night to my parents before we leave. Come.” Christian leads me through a gaggle of guests to Grace and Carrick, who wish us fond and warm farewells.

“Please do come again, Anastasia, it’s been lovely having you here,” says Grace kindly.

I am a little overwhelmed by both her and Carrick’s reaction. Fortunately, Grace’s parents have retired for the evening, so at least I am spared their enthusiasm.

In a relaxed, weary silence, Christian and I walk hand in hand to the front of the house, where countless cars are lined up waiting to collect guests. I glance up at Fifty. He looks happy. It’s a real pleasure to see him this way, though I suspect it’s unusual after such an extraordinary day.

“Are you warm enough?” he asks.

“Yes, thank you.” I clasp my satin wrap.

“I really enjoyed this evening, Anastasia. Thank you.”

“Me too, some parts more than others.” I grin.

He grins and nods, then his brow creases. “Don’t bite your lip,” he warns in a way that makes my blood sing.

“What did you mean about a big day tomorrow?” I ask to distract myself.

“Dr. Greene is coming to sort you out. Plus, I have a surprise for you.”

“Dr. Greene!” I halt.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I hate condoms,” he says quietly. His eyes glint in the soft light from the paper lanterns, gauging my reaction.

“It’s my body,” I mutter, annoyed that he hasn’t asked me.

“It’s mine, too,” he whispers.

I gaze up at him as various guests pass by, ignoring us. He looks so earnest. Yes, my body is his … he knows it better than I do.

I reach up, and he flinches ever so slightly but stays still. Grasping the corner of his bow tie, I pull so it unravels, revealing the top button of his shirt. Gently I undo it.

“You look hot like this,” I whisper. Actually he looks hot all the time, but really hot like this.

He smiles. “I need to get you home. Come.”

At the car, Sawyer hands Christian an envelope. He frowns at it and glances at me as Taylor ushers me into the car. Taylor looks relieved for some reason. Christian climbs in and hands me the envelope, unopened, as Taylor and Sawyer take their seats in the front.

“It’s addressed to you. One of the staff gave it to Sawyer. No doubt from yet another ensnared heart.” Christian’s mouth twists. It’s obvious this is an unpleasant concept to him.

I stare at the note. Who is this from? Ripping it open, I read it quickly in the dim light. Holy shit, it’s from *her*! Why won’t she leave me alone?

*I may have misjudged you. And you have definitely misjudged me. Call me if you need to fill in any of the blanks—we could have lunch. Christian doesn’t want me talking to you, but I would be more than happy to help. Don’t get me wrong, I approve, believe me—but so help me, if you hurt him … He’s been hurt enough. Call me: (206) 279-6261*

*Mrs. Robinson*

*Fuck, she’s signed it Mrs. Robinson! He told her. The bastard.*

“You told her?”

“Told who, what?”

“That I call her Mrs. Robinson,” I snap.

“It’s from Elena?” Christian is shocked. “This is ridiculous,” he grumbles, running a hand through his hair, and I can tell he’s irritated. “I’ll deal with her tomorrow. Or Monday,” he mutters bitterly.

And though I’m ashamed to admit it, a very small part of me is pleased. My subconscious nods sagely. Elena is pissing him off, and this can only be good—surely. I decide to say nothing for now but stash her note in my bag, and in a gesture guaranteed to lighten his mood, I hand him back the balls.

“Until next time,” I murmur.

He glances at me, and it’s hard to see his face in the dark, but I think he’s smirking. He reaches for my hand and squeezes it.

I gaze out of the window into the darkness, reflecting on this long day. I’ve learned so much about him, gleaned many missing details—the salons, the road map, his childhood—but there’s still much more to discover. And what about Mrs. R? Yes, she cares for him, and deeply, it would appear. I can see that, and he cares for her—but not in the same way. I don’t know what to think anymore. All this information is making my head hurt.

CHRISTIAN WAKES ME JUST as we pull up outside Escala. “Do I need to carry you in?” he asks gently.

I shake my head sleepily. No way.

As we stand in the elevator, I lean against him, putting my head against his shoulder. Sawyer stands in front of us, shifting uncomfortably.

“It’s been a long day, eh, Anastasia?”

I nod.

“Tired?”

I nod.

“You’re not very talkative.”

I nod and he grins.

“Come. I’ll put you to bed.” He takes my hand as we exit the elevator, but we stop in the foyer when Sawyer holds up his hand. In that split second, I am instantly wide awake. Sawyer talks into his sleeve. I had no idea that he was wearing a radio.

“Will do, T,” he says and turns to face us. “Mr. Grey, the tires on Ms. Steele’s Audi have been slashed and paint thrown all over it.”

*Holy shit. My car!* Who would do that? And I know the answer as soon as the question materializes in my mind. Leila. I glance up at Christian, and he blanches.

“Taylor is concerned that the perp may have entered the apartment and may

still be there. He wants to make sure."

"I see," Christian whispers. "What's Taylor's plan?"

"He's coming up in the service elevator with Ryan and Reynolds. They'll do a sweep, then give us the all clear. I'm to wait with you, sir."

"Thank you, Sawyer." Christian tightens his arm around me. "This day just gets better and better," he sighs bitterly, nuzzling my hair. "Listen, I can't stand here and wait. Sawyer, take care of Miss Steele. Don't let her in until you have the all clear. I am sure Taylor is overreacting. She can't get into the apartment."

*What?* "No, Christian—you have to stay with me," I plead.

Christian releases me. "Do as you're told, Anastasia. Wait here."

No!

"Sawyer?" Christian says.

Sawyer opens the foyer door to let Christian enter the apartment then shuts the door behind him and stands in front of it, staring impassively down at me.

*Holy shit. Christian!* All manner of horrific outcomes run through my mind, but all I can do is stand and wait.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Sawyer talks into his sleeve again.

"Taylor, Mr. Grey has entered the apartment." He flinches and grabs the earpiece, pulling it out of his ear, presumably receiving some powerful invective from Taylor.

*Oh no—if Taylor is worried …*

"Please let me go in," I plead.

"Sorry, Miss Steele. This won't take long." Sawyer holds both hands up in a defensive gesture. "Taylor and the guys are just coming into the apartment now."

Oh. I feel so impotent. Standing stock-still, I listen avidly for the slightest sound, but all I hear is my aggravated breathing. It's loud and shallow, my scalp prickles, my mouth is dry, and I feel faint. *Please, let Christian be okay*, I pray silently.

I have no idea how much time passes, and still we hear nothing. Surely no sound is good—there are no gunshots. I begin pacing around the table in the foyer and examine the paintings on the walls to distract myself.

I've never really looked at them before: all figurative paintings, all religious—the Madonna and child, all sixteen of them. *How odd*.

Christian isn't religious, is he? All of the paintings in the great room are abstracts—these are so different. They don't distract me for long. *Where is Christian?*

I stare at Sawyer and he watches me impassively.

"What's happening?"

"No news, Miss Steele."

Abruptly, the doorknob moves. Sawyer spins like a top and draws a gun from his shoulder holster.

I freeze. Christian appears at the door.

"All clear," he says, frowning at Sawyer, who puts his gun away immediately and steps back to let me in.

"Taylor is overreacting," Christian grumbles as he holds out his hand to me. I stand gaping at him, unable to move, drinking in every little detail: his unruly hair, the tightness around his eyes, the tense jaw, the top two buttons of his shirt

undone. I think I must have aged ten years. Christian frowns at me in concern, his eyes dark.

"It's all right, baby." He moves toward me, enveloping me in his arms, and kisses my hair. "Come on, you're tired. Bed."

"I was so worried," I murmur, rejoicing in his embrace and inhaling his sweet, sweet scent with my head against his chest.

"I know. We're all jumpy."

Sawyer has disappeared, presumably into the apartment.

"Honestly, your exes are proving to be very challenging, Mr. Grey," I mutter wryly. Christian relaxes.

"Yes. They are."

He releases me and, taking my hand, leads me across the hallway and into the great room.

"Taylor and his crew are checking all the closets and cupboards. I don't think she's here."

"Why would she be here?" It makes no sense.

"Exactly."

"Could she get in?"

"I don't see how. But Taylor is overcautious sometimes."

"Have you searched your playroom?" I whisper.

Christian glances quickly at me, his brow creasing. "Yes, it's locked—but Taylor and I checked."

I take a deep, cleansing breath.

"Do you want a drink or anything?" Christian asks.

"No." Fatigue sweeps through me—I just want to go to bed.

"Come. Let me put you to bed. You look exhausted." Christian's expression softens.

I frown. Isn't he coming, too? Does he want to sleep alone?

I'm relieved when he leads me into his bedroom. I place my clutch bag on the chest of drawers and open it to empty the contents. I spy Mrs. Robinson's note.

"Here." I pass it to Christian. "I don't know if you want to read this. I want to ignore it."

Christian scans it briefly and his jaw tenses.

"I'm not sure what blanks she can fill in," he says dismissively. "I need to talk to Taylor." He gazes down at me. "Let me unzip your dress."

"Are you going to call the police about the car?" I ask as I turn around.

He sweeps my hair out of the way, his fingers softly grazing my naked back, and tugs down my zipper.

"No. I don't want the police involved. Leila needs help, not police

intervention, and I don't want them here. We just have to double our efforts to find her." He leans down and plants a gentle kiss on my shoulder.

"Go to bed," he orders, and then he's gone.

I LIE, STARING AT the ceiling, waiting for him to return. So much has happened today, so much to process. Where to start?

I wake with a jolt, disoriented. Have I been asleep? Blinking in the dim glow the hallway casts through the slightly open bedroom door, I notice that Christian is not with me. Where is he? I glance up. Standing at the end of the bed is a shadow. A woman, maybe? Dressed in black? It's difficult to tell.

In my befuddled state, I reach across and switch on the bedside light, then turn back to look but there's no one there. I shake my head. Did I imagine it? Dream it?

I sit up and look around the room, a vague, insidious unease gripping me—but I am quite alone.

I rub my face. What time is it? Where's Christian? The alarm clock shows that it's two fifteen in the morning.

Climbing groggily out of bed, I set off to hunt him down, disconcerted by my overactive imagination. I am seeing things now. It must be a reaction to the dramatic events of the evening.

The main room is empty, the only light emanating from the three pendulum lamps above the breakfast bar. But his study door is ajar, and I hear him on the phone.

"I don't know why you're calling at this hour. I have nothing to say to you … well, you can tell me now. You don't have to leave a message."

I stand motionless by the door, eavesdropping guiltily. Who is he talking to?

"No, you listen. I asked you, and now I am telling you. Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with you. Do you understand?"

He sounds belligerent and angry. I hesitate to knock.

"I know you do. But I mean it, Elena. Leave her the fuck alone. Do I need to put it in triplicate for you? Are you hearing me? … Good. Good night." He slams the phone down on the desk.

*Oh, shit*. I knock tentatively on the door.

"What?" he snarls, and I almost want to run and hide.

He sits at his desk with his head in his hands. He glances up, his expression ferocious, but his face softens immediately when he sees me. His eyes are wide and cautious. Suddenly, he looks so tired and my heart constricts.

He blinks, and his eyes sweep down my legs and back again. I am wearing one of his T-shirts.

“You should be in satin or silk, Anastasia,” he breathes. “But even in my T-shirt you look beautiful.”

Oh, an unexpected compliment. “I missed you. Come to bed.”

He rises slowly out of the chair, still in his white shirt and black dress pants. But now his eyes are shining and full of promise … but there’s a trace of sadness, too. He stands in front of me, staring intently but not touching me.

“Do you know what you mean to me?” he murmurs. “If something happened to you, because of me …” His voice trails off, his brow creasing, and the pain that flashes across his face is almost palpable. He looks so vulnerable—his fear very much apparent.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” I reassure him, my voice soothing. I reach up and stroke his face, running my fingers through the stubble on his cheek. It’s unexpectedly soft. “Your beard grows quickly,” I whisper, unable to hide the wonder in my voice at this beautiful, fucked-up man who stands before me.

I trace the line of his bottom lip then trail my fingers down his throat, to the faint smudge of lipstick at the base of his neck. He gazes down at me, still not touching me, his lips parted. I run my index finger along the line, and he closes his eyes. His soft breathing quickens. My fingers reach the edge of his shirt, and I run them down to the next fastened button.

“I’m not going to touch you. I just want to undo your shirt,” I whisper.

His eyes open wide, regarding me with alarm. But he doesn’t move, and he doesn’t stop me. Very slowly I unfasten the button, holding the material away from his skin, and move tentatively down to the next button, repeating the process—slowly, concentrating on what I am doing.

I don’t want to touch him. *Well, I do … but I won’t.* On the fourth button, the red line reappears, and I smile shyly up at him.

“Back on home territory.” I trace the line with my fingers before undoing the final button. I pull his shirt open and move to his cuffs, removing his black polished stone cufflinks one at a time.

“Can I take your shirt off?” I ask, my voice low.

He nods, eyes still wide, as I reach up and pull his shirt over his shoulders. He frees his hands so he’s standing in front of me naked from the waist up. With his shirt off, he seems to recover his equilibrium. He smirks down at me.

“What about my pants, Miss Steele?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“In the bedroom. I want you in your bed.”

“Do you, now? Miss Steele, you are insatiable.”

“I can’t think why.” I grab his hand, pull him from his study, and lead him to his bedroom. The room is chilly.

“You opened the balcony door?” he asks, frowning down at me as we arrive

in his room.

"No." I don't remember doing that. I recall scanning the room when I woke. The door was definitely closed.

*Oh shit* … All the blood rushes from my face, and I stare at Christian as my mouth falls open.

"What?" he snaps, glaring at me.

"When I woke … there was someone in here," I whisper. "I thought it was my imagination."

"What?" He looks horrified and dashes to the balcony door, peers out, then steps back into the room and locks the door behind him. "Are you sure? Who?" he asks his voice tight.

"A woman, I think. It was dark. I'd only just woken up."

"Get dressed," he snarls at me on his way back in. "Now!"

"My clothes are upstairs," I whimper.

He pulls open one of the drawers in his chest of drawers and fishes out a pair of sweatpants.

"Put these on." They are far too big, but he is not to be argued with.

He swipes a T-shirt, too, and quickly pulls it over his head. Grabbing the bedside phone, he presses two buttons.

"She's still fucking here," he hisses down the phone.

Approximately three seconds later, Taylor and one of the other security guys burst into Christian's bedroom. Christian gives them a précis of what has happened.

"How long ago?" Taylor demands, staring at me all businesslike. He's still wearing his jacket. Does this man ever sleep?

"About ten minutes," I mutter, for some reason feeling guilty.

"She knows the apartment like the back of her hand," says Christian. "I am taking Anastasia away now. She's hiding here somewhere. Find her. When is Gail back?"

"Tomorrow evening, sir."

"She's not to return until this place is secure. Understand?" Christian snaps.

"Yes, sir. Will you be going to Bellevue?"

"I'm not leading this problem to my parents. Book me somewhere."

"Yes. I'll call you."

"Aren't we all overreacting slightly?" I ask.

Christian glowers at me. "She may have a gun," he growls.

"Christian, she was standing at the end of the bed. She could have shot me then if that's what she wanted to do."

Christian pauses for a moment to rein in his temper, I think. In a menacingly

soft voice he says, “I’m not prepared to take the risk. Taylor, Anastasia needs shoes.”

Christian disappears into his closet while the security guy watches me. I can’t remember his name, Ryan maybe. He looks alternately down the hall and to the balcony windows. Christian emerges a couple of minutes later with a leather messenger bag, wearing jeans and his pinstriped blazer. He drapes a denim jacket around my shoulders.

“Come.” He clasps my hand tightly, and I have to practically run to keep up with his long strides into the great room.

“I can’t believe she could hide somewhere in here,” I mutter, staring out the balcony doors.

“It’s a big place. You haven’t seen it all yet.”

“Why don’t you just call her … tell her you want to talk to her?”

“Anastasia, she’s unstable, and she may be armed,” he says irritably.

“So we just run?”

“For now—yes.”

“Supposing she tries to shoot Taylor?”

“Taylor knows and understands guns,” he says with distaste. “He’ll be quicker with a gun than she is.”

“Ray was in the army. He taught me to shoot.”

Christian raises his eyebrows and for a moment looks utterly bemused. “You, with a gun?” he says incredulously.

“Yes.” I am affronted. “I can shoot, Mr. Grey, so you’d better beware. It’s not just crazy ex-subs you need to worry about.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, Miss Steele,” he answers dryly, amused, and it feels good to know that even in this ridiculously tense situation, I can make him smile.

Taylor meets us in the foyer and hands me my small suitcase and my black Converse sneakers. I am stunned that he’s packed me some clothes. I smile shyly at him with gratitude, and his returning smile is swift and reassuring. Before I can stop myself I hug him, hard. He’s taken by surprise, and when I release him, he’s pink in both cheeks.

“Be careful,” I murmur.

“Yes, Miss Steele,” he mutters, embarrassed.

Christian frowns at me and then looks questioningly at Taylor, who smiles very slightly and adjusts his tie.

“Let me know where I’m going.” Christian says.

Taylor reaches into his jacket, pulls out his wallet, and hands Christian a credit card.

“You might want to use this when you get there.”

Christian nods. “Good thinking.”

Ryan joins us. “Sawyer and Reynolds found nothing,” he says to Taylor.

“Accompany Mr. Grey and Miss Steele to the garage,” Taylor orders.

The garage is deserted. Well, it is nearly three in the morning. Christian ushers me into the passenger seat of the R8 and puts my case and his bag in the trunk at the front of the car. The Audi beside us is a complete mess—every tire slashed, white paint splattered all over it. It’s chilling and makes me grateful that Christian is taking me somewhere else.

“A replacement will arrive on Monday,” Christian says bleakly when he’s seated beside me.

“How could she have known it was my car?”

He glances anxiously at me and sighs. “She had an Audi A3. I buy one for all my submissives—it’s one of the safest cars in its class.”

Oh. “So, not so much a graduation present, then.”

“Anastasia, despite what I hoped, you have never been my submissive, so technically it *is* a graduation present.” He pulls out of the parking space and speeds to the exit.

*Despite what he hoped. Oh no* … My subconscious shakes her head sadly. This is what we come back to all the time.

“Are you still hoping?” I whisper.

The in-car phone buzzes. “Grey,” Christian snaps.

“Fairmont Olympic. In my name.”

“Thank you, Taylor. And, Taylor, be careful.”

Taylor pauses. “Yes, sir,” he says quietly, and Christian hangs up.

The streets of Seattle are deserted, and Christian roars up Fifth Avenue toward I-5. Once on the interstate, he floors the gas pedal, heading north. He accelerates so quickly I’m momentarily thrown back in my seat.

I peek at him. He’s deep in thought, radiating a deadly brooding silence. He hasn’t answered my question. He glances frequently at the rearview mirror, and I realize he’s checking that we’re not being followed. Perhaps that’s why we’re on I-5. I thought the Fairmont was in Seattle.

I gaze out of the window, trying to rationalize my exhausted, overactive mind. If she’d wanted to hurt me, she had ample opportunity in the bedroom.

“No. It’s not what I hope for, not anymore. I thought that was obvious.” Christian interrupts my introspection, his voice soft.

I blink at him, pulling his denim jacket tighter around me, and I don’t know if the chill is emanating from within me or from outside.

“I worry that, you know … that I’m not enough.”

“You’re more than enough. For the love of God, Anastasia, what do I have to

do?"

*Tell me about yourself. Tell me you love me*.

"Why did you think I'd leave when I told you Dr. Flynn had told me all there was to know about you?"

He sighs heavily, closing his eyes for a moment, and for the longest time he doesn't answer. "You cannot begin to understand the depths of my depravity, Anastasia. And it's not something I want to share with you."

"And you really think I'd leave if I knew?" My voice is high, incredulous. Doesn't he understand that I love him? "Do you think so little of me?"

"I know you'll leave," he says sadly.

"Christian … I think that's very unlikely. I can't imagine being without you." *Ever …*

"You left me once—I don't want to go there again."

"Elena said she saw you last Saturday," I whisper quietly.

"She didn't." He frowns.

"You didn't go to see her when I left?"

"No," he snaps, irritated. "I just told you I didn't—and I don't like to be doubted," he scolds. "I didn't go anywhere last weekend. I sat and made the glider you gave me. Took me forever," he adds quietly.

My heart clenches again. Mrs. Robinson said she saw him.

Did she or didn't she? She's lying. Why?

"Contrary to what Elena thinks, I don't rush to her with all my problems, Anastasia. I don't rush to anybody. You may have noticed—I'm not much of a talker." He tightens his hold on the steering wheel.

"Carrick told me you didn't talk for two years."

"Did he, now?" Christian's mouth presses into a hard line.

"I kind of pumped him for information." Embarrassed, I stare at my fingers.

"So what else did Daddy say?"

"He said your mom was the doctor who examined you when you were brought into the hospital. After you were discovered in your apartment."

Christian's expression remains blank … careful.

"He said learning the piano helped. And Mia."

His lips curl in a fond smile at the mention of her name. After a moment he says, "She was about six months old when she arrived. I was thrilled, Elliot less so. He'd already had to contend with my arrival. She was perfect." The sweet, sad awe in his voice is affecting. "Less so now, of course," he mutters, and I recall her successful attempts at the ball to thwart our lascivious intentions. It makes me giggle.

Christian gives me a sideways glance. "You find that amusing, Miss Steele?"

“She seemed determined to keep us apart.”

He laughs mirthlessly. “Yes, she’s quite accomplished.” He reaches across and squeezes my knee. “But we got there in the end.” He smiles then glances in the rearview mirror once more. “I don’t think we’ve been followed.” He turns off I-5 and heads back to central Seattle.

“Can I ask you something about Elena?” We are stopped at some traffic lights.

He gazes at me warily. “If you must,” he mutters sullenly, but I don’t let his irritability deter me.

“You told me ages ago that she loved you in a way you found acceptable. What did that mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks.

“Not to me.”

“I was out of control. I couldn’t bear to be touched. I can’t bear it now. For a fourteen, fifteen-year-old adolescent boy with hormones raging, it was a difficult time. She showed me a way to let off steam.”

*Oh*. “Mia said you were a brawler.”

“Christ, what is it with my loquacious family? Actually—it’s you.” We’ve stopped at more lights, and he narrows his eyes at me. “You inveigle information out of people.” He shakes his head in mock disgust.

“Mia volunteered that information. In fact, she was very forthcoming. She was worried you’d start a brawl in the tent if you didn’t win me at the auction,” I mutter indignantly.

“Oh, baby, there was no danger of that. There was no way I would let anyone else dance with you.”

“You let Dr. Flynn.”

“He’s always the exception to the rule.”

Christian pulls into the impressive, leafy driveway of the Fairmont Olympic Hotel and parks near the front door, beside a quaint stone fountain.

“Come.” He climbs out of the car and retrieves our luggage. A valet rushes toward us, looking surprised—no doubt at our late arrival. Christian tosses him the car keys.

“Name of Taylor,” he says. The valet nods and can’t contain his glee as he leaps into the R8 and drives off. Christian takes my hand and strides into the lobby.

As I stand beside him at the reception desk, I feel utterly ridiculous. Here I am, in Seattle’s most prestigious hotel, dressed in an oversized denim jacket, oversized sweatpants, and an old T-shirt next to this elegant Greek god. No wonder the receptionist is looking from one to the other as if the equation doesn’t add up. Of course, she’s overawed by Christian. I roll my eyes as she

flushes crimson and stutters. *Even her hands are shaking*.

"Do … you need a hand … with your bags, Mr. Taylor?" she asks, going scarlet again.

"No, Mrs. Taylor and I can manage."

*Mrs. Taylor!* But I'm not wearing a ring. I put my hands behind my back.

"You're in the Cascade Suite, Mr. Taylor, eleventh floor. Our bellboy will help with your bags."

"We're fine," Christian says curtly. "Where are the elevators?"

Miss Flushing Crimson explains, and Christian grasps my hand once more. I glance briefly around the impressive, sumptuous lobby full of overstuffed chairs, deserted save for a dark-haired woman sitting on a cozy sofa, feeding tidbits to her Westie. She glances up and smiles at us as we make our way to the elevators. So, the hotel allows pets? Odd for a place so grand!

The suite has two bedrooms, a formal dining room, and comes complete with grand piano. A log fire blazes in the massive main room. This suite is bigger than my apartment.

"Well, Mrs. Taylor, I don't know about you, but I'd really like a drink," Christian mutters, locking the front door securely.

In the bedroom, he puts my case and his satchel on the ottoman at the foot of the king-sized four-poster bed and leads me into the main room where the fire is burning brightly. It's a welcome sight. I stand and warm my hands while Christian fixes us both a drink.

"Armagnac?"

"Please."

After a moment, he joins me by the fire and hands me a crystal brandy glass.

"It's been quite a day, huh?"

I nod and his gaze is searching, concerned.

"I'm okay," I whisper reassuringly. "How about you?"

"Well, right now I'd like to drink this and then, if you're not too tired, take you to bed and lose myself in you."

"I think that can be arranged, Mr. Taylor." I smile shyly at him as he shuffles out of his shoes and peels off his socks.

"Mrs. Taylor, stop biting your lip," he whispers.

I blush into my glass. The Armagnac is delicious, leaving a burning warmth in its wake as it glides silkily down my throat. When I glance up at Christian, he's sipping his brandy, watching me, his eyes dark—hungry.

"You never cease to amaze me, Anastasia. After a day like today—or yesterday, rather—you're not whining or running off into the hills screaming. I am in awe of you. You're very strong."

“You’re a very good reason to stay,” I murmur. “I told you, Christian, I’m not going anywhere, no matter what you’ve done. You know how I feel about you.”

His mouth twists as if he doubts my words, and his brow creases as if what I’m saying is painful for him to hear. Oh, Christian, what do I have to do to make you realize how I feel?

*Let him beat you*, my subconscious sneers. I scowl inwardly at her.

“Where are you going to hang José’s portraits of me?” I try to lighten the mood.

“That depends.” His lips twitch. This is obviously a much more palatable topic of conversation for him.

“On what?”

“Circumstances,” he says mysteriously. “His show’s not over yet, so I don’t have to decide straightaway.”

I cock my head to one side and narrow my eyes.

“You can look as sternly as you like, Mrs. Taylor. I’m saying nothing,” he teases.

“I may torture the truth from you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Really, Anastasia, I don’t think you should make promises you can’t fulfill.”

Oh my, is that what he thinks? I place my glass on the mantelpiece, reach over, and much to Christian’s surprise, take his glass and place it beside mine.

“We’ll just have to see about that,” I murmur. Very bravely—emboldened by the brandy, no doubt—I take Christian’s hand and pull him toward the bedroom. At the foot of the bed I stop. Christian is trying to hide his amusement.

“Now that you have me in here, Anastasia, what are you going to do with me?” he teases, his voice low.

“I’m going to start by undressing you. I want to finish what I started earlier.” I reach for the lapels on his jacket, careful not to touch him, and he doesn’t flinch but he’s holding his breath.

Gently, I push his jacket over his shoulders, and his eyes stay on mine, all traces of humor gone, as they grow larger, burning into me, wary … and needful? There are so many interpretations of his look. *What is he thinking?* I place his jacket on the ottoman.

“Now your T-shirt,” I whisper and lift it by the hem. He cooperates, raising his arms and backing away, making it easier for me to pull it over his head. Once off, he gazes down at me, intently, wearing just his jeans that hang so provocatively from his hips. The band of his boxer briefs is visible.

My eyes move hungrily up across his taut stomach to the remains of the lipstick line, faded and smudged, then up to his chest. I want nothing more than

to run my tongue through his chest hair to savor his taste.

"Now what?" he whispers, eyes blazing.

"I want to kiss you here." I run my finger from hipbone to hipbone across his belly.

His lips part as he inhales sharply. "I'm not stopping you," he breathes.

I take his hand. "You'd better lie down then," I murmur and lead him to the side of the four-poster bed. He seems bewildered, and it occurs to me that perhaps no one has taken the lead with him since … her. *No, don't go there*.

Lifting the covers, he sits on the edge of the bed, gazing up at me, waiting, his expression wary and serious. I stand before him and slip off his denim jacket and let it drop to the floor, then I shuffle out of his sweatpants.

He rubs his thumb over the tips of his fingers. He's itching to touch me, I can tell, but he suppresses the urge. Taking a deep breath and beyond courageous, I reach for the hem of my T-shirt and lift it over my head so I am naked before him. His eyes don't leave mine, but he swallows and his lips part.

"You are Aphrodite, Anastasia," he murmurs.

I clasp his face in my hands, tip his head up, and bend to kiss him. He groans low in his throat.

As I place my mouth on his, he grabs my hips, and before I know it, I am pinned beneath him, his legs forcing mine apart so that he's cradled against my body between my legs. He's kissing me, ravaging my mouth, our tongues entwined. His hand trails from my thigh, over my hip, along my belly to my breast, squeezing, kneading, and pulling enticingly on my nipple.

I groan and tilt my pelvis involuntarily against him, finding a delicious friction against the seam of his fly and his growing erection. He stops kissing me and gazes down at me bemused and breathless. He flexes his hips so his erection pushes against me.… *Yes. Right there*.

I close my eyes and moan, and he does it again, but this time I push back, relishing his answering moan as he kisses me again. He continues the slow delicious torture—rubbing me, rubbing him. And he's right—getting lost in him—it's intoxicating to the exclusion of everything else. All my worries are obliterated. I am here in this moment with him—my blood singing in my veins, thrumming loudly through my ears, mixed with the sound of our panting breaths. I bury my hands in his hair, holding him to my mouth, consuming him, my tongue as avaricious as his. I trail my fingers down his arms, down his lower back to the waistband of his jeans, and push my intrepid, greedy hands inside, urging him on and on—forgetting everything, except us.

"You're going to unman me, Ana," he whispers suddenly, breaking away from me and kneeling up. He briskly pulls down his jeans and hands me a foil

packet.

"You want me, baby, and I sure as hell want you. You know what to do."

With anxious, dexterous fingers, I rip open the foil and unroll the condom over him. He grins down at me, his mouth open, eyes misty gray and full of carnal promise. Leaning over me, he rubs his nose against mine, his eyes closed, and deliciously, slowly, he enters me.

I grasp his arms and tilt my chin up, reveling in the exquisitely full feeling of his possession. He runs his teeth along my chin, eases back, and then slides into me again—so slow, so sweet, so tender—his body pressing down on me, his elbows and his hands on either side of my face.

"You make me forget everything. You are the best therapy," he breathes, moving at an achingly leisurely pace, savoring every inch of me.

"Please, Christian—faster," I murmur, wanting more, now.

"Oh no, baby. I need this slow." He kisses me sweetly, gently biting my lower lip and absorbing my soft moans.

I move my hands into his hair and surrender myself to his rhythm as slowly and surely my body climbs higher and higher and plateaus, then falls hard and fast as I come around him.

"Oh, Ana," he breathes as he lets go, my name a benediction on his lips as he finds his release.

HIS HEAD RESTS ON my belly, his arms wrapped around me. My fingers forage in his unruly hair, and we lie like this for I don't know how long. It's so late and I am so tired, but I just want to enjoy the quiet serene afterglow of making love with Christian Grey, because that's what we've done: gentle, sweet lovemaking.

He's come a long way, as have I, in such a short time. It's almost too much to absorb. With all the fucked-up stuff, I am losing sight of his simple, honest journey with me.

"I will never get enough of you. Don't leave me," he murmurs and kisses my belly.

"I'm not going anywhere, Christian, and I seem to remember that I wanted to kiss your belly," I grumble sleepily.

He grins against my skin. "Nothing stopping you now baby."

"I don't think I can move … I'm so tired."

Christian sighs and shifts reluctantly, coming to lie beside me with his head on his elbow and dragging the covers over us. He gazes down at me, his eyes glowing, warm, loving.

"Sleep now, baby." He kisses my hair and wraps his arm around me and I drift.

WHEN I OPEN MY eyes, light is filling the room, making me blink. My head is fuzzy from lack of sleep. *Where am I? Oh—the hotel …*

"Hi," Christian murmurs, smiling fondly. He's lying beside me, fully dressed, on top of the bed. How long has he been here? Has he been studying me? Suddenly, I feel incredibly shy as my face heats under his steady gaze.

"Hi," I murmur, grateful that I am lying on my front. "How long have you been watching me?"

"I could watch you sleep for hours, Anastasia. But I've only been here about five minutes." He leans over and kisses me gently. "Dr. Greene will be here shortly."

"Oh." I'd forgotten about Christian's inappropriate intervention.

"Did you sleep well?" he inquires mildly. "Certainly seemed like it to me, with all that snoring."

*Oh, playful teasing Fifty*.

"I do not snore!" I pout petulantly.

"No. You don't." He grins at me. The faint line of red lipstick is still visible around his neck.

"Did you shower?"

"No. Waiting for you."

"Oh … okay."

"What time is it?"

"Ten fifteen. I didn't have the heart to wake you earlier."

"You told me you didn't have a heart at all."

He smiles sadly, but doesn't answer. "Breakfast is here—pancakes and bacon for you. Come, get up, I'm getting lonely out here." He swats me sharply on my behind, making me jump, and rises from the bed.

*Hmm* … Christian's version of warm affection.

As I stretch, I'm aware I ache all over … no doubt a result of all the sex, dancing, and teetering in expensive high-heeled shoes. I stagger out of bed and make my way into the sumptuously appointed bathroom while going over the events of the previous day in my mind. When I come out, I don one of the overly fluffy bathrobes that hang on a brass peg in the bathroom.

Leila—the girl who looks like me—that's the most startling image my brain conjures for conjecture, that and her eerie presence in Christian's bedroom. What did she want? Me? Christian? To do what? And why the fuck has she wrecked my car?

Christian said I would have another Audi, like all his submissives. The thought is unwelcome. Since I was so generous with the money he gave me, there's not a lot I can do.

I wander into the main room of the suite—no sign of Christian. I finally locate him in the dining room. I take a seat, grateful for the impressive breakfast laid before me. Christian is reading the Sunday papers and drinking coffee, his breakfast finished. He smiles at me.

"Eat up. You're going to need your strength today," he teases.

"And why is that? You going to lock me in the bedroom?" My inner goddess jerks awake suddenly, all disheveled with a just-fucked look.

"Appealing as that idea is, I thought we'd go out today. Get some fresh air."

"Is it safe?" I ask innocently, trying and failing to keep the irony from my voice.

Christian's face falls, and his mouth presses in a line. "Where we're going, it is. And it's not a joking matter," he adds sternly, narrowing his eyes.

I flush and stare down at my breakfast. I don't feel like being scolded after all the drama and such a late night. I eat my breakfast in silence, feeling petulant.

My subconscious is shaking her head at me. Fifty doesn't joke about my safety—I should know this by now. I want to roll my eyes at him, but I refrain.

Okay, I'm tired and testy. I had a long day yesterday and not enough sleep. Why, oh why does he get to look as fresh as a daisy? Life is not fair.

There's a knock at the door.

"That'll be the good doctor," Christian grumbles, obviously still smarting from my irony. He stalks from the table.

Can't we just have a calm, normal morning? I sigh heavily, leaving half my breakfast, and get up to greet Dr. Depo-Provera.

WE'RE IN THE BEDROOM, and Dr. Greene is staring at me openmouthed. She's dressed more casually than last time, in a pale pink cashmere twin set and black pants, and her fine blonde hair is loose.

"And you just stopped taking it? Just like that?"

I flush, feeling beyond foolish.

"Yes." Could my voice be any smaller?

"You could be pregnant," she says matter-of-factly.

*What!* The world falls away at my feet. My subconscious collapses on the floor retching, and I think I'm going to be sick, too. *No!*

"Here, go pee in this." She's all business today—taking no prisoners.

Meekly I accept the small plastic container she's offered and wander in a daze into the bathroom. No. No. No. No way … No way … Please no. No.

What will Fifty do? I go pale. He'll freak.

*No, please!* I whisper a silent prayer.

I hand Dr. Greene my sample, and she carefully places a small white stick in

it.

"When did your period start?"

How am I supposed to think about such minutiae when all I can do is stare anxiously at the white stick?

"Er … Wednesday? Not the one just gone, the one before that. June first."

"And when did you stop taking the pill?"

"Sunday. Last Sunday."

She purses her lips.

"You should be okay," she says sharply. "I can tell by your expression that an unplanned pregnancy would not be welcome news. So medroxyprogesterone is a good idea if you can't remember to take the pill every day." She gives me a stern look, and I quail under her authoritative glare. Picking up the white stick, she peers at it.

"You're in the clear. You've not ovulated yet, so provided you've been taking proper precautions, you shouldn't be pregnant. Now, let me counsel you about this shot. We discounted it last time because of the side effects, but quite frankly, the side effects of a child are far-reaching and go on for years." She smiles, pleased with herself and her little joke, but I can't begin to respond—I'm too stunned.

Dr. Greene launches into full disclosure mode about side effects, and I sit paralyzed with relief, not listening to a word. I think I'd tolerate any number of strange women standing at the end of my bed rather than confess to Christian that I might be pregnant.

"Ana!" Dr. Greene snaps. "Let's do this thing." She pulls me out of my reverie, and I willingly roll up my sleeve.

---

CHRISTIAN CLOSES THE DOOR behind her and gazes at me warily. "Everything okay?" he asks.

I nod mutely, and he tilts his head to one side, his face tense with concern.

"Anastasia, what is it? What did Dr. Greene say?"

I shake my head. "You're good to go in seven days," I mutter.

"Seven days?"

"Yes."

"Ana, what's wrong?"

I swallow. "It's nothing to worry about. Please, Christian, just leave it."

Christian looms in front of me. He grasps my chin, tipping my head back, and stares into my eyes, trying to decipher my panic.

"Tell me," he snaps.

"There's nothing to tell. I'd like to get dressed." I pull my chin out of his

reach.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, frowning at me. “Let’s shower,” he says eventually.

“Of course,” I mutter, distracted, and his mouth twists.

“Come,” he says sulkily, clasping my hand firmly. He stalks toward the bathroom as I trail behind him. I am not the only one in a bad mood, it seems. Firing up the shower, Christian quickly strips before turning to me.

“I don’t know what’s upset you, or if you’re just bad-tempered through lack of sleep,” he says while unfastening my robe. “But I want you to tell me. My imagination is running away with me, and I don’t like it.”

I roll my eyes at him, and he glares at me, narrowing his eyes. *Shit! Okay … here goes*.

“Dr. Greene scolded me about missing the pill. She said I could be pregnant.”

“What?” He pales, and his hands freeze as he gazes at me, suddenly ashen.

“But I’m not. She did a test. It was a shock, that’s all. I can’t believe I was that stupid.”

He visibly relaxes. “You’re sure you’re not?”

“Yes.”

He blows out a deep breath. “Good. Yes, I can see that news like that would be very upsetting.”

I frown.… *upsetting*? “I was more worried about your reaction.”

He furrows his brow at me, puzzled. “My reaction? Well, naturally I’m relieved … it would be the height of carelessness and bad manners to knock you up.”

“Then maybe we should abstain,” I hiss.

He gazes at me for a moment, bewildered, as if I’m some kind of science experiment. “You are in a bad temper this morning.”

“It was just a shock, that’s all,” I repeat petulantly.

Clasping the lapels of my robe, he pulls me into a warm embrace, kisses my hair, and presses my head against his chest. I’m distracted by his chest hair as it tickles my cheek. Oh, if I could just nuzzle him!

“Ana, I’m not used to this,” he murmurs. “My natural inclination is to beat it out of you, but I seriously doubt you want that.”

*Holy shit*. “No, I don’t. This helps.” I hug Christian tighter, and we stand for an age in a strange embrace, Christian naked and I wrapped in a robe. I am once again floored by his honesty. He knows nothing about relationships, and neither do I, except what I’ve learned from him. Well, he’s asked for faith and patience; maybe I should do the same.

“Come, let’s shower,” Christian says eventually, releasing me.

Stepping back, he peels me out of my robe, and I follow him into the cascading water, holding my face up to the torrent. There's room for both of us under the gargantuan showerhead. Christian reaches for the shampoo and starts washing his hair. He hands it to me and I follow suit.

*Oh, this feels good*. Closing my eyes, I succumb to the cleansing, warming water. As I rinse off the shampoo, I feel his hands on me, soaping my body: my shoulders, my arms, under my arms, my breasts, my back. Gently he turns me around and pulls me against him as he continues down my body: my stomach, my belly, his skilled fingers between my legs—hmm—my behind. Oh, that feels good and so intimate. He turns me around to face him again.

"Here," he says quietly, handing me the body wash. "I want you to wash off the remains of the lipstick."

My eyes open in a flurry and dart quickly to his. He's staring at me intently, soaking wet and beautiful, his glorious, bright gray eyes giving nothing away.

"Don't stray far from the line, please," he mutters tightly.

"Okay," I murmur, trying to absorb the enormity of what he's just asked me to do—to touch him on the edge of the forbidden zone.

I squeeze a small amount of soap on my hand, rub my hands together to create lather, then place them on his shoulders and gently wash away the line of lipstick on each side. He stills and closes his eyes, his face impassive, but he's breathing rapidly, and I know it's not lust but fear. It cuts me to the quick.

With trembling fingers, I carefully follow the line down the side of his chest, soaping and rubbing softly; he swallows, with his jaw tense as if his teeth are clenched. *Oh!* My heart constricts and my throat tightens. *Oh no, I'm going to cry*.

I stop to add more soap to my hand and feel him relax in front of me. I can't look up at him. I can't bear to see his pain—it's too much. It's my turn to swallow.

"Ready?" I murmur and the tension is loud and clear in my voice.

"Yes," he whispers, his voice husky, laced with fear.

Gently, I place my hands on either side of his chest, and he freezes again.

It's too much. I am overwhelmed by his trust in me—overwhelmed by his fear, by the damage done to this beautiful, fallen, flawed man.

Tears pool in my eyes and spill down my face, lost in the water from the shower. *Oh, Christian! Who did this to you?*

His diaphragm moves rapidly with each shallow breath, his body is rigid, tension radiating off him in waves as my hands move along the line, erasing it. Oh, if I could just erase his pain, I would—I'd do anything—and I want nothing more than to kiss every single scar I see, to kiss away those hideous years of

neglect. But I know I can't, and my tears fall unbidden down my cheeks.

"No. Please, don't cry," he murmurs, his voice anguished as he wraps me tightly in his arms. "Please don't cry for me." And I burst into full-blown sobs, burying my face against his neck, as I think of a little boy lost in a sea of fear and pain, frightened, neglected, abused—hurt beyond all endurance.

Pulling away, he clasps my head with both hands, tilts it backward, and leans down to kiss me.

"Don't cry, Ana, please," he murmurs against my mouth. "It was long ago. I am aching for you to touch me, but I just can't bear it. It's too much. Please, please don't cry."

"I want to touch you, too. More than you'll ever know. To see you like this … so hurt and afraid, Christian … it wounds me deeply. I love you so much."

He runs his thumb across my bottom lip. "I know. I know," he whispers.

"You're very easy to love. Don't you see that?"

"No, baby, I don't."

"You are. And I do and so does your family. So do Elena and Leila—they have a strange way of showing it—but they do. You are worthy."

"Stop." He puts his finger over my lips and shakes his head, an agonized expression on his face. "I can't hear this. I'm nothing, Anastasia. I'm a husk of a man. I don't have a heart."

"Yes, you do. And I want it, all of it. You're a good man, Christian, a really good man. Don't ever doubt that. Look at what you've done … what you've achieved," I sob. "Look what you've done for me … what you've turned your back on, for me," I whisper. "I know. I know how you feel about me."

He gazes down at me, his eyes wide and panicked, and all we can hear is the steady stream of water as it flows over us in the shower.

"You love me," I whisper.

His eyes widen further and his mouth opens. He takes a huge breath, as if winded. He looks tortured—vulnerable.

"Yes," he whispers. "I do."

## CHAPTER NINE

I cannot contain my jubilation. My subconscious gapes at me in stunned silence, and I wear a face-splitting grin as I gaze longingly up into Christian's tortured eyes.

His soft, sweet confession calls to me on some deep elemental level, as if he's seeking absolution; his three small words are my manna from heaven. Tears prick my eyes once more. *Yes, you do. I know you do.*

It's such a liberating realization, as if a crushing millstone has been tossed aside. This beautiful, fucked-up man, whom I once thought of as my romantic hero—strong, solitary, mysterious—possesses all these traits, but he's also fragile and alienated and full of self-loathing. My heart swells with joy but also pain for his suffering. And I know in this moment that my heart is big enough for both of us. I *hope* it's big enough for both of us.

I reach up to clasp his dear, handsome face and kiss him gently, pouring all the love I feel into this one sweet connection. I want to devour him beneath the hot cascading water. Christian groans and encircles me in his arms, holding me as if I am the air he needs to breathe.

"Oh, Ana," he whispers hoarsely, "I want you, but not here."

"Yes," I murmur fervently into his mouth.

He switches off the shower and takes my hand, leading me out and enfolding me in my bathrobe. Grabbing a towel, he wraps it around his waist, then takes a smaller one and begins to gently dry my hair. When he's satisfied, he swathes the towel around my head so that in the large mirror over the sink I look like I'm wearing a veil. He's standing behind me and our eyes meet in the mirror, smoldering gray to bright blue, and it gives me an idea.

"Can I reciprocate?" I ask.

He nods, though his brow creases. I reach for another towel from the plethora of fluffy towels stacked beside the vanity, and standing before him on tiptoe, I start to dry his hair. He bends forward, making the process easier, and as I catch the occasional glimpse of his face beneath the towel, I see he's grinning like a small boy.

"It's a long time since anyone did this to me. A very long time," he murmurs,

but then frowns. “In fact, I don’t think anyone’s ever dried my hair.”

“Surely Grace did? Dried your hair when you were young?”

He shakes his head, hampering my progress.

“No. She respected my boundaries from day one, even though it was painful for her. I was very self-sufficient as a child,” he says quietly.

I feel a swift kick in the ribs as I think of a small copper-haired child looking after himself because no one else cares. The thought is sickeningly sad. But I don’t want my melancholy to hijack this blossoming intimacy.

“Well, I’m honored,” I gently tease him.

“That you are, Miss Steele. Or maybe it is I who am honored.”

“That goes without saying, Mr. Grey,” I respond tartly.

I finish with his hair, reach for another small towel, and move around to stand behind him. Our eyes meet again in the mirror, and his watchful, questioning look prompts me to speak.

“Can I try something?”

After a moment, he nods. Warily, and very gently, I run the soft cloth down his left arm, soaking up the water that has beaded on his skin. Glancing up, I check his expression in the mirror. He blinks at me, his eyes burning into mine.

I lean forward and kiss his bicep, and his lips part infinitesimally. I dry his other arm in a similar fashion, trailing kisses around his bicep, and a small smile plays on his lips. Carefully, I wipe his back beneath the faint lipstick line, which is still visible. I hadn’t gotten around to washing his back.

“Whole back,” he says quietly, “with the towel.” He takes a sharp breath and screws his eyes closed as I briskly dry him, careful to touch him only with the towel.

He has such an attractive back—broad, sculptured shoulders, all the small muscles clearly defined. He really looks after himself. The beautiful sight is marred only by his scars.

With difficulty I ignore them and suppress my overwhelming urge to kiss each and every one. When I finish he exhales, and I lean forward and reward him with a kiss on his shoulder. Putting my arms around him, I dry his stomach. Our eyes meet once more in the mirror, his expression amused but wary, too.

“Hold this.” I hand him a smaller face towel, and he gives me a bemused frown. “Remember in Georgia? You made me touch myself using your hands,” I add.

His face darkens, but I ignore his reaction and put my arms around him. Gazing at us both in the mirror—his beauty, his nakedness, and me with my covered hair—we look almost biblical, as if from an Old Testament Baroque painting.

I reach for his hand, which he willingly entrusts to me, and guide that hand up to his chest to dry it, sweeping the towel slowly, awkwardly across his body. Once, twice—then again. He's completely immobilized, rigid with tension, except for his eyes, which follow my hand clasped around his.

My subconscious looks on with approval, her normally pursed mouth smiling, and I am the supreme puppet master. His anxiety ripples off his back in waves, but he maintains eye contact, though his eyes are darker, more deadly … showing their secrets, maybe.

Is this a place I want to go? Do I want to confront his demons?

"I think you're dry now," I whisper as I drop my hand, gazing into the depths of his eyes in the mirror. His breathing is accelerated, lips parted.

"I need you, Anastasia," he whispers.

"I need you, too." And as I say the words, I am struck how true they are. I cannot imagine being without Christian, ever.

"Let me love you," he says hoarsely.

"Yes," I answer, and turning, he hauls me into his arms, his lips seeking mine, beseeching me, worshipping me, cherishing me … loving me.

HE TRAILS HIS FINGERS up and down my spine as we gaze at each other, basking in our postcoital bliss, replete. We lie together, me on my front hugging my pillow, he on his side, and I am treasuring his tender touch. I know that right now he needs to touch me. I am a balm for him, a source of solace, and how could I deny him that? I feel exactly the same about him.

"So you can be gentle," I murmur.

"Hmm … so it would seem, Miss Steele."

I grin. "You weren't particularly the first time we … um, did this."

"No?" He smirks. "When I robbed you of your virtue."

"I don't think you robbed me," I mutter haughtily—*I am not a helpless maiden*. "I think my virtue was offered up pretty freely and willingly. I wanted you too, and if I remember correctly, I rather enjoyed myself." I smile shyly at him, biting my lip.

"So did I if I recall, Miss Steele. We aim to please," he drawls and his face softens, serious. "And it means you're mine, completely." All trace of humor has vanished as he gazes at me.

"Yes, I am," I murmur back at him. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"Your biological father … do you know who he was?" This thought has been bugging me.

His brow creases, and then he shakes his head. "I have no idea. Wasn't the

savage who was her pimp, which is good."

"How do you know?"

"Something my dad … something Carrick said to me."

I gaze at my Fifty expectantly, waiting.

"So hungry for information, Anastasia," he sighs, shaking his head. "The pimp discovered the crack whore's body and phoned it in to the authorities. Took him four days to make the discovery, though. He shut the door when he left … left me with her … her body." His eyes cloud at the memory.

I inhale sharply. Poor baby boy—the horror is too grim to contemplate.

"Police interviewed him later. He denied flat out I had anything to do with him, and Carrick said he looked nothing like me."

"Do you remember what he did look like?"

"Anastasia, this isn't a part of my life I revisit very often. Yes, I remember what he looked like. I'll never forget him." Christian's face darkens and hardens, becoming more angular, his eyes frosting with anger. "Can we talk about something else?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

He shakes his head. "It's old news, Ana. Not something I want to think about."

"So what's this surprise, then?" I need to change the subject before he goes all Fifty on me. His expression lightens immediately.

"Can you face going out for some fresh air? I want to show you something."

"Of course."

I marvel how quickly he turns—mercurial as ever. He grins at me with his boyish, carefree, I'm-only-twenty-seven smile, and my heart lurches into my mouth. So it's something close to his heart, I can tell. He swats me playfully on my behind.

"Get dressed. Jeans will be good. I hope Taylor's packed some for you."

He rises and pulls on his boxer briefs. Oh … I could sit here all day, watching him wander around the room.

"Up," he scolds, bossy as ever. I gaze at him, grinning.

"Just admiring the view."

He rolls his eyes at me.

As we dress, I notice that we move with the synchronization of two people who know each other well, each watchful and acutely aware of the other, exchanging the occasional shy smile and sweet touch. And it dawns on me that this is just as new for him as it is for me.

"Dry your hair," Christian orders once we're dressed.

"Domineering as ever." I smirk at him, and he leans down to kiss my hair.

“That’s never going to change, baby. I don’t want you sick.”

I roll my eyes at him, and his mouth twists in amusement.

“My palms still twitch, you know, Miss Steele.”

“I am glad to hear it, Mr. Grey. I was beginning to think you were losing your edge.”

“I could easily demonstrate that is not the case, should you so wish.” Christian drags a large, cream, cable-knit sweater out of his bag and drapes it artfully over his shoulders. With his white T-shirt and jeans, his artfully rumpled hair, and now this, he looks as if he’s stepped out of the pages of a high-end glossy magazine.

No one should look this good. And I don’t know if it’s the momentary distraction of his perfect looks or the knowledge that he loves me, but his threat no longer fills me with dread. This is my Fifty Shades; this is the way he is.

As I reach for the hair dryer, a tangible ray of hope blossoms. We will find a middle way. We just have to recognize each other’s needs and accommodate them. *I can do that, surely?*

I gaze at myself in the dresser mirror. I’m wearing the pale blue shirt that Taylor bought and had packed for me. My hair is a mess, my face flushed, my lips swollen—I touch them, remembering Christian’s searing kisses, and I can’t help a small smile as I stare. *Yes, I do*, he said.

“WHERE ARE WE GOING, exactly?” I ask as we wait in the lobby for the parking valet.

Christian taps the side of his nose and winks at me conspiratorially, looking like he’s desperately trying to contain his glee. Frankly, it’s very un-Fifty.

He was like this when we went gliding—perhaps that’s what we’re doing. I beam back at him. He stares down his nose at me in that superior way he has with his lopsided grin. Leaning down, he kisses me gently.

“Do you have any idea how happy you make me feel?” he murmurs.

“Yes … I know exactly. Because you do the same for me.”

The valet zooms up in Christian’s car, wearing an enormous grin. Jeez, everyone is so happy today.

“Great car, sir,” he mumbles as he hands over the keys. Christian winks and gives him an obscenely large tip.

I frown at him. Honestly.

AS WE CRUISE THROUGH the traffic, Christian is deep in thought. A young woman’s voice comes over the loudspeakers; it has a beautiful, rich, mellow timbre, and I lose myself in her sad, soulful voice.

“I need to make a detour. It shouldn’t take long,” he says absentmindedly,

distracting me from the song.

*Oh, why?* I'm intrigued to know the surprise. My inner goddess is bouncing about like a five-year-old.

"Sure," I murmur. Something is amiss. Suddenly he looks grimly determined.

He pulls into the parking lot of a large car dealership, stops the car, and turns to face me, his expression wary.

"We need to get you a new car," he says. I gape at him.

*Now?* On a Sunday? What the hell? And this is a Saab dealership.

"Not an Audi?" is, stupidly, the only thing I can think of to say, and bless him, he actually flushes.

Christian, embarrassed. This is a first!

"I thought you might like something else," he mutters. He's almost squirming.

*Oh, please* … This is too valuable an opportunity not to tease him. I smirk. "A Saab?"

"Yeah. A 9-3. Come."

"What is it with you and foreign cars?"

"The Germans and the Swedes make the safest cars in the world, Anastasia."

*Do they?* "I thought you'd already ordered me another Audi A3?"

He gives me a darkly amused look. "I can cancel that. Come." Climbing out of the car, he strolls to my side and opens my door.

"I owe you a graduation present," he says and holds his hand out for me.

"Christian, you really don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. Please. Come." His tone says he's not to be trifled with.

I resign myself to my fate. A Saab? Do I want a Saab? I quite liked the Audi Submissive Special. It was very nifty.

Of course, now it's under a ton of white paint … I shudder. And she's still out there.

I take Christian's hand, and we wander into the showroom.

Troy Turniansky, the salesman, is all over Fifty like a cheap suit. He can smell a sale. His accent sounds oddly mid-Atlantic, maybe British? It's difficult to tell.

"A Saab, sir? Pre-owned?" He rubs his hands with glee.

"New." Christian's lips set into a hard line.

*New!*

"Did you have a model in mind, sir?" And he's smarmy, too.

"9-3 2.0T Sport Sedan."

"An excellent choice, sir."

"What color, Anastasia?" Christian inclines his head.

"Er … black?" I shrug. "You really don't need to do this."

He frowns. "Black's not easily seen at night."

*Oh, for heaven's sake*. I resist the temptation to roll my eyes. "You have a black car."

He scowls at me.

"Canary yellow, then." I shrug.

Christian makes a face—canary yellow is obviously not his thing.

"What color do you want me to have?" I ask as if he's a small child, which he is in many ways. The thought is unwelcome—sad and sobering at once.

"Silver or white."

"Silver, then. You know I'll take the Audi," I add, chastened by my thoughts.

Troy pales, sensing he's losing a sale. "Perhaps you'd like the convertible, ma'am?" he asks, clapping his hands with enthusiasm.

My subconscious is cringing in disgust, mortified by the whole buying-a-car business, but my inner goddess tackles her to the floor. *Convertible? Drool!*

Christian frowns and peers at me. "Convertible?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

I flush. It's like he has a direct hotline to my inner goddess, which, of course, he has. It's most inconvenient at times. I stare down at my hands.

Christian turns to Troy. "What are the safety stats on the convertible?"

Troy, sensing Christian's vulnerability, heads in for the kill, reeling off all manner of statistics.

Naturally Christian wants me safe. It's a religion with him, and like the zealot he is, he listens intently to Troy's well-honed patter. Fifty really does care.

*Yes. I do*. I remember his whispered, choked words from this morning, and a melting glow spreads like warm honey through my veins. This man—God's gift to women—loves me.

I find myself grinning goofily at him, and when he glances down at me, he's amused yet puzzled by my expression. I want to hug myself, I am so happy.

"Whatever you're high on, I'd like some, Miss Steele," he murmurs as Troy heads off to his computer.

"I'm high on you, Mr. Grey."

"Really? Well you certainly look intoxicated." He kisses me briefly. "And thank you for accepting the car. That was easier than last time."

"Well, it's not an Audi A3."

He smirks. "That's not the car for you."

"I liked it."

"Sir, the 9-3? I've located one at our Beverly Hills dealership. We can have it here for you in a couple of days." Troy glows with triumph.

"Top of the range?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent." Christian produces his credit card, or is it Taylor's? The thought

is unnerving. I wonder how Taylor is, and if he's located Leila in the apartment. I rub my forehead. Yes, there's all of Christian's baggage, too.

"If you'll come this way, Mr."—Troy glances at the name on the card —"Grey."

CHRISTIAN OPENS MY DOOR, and I climb back into the passenger seat.

"Thank you," I say when he's seated beside me.

He smiles.

"You're most welcome, Anastasia."

The music starts again as Christian starts the engine.

"Who's this?" I ask.

"Eva Cassidy."

"She has a lovely voice."

"She does, she did."

"Oh."

"She died young."

"Oh."

"Are you hungry? You didn't finish all your breakfast." He glances quickly at me, disapproval outlined on his face.

*Uh-oh*. "Yes."

"Lunch first, then."

Christian drives toward the waterfront and then heads north along the Alaskan Way Viaduct. It's another beautiful day in Seattle; it's been uncharacteristically fine for the last few weeks.

Christian looks happy and relaxed as we sit back listening to Eva Cassidy's sweet, soulful voice and cruise down the highway. Have I ever felt this comfortable in his company before? I don't know.

I am less nervous of his moods, confident that he won't punish me, and he seems more comfortable with me, too. He turns left, following the coast road, and eventually pulls up in a parking lot opposite a vast marina.

"We'll eat here. I'll open your door," he says in such a way that I know it's not wise to move, and I watch him move around the car. Will this ever get old?

WE STROLL ARM IN arm to the waterfront, where the marina stretches out in front of us.

"So many boats," I murmur in wonder. There are hundreds of them in all shapes and sizes, bobbing up and down on the calm, still waters of the marina. Out on Puget Sound there are dozens of sails in the wind, weaving to and fro. It's a wholesome, outdoorsy sight. The wind has picked up a little, so I pull my jacket around me.

“Cold?” he asks and pulls me tightly against him.

“No, just admiring the view.”

“I could stare at it all day. Come, this way.”

Christian leads me into a large seafront bar and makes his way to the counter. The decor is more New England than West Coast—white-limed walls, pale blue furnishings, and boating paraphernalia hanging everywhere. It’s a bright, cheery place.

“Mr. Grey!” the barman greets Christian warmly. “What can I get you this afternoon?”

“Dante, good afternoon.” Christian grins as we both slip onto barstools. “This lovely lady is Anastasia Steele.”

“Welcome to SP’s Place.” Dante gives me a friendly smile. He’s black and beautiful, his dark eyes assessing me and not finding me wanting, it seems. One large diamond stud winks at me from his ear. I like him immediately.

“What would you like to drink, Anastasia?”

I glance at Christian, who regards me expectantly. Oh, he’s going to let me choose.

“Please, call me Ana, and I’ll have whatever Christian’s drinking.” I smile shyly at Dante. Fifty’s so much better at wine than I am.

“I’m going to have a beer. This is the only bar in Seattle where you can get Adnams Explorer.”

“A beer?”

“Yes.” He grins at me. “Two Explorers, please, Dante.”

Dante nods and sets up the beers on the bar.

“They do a delicious seafood chowder here,” Christian says.

He’s asking me.

“Chowder and beer sound great.” I smile at him.

“Two chowders?” Dante asks.

“Please.” Christian grins at him.

We talk through our meal, as we never have before. Christian is relaxed and calm—he looks young, happy, and animated despite all that transpired yesterday. He recounts the history of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc., and the more he reveals, the more I sense his passion for fixing problem companies, his hopes for the technology he’s developing, and his dreams of making land in the third world more productive. I listen, enraptured. He’s funny, clever, philanthropic, and beautiful, and he loves me.

In turn he plagues me with questions about Ray and my mom, about growing up in the lush forests of Montesano, and my brief stints in Texas and Vegas. He demands to know my favorite books and films, and I’m surprised by how much

we have in common.

As we talk, it strikes me that he's turned from Hardy's Alec to Angel, debasement to high ideal in such a short space of time.

It's after two when we finish our meal. Christian settles the tab with Dante, who wishes us a fond farewell.

"This is a great place. Thank you for lunch," I say as Christian takes my hand and we leave the bar.

"We'll come again," he says, and we stroll along the waterfront. "I wanted to show you something."

"I know … and I can't wait to see it, whatever it is."

WE WANDER HAND IN hand along the marina. It is such a pleasant afternoon. People are out enjoying their Sunday—walking dogs, admiring the boats, watching their kids run along the promenade.

As we head down the marina, the boats grow progressively larger. Christian leads me onto the dock and stops in front of a huge catamaran.

"I thought we'd go sailing this afternoon. This is my boat."

*Holy cow*. It must be at least forty, maybe fifty feet. Two sleek white hulls, a deck, a roomy cabin, and towering overhead an impressive mast. I know nothing about boats, but I can tell this one is special.

"Wow …," I murmur in wonder.

"Built by my company," he says proudly, and my heart swells. "She's been designed from the ground up by the very best naval architects in the world and constructed here in Seattle at my yard. She has hybrid electric drives, asymmetric dagger boards, a square-topped mainsail—"

"Okay … you've lost me, Christian."

He grins. "She's a great boat."

"She looks mighty fine, Mr. Grey."

"That she does, Miss Steele."

"What's her name?"

He pulls me to the side so I can see her name: *The Grace*. I'm surprised. "You named her after your mom?"

"Yes." He cocks his head to one side, quizzical. "Why do you find that strange?"

I shrug. I'm surprised—he always seems ambivalent in her presence.

"I adore my mom, Anastasia. Why wouldn't I name a boat after her?"

I flush. "No, it's not that … it's just …" Shit, how can I put this into words?

"Anastasia, Grace Trevelyan-Grey saved my life. I owe her everything."

I gaze at him, and let the reverence in his softly spoken admission wash over

me. It’s obvious to me, for the first time, that he loves his mom. Why, then, his strange, strained ambivalence toward her?

“Do you want to come aboard?” he asks, his eyes bright, excited.

“Yes, please.” I smile.

He looks delighted and grasping my hand, he strides up the small gangplank taking me aboard. We stand on deck beneath a rigid canopy.

To one side there’s a table and a U-shaped banquette covered in pale blue leather, which must seat at least eight people. I glance through the sliding doors to the interior of the cabin and jump, startled, when I spy someone there. The tall blond man opens the sliding doors and emerges—all tanned, curly-haired, and brown-eyed—wearing a faded pink short-sleeved polo shirt, shorts, and deck shoes. He must be in his early thirties.

“Mac.” Christian beams.

“Mr. Grey! Welcome back.” They shake hands.

“Anastasia, this is Liam McConnell. Liam, my girlfriend, Anastasia Steele.”

*Girlfriend!* My inner goddess performs a quick arabesque. She’s still grinning over the convertible. I have to get used to this—it’s not the first time he’s said it, but hearing him say it is still a thrill.

“How do you do?” Liam and I shake hands.

“Call me Mac,” he says warmly, and I can’t place his accent. “Welcome aboard, Miss Steele.”

“Ana, please,” I mutter, flushing. He has deep brown eyes.

“How’s she shaping up, Mac?” Christian interjects quickly, and for a moment, I think he’s talking about me.

“She’s ready to rock and roll, sir,” Mac beams. *Oh, the boat,* The Grace. *Silly me*.

“Let’s get under way, then.”

“You going to take her out?”

“Yep.” Christian flashes Mac a wicked grin. “Quick tour, Anastasia?”

“Yes, please.”

I follow him inside the cabin. An L-shaped cream leather sofa is directly in front of us, and above it, a massive curved window offers a panoramic view of the marina. To the left is the kitchen area—very well appointed, all pale wood.

“This is the main saloon. Galley beside,” Christian says, waving his hand in the direction of the kitchen.

He takes my hand and leads me through the main cabin. It’s surprisingly spacious. The floor is the same pale wood. It looks modern and sleek and has a light, airy feel, but it’s all very functional, as if he doesn’t spend much time here.

“Bathrooms on either side.” Christian points to two doors, then opens the

small, oddly shaped door directly in front of us and steps in. We're in a plush bedroom. *Oh* …

It has a king-sized cabin bed and is all pale blue linen and pale wood like his bedroom at Escala. Christian obviously chooses a theme and sticks to it.

"This is the master cabin." He gazes down at me, eyes glowing. "You're the first girl in here, apart from family," he says. "They don't count."

I flush under his heated stare, and my pulse quickens. *Really? Another first.* He pulls me into his arms, his fingers tangling in my hair, and kisses me, long and hard. We're both breathless when he pulls away.

"Might have to christen this bed," he whispers against my mouth.

*Oh, at sea!*

"But not right now. Come, Mac will be casting off." I ignore the stab of disappointment as he takes my hand and leads me back through the saloon. He indicates another door.

"Office in there, and at the front here, two more cabins."

"So how many can sleep on board?"

"It's a six-berth cat. I've only ever had the family on board, though. I like to sail alone. But not when you're here. I need to keep an eye on you."

He delves into a chest and pulls out a bright red lifejacket.

"Here." Putting it over my head, he tightens all the straps, a faint smile playing on his lips.

"You love strapping me in, don't you?"

"In any form," he says, a salacious grin playing on his lips.

"You are a pervert."

"I know." He raises his eyebrows and his grin broadens.

"My pervert," I whisper.

"Yes, yours."

Once secured, he grabs the sides of the jacket and kisses me. "Always," he breathes, then releases me before I have a chance to respond.

*Always! Holy shit.*

"Come." He grabs my hand and leads me outside, up some steps, and onto the upper deck to a small cockpit that houses a big steering wheel and a raised seat. At the prow of the boat Mac is doing something with ropes.

"Is this where you learned all your rope tricks?" I ask Christian innocently.

"Clove hitches have come in handy," he says, looking at me appraisingly. "Miss Steele, you sound curious. I like you curious. I'd be more than happy to demonstrate what I can do with a rope." He smirks at me, and I gaze back impassively as if he's upset me. His face falls.

"Gotcha." I grin.

His mouth twists and he narrows his eyes. “I may have to deal with you later, but right now, I’ve got to drive my boat.” He sits at the controls, presses a button, and the engines roar into life.

Mac comes scooting back down the side of the boat, grinning at me, and jumps down to the deck below where he starts to unfasten a rope. Maybe he knows some rope tricks, too. The idea pops unwelcome into my head and I flush.

My subconscious glares at me. Mentally I shrug at her and glance at Christian—I blame Fifty. He picks up the receiver and radios the coast guard as Mac calls up that we are set to go.

Once more, I am dazzled by Christian’s expertise. Is there nothing that this man can’t do? Then I remember his earnest attempt to chop and dice a pepper in my apartment on Friday. The thought makes me smile.

Slowly Christian eases *The Grace* out of her berth and toward the marina entrance. Behind us, a small crowd has gathered on the dockside to watch our departure. Small children are waving, and I wave back.

Christian glances over his shoulder, then pulls me between his legs and points out various dials and gadgets in the cockpit. “Grab the wheel,” he orders, bossy as ever, but I do as I’m told.

“Aye, aye, Captain!” I giggle.

Placing his hands snugly over mine, he continues to steer our course out of the marina, and within a few minutes we are out on the open sea, the cold blue waters of Puget Sound. Away from the shelter of the marina’s protective wall, the wind is stronger, and the sea pitches and rolls beneath us.

I can’t help but grin, feeling Christian’s excitement—this is such fun. We make a large curve until we are heading west toward the Olympic Peninsula, the wind behind us.

“Sail time,” Christian says, excited. “Here—you take her. Keep her on this course.”

*What?* He grins, reacting to the horror in my face.

“Baby, it’s really easy. Hold the wheel and keep your eye on the horizon over the bow. You’ll do great; you always do. When the sails go up, you’ll feel the drag. Just hold her steady. I’ll signal like this”—he makes a slashing motion across his throat—“and you can cut the engines. This button here.” He points to a large black button. “Understand?”

“Yes.” I nod frantically, feeling panicky. *Holy cow—I hadn’t expected to do anything!*

He kisses me quickly, then steps off his captain’s chair and bounds up to the front of the boat to join Mac, where he starts unfurling sails, untying ropes, and operating winches and pulleys. They work well together in a team, shouting

various nautical terms to each other, and it's warming to see Fifty interacting with someone else in such a carefree manner.

Perhaps Mac is Fifty's friend. He doesn't seem to have many, as far as I can tell, but then, I don't have many, either. Well, not here in Seattle. The only friend I have is on vacation sunning herself in Saint James on the west coast of Barbados.

I feel a sudden pang for Kate. I miss my roommate more than I thought I would when she left. I hope she changes her mind and comes home with her brother, Ethan, rather than prolong her stay with Christian's brother, Elliot.

Christian and Mac hoist the mainsail. It fills and billows out as the wind seizes it hungrily, and the boat lurches suddenly, zipping forward. I feel it through the wheel. *Whoa!*

They get to work on the headsail, and I watch fascinated as it flies up the mast. The wind catches it, stretching it taut.

"Hold her steady, baby, and cut the engines!" Christian cries out to me over the wind, motioning me to switch off the engines. I can only just hear his voice, but I nod enthusiastically, gazing at the man I love all windswept, exhilarated, and bracing himself against the pitch and yaw of the boat.

I press the button, the roar of the engines ceases, and *The Grace* soars toward the Olympic Peninsula, skimming across the water as if she's flying. I want to yell and scream and cheer—this has to be one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life—except perhaps the glider, and maybe the Red Room of Pain.

Whoa. This boat can move! I stand firm, grasping the wheel, fighting the rudder, and Christian is behind me once more, his hands on mine.

"What do you think?" he shouts above the sound of the wind and the sea.

"Christian! This is fantastic."

He beams, grinning from ear to ear. "You wait until the spinney's up." He points with his chin toward Mac, who is unfurling the spinnaker—a sail that's a dark, rich red. It reminds me of the walls in the playroom.

"Interesting color," I shout.

He gives me a wolfish grin and winks. Oh, it's deliberate.

The spinney balloons out—a large, odd, elliptical shape—putting *The Grace* in overdrive. Finding her head, she speeds over the Sound.

"Asymmetrical sail. For speed." Christian answers my unasked question.

"It's amazing." I can think of nothing better to say. I have the most ridiculous grin on my face as we whip through the water, heading for the majesty of the Olympic Mountains and Bainbridge Island. Glancing back, I see Seattle shrinking behind us, Mount Rainier in the far distance.

I had not really appreciated how beautiful and rugged Seattle's surrounding landscape is—verdant, lush, and temperate, tall evergreens and cliff faces jutting out here and there. It has a wild but serene beauty on this glorious sunny afternoon that takes my breath away. The stillness is stunning compared to our speed as we whip across the water.

"How fast are we going?"

"She's doing fifteen knots."

"I have no idea what that means."

"It's about seventeen miles an hour."

"Is that all? It feels much faster."

He squeezes my hands, smiling. "You look lovely, Anastasia. It's good to see some color in your cheeks … and not from blushing. You look like you do in José's photos."

I turn and kiss him.

"You know how to show a girl a good time, Mr. Grey."

"We aim to please, Miss Steele." He scoops my hair out of the way and kisses the back of my neck, sending delicious tingles down my spine. "I like seeing you happy," he murmurs and tightens his arms around me.

I gaze out over the wide blue water, wondering what I could possibly have done in the past to have fortune smile and deliver this man to me.

*Yes, you're a lucky bitch*, my subconscious snaps. *But you have your work cut out with him. He's not going to want this vanilla crap forever … you're going to have to compromise*. I glare mentally at her snarky, insolent face and rest my head against Christian's chest. Deep down I know my subconscious is right, but I banish the thoughts. I don't want to spoil my day.

AN HOUR LATER, WE are anchored in a small, secluded cove off Bainbridge Island. Mac has gone ashore in the inflatable dinghy—for what, I don't know—but I have my suspicions because as soon as Mac starts the outboard engine, Christian grabs my hand and practically drags me into his cabin, a man with a mission.

Now he stands before me, exuding his intoxicating sensuality as his deft fingers make quick work of the straps on my lifejacket. He tosses it to one side and gazes intently down at me, eyes dark, dilated.

I'm already lost and he's barely touched me. He raises his hand to my face, and his fingers move down my chin, the column of my throat, my sternum, searing me with his touch, to the first button of my blue blouse.

"I want to see you," he breathes and dexterously undoes the button. Bending, he plants a soft kiss on my parted lips. I am panting and eager, aroused by the potent combination of his captivating beauty, his raw sexuality in the confines of

this cabin, and the gentle sway of the boat. He stands back.

"Strip for me," he whispers, eyes burning.

*Oh my*. I'm only too happy to comply. Not taking my eyes off his, I slowly undo each button, savoring his scorching gaze. Oh, this is heady stuff. I see his desire—it's evident on his face … and elsewhere.

I let my shirt fall to the floor and reach for the button on my jeans.

"Stop," he orders. "Sit."

I sit down on the edge of the bed, and in one fluid movement he's on his knees in front of me, undoing the laces of first one and then the other sneaker, pulling each off, followed by my socks. He picks up my left foot and raising it, plants a soft kiss on the pad of my big toe, then grazes his teeth against it.

"Ah!" I moan as I feel the effect in my groin. He stands in one smooth move, holds his hand out to me, and pulls me up off the bed.

"Continue," he says and stands back to watch me.

I ease the zipper of my jeans down and hook my thumbs in the waistband as I sashay then slide the denim down my legs. A soft smile plays on his lips, but his eyes remain dark.

And I don't know if it's because he made love to me this morning, and I mean really made love to me, gently, sweetly, or if it was his impassioned declaration —*yes … I do*—but I don't feel embarrassed at all. I want to be sexy for this man. He deserves sexy—he makes me feel sexy. Okay, it's new to me, but I'm learning under his expert tutelage. And then again, so much is new to him, too. It balances the seesaw between us, a little, I think.

I am wearing some of my new underwear—a white lacy thong and matching bra—a designer brand with a price tag to match. I step out of my jeans and stand there for him in the lingerie he's paid for, but I no longer feel cheap. I feel his.

Reaching behind I unhook my bra, sliding the straps down my arms, and drop it on top of my blouse. Slowly, I slip my panties off, letting them fall to my ankles, and step out of them, surprised by my grace.

Standing before him, I am naked and unashamed, and I know it's because he loves me. I no longer have to hide. He says nothing, just gazes at me. All I see is his desire, his adoration even, and something else, the depth of his need—the depth of his love for me.

He reaches down, lifts the hem of his cream-colored sweater, and pulls it over his head, followed by his T-shirt, revealing his chest, never taking his bold gray eyes off mine. His shoes and socks follow before he grasps the button of his jeans.

Reaching over, I whisper, "Let me."

His lips purse briefly into an *ooh* shape, and he smiles. "Be my guest."

I step toward him, slip my fearless fingers inside the waistband of his jeans, and tug so he's forced to take a step closer to me. He gasps involuntarily at my unexpected audacity, then smiles down at me. I undo the button, but before I unzip him I let my fingers wander, tracing his erection through the soft denim. He flexes his hips into my palm and closes his eyes briefly, relishing my touch.

"You're getting so bold, Ana, so brave," he whispers and clasps my face with both hands, bending to kiss me deeply.

I put my hands on his hips—half on his cool skin and half on the low-slung waistband of his jeans. "So are you," I murmur against his lips as my thumbs rub slow circles on his skin, and he smiles.

"Getting there."

I move my hands to the front of his jeans and pull down the zipper. My intrepid fingers move through his pubic hair to his erection, and I grasp him tightly.

He makes a low sound in his throat, his sweet breath washing over me, and he kisses me again, lovingly. As my hand moves over him, around him, stroking him, squeezing him tightly, he puts his arms around me, his right hand flat against the middle of my back and his fingers spread. His left hand is in my hair, holding me to his mouth.

"Oh, I want you so much, baby," he breathes, and steps back suddenly to remove his jeans and boxers in one swift, agile move. He is a fine, fine sight in or out of clothes, every single inch of him.

He is perfect. *His beauty is desecrated only by his scars*, I think sadly. And they run so much deeper than his skin.

"What's wrong, Ana?" he murmurs and gently strokes my cheek with his knuckles.

"Nothing. Love me, now."

He pulls me into his arms, kissing me, twisting his hands into my hair. Our tongues entwined, he walks me backward to the bed and gently lowers me onto it, following me down so that he's lying by my side.

He runs his nose along my jawline as my hands move to his hair.

"Do you have any idea how exquisite your scent is, Ana? It's irresistible."

His words do what they always do—flame my blood, quicken my pulse—and he trails his nose down my throat, across my breasts, kissing me reverentially as he does.

"You are so beautiful," he murmurs, as he takes one of my nipples in his mouth and softly suckles.

I moan as my body bows off the bed.

"Let me hear you, baby."

His hand trails down to my waist, and I glory in the feel of his touch, skin to skin—his hungry mouth at my breasts and his skilled long fingers caressing and stroking me, cherishing me. Moving over my hips, over my behind, and down my leg to my knee, and all this time he's kissing and sucking my breasts.

Grasping my knee, he suddenly hitches my leg up, curling it over his hips, making me gasp, and I feel rather than see his responding grin against my skin. He rolls over so that I am astride him and hands me a foil packet.

I shift back, taking him in my hands, and I just can't resist him in all his glory. I bend and kiss him, taking him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around him, then sucking hard. He groans and flexes his hips so that he's deeper in my mouth.

*Mmm … he tastes good*. I want him inside me. I sit up and gaze at him; he's breathless, mouth open, watching me intently.

Hurriedly I tear open the condom and unroll it over him. He holds out his hands for me. I take one and with my other hand, position myself over him, then slowly claim him as mine.

He groans low in his throat, closing his eyes.

*The feel of him in me … stretching … filling me*—I moan softly—*it's divine*. He places his hands on my hips and moves me up, down, and pushes into me. *Oh … it's so good*.

"Oh, baby," he whispers, and suddenly he sits up so we're nose to nose, and the sensation is extraordinary—so full. I gasp, grabbing his upper arms as he clasps my head in his hands and gazes into my eyes—his intense and gray, burning with desire.

"Oh, Ana. What you make me feel," he murmurs and kisses me passionately with fervent ardor. I kiss him back, dizzy with the delicious feeling of him buried deep inside me.

"Oh, I love you," I murmur. He groans as if pained to hear my whispered words and rolls over, taking me with him without breaking our precious contact, so that I'm lying beneath him. I wrap my legs around his waist.

He stares down at me with adoring wonder, and I am sure I mirror his expression as I reach up to caress his beautiful face. Very slowly, he starts to move, closing his eyes as he does and moaning softly.

The gentle sway of the boat and the peace and quiet tranquility of the cabin are broken only by our mingled breaths as he moves slowly in and out of me, so controlled and so good—it's heavenly. He puts his arm over my head, his hand on my hair, and he caresses my face with the other as he bends to kiss me.

I'm cocooned by him as he loves me, slowly moving in and out, savoring me. I touch him—sticking to the boundaries—his arms, his hair, his lower back, his

beautiful behind—and my breathing accelerates as his steady rhythm pushes me higher and higher. He's kissing my mouth, my chin, my jaw, then nibbling my ear. I can hear his staccato breaths with each gentle thrust of his body.

My body starts to quiver. *Oh … This feeling that I now know so well … I am close … Oh …*

"That's right, baby … give it up for me … Please … Ana," he murmurs and his words are my undoing.

"Christian," I call out, and he groans as we both come together.

## CHAPTER TEN

Mac will be back soon," he murmurs.

"Hmm." My eyes flicker open to meet his soft gray gaze. Lord, his eyes are an amazing color—especially here, out on the sea—reflecting the light bouncing off the water through the small portholes into the cabin.

"As much as I'd like to lie here with you all afternoon, he'll need a hand with the dinghy." Leaning over, Christian kisses me tenderly. "Ana, you look so beautiful right now, all mussed up and sexy. Makes me want you more." He smiles and rises from the bed. I lie on my stomach, admiring the view.

"You ain't so bad yourself, Captain." I smack my lips in admiration and he grins.

I watch him move about the cabin as he dresses. This man who has just made such sweet love to me again. I can hardly believe my good fortune. I can't quite believe that he's mine. He sits down beside me to put on his shoes.

"Captain, eh?" he says dryly. "Well, I am master of this vessel."

I cock my head to one side. "You are master of my heart, Mr. Grey." *And my body … and my soul*.

He shakes his head incredulously and bends to kiss me. "I'll be on deck. There's a shower in the bathroom if you want one. Do you need anything? A drink?" he asks solicitously, and all I can do is grin at him. Is this the same man? Is this the same Fifty?

"What?" he says, reacting to my stupid grin.

"You."

"What about me?"

"Who are you and what have you done with Christian?"

His lips twitch with a sad smile.

"He's not very far away, baby," he says softly, and there's a touch of melancholy in his voice that makes me instantly regret asking the question. But he shakes it off. "You'll see him soon enough"—he smirks at me—"especially if you don't get up." Reaching over, he smacks me hard on my behind so I yelp and laugh at the same time.

"You had me worried."

“Did I, now?” Christian’s brow creases. “You do give off some mixed signals, Anastasia. How’s a man supposed to keep up?” He leans down and kisses me again. “Laters, baby,” he adds, and with a dazzling smile, he gets up and leaves me to my scattered thoughts.

WHEN I SURFACE ON deck, Mac is back on board, but he disappears onto the upper deck as I open the saloon doors. Christian is on his BlackBerry. *Talking to whom?* I wonder. He wanders over and pulls me close, kissing my hair.

“Great news … good. Yeah … Really? The fire escape stairwell? … I see … Yes, tonight.”

He hits the “end” button, and the sound of the engines firing up startles me. Mac must be in the cockpit above.

“Time to head back,” Christian says, kissing me once more as he straps me into my lifejacket.

THE SUN IS LOW in the sky behind us as we make our way back to the marina, and I reflect on a wonderful afternoon. Under Christian’s careful, patient tuition, I have now stowed a mainsail, a headsail, and a spinnaker, as well as learned to tie a reef knot, clove hitch, and sheepshank. His lips were twitching throughout the lesson.

“I may tie you up one day,” I mutter crabbily.

His mouth twists with humor. “You’ll have to catch me first, Miss Steele.”

His words bring to mind him chasing me around the apartment, the thrill, and then the hideous aftermath. I frown and shudder. After that, I left him.

Would I leave him again now that he’s admitted he loves me? I gaze up into his clear gray eyes. Could I ever leave him again—no matter what he did to me? Could I betray him like that? No. I don’t think I could.

He’s given me a more thorough tour of this beautiful boat, explaining all the innovative designs and techniques, and the high-quality materials used to build it. I remember the interview when I first met him; I picked up then on his passion for ships. I thought his love was only for the ocean-going freighters his company builds—not for super-sexy, sleek catamarans, too.

And, of course, he’s made sweet, unhurried love to me. I shake my head, remembering my body bowed and wanting beneath his expert hands. He is an exceptional lover, I’m sure—though, of course, I have no comparison. But Kate would have raved more if it was always like this; it’s not like her to hold back on details.

But how long will this be enough for him? I just don’t know, and the thought is unnerving.

Now he sits, and I stand in the safe circle of his arms for hours, it seems, in comfortable, companionable silence as *The Grace* glides closer and closer to Seattle. I have the wheel, Christian advising on adjustments every so often.

"There is poetry of sailing as old as the world," he murmurs in my ear.

"That sounds like a quote."

I sense his grin. "It is. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry."

"Oh … I adore *The Little Prince*."

"Me, too."

IT IS EARLY EVENING as Christian, his hands still on mine, steers us into the marina. There are lights winking from the boats, reflecting off the dark water, but it is still light—a balmy, bright evening, an overture for what is sure to be a spectacular sunset.

A crowd gathers on the dockside as Christian slowly turns the boat around in a relatively small space. He does it with ease and reverses smoothly into the same berth we left earlier. Mac jumps on to the dock and ties *The Grace* securely to a bollard.

"Back again," Christian murmurs.

"Thank you," I murmur shyly. "That was a perfect afternoon."

Christian grins. "I thought so, too. Perhaps we can enroll you in sailing school, so we can go out for a few days, just the two of us."

"I'd love that. We can christen the bedroom again and again."

He leans forward and kisses me under my ear. "Hmm … I look forward to it, Anastasia," he whispers, making every single hair follicle on my body stand to attention.

How does he do that?

"Come, the apartment is clean. We can go back."

"What about our things at the hotel?"

"Taylor has collected them already."

*Oh! When?*

"Earlier today, after he did a sweep of *The Grace* with his team." Christian answers my unspoken question.

"Does that poor man ever sleep?"

"He sleeps." Christian quirks an eyebrow at me, puzzled. "He's just doing his job, Anastasia, which he's very good at. Jason is a real find."

"Jason?"

"Jason Taylor."

I thought Taylor was his first name. Jason. It suits him—solid, reliable. For some reason it makes me smile.

“You’re fond of Taylor,” Christian says, eyeing me with speculation.

“I suppose I am.” His question derails me. He frowns. “I’m not attracted to him, if that’s why you’re frowning. Stop.”

Christian is almost pouting—sulky.

*Jeez, he’s such a child sometimes*. “I think Taylor looks after you very well. That’s why I like him. He seems kind, reliable, and loyal. He has an avuncular appeal to me.”

“Avuncular?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, avuncular.” Christian is testing the word and meaning. I laugh.

“Oh, Christian, grow up, for heaven’s sake.”

His mouth drops open, surprised by my outburst, but then he frowns as if considering my statement. “I’m trying,” he says eventually.

“That you are. Very.” I answer softly but then roll my eyes at him.

“What memories you evoke when you roll your eyes at me, Anastasia.” He grins.

I smirk at him. “Well, if you behave yourself, maybe we can relive some of those memories.”

His mouth twists with humor. “Behave myself?” He raises his eyebrows. “Really, Miss Steele—what makes you think I want to relive them?”

“Probably the way your eyes lit up like Christmas when I said that.”

“You know me so well already,” he says dryly.

“I’d like to know you better.”

He smiles softly. “And I you, Anastasia.”

“THANKS, MAC.” CHRISTIAN SHAKES McConnell’s hand and steps on the dock.

“Always a pleasure, Mr. Grey, and good-bye. Ana, great to meet you.”

I shake his hand shyly. He must know what Christian and I were up to on the boat while he went ashore.

“Good day, Mac, and thank you.”

He grins at me and winks, making me flush. Christian takes my hand, and we walk up the dock to the marina’s promenade.

“Where’s Mac from?” I ask, curious about his accent.

“Ireland … Northern Ireland,” Christian corrects himself.

“Is he your friend?”

“Mac? He works for me. Helped build *The Grace*.”

“Do you have many friends?”

He frowns. “Not really. Doing what I do … I don’t cultivate friendships. There’s only—” He stops, his frown deepening, and I know he was going to

mention Mrs. Robinson.

"Hungry?" he asks, trying to change the subject.

I nod. Actually, I'm famished.

"We'll eat where I left the car. Come."

NEXT TO SP'S IS a small Italian bistro called Bee's. It reminds me of the place in Portland—a few tables and booths, the decor very crisp and modern, with a large black-and-white photograph of a turn-of-the-century fiesta serving as a mural.

Christian and I are seated in a booth, poring over the menu and sipping a delicious light Frascati. When I glance up from the menu, having made my choice, Christian is gazing at me speculatively.

"What?" I ask.

"You look lovely, Anastasia. The outdoors agrees with you."

I flush. "I feel rather windburned, to tell the truth. But I had a lovely afternoon. A perfect afternoon. Thank you."

He smiles, his eyes warm. "My pleasure," he murmurs.

"Can I ask you something?" I decide on a fact-finding mission.

"Anything, Anastasia. You know that." He cocks his head to one side, looking delicious.

"You don't seem to have many friends. Why is that?"

He shrugs and frowns. "I told you, I don't really have time. I have business associates—though that's very different from friendships, I suppose. I have my family and that's it. Apart from Elena."

I ignore the mention of the bitch-troll. "No male friends your own age that you can go out with and let off steam?"

"You know how I like to let off steam, Anastasia." Christian's mouth twists. "And I've been working, building up the business." He looks puzzled. "That's all I do—except sail and fly occasionally."

"Not even in college?"

"Not really."

"Just Elena, then?"

He nods, his expression wary.

"Must be lonely."

His lips curl in a small wistful smile. "What would you like to eat?" he asks, changing the subject again.

"I'm going for the risotto."

"Good choice." Christian summons the waiter, putting an end to that conversation.

After we've placed our order, I shift uncomfortably in my seat, staring at my

knotted fingers. If he's in a talking mood, I need to take advantage.

I have to talk to him about his expectations, about his, um … needs.

"Anastasia, what's wrong? Tell me."

I glance up into his concerned face.

"Tell me," he says more forcefully, and his concern evolves into what? Fear? Anger?

I take a deep breath. "I'm just worried that this isn't enough for you. You know, to let off steam."

His jaw tenses and his eyes harden. "Have I given you any indication that this isn't enough?"

"No."

"Then why do you think that?"

"I know what you're like. What you … um … need," I stutter.

He closes his eyes and rubs his forehead with long fingers.

"What do I have to do?" His voice is ominously soft, as if he's angry, and my heart sinks.

"No, you misunderstand—you have been amazing, and I know it's just been a few days, but I hope I'm not forcing you to be someone you're not."

"I'm still me, Anastasia—in all my fifty shades of fucked-upness. Yes, I have to fight the urge to be controlling … but that's my nature, how I've dealt with my life. Yes, I expect you to behave a certain way, and when you don't it's both challenging and refreshing. We still do what I like to do. You let me spank you after your outrageous bid yesterday." He smiles fondly at the memory. "I enjoy punishing you. I don't think the urge will ever go … but I'm trying, and it's not as hard as I thought it would be."

I squirm and flush, remembering our illicit tryst in his childhood bedroom. "I didn't mind that," I whisper, smiling shyly.

"I know." His lips curl in a reluctant smile. "Neither did I. But let me tell you, Anastasia, this is all new to me and these last few days have been the best in my life. I don't want to change anything."

*Oh!*

"They've been the best in my life, too, without exception," I murmur and his smile broadens. My inner goddess nods frantically in agreement—and nudges me hard. *Okay, okay*.

"So, you don't want to take me into your playroom?"

He swallows and pales, all trace of humor gone. "No, I don't."

"Why not?" I whisper. This is not the answer I expected.

And yes, there it is—that little pinch of disappointment. My inner goddess stomps off pouting, her arms crossed like an angry toddler's.

“The last time we were in there you left me,” he says quietly. “I will shy away from anything that could make you leave me again. I was devastated when you left. I explained that. I never want to feel like that again. I’ve told you how I feel about you.” His gray eyes are wide and intense with his sincerity.

“But it hardly seems fair. It can’t be very relaxing for you—to be constantly concerned about how I feel. You’ve made all these changes for me, and I … I think I should reciprocate in some way. I don’t know—maybe … try … some role-playing games,” I stutter, my face as crimson as the walls of the playroom.

Why is this so hard to talk about? I have done all manner of kinky fuckery with this man, things I hadn’t even heard of a few weeks ago, things that I would never have thought possible, yet the hardest of all is talking to him.

“Ana, you do reciprocate, more than you know. Please, please don’t feel like this.”

Gone is carefree Christian. His eyes are wider now with alarm, and it’s gut-wrenching. “Baby, it’s only been one weekend,” he continues. “Give us some time. I thought a great deal about us last week when you left. We need time. You need to trust me, and I you. Maybe in time we can indulge, but I like how you are now. I like seeing you this happy, this relaxed and carefree, knowing that I had something to do with it. I have never—” He stops and runs his hand through his hair. “We have to walk before we can run.” Suddenly he smirks.

“What’s so funny?”

“Flynn. He says that all the time. I never thought I’d be quoting him.”

“A Flynnism.”

Christian laughs. “Exactly.”

The waiter arrives with our starters and bruschetta, and our conversation changes tack as Christian relaxes.

But when the unreasonably large plates are placed before us, I can’t help think how I have thought of Christian today—relaxed, happy, and carefree. At least he’s laughing now, at ease again.

I breathe an inward sigh of relief as he starts quizzing me about places I’ve been. This is a short discussion, since I have never been anywhere except the continental United States. Christian, on the other hand, has traveled the world. We slip into an easier, happier conversation, talking about all the places he’s visited.

AFTER OUR TASTY AND filling meal, Christian drives back to Escala, with Eva Cassidy’s gentle sweet voice singing over the speakers. It allows me a peaceful interlude in which to think. I have had a mind-blowing day: Dr. Greene; our shower; Christian’s admission; making love at the hotel and on the boat; buying the car.

Even Christian himself has been so different. It's as if he's letting go of something or rediscovering something—I don't know which.

Who knew he could be so sweet? Did he?

When I glance at him, he, too, looks lost in thought. It strikes me then that he never really had an adolescence—a normal one, anyway. I shake my head.

My mind drifts back to the ball and dancing with Dr. Flynn and Christian's fear that Flynn had told me all about him. Christian is still hiding something from me. How can we move on if he feels that way?

He thinks I might leave if I know him. He thinks that I might leave if he's himself. *Oh, this man is so complicated*.

As we get closer to his home, he starts radiating tension until it becomes palpable. He scans the sidewalks and side alleys, his eyes darting everywhere, and I know he's looking for Leila. I start looking, too. Every young brunette is a suspect, but we don't see her.

When he pulls into the garage, his mouth is set in a tense, grim line. I wonder why we've come back here if he's going to be so wary and uptight. Sawyer is in the garage, patrolling. The defiled Audi is gone. He comes to open my door as Christian pulls in beside the SUV.

"Hello, Sawyer," I murmur my greeting.

"Miss Steele." He nods. "Mr. Grey."

"No sign?" Christian asks.

"No, sir."

Christian nods, grasps my hand, and heads for the elevator. I know his brain is working overtime—he's distracted. Once we're inside he turns to me.

"You are not allowed out of here alone. You understand?" he snaps.

"Okay." *Jeez—keep your hair on*. But his attitude makes me smile. I want to hug myself—this man, all domineering and short with me, I know. I marvel that I would have found it so threatening only a week or so ago when he spoke to me this way. But now I understand him so much better. This is his coping mechanism. He's stressed about Leila, he loves me, and he wants to protect me.

"What's so funny?" he murmurs, a hint of amusement in his expression.

"You are."

"Me? Miss Steele? Why am I funny?" he pouts.

Christian pouting is … hot.

"Don't pout."

"Why?" He's even more amused.

"Because it has the same effect on me as I have on you when I do this." I bite my lip deliberately.

He raises his eyebrows, surprised and pleased at the same time. "Really?" He

pouts again and leans down to give me a swift chaste kiss.

I raise my lips to meet his, and in the nanosecond when our lips touch, the nature of the kiss changes—wildfire spreading through my veins from this intimate point of contact, driving me to him.

Suddenly, my fingers are curling in his hair as he grabs me and pushes me against the elevator wall, his hands framing my face, holding me to his lips as our tongues thrash against each other. And I don't know if it's the confines of the elevator making everything much more real, but I feel his need, his anxiety, his passion.

*Holy shit*. I want him, here, now.

The elevator pings to a halt, the doors slide open, and Christian drags his face from mine, his hips still pinning me to the wall, his erection digging into me.

"Whoa," he murmurs panting.

"Whoa," I mirror him, dragging a welcome breath into my lungs.

He gazes at me, eyes blazing. "What you do to me, Ana." He traces my lower lip with his thumb.

Out of the corner of my eye, Taylor steps backward so he's no longer in my line of sight. I reach up and kiss Christian at the corner of his beautifully sculptured mouth.

"What you do to me, Christian."

He steps back and takes my hand, his eyes darker now, hooded. "Come," he orders.

Taylor is still in the foyer, waiting discreetly for us.

"Good evening, Taylor," Christian says cordially.

"Mr. Grey, Miss Steele."

"I was Mrs. Taylor yesterday." I grin at Taylor, who flushes.

"That has a nice ring to it, Miss Steele," Taylor says matter-of-factly.

"I thought so, too."

Christian tightens his hold on my hand, scowling. "If you two have quite finished, I'd like a debriefing." He glares at Taylor, who now looks uncomfortable, and I cringe inwardly. I have overstepped the mark.

"Sorry," I mouth at Taylor, who shrugs and smiles kindly before I turn to follow Christian.

"I'll be with you shortly. I just want a word with Miss Steele," Christian says to Taylor, and I know I'm in trouble.

Christian leads me into his bedroom and closes the door.

"Don't flirt with the staff, Anastasia," he scolds.

I open my mouth to defend myself—then close it again, then open it. "I wasn't flirting. I was being friendly—there is a difference."

“Don’t be friendly with the staff or flirt with them. I don’t like it.”

*Oh. Good-bye, carefree Christian.* “I’m sorry,” I mutter and stare down at my fingers. He hasn’t made me feel like a child all day. Reaching down he cups my chin, pulling my head up to meet his eyes.

“You know how jealous I am,” he whispers.

“You have no reason to be jealous, Christian. You own me body and soul.”

He blinks as if he’s finding this fact hard to process. He leans down and kisses me quickly, but with none of the passion we experienced a moment ago in the elevator.

“I won’t be long. Make yourself at home,” he says sulkily and turns, leaving me standing in his bedroom, dazed and confused.

*Why on earth would he be jealous of Taylor?* I shake my head in disbelief.

Glancing at the alarm clock, I notice it’s just after eight. I decide to get my clothes ready for work tomorrow. I head upstairs to my room and open the walk-in closet. It’s empty. All the clothes have gone. *Oh no!* Christian has taken me at my word and disposed of the clothes. *Shit*.

My subconscious glares at me. *Well, that would be you and your big mouth.*

Why did he take me at my word? My mother’s advice comes back to haunt me: “*Men are so literal, darling*.” I pout, staring at the empty space. There were some lovely clothes, too, like the silver dress I wore to the ball.

I wander disconsolately into the bedroom. *Wait a minute—what is going on?* The iPad is gone. Where’s my Mac? *Oh no*. My first uncharitable thought is that Leila may have stolen them.

I fly back downstairs and back into Christian’s bedroom. On the bedside table are my Mac, my iPad, and my backpack. It’s all here.

I open the walk-in closet door. My clothes are here—all of them—sharing space with Christian’s clothes. When did this happen? Why does he never warn me before he does things like this?

I turn, and he’s standing in the doorway.

“Oh, they managed the move,” he mutters, distracted.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. His face is grim.

“Taylor thinks Leila was getting in through the emergency stairwell. She must have had a key. All the locks have been changed now. Taylor’s team has done a sweep of every room in the apartment. She’s not here.” He stops and runs a hand through his hair. “I wish I knew where she was. She’s evading all our attempts to find her when she needs help.” He frowns, and my earlier pique vanishes. I put my arms around him. Folding me into his embrace, he kisses my hair.

“What will you do when you find her?” I ask.

“Dr. Flynn has a place.”

“What about her husband?”

“He’s washed his hands of her.” Christian’s tone is bitter. “Her family is in Connecticut. I think she’s very much on her own out there.”

“That’s sad.”

“Are you okay with all your stuff being here? I want you to share my room,” he murmurs.

*Whoa, quick change of direction.*

“Yes.”

“I want you sleeping with me. I don’t have nightmares when you’re with me.”

“You have nightmares?”

“Yes.”

I tighten my hold around him. More baggage. My heart contracts for this man.

“I was just getting my clothes ready for work tomorrow,” I mutter.

“Work!” Christian exclaims as if it’s a dirty word, and he releases me, glaring.

“Yes, work,” I reply, confused by his reaction.

He stares at me with complete incomprehension. “But Leila—she’s out there,” he pauses. “I don’t want you to go to work.”

*What?* “That’s ridiculous, Christian. I have to go to work.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I have a new job, which I enjoy. Of course I have to go to work.” *What does he mean?*

“No, you don’t,” he repeats, emphatically.

“Do you think I am going to stay here twiddling my thumbs while you’re off being Master of the Universe?”

“Frankly … yes.”

*Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty … give me strength.*

“Christian, I need to go to work.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes. I. Do.” I say it slowly as if he’s a child.

He scowls at me. “It’s not safe.”

“Christian … I need to work for a living, and I’ll be fine.”

“No, you don’t need to work for a living—and how do you know you’ll be fine?” He’s almost shouting.

What does he mean? He’s going to support me? Oh, this is beyond ridiculous—I’ve known him for what—five weeks?

He’s angry now, his eyes stormy and flashing, but I don’t give a shit.

“For heaven’s sake, Christian, Leila was standing at the end of your bed, and she didn’t harm me, and yes, I do need to work. I don’t want to be beholden to you. I have my student loans to pay.”

His mouth presses into a grim line, as I place my hands on my hips. I am not budging on this. Who the fuck does he think he is?

"I don't want you going to work."

"It's not up to you, Christian. This is not your decision to make."

He runs his hand through his hair as he stares at me. Seconds, minutes tick by as we glare at each other.

"Sawyer will come with you."

"Christian, that's not necessary. You're being irrational."

"Irrational?" he growls. "Either he comes with you, or I will be really irrational and keep you here."

*He wouldn't, would he?* "How, exactly?"

"Oh, I'd find a way, Anastasia. Don't push me."

"Okay!" I concede, holding up both my hands, placating him. *Holy fuck—Fifty is back with a vengeance.*

We stand, scowling at each other.

"Okay—Sawyer can come with me if it makes you feel better." I concede rolling my eyes. Christian narrows his and takes a menacing step in my direction. I immediately step back. He stops and takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and runs both his hands through his hair. Oh no. Fifty is well and truly wound up.

"Shall I give you a tour?"

*A tour? Are you kidding me?* "Okay," I mutter warily. Another change of tack—Mr. Mercurial is back in town. He holds out his hand and when I take it, he squeezes mine softly.

"I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You didn't. I was just getting ready to run," I quip.

"Run?" Christian eyes widen.

"I'm joking!" *Oh, jeez.*

He leads me out of the closet, and I take a moment to calm down. Adrenaline is still coursing through my body. A fight with Fifty is not to be undertaken lightly.

He gives me a tour of the apartment, showing me the various rooms. Along with the playroom and three spare bedrooms upstairs, I'm intrigued to find that Taylor and Mrs. Jones have a wing to themselves—a kitchen, spacious living area, and a bedroom each. Mrs. Jones has not yet returned from visiting her sister who lives in Portland.

Downstairs, the room that catches my eye is opposite his study—a TV room with a too-large plasma screen and assorted games consoles. It's cozy.

"So, you do have an Xbox?" I smirk.

“Yes, but I’m crap at it. Elliot always beats me. That was funny, when you thought I meant this room was my playroom.” He grins down at me, his conniption forgotten. Thank heavens he’s recovered his good mood.

“I’m glad you find me amusing, Mr. Grey,” I respond haughtily.

“That you are, Miss Steele—when you’re not being exasperating, of course.”

“I’m usually exasperating when you’re being unreasonable.”

“Me? Unreasonable?”

“Yes, Mr. Grey. Unreasonable could be your middle name.”

“I don’t have a middle name.”

“Unreasonable would suit, then.”

“I think that’s a matter of opinion, Miss Steele.”

“I would be interested in Dr. Flynn’s professional opinion.”

Christian smirks.

“I thought Trevelyan was your middle name.”

“No. Surname. Trevelyan-Grey.”

“But you don’t use it.”

“It’s too long. Come,” he commands. I follow him out of the TV room through the great room to the main corridor past the utility room and an impressive wine cellar and into Taylor’s own large, well-equipped office. Taylor stands when we enter. There’s room in here for a meeting table that seats six. Above one desk is a bank of monitors. I had no idea the apartment had CCTV. It appears to monitor the balcony, stairwell, service elevator, and foyer.

“Hi, Taylor. I’m just giving Anastasia a tour.”

Taylor nods but doesn’t smile. I wonder if he’s been told off, too, and why is he still working? When I smile at him, he nods politely. Christian grabs my hand once more and leads me to the library.

“And, of course, you’ve been in here.” Christian opens the door. I spy the green baize of the billiard table.

“Shall we play?” I ask.

Christian smiles, surprised. “Okay. Have you played before?”

“A few times,” I lie, and he narrows his eyes, cocking his head to one side.

“You’re a hopeless liar, Anastasia. Either you’ve never played before or—”

I lick my lips. “Frightened of a little competition?”

“Frightened of a little girl like you?” Christian scoffs good-naturedly.

“A wager, Mr. Grey.”

“You’re that confident, Miss Steele?” He smirks, amused and incredulous at once. “What would you like to wager?”

“If I win, you’ll take me back into the playroom.”

He gazes at me as if he can’t quite comprehend what I’ve said. “And if I

win?" he asks after several shell-shocked beats.

"Then it's your choice."

His mouth twists as he contemplates his answer. "Okay, deal." He smirks. "Do you want to play pool, English snooker, or carom billiards?"

"Pool, please. I don't know the others."

From a cupboard beneath one of the bookshelves, Christian takes out a large leather case. Inside the pool balls are nested in velvet. Quickly and efficiently, he racks the balls on the baize. I don't think I've ever played pool on such a large table before. Christian hands me a cue and some chalk.

"Would you like to break?" He feigns politeness. He's enjoying himself—he thinks he's going to win.

"Okay." I chalk the end of my cue and blow the excess chalk off—staring up at Christian through my lashes. His eyes darken as I do.

I line up on the white ball and with a swift clean stroke, hit the center ball of the triangle square on with such force that a striped ball spins and plunges into the top right pocket. I've scattered the rest of the balls.

"I choose stripes," I say innocently, smiling coyly at Christian. His mouth twists in amusement.

"Be my guest," he says politely.

I proceed to pocket the next three balls in quick succession. Inside myself I'm dancing. At this moment I am so grateful to José for teaching me to play pool and play it well. Christian watches impassively, giving nothing away, but his amusement seems to ebb. I miss the green stripe by a hairbreadth.

"You know, Anastasia, I could stand here and watch you leaning and stretching across this billiard table all day," he says appreciatively.

I flush. Thank heavens I am wearing my jeans. He smirks. He's trying to put me off my game, the bastard. He pulls his cream sweater over his head, tosses it onto the back of a chair, and grins at me, as he saunters over to take his first shot.

He bends low over the table. My mouth goes dry. *Oh, I see what he means*. Christian in tight jeans and white T-shirt, bending, like that … is something to behold. I quite lose my train of thought. He sinks four solids rapidly, then fouls by sinking the white.

"A very elementary mistake, Mr. Grey," I tease.

He smirks. "Ah, Miss Steele, I am but a foolish mortal. Your turn, I believe." He waves at the table.

"You're not trying to lose, are you?"

"Oh no. For what I have in mind as the prize, I want to win, Anastasia." He shrugs casually. "But then, I always want to win."

I narrow my eyes at him. *Right, then* … I'm so glad I'm wearing my blue blouse, which is pleasingly low-cut. I stalk around the table, bending low at every available opportunity—giving Christian an eyeful of my behind and my cleavage whenever I can. Two can play at that game. I glance at him.

"I know what you're doing," he whispers, his eyes dark.

I tilt my head coquettishly to one side, gently fondling my cue, running my hand up and down it slowly. "Oh. I am just deciding where to take my next shot," I murmur distractedly.

Leaning across, I hit the orange stripe into a better position. I then stand directly in front of Christian and take the rest from underneath the table. I line up my next shot, leaning right over the table. I hear Christian's sharp intake of breath, and of course, I miss. *Shit*.

He comes to stand behind me while I am still bent over the table and places his hand on my backside. *Hmm* …

"Are you waving this around to taunt me, Miss Steele?" And he smacks me, hard.

I gasp. "Yes," I mutter, because it's true.

"Be careful what you wish for, baby."

I rub my behind as he wanders to the other end of the table, leans over, and takes his shot. He hits the red ball, and it shoots into the left side pocket. He aims for the yellow, top right, and it just misses. I grin.

"Red Room, here we come," I taunt him.

He merely raises an eyebrow and directs me to continue. I make quick work of the green stripe and by some fluke, manage to knock in the final orange stripe.

"Name your pocket," Christian murmurs, and it's as if he's talking about something else, something dark and naughty.

"Top left-hand." I take aim over the black, hit it, but miss. It skirts wide. *Damn*.

Christian smiles a wicked grin as he leans over the table and makes short work of the two remaining solids. I am practically panting, watching him, his lithe body stretching over the table. He stands and chalks his cue, his eyes burning into me.

"If I win …"

*Oh yes?*

"I am going to spank you, then fuck you over this billiard table."

*Holy shit*. Every single muscle south of my navel clenches hard.

"Top right," he murmurs, pointing to the black, and bends to take the shot.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

With easy grace, Christian taps the white ball so that it glides across the table, kisses the black, and oh-so-slowly the black rolls, teeters on the edge, and finally drops into the top right pocket of the billiard table.

Damn.

He stands, and his mouth twists in a triumphant I-so-own-you-Steele smile. Putting down his cue, he saunters casually toward me, all tousled hair, jeans, and white T-shirt. He doesn't look like a CEO—he looks like a bad boy from the wrong side of town. Holy cow, he's so fucking sexy.

"You're not going to be a sore loser, are you?" he murmurs, barely containing his grin.

"Depends how hard you spank me," I whisper, holding on to my cue for support. He takes my cue and puts it to one side, hooks his finger into the top of my shirt, and pulls me toward him.

"Well, let's count your misdemeanors, Miss Steele." He counts on his long fingers. "One, making me jealous of my own staff. Two, arguing with me about working. And three, waving your delectable derriere at me for the last twenty minutes."

His eyes glow a soft gray with excitement, and leaning down, he rubs his nose against mine. "I want you to take your jeans and this very fetching shirt off. Now." He plants a feather-soft kiss on my lips, wanders nonchalantly over to the door, and locks it.

When he turns and gazes at me, his eyes are burning. I stand paralyzed like a complete zombie, my heart pounding, my blood pumping, not actually able to move a muscle. In my mind, all I can think is—*this is for him*—the thought repeating like a mantra over and over again.

"Clothes, Anastasia. You appear to still be wearing them. Take them off—or I will do it for you."

"You do it." I finally find my voice, and it sounds low and heated. Christian grins.

"Oh, Miss Steele. It's a dirty job, but I think I can rise to the challenge."

"You normally rise to most challenges, Mr. Grey." I raise an eyebrow at him,

and he smirks.

"Why, Miss Steele, whatever do you mean?" On his way over to me, he pauses at the small desk built into one of the bookshelves. Reaching over, he picks up a twelve-inch Perspex ruler. He holds each end and flexes it, his eyes not leaving mine.

*Holy shit—his weapon of choice*. My mouth goes dry.

Suddenly I'm hot and bothered and damp in all the right places. Only Christian could turn me on with just a look and the flex of a ruler. He slips it into the back pocket of his jeans and ambles toward me, eyes dark and full of promise. Without saying a word, he drops to his knees in front of me and starts to undo my laces, quickly and efficiently, dragging both my Converses and socks off. I lean on the side of the billiard table so I don't fall. Gazing down at him as he undoes my laces, I marvel at the depth of feeling that I have for this man. I love him.

He grabs my hips, slips his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, and undoes the button and zipper. He peers up through his long lashes, grinning his most salacious grin as he slowly peels my jeans off. I step out of them, glad that I'm wearing these pretty white lace panties, and he grasps the back of my legs and runs his nose along the apex of my thighs. I practically melt.

"I want to be quite rough with you, Ana. You'll have to tell me to stop if it's too much," he breathes.

*Oh my*. He kisses me … there. I moan softly.

"Safeword?" I murmur.

"No, no safeword, just tell me to stop, and I'll stop. Understand?" He kisses me again, nuzzling me. *Oh, that feels good*. He stands up, his stare intense. "Answer me," he orders his voice velvet soft.

"Yes, yes, I understand." I'm puzzled by his insistence.

"You've been dropping hints and giving me mixed signals all day, Anastasia," he says. "You said you were worried I'd lost my edge. I'm not sure what you meant by that, and I don't know how serious you were, but we are going to find out. I don't want to go back into the playroom yet, so we can try this now, but if you don't like it, you must promise to tell me." A burning intensity born of his anxiety replaces his earlier cockiness.

*Whoa, please don't be anxious, Christian*. "I'll tell you. No safeword," I reiterate to reassure him.

"We're lovers, Anastasia. Lovers don't need safewords." He frowns. "Do they?"

"I guess not," I murmur. *How do I know?* "I promise."

He searches my face for any clue that I might lack the courage of my

convictions, and I'm nervous but excited, too. I'm much happier to do this, knowing that he loves me. It's very simple to me, and right now, I don't want to overthink it.

A slow smile stretches across his face, and he starts to unbutton my shirt, his deft fingers making short work of it, though he doesn't take it off. He leans over and picks up the cue.

*Oh fuck, what's he going to do with that?* A frisson of fear runs through me.

"You play well, Miss Steele. I must say I'm surprised. Why don't you sink the black?"

My fear forgotten, I pout, wondering why the hell he should be surprised—sexy, arrogant bastard. My inner goddess is limbering up in the background, doing her floor exercises—a great wide smile on her face.

I position the white ball. Christian strolls back around the table and stands right behind me as I lean over to take my shot. He places his hand on my right thigh and runs his fingers up and down my leg, up to my behind and back again, lightly stroking me.

"I am going to miss if you keep doing that," I whisper, closing my eyes and relishing the feel of his hands on me.

"I don't care if you hit or miss, baby. I just wanted to see you like this—partially dressed, stretched out on my billiard table. Do you have any idea how hot you look at this moment?"

I flush, and my inner goddess grabs a rose between her teeth and starts to tango. Taking a deep breath, I try to ignore him and line up my shot. It's impossible. He caresses my behind, over and over again.

"Top left," I murmur, then hit the white ball. He smacks me hard, squarely on my backside.

It's so unexpected, I yelp. The white hits the black, which bounces off the cushion wide of the pocket. Christian caresses my behind again.

"Oh, I think you need to try that again," he whispers. "You should concentrate, Anastasia."

I'm panting now, excited by this game. He strolls to the end of the table, sets up the black ball again, then runs the white ball back down to me. He looks so carnal, dark-eyed with a lascivious smile. How could I ever resist him? I catch the ball and line it up, ready to strike again.

"Uh-uh," he admonishes. "Just wait." Oh, he just loves prolonging the agony. He wanders back and stands behind me again. I close my eyes once more as he strokes my left thigh this time, then fondles my backside again.

"Take aim," he breathes.

I can't help my moan as desire twists and turns inside me. And I try, really try,

to think about where I should hit the black with the white. I shift slightly to my right, and he follows me. I bend over the table once more. Using every last vestige of inner strength—which has diminished considerably since I know what will happen once I strike the white ball—I take aim and hit the white again. Christian smacks me once more, hard.

*Ow!* I miss again. "Oh no!" I groan.

"Once more, baby. And if you miss this time, I'm really going to let you have it."

*What? Have what?*

He sets up the black ball once more and walks, achingly slow, back to me until he's standing behind me, caressing my backside once more.

"You can do it," he coaxes.

*Oh—not when you're distracting me like this.* I push my behind back against his hand, and he smacks me lightly.

"Eager, Miss Steele?" he murmurs.

*Yes. I want you.*

"Well, let's get rid of these." He gently slides my panties down my thighs and off. I can't see what he does with them, but he leaves me feeling exposed as he plants a soft kiss on each cheek.

"Take the shot, baby."

I want to whimper; this is so not going to happen. I know I am going to miss. I line up the white, hit it, and in my impatience, miss the black completely. I wait for the blow—but it doesn't come. Instead he leans right over me, flattening me against the table, takes the cue out of my hand and rolls it to the side cushion. I feel him, hard, against my backside.

"You missed," he says softly in my ear. My cheek is pressed against the baize. "Put your hands flat on the table."

I do as he says.

"Good. I'm going to spank you now and next time, maybe you won't." He shifts so he's standing to my left side, his erection against my hip.

I groan and my heart leaps into my mouth. My breath comes in short pants and a hot, heavy excitement courses through my veins. Gently, he caresses my behind and curls his other hand around the nape of my neck, his fingers tightening around my hair at the nape, his elbow at my back, holding me down. I am completely helpless.

"Open your legs," he murmurs and for a moment, I hesitate. And he smacks me hard—with the ruler! The noise is harsher than the sting, and it takes me by surprise. I gasp, and he hits me again.

"Legs," he orders. I open my legs, panting. The ruler strikes again. Ow—it

stings, but its crack across my skin sounds worse than it feels.

I close my eyes and absorb the pain. It's not too bad, and Christian's breathing becomes harsher. He hits me again and again, and I moan. I am not sure how many more strokes I can bear—but hearing him, knowing how turned on he is, feeds my arousal and my willingness to continue. I am crossing to the dark side, a place in my psyche I don't know well but have visited before in the playroom—with the Tallis. The ruler strikes once more, and I moan loudly, and Christian groans in response. He hits me again—and again … and once more … harder this time—and I wince.

"Stop." The word is out of my mouth before I'm even aware that I've said it. Christian drops the ruler immediately and releases me.

"Enough?" he whispers.

"Yes."

"I want to fuck you now," he says, his voice strained.

"Yes," I murmur with longing. He undoes his fly, as I lie panting on the table, knowing that he's going to be rough.

I marvel once more at how I have managed—and yes, enjoyed—what he's done to me up to this point. It's so dark but so him.

He eases two fingers inside me and moves them in a circular motion. The feeling is exquisite. Closing my eyes, I revel in the sensation. I hear the telltale rip of foil, then he's standing behind me, between my legs, pushing them wider.

Slowly he sinks into me, filling me. I hear his groan of pure pleasure, and it stirs my soul. He grasps my hips firmly, eases out of me again, and this time slams back into me, causing me to cry out. He stills for a moment.

"Again?" he asks softly.

"Yes … I'm fine. Lose yourself … take me with you," I murmur breathlessly.

He moans low in his throat, eases out of me once more, then slams into me, and repeats this over and over slowly, deliberately—a punishing, brutal, heavenly rhythm.

*Oh fucking my* … My insides begin to quicken. He feels it, too, and increases the rhythm, pushing me, higher, harder, faster—and I surrender, exploding around him—a draining, soul-grabbing orgasm that leaves me spent and exhausted.

I'm vaguely aware that Christian, too, is letting go, calling my name, his fingers digging into my hips, and then he stills and collapses on me. We sink to the floor, and he cradles me in his arms.

"Thank you, baby," he breathes, covering my upturned face in soft feather-light kisses. I open my eyes and gaze up at him, and he wraps his arms tighter around me.

“Your cheek is pink from the baize,” he murmurs, rubbing my face tenderly. “How was that?” His eyes are wide and cautious.

“Teeth-clenchingly good,” I mutter. “I like it rough, Christian, and I like it gentle, too. I like that it’s with you.”

He closes his eyes and hugs me even tighter.

*Jeez, I’m tired*.

“You never fail, Ana. You are beautiful, bright, challenging, fun, sexy, and I thank Divine Providence every day that it was you who came to interview me and not Katherine Kavanagh.” He kisses my hair. I smile and yawn against his chest. “I’m wearing you out,” he continues. “Come. Bath, then bed.”

WE ARE BOTH IN Christian’s bath, facing each other chin-deep in foam, the sweet scent of jasmine enveloping us. Christian is massaging my feet, one at a time. It feels so good it should be illegal.

“Can I ask you something?” I murmur.

“Of course. Anything, Ana, you know that.”

I take a deep breath and sit up, flinching only slightly.

“Tomorrow—when I go to work—can Sawyer just deliver me to the front door of the office, then pick me up at the end of the day? Please, Christian. Please,” I plead.

His hands still as his brow creases. “I thought we agreed,” he grumbles.

“Please,” I beg.

“What about lunchtime?”

“I’ll make myself something to take from here so I don’t have to go out, please.”

He kisses my instep. “I find it very difficult to say no to you,” he mutters as if he senses this is a failing on his part. “You won’t go out?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

I beam at him. “Thank you.” I lean up onto my knees, sloshing water everywhere, and kiss him.

“You’re most welcome, Miss Steele. How’s your behind?”

“Sore. But not too bad. The water is soothing.”

“I’m glad you told me to stop,” he says, gazing at me.

“So is my behind.”

He grins.

I STRETCH OUT IN bed, so tired. It’s only ten thirty, but it feels like three in the morning. This has to be one of the most exhausting weekends of my life.

“Didn’t Ms. Acton provide any nightwear?” Christian asks, his voice laced with disapproval as he stares down at me.

“I have no idea. I like wearing your T-shirts,” I mumble sleepily.

His face softens, and he leans over and kisses my forehead.

“I need to work. But I don’t want to leave you alone. Can I use your laptop to log in to the office? Will I disturb you if I work from here?”

“S’not my laptop.” I drift.

THE ALARM CLICKS ON, startling me awake with the traffic news. Christian is still asleep beside me. Rubbing my eyes, I glance at the clock. Six thirty—too early.

It’s raining outside for the first time in ages, and the light is muted and mellow. I’m cozy and comfortable in this vast modern monolith with Christian at my side. I stretch and turn to the delicious man beside me. His eyes spring open and he blinks sleepily.

“Good morning.” I smile and caress his face, leaning down to kiss him.

“Good morning, baby. I usually wake before the alarm goes off,” he murmurs in wonder.

“It’s set so early.”

“That it is, Miss Steele.” Christian grins. “I have to get up.” He kisses me, and then he’s up and out of bed. I flop back against the pillows. Wow, waking up on a school day next to Christian Grey. How did this all happen? I close my eyes and doze.

“Come on, sleepyhead, get up.” Christian leans over me. He’s shaved, clean, fresh—*hmm, he smells so good*—in a crisp white shirt and black suit, no tie—the CEO is back.

“What?” he asks.

“I wish you’d come back to bed.”

His lips part, surprised by my come-on, and he smiles almost shyly. “You are insatiable, Miss Steele. As much as that idea appeals, I have an eight thirty meeting, so I have to go shortly.”

Oh, I’ve slept for another hour or so. *Shit*. I leap out of bed, much to Christian’s amusement.

I SHOWER AND DRESS quickly, wearing the clothes I set out yesterday: a fitted gray pencil skirt; pale gray silk shirt; and high-heeled black pumps, all care of my new wardrobe. I brush my hair and carefully put it up, then wander out to the great room, not really knowing what to expect. How am I going to get to work?

Christian is sipping coffee at the breakfast bar. Mrs. Jones is in the kitchen making pancakes and bacon.

“You look lovely,” Christian murmurs. Wrapping an arm around me, he kisses me under my ear. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Mrs. Jones’s smile. I flush.

“Good morning, Miss Steele,” she says as she places pancakes and bacon in front of me.

“Oh, thank you. Good morning,” I mumble. Jeez—I could get used to this.

“Mr. Grey says you’d like to take lunch with you to work. What would you like to eat?”

I glance at Christian, who is trying very hard not to smirk. I narrow my eyes at him.

“A sandwich … salad. I really don’t mind.” I beam at Mrs. Jones.

“I’ll rustle up a packed lunch for you, ma’am.”

“Please, Mrs. Jones, call me Ana.”

“Ana.” She smiles and turns to make me tea.

*Wow … this is so cool*.

I turn and cock my head at Christian, challenging him—go on, accuse me of flirting with Mrs. Jones.

“I have to go, baby. Taylor will come back and drop you at work with Sawyer.”

“Only to the door.”

“Yes. Only to the door.” Christian rolls his eyes. “Be careful, though.”

I glance around and spy Taylor standing in the entranceway. Christian stands and kisses me, grasping my chin.

“Laters, baby.”

“Have a good day at the office, dear,” I call after him. He turns and flashes me his beautiful smile then he’s gone. Mrs. Jones hands me a cup of tea, and suddenly I feel awkward with just the two of us here.

“How long have you worked for Christian?” I ask, thinking I ought to make some kind of conversation.

“Four years or so,” she says pleasantly, as she sets about making my packed lunch.

“You know, I can do that,” I mutter, embarrassed that she should be doing this for me.

“You eat your breakfast, Ana. This is what I do. I enjoy it. It’s nice to look after someone other than Mr. Taylor and Mr. Grey.” She smiles very sweetly at me.

My cheeks flush with pleasure, and I want to bombard this woman with questions. She must know so much about Fifty, and although her manner is warm and friendly, it’s also very professional. I know I’ll only embarrass both of

us if I start quizzing her, so I finish my breakfast in a reasonably comfortable silence, punctuated only by her questions on my general food preferences.

Twenty-five minutes later Sawyer appears at the entrance to the great room. I have brushed my teeth, and I'm waiting to go. Clutching my brown paper lunch bag—I can't even remember my mom doing this for me—Sawyer and I head to the first floor via the elevator. He's very taciturn, too, giving nothing away. Taylor is waiting in the Audi, and I climb into the rear passenger seat when Sawyer opens the door.

"Good morning, Taylor," I say brightly.

"Miss Steele." He smiles.

"Taylor, I'm sorry about yesterday and my inappropriate remarks. I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

Taylor frowns in bemusement at me from the rearview mirror as he pulls out into the Seattle traffic.

"Miss Steele, I'm rarely in trouble," he says reassuringly.

*Oh, good. Maybe Christian didn't tell him off. Just me, then,* I think sourly.

"I'm glad to hear it, Taylor." I smile.

JACK GAZES AT ME, assessing my appearance, as I make my way to my desk.

"Morning, Ana. Good weekend?"

"Yes, thanks. You?"

"It was good. Get settled in—I have work for you to do."

I nod and sit down at my computer. It seems like years since I was at work. I switch on my computer and fire up my e-mail program—and of course there's an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Boss

**Date:** June 13 2011 08:24

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Good morning, Miss Steele

I just wanted to say thank you for a wonderful weekend in spite of all the drama.

I hope you never leave, ever.

And just to remind you that the news of SIP is embargoed for four weeks.

Delete this e-mail as soon as you've read it.

Yours

Christian Grey,

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. & your boss's boss's boss.

Hope I never leave? Does he want me to move in? Holy Moses … I barely know the man. I press delete.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Bossy

**Date:** June 13 2011: 09:03

**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

Are you asking me to move in with you? And of course, I remembered that the evidence of your epic stalking capabilities is embargoed for another four weeks. Do I make a check out to Coping Together and send to your dad? Please don't delete this e-mail. Please respond to it.

ILY xxx

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

"Ana!" Jack makes me jump.

"Yes," I flush, and Jack frowns at me.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure." I scramble up and take my notebook into his office.

"Good. As you probably remember, I'm going to that Fiction Symposium in New York on Thursday. I have tickets and reservations, but I'd like you to come with me."

"To New York?"

"Yes. We'll need to go Wednesday and stay overnight. I think you'll find it a very educational experience." His eyes darken as he says this, but his smile is polite. "Would you make the necessary travel arrangements? And book an additional room at the hotel where I am staying? I think Sabrina, my previous PA, left all the details handy somewhere."

"Okay." I smile wanly at Jack.

Crap. I wander back to my desk. This is not going to go down well with Fifty—but the fact is, I want to go. It sounds like a real opportunity, and I'm sure I can keep Jack at arm's length if that's his ulterior motive. Back at my desk there's a response from Christian.

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Me, Bossy?
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:07
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Yes. Please.

Christian Grey,
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

He does want me to move in. Oh, Christian—it's too soon. I put my head in my hands to try and recover my wits. This is all I need after my extraordinary weekend. I haven't had a moment to myself to think through and understand all that I have experienced and discovered these last two days.

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Flynnisms
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:20
**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

What happened to walking before we run?

Can we talk about this tonight, please?

I've been asked to go to a conference in New York on Thursday.

It means an overnight stay on Wednesday.

Just thought you should know.

A x

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** WHAT?
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:21
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Yes. Let’s talk this evening.

Are you going on your own?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** No Bold Shouty Capitals on a Monday Morning!
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:30
**To:** Christian Grey

Can we talk about this tonight?

A x

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** You Haven’t Seen Shouty Yet.
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:35
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Tell me.

If it’s with the sleazeball you work with, then the answer is no, over my dead body.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# My heart sinks. Shit—it’s like he’s my dad.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** No YOU haven’t seen shouty yet.
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:46
**To:** Christian Grey

Yes. It is with Jack.

I want to go. It’s an exciting opportunity for me.

And I have never been to New York.

Don’t get your knickers in a twist.

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** No YOU haven’t seen shouty yet.
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:50
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Anastasia

It’s not my fucking knickers I am worried about.

The answer is NO.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

“No!” I shout at my computer, causing the entire office to come to a standstill and stare at me. Jack peers out from his office.

“Everything all right, Ana?”

“Yes. Sorry,” I mutter. “I er … just didn’t save a document.” I am scarlet with embarrassment. He smiles at me, but with a puzzled expression. I take several deep breaths and quickly type a response. I am so mad.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Fifty Shades
**Date:** June 13 2011 09:55
**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

You need to get a grip.

I am NOT going to sleep with Jack—not for all the tea in China.

I LOVE you. That’s what happens when people love each other.

They TRUST each other.

I don’t think you are going to SLEEP WITH, SPANK, FUCK, or WHIP anyone else. I have FAITH and TRUST in you.

Please extend the same COURTESY to me.

Ana

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

I sit waiting for his response. Nothing arrives. I call the airline and book a ticket for myself, ensuring I am on the same flight as Jack. I hear the *ping* of new mail.

---

**From:** Lincoln, Elena
**Subject:** Lunch Date
**Date:** June 13 2011 10:15
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear Anastasia

I would really like to have lunch with you. I think we got off on the wrong foot, and I'd like to make that right. Are you free sometime this week?

Elena Lincoln

*Holy crap—not Mrs. Robinson!* How the hell did she find out my e-mail address? I put my head in my hands. Can this day get any worse?

My phone rings and wearily I lift my head from my hands and answer, glancing at the clock. It is only ten twenty, and already I wish I hadn't left Christian's bed.

"Jack Hyde's office, Ana Steele speaking."

An achingly familiar voice snarls at me, "Will you please delete the last e-mail you sent me and try to be a little more circumspect in the language you use in your work e-mail? I told you, the system is monitored. I will endeavor to do some damage limitation from here." He hangs up.

*Holy fuck* … I sit staring at the phone. Christian hung up on me. That man is stomping all over my fledgling career, and he hangs up on me? I glare at the receiver, and if it wasn't completely inanimate, I know it would shrivel in horror under my withering stare.

I open my e-mails and delete the one I sent him. It's not that bad. I just mention spanking and well, whipping. If he's so ashamed of it, he damn well shouldn't do it. I pick up my BlackBerry and call his mobile.

"What?" he snaps.

“I am going to New York whether you like it or not,” I hiss.

“Don’t count—”

I hang up, cutting him off mid-sentence. Adrenaline is coursing through my body. There—that told him. I am so mad.

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. Closing my eyes, I imagine that I am in my happy place. *Hmm … a boat cabin with Christian*. I shake the image off, as I am too mad at Fifty right now for him to be anywhere near my happy place.

Opening my eyes, I calmly reach for my notebook and carefully run through my to-do list. I take a long, deep breath, my equilibrium restored.

“Ana!” Jack shouts, startling me. “Don’t book that flight!”

“Oh, too late. I’ve done it,” I reply as he strides out of his office over to me. He looks mad.

“Look, there’s something going on. For some reason, suddenly, all travel and hotel expenses for staff have to be approved by senior management. This has come right from the top. I am going up to see old Roach. Apparently, a moratorium on all spending has just been implemented. I don’t understand it.” Jack pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes.

Most of the blood drains from my face and knots form in my stomach. *Fifty!*

“Take my calls. I’ll go see what Roach has to say.” He winks at me and strides off to see his boss—not the boss’s boss.

*Damn it. Christian Grey* … My blood starts to boil again.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** What have you done?

**Date:** June 13 2011 10:43

**To:** Christian Grey

Please tell me you won’t interfere with my work.

I really want to go to this conference.

I shouldn’t have to ask you.

I have deleted the offending e-mail.

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** What have you done?

**Date:** June 13 2011 10:46

**To:** Anastasia Steele

I am just protecting what is mine.

The e-mail that you so rashly sent is wiped from the SIP server now, as are my e-mails to you.

Incidentally, I trust you implicitly. It's him I don't trust.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I check to see if I still have his e-mails, and they have disappeared. This man's influence knows no bounds. How does he do this? Who does he know that can stealthily delve into the depths of SIP's servers and remove e-mails? I am so out of my league here.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Grown Up

**Date:** June 13 2011 10:48

**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

I don't need protecting from my own boss.

He may make a pass at me, but I would say no.

You cannot interfere. It's wrong and controlling on so many levels.

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** The Answer is NO

**Date:** June 13 2011 10:50

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Ana

I have seen how "effective" you are at fighting off unwanted attention. I remember that's how I had the pleasure of spending my first night with you. At least the photographer has feelings for you. The sleazeball, on the other hand, does not. He is a serial philanderer, and he will try to seduce you. Ask him what happened to his previous PA and the one before that.

I don't want to fight about this.

If you want to go to New York, I'll take you. We can go this weekend. I have an apartment there.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Oh, Christian!* That's not the point. He's so damn frustrating. And of course he has an apartment there. Where else does he own property? Trust him to bring up José. Will I ever live that down? I was drunk, for heaven's sake. I wouldn't get drunk with Jack.

I shake my head at the screen, but figure I cannot continue to argue with him over e-mail. I will have to bide my time until this evening. I check the clock. Jack is still not back from his meeting with Jerry, and I need to deal with Elena. I read her e-mail again and decide that the best way to handle it is to send it to Christian. Let him concentrate on her rather than me.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** FW Lunch date or Irritating Baggage

**Date:** June 13 2011 11:15

**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

While you have been busy interfering in my career and saving your ass from my careless missives, I received the following e-mail from Mrs. Lincoln. I really don't want to meet with her—even if I did, I am not allowed to leave this building. How she got hold of my e-mail address, I don't know. What would you suggest I do? Her e-mail is below:

> *Dear Anastasia, I would really like to have lunch with you. I think we got off on the wrong foot, and I'd like to make that right. Are you free sometime this week? Elena Lincoln*

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Irritating Baggage

**Date:** June 13 2011 11:23

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Don't be mad at me. I have your best interests at heart.

If anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself.

I'll deal with Mrs. Lincoln.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Laters

**Date:** June 13 2011 11:32

**To:** Christian Grey

Can we please discuss this tonight?

I am trying to work, and your continued interference is very distracting.

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

Jack returns after midday and tells me that New York is off for me, though he is still going and there's nothing he can do to change senior management policy. He strides into his office, slamming the door, obviously furious. Why is he so angry?

Deep down, I know his intentions are less than honorable, but I am sure I can deal with him, and I wonder what Christian knows about Jack's previous PAs. I park these thoughts and continue with some work, but resolve to try to make Christian change his mind, though the prospects are bleak.

At one o'clock, Jack pokes his head out of the office door.

"Ana, please could you go and get me some lunch?"

"Sure. What would you like?"

"Pastrami on rye, hold the mustard. I'll give you the money when you're back."

"Anything to drink?"

"Coke, please. Thanks, Ana." He heads back into his office as I reach for my purse.

Crap. I promised Christian I wouldn't go out. I sigh. He'll never know, and I'll be quick.

Claire from Reception offers me her umbrella since it is still pouring with rain. As I head out of the front doors, I pull my jacket around me and take a furtive glance in both directions from beneath the overlarge golf umbrella. Nothing seems amiss. There's no sign of Ghost Girl.

I march briskly, and I hope inconspicuously, down the block to the deli. However, the closer I get to the deli, the more I have a creepy sense that I am

being watched, and I don't know if it's my heightened feeling of paranoia or a reality. Shit. I hope it's not Leila with a gun.

*It's just your imagination*, my subconscious snaps. *Who the hell would want to shoot you?*

Within fifteen minutes, I am back—safe and sound, but relieved. I think Christian's extreme paranoia and his overprotective vigilance is beginning to get to me.

As I take Jack's lunch in to him, he glances up from the phone.

"Ana, thanks. Since you're not coming with me, I'm going to need you to work late. We need to get these briefs ready. Hope you don't have plans." He smiles up at me warmly, and I flush.

"No, that's fine," I say with a bright smile and a sinking heart. This is not going to go down well. Christian will freak, I'm sure.

As I head back to my desk I decide not to tell him immediately; otherwise he might have time to interfere in some way. I sit and eat the chicken salad sandwich Mrs. Jones made for me. It's delicious. She makes a mean sandwich.

Of course, if I moved in with Christian, she would make lunch for me every weekday. The idea is unsettling. I have never had dreams of obscene wealth and all the trappings—only love. To find someone who loves me and doesn't try to control my every move. The phone rings.

"Jack Hyde's office—"

"You assured me you wouldn't go out," Christian interrupts me, his voice cold and hard.

My heart sinks for the millionth time this day. Shit. How the hell does he know?

"Jack sent me out for some lunch. I couldn't say no. Are you having me watched?" My scalp prickles at the notion. No wonder I felt so paranoid—someone *was* watching me. The thought makes me angry.

"This is why I didn't want you going back to work," Christian snaps.

"Christian, please. You're being"—*So Fifty*—"so suffocating."

"Suffocating?" he whispers, surprised.

"Yes. You have to stop this. I'll talk to you this evening. Unfortunately I have to work late because I can't go to New York."

"Anastasia, I don't want to suffocate you," he says quietly, appalled.

"Well, you are. I have work to do. I'll talk to you later." I hang up, feeling drained and vaguely depressed.

After our wonderful weekend, the reality is hitting home. I have never felt more like running. Running to some quiet retreat so I can think about this man, about how he is, and about how to deal with him. On one level, I know he's

broken—I can see that clearly now—and it's both heartbreaking and exhausting. From the small pieces of precious information that he's given me about his life, I understand why. An unloved child; a hideously abusive environment; a mother who couldn't protect him, whom he couldn't protect, and who died in front of him.

I shudder. My poor Fifty. I am his, but not to be kept in some gilded cage. How am I going to make him see this?

With a heavy heart, I drag one of the manuscripts Jack wants me to summarize into my lap and continue to read. I can think of no easy solution to Christian's fucked-up control issues. I will just have to talk to him later, face-to-face.

Half an hour later, Jack e-mails me a document that I need to tidy up, polish, and have ready to be printed in time for his conference. It will take me not just the rest of the afternoon but well into the evening, too. I set to work.

When I look up, it's after seven and the office is deserted, though the light in Jack's office is still on. I hadn't noticed everyone leaving, but I am nearly finished. I e-mail the document back to Jack for his approval and check my inbox. There's nothing new from Christian, so I quickly glance at my BlackBerry, and it startles me by buzzing—it's Christian.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi, when will you be finished?"

"By seven thirty, I think."

"I'll meet you outside."

"Okay."

He sounds quiet, nervous even. Why? Wary of my reaction?

"I'm still mad at you, but that's all," I whisper. "We have a lot to talk about."

"I know. See you at seven thirty."

Jack comes out of his office.

"I have to go. See you later." I hang up.

I look up at Jack as he strolls casually toward me.

"I just need a couple of tweaks. I've e-mailed the brief back to you."

He leans over me while I retrieve the document, rather close—uncomfortably close. His arm brushes mine. Accidentally? I flinch, but he pretends not to notice. His other arm rests on the back of my chair, touching my back. I sit up so I'm not leaning against the backrest.

"Pages sixteen and twenty-three, and that should be it," he murmurs, his mouth inches from my ear.

My skin crawls at his proximity, but I choose to ignore it. Opening the document, I shakily start on the changes. He's still leaning over me, and all my

senses are hyperaware. It's distracting and awkward, and inside I am screaming, *Back off!*

"Once this is done, it'll be good to go to print. You can organize that tomorrow. Thank you for staying late and doing this, Ana." His voice is smooth, gentle, like he's talking to a wounded animal. My stomach twists.

"I think the least I could do is reward you with a quick drink. You deserve one." He tucks a strand of my hair that's come loose from my hair tie behind my ear and gently caresses the lobe.

I cringe, gritting my teeth, and jerk my head away. *Shit!* Christian was right. *Don't touch me*.

"Actually, I can't this evening." *Or any other evening, Jack.*

"Just a quick one?" he coaxes.

"No, I can't. But thank you."

Jack sits on the end of my desk and frowns. Alarm bells sound loudly in my head. I am on my own in the office. I cannot leave. I glance nervously at the clock. Another five minutes before Christian is due.

"Ana, I think we make a great team. I'm sorry that I couldn't pull off this New York trip. It won't be the same without you."

*I'm sure it won't.* I smile weakly up at him, because I can't think of what to say. And for the first time all day, I feel the tiniest hint of relief that I am not going.

"So, did you have a good weekend?" he asks smoothly.

"Yes, thanks." Where is he going with this?

"See your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"What does he do?"

*Owns your ass* … "He's in business."

"That's interesting. What kind of business?"

"Oh, he has his fingers in all sorts of pies."

Jack cocks his head to one side as he leans in toward me, invading my personal space—again.

"You're being very coy, Ana."

"Well, he's in telecommunications, manufacturing, and agriculture."

Jack raises his eyebrows. "So many things. Who does he work for?"

"He works for himself. If you're happy with the document, I'd like to go, if that's okay?"

He leans back. My personal space is safe again.

"Of course. Sorry, I didn't mean to keep you," he says disingenuously.

"What time does the building close?"

“Security is here until eleven.”

“Good.” I smile, and my subconscious flops down in her armchair, relieved to know that we are not alone in the building. Switching off my computer, I grab my purse and stand up, ready to leave.

“You like him then? Your boyfriend?”

“I love him,” I answer, looking Jack squarely in the eye.

“I see.” Jack frowns and he stands up from my desk. “What’s his surname?”

I flush.

“Grey. Christian Grey,” I mumble.

Jack’s mouth drops open. “Seattle’s richest bachelor? That Christian Grey?”

“Yes. The same.” Yes, that Christian Grey, your future boss who will have you for breakfast if you invade my personal space again.

“I thought he looked familiar,” Jack says darkly and his brow creases again. “Well, he’s a lucky man.”

I blink at him. What do I say to that?

“Have a good evening, Ana.” Jack smiles, but the smile doesn’t touch his eyes, and he walks stiffly back into his office without a backward glance.

I let out a long sigh of relief. Well, that problem might be solved. Fifty works his magic again. Just his name is my talisman, and it has this man retreating with his tail between his legs. I allow myself a small victorious smile. *You see, Christian? Even your name protects me—you didn’t have to go to all that trouble of clamping down on expenses*. I tidy my desk and check my watch. Christian should be outside.

The Audi is parked by the sidewalk, and Taylor leaps out to open the rear passenger door. I have never been so pleased to see him, and I scramble into the car out of the rain.

Christian is in the rear seat, gazing at me, his eyes wide and wary. He’s bracing himself for my anger, his jaw tight and tense.

“Hi,” I murmur.

“Hi,” he replies cautiously. He reaches over and grasps my hand, squeezing it tightly, and my heart thaws a little. I’m so confused. I haven’t even worked out what I need to say to him.

“Are you still mad?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I murmur. He raises my hand and lightly grazes my knuckles with soft butterfly kisses.

“It’s been a shitty day,” he says.

“Yes, it has.” But for the first time since he left for work this morning, I begin to relax. Just being in his company is a soothing balm; all the shit from Jack, and the snarky e-mails to and fro, and the nuisance that is Elena fade into the

background. It's just me and my control freak in the back of the car.

"It's better now that you're here," he murmurs. We sit in silence as Taylor weaves through the evening traffic, both of us brooding and contemplative; but I feel Christian slowly unwind beside me as he, too, relaxes, gently running his thumb across my knuckles in a soft, soothing rhythm.

Taylor drops us outside the apartment building, and we both duck inside, out of the rain. Christian clasps my hand as we wait for the elevator, his eyes scanning the front of the building.

"I take it you haven't found Leila yet."

"No. Welch is still looking for her," he mutters despondently.

The elevator arrives and in we step. Christian glances down at me, his eyes unreadable. Oh, he just looks glorious—tousled hair, white shirt, dark suit. And suddenly it's there, from nowhere, that feeling. *Oh my*—the longing, the lust, the electricity. If it were visible, it would be an intense blue aura around and between us; it's so strong. His lips part as he gazes at me.

"Do you feel it?" he breathes.

"Yes."

"Oh, Ana." He groans and he grabs me, his arms snaking around me, one hand at the nape of my neck, tipping my head back as his lips find mine. My fingers are in his hair and caressing his cheek as he pushes me back against the elevator wall.

"I hate arguing with you," he breathes against my mouth, and there's a desperate, passionate quality to his kiss that mirrors mine. Desire explodes in my body, all the tension of the day seeking an outlet, straining against him, seeking more. We're all tongues and breathing and hands and touch and sweet, sweet sensation. His hand is on my hip, and abruptly he's pulling up my skirt, his fingers stroking my thighs.

"Sweet Jesus, you're wearing stockings." He moans in appreciative awe as his thumb caresses the flesh above my stocking line. "I want to see this," he breathes, and he pulls my skirt right up, exposing the tops of my thighs.

Stepping back, he reaches over to press the "stop" button, and the elevator coasts smoothly to a halt between the twenty-second and twenty-third floors. His eyes are dark, lips parted, and he's breathing as hard as am I. We gaze at each other, not touching. I am grateful for the wall against my back, holding me up while I bask in this beautiful man's sensual, carnal appraisal.

"Take your hair down," he orders, his voice husky. I reach up and undo the tie, releasing my hair so it tumbles in a thick cloud around my shoulders to my breasts. "Undo the top two buttons of your shirt," he whispers, his eyes wilder now.

He makes me feel so wanton. I reach up and undo each button, achingly, slowly, so that the tops of my breasts are tantalizingly revealed.

He swallows. “Do you have any idea how alluring you look right now?”

Very deliberately, I bite my lip and shake my head. He closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them again, they are blazing. He steps forward and places his hands on the elevator walls on either side of my face. He’s as close as he can be without touching me.

I tip my face up to meet his gaze, and he leans down and runs his nose against mine, so it’s the only contact between us. I am so hot in the confines of this elevator with him. I want him—now.

“I think you do, Miss Steele. I think you like to drive me wild.”

“Do I drive you wild?” I whisper.

“In all things, Anastasia. You are a siren, a goddess.” And he reaches for me, grasping my leg above my knee and hitching it around his waist, so that I am standing on one leg, leaning into him. I feel him against me, feel him hard and wanting above the apex of my thighs as he runs his lips down my throat. I moan and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m going to take you now,” he breathes and I arch my back in response, pressing myself against him, eager for the friction. He groans deep and low in the back of his throat and boosts me higher as he undoes his fly.

“Hold tight, baby,” he murmurs, and magically produces a foil packet that he holds in front of my mouth. I take it between my teeth, and he tugs, so that between us, we rip it open.

“Good girl.” He steps back a fraction as he slides on the condom. “God, I can’t wait for the next six days,” he growls and gazes down at me through hooded eyes. “I do hope you’re not overly fond of these panties.” He tears through them with his adept fingers, and they disintegrate in his hands. My blood is pounding through my veins. I am panting with need.

His words are intoxicating, all my angst from the day forgotten. It’s just him and me, doing what we do best. Without taking his eyes off mine, he sinks slowly into me. My body bows and I tilt my head back, closing my eyes, relishing the feel of him inside me. He pulls back and then moves into me again, so slow, so sweet. I groan.

“You’re mine, Anastasia,” he murmurs against my throat.

“Yes. Yours. When will you accept that?” I pant. He groans and starts to move, really move. And I surrender myself to his relentless rhythm, savoring each push and pull, his ragged breathing, his need for me, reflecting mine.

It makes me feel powerful, strong, desired, and loved—loved by this captivating, complicated man, whom I love in return with all my heart. He

pushes harder and harder, his breathing ragged, losing himself in me as I lose myself in him.

"Oh, baby," Christian moans, his teeth grazing my jaw, and I come hard around him. He stills, clutches me, and follows suit, whispering my name.

NOW THAT CHRISTIAN IS spent, calm and kissing me gently, his breathing eases. He holds me upright against the elevator wall, our foreheads pressed together, and my body is like jelly, weak but gratifyingly sated from my climax.

"Oh, Ana," he murmurs. "I need you so much." He kisses my forehead.

"And I you, Christian."

Releasing me, he straightens my skirt and does up the two buttons on my shirt, then punches the combination into the keypad that starts the elevator again. It rises with a jolt so that I reach out and clasp his arms.

"Taylor will be wondering where we are." He grins lasciviously at me.

*Oh, crap*. I drag my fingers through my hair in a vain attempt to combat the just-fucked look, then give up and fasten it in a ponytail.

"You'll do." Christian smirks as he does up his fly and puts the condom in his pants pocket.

Once more he looks the embodiment of an American entrepreneur, and since his hair has the just-fucked look most of the time, there's very little difference. Except now he's smiling, relaxed, his eyes crinkling with boyish charm. Are all men this easily placated?

Taylor is waiting when the doors open.

"Problem with the elevator," Christian murmurs as we both step out, and I cannot look either of them in the face. I scurry through the double doors to Christian's bedroom in search of some fresh underwear.

WHEN I RETURN, CHRISTIAN has removed his jacket and is sitting at the breakfast bar chatting with Mrs. Jones. She smiles kindly at me as she puts out two plates of hot food for us. Mmm, it smells delicious—coq au vin if I am not mistaken. I am famished.

"Enjoy, Mr. Grey, Ana," she says and leaves us to it.

Christian fetches a bottle of white wine from the fridge, and as we sit and eat, he tells me about how much nearer he's getting to perfecting a solar-powered mobile phone. He's animated and excited about the whole project, and I know then that he hasn't had an entirely shitty day.

I ask him about his properties. He smirks, and it turns out he only has apartments in New York, Aspen, and Escala. Nothing else. When we're done, I collect his plate and mine and take them to sink.

“Leave that. Gail will do it,” he says. I turn and gaze at him, and he’s watching me intently. Will I ever get used to having someone clean up after me?

“Well, now that you are more docile, Miss Steele, shall we talk about today?”

“I think you’re the one who’s more docile. I think I’m doing a good job in taming you.”

“Taming me?” he snorts, amused. When I nod, he frowns as if reflecting on my words. “Yes. Maybe you are, Anastasia.”

“You were right about Jack,” I murmur, serious now, and I lean across the kitchen island gauging his reaction. Christian’s face falls and his eyes harden.

“Has he tried anything?” he whispers, his voice deathly cold.

I shake my head to reassure him. “No, and he won’t, Christian. I told him today that I’m your girlfriend, and he backed right off.”

“You’re sure? I could fire the fucker.” Christian scowls.

I sigh, emboldened by my glass of wine. “You really have to let me fight my own battles. You can’t constantly second-guess me and try to protect me. It’s stifling, Christian. I’ll never flourish with your incessant interference. I need some freedom. I wouldn’t dream of meddling in your affairs.”

He blinks at me. “I only want you safe, Anastasia. If anything happened to you, I—” He stops.

“I know, and I understand why you feel so driven to protect me. And part of me loves it. I know that if I need you, you’ll be there, as I am for you. But if we are to have any hope of a future together, you have to trust me and trust my judgment. Yes, I’ll get it wrong sometimes—I’ll make mistakes, but I have to learn.”

He stares at me, his expression anxious, spurring me to walk around to him so that I am standing between his legs while he sits on the barstool. Grabbing his hands, I put them around me and place my hands on his arms.

“You can’t interfere in my job. It’s wrong. I don’t need you charging in like a white knight to save the day. I know you want to control everything, and I understand why, but you can’t. It’s an impossible goal … you have to learn to let go.” I reach up and stroke his face as he gazes at me, his eyes wide. “And if you can do that—give me that—I’ll move in with you,” I add softly.

He inhales sharply, surprised. “You’d do that?” he whispers.

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know me.” He frowns and sounds choked and panicky all of a sudden, very un-Fifty.

“I know you well enough, Christian. Nothing you tell me about yourself will frighten me away.” I gently run my knuckles across his cheek. His expression turns from anxious to dubious. “But if you could just ease up on me,” I plead.

“I’m trying, Anastasia. I couldn’t just stand by and let you go to New York with that … sleazeball. He has an alarming reputation. None of his assistants have lasted more than three months, and they’re never retained by the company. I don’t want that for you, baby.” He sighs. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. You being hurt … the thought fills me with dread. I can’t promise not to interfere, not if I think you’ll come to harm.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “I love you, Anastasia. I will do everything in my power to protect you. I cannot imagine my life without you.”

*Holy cow*. My inner goddess, my subconscious, and I all gape at Fifty in shock.

Three little words. My world stands still, tilts, then spins on a new axis; and I savor the moment, gazing into his sincere, beautiful gray eyes.

“I love you, too, Christian.” I lean over and kiss him, and the kiss deepens.

Entering unseen, Taylor clears his throat. Christian pulls back, gazing intently at me. He stands up, his arm around my waist.

“Yes?” he snaps at Taylor.

“Mrs. Lincoln is on her way up, sir.”

“What?”

Taylor shrugs apologetically. Christian sighs heavily and shakes his head.

“Well, this should be interesting,” he mutters and gives me a crooked grin of resignation.

*Fuck!* Why can’t that damned woman leave us alone?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Did you talk to her today?" I ask Christian as we wait for Mrs. Robinson's arrival.

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I said that you didn't want to see her, and that I understood your reasons why. I also told her that I didn't appreciate her going behind my back." His gaze is impassive, giving nothing away.

*Oh, good*. "What did she say?"

"She brushed it off in a way that only Elena can." His mouth flattens to a crooked line.

"Why do you think she's here?"

"I have no idea." Christian shrugs.

Taylor enters the great room again. "Mrs. Lincoln," he announces.

*And here she is* … Why is she so damned attractive? She's dressed entirely in black: tight jeans, a shirt that emphasizes her perfect figure, and a halo of bright, glossy hair.

Christian pulls me close. "Elena," he says, his tone puzzled.

She gapes at me in shock, frozen to the spot. She blinks before finding her soft voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company, Christian. It's Monday," she says as if this explains why she's here.

"Girlfriend," he says by way of explanation and tilts his head to one side and gives her a cool smile.

A slow, beaming smile directed entirely at him spreads across her face. It's unnerving.

"Of course. Hello, Anastasia. I didn't know you'd be here. I know you don't want to talk to me. I accept that."

"Do you?" I assert quietly, gazing at her and taking all of us by surprise. With a slight frown, she moves farther into the room.

"Yes, I get the message. I'm not here to see you. Like I said, Christian rarely has company during the week." She pauses. "I have a problem, and I need to talk to Christian about it."

“Oh?” Christian straightens up. “Do you want a drink?”

“Yes, please,” she murmurs gratefully.

Christian fetches a glass while Elena and I stand awkwardly gazing at each other. She fidgets with a large silver ring on her middle finger, while I don’t know where to look. Finally, she gives me a small tight smile and approaches the kitchen island and sits on the barstool at the end. She obviously knows the place well and feels comfortable moving around here.

Do I stay? Do I go? *Oh, this is so difficult*. My subconscious scowls at the woman with her most hostile harpy face.

There’s so much I want to say to this woman, and none of it complimentary. But she’s Christian’s friend—his only friend—and for all my loathing of this woman, I am innately polite. Deciding to stay, I sit as gracefully as I can manage on the stool Christian’s vacated. Christian pours wine into each of our glasses and sits between us at the breakfast bar. Can’t he feel how weird this is?

“What’s up?” he asks her.

Elena looks nervously at me, and Christian reaches over and clasps my hand.

“Anastasia’s with me now,” he says to her silent query and squeezes my hand. I flush, and my subconscious beams at him, harpy face forgotten.

Elena’s face softens as if she’s pleased for him. *Really* pleased for him. Oh, I don’t understand this woman at all, and I’m uncomfortable and edgy in her presence.

She takes a deep breath and shifts, perching on the edge of her barstool and looking agitated. She glances nervously down at her hands and starts manically twisting the large silver ring around and around on her middle finger.

What’s wrong with her? Is it my presence? Do I have that effect on her? Because I feel the same way—I don’t want her here. She raises her head and looks Christian squarely in the eye.

“I’m being blackmailed.”

*Holy shit*. Not what I expected out of her mouth. Christian stiffens. Has someone found out about her penchant for beating and fucking underage boys? I suppress my revulsion, and a fleeting thought about chickens coming home to roost crosses my mind. My subconscious rubs her hands together with ill-disguised glee. *Good*.

“How?” Christian asks, his horror clear in his voice.

She reaches into her oversized patent-leather designer purse, pulls out a note, and hands it to him.

“Put it down, lay it out.” Christian points to the breakfast bar counter with his chin.

“You don’t want to touch it?”

“No. Fingerprints.”

“Christian, you know I can’t go to the police with this.”

Why am I listening to this? Is she fucking some other poor boy?

She lays the note out for him, and he bends to read it.

“They’re only asking for five thousand dollars,” he says almost absentmindedly. “Any idea who it might be? Someone in the community?”

“No,” she says in her soft sweet voice.

“Linc?”

*Linc? Who’s that?*

“What—after all this time? I don’t think so,” she grumbles.

“Does Isaac know?”

“I haven’t told him.”

*Who’s Isaac?*

“I think he needs to know,” Christian says. She shakes her head, and now I feel I’m intruding. I want none of this. I try to retrieve my hand from Christian’s grasp, but he just tightens his hold and turns to gaze at me.

“What?” he asks.

“I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed.”

His eyes search mine, looking for what? Censure? Acceptance? Hostility? I keep my expression as bland as possible.

“Okay,” he says. “I won’t be long.”

He releases me and I stand. Elena watches me warily. I stay tight-lipped and return her gaze, giving nothing away.

“Good night, Anastasia.” She gives me a small smile.

“Good night,” I mutter, my voice sounds cold. I turn to leave. The tension is too much for me to bear. As I exit the room they continue their conversation.

“I don’t think there’s a great deal I can do, Elena,” Christian says to her. “If it’s a question of money …” His voice trails off. “I could ask Welch to investigate.”

“No, Christian, I just wanted to share,” she says.

When I am out of the room, I hear her say, “You look very happy.”

“I am,” Christian responds.

“You deserve to be.”

“I wish that were true.”

“Christian,” she scolds.

I freeze, listening intently. I can’t help it.

“Does she know how negative you are about yourself? About all your issues.”

“She knows me better than anyone.”

“Ouch! That hurts.”

“It’s the truth, Elena. I don’t have to play games with her. And I mean it, leave her alone.”

“What is her problem?”

“You … What we were. What we did. She doesn’t understand.”

“Make her understand.”

“It’s in the past, Elena, and why would I want to taint her with our fucked-up relationship? She’s good and sweet and innocent, and by some miracle she loves me.”

“It’s no miracle, Christian,” Elena scoffs good-naturedly. “Have a little faith in yourself. You really are quite a catch. I’ve told you often enough. And she seems lovely, too. Strong. Someone to stand up to you.”

I can’t hear Christian’s response. So I’m strong, am I? I certainly don’t feel that way.

“Don’t you miss it?” Elena continues.

“What?”

“Your playroom.”

I stop breathing.

“That really is none of your fucking business,” Christian snaps.

*Oh*.

“I’m sorry.” Elena snorts insincerely.

“I think you’d better go. And please, call before you come again.”

“Christian, I am sorry,” she says, and from her tone, this time she means it. “Since when are you so sensitive?” She’s scolding him again.

“Elena, we have a business relationship that has profited us both immensely. Let’s keep it that way. What was between us is part of the past. Anastasia is my future, and I won’t jeopardize it in any way, so cut the fucking crap.”

*His future!*

“I see.”

“Look, I’m sorry for your trouble. Perhaps you should ride it out and call their bluff.” His tone is softer.

“I don’t want to lose you, Christian.”

“I’m not yours to lose, Elena,” he snaps again.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” He’s brusque, angry.

“Look, I don’t want to argue with you. Your friendship means a lot to me. I’ll back off from Anastasia. But I’m here if you need me. I always will be.”

“Anastasia thinks that you saw me last Saturday. You called, that’s all. Why did you tell her otherwise?”

“I wanted her to know how upset you were when she left. I don’t want her to

hurt you."

"She knows. I've told her. Stop interfering. Honestly, you're like a mother hen." Christian sounds more resigned, and Elena laughs, but there's a sad tone to her laugh.

"I know. I'm sorry. You know I care about you. I never thought you'd end up falling in love, Christian. It's very gratifying to see. But I couldn't bear it if she hurt you."

"I'll take my chances," he says dryly. "Now, are you sure you don't want Welch to sniff around?"

She sighs heavily. "I suppose it wouldn't do any harm."

"Okay. I'll call him in the morning."

I listen to them bickering, trying to figure this out. They do sound like old friends, as Christian says. Just friends. And she cares about him—maybe too much. Well, would anybody who knew him not care?

"Thank you, Christian. And I am sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I'll go. Next time I'll call."

"Good."

*She's going! Shit!* I scamper up the hallway to Christian's bedroom and sit down on the bed. Christian enters a few moments later.

"She's gone," he says warily, gauging my reaction.

I gaze up at him, trying to frame my question. "Will you tell me all about her? I am trying to understand why you think she helped you." I pause, thinking carefully about my next sentence. "I loathe her, Christian. I think she did you untold damage. You have no friends. Did she keep them away from you?"

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair.

"Why the fuck do you want to know about her? We had a very long-standing affair, she beat the shit out of me often, and I fucked her in all sorts of ways you can't even imagine, end of story."

I pale. Shit, he's angry—with me. I blink at him. "Why are you so angry?"

"Because all of that shit is *over*!" he shouts, glowering at me. He sighs in exasperation and shakes his head.

I blanch. *Shit.* I look down at my hands, knotted in my lap. I just want to understand.

He sits down beside me. "What do you want to know?" he asks wearily.

"You don't have to tell me. I don't mean to intrude."

"Anastasia, it's not that. I don't like talking about this shit. I've lived in a bubble for years with nothing affecting me and not having to justify myself to anyone. She's always been there as a confidante. And now my past and my future are colliding in a way I never thought possible."

I glance at him and he's staring at me, his eyes wide.

"I never thought I had a future with anyone, Anastasia. You give me hope and have me thinking about all sorts of possibilities." He drifts off.

"I was listening," I whisper and stare back down at my hands.

"What? To our conversation?"

"Yes."

"Well?" He sounds resigned.

"She cares for you."

"Yes, she does. And I for her in my own way, but it doesn't come close to how I feel about you. If that's what this is about."

"I'm not jealous." I'm wounded that he would think that—or am I? Shit. Maybe that's what this is. "You don't love her," I murmur.

He sighs again. He really is pissed. "A long time ago, I thought I loved her," he says through gritted teeth.

*Oh*. "When we were in Georgia … you said you didn't love her."

"That's right."

I frown.

"I loved you then, Anastasia," he whispers. "You're the only person I'd fly three thousand miles to see."

*Oh my*. I don't understand. He still wanted me as a sub then. My frown deepens.

"The feelings I have for you are very different from any I ever had for Elena," he says by way of explanation.

"When did you know?"

He shrugs. "Ironically, it was Elena who pointed it out to me. She encouraged me to go to Georgia."

*I knew it!* I knew it in Savannah. I gaze at him, blankly.

What do I make of this? Maybe she is on my side and just worried that I'll hurt him. The thought is painful. I would never want to hurt him. She's right—he's been hurt enough.

Perhaps she's not so bad. I shake my head. I don't want to accept his relationship with her. I disapprove. Yes, that's what this is. She's an unsavory character who preyed on a vulnerable adolescent, robbing him of his teenage years, no matter what he says.

"So you desired her? When you were younger."

"Yes."

*Oh*.

"She taught me a great deal. She taught me to believe in myself."

*Oh*. "But she also beat the shit out of you."

He smiles fondly. “Yes, she did.”

“And you liked that?”

“At the time I did.”

“So much that you wanted to do it to others?”

His eyes grow wide and serious. “Yes.”

“Did she help you with that?”

“Yes.”

“Did she sub for you?”

“Yes.”

*Holy fuck*. “Do you expect me to like her?” My voice sounds brittle and bitter.

“No. Though it would make my life a hell of a lot easier,” he says wearily. “I do understand your reticence.”

“Reticence! Jeez, Christian—if that were your son, how would you feel?”

He blinks at me as though he doesn’t comprehend the question. He frowns. “I didn’t have to stay with her. It was my choice, too, Anastasia,” he murmurs.

This is getting me nowhere.

“Who’s Linc?”

“Her ex-husband.”

“Lincoln Timber?”

“The very same,” he smirks.

“And Isaac?”

“Her current submissive.”

*Oh no*.

“He’s in his mid-twenties, Anastasia. You know—a consenting adult,” he adds quickly, correctly deciphering my look of disgust.

“Your age,” I mutter.

“Look, Anastasia, as I said to her, she’s part of my past. You are my future. Don’t let her come between us, please. And quite frankly, I’m really bored of this subject. I’m going to do some work.” He stands and gazes down at me. “Let it go. Please.”

I stare mulishly up at him.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he adds. “Your car arrived a day early. It’s in the garage. Taylor has the key.”

Whoa … the Saab? “Can I drive it tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not. And that reminds me. If you are going to leave your office, let me know. Sawyer was there, watching you. It seems I can’t trust you to look after yourself at all.” He scowls, making me feel like an errant child—

again. And I would argue with him, but he's pretty worked up over Elena, and I don't want to push him any further, but I can't resist one comment.

"Seems I can't trust you either," I mutter. "You could have told me Sawyer was watching me."

"Do you want to fight about that, too?" he snaps.

"I wasn't aware we were fighting. I thought we were communicating," I mumble petulantly.

He closes his eyes briefly as he struggles to contain his temper. I swallow and watch anxiously. This could go either way.

"I have to work," he says quietly, and with that, he leaves the room.

I exhale. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath. I flop back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Can we ever have a normal conversation without it disintegrating into an argument? It's exhausting.

We just don't know each other that well. Do I really want to move in with him? I don't even know if I should make him a cup of tea or coffee while he's working. Should I disturb him at all? I have no idea of his likes and dislikes.

Evidently he's bored with the whole Elena thing—he's right, I need to move on. Let it go. Well, at least he's not expecting me to be friends with her, and I hope that she'll now stop hassling me for a meeting.

I get off the bed and wander to the window. Unlocking the balcony door, I open it and stroll over to the glass railing. Its transparency is unnerving. The air's chilly and fresh, as I'm up so high.

I gaze out over the twinkling lights of Seattle. He's so far removed from everything up here in his fortress. Answerable to no one. *He'd just told me he loves me, then all this crap comes up because of that dreadful woman*. I roll my eyes. His life is so complicated. He's so complicated.

With a heavy sigh and a last glance at Seattle spread like cloths of gold at my feet, I decide to call Ray. I haven't spoken to him for a while. It's a brief conversation as usual, but I ascertain he's fine and that I'm interrupting an important soccer match.

"Hope all is well with Christian," he says casually, and I know he's fishing for information but doesn't really want to know.

"Yeah. We're cool." Sort of, and I'm moving in with him. Though we haven't discussed a timetable.

"Love you, Dad."

"Love you, too, Annie."

I hang up and check my watch. It's only ten. Because of our discussion, I am feeling strangely innervated and restless.

I shower quickly, and back in the bedroom, decide to wear one of the nightdresses that Caroline Acton procured for me from Neiman Marcus. Christian's always moaning about my T-shirts. There are three. I choose the pale pink and put it on over my head. The fabric skims across my skin, caressing and clinging to me as it falls around my body. It feels luxurious—the finest, thinnest satin. *Whoa!* In the mirror, I look like a 1930s movie star. It's long, elegant—and very un-me.

I grab the matching robe and decide to hunt out a book in the library. I could read on my iPad—but right now, I want the comfort and reassurance of a physical book. I'll leave Christian alone. Perhaps he'll recover his good humor once he's finished working.

There are so many books in Christian's library. Scanning every title will take forever. I glance occasionally at the billiard table and flush as I recall our previous evening. I smile when I see that the ruler is still on the floor. Picking it up, I swat my palm. Ow! It stings.

Why can't I take a little more pain for my man? Disconsolately, I place it on the desk and continue my hunt for a good read.

Most of the books are first editions. How can he have amassed a collection like this in such a short time? Perhaps Taylor's job description includes book buying. I settle on *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. I haven't read this for a long time. I smile as I curl up in one of the overstuffed armchairs and read the first line:

*Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again …*

I am jostled awake as Christian lifts me in his arms.

"Hey," he murmurs, "you fell asleep. I couldn't find you." He nuzzles my hair. Sleepily, I put my arms around his neck and breathe in his scent—oh, he smells so good—as he carries me back to the bedroom. He lays me down on the bed and covers me.

"Sleep, baby," he whispers and he presses his lips against my forehead.

I WAKE SUDDENLY FROM a disturbing dream and am momentarily disoriented. I find myself anxiously checking the end of the bed, but there's no one there. Drifting from the great room, I hear the faint strains of a complex melody from the piano.

What time is it? I check the alarm clock—two in the morning. Has Christian come to sleep at all? I disentangle my legs from my robe, which I'm still wearing, and clamber out of bed.

In the great room, I stand in the shadows, listening. Christian is lost to the music. He looks safe and secure in his bubble of light. And the tune he plays has a lilting melody, parts of which sound familiar, but so elaborate. *He's so good*. Why does this always take me by surprise?

The whole scene looks different somehow, and I realize that the piano lid is down, giving me an unhindered view. He glances up and our eyes lock, his gray and softly luminous in the diffuse glow of the lamp. He continues to play, not faltering at all, as I make my way over to him. His eyes follow me, drinking me in, burning brighter. As I reach him, he stops.

"Why did you stop? That was lovely."

"Do you have any idea how desirable you look at this moment?" he says, his voice soft.

*Oh*. "Come to bed," I whisper and his eyes heat as he holds out his hand. When I take it, he tugs unexpectedly so I fall into his lap. He wraps his arms around me and nuzzles my neck behind my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

"Why do we fight?" he whispers, as his teeth graze my earlobe.

My heart skips a beat, then starts pounding, coursing heat throughout my body.

"Because we're getting to know each other, and you're stubborn and cantankerous and moody and difficult," I murmur breathlessly, shifting my head to give him better access to my throat. He runs his nose down my neck, and I feel his smile.

"I'm all those things, Miss Steele. It's a wonder you put up with me." He nips my earlobe and I moan. "Is it always like this?" he sighs.

"I have no idea."

"Me neither." He yanks the sash of my robe so it falls open, and his hand skims down my body, over my breast. My nipples harden beneath his gentle touch and strain against the satin. He continues down to my waist, down to my hip.

"You feel so fine under this material, and I can see everything—even this." He tugs gently on my pubic hair through the fabric, making me gasp, while his other hand fists in my hair at my nape. Pulling my head back, he kisses me, his tongue urgent, relentless, needy. I moan in response and caress his dear, dear face. His hand gently pulls my nightdress up, slowly, tantalizingly until he's fondling my naked behind and then running his thumbnail down the inside of my thigh.

Suddenly he rises, startling me, and he lifts me onto the piano. My feet rest on the keys, sounding discordant, disjointed notes, and his hands skim up my legs and part my knees. He grabs my hands.

“Lie back,” he orders, holding my hands while I sink back on top of the piano. The lid is hard and uncompromising against my back. He lets go and pushes my legs open wider, my feet dancing over the keys, over the lower and higher notes.

*Oh, boy*. I know what he’s going to do, and the anticipation … I groan loudly as he kisses the inside of my knee, then kisses and sucks and nips his way higher up my leg to my thigh. The soft satin of my nightgown rises higher, skimming over my sensitized skin, as he pushes the fabric. I flex my feet and the chords sound again. Closing my eyes, I surrender myself to him as his mouth reaches the apex of my thighs.

He kisses me … *there* … *Oh, boy* … then gently blows before his tongue circles my clitoris. He pushes my legs wider. I feel so open—so exposed. He holds me in place, his hands just above my knees as his tongue tortures me, giving no quarter, no respite … no reprieve. Tilting my hips up, meeting and matching his rhythm, I am consumed.

“Oh, Christian, please.” I moan.

“Oh no, baby, not yet,” he teases, but I feel myself quicken as does he, and he stops.

“No,” I whimper.

“This is my revenge, Ana,” he growls softly. “Argue with me, and I am going to take it out on your body somehow.” He trails kisses along my belly, his hands traveling up my thighs, stroking, kneading, tantalizing. His tongue circles my navel as his hands—*and his thumbs … oh his thumbs*—reach the summit of my thighs.

“Ah!” I cry out as he pushes one inside me. The other persecutes me, slowly, agonizingly, circling around and around. My back arches off the piano as I writhe beneath his touch. It’s almost unbearable.

“Christian!” I cry, spiraling out of control with need.

He takes pity on me and stops. Lifting my feet off the keys, he pushes me; and suddenly, I’m sliding effortlessly up the piano, gliding on satin, and he’s following me up there, briefly kneeling between my legs to roll on a condom. He hovers over me and I’m panting, gazing up at him with raging need, and I realize he’s naked. When did he take off his clothes?

He stares down at me, and there’s wonder in his eyes, wonder and love and passion, and it’s breathtaking.

“I want you so badly,” he says and very slowly, exquisitely, he sinks into me.

I AM SPRAWLED ON top of him, wrung out, my limbs heavy and languid, as we lie on top of his grand piano. *Oh my*. He’s much more comfortable to lie on than the piano. Careful not to touch his chest, I rest my cheek against him and keep perfectly

still. He doesn't object, and I listen to his breathing as it slows like mine. Gently he strokes my hair.

"Do you drink tea or coffee in the evening?" I ask sleepily.

"What a strange question," he says dreamily.

"I thought I could bring you tea in your study, and then I realized I didn't know what you would like."

"Oh, I see. Water or wine in the evening, Ana. Though maybe I should try tea."

His hand moves rhythmically down my back, stroking me tenderly.

"We really know very little about each other," I murmur.

"I know," he says, and his voice is mournful. I sit up to gaze at him.

"What is it?" I ask. He shakes his head as if to rid himself of some unpleasant thought, and raising his hand, he caresses my cheek, his eyes bright and earnest.

"I love you, Ana Steele," he says.

---

The alarm goes off with the six a.m. traffic news, and I am rudely awakened from my disturbing dream of overly blonde and dark-haired women. I can't grasp what it's about, and I'm immediately distracted because Christian Grey is wrapped around me like silk, his unruly-haired head on my chest, his hand on my breast, his leg over me, holding me down. He's still asleep, and I am too warm. But I ignore my discomfort, tentatively reaching up to run my fingers gently through his hair, and he stirs. Raising bright gray eyes, he grins sleepily. *Oh my … he's adorable*.

"Good morning, beautiful," he says.

"Good morning, beautiful, yourself." I smile back at him. He kisses me, disentangles himself, and leans up on his elbow, staring down at me.

"Sleep okay?" he asks.

"Yes, despite the interruption to my sleep last night."

His grin broadens. "Hmm. You can interrupt me like that anytime." He kisses me again.

"How about you? Did you sleep well?"

"I always sleep well with you, Anastasia."

"No more nightmares?"

"No."

I frown and chance a question. "What are your nightmares about?"

His brow creases and his grin fades. *Shit—my stupid curiosity*.

"They're flashbacks of my early childhood, or so Dr. Flynn says. Some vivid, some less so." His voice drops and a distant, harrowed look crosses his face.

Absentmindedly, he begins to trace my collarbone with his finger, distracting me.

"Do you wake up crying and screaming?" I try in vain to joke.

He looks at me, puzzled. "No, Anastasia. I've never cried. As far as I can remember." He frowns, as if reaching into the depths of his memories. Oh no—that's too dark a place to go at this hour, surely.

"Do you have any happy memories of your childhood?" I ask quickly, mainly to distract him. He looks pensive for a moment, still running his finger along my skin.

"I recall the crack whore baking. I remember the smell. A birthday cake I think. For me. And then there's Mia's arrival with my mom and dad. My mom was worried about my reaction, but I adored baby Mia immediately. My first word was Mia. I remember my first piano lesson. Miss Kathie, my tutor, was awesome. She kept horses, too." He smiles wistfully.

"You said your mom saved you. How?"

His reverie is broken, and he gazes at me as if I don't understand the elementary math of two plus two.

"She adopted me," he says simply. "I thought she was an angel when I first met her. She was dressed in white and so gentle and calm as she examined me. I'll never forget that. If she'd said no or if Carrick had said no …" He shrugs and glances over his shoulder at the alarm clock. "This is all a little deep for so early in the morning," he mutters.

"I have made a vow to get to know you better."

"Did you, now, Miss Steele? I thought you wanted to know if I preferred coffee or tea." He smirks. "Anyway, I can think of one way you can get to know me." He pushes his hips suggestively against me.

"I think I know you quite well enough that way." My voice is haughty and scolding, and it makes him smile more broadly.

"I don't think I'll ever get to know you well enough that way," he murmurs. "There are definite advantages to waking up beside you." His voice is soft and bone-meltingly seductive.

"Don't you have to get up?" My voice is low and husky. *Oh … what he does to me …*

"Not this morning. Only one place I want to be up right now, Miss Steele." And his eyes sparkle salaciously.

"Christian!" I gasp, shocked. He shifts suddenly so that he's on top of me, pressing me into the bed. Grabbing my hands, he pulls them up above my head and begins to kiss my throat.

"Oh, Miss Steele." He smiles against my skin, sending delicious tingles

through me, as his hand travels down my body and starts to slowly hitch up my satin nightdress. “Oh, what I’d like to do to you,” he murmurs.

And I am lost, interrogation over.

MRS. JONES SETS DOWN my breakfast of pancakes and bacon, and for Christian an omelet and bacon. We sit side by side at the bar in a comfortable silence.

“When am I going to meet your trainer, Claude, and put him through his paces?” I ask. Christian glances down at me, grinning.

“Depends if you want to go to New York this weekend or not—unless you’d like to see him early one morning this week. I’ll ask Andrea to check on his schedule and come back to you.”

“Andrea?”

“My PA.”

Oh yes. “One of your many blondes,” I tease him.

“She’s not mine. She works for me. You’re mine.”

“I work for you,” I mutter sourly.

He grins as if he’s forgotten. “So you do.” His beaming smile is infectious.

“Maybe Claude can teach me to kickbox,” I warn.

“Oh yeah? To improve your odds against me?” Christian raises an eyebrow, amused. “Bring it on, Miss Steele.” He is so damned happy compared to yesterday’s foul mood after Elena left. It’s totally disarming. Maybe it’s all the sex … perhaps that’s what’s making him so buoyant.

I glance behind me at the piano, savoring the memory of last night. “You put the lid of the piano back up.”

“I closed it last night so as not to disturb you. Guess it didn’t work, but I’m glad it didn’t.” Christian’s lips twitch into a lascivious smile as he takes a bite of omelet. I go crimson and smirk back at him.

*Oh yes … fun times on the piano*.

Mrs. Jones leans over and places a paper bag containing my lunch in front of me, making me flush guiltily.

“For later, Ana. Tuna, okay?”

“Oh yes. Thank you, Mrs. Jones.” I give her a shy smile, which she reciprocates warmly before leaving the great room. I suspect it’s to give us some privacy.

“Can I ask you something?” I turn back to Christian.

His amused expression slips. “Of course.”

“And you won’t be angry?”

“Is it about Elena?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t be angry.”

“But I now have a supplementary question.”

“Oh?”

“Which is about her.”

He rolls his eyes. “What?” he says, and now he’s exasperated.

“Why do you get so mad when I ask you about her?”

“Honestly?”

I scowl at him. “I thought you were always honest with me.”

“I endeavor to be.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “That sounds like a very evasive answer.”

“I am always honest with you, Ana. I don’t want to play games. Well, not those sorts of games,” he qualifies, as his eyes heat.

“What sort of games do you want to play?”

He inclines his head to one side and smirks at me. “Miss Steele, you are so easily distracted.”

I giggle. He’s right. “Mr. Grey, you are distracting on so many levels.” I gaze at his dancing gray eyes alight with humor.

“My favorite sound in the whole world is your giggle, Anastasia. Now—what was your original question?” he asks smoothly, and I think he’s laughing at me. I try to twist my mouth to show my displeasure, but I like playful Fifty—he’s fun. I love some early morning banter. I frown, trying to recall my question.

“Oh yes. You only saw your subs on the weekends?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” he says regarding me nervously.

I grin at him. “So, no sex during the week.”

He laughs. “Oh, that’s where we’re going with this.” He looks vaguely relieved. “Why do you think I work out every weekday?” Now he really is laughing at me, but I don’t care. I want to hug myself with glee. Another first—well, several firsts.

“You look very pleased with yourself, Miss Steele.”

“I am, Mr. Grey.”

“You should be.” He grins. “Now eat your breakfast.”

Oh, bossy Fifty … he’s never far away.

WE ARE IN THE back of the Audi. Taylor is driving with the intention of dropping me off at work, then Christian. Sawyer is riding shotgun.

“Didn’t you say your roommate’s brother was arriving today?” Christian asks, almost casually, his voice and expression giving nothing away.

“Oh, Ethan,” I gasp. “I forgot. Oh Christian, thank you for reminding me. I’ll have to go back to the apartment.”

His face falls. “What time?”

“I’m not sure what time he’s arriving.”

“I don’t want you going anywhere on your own,” he says sharply.

“I know,” I mutter and resist rolling my eyes at Mr. Overreaction. “Will Sawyer be spying—um … patrolling today?” I glance slyly in Sawyer’s direction to see the backs of his ears turn red.

“Yes,” Christian snaps, his eyes glacial.

“If I were driving the Saab it would be easier,” I mutter petulantly.

“Sawyer will have a car, and he can drive you to your apartment, depending on what time.”

“Okay. I think Ethan will probably contact me during the day. I’ll let you know what the plans are then.”

He gazes at me, saying nothing. Oh, what is he thinking?

“Okay,” he acquiesces. “Nowhere on your own. Do you understand?” He waves a finger at me.

“Yes, dear,” I mutter.

There’s a trace of a smile on his face. “And maybe you should just use your BlackBerry—I’ll e-mail you on it. That should prevent my IT guy having a thoroughly interesting morning, okay?” His voice is sardonic.

“Yes, Christian.” I can’t resist. I roll my eyes at him, and he smirks at me.

“Why Miss Steele, I do believe you’re making my palm twitch.”

“Ah, Mr. Grey, your perpetually twitching palm. What are we going to do with that?”

He laughs and then is distracted by his BlackBerry, which must be on vibrate because it doesn’t ring. He frowns when he sees the caller ID.

“What is it?” he snaps into the phone, then listens intently. I use the opportunity to study his lovely features—his straight nose, his hair hanging scruffily over his forehead. I am distracted from my surreptitious ogling by his expression, which turns from incredulity to amusement. I pay attention.

“You’re kidding … For a scene … When did he tell you this?” Christian chuckles, almost reluctantly. “No, don’t worry. You don’t have to apologize. I’m glad there’s a logical explanation. It did seem a ridiculously low amount of money … I have no doubt you’ve something evil and creative planned for your revenge. Poor Isaac.” He smiles. “Good … Good-bye.” He snaps the phone shut and glances at me. His eyes are suddenly wary, but oddly, he looks relieved, too.

“Who was that?” I ask.

“You really want to know?” he asks quietly.

With that response, I know. I shake my head and stare out my window at the gray Seattle day, feeling forlorn. Why can’t she leave him alone?

“Hey.” He reaches for my hand and kisses each of my knuckles in turn, and suddenly he’s sucking my little finger, hard. Then biting it softly.

*Whoa!* He has a hotline to my groin, I gasp and glance nervously at Taylor and Sawyer, then at Christian, and his eyes are darker. He gives me a slow, carnal smile.

“Don’t sweat it, Anastasia,” he murmurs. “She’s in the past.” And he plants a kiss in the center of my palm, sending tingles everywhere, and my momentary pique is forgotten.

“MORNING, ANA,” JACK MUTTERS as I make my way to my desk. “Nice dress.”

I flush. The dress is part of my new wardrobe, courtesy of my incredibly rich boyfriend. It’s a sleeveless shift dress of pale blue linen, quite fitted, and I’m wearing cream high-heeled sandals. Christian likes heels, I think. I smile secretly at the thought but quickly recover my bland professional smile for my boss.

“Good morning, Jack.”

I set about ordering a messenger to take his brochure to the printers. He pops his head around his office door.

“Could I have a coffee, please, Ana?”

“Sure.” I wander into the kitchen and bump into Claire from Reception, who is also fixing coffee.

“Hey, Ana,” she says cheerfully.

“Hi, Claire.”

We chat briefly about her extended-family gathering over the weekend, which she enjoyed immensely, and I tell her about sailing with Christian.

“Your boyfriend is so dreamy, Ana,” she says, her eyes glazing over.

I am tempted to roll my eyes at her.

“He’s not bad-looking.” I smile and we both start laughing.

“YOU TOOK YOUR TIME!” Jack snaps when I bring in his coffee.

*Oh!* “I’m sorry.” I flush, then frown. I took the usual amount of time. What’s his problem? Perhaps he’s nervous about something.

He shakes his head. “Sorry, Ana. I didn’t mean to bark at you, honey.”

*Honey?*

“There’s something going on at senior management level, and I don’t know what it is. Keep your ear to the ground, okay? If you hear anything—I know how you girls talk.” He grins at me, and I feel slightly sick. He has no idea how we “girls” talk. Besides, I know what’s happening.

“You’ll let me know, right?”

“Sure,” I mutter. “I’ve sent the brochure to the printers. It will be back by two

o’clock.”

“Great. Here.” He hands me a pile of manuscripts. “All these need synopses of the first chapter, then filing.”

“I’ll get on it.”

I am relieved to step out of his office and sit down at my desk. Oh, it’s hard being in the know. What will he do when he finds out? My blood runs cold. Something tells me Jack will be annoyed. I glance at my BlackBerry and smile. There’s an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Sunrise

**Date:** June 14 2011 09:23

**To:** Anastasia Steele

I love waking up with you in the morning.

Christian Grey

Completely & Utterly Smitten CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I think my face splits in two with my grin.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Sundown

**Date:** June 14 2011 09:35

**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Completely & Utterly Smitten

I love waking up with you, too. But I love being in bed with you and in elevators and on pianos and billiard tables and boats and desks and showers and bathtubs and strange wooden crosses with shackles and four-poster beds with red satin sheets and boathouses and childhood bedrooms.

Yours

Sex Mad and Insatiable xx

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Wet Hardware

**Date:** June 14 2011 09:37

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear Sex Mad and Insatiable

I’ve just spat coffee all over my keyboard.

I don’t think that’s ever happened to me before.

I do admire a woman who concentrates on geography.

Am I to infer you just want me for my body?

Christian Grey
Completely & Utterly Shocked CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Giggling—and wet too
**Date:** June 14 2011 09:42
**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Completely & Utterly Shocked

Always.

I have work to do.

Stop bothering me.

SM&I xx

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Do I have to?
**Date:** June 14 2011 09:50
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Dear SM&I

As ever, your wish is my command.

Love that you are giggling and wet.

Laters, baby.

x

Christian Grey,
Completely & Utterly Smitten, Shocked, and Spellbound
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I put the BlackBerry down and get on with my work.

AT LUNCHTIME JACK ASKS me to go down to the deli for him. I call Christian as soon as I leave Jack's office.

"Anastasia." He answers immediately, his voice warm and caressing. How is it that this man can make me melt over the phone?

"Christian, Jack has asked me to get his lunch."

"Lazy bastard," Christian gripes.

I ignore him and continue. "So, I'm going to get it. It might be handy if you gave me Sawyer's number, so I don't have to bother you."

"It's no bother, baby."

"Are you on your own?"

"No. There are six people staring at me right now wondering who the hell I'm talking to."

*Shit* … "Really?" I gasp, panicked.

"Yes. Really. My girlfriend," he announces away from the phone.

*Holy cow!* "They probably all thought you were gay, you know."

He laughs. "Yeah, probably." I hear his grin.

"Er—I'd better go." I am sure he can tell how embarrassed I am to be interrupting him.

"I'll let Sawyer know." He laughs again. "Have you heard from your friend?"

"Not yet. You'll be the first to know, Mr. Grey."

"Good. Laters, baby."

"Bye, Christian." I grin. Every time he says that, it makes me smile … so un-Fifty, but somehow so him, too.

WHEN I EXIT SECONDS later, Sawyer is waiting on the doorstep of the building.

"Miss Steele," he greets me formally.

"Sawyer." I nod in response and together we head down to the deli.

I don't feel as comfortable with Sawyer as I do with Taylor. He keeps scanning the street as we make our way along the block. It actually makes me more nervous, and I find myself mirroring his actions.

Is Leila out there? Or are we all infected by Christian's paranoia? Is this part of his fifty shades? What I'd give for half an hour of candid discussion with Dr. Flynn to find out.

There's nothing amiss, just lunchtime Seattle—people rushing for lunch, shopping, meeting friends. I watch two young women hug as they meet up.

I miss Kate. It's only been two weeks since she left for her vacation, but it feels like the longest two weeks of my life. So much has happened—she'll never

believe me when I tell her. Well, tell her the edited, NDA-compliant version. I frown. I'll have to talk to Christian about that. What would Kate make of it? I blanch at the thought. Perhaps she'll be back with Ethan. I feel a rush of excitement at the thought, but I think it's unlikely. She'd probably stay on with Elliot.

"Where do you stand when you're waiting and watching outside?" I ask Sawyer as we get in line for lunch. Sawyer is in front of me, facing the door, continually monitoring the street and anyone who comes in. It's unnerving.

"I sit in the coffee shop directly across the street, Miss Steele."

"Doesn't it get very boring?"

"Not to me, ma'am. It's what I do," he says stiffly.

I flush. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply …" My voice trails off at his kind, understanding expression.

"Please, Miss Steele. My job is to protect you. And that's what I'll do."

"So, no sign of Leila?"

"No, ma'am."

I frown. "How do you know what she looks like?"

"I've seen her photograph."

"Oh, do you have it on you?"

"No, ma'am." He taps his skull. "Committed to memory."

Of course. I'd really like to examine a photograph of Leila to see what she looked like before she became Ghost Girl. I wonder if Christian would let me have a copy? Yes, he probably would—for my safety. I hatch a plan, and my subconscious gloats and nods approvingly.

THE BROCHURES ARRIVE BACK at the office, and to my relief they look great. I take one into Jack's office. His eyes light up; I don't know if it's at me or the brochure. I choose to believe it's the latter.

"These look great, Ana." Idly, he flicks through it. "Yeah, good job. Are you seeing your boyfriend this evening?" His lip curls as he says "boyfriend."

"Yes. We live together." It's sort of the truth. Well, we do at the moment. And I have officially agreed to move in, so it's not much of a white lie. I hope that it's enough to throw him off the scent.

"Would he object to you coming out for a quick drink tonight? To celebrate all your hard work?"

"I have a friend coming in from out of town tonight, and we're all going out for dinner." And I'll be busy every night, Jack.

"I see." He sighs, exasperated. "Maybe when I'm back from New York, huh?" He raises his eyebrows in expectation, and his gaze darkens suggestively.

*Oh no*. I smile, noncommittal, stifling a shudder.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" I ask.

"Coffee, please." His voice is low and husky as if he's asking for something else. Fuck. He's not going to back off. I can see that now. *Oh … What to do?*

I breathe a long sigh of relief when I am out of his office. He makes me tense. Christian is right about him, and part of me is pissed that Christian *is* right about him.

I sit down at my desk and my BlackBerry rings—a number I don't recognize.

"Ana Steele."

"Hi, Steele!" Ethan's drawl catches me momentarily off guard.

"Ethan! How are you?" I almost squeal with delight.

"Glad to be back. I am seriously fed up with sunshine and rum punches, and my baby sister being hopelessly in love with the big guy. It's been hell, Ana."

"Yeah! Sea, sand, sun, and rum punches sounds like *Dante's Inferno*." I giggle. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Sea-Tac, waiting for my bag. What are you doing?"

"I'm at work. Yes, I am gainfully employed," I respond to his gasp. "Do you want to come here and collect the keys? I can meet you later at the apartment."

"Sounds great. I'll see you in about forty-five minutes, an hour maybe? What's the address?"

I give him SIP's address.

"See you soon, Ethan."

"Laters," he says and hangs up. What? Not Ethan, too? And it dawns on me that he's just spent a week with Elliot. I quickly type an e-mail to Christian.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Visitors from Sunny Climes.

**Date:** June 14 2011 14:55

**To:** Christian Grey

Dearest Completely & Utterly SS&S

Ethan is back, and he's coming here to collect keys to the apartment.

I'd really like to make sure he's settled in okay.

Why don't you pick me up after work? We can go to the apartment, then we can ALL go out for a meal maybe?

My treat?

Your

Ana x

Still SM&I

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Dinner Out
**Date:** June 14 2011 15:05
**To:** Anastasia Steele

I approve of your plan. Except the part about you paying!

My treat.

I'll pick you up at 6:00.

x

PS: Why aren't you using your BlackBerry!!!

Christian Grey
Completely and Utterly Annoyed, CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Bossiness
**Date:** June 14 2011 15:11
**To:** Christian Grey

Oh, don't be so crusty and cross.

It's all in code.

I'll see you at 6:00.

Ana x

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Maddening Woman
**Date:** June 14 2011 15:18

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Crusty and cross!

I'll give you crusty and cross.

And look forward to it.

Christian Grey
Completely and Utterly More Annoyed, but Smiling for Some Unknown Reason, CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Promises. Promises.
**Date:** June 14 2011 15:23
**To:** Christian Grey

Bring it on, Mr. Grey

I look forward to it too. ;D

Ana x

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

He doesn't reply, but then I don't expect him to. I imagine him moaning about mixed signals, and the thought makes me smile. I daydream briefly about what he might do to me but find myself shifting about in my chair. My subconscious gazes at me disapprovingly over her half-moon specs—get on with your work.

A LITTLE LATER, MY phone buzzes. It's Claire at Reception.

"There's a real cute guy in Reception to see you. We must go out for drinks sometime, Ana. You sure know some hunky guys," she hisses conspiratorially through the phone.

Ethan! Grabbing my keys from my purse, I hurry out to the foyer.

Holy shit—sun-bleached blond hair, a tan to die for, and glowing hazel eyes gaze up at me from the green leather couch. As soon as he sees me, his mouth drops open, and he's on his feet coming toward me.

"Wow, Ana." He frowns at me as he bends to give me hug.

"You look well." I grin up at him.

"You look … wow—different. Worldly, more sophisticated. What's happened? You changed your hair? Clothes? I don't know, Steele, but you look

hot!”

I blush furiously. “Oh, Ethan. I’m just in my work clothes,” I scold as Claire looks on with an arched eyebrow and a wry smile.

“How was Barbados?”

“Fun,” he says.

“When’s Kate coming back?”

“She and Elliot are flying back Friday. They’re pretty damn serious about each other.” Ethan rolls his eyes.

“I’ve missed her.”

“Yeah? How have you been doing with Mr. Mogul?”

“Mr. Mogul?” I snicker. “Well, it’s been interesting. He’s taking us out for dinner this evening.”

“Cool.” Ethan seems genuinely pleased. Phew!

“Here.” I hand him the keys. “You have the address?”

“Yeah. Laters.” He leans over and kisses my cheek.

“Elliot’s expression?”

“Yeah, kind of grows on you.”

“It does. Laters.” I smile at him as he picks up his large over-the-shoulder bag from beside the green couch and exits the building.

When I turn, Jack is watching me from the far side of the foyer, his expression unreadable. I smile brightly at him and head back to my desk, feeling his eyes on me the whole time. This is beginning to get on my nerves. What to do? I have no idea. I’ll have to wait until Kate is back. She’s bound to come up with a plan. The thought dispels my bleak mood, and I pick up the next manuscript.

AT FIVE TO SIX, my phone buzzes. It’s Christian.

“Crusty and Cross here,” he says and I grin. He’s still playful Fifty. My inner goddess is clapping her hands with glee like a small child.

“Well, this is Sex Mad and Insatiable. I take it you’re outside?” I ask dryly.

“I am indeed, Miss Steele. Looking forward to seeing you.” His voice is warm and seductive, and my heart flutters wildly.

“Ditto, Mr. Grey. I’ll be right out.” I hang up.

I switch off my computer and gather up my purse and cream cardigan.

“I’m off now, Jack,” I call through.

“Okay, Ana. Thanks for today! Have a great evening.”

“You, too.”

Why can’t he be like that all the time? I don’t understand him.

THE AUDI IS PARKED at the curb, and Christian climbs out as I approach. He’s taken off his

jacket, and he's wearing his gray pants, my favorite ones that hang from his hips—in that way. How can this Greek god be meant for me? I find myself grinning like a loon in answer to his own idiotic grin.

He's spent the whole day acting like a boyfriend in love—in love with me. This adorable, complex, flawed man is in love with me, and I with him. Joy bursts unexpectedly inside me, and I savor the moment as I feel briefly that I could conquer the world.

"Miss Steele, you look as captivating as you did this morning." Christian pulls me into his arms and kisses me soundly.

"Mr. Grey, so do you."

"Let's go get your friend." He smiles down at me and opens the car door.

As Taylor heads to the apartment, Christian fills me in on his day—a much better one than yesterday, it seems. I gaze at him adoringly as he attempts to explain some breakthrough the environmental science department at WSU in Vancouver has made. His words mean very little to me, but I'm captivated by his passion and interest in this subject. Maybe this is what it will be like, good days and bad days, and if the good days are like this, I won't have much to complain about. He hands me a sheet of paper.

"These are the times that Claude is free this week," he says.

Oh! The trainer.

As we pull up to my apartment building, he fishes his BlackBerry from his pocket.

"Grey," he answers. "Ros, what is it?" He listens intently, and I can tell it's an involved conversation.

"I'll go and get Ethan. I'll be two minutes," I mouth at Christian and hold up two fingers.

He nods, obviously distracted by the call. Taylor opens my door, smiling at me warmly. I grin at him; even Taylor's feeling it. I press the entry phone and shout happily into it.

"Hi, Ethan, it's me. Let me in."

The door buzzes, and I head upstairs to the apartment. It occurs to me that I have not been here since Saturday morning. That seems so long ago. Ethan has kindly left the front door open. I step into the apartment, and I don't know why, but I freeze instinctively as soon as I step inside. I take a moment to realize it's because the pale, wan figure standing by the kitchen island and holding a small revolver is Leila, and she's gazing impassively at me.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Holy fuck.*

She's here, gazing at me with an unnerving blank expression, holding a gun. My subconscious swoons into a dead faint, and I don't think even smelling salts will bring her back.

I blink repeatedly at Leila as my mind goes into overdrive. How did she get in? Where's Ethan? Holy shit! Where is Ethan?

A creeping cold fear grips my heart, and my scalp prickles as each and every follicle on my head tightens with terror. What if she's harmed him? I start breathing rapidly as adrenaline and bone-numbing dread course through my body. *Keep calm, keep calm*—I repeat the mantra over and over in my head.

She tilts her head to one side, regarding me as if I'm an exhibit in a freak show. Jeez, I'm not the freak here.

It feels like an eon has passed while I process all this, though in reality it is only a split second. Leila's expression remains blank, and her appearance is as scruffy and ill-kempt as ever. She's still wearing that grubby trench coat, and she looks desperately in need of a shower. Her hair is greasy and lank, plastered against her head, and her eyes are a dull brown, cloudy, and vaguely confused.

Despite the fact that my mouth has no moisture in it whatsoever, I attempt to speak. "Hi. Leila, isn't it?" I rasp. She smiles, but it's a disturbing curl of her lip rather than a true smile.

"She speaks," she whispers, and her voice is soft and hoarse at the same time, an eerie sound.

"Yes, I speak," I say gently as if to a child. "Are you here alone?" Where is Ethan? My heart pounds at the thought that he might have come to some harm.

Her face falls, so much so that I think she's about to burst into tears—she looks so forlorn.

"Alone," she whispers. "Alone." And the depth of sadness in that one word is heart wrenching. What does she mean? I am alone? She's alone? She's alone because she's harmed Ethan? Oh … no … I have to fight the choking fear clawing at my throat as tears threaten.

"What are you doing here? Can I help you?" My words are a calm, gentle

interrogation despite the suffocating fear in my throat. Her brow furrows as if she's completely befuddled by my questions. But she makes no violent move against me. Her hand is still relaxed around her gun. I take a different tack, trying to ignore my tightening scalp.

"Would you like some tea?" Why am I asking her if she wants tea? It's Ray's answer to any emotional situation, resurfacing inappropriately. Jeez, he'd have a fit if he saw me right this minute. His army training would have kicked in, and he'd have disarmed her by now. She's not actually pointing that gun at me. Perhaps I can move. She shakes her head and tilts it from side to side as if stretching her neck.

I take a deep precious lungful of air, trying to calm my panicked breathing, and move toward the kitchen island. She frowns as if she can't quite understand what I am doing and shifts a little so she is still facing me. I reach the kettle and with a shaking hand fill it from the faucet. As I move, my breathing eases. Yes, if she wanted me dead, surely she would have shot me by now. She watches me with an absent, bemused curiosity. As I switch on the kettle, I'm plagued by the thought of Ethan. Is he hurt? Tied up?

"Is there anyone else in the apartment?" I ask tentatively.

She inclines her head the other way, and with her right hand—the hand not holding the revolver—she grabs a strand of her long greasy hair and starts twirling and fiddling with it, pulling and twisting. It's obviously a nervous habit, and while I am distracted by this, I am struck once again by how much she resembles me. I hold my breath, waiting for her answer, the anxiety building to an almost unbearable pitch.

"Alone. All alone," she murmurs. I find this comforting. Maybe Ethan isn't here. The relief is empowering.

"Are you sure you don't want tea or coffee?"

"Not thirsty," she answers softly, and she takes a cautious step toward me. My feeling of empowerment evaporates. Fuck! I start panting with fear again, feeling it surge thick and rough through my veins. In spite of this and feeling beyond brave, I turn and fetch a couple of cups from the cupboard.

"What do you have that I don't?" she asks, her voice assuming the singsong intonation of a child.

"What do you mean, Leila?" I ask as gently as I can.

"Master—Mr. Grey—he lets you call him by his given name."

"I'm not his submissive, Leila. Er … Master understands that I am unable, inadequate to fulfill that role."

She tilts her head to the other side. It's wholly unnerving and unnatural as a gesture.

“In-ad-e-quate.” She tests the word, sounding it out, seeing how it feels on her tongue. “But Master is happy. I have seen him. He laughs and smiles. These reactions are rare … very rare for him.”

*Oh*.

“You look like me.” Leila changes tack, surprising me, her eyes seeming truly to focus on me for the first time. “Master likes obedient ones who look like you and me. The others, all the same … all the same … and yet you sleep in his bed. I saw you.”

Shit! She was in the room. I didn’t imagine it.

“You saw me in his bed?” I whisper.

“I never slept in Master’s bed,” she murmurs. She’s like a fallen ethereal wraith. Half a person. She looks so slight, and in spite of the fact that she’s holding a gun, I suddenly feel overwhelmed with sympathy for her. Her hands flex around the weapon, and my eyes widen, threatening to pop from my head.

“Why does Master like us like this? It makes me think something … something … Master is dark … Master is a dark man, but I love him.”

*No, no, he’s not*. I bristle internally. He’s not dark. He’s a good man, and he’s not in the dark. He’s joined me in the light. And now she’s here, trying to drag him back with some warped idea that she loves him.

“Leila, do you want to give me the gun?” I ask softly. Her hand grips it tightly, and she hugs it to her chest.

“This is mine. It’s all I have left.” She gently caresses the gun. “So she can join her love.”

*Shit!* Which love—Christian? It’s like she’s punched me in the stomach. I know he will be here momentarily to find out what’s keeping me. Does she mean to shoot him? The thought is so horrific, I feel my throat swell and ache as a huge knot forms there, almost choking me, matching the fear that’s balled tightly in my stomach.

Right on cue the door bursts open, and Christian is standing in the doorway, Taylor behind him.

Glancing at me briefly, Christian’s eyes sweep over me from head to toe, and I notice the small spark of relief in his look. But his relief is fleeting as his gaze darts to Leila and stills, focusing on her, not wavering in the slightest. He glares at her with an intensity I have not seen before, his eyes wild, wide, angry, and scared.

*Oh no … oh no*.

Leila’s eyes widen, and for a moment, it seems her reason returns. She blinks rapidly while her hand tightens once more around the gun.

My breath catches in my throat, and my heart starts thumping so loud that I

hear the blood pounding in my ears. *No no no!*

My world teeters precariously in the hands of this poor, fucked-up woman. Will she shoot? Both of us? Just Christian? The thought is crippling.

But after an eternity, as time hangs suspended around us, her head dips slightly and she gazes up at him through her long lashes, her expression contrite.

Christian holds up his hand, signaling to Taylor to stay where he is. Taylor's blanched face betrays his fury. I have never seen him like this, but he stands stock-still as Christian and Leila stare at each other.

I realize I'm holding my breath. What will she do? What will he do? But they just continue to stare at each other. Christian's expression is raw, full of some unnamed emotion. It could be pity, fear, affection … or is it love? No, please, not love!

His eyes bore into her, and agonizingly slowly, the atmosphere in the apartment changes. The tension is building so that I can sense their connection, the charge between them.

*No!* Suddenly I feel *I'm* the interloper, intruding on them as they stand gazing at each other. I'm an outsider—a voyeur, spying on a forbidden, intimate scene behind closed curtains.

Christian's intense gaze burns brighter, and his bearing changes subtly. He looks taller, more angular somehow, colder, and more distant. I recognize this stance. I've seen him like this before—in his playroom.

My scalp prickles anew. This is Dominant Christian, and how at ease he looks. Whether he was born to or made for this role, I just don't know, but with a sinking heart and sickened stomach, I watch as Leila responds, her lips parting, her breathing picking up as the first flush of color stains her cheeks. *No!* It's such an unwelcome glimpse into his past, agonizing to witness.

Finally he mouths a word at her. I can't make out what it is, but the effect on Leila is immediate. She drops to the floor on her knees, her head bowed, and the gun falls and skitters uselessly across the wooden floor. *Holy fuck*.

Christian walks calmly over to where the gun has fallen and bends gracefully to pick it up. He regards it with ill-disguised disgust, and then slips it into his jacket pocket. He gazes once more at Leila as she kneels compliantly beside the kitchen island.

"Anastasia, go with Taylor," he commands. Taylor crosses the threshold and stares at me.

"Ethan," I whisper.

"Downstairs." He responds matter-of-factly, his eyes never leaving Leila.

Downstairs. Not here. Ethan's okay. Relief floods hard and fast through my blood, and for a moment I think I'm going to faint.

“Anastasia,” Christian’s tone is clipped in warning.

I blink at him, and I’m suddenly unable to move. I don’t want to leave him—leave him with her. He moves to stand beside Leila as she kneels at his feet. He’s hovering over her, protectively. She’s so still, it’s unnatural. I can’t take my eyes off the two of them—together …

“For the love of God, Anastasia, will you do as you’re told for once in your life and go!” Christian’s eyes lock with mine as he glowers at me, his voice a cold shard of ice. The anger beneath the quiet, deliberate delivery of his words is palpable.

Angry at me? No way. Please—no! I feel like he’s slapped me hard. Why does he want to stay with her?

“Taylor. Take Miss Steele downstairs. Now.”

Taylor nods at him as I stare at Christian.

“Why?” I whisper.

“Go. Back to the apartment.” His eyes blaze frostily at me. “I need to be alone with Leila.” He says it urgently.

I think he’s trying to convey some kind of message, but I’m so thrown by all that’s happened that I’m not sure. I glance down at Leila and notice a very small smile cross her lips, but otherwise she remains truly impassive. A complete submissive. *Fuck!* My heart chills.

This is what he needs. This is what he likes. *No!* I want to wail.

“Miss Steele. Ana.” Taylor holds his hand out to me, imploring me to come. I am immobilized by the horrific spectacle before me. It confirms my worst fears and plays on all my insecurities: Christian and Leila together—the Dom and his sub.

“Taylor,” Christian urges, and Taylor leans down and scoops me into his arms. The last thing I see as we leave is Christian gently stroking Leila’s head as he murmurs something softly to her.

*No!*

As Taylor carries me down the stairs, I lie limply in his arms trying to grasp what’s happened in the last ten minutes—or was it longer? Shorter? The concept of time has deserted me.

Christian and Leila, Leila and Christian … together? What is he doing with her now?

“Jesus, Ana! What the fuck is going on?”

I am relieved to see Ethan as he paces the small lobby, still carrying his large bag. *Oh, thank heavens he’s okay!* When Taylor sets me down, I practically throw myself at Ethan, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Ethan. Oh, thank God!” I hug him, holding him close. I was so worried, and

for a brief moment, I enjoy some respite from my rising panic at what is unfolding upstairs in my apartment.

"What the fuck is going on, Ana? Who's this guy?"

"Oh, sorry, Ethan, this is Taylor. He works with Christian. Taylor, this is Ethan, my roommate's brother."

They nod at each other.

"Ana, upstairs, what's going on? I was fishing for the apartment keys when these guys jumped out of nowhere and grabbed them. One of them was Christian …" Ethan's voice trails off.

"You were late … Thank God."

"Yeah. I met a friend from Pullman—we had a quick drink. What's going on up there?"

"There's a girl, an ex of Christian's. In our apartment. She's gone postal, and Christian is …" My voice cracks, and tears pool in my eyes.

"Hey," Ethan whispers and pulls me close once more. "Has anyone called the cops?"

"No, it's not like that." I sob into his chest and now I've started, I can't stop crying, the tension of this latest episode releasing through my tears. Ethan tightens his arms around me, but I sense his bemusement.

"Hey, Ana, let's go get a drink." He pats my back awkwardly. Abruptly, I feel awkward, too, and embarrassed, and in all honesty, I want to be on my own. But I nod, accepting his offer. I want to be away from here, away from whatever's going on upstairs.

I turn to Taylor.

"Was the apartment checked?" I ask him tearfully, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

"This afternoon." Taylor shrugs apologetically as he hands me a handkerchief. He looks devastated. "I'm sorry, Ana," he murmurs.

I frown. Jeez, he looks so guilty. I don't want to make him feel worse.

"She does seem to have an uncanny ability to evade us," he adds scowling again.

"Ethan and I will go for a quick drink and then head back to Escala." I dry my eyes.

Taylor shuffles from foot to foot uncomfortably. "Mr. Grey wanted you to go back to the apartment," he says quietly.

"Well, we know where Leila is now." I can't keep the bitterness out of my voice. "So, no need for all the security. Tell Christian we'll see him later."

Taylor opens his mouth to speak and then wisely closes it again.

"Do you want to leave your bag with Taylor?" I ask Ethan.

“No, I’ll keep it with me, thanks.”

Ethan nods at Taylor, then ushers me out the front door. Too late, I remember that I’ve left my purse in the back of Audi. I have nothing.

“My purse—”

“Don’t worry,” Ethan murmurs, his face full of concern. “It’s cool, it’s on me.”

WE CHOOSE A BAR across the street, settling onto wooden barstools by the window. I want to see what’s going on—who’s coming, and more important, who’s going. Ethan hands me a bottle of beer.

“Trouble with an ex?” he says gently.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” I mutter, abruptly guarded. I can’t talk about this—I have signed an NDA. And for the first time, I really resent that fact, plus that Christian’s said nothing about rescinding it.

“I’ve got time,” Ethan says kindly and takes a long slug of his beer.

“She’s an ex, from years back. She left her husband for some guy. Then a couple of weeks or so ago he was killed in a car crash, and now she’s come after Christian.” I shrug. There, that didn’t give too much away.

“Come after him?”

“She had a gun.”

“What the fuck!”

“She didn’t actually threaten anyone with it. I think she meant to harm herself. But that’s why I was so worried about you. I didn’t know if you were in the apartment.”

“I see. She sounds unstable.”

“Yes, she is.”

“And what’s Christian doing with her now?”

The blood drains from my face and bile rises in my throat. “I don’t know,” I whisper.

Ethan’s eyes widen—at last he’s got it.

This is the crux of my problem. What the fuck are they doing? Talking, I hope. Just talking. Yet all I can see in my mind’s eye is his hand, tenderly stroking her hair.

*She’s disturbed and Christian cares about her; that’s all this is,* I rationalize. But in the back of my mind, my subconscious is shaking her head sadly.

It’s more than that. Leila was able to fulfill his needs in a way I cannot. The thought is depressing.

I try to focus on all we’ve done in the last few days—his declaration of love, his flirty humor, his playfulness. But Elena’s words keep coming back to taunt

me. It's true what they say about eavesdroppers.

*Don't you miss it … your playroom?*

I finish my beer in record time, and Ethan lines up another. I am not much of a companion, but to his credit he stays with me, chatting, trying to lift my spirits, talking about Barbados, about Kate and Elliot's antics, which is wonderfully distracting. But it's just that—a distraction.

My mind, my heart, my soul are all still in that apartment with my Fifty Shades and the woman who used to be his submissive. A woman who thinks she still loves him. A woman who looks like me.

During our third beer, a large cruiser with heavily-tinted windows pulls up next to the Audi in front of the apartment. I recognize Dr. Flynn as he climbs out, accompanied by a woman dressed in what look like pale blue scrubs. I glimpse Taylor as he lets them in through the front door.

"Who's that?" Ethan asks.

"His name's Dr. Flynn. Christian knows him."

"What kind of doctor?"

"A shrink."

"Oh."

We both watch, and a few minutes later they are back. Christian is carrying Leila, who is wrapped in a blanket. *What?* I watch horrified as they all climb into the cruiser, and it speeds away.

Ethan glances at me sympathetically, and I feel desolate, completely desolate.

"Can I have something a bit stronger?" I ask Ethan, my voice small.

"Sure. What would you like?"

"A brandy. Please."

Ethan nods and retreats to the bar. I gaze through the window at the front door. Moments later Taylor emerges, climbs into the Audi, and heads off toward Escala … after Christian? I don't know.

Ethan places a large brandy in front of me.

"Come on, Steele. Let's get drunk."

Sounds like the best offer I've had in a while. We clink glasses, and I take a gulp of the burning amber liquid, the fiery heat a welcome distraction from the hideous blossoming pain in my heart.

---

IT'S LATE AND I feel fuzzy. Ethan and I are locked out of the apartment. He insists on walking me back to Escala, but he won't stay. He's called the friend he met earlier for a drink and arranged to crash with him.

"So, this is where the mogul lives." Ethan whistles through his teeth,

impressed.

I nod.

“Sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” he asks.

“No, I need to face this—or just go to bed.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Thanks, Ethan.” I hug him.

“You’ll work it out, Steele,” he murmurs against my ear. He releases me and watches while I head into the building.

“Laters,” he calls. I offer him a weak smile and a wave, and then press the button to call the elevator.

I step out of the elevator and into Christian’s apartment. Taylor is not waiting, which is unusual. Opening the double doors, I head toward the great room. Christian is on the phone, pacing the room near the piano.

“She’s here,” he snaps. He turns to glare at me as he switches off his phone. “Where the fuck have you been?” he growls but doesn’t make a move toward me.

He’s angry with me? He’s the one that just spent God knows how long with his loony ex-girlfriend, and he’s angry with me?

“Have you been drinking?” he asks, appalled.

“A bit.” I didn’t think it was that obvious.

He gasps and runs his hand through his hair. “I told you to come back here.” His voice is menacingly quiet. “It’s now fifteen after ten. I’ve been worried about you.”

“I went for a drink or three with Ethan while you attended to your ex,” I hiss at him. “I didn’t know how long you were going to be … with her.”

He narrows his eyes and takes a few paces toward me but stops.

“Why do you say it like that?”

I shrug and stare down at my fingers.

“Ana, what’s wrong?” And for the first time, I hear something other than anger in his voice. What? Fear?

I swallow, trying to work out what I want to say. “Where’s Leila?” I ask looking up at him.

“In a psychiatric hospital in Fremont,” he says, and his face is scrutinizing mine. “Ana, what is it?” He moves toward me until he’s standing right in front of me. “What’s wrong?” he breathes.

I shake my head. “I’m no good for you.”

“What?” he breathes, his eyes widening in alarm. “Why do you think that? How can you possibly think that?”

“I can’t be everything you need.”

“You are everything I need.”

“Just seeing you with her …” My voice trails off.

“Why do you do this to me? This is not about you, Ana. It’s about her.” He takes a sharp breath, running his hand through his hair again. “Right now she’s a very sick girl.”

“But I felt it … what you had together.”

“What? No.” He reaches for me, and I step back instinctively. He drops his hand, blinking at me. He looks as though he’s seized with panic.

“You’re running?” he whispers as his eyes widen with fear.

I say nothing as I try to collect my scattered thoughts.

“You can’t,” he pleads.

“Christian … I …” I struggle to collect my thoughts. What am I trying to say? I need time, time to process this. Give me time.

“No. No!” he says.

“I …”

He looks wildly around the room. For inspiration? For divine intervention? I don’t know.

“You can’t go. Ana, I love you!”

“I love you, too, Christian, it’s just—”

“No … no!” he says in desperation and puts both hands on his head.

“Christian …”

“No,” he breathes, his eyes wide with panic, and suddenly he drops to his knees in front of me, head bowed, his hands spread out on his thighs. He takes a deep breath and doesn’t move.

*What?* “Christian, what are you doing?”

He continues to stare down, not looking at me.

“Christian! What are you doing?” I repeat in a high-pitched voice. He doesn’t move. “Christian, look at me!” I command in panic.

His head sweeps up without hesitation, and he regards me passively with his cool gray gaze—he’s almost serene … expectant.

*Holy Fuck* … Christian. The submissive.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Christian on his knees at my feet, holding me with his steady gray gaze, is the most chilling and sobering sight I have ever seen—more so than Leila and her gun. The vague alcoholic fuzziness I'm suffering from evaporates in an instant, and is replaced by a prickling scalp and a creeping sense of doom as the blood drains from my face.

I inhale sharply with shock. *No. No, this is wrong, so wrong and so disturbing*.

"Christian, please, don't do this. I don't want this."

He continues to regard me passively, not moving, saying nothing.

*Oh, fuck. My poor Fifty*. My heart squeezes and twists. What the hell have I done to him? Tears prick my eyes.

"Why are you doing this? Talk to me," I whisper.

He blinks once.

"What would you like me to say?" he says softly, blandly, and for a moment I'm relieved that he's talking, but not like this—no. No.

Tears begin to ooze down my cheeks, and suddenly it is too much to see him in the same prostrate position as the pathetic creature that was Leila. The image of a powerful man who's really still a little boy, who was horrifically abused and neglected, who feels unworthy of love from his perfect family and his much-less-than-perfect girlfriend … my lost boy … it's heartbreaking.

Compassion, loss, and despair all swell in my heart, and I feel a choking sense of desperation. I am going to have to fight to bring him back, to bring back *my* Fifty.

The thought of me dominating anyone is appalling. The thought of dominating Christian is nauseating. It would make me like her—the woman who did this to him.

I shudder at that thought, fighting the bile in my throat. No way can I do that. No way do I want that.

As my thoughts clear, I can see only one way. Not taking my eyes off his, I sink to my knees in front of him.

The wooden floor is hard against my shins, and I dash my tears away roughly

with the back of my hand.

Like this, we are equals. We're on a level. This is the only way I'm going to retrieve him.

His eyes widen fractionally as I stare up at him, but beyond that his expression and stance don't change.

"Christian, you don't have to do this," I plead. "I'm not going to run. I've told you and told you and told you, I won't run. All that's happened … it's overwhelming. I just need some time to think … some time to myself. Why do you always assume the worst?" My heart clenches again because I know; it's because he's so doubting, so full of self-loathing.

Elena's words come back to haunt me. *"Does she know how negative you are about yourself? About all your issues?"*

*Oh, Christian.* Fear grips my heart once more and I start babbling, "I was going to suggest going back to my apartment this evening. You never give me any time … time to just think things through," I sob, and a ghost of a frown crosses his face. "Just time to think. We barely know each other, and all this baggage that comes with you … I need … I need time to think it through. And now that Leila is … well, whatever she is … she's off the streets and not a threat … I thought … I thought …" My voice trails off and I stare at him. He regards me intently and I think he's listening

"Seeing you with Leila …" I close my eyes as the painful memory of his interaction with his ex-sub gnaws at me anew. "It was such a shock. I had a glimpse into how your life has been … and …" I gaze down at my knotted fingers, tears still trickling down my cheeks. "This is about me not being good enough for you. It was an insight into your life, and I am so scared you'll get bored with me, and then you'll go … and I'll end up like Leila … a shadow. Because I love you, Christian, and if you leave me, it will be like a world without light. I'll be in darkness. I don't want to run. I'm just so frightened you'll leave me …"

I realize as I say these words to him—in the hope that he's listening—what my real problem is. I just don't get why he likes me. I have *never* understood why he likes me.

"I don't understand why you find me attractive," I murmur. "You're, well, you're you … and I'm …" I shrug and gaze up at him. "I just don't see it. You're beautiful and sexy and successful and good and kind and caring—all those things—and I'm not. And I can't do the things you like to do. I can't give you what you need. How could you be happy with me? How can I possibly hold you?" My voice is a whisper as I express my darkest fears. "I have never understood what you see in me. And seeing you with her, it brought all that

home.” I sniff and wipe my nose with the back of my hand, gazing at his impassive expression.

Oh, he’s so exasperating. *Talk to me, damn it!*

“Are you going to kneel here all night? Because I’ll do it, too,” I snap at him.

I think his expression softens—maybe he looks vaguely amused. But it’s so hard to tell.

I could reach across and touch him, but this would be a gross abuse of the position he’s put me in. I don’t want that, but I don’t know what he wants, or what he’s trying to say to me. I just don’t understand.

“Christian, please, please … talk to me,” I beseech him, wringing my hands in my lap. I am uncomfortable on my knees, but I continue to kneel, staring into his serious, beautiful, gray eyes, and I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

“Please,” I beg once more.

His intense gaze darkens suddenly and he blinks.

“I was so scared,” he whispers.

Oh, thank the Lord! My subconscious staggers back into her armchair, sagging with relief, and takes a large swig of gin.

*He’s talking!* Gratitude overwhelms me, and I swallow, trying to contain my emotion and the fresh bout of tears that threatens.

His voice is soft and low. “When I saw Ethan arrive outside, I knew someone had let you into your apartment. Both Taylor and I leapt out of the car. We knew, and to see her there like that with you—and armed. I think I died a thousand deaths, Ana. Someone threatening you … all my worst fears realized. I was so angry, with her, with you, with Taylor, with myself.”

He shakes his head revealing his agony. “I didn’t know how volatile she would be. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how she’d react.” He stops and frowns. “And then she gave me a clue; she looked so contrite. And I just knew what I had to do.” He pauses, gazing at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

“Go on,” I whisper.

He swallows. “Seeing her in that state, knowing that I might have something to do with her mental breakdown …” He closes his eyes once more. “She was always so mischievous and lively.” He shudders and takes a rasping breath, almost like a sob. This is torture to listen to, but I kneel, attentive, lapping up this insight.

“She might have harmed you. And it would have been my fault.” His eyes drift off, filled with uncomprehending horror, and he’s silent once more.

“But she didn’t,” I whisper. “And you weren’t responsible for her being in

that state, Christian." I blink up at him, encouraging him to continue.

Then it dawns on me that everything he did was to keep me safe, and perhaps Leila, too, because he also cares for her. But how much does he care for her? The question lingers in my head, unwelcome. He says he loves me, but then he was so harsh, throwing me out of my own apartment.

"I just wanted you gone," he murmurs, with his uncanny ability to read my thoughts. "I wanted you away from the danger, and … You. Just. Wouldn't. Go," he hisses through clenched teeth and shakes his head. His exasperation is palpable.

He gazes at me intently. "Anastasia Steele, you are the most stubborn woman I know." He closes his eyes and shakes his head once more in disbelief.

*Oh, he's back*. I breathe a long, cleansing sigh of relief.

He opens his eyes again, and his expression is forlorn—sincere. "You weren't going to run?" he asks.

*"No!"*

He closes his eyes again and his whole body relaxes. When he opens his eyes, I can see his pain and anguish.

"I thought—" He stops. "This is me, Ana. All of me … and I'm all yours. What do I have to do to make you realize that? To make you see that I want you any way I can get you. That I love you."

"I love you, too, Christian, and to see you like this is …" I choke and my tears start anew. "I thought I'd broken you."

"Broken? Me? Oh no, Ana. Just the opposite." He reaches out and takes my hand. "You're my lifeline," he whispers, and he kisses my knuckles before pressing my palm against his.

With his eyes wide and full of fear, he gently tugs my hand and places it on his chest over his heart—in the forbidden zone. His breathing quickens. His heart is beating a frantic, pounding tattoo beneath my fingers. He doesn't take his eyes off mine; his jaw is tense, his teeth clenched.

I gasp. *Oh, my Fifty!* He's letting me touch him. And it's like all the air in my lungs has vaporized—gone. The blood is pounding in my ears as the rhythm of my heart rises to match his.

He releases my hand, leaving it in place over his heart. I flex my fingers slightly, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath the thin fabric of his shirt. He's holding his breath. I can't bear it. I make to move my hand.

"No," he says quickly and places his hand once more over mine, pressing my fingers against him. "Don't."

Emboldened by these two words, I shuffle closer so our knees are touching and tentatively raise my other hand so that he knows exactly what I intend to do.

His eyes grow wider but he doesn't stop me.

Gently I start to undo the buttons on his shirt. It's tricky with one hand. I flex my fingers beneath his hand and he lets go, allowing me to use both hands to undo his shirt. My eyes don't leave his as I pull his shirt wide open, revealing his chest.

He swallows, and his lips part as his breathing increases, and I sense his rising panic, but he doesn't pull away. Is he still in sub mode? I have no idea.

Should I do this? I don't want to hurt him, physically or mentally. The sight of him like this, offering himself to me, has been a wake-up call.

I reach up, and my hand hovers over his chest, and I stare at him … asking his permission. Very subtly he tilts his head to one side, steeling himself in anticipation of my touch, and the tension radiates from him, but this time it's not in anger—it's in fear.

I hesitate. Can I really do this to him?

"Yes," he breathes—again with the weird ability to answer my unspoken questions.

I extend my fingertips into his chest hair and lightly brush them down his sternum. He closes his eyes, and his face creases as if he's experiencing intolerable pain. It's unbearable to witness, so I lift my fingers immediately, but he quickly grabs my hand and replaces it firmly, flat on his bare chest so that the hair tickles my palm.

"No," he says, his voice strained. "I need to."

His eyes are screwed up so tightly. This must be agony. It's truly tormenting to watch. Carefully I let my fingers stroke across his chest to his heart, marveling at the feel of him, terrified that this is a step too far.

He opens his eyes, and they are gray fire, blazing at me.

*Holy cow*. His look is blistering, feral, beyond intense, and his breathing is rapid. It stirs my blood. I squirm under his gaze.

He hasn't stopped me, so I run my fingertips across his chest again, and his mouth goes slack. He's panting, and I don't know if it's from fear, or something else.

I've wanted to kiss him there for so long that I lean up on my knees and hold his gaze for a moment, making my intention perfectly clear. Then I bend and gently plant a soft kiss above his heart, feeling his warm, sweet-smelling skin beneath my lips.

His strangled groan moves me so much that I sit back on my heels, fearful of what I'll see on his face. His eyes are screwed tightly shut, but he hasn't moved.

"Again," he whispers, and I lean into his chest once more, this time to kiss one of his scars. He gasps, and I kiss another and another. He groans loudly, and

suddenly his arms are around me, and his hand is in my hair, pulling my head up painfully so that my lips meet his insistent mouth. And we're kissing, my fingers knotting into his hair.

"Oh, Ana," he breathes, and he twists and pulls me down on to the floor so that I am underneath him. I bring my hands up to cup his beautiful face, and in that moment, I feel his tears.

*He's crying … no. No!*

"Christian, please don't cry. I meant it when I said I'd never leave you. I did. If I gave you any other impression, I'm so sorry … please, please forgive me. I love you. I will always love you."

He looms over me, gazing down into my face, and his expression is so pained.

"What is it?"

His eyes grow larger.

"What is this secret that makes you think I'll run for the hills? That makes you so determined to believe I'll go?" I plead, my voice tremulous. "Tell me, Christian, *please* …"

He sits up, though this time he crosses his legs and I follow suit, my legs outstretched. Vaguely I wonder if we can get off the floor. But I don't want to interrupt his train of thought. He's finally going to confide in me.

He gazes down at me, and he looks utterly desolate. *Oh, shit—it's bad.*

"Ana …" He pauses, searching for the words, his expression pained … Where the hell is this going?

He takes a deep breath and swallows. "I'm a sadist, Ana. I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore—my birth mother. I'm sure you can guess why." He says it in a rush as if he's had the sentence in his head for days and days and is desperate to be rid of it.

My world stops. *Oh no.*

This is not what I expected. This is bad. Really bad. I gaze at him, trying to understand the implication of what he's just said. It does explain why we all look the same.

My immediate thought is that Leila was right—"*Master is dark.*"

I recall the first conversation I had with him about his tendencies when we were in the Red Room of Pain.

"You said you weren't a sadist," I whisper, desperately trying to understand … make some excuse for him.

"No, I said I was a Dominant. If I lied to you, it was a lie of omission. I'm sorry." He looks briefly down at his manicured fingernails.

I think he's mortified. Mortified about lying to me? Or about what he is?

"When you asked me that question, I had envisioned a very different

relationship between us," he murmurs. I can tell by his gaze that he's terrified.

Then it hits me like a wrecking ball. If he's a sadist, he really needs all that whipping and caning shit. Oh, fuck. I put my head in my hands.

"So it's true," I whisper, glancing up at him. "I can't give you what you need." This is it—this really does mean we are incompatible.

The world starts falling away at my feet, collapsing around me as panic grips my throat. This is it. We can't do this.

He frowns. "No no no. Ana. No. You can. You *do* give me what I need." He clenches his fists. "Please believe me," he murmurs, his words an impassioned plea.

"I don't know what to believe, Christian. This is so fucked-up," I whisper, my throat hoarse and aching as it closes in, choking me with unshed tears.

His eyes are wide and luminous when he looks at me again.

"Ana, believe me. After I punished you and you left me, my worldview changed. I wasn't joking when I said I would avoid ever feeling like that again." He gazes at me with pained entreaty. "When you said you loved me, it was a revelation. No one's ever said it to me before, and it was as if I'd laid something to rest—or maybe you'd laid it to rest, I don't know. Dr. Flynn and I are still in deep discussion about it."

*Oh*. Hope flares briefly in my heart. Perhaps we'll be okay. I want us to be okay. *Don't I?* "What does that all mean?" I whisper.

"It means I don't need it. Not now."

*What?* "How do you know? How can you be so sure?"

"I just know. The thought of hurting you … in any real way … it's abhorrent to me."

"I don't understand. What about rulers and spanking and all that kinky fuckery?"

He runs a hand through his hair and almost smiles but instead sighs ruefully. "I'm talking about the heavy shit, Anastasia. You should see what I can do with a cane or a cat."

My mouth drops open, stunned. "I'd rather not."

"I know. If you wanted to do that, then fine … but you don't and I get it. I can't do all that shit with you if you don't want to. I told you once before, you have all the power. And now, since you came back, I don't feel that compulsion at all."

I gape at him for a moment trying to take this all in. "When we met, that's what you wanted, though?"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"How can your compulsion just go, Christian? Like I'm some kind of

panacea, and you're—for want of a better word—cured? I don't get it."

He sighs once more. "I wouldn't say 'cured' … You don't believe me?"

"I just find it—unbelievable. Which is different."

"If you'd never left me, then I probably wouldn't feel this way. Your walking out on me was the best thing you ever did … for us. It made me realize how much I want you, just you, and I mean it when I say I'll take you any way I can have you."

I gaze at him. Can I believe this? My head hurts just trying to think this all through, and deep down I feel … numb.

"You're still here. I thought you would be out of the door by now," he whispers.

"Why? Because I might think you're a sicko for whipping and fucking women who look like your mother? Whatever would give you that impression?" I hiss, lashing out.

He blanches at my harsh words.

"Well, I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but yes," he says, his eyes wide and hurt.

His expression is sobering and I regret my outburst. I frown, feeling a pang of guilt.

Oh, what am I going to do? I gaze at him and he looks contrite, sincere … he looks like my Fifty.

And unbidden, I recall the photograph in his childhood bedroom, and in that moment realize why the woman in it looked so familiar. She looked like him. She must have been his biological mother.

His easy dismissal of her comes to mind: *No one of consequence* … She's responsible for all this … and I look like her … *Fuck!*

He stares at me, eyes raw, and I know he's waiting for my next move. He seems genuine. He's said he loves me, but I'm really confused.

This is all so fucked-up. He's reassured me about Leila, but now I know with more certainty than ever how she was able to give him his kicks. The thought is wearying and unpalatable.

"Christian, I'm exhausted. Can we discuss this tomorrow? I want to go to bed."

He blinks at me in surprise. "You're not going?"

"Do you want me to go?"

"No! I thought you would leave once you knew."

All the times he's alluded to my leaving once I knew his darkest secrets flash through my mind … and now I know. Shit. Master *is* dark.

Should I leave? I gaze at him, this crazy man that I love—yes, love.

Can I leave him? I left him once before, and it nearly broke me … and him. I love him. I know that in spite of this revelation.

"Don't leave me," he whispers.

"Oh, for crying out loud—no! I am not going to go!" I shout, and it's cathartic. There, I've said it. I am not leaving.

"Really?" His eyes widen.

"What can I do to make you understand I will not run? What can I say?"

He gazes at me, revealing his fear and anguish again. He swallows. "There is one thing you can do."

"What?" I snap.

"Marry me," he whispers.

*What? Did he really just—*

For the second time in less than half an hour my world stops.

*Holy fuck*. I stare at the deeply damaged man I love. I can't believe what he's just said.

*Marriage?* He's proposing marriage? Is he kidding? I can't help it—a small, nervous, disbelieving giggle erupts from deep inside. I bite my lip to stop it from turning into full-scale hysterical laughter and fail miserably. I lie back flat on the floor and surrender myself to the laughter, laughing as I've never laughed before, huge healing cathartic howls of laughter.

And for a moment I am on my own, looking down at this absurd situation, a giggling, overwhelmed girl beside a beautiful, disturbed boy. I drape my arm across my eyes, as my laughter turns to scalding tears. *No, no … this is too much*.

As the hysteria subsides, Christian gently lifts my arm off my face. I turn and gaze up at him.

He's leaning over me. His mouth is twisted with wry amusement, but his eyes are a burning gray, maybe wounded. *Oh no*.

He gently wipes away a stray tear with the back of his knuckles. "You find my proposal amusing, Miss Steele?"

*Oh, Fifty!* Reaching up, I caress his cheek tenderly, enjoying the feel of the stubble beneath my fingers. Lord, I love this man.

"Mr. Grey … Christian. Your sense of timing is without doubt …" I gaze up at him as words fail me.

He smirks at me, but the crinkling around his eyes shows me that he's hurt. It's sobering.

"You're cutting me to the quick here, Ana. Will you marry me?"

I sit up and lean over him, placing my hands on his knees. I stare into his lovely face. "Christian, I've met your psycho ex with a gun, been thrown out of

my apartment, had you go thermonuclear Fifty on me—”

He opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up my hand. He obediently shuts his mouth.

“You’ve just revealed some quite frankly shocking information about yourself, and now you’ve asked me to marry you.”

He moves his head from side to side as if considering the facts. He’s amused. Thank heavens.

“Yes, I think that’s a fair and accurate summary of the situation,” he says dryly.

I shake my head at him. “Whatever happened to delayed gratification?”

“I got over it, and I’m now a firm advocate of instant gratification. Carpe diem, Ana,” he whispers.

“Look, Christian, I’ve known you for about three minutes, and there’s so much more I need to know. I’ve had too much to drink, I’m hungry, I’m tired, and I want to go to bed. I need to consider your proposal just as I considered that contract you gave me. And”—I press my lips together to show my displeasure but also to lighten the mood between us—“that wasn’t the most romantic proposal.”

He tilts his head to one side and his lips quirk up in a smile. “Fair point well made, as ever, Miss Steele,” he breathes, his voice laced with relief. “So, that’s not a no?”

I sigh. “No, Mr. Grey, it’s not a no, but it’s not a yes, either. You’re only doing this because you’re scared, and you don’t trust me.”

“No, I’m doing this because I’ve finally met someone I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

*Oh*. My heart skips a beat and inside, I melt. How is it that in the middle of the most bizarre situations he can say the most romantic things? My mouth pops open in shock.

“I never thought that would happen to me,” he continues, his expression radiating pure undiluted sincerity.

I gape at him, searching for the right words.

“Can I think about it … please? And think about everything else that’s happened today? What you’ve just told me? You asked for patience and faith. Well, back at you, Grey. I need those now.”

His eyes search mine and after a beat, he leans forward and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“I can live with that.” He kisses me quickly on the lips. “Not very romantic, eh?” He raises his eyebrows, and I give him an admonishing shake of my head. “Hearts and flowers?” he asks softly.

I nod and he gives me a slight smile.

"You're hungry?"

"Yes."

"You didn't eat." His eyes frost and his jaw hardens.

"No, I didn't eat." I sit back on my heels and regard him passively. "Being thrown out of my apartment after witnessing my boyfriend interacting intimately with his ex-submissive considerably suppressed my appetite." I glare at him and fist my hands on my hips.

Christian shakes his head and rises gracefully to his feet. *Oh, finally we can get off the floor*. He holds his hand out to me.

"Let me fix you something to eat," he says.

"Can't I just go to bed?" I mutter wearily as I place my hand in his.

He pulls me up. I am stiff. He gazes down at me, his expression soft.

"No, you need to eat. Come." Bossy Christian is back, and it's a relief.

He leads me to the kitchen area and ushers me toward a barstool as he heads to the fridge. I glance at my watch and it's nearly eleven thirty and I have to get up for work in the morning.

"Christian, I'm really not hungry."

He studiously ignores me as he ferrets through the enormous fridge. "Cheese?" he asks.

"Not at this hour."

"Pretzels?"

"In the fridge? No," I snap.

He turns and grins at me. "You don't like pretzels?"

"Not at eleven thirty. Christian, I'm going to bed. You can rummage around in your refrigerator for the rest of the night if you want. I'm tired, and I've had far too interesting a day. A day I'd like to forget." I slide off the stool and he scowls at me, but right now I don't care. I want to go to bed—I'm exhausted.

"Macaroni and cheese?" He holds up a white bowl lidded with foil. He looks so hopeful and endearing.

"You like macaroni and cheese?" I ask.

He nods enthusiastically, and my heart melts. He looks so young all of a sudden. Who would have thought? Christian Grey likes nursery food.

"You want some?" he asks, sounding hopeful. I can't resist him, and I'm hungry.

I nod and give him a weak smile. His answering grin is breathtaking. He takes the foil off the bowl and pops it into the microwave. I perch back on the stool and watch the beauty that is Mr. Christian Grey—the man who wants to marry me—move gracefully and with ease around his kitchen.

“So you know how to use the microwave, then?” I tease softly.

“If it’s in a packet, I can usually do something with it. It’s real food I have a problem with.”

I cannot believe this is the same man who was on his knees in front of me not half an hour before. He’s his usual mercurial self. He sets out plates, cutlery, and place mats on the breakfast bar.

“It’s very late,” I mutter.

“Don’t go to work tomorrow.”

“I have to go to work tomorrow. My boss is leaving for New York.”

Christian frowns. “Do you want to go there this weekend?”

“I checked the weather forecast, and it looks like rain,” I say, shaking my head.

“Oh, so what do you want to do?”

The microwave’s *ping* announces that our supper is warmed through.

“I just want to get through one day at a time right now. All this excitement is … tiring.” I raise an eyebrow at him, which he judiciously ignores.

Christian places the white bowl in between our place settings and takes his seat beside me. He looks deep in thought, distracted. I dish the macaroni onto our plates. It smells divine, and my mouth waters in anticipation. I am famished.

“Sorry about Leila,” he murmurs.

“Why are you sorry?” Mmm, the macaroni tastes as good as it smells. My stomach grumbles gratefully.

“It must have been a terrible shock for you, finding her in your apartment. Taylor swept through it earlier himself. He’s very upset.”

“I don’t blame Taylor.”

“Neither do I. He’s been out looking for you.”

“Really? Why?”

“I didn’t know where you were. You left your purse, your phone. I couldn’t even track you. Where did you go?” he asks. His voice is soft, but there’s an ominous undercurrent to his words.

“Ethan and I just went to a bar across the street. So I could watch what was happening.”

“I see.” The atmosphere between us has changed subtly. It’s no longer light.

*Okay, well … two can play that game. Let’s just bring this back to you, Fifty*. Trying to sound nonchalant, wanting to assuage my burning curiosity but dreading the answer, I ask, “So, what did you do with Leila in the apartment?”

I glance up at him, and he freezes with his forkful of macaroni suspended in midair. *Oh no, that’s not good.*

“You really want to know?”

A knot tightens in my gut and my appetite vanishes. “Yes,” I whisper. *Do you? Do you really?* My subconscious has thrown her empty bottle of gin on the floor and is sitting up in her armchair, glaring at me in horror.

Christian’s mouth flattens into a line, and he hesitates. “We talked, and I gave her a bath.” His voice is hoarse, and he continues quickly when I make no response. “And I dressed her in some of your clothes. I hope you don’t mind. But she was filthy.”

*Holy fuck.* He bathed her?

What an inappropriate thing to do. I’m reeling, staring down at my uneaten macaroni. The sight of it now makes me nauseous.

*Try to rationalize this*, my subconscious coaches. That cool, intellectual part of my brain knows that he just did that because she was dirty, but it’s too hard. My fragile, jealous self can’t bear it.

Suddenly I want to cry—not succumb to ladylike tears that trickle decorously down my cheeks, but howling-at-the-moon crying. I take a deep breath to suppress the urge, but my throat is arid and uncomfortable from my unshed tears and sobs.

“It was all I could do, Ana,” he says softly.

“You still have feelings for her?”

“No!” he says, appalled, and closes his eyes, his expression one of anguish. I turn away, staring once more at my sickening food. I can’t bear to look at him.

“To see her like that—so different, so broken. I care about her, one human being to another.” He shrugs as if to shake off an unpleasant memory. Jeez, is he expecting my sympathy?

“Ana, look at me.”

I can’t. I know that if I do, I will burst into tears. This is just too much to absorb. I’m like an overflowing tank of gasoline—full, beyond capacity. There is no room for any more. I simply cannot cope with any more crap. I will combust and explode, and it will be ugly if I try. Jeez!

Christian caring for his ex-sub in such an intimate fashion—the image flashes through my brain. Bathing her, for fuck’s sake—naked. A harsh, painful shudder wracks my body.

“Ana.”

“What?”

“Don’t. It doesn’t mean anything. It was like caring for a child, a broken, shattered child,” he mutters.

What the hell would he know about caring for a child? This was a woman he had a very full-on, deviant sexual relationship with.

*Oh, this hurts*. I take a deep, steadying breath. Or perhaps he’s referring to

himself. He’s the broken child. That makes more sense … or maybe it makes no sense at all. Oh, this is so fucked-up, and suddenly I’m bone-crushingly tired. I need sleep.

“Ana?”

I stand, take my plate to the sink, and scrape the contents into the trash.

“Ana, please.”

I whirl around and face him. “Just stop, Christian! Just stop with the ‘Ana, please’!” I shout at him, and my tears start to trickle down my face. “I’ve had enough of all this shit today. I am going to bed. I am tired and emotional. Now let me be.”

I turn on my heel and practically run to the bedroom, taking with me the memory of his wide-eyed, shocked stare. Nice to know I can shock him, too. I strip out of my clothes in double-quick time, and after rifling through his chest of drawers, drag on one of his T-shirts and head for the bathroom.

I gaze at myself in the mirror, hardly recognizing the gaunt, pink-eyed, blotchy-cheeked harridan staring back at me, and it’s too much. I sink to the floor and surrender to the overwhelming emotion I can no longer contain, sobbing huge chest-wrenching sobs, finally letting my tears flow unrestrained.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hey," Christian's says gently as he pulls me into his arms, "please don't cry, Ana, please," he begs. He's on the bathroom floor, and I am in his lap. I put my arms around him and weep into his neck. Cooing softly into my hair, he gently strokes my back, my head.

"I'm sorry, baby," he whispers, and that makes me cry harder and hug him tighter.

We sit like this forever. Eventually, when I'm all cried out, Christian staggers to his feet, holding me, and carries me into his room where he lays me down in the bed. In a few seconds he's beside me and the lights are off. He pulls me into his arms, hugging me tightly, and I finally drift off into a dark and troubled sleep.

I AWAKE WITH A jolt. My head is fuzzy and I'm too warm. Christian is wrapped around me like a vine. He grumbles in his sleep as I slip out of his arms, but he doesn't wake. Sitting up, I glance at the alarm clock. It's three in the morning. I need an Advil and a drink. I swing my legs out of bed and make my way to the kitchen in the great room.

In the fridge I find a carton of orange juice and pour myself a glass. Mmm … it's delicious, and my fuzzy head eases immediately. I hunt through the cupboards looking for some painkillers and eventually come across a plastic box full of meds. I sink two Advil and pour myself another orange juice.

Wandering to the great wall of glass, I look out on a sleeping Seattle. The lights twinkle and wink beneath Christian's castle in the sky, or should I say fortress? I press my forehead against the cool window—it's a relief. I have so much to think about after all the revelations of yesterday. I place my back against the glass and slide down onto the floor. The great room is cavernous in the dark, the only light coming from the three lamps above the kitchen island.

Could I live here, married to Christian? After all that he's done here? All the history this place holds for him?

Marriage. It's almost unbelievable and completely unexpected. But then, everything about Christian is unexpected. My lips smirk with irony of this

reality. Christian Grey, expect the unexpected—fifty shades of fucked-up.

My smile fades. I look like his mother. This wounds me deeply, and the air leaves my lungs in a rush. We all look like his mom.

How the hell do I move on from the disclosure of that little secret? No wonder he didn't want to tell me. But certainly he can't remember much of his mother. I wonder once more if I should talk to Dr. Flynn. Would Christian let me? Perhaps he could fill in the gaps.

I shake my head. I feel world-weary, but I'm enjoying the calm serenity of the great room and its beautiful works of art—cold and austere, but in their own way, still beautiful in the shadows and surely worth a fortune. Could I live here? For better, for worse? In sickness and in health? I close my eyes, lean my head back against the glass, and take a deep, cleansing breath.

The peaceful tranquility is shattered by a visceral, primeval cry that makes every single hair on my body stand to attention. *Christian! Holy fuck—what's happened?* I am on my feet, running back to the bedroom before the echoes of that horrible sound have died away, my heart thumping with fear.

I flip one of the light switches, and Christian's bedside light comes to life. He's tossing and turning, writhing in agony. *No!* He cries out again, and the eerie, devastating sound lances through me anew.

Shit—a nightmare!

"Christian!" I lean over him, grab his shoulders, and shake him awake. He opens his eyes, and they are wild and vacant, scanning quickly around the empty room before coming back to rest on me.

"You left, you left, you must have left," he mumbles—his wide-eyed stare becoming accusatory—and he looks so lost, it wrenches at my heart. Poor Fifty.

"I'm here." I sit down on the bed beside him. "I'm here," I murmur softly in an effort to reassure him. I reach out to place my palm on the side of his face, trying to soothe him.

"You were gone," he whispers rapidly. His eyes are still wild and frightened, but he seems to be calming.

"I went to get a drink. I was thirsty."

He closes his eyes and rubs his face. When he opens them again, he looks so desolate.

"You're here. Oh, thank God." He reaches for me, and grabbing me tightly, he pulls me down on the bed beside him.

"I just went for a drink," I murmur.

*Oh, the intensity of his fear … I can feel it.* His T-shirt is drenched in sweat, and his heart is pounding as he hugs me close. He's gazing at me as if reassuring himself that I am really here. I gently stroke his hair and then his cheek.

“Christian, please. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere,” I say soothingly.

“Oh, Ana,” he breathes. He grasps my chin to hold me in place, and then his mouth is on mine. Desire sweeps through him, and unbidden my body responds—it’s so tied and attuned to him. His lips are at my ear, my throat, then back at my mouth, his teeth gently pulling at my lower lip, his hand traveling up my body from my hip to my breast, dragging my T-shirt up. Caressing me, feeling his way through the dips and shallows of my skin, he elicits the same familiar reaction, his touch sending shivers through me. I moan as his hand cups my breast and his fingers tighten over my nipple.

“I want you,” he murmurs.

“I’m here for you. Only you, Christian.”

He groans and kisses me once more, passionately, with a fervor and desperation I’ve not felt from him before. Grabbing the hem of his T-shirt, I tug and he helps me pull it off over his head. Kneeling between my legs, he hastily pulls me upright and drags my T-shirt off.

His eyes are serious, wanting, full of dark secrets—exposed. He cups his hands around my face and kisses me, and we sink down into the bed once more, his thigh between both of mine so that he’s half lying on top of me. His erection is rigid against my hip through his boxer briefs. He wants me, but his words from earlier choose this moment to come back and haunt me, what he said about his mother. And it’s like a bucket of cold water on my libido. Fuck. I can’t do this. Not now.

“Christian … Stop. I can’t do this,” I whisper urgently against his mouth, my hands pushing on his upper arms.

“What? What’s wrong?” he murmurs and starts kissing my neck, running the tip of his tongue lightly down my throat. *Oh* …

“No, please. I can’t do this, not now. I need some time, please.”

“Oh, Ana, don’t overthink this,” he whispers as he nips my earlobe.

“Ah!” I gasp, feeling it in my groin, and my body bows, betraying me. This is so confusing.

“I am just the same, Ana. I love you and I need you. Touch me. Please.” He rubs his nose against mine, and his quiet heartfelt plea moves me and I melt.

*Touch him. Touch him while we make love. Oh my.*

He rears up over me, gazing down, and in the half-light from the dimmed bedside light, I can tell that he’s waiting for my decision, and he’s caught in my spell.

I reach up and tentatively place my hand on the soft patch of hair over his sternum. He gasps and scrunches his eyes closed as if in pain, but I don’t take my hand away this time. I move it up to his shoulders, feeling the tremor run

through him. He groans, and I pull him down to me and place both my hands on his back, where I've never touched him before, on his shoulder blades, holding him to me. His strangled moan arouses me like nothing else.

He buries his head in my neck, kissing and sucking and biting me, before trailing his nose up my chin and kissing me, his tongue possessing my mouth, his hands moving over my body once more. His lips move down … down … down to my breasts, worshipping as they go, and my hands stay on his shoulders and his back, enjoying the flex and ripple of his finely honed muscles, his skin still damp from his nightmare. His lips close over my nipple, pulling and tugging, so that it rises to greet his glorious skilled mouth.

I groan and run my fingernails across his back. And he gasps, a strangled moan.

"Oh, fuck, Ana," he chokes, and it's a half cry, half groan. It tears at my heart, but also deep inside me, tightening all the muscles below my waist. Oh, what I can do to him! I'm panting now, matching his tortured breaths with my own.

His hand travels south, over my belly, down to my sex—and his fingers are on me, then in me. I groan as he moves his fingers around inside me, in that way, and I push my pelvis up to welcome his touch.

"Ana," he breathes. He suddenly releases me and sits up; he removes his boxer briefs and leans over to the bedside table to grab a foil packet. His eyes are a blazing gray as he passes me the condom. "You want to do this? You can still say no. You can always say no," he murmurs.

"Don't give me a chance to think, Christian. I want you, too." I rip the packet open with my teeth as he kneels between my legs, and with trembling fingers I slide it onto him.

"Steady," he says. "You are going to unman me, Ana."

I marvel at what I can do to this man with my touch. He stretches out over me, and for now my doubts are pushed down and locked away in the dark, scary depths at the back of my mind. I'm intoxicated with this man, my man, my Fifty Shades. He shifts suddenly, completely taking me by surprise, so I am on top. *Whoa*.

"You—take me," he murmurs, his eyes glowing with a feral intensity.

Oh my. Slowly, oh so slowly, I sink down onto him. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes as he groans. I grab his hands and start to move, reveling in the fullness of my possession, reveling in his reaction, watching him unravel beneath me. I feel like a goddess. I lean down and kiss his chin, running my teeth along his stubbled jaw. He tastes delicious. He clasps my hips and steadies my rhythm, slow and easy.

"Ana, touch me … please."

*Oh*. I lean forward and steady myself with my hands on his chest. And he calls out, his cry almost a sob, and he thrusts deep inside me.

"Ahh," I whimper and run my fingernails gently over his chest, through the hair there, and he groans loudly and twists abruptly so I am once more beneath him.

"Enough." He moans. "No more, please." And it's a heartfelt plea.

Reaching up, I clasp his face in my hands, feeling the dampness on his cheeks, and pull him down to my lips so that I can kiss him. I curl my hands around his back.

He groans deep and low in his throat as he moves inside me, pushing me onward and upward, but I can't find my release. My head is too cloudy with issues. I am too wrapped up in him.

"Let go, Ana," he urges me.

"No."

"Yes," he snarls. He shifts slightly and gyrates his hips, again and again.

*Jeez … argh!*

"Come on baby, I need this. Give it to me."

And I explode, my body a slave to his, and wrap myself around him, clinging to him like a vine as he cries out my name, and climaxes with me, then collapses, his full weight pressing me into the mattress.

---

I CRADLE CHRISTIAN IN my arms, his head on my chest, as we lie in the afterglow of our lovemaking. I run my fingers through his hair as I listen to his breathing return to normal.

"Don't ever leave me," he whispers, and I roll my eyes in the full knowledge that he can't see me.

"I know you're rolling your eyes at me," he murmurs, and I hear the trace of humor in his voice.

"You know me well," I murmur.

"I'd like to know you better."

"Back at you, Grey. What was your nightmare about?"

"The usual."

"Tell me."

He swallows and tenses before he issues a drawn-out sigh. "I must be about three, and the crack whore's pimp is mad as hell again. He smokes and smokes, one cigarette after another, and he can't find an ashtray." He stops, and I freeze as a creeping chill grips my heart.

"It hurt," he says, "It's the pain I remember. That's what gives me nightmares.

That, and the fact that she did nothing to stop him."

Oh no. This is unbearable. I tighten my grip around him, my legs and arms holding him to me, and I try not to let my despair choke me. How could anyone treat a child like that? He raises his head and pins me with his intense gray gaze.

"You're not like her. Don't ever think that. Please."

I blink back at him. It's very reassuring to hear. He puts his head on my chest again, and I think he's finished, but he surprises me by continuing.

"Sometimes in the dreams she's just lying on the floor. And I think she's asleep. But she doesn't move. She never moves. And I'm hungry. Really hungry."

*Oh, fuck.*

"There's a loud noise and he's back, and he hits me so hard, cursing the crack whore. His first reaction was always to use his fists or his belt."

"Is that why you don't like to be touched?"

He closes his eyes and hugs me tighter. "That's complicated," he murmurs. He nuzzles me between my breasts, inhaling deeply, trying to distract me.

"Tell me," I prompt.

He sighs. "She didn't love me. I didn't love me. The only touch I knew was … harsh. It stemmed from there. Flynn explains it better than I can."

"Can I see Flynn?"

He raises his head to look at me. "Fifty Shades rubbing off on you?"

"And then some. I like how it's rubbing off right now." I wriggle provocatively underneath him and he smiles.

"Yes, Miss Steele, I like that, too." He leans up and kisses me. He gazes at me for a moment.

"You are so precious to me, Ana. I was serious about marrying you. We can get to know each other then. I can look after you. You can look after me. We can have kids if you want. I will lay my world at your feet, Anastasia. I want you, body and soul, forever. Please think about it."

"I will think about it, Christian. I will," I reassure him, reeling once more. *Kids? Jeez.* "I'd really like to talk to Dr. Flynn, though, if you don't mind."

"Anything for you, baby. Anything. When would you like to see him?"

"Sooner rather than later."

"Okay. I'll make the arrangements in the morning." He glances at the clock. "It's late. We should sleep." He shifts to switch off his bedside light and pulls me against him.

I glance at the alarm clock. Crap, it's three forty-five.

He curls his arms around me, his front to my back, and nuzzles my neck. "I love you, Ana Steele, and I want you by my side, always," he murmurs as he

kisses my neck. “Now go to sleep.”

I close my eyes.

---

RELUCTANTLY, I OPEN MY heavy eyelids and bright light fills the room. I groan. I feel cloudy, disconnected from my leaden limbs, and Christian is wrapped around me like ivy. As usual, I’m too warm. It can’t be later than five in the morning; the alarm has not gone off yet. I stretch out to free myself from his heat, turning in his arms, and he mumbles something unintelligible in his sleep. I glance at the clock. Eight forty-five.

Shit, I’m going to be late. *Fuck*. I scramble out of bed and dash to the bathroom. I am showered and out within four minutes.

Christian sits up in bed watching me with ill-concealed amusement coupled with wariness as I continue to dry myself while gathering my clothes. Perhaps he’s waiting for me to react to yesterday’s revelations. Right now, I just don’t have time.

I check my clothes—black slacks, black shirt—all a bit Mrs. R, but I don’t have a second to change my mind. I hastily don black bra and panties, conscious that he’s watching my every move. It’s … unnerving. The panties and bra will do.

“You look good,” Christian purrs from the bed. “You can call in sick, you know.” He gives me his devastating, lopsided, 150 percent panty-busting smile. Oh, he’s so tempting. My inner goddess pouts provocatively at me.

“No, Christian, I can’t. I am not a megalomaniac CEO with a beautiful smile who can come and go as he pleases.”

“I like to come as I please.” He smirks and cranks his glorious smile up another notch so it’s in full HD IMAX.

“Christian!” I scold. I throw my towel at him and he laughs.

“Beautiful smile, huh?”

“Yes. You know the effect you have on me.” I put on my watch.

“Do I?” he blinks innocently.

“Yes, you do. The same effect you have on all women. Gets really tiresome, watching them all swoon.”

“Does it?” He cocks his eyebrow at me, more amused.

“Don’t play the innocent, Mr. Grey, it really doesn’t suit you,” I mutter distractedly as I scoop my hair into a ponytail and pull on my black high-heeled shoes. There, that will do.

When I bend to kiss him good-bye, he grabs me and pulls me down onto the bed, leaning over me and smiling from ear to ear. *Oh my*. He’s so beautiful—

eyes bright with mischief, floppy just-fucked-again hair, that dazzling smile. Now he's playful.

I'm tired, still reeling from all the disclosures of yesterday, while he's bright as a button and sexy as fuck. Oh, exasperating

Fifty.

"What can I do to tempt you to stay?" he says softly, and my heart skips a beat and begins to pound. He is temptation personified.

"You can't," I grumble, struggling to sit back up. "Let me go."

He pouts and I give up. Grinning, I trace my fingers over his sculptured lips—my Fifty Shades. I love him so in all his monumental, fuckedupness. I haven't even begun to process yesterday's events and how I feel about them.

I lean up to kiss him, thankful that I have brushed my teeth. He kisses me long and hard and then swiftly sets me on my feet, leaving me dazed, breathless, and slightly wobbly.

"Taylor will take you. Quicker than finding somewhere to park. He's waiting outside the building," Christian says kindly, and he seems relieved. Is he worried about my reaction this morning? Surely last night—er, this morning—proved that I am not going to run.

"Okay. Thank you," I mutter, disappointed that I am upright on my feet, confused by his hesitancy, and vaguely irritated that once again I won't be driving my Saab. But he's right, of course—it will be quicker with Taylor.

"Enjoy your lazy morning, Mr. Grey. I wish I could stay, but the man who owns the company I work for would not approve of his staff ditching just for hot sex." I grab my purse.

"Personally, Miss Steele, I have no doubt that he would approve. In fact he might insist on it."

"Why are you staying in bed? It's not like you."

He crosses his hands behind his head and grins at me.

"Because I can, Miss Steele."

I shake my head at him. "Laters, baby." I blow him a kiss, and I am out the door.

TAYLOR IS WAITING FOR me, and he seems to understand that I am late because he drives like a bat out of hell to get me to work by nine fifteen. I am grateful when he pulls up at the curb—grateful to be alive–his driving was scary. And grateful that I am not hideously late—only fifteen minutes.

"Thank you, Taylor," I mutter, ashen-faced. I remember Christian telling me he drove tanks; maybe he drives for NASCAR, too.

"Ana." He nods a farewell, and I dash into my office, realizing as I open the

door to Reception that Taylor seems to have overcome the Miss Steele formality. It makes me smile.

Claire grins at me as I rush through Reception and make my way to my desk.

“Ana!” Jack calls me. “Get in here.”

*Oh, shit.*

“What time do you call this?” he snaps.

“I’m sorry. I overslept.” I flush crimson.

“Don’t let it happen again. Fix me some coffee, and then I need you to do some letters. Jump to it,” he shouts, making me flinch.

Why is he so mad? What’s his problem? What have I done? I hurry to the kitchen to fix his coffee. Maybe I should have ditched. I could be … well, doing something hot with Christian, or having breakfast with him, or just talking—that would be novel.

Jack barely acknowledges my presence when I venture back into his office to deliver his coffee. He thrusts a sheet of paper at me—it’s handwritten in a barely legible scrawl.

“Type this up, have me sign, then copy and mail it to all our authors.”

“Yes, Jack.”

He doesn’t look up as I leave. Boy, is he mad.

It is with some relief that I finally sit down at my desk. I take a sip of tea as I wait for my computer to boot up. I check my e-mails.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Missing you

**Date:** June 15 2011 09:05

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Please use your BlackBerry.

x

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** All Right for Some

**Date:** June 15 2011 09:27

**To:** Christian Grey

My boss is mad.

I blame you for keeping me up late with your … shenanigans.

You should be ashamed of yourself.

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Shenaniwhatagans?
**Date:** June 15 2011 09:32
**To:** Anastasia Steele

You don't have to work, Anastasia.

You have no idea how appalled I am at my shenanigans.

But I like keeping you up late ;)

Please use your BlackBerry.

Oh, and marry me, please.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Living to make
**Date:** June 15 2011 09:35
**To:** Christian Grey

I know your natural inclination is toward nagging, but just stop.

I need to talk to your shrink.

Only then will I give you my answer.

I am not opposed to living in sin.

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** BLACKBERRY
**Date:** June 15 2011 09:40
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Anastasia, if you are going to start discussing Dr. Flynn, then USE YOUR BLACKBERRY.

This is not a request.

Christian Grey,
Now Pissed CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh shit. Now he's mad at me, too. Well, he can stew for all I care. I take my BlackBerry out of my purse and eye it with skepticism. As I do, it starts ringing. Can't he leave me alone?

"Yes," I snap.

"Ana, hi—"

"José! How are you?" Oh, it's good to hear his voice.

"I'm fine, Ana. Look, are you still seeing that Grey guy?"

"Er—yes … Why?" Where is he going with this?

"Well, he's bought all your photos, and I thought I could deliver them up to Seattle. The exhibition closes Thursday, so I could bring them up Friday evening and drop them off, you know. And maybe we could catch a drink or something. Actually, I was hoping for a place to crash, too."

"José, that's cool. Yeah, I'm sure we could work something out. Let me talk to Christian and call you back, okay?"

"Cool, I'll wait to hear from you. Bye, Ana."

"Bye." And he's gone.

Holy cow. I haven't seen or heard from José since his show. I didn't even ask him how it went or if he sold any more pictures. Some friend I am.

So, I could spend the evening with José on Friday. How will Christian like that? I become aware that I am biting my lip till it hurts. Oh, that man has double standards. He can—I shudder at the thought—bathe his batshit ex-lover, but I will probably get a truckload of grief for wanting to have a drink with José. How am I going to handle this?

"Ana!" Jack pulls me abruptly out of my reverie. Is he still mad? "Where's that letter?"

"Er—coming." Shit. What is eating him?

I type up his letter in double-quick time, print it out, and nervously make my way into his office.

"Here you go." I place it on his desk and turn to leave. Jack quickly casts his critical, piercing eyes over it.

"I don't know what you're doing out there, but I pay you to work," he barks.

“I’m aware of that, Jack,” I mutter apologetically. I feel a slow flush creep up my skin.

“This is full of mistakes,” he snaps. “Do it again.”

Fuck. He’s beginning to sound like someone I know, but rudeness from Christian I can tolerate. Jack is beginning to piss me off.

“And get me another coffee while you’re at it.”

“Sorry,” I whisper and scurry out of his office as quickly as I can.

Holy fuck. He’s being unbearable. I sit back down at my desk, hastily redo his letter, which had two mistakes in it, and check it thoroughly before printing. Now it’s perfect. I fetch him another coffee, letting Claire know with a roll of my eyes that I am in deep doo-doo. Taking a deep breath, I approach his office again.

“Better,” he mumbles reluctantly as he signs the letter. “Photocopy it, file the original, and mail out to all authors. Understand?”

“Yes.” I am not an idiot. “Jack, is there something wrong?”

He glances up, his blue eyes darkening as his gaze runs up and down my body. My blood chills.

“No.” His answer is concise, rude, and dismissive. I stand there like the idiot I professed not to be and then shuffle back out of his office. Perhaps he, too, suffers from a personality disorder. Sheesh, I’m surrounded by them. I make my way to the copy machine—which, of course, is suffering from a paper jam—and when I’ve fixed it, I find it’s out of paper. This is not my day.

When I am finally back at my desk, stuffing envelopes, my BlackBerry buzzes. I can see through the glass wall that Jack is on the phone. I answer—it’s Ethan.

“Hi, Ana. How’d it go last night?”

Last night. A quick montage of images flashes through my mind—Christian kneeling, his revelation, his proposal, macaroni and cheese, my weeping, his nightmare, *the sex*, touching him …

“Eh … fine,” I mutter unconvincingly.

Ethan pauses and decides to collude in my denial. “Cool. Can I pick up the keys?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll be over in about half an hour. Will you have time to grab a coffee?”

“Not today. I was late getting in, and my boss is like an angry bear with a sore head and poison ivy up his ass.”

“Sounds nasty.”

“Nasty and ugly.” I giggle.

Ethan laughs and my mood lifts a little. “Okay. See you in thirty.” He hangs

up.

I glance up at Jack and he's staring at me. Oh, shit. I studiously ignore him and continue to stuff envelopes.

Half an hour later my phone buzzes. It's Claire. "He's here again, in Reception. The blond god."

Ethan is a joy to see after all the angst of yesterday and the bad temper my boss is inflicting on me today, but all too soon, he's saying good-bye.

"Will I see you this evening?"

"I'll probably stay with Christian." I flush.

"You have got it bad," Ethan observes good-naturedly.

I shrug. That's not the half of it, and in that moment I realize, I have it more than bad. I have it for life. And amazingly, Christian seems to feel the same. Ethan gives me a swift hug.

"Laters, Ana."

I return to my desk, wrestling with my realization. Oh, what I would do for a day on my own, to just think all this through.

"Where have you been?" Jack is suddenly looming over me.

"I had some business to attend to in Reception." He is really getting on my nerves.

"I want my lunch. The usual," he says abruptly and stomps back into his office.

*Why didn't I stay home with Christian?* My inner goddess crosses her arms and purses her lips; she wants to know the answer to that one, too. Picking up my purse and my BlackBerry, I head for the door. I check my messages.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Missing you

**Date:** June 15 2011 09:06

**To:** Anastasia Steele

My bed is too big without you.

Looks like I'll have to go to work after all.

Even megalomaniac CEOs need something to do.

x

Christian Grey

Twiddling His Thumbs CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

And there’s another from him, from later this morning.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Discretion
**Date:** June 15 2011 09:50
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Is the better part of valor.

Please use discretion … your work e-mails are monitored.

HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU THIS?

Yes. Shouty capitals as you say. USE YOUR BLACKBERRY.

Dr. Flynn can see us tomorrow evening.

x

Christian Grey,
Still Pissed CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

And an even later one … Oh no.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Crickets
**Date:** June 15 2011 12:15
**To:** Anastasia Steele

I haven’t heard from you.

Please tell me you are okay.

You know how I worry.

I will send Taylor to check!

x

Christian Grey,
Overanxious CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I roll my eyes, and call him. I don’t want him to worry.

“Christian Grey’s phone, Andrea Parker speaking.”

Oh. I am so disconcerted that it’s not Christian who answers that it halts me in the street, and the young man behind me mutters angrily as he swerves to avoid bumping into me. I stand under the green awning of the deli.

“Hello? Can I help you?” Andrea fills the void of awkward silence.

“Sorry … Er … I was hoping to speak to Christian—”

“Mr. Grey is in a meeting at this time.” She bristles with efficiency. “Can I take a message?”

“Can you tell him Ana called?”

“Ana? As in Anastasia Steele?”

“Er … Yes.” Her question confuses me.

“Hold one second please, Miss Steele.”

I listen attentively as she puts the phone down, but I can’t tell what’s going on. A few seconds later Christian is on the line. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

He releases his held breath, relieved.

“Christian, why wouldn’t I be okay?” I whisper reassuringly.

“You’re normally so quick at responding to my e-mails. After what I told you yesterday, I was worried,” he says quietly, and then he’s talking to someone in his office.

“No, Andrea. Tell them to wait,” he says sternly. Oh, I know that tone of voice.

I can’t hear Andrea’s response.

“No. I said wait,” he snaps.

“Christian, you’re obviously busy. I only called to let you know that I’m okay, and I mean that—just very busy today. Jack has been cracking the whip. Er … I mean …” I flush and fall silent.

Christian says nothing for a minute.

“Cracking the whip, eh? Well, there was a time when I would have called him a lucky man.” His voice is full of dry humor. “Don’t let him get on top of you, baby.”

“Christian!” I scold him and I know he’s grinning.

“Just watch him, that’s all. Look, I’m glad you’re okay. What time should I pick you up?”

“I’ll e-mail you.”

“From your BlackBerry,” he says sternly.

“Yes, Sir,” I snap back.

“Laters, baby.”

“Bye …”

He’s still hanging on.

“Hang up,” I scold, smiling.

He sighs heavily down the phone. “I wish you’d never gone to work this morning.”

“Me, too. But I am busy. Hang up.”

“You hang up.” I hear his smile. Oh, playful Christian. I love playful Christian. Hmm … I love Christian, period.

“We’ve been here before.”

“You’re biting your lip.”

Shit, he’s right. How does he know?

“You see, you think I don’t know you, Anastasia. But I know you better than you think,” he murmurs seductively in that way that makes me weak, and wet.

“Christian, I’ll talk to you later. Right now, I really wish I hadn’t left this morning, too.”

“I’ll wait for your e-mail, Miss Steele.”

“Good day, Mr. Grey.”

Hanging up, I lean against the cold, hard glass of the deli store window. Oh my, even on the phone he owns me. Shaking my head to clear it of all thoughts Grey, I head into the deli, depressed by all thoughts Jack.

HE IS SCOWLING WHEN I get back.

“Is it okay if I go to lunch now?” I ask tentatively. He gazes up at me and his scowl deepens.

“If you must,” he snaps. “Forty-five minutes. Make up the time you lost this morning.”

“Jack, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“You seem kind of out of sorts today. Have I done something to offend you?”

He blinks at me momentarily. “I don’t think I’m in the mood to list your misdemeanors right now. I’m busy.” He continues to stare at his computer screen, effectively dismissing me.

*Whoa … What have I done?*

I turn and leave his office, and for a minute I think I’m going to cry. Why has he taken such a sudden and intense dislike to me? A very unwelcome idea pops into my head, but I ignore it. I don’t need his shit right now—I have enough of my own.

I head out of the building to the nearby Starbucks, order a latte, and sit down in the window. Taking my iPod from my purse, I plug my headphones in. I choose a song haphazardly and press “repeat” so it will play over and over again.

I need music to think by.

My mind drifts. Christian the sadist. Christian the submissive. Christian the untouchable. Christian's Oedipal impulses. Christian bathing Leila. I groan and close my eyes while that last image haunts me.

Can I really marry this man? He's so much to take in. He's complex and difficult, but deep down I know I don't want to leave him despite all his issues. I could never leave him. I love him. It would be like cutting off my right arm.

Right now, I have never felt so alive, so vital. I've encountered all manner of perplexing, profound feelings and new experiences since I met him. It's never a dull moment with Fifty.

Looking back on my life before Christian, it's as if everything was in black and white, like José's pictures. Now my whole world is in rich, bright, saturated color. I am soaring in a beam of dazzling light, Christian's dazzling light. I am still Icarus, flying too close to his sun. I snort to myself. Flying with Christian—who can resist a man who can fly?

Can I give him up? Do I want to give him up? It's as if he's flipped a switch and lit me up from within. It's been an education knowing him. I have discovered more about myself in the last few weeks than ever before. I've learned about my body, my hard limits, my soft limits, my tolerance, my patience, my compassion, and my capacity for love.

And it strikes me like a thunderbolt—that's what he needs from me, what he's entitled to—unconditional love. He never received it from the crack whore—it's what he needs. Can I love him unconditionally? Can I accept him for who he is regardless of his revelations last night?

I know he's damaged, but I don't think he's irredeemable. I sigh, recalling Taylor's words. *"He's a good man, Miss Steele."*

I've seen the weighty evidence of his goodness—his charity work, his business ethics, his generosity—and yet he doesn't see it in himself. He doesn't feel deserving of any love. Given his history and his predilections, I have an inkling of his self-loathing—that's why he's never let anyone in. *Can I get past this?*

He said once that I couldn't begin to understand the depths of his depravity. Well, he's told me now, and given the first few years of his life, it doesn't surprise me … though it was still a shock to hear it out loud. At least he's told me—and he seems happier now that he has. I know everything.

Does it devalue his love for me? No, I don't think so. He's never felt this way before and neither have I. We've both come so far.

Tears prick and pool in my eyes as I recall his final barriers crumbling last night when he let me touch him. And it took Leila and all her craziness to get us

to there.

Perhaps I should be grateful. The fact that he bathed her is not quite such a bitter taste on my tongue now. I wonder which clothes he gave her. I hope it wasn't the plum dress. I liked that.

So can I love this man with all his issues unconditionally? Because he deserves nothing less. He still needs to learn boundaries and little things like empathy, and to be less controlling. He says he no longer feels the compulsion to hurt me; perhaps Dr. Flynn will be able to cast some light on that.

Fundamentally, that's what concerns me most—that he needs that and has always found like-minded women who need it, too. I frown. Yes, this is the reassurance I need. I want to be all things to this man, his Alpha and his Omega and everything in between, because he is all things to me.

I hope Flynn will have the answers, and maybe then I can say yes. Christian and I can find our own slice of heaven close to the sun.

I gaze out at bustling, lunchtime Seattle. Mrs. Christian Grey—who would have thought? I glance at my watch. *Shit!* I leap up from my seat and dash to the door—a whole hour of just sitting—where did the time go? Jack is going to go ballistic!

I SLINK BACK TO my desk. Fortunately he's not in his office. It looks like I've gotten away with it. I gaze intently at my computer screen, unseeing, trying to reassemble my thoughts into work mode.

"Where were you?"

I jump. Jack is standing, arms crossed, behind me.

"I was in the basement, photocopying," I lie. Jack's lips press into a thin, uncompromising line.

"I'm leaving for my plane at six thirty. I need you to stay until then."

"Okay." I smile as sweetly as I can manage.

"I'd like my itinerary for New York printed out and photocopied ten times. And get the brochures packaged up. And get me some coffee!" he snarls and stalks into his office.

I breathe a sigh of relief and stick my tongue out at him as he closes the door. Bastard.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK, CLAIRE rings from Reception.

"I have Mia Grey on the line for you."

Mia? I hope she doesn't want to hang at the mall.

"Hi, Mia!"

"Ana, hi. How are you?" Her excitement is stifling.

“Good. Busy today. You?”

“I am so bored! I need to find something to do, so I’m arranging a birthday party for Christian.”

Christian’s birthday? Jeez, I had no idea. “When is it?”

“I knew it. I knew he wouldn’t tell you. It’s on Saturday. Mom and Dad want everyone over for a meal to celebrate. I’m officially inviting you.”

“Oh, that’s lovely. Thank you, Mia.”

“I’ve already called Christian and told him, and he gave me your number here.”

“Cool.” My mind is in a flat spin—what the hell am I going to get Christian for his birthday? What do you buy the man who has everything?

“And maybe sometime next week we can go out for lunch?”

“Sure. How about tomorrow? My boss is away in New York.”

“Oh, that would be cool, Ana. What time?”

“Twelve forty-five?”

“I’ll be there. Bye, Ana.”

“Bye.” I hang up.

Christian. Birthday. What on earth should I get him?

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Antediluvian

**Date:** June 15 2011 16:11

**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

When, exactly, were you going to tell me?

What shall I get my old man for his birthday?

Perhaps some new batteries for his hearing aid?

A x

Anastasia Steele

Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Prehistoric

**Date:** June 15 2011 16:20

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Don’t mock the elderly.

Glad you are alive and kicking.

And that Mia has been in touch.

Batteries are always useful.

I don’t like celebrating my birthday.

x

Christian Grey,
Deaf as a Post CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Hmmm.
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:24
**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

I can imagine you pouting as you wrote that last sentence.

That does things to me. A xox

Anastasia Steele
Assistant to Jack Hyde, Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Rolling Eyes
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:29
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele

WILL YOU USE YOUR BLACKBERRY!!!

x

Christian Grey,
Twitchy Palmed, CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I roll my eyes. Why is he so touchy about e-mails?

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Inspiration
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:33
**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

Ah … your twitchy palms can't stay still for long, can they?

I wonder what Dr. Flynn would say about that?

But now I know what to give you for your birthday—and I hope it makes me sore …

;)

A x

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Angina
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:38
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Miss Steele

I don't think my heart could stand the strain of another e-mail like that, or my pants for that matter.

Behave.

x

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Trying
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:42
**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

I am trying to work for my very trying boss.

Please stop bothering me and being trying yourself.

Your last e-mail nearly made me combust.

x

PS: Can you pick me up at 6:30?

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** I'll Be There
**Date:** June 15 2011 16:47
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Nothing would give me greater pleasure.

Actually, I can think of any of number of things that would give me greater pleasure, and they all involve you.

x

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I flush reading his response and shake my head. E-mail banter is all well and good, but we really need to talk. Perhaps once we've seen Flynn. I put my BlackBerry down and finish my petty cash reconciliation.

BY SIX FIFTEEN, THE office is deserted. I have everything ready for Jack. His cab to the airport is booked, and I just have to hand him his documents. I glance anxiously through the glass, but he's still deep in his telephone call, and I don't want to interrupt him—not in the mood he's in today.

As I wait for him to finish, it occurs to me that I have not eaten today. Oh shit, that's not going to go down well with Fifty. I quickly skip down to the kitchen to see if there are any cookies left.

As I'm opening the communal cookie jar, Jack appears unexpectedly in the kitchen doorway, startling me.

*Oh. What's he doing here?*

He stares at me. "Well, Ana, I think this might be a good time to discuss your misdemeanors." He steps in, closing the door behind him, and my mouth instantly dries as alarm bells ring loud and piercing in my head.

*Oh, fuck.*

His lips twitch into a grotesque smile, and his eyes gleam deep, dark cobalt.

“At last, I have you on your own,” he says, and he slowly licks his lower lip.

*What?*

“Now … are you going to be a good girl and listen very carefully to what I say?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jack's eyes flash the darkest blue, and he sneers as he casts a leering look down my body.

Fear chokes me. What is this? What does he want? From somewhere deep inside and despite my dry mouth, I find the resolve and courage to squeeze out some words, my self-defense class "Keep them talking" mantra circling my brain like an ethereal sentinel.

"Jack, now might not be a good time for this. Your cab is due in ten minutes, and I need to give you all your documents." My voice is quiet but hoarse, betraying me.

He smiles, and it's a despotic fuck-you smile that finally touches his eyes. They glint in the harsh fluorescent glow of the strip light above us in the drab windowless room. He takes a step toward me, glaring, his eyes never leaving mine. His pupils are dilating as I watch—the black eclipsing the blue. Oh no. My fear escalates.

"You know I had to fight with Elizabeth to give you this job …" His voice trails off as he takes another step toward me, and I step back against the dingy wall cupboards. *Keep him talking, keep him talking, keep him talking.*

"Jack, what exactly is your problem? If you want to air your grievances, then perhaps we should ask HR to get involved. We could do this with Elizabeth in a more formal setting."

Where is Security? Are they in the building yet?

"We don't need HR to overmanage this situation, Ana." He sneers. "When I hired you, I thought you would be a hard worker. I thought you had potential. But now, I don't know. You've become distracted and sloppy. And I wondered … is it your *boyfriend* who's leading you astray?" He says "boyfriend" with chilling contempt.

"I decided to check through your e-mail account to see if I could find any clues. And you know what I found, Ana? What was out of place? The only personal e-mails in your account were to your hotshot boyfriend." He pauses, assessing my reaction. "And I got to thinking … where are the e-mails from him? There are none. Nada. Nothing. So what's going on, Ana? How come his

e-mails to you aren't on our system? Are you some company spy, planted in here by Grey's organization? Is that what this is?"

Holy shit, the e-mails. *Oh no*. What have I said?

"Jack, what are you talking about?" I try for bewildered, and I'm pretty convincing. This conversation is not going as I expected, and I don't trust him in the slightest. Some subliminal pheromone that Jack is exuding has me on high alert. This man is angry, volatile, and totally unpredictable. I try to reason with him.

"You just said that you had to persuade Elizabeth to hire me. So how could I be planted as a spy? Make up your mind, Jack."

"But Grey fucked the New York trip, didn't he?"

*Oh, shit*.

"How did he manage that, Ana? What did your rich, Ivy League boyfriend do?"

What little blood remains in my face drains away, and I think I'm going to faint. "I don't know what you're talking about, Jack," I whisper. "Your cab will be here shortly. Shall I fetch your things?" Oh, please, let me go. Stop this.

Jack continues, enjoying my discomfort. "And he thinks I'd make a pass at you?" He smirks and his eyes heat. "Well, I want you to think about something while I'm in New York. I gave you this job, and I expect you to show me some gratitude. In fact, I'm entitled to it. I had to fight to get you. Elizabeth wanted someone better qualified, but I—I saw something in you. So, we need to work out a deal. A deal where you keep me happy. D'you understand what I'm saying, Ana?"

*Fuck!*

"Look at it as refining your job description if you like. And if you keep me happy, I won't dig any further into how your boyfriend is pulling strings, milking his contacts, or cashing in some favor from one of his Ivy League frat-boy sycophants."

My mouth drops open. *He's blackmailing me. For sex!* And what can I say? News of Christian's takeover is embargoed for another three weeks. I can barely believe this. Sex—with me!

Jack moves closer until he's standing right in front of me, staring down into my eyes. His cloying sweet cologne invades my nostrils—it's nauseating—and if I'm not mistaken, the bitter stench of alcohol is on his breath. *Fuck, he's been drinking … when?*

"You are such a tight-assed, cock-blocking, prick tease, you know, Ana," he whispers through clenched teeth.

*What? Prick tease … Me?*

“Jack, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I whisper, as I feel the adrenaline surge through my body. He’s closer now. I am waiting to make my move. Ray will be proud. Ray taught me what to do. Ray knows his self-defense. If Jack touches me—if he even breathes too close to me—I will take him down. My breath is shallow. *I must not faint, I must not faint.*

“Look at you.” He gives me a leering look. “You’re so turned on, I can tell. You’ve really led me on. Deep down you want it. I know.”

*Holy fuck*. The man is completely delusional. My fear rises to DEFCON 1, threatening to overwhelm me. “No, Jack. I have never led you on.”

“You have, you prick-teasing bitch. I can read the signs.” Reaching up, he gently strokes my face with the back of his knuckles, down to my chin. His index finger strokes my throat, and my heart leaps into my mouth as I fight my gag reflex. He reaches the dip at the base of my neck, where the top button of my black shirt is open, and presses his hand against my chest.

“You want me. Admit it, Ana.”

Keeping my eyes firmly fixed on his and concentrating on what I have to do—rather than my mushrooming revulsion and dread—I place my hand gently over his in a caress. He smiles in triumph. I grab his little finger and twist it back, pulling it sharply down backward to his hip.

“Arrgh!” he cries out in pain and surprise, and as he leans off balance, I bring my knee, swift and hard, up into his groin, and make perfect contact with my goal. I dodge deftly to my left as his knees buckle, and he collapses with a groan onto the kitchen floor, grasping himself between his legs.

“Don’t you ever touch me again,” I snarl at him. “Your itinerary and the brochures are packaged on my desk. I am going home now. Have a nice trip. And in the future, get your own damn coffee.”

“You fucking bitch!” he half screams, half groans at me, but I am already out the door.

I run full tilt to my desk, grab my jacket and my purse, and dash to Reception, ignoring the moans and curses emanating from the bastard still prostrate on the kitchen floor. I burst out of the building and stop for a minute as the cool air hits my face. I take a deep breath and compose myself. But I haven’t eaten all day, and as the very unwelcome surge of adrenaline recedes, my legs give out beneath me and I sink to the ground.

I watch with mild detachment the slow motion movie that plays out in front of me: Christian and Taylor in dark suits and white shirts, leaping out of the waiting car and running toward me. Christian sinks to his knees at my side, and on some unconscious level, all I can think is: *He’s here. My love is here*.

“Ana, Ana! What’s wrong?” He scoops me into his lap, running his hands up

and down my arms, checking for any signs of injury. Grabbing my head between his hands, he stares with wide, terrified, gray eyes into mine. I sag against him, suddenly overwhelmed with relief and fatigue. Oh, Christian's arms. There is no place I'd rather be.

"Ana." He shakes me gently. "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

I shake my head as I realize I need to start communicating.

"Jack," I whisper, and I sense rather than see Christian's swift glance at Taylor, who abruptly disappears into the building.

"Fuck!" Christian enfolds me in his arms. "What did that sleazeball do to you?"

And from somewhere just the right side of crazy, a giggle bubbles in my throat. I recall Jack's utter shock as I grabbed his finger.

"It's what I did to him." I start giggling and I can't stop.

"Ana!" Christian shakes me again, and my giggling fit ceases. "Did he touch you?"

"Only once."

Christian's muscles bunch and tense as rage sweeps through him, and he stands up swiftly, powerfully—rock steady—with me in his arms. He's furious. *No!*

"Where is that fucker?"

From inside the building we hear muffled shouting. Christian sets me on my feet.

"Can you stand?"

I nod.

"Don't go in. Don't, Christian." Suddenly my fear is back, fear of what Christian will do to Jack.

"Get in the car," he barks at me.

"Christian, no." I grab his arm.

"Get in the goddamned car, Ana." He shakes me off.

"No! Please!" I plead with him. "Stay. Don't leave me on my own." I deploy my ultimate weapon.

Seething, Christian runs his hand through his hair and glares down at me, clearly wracked with indecision. The shouting inside the building escalates, and then stops suddenly.

*Oh no. What has Taylor done?*

Christian fishes out his BlackBerry.

"Christian, he has my e-mails."

"What?"

"My e-mails to you. He wanted to know where your e-mails to me were. He

was trying to blackmail me."

Christian's look is murderous.

*Oh, shit.*

"Fuck!" he splutters and narrows his eyes at me. He punches a number into his BlackBerry.

Oh no. I'm in trouble. Who's he calling?

"Barney. Grey. I need you to access the SIP main server and wipe all Anastasia Steele's e-mails to me. Then access the personal data files of Jack Hyde and check they aren't stored there. If they are, wipe them … Yes, all of them. Now. Let me know when it's done."

He stabs the "off" button then dials another number.

"Roach. Grey. Hyde—I want him out. Now. This minute. Call Security. Get him to clear his desk immediately, or I will liquidate this company first thing in the morning. You already have all the justification you need to give him his pink slip. Do you understand?" He listens briefly and hangs up, seemingly satisfied.

"BlackBerry," he hisses at me through clenched teeth.

"Please don't be mad at me." I blink up at him.

"I am so mad at you right now," he snarls and once more sweeps his hand through his hair. "Get in the car."

"Christian, please—"

"Get in the fucking car, Anastasia, or so help me I'll put you in there myself," he threatens, his eyes blazing with fury.

*Oh, shit.* "Don't do anything stupid, please," I beg.

*"STUPID!"* he explodes. "I told you to use your fucking BlackBerry. Don't talk to me about stupid. Get in the motherfucking car, Anastasia—*NOW!*" he snarls, and a frisson of fear runs through me. This is Very Angry Christian. I've not seen him this mad before. He's barely holding on to his self-control.

"Okay," I mutter, placating him. "But please, be careful."

Pressing his lips together in a hard line, he points angrily to the car, glaring at me.

*Jeez, okay, I get the message.*

"Please be careful. I don't want anything to happen to you. It would kill me," I murmur. He blinks rapidly and stills, lowering his arm while he takes a deep breath.

"I'll be careful," he says, his eyes softening. Oh, thank the Lord. His eyes burn into me as I head to the car, open the front passenger door, and climb in. Once I'm safely in the comfort of the Audi, he disappears into the building, and my heart leaps again into my throat. What's he planning to do?

I sit and wait. And wait. And wait. Five eternal minutes. Jack's cab pulls up in

front of the Audi. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Jeez, what are they doing in there, and how is Taylor? The wait is agonizing.

Twenty-five minutes later, Jack emerges from the building, clutching a cardboard storage box. Behind him is the security guard. Where was he earlier? And after them come Christian and Taylor. Jack looks sick. He heads straight for the cab, and I'm grateful for the Audi's heavily tinted windows so he cannot see me. The cab drives off—presumably not to Sea-Tac—as Christian and Taylor reach the car.

Opening the driver's door, Christian slides smoothly into the seat, presumably because I am in the front, and Taylor gets in behind me. Neither of them says a word as Christian starts the car and pulls out into the traffic. I risk a quick glance at Fifty. His mouth is set in a firm line, but he seems distracted. The car phone rings.

"Grey," Christian snaps.

"Mr. Grey, Barney here."

"Barney, I'm on speakerphone, and there are others in the car," Christian warns.

"Sir, it's all done. But I need to talk to you about what else I found on Mr. Hyde's computer."

"I'll call you when I reach my destination. And thanks, Barney."

"No problem, Mr. Grey."

Barney hangs up. He sounds much younger than I expected.

*What else is on Jack's computer?*

"Are you talking to me?" I ask quietly.

Christian glances at me, before fixing his eyes back on the road ahead, and I can tell he's still mad.

"No," he mutters sullenly.

Oh, there we go … how childish. I wrap my arms around myself and stare unseeing out the window. Perhaps I should just ask him to drop me off at my apartment; then he can "not talk" to me from the safety of Escala and save us both the inevitable quarrel. But even as I think it, I know I don't want to leave him to brood, not after yesterday.

Eventually we pull up in front of his apartment building, and Christian climbs out of the car. Moving with easy grace around to my side, he opens my door.

"Come," he orders as Taylor clambers into the driver's seat. I take his proffered hand and follow him through the grand foyer to the elevator. He doesn't let go of me.

"Christian, why are you so mad at me?" I whisper as we wait.

"You know why," he mutters as we step into the elevator, and he punches in

the code to his floor. “God, if something had happened to you, he’d be dead by now.” Christian’s tone chills me to the bone. The doors close.

“As it is, I’m going to ruin his career so he can’t take advantage of young women anymore, miserable excuse for a man that he is.” He shakes his head. “Jesus, Ana!” He grabs me suddenly, imprisoning me in the corner of the elevator.

His hands fist in my hair as he pulls my face up to his, and his mouth is on mine, a passionate desperation in his kiss. I don’t know why this takes me by surprise, but it does. I taste his relief, his longing, and his residual anger while his tongue possesses my mouth. He stops, gazing down at me, resting his weight against me so I can’t move. He leaves me breathless, clinging to him for support, staring up into that beautiful face etched with determination and without any trace of humor.

“If anything had happened to you … If he’d harmed you …” I feel the shudder that runs through him. “BlackBerry,” he commands quietly. “From now on. Understand?”

I nod, swallowing, unable to break eye contact from his grim, mesmerizing look.

He straightens, releasing me as the elevator comes to a stop. “He said you kicked him in the balls.” Christian’s tone is lighter with a trace of admiration, and I think I’m forgiven.

“Yes,” I whisper, still reeling from the intensity of his kiss and his impassioned command.

“Good.”

“Ray is ex-army. He taught me well.”

“I’m very glad he did,” he breathes and adds, arching a brow, “I’ll need to remember that.” Taking my hand, he leads me out of the elevator and I follow, relieved. I think that’s as bad as his mood is going to get.

“I need to call Barney. I won’t be long.” He disappears into his study, leaving me stranded in the vast living room. Mrs. Jones is adding the finishing touches to our meal. I realize I am famished, but I need something to do.

“Can I help?” I ask.

She laughs. “No, Ana. Can I fix you a drink or something? You look beat.”

“I’d love a glass of wine.”

“White?”

“Yes, please.”

I perch on one of the barstools, and she hands me a glass of chilled wine. I don’t know what it is, but it’s delicious and slides down easily, soothing my shattered nerves. What was I thinking about earlier today? How alive I have felt

since I met Christian. How exciting my life has become. Jeez, could I just have a few boring days?

What if I'd never met Christian? I'd be holed up in my apartment, talking it through with Ethan, completely freaked by my encounter with Jack, knowing I would have to face the sleazeball again on Friday. As it is, there's every chance I'll never set eyes on him again. But who will I work for now? I frown. I hadn't thought of that. Shit, do I even have a job?

"Evening, Gail," Christian says as he comes back into the great room, dragging me from my thoughts. Heading straight to the fridge, he pours himself a glass of wine.

"Good evening, Mr. Grey. Dinner in ten, sir?"

"Sounds good."

Christian raises his glass.

"To ex-military men who train their daughters well," he says and his eyes soften.

"Cheers," I mutter, raising my glass.

"What's wrong?" Christian asks.

"I don't know if I still have a job."

He cocks his head to the side. "Do you still want one?"

"Of course."

"Then you still have one."

Simple. See? He is master of my universe. I roll my eyes at him and he smiles.

MRS. JONES MAKES A mean chicken potpie. She has left us to enjoy the fruits of her labors, and I feel much better now I've had something to eat. We are sitting at the breakfast bar, and despite my best cajoling, Christian won't tell me what Barney has found on Jack's computer. I drop the subject, and decide to tackle instead the thorny issue of José's impending visit.

"José called," I say nonchalantly.

"Oh?" Christian turns to face me.

"He wants to deliver your photos on Friday."

"A personal delivery. How accommodating of him," Christian mutters.

"He wants to go out. For a drink. With me."

"I see."

"And Kate and Elliot should be back," I add quickly.

Christian puts his fork down, frowning at me.

"What exactly are you asking?"

I bristle. "I'm not asking anything. I'm informing you of my plans for Friday. Look, I want to see José, and he wants to stay over. Either he stays here or he

can stay at my place, but if he does, I should be there, too."

Christian's eyes widen. He looks dumbfounded.

"He made a pass at you."

"Christian, that was weeks ago. He was drunk, I was drunk, you saved the day—it won't happen again. He's no Jack, for heaven's sake."

"Ethan's there. He can keep him company."

"He wants to see me, not Ethan."

Christian scowls at me.

"He's just a friend." My voice is emphatic.

"I don't like it."

*So what?* Jeez, he's irritating sometimes. I take a deep breath. "He's my friend, Christian. I haven't seen him since his show. And that was too brief. I know you don't have any friends, apart from that god-awful woman, but I don't moan about you seeing her," I snap. Christian blinks, shocked. "I want to see him. I've been a poor friend to him." My subconscious is alarmed. *Are you stamping your little foot? Steady now!*

Gray eyes blaze at me. "Is that what you think?" he breathes.

"Think about what?"

"Elena. You'd rather I didn't see her?"

"Exactly. I'd rather you didn't see her."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Because it's not my place to say. You think she's your only friend." I shrug in exasperation. He really doesn't get it. How did this turn into a conversation about her? I don't even want to think about her. I try to steer us back to José. "Just as it's not your place to say if I can or can't see José. Don't you see that?"

Christian gazes at me, perplexed, I think. *Oh, what is he thinking?*

"He can stay here, I suppose," he mutters. "I can keep an eye on him." He sounds petulant.

*Hallelujah!*

"Thank you! You know, if I am going to live here, too …" I trail off. Christian nods. He knows what I'm trying to say. "It's not like you haven't got the space." I smirk.

His lips turn up slowly. "Are you smirking at me, Miss Steele?"

"Most definitely, Mr. Grey." I get up just in case his palms start twitching, clear our plates, and then load them into the dishwasher.

"Gail will do that."

"I've done it now." I stand up and gaze at him. He's watching me intently.

"I have to work for a while," he says apologetically.

"Cool. I'll find something to do."

“Come here,” he orders, but his voice is soft and seductive, his eyes heated. I don’t hesitate to walk into his arms, clasping him around his neck as he perches on his barstool. He wraps his arms around me, crushes me to him, and just holds me.

“Are you okay?” he whispers into my hair.

“Okay?”

“After what happened with that fucker? After what happened yesterday?” he adds, his voice quiet and earnest.

I gaze into dark, serious, eyes. *Am I okay?* “Yes,” I whisper.

His arms tighten around me, and I feel safe, cherished, and loved all at once. It’s blissful. Closing my eyes, I enjoy the feel of being in his arms. I love this man. I love his intoxicating scent, his strength, his mercurial ways—my Fifty.

“Let’s not fight,” he murmurs. He kisses my hair and inhales deeply. “You smell heavenly as usual, Ana.”

“So do you,” I whisper and kiss his neck.

All too soon he releases me. “I should only be a couple of hours.”

I WANDER LISTLESSLY THROUGH the apartment. Christian is still working. I have showered and dressed in some sweats and a T-shirt of my own, and I’m bored. I don’t want to read. If I sit still, I’ll recall Jack and his fingers on me.

I check out my old bedroom, the subs’ room. José can sleep here—he’ll like the view. It’s about eight fifteen, and the sun is beginning to sink into the west. The lights of the city twinkle below me. It’s glorious. Yes, José will like it here. I wonder idly where Christian will hang José’s pictures of me. I’d rather he didn’t. I am not keen on looking at myself.

Back down the hallway I find myself outside the playroom, and without thinking, I try the door handle. Christian normally keeps it locked, but to my surprise, the door opens. How strange. Feeling like a child playing hooky and straying into the forbidden forest, I walk in. It’s dark. I flick the switch and the lights under the cornice light up with a soft glow. It’s as I remember it. A womblike room.

Memories of the last time I was in here flash through my mind. The belt … I wince at the recollection. Now it hangs innocently, lined up with others, on the rack beside the door. Tentatively I run my fingers over the belts, the floggers, the paddles, and the whips. Sheesh. This is what I need to square with Dr. Flynn. Can someone in this lifestyle just stop? It seems so improbable. Wandering over to the bed, I sit on soft red satin sheets, gazing around at all the apparatuses.

Beside me is the bench, above that the assortment of canes. *So many! Surely one is enough?* Well, the less said about that, the better. And the large table. We

never tried that, whatever he does on it. My eyes fall on the chesterfield, and I move over to sit on it. It's just a couch, nothing extraordinary about it—nothing to fasten anything to, not that I can see. Glancing behind me, I spy the museum chest. My curiosity is piqued. What does he keep in there?

As I pull open the top drawer I realize my blood is pounding through my veins. Why am I so nervous? This feels so illicit, as if I'm trespassing, which of course I am. But if he wants to marry me, well …

Holy fuck, what's all this? An array of instruments and bizarre implements—I don't have a clue what they are, or what they're for—are carefully laid out in the display drawer. I pick one up. It's bullet-shaped with a sort of handle. *Hmm … what the hell do you do with that?* My mind boggles, though I think I have an idea. There are four different sizes! My scalp prickles and I glance up.

Christian is standing in the doorway, staring at me, his face unreadable. How long has he been there? I feel like I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

"Hi." I smile nervously, and I know my eyes are wide and that I'm deathly pale.

"What are you doing?" he says softly, but there's an undercurrent in his tone.

Oh shit. Is he mad? I flush. "Er … I was bored and curious," I mutter, embarrassed to be found out. He said he'd be two hours.

"That's a very dangerous combination." He runs his index finger across his lower lip in quiet contemplation, not taking his eyes off me. I swallow and my mouth is dry.

Slowly he enters the room and closes the door quietly behind him, his eyes liquid gray fire. *Oh my*. He leans casually over the chest of drawers, but I think his stance is deceptive. My inner goddess doesn't know whether it's fight-or-flight time.

"So, what exactly are you curious about, Miss Steele? Perhaps I could enlighten you."

"The door was open … I—" I gaze at Christian as I hold my breath and blink, uncertain as ever of his reaction or what I should say. His eyes are dark. I think he's amused, but it's difficult to tell. He places his elbows on the museum chest and rests his chin on his clasped hands.

"I was in here earlier today wondering what to do with it all. I must have forgotten to lock it." He scowls momentarily, as if leaving the door unlocked is a terrible lapse in judgment. I frown—it's not like him to be forgetful.

"Oh?"

"But now here you are, curious as ever." His voice is soft, puzzled.

"You're not mad?" I whisper, using my remaining breath.

He cocks his head to one side, and his lips twitch in amusement.

"Why would I be mad?"

"I feel like I'm trespassing … and you're always mad at me." My voice is quiet, though I'm relieved. Christian's brow creases once more.

"Yes, you're trespassing, but I'm not mad. I hope that one day you'll live with me here, and all this"—he gestures vaguely around the room with one hand —"will be yours, too."

My playroom …? I gape at him—that's a lot to take in.

"That's why I was in here today. Trying to decide what to do." He taps his lips with his index finger. "Am I angry with you all the time? I wasn't this morning."

Oh, that's true. I smile at the memory of Christian when we woke, and it distracts me from the thought of what will become of the playroom. He was such fun Fifty this morning.

"You were playful. I like playful Christian."

"Do you, now?" He arches an eyebrow, and his lovely mouth curves up in a smile, a shy smile. Wow!

"What's this?" I hold up the silver bullet thing.

"Always hungry for information, Miss Steele. That's a butt plug," he says gently.

"Oh …"

"Bought for you."

*What?* "For me?"

He nods slowly, his face now serious and wary.

I frown. "You buy new, er … toys … for each submissive?"

"Some things. Yes."

"Butt plugs?"

"Yes."

Okay … I swallow. Butt plug. It's solid metal—surely that's uncomfortable? I remember our discussion about sex toys and hard limits after I graduated. I think at the time I said I would try. Now, actually seeing one, I don't know if it's something I want to do. I examine it once more and place it back in the drawer.

"And this?" I take out a long, black, rubbery object made of gradually diminishing spherical bubbles joined together, the first one large and the last much smaller. Eight bubbles in total.

"Anal beads," says Christian, watching me carefully.

*Oh!* I examine them with fascinated horror. All of these, inside me … *there*! I had no idea.

"They have quite an effect if you pull them out mid-orgasm," he adds matter-of-factly.

“This is for me?” I whisper.

“For you.” He nods slowly.

“This is the butt drawer?”

He smirks. “If you like.”

I close it quickly, feeling myself turning red as a stoplight.

“Don’t you like the butt drawer?” he asks innocently, amused. I gaze at him and shrug, trying to brazen out my shock.

“It’s not top of my Christmas card list,” I mutter nonchalantly. Tentatively, I open the second drawer. He grins.

“Next drawer down holds a selection of vibrators.”

I shut the drawer quickly.

“And the next?” I whisper, ashen once more, but this time with embarrassment.

“That’s more interesting.”

*Oh!* Hesitantly I pull the drawer open, not taking my eyes off his beautiful but rather smug face. Inside there are an assortment of metal items and some clothespins. Clothespins! I pick up a large metal cliplike device.

“Genital clamp,” Christian says. He stands up and moves casually around so that he’s beside me. I put it back immediately and choose something more delicate—two small clips on a chain.

“Some of these are for pain, but most are for pleasure,” he murmurs.

“What’s this?”

“Nipple clamps—that’s for both.”

“Both? Nipples?”

Christian smirks at me. “Well, there are two clamps, baby. Yes, both nipples, but that’s not what I meant. These are for both pleasure and pain.”

Oh. He takes it from me.

“Hold out your little finger.”

I do as he asks, and he clamps one clip to the tip of my finger. It’s not too harsh.

“The sensation is very intense, but it’s when taking them off that they are at their most painful and pleasurable.” I remove the clip. Hmm, that might be nice. I squirm at the thought.

“I like the look of these,” I murmur and Christian smiles.

“Do you now, Miss Steele? I think I can tell.”

I nod shyly and put the clips back in the drawer. Christian leans forward to pull out two more.

“These are adjustable.” He holds them up for me to inspect.

“Adjustable?”

“You can wear them very tight … or not. Depending on your mood.”

How does he make that sound so erotic? I swallow, and to divert his attention, pull out a device that looks like a spiky pastry cutter.

“This?” I frown. No baking in the playroom, surely.

“That’s a Wartenberg pinwheel.”

“For?”

He reaches over and takes it from me. “Give me your hand. Palm up.”

I offer him my left hand and he takes it gently, skating his thumb over my knuckles. A shiver runs through me. His skin against mine, it never fails to thrill me. He runs the wheel over my palm.

“Ah!” The prongs bite into my skin—there’s more than just pain. In fact, it tickles.

“Imagine that over your breasts,” Christian murmurs lasciviously.

*Oh!* I flush and snatch my hand back. My breathing and heart rate increase.

“There’s a fine line between pleasure and pain, Anastasia,” he says softly as he leans down and puts the device back in the drawer.

“Clothespins?” I whisper.

“You can do a great deal with a clothespin.” His eyes burn.

I lean against the drawer so it closes.

“Is that all?” Christian looks amused.

“No …” I pull open the fourth drawer to be confounded by a mass of leather and straps. I tug at one of the straps … it appears to be attached to a ball.

“Ball gag. To keep you quiet,” says Christian, amused once more.

“Soft limit,” I mutter.

“I remember,” he says. “But you can still breathe. Your teeth clamp over the ball.” Taking it from me, he replicates a mouth clamping down on the ball with his fingers.

“Have you worn one of these?” I ask.

He stills and gazes down at me. “Yes.”

“To mask your screams?”

He closes his eyes, and I think it’s in exasperation. “No, that’s not what they’re about.”

*Oh?*

“It’s about control, Anastasia. How helpless would you be if you were tied up and couldn’t speak? How trusting would you have to be, knowing I had that much power over you? That I had to read your body and your reaction, rather than hear your words? It makes you more dependent, puts me in ultimate control.”

I swallow.

“You sound like you miss it.”

“It’s what I know,” he murmurs. His eyes are wide and serious, and the atmosphere between us has changed, as if he’s at confessional.

“You have power over me. You know you do,” I whisper.

“Do I? You make me feel … helpless.”

“No!” *Oh, Fifty* … “Why?”

“Because you’re the only person I know who could really hurt me.” He reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“Oh, Christian … that works both ways. If you didn’t want me—” I shudder, glancing down at my twisting fingers. Therein lies my other dark reservation about us. If he wasn’t so … broken, would he want me? I shake my head. I must try not to think like that.

“The last thing I want to do is hurt you. I love you,” I murmur, reaching up with both hands to run my fingers through his sideburns and gently stroke his cheeks. He leans his face into my touch, drops the gag back in the drawer, and reaches for me, his hands around my waist. He pulls me against him.

“Have we finished show-and-tell?” he asks, his voice soft and seductive. His hand moves up my back to the nape of my neck.

“Why? What did you want to do?”

He bends and kisses me gently, and I melt against him, grasping his arms.

“Ana, you were nearly attacked today.” His voice is soft but wary.

“So?” I ask, enjoying the feel of his hand at my back and his proximity. He pulls his head back and scowls down at me.

“What do you mean, ‘so?’ ” he rebukes.

I gaze up into his lovely, grumpy face, and I’m dazzled.

“Christian, I’m fine.”

He wraps me in his arms, holding me close. “When I think what might have happened,” he breathes, burying his face in my hair.

“When will you learn that I’m stronger than I look?” I whisper reassuringly into his neck, inhaling his delicious scent. There is nothing better on the planet than being in Christian’s arms.

“I know you’re strong,” Christian muses quietly. He kisses my hair, but then to my great disappointment, releases me. *Oh?*

Bending down I fish another item out of the open drawer. Several cuffs attached to a bar. I hold it up.

“That,” says Christian, his eyes darkening, “is a spreader bar with ankle and wrist restraints.”

“How does it work?” I ask, genuinely intrigued.

“You want me to show you?” he breathes in surprise, closing his eyes briefly.

I blink at him. When he opens his eyes, they are blazing.

"Yes, I want a demonstration. I like being tied up," I whisper as my inner goddess pole vaults from the bunker onto her chaise longue.

"Oh, Ana," he murmurs. He looks pained all of a sudden.

"What?"

"Not here."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you in my bed, not in here. Come." He grabs the bar and my hand, then leads me promptly out of the room.

Why are we leaving? I glance behind me as we exit. "Why not in there?"

Christian stops on the stairs and gazes up at me, his expression grave.

"Ana, you may be ready to go back in there, but I'm not. Last time we were in there, you left me. I keep telling you—when will you understand?" He frowns, releasing me so that he can gesticulate with his free hand.

"My whole attitude has changed as a result. My whole outlook on life has radically shifted. I've told you this. What I haven't told you is—" He stops and runs his hand through his hair, searching for the correct words. "I'm like a recovering alcoholic, okay? That's the only comparison I can draw. The compulsion has gone, but I don't want to put temptation in my way. I don't want to hurt you."

He looks so remorseful, and in that moment, a sharp nagging pain lances through me. What have I done to this man? Have I improved his life? He was happy before he met me, wasn't he?

"I can't bear to hurt you because I love you," he adds, gazing up at me, his expression one of absolute sincerity like a small boy telling a very simple truth.

He's completely guileless, and he takes my breath away. I adore him more than anything or anyone. I *do* love this man unconditionally.

I launch myself at him so hard that he has to drop what he's carrying to catch me as I push him up against the wall. Grabbing his face between my hands, I pull his lips to mine tasting his surprise as I push my tongue into his mouth. I am standing on the step above him—we're at the same level, and I feel euphorically empowered. Kissing him passionately, my fingers twisting into his hair, I want to touch him, everywhere, but restrain myself, knowing his fear. Regardless, my desire unfurls, hot and heavy, blossoming deep inside me. He groans and grabs my shoulders, pushing me away.

"Do you want me to fuck you on the stairs?" he mutters, his breathing ragged. "Because right now, I will."

"Yes," I murmur and I'm sure my dark gaze matches his.

He glares at me, his eyes hooded and heavy. "No. I want you in my bed." He

scoops me up suddenly over his shoulder, making me squeal loudly, and smacks me hard on my behind, so that I squeal again. As he heads down the stairs, he stoops to pick up the fallen spreader bar.

Mrs. Jones is coming out of the utility room when we pass through the hall. She smiles at us, and I give her an apologetic upside-down wave. I don't think Christian notices her.

In the bedroom he sets me down on my feet and drops the spreader onto the bed.

"I don't think you'll hurt me," I breathe.

"I don't think I'll hurt you, either," he says. He takes my head in his hands and kisses me, long and hard, igniting my already heated blood.

"I want you so much," he whispers against my mouth, panting. "Are you sure about this—after today?"

"Yes. I want you, too. I want to undress you." I can't wait to get my hands on him—my fingers are itching to touch him.

His eyes widen and for a second he hesitates, perhaps to consider my request.

"Okay," he says cautiously.

I reach for the second button on his shirt and hear him catch his breath.

"I won't touch you if you don't want me to," I whisper.

"No," he responds quickly. "Do. It's fine. I'm good," he mutters.

I gently undo the button and my fingers glide down his shirt to the next. His eyes are large and luminous, his lips parted as his breathing shallows. He is so beautiful, even in his fear … because of his fear. I undo the third button and notice his soft hair poking through the large V of the shirt.

"I want to kiss you there," I murmur.

He inhales sharply. "Kiss me?"

"Yes," I murmur.

He gasps as I undo the next button and very slowly lean forward, making my intention clear. He's holding his breath, but stands stock-still as I plant a gentle kiss among the soft, exposed curls. I undo the final button and lift my face to him. He's gazing at me, and there's a look of satisfaction, calm, and … wonder on his face.

"It's getting easier, isn't it?" I whisper.

He nods as I slowly push his shirt off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

"What have you done to me, Ana?" he murmurs. "Whatever it is, don't stop." And he gathers me in his arms, thrusting both his hands into my hair and pulling my head right back so that he can have easy access to my throat.

He runs his lips up to my jaw, nipping softly. I groan. Oh, I want this man. My fingers fumble at his waistband, undoing the button and pulling down the zipper.

“Oh, baby,” he breathes as he kisses me behind my ear. I feel his erection, firm and hard, straining against me. I want him—in my mouth. I step back abruptly and drop to my knees.

“Whoa!” he gasps.

I tug his pants and boxers sharply, and he springs free. Before he can stop me, I take him into my mouth, sucking hard, enjoying his shocked astonishment as his mouth drops open. He gazes down at me, watching my every move, eyes so dark and filled with carnal bliss. Oh my. I sheath my teeth and suck harder. He closes his eyes and surrenders to this blissful carnal pleasure. I know what I do to him, and it’s hedonistic, liberating, and sexy as hell. The feeling is heady; I’m not just powerful—I’m omniscient.

“Fuck,” he hisses and gently cradles my head, flexing his hips so he moves deeper inside my mouth. Oh yes, I want this and I swirl my tongue around him, pulling hard … over and over.

“Ana.” He tries to step back.

*Oh no you don’t, Grey. I want you*. I grab his hips firmly, doubling my efforts, and I can tell he’s close.

“Please,” he pants. “I’m gonna come, Ana,” he groans.

Good. My inner goddess’s head is thrown back in ecstasy, and he comes, loudly and wetly, into my mouth.

He opens his bright gray eyes, gazing down at me, and I smile up at him, licking my lips. He grins back at me, a wicked, salacious grin.

“Oh, so this is the game we’re playing, Miss Steele?” He bends, hooks his hands under my arms, and pulls me to my feet. Suddenly his mouth is on mine. He groans.

“I can taste myself. You taste better,” he murmurs against my lips. He tugs my T-shirt off and throws it carelessly onto the floor, then picks me up and tosses me onto the bed. Grabbing the end of my sweats, he tugs abruptly so that they come off in one swift move. I’m naked underneath, sprawled across his bed. Waiting. Wanting. His eyes drink me in, and slowly he removes his remaining clothes, not taking his eyes off me.

“You are one beautiful woman, Anastasia,” he murmurs appreciatively.

Hmm … I tilt my head coquettishly to one side and beam at him.

“You are one beautiful man, Christian, and you taste mighty fine.”

He gives me a wicked grin and reaches for the spreader bar. Grabbing my left ankle, he quickly cuffs it, strapping the buckle tightly, but not too tight. He tests how much room I have by sliding his little finger between the cuff and my ankle. He doesn’t take his eyes off mine; he doesn’t need to see what he’s doing. Hmm … he’s done this before.

“We’ll have to see how you taste. If I recall, you’re a rare, exquisite delicacy, Miss Steele.”

*Oh.*

Grasping my other ankle, he quickly and efficiently cuffs that one as well, so that my feet are about two feet apart.

“The good thing about this spreader is, it expands,” he murmurs. He clicks something on the bar, then pushes, so my legs spread further. Whoa, three feet apart. My mouth drops open, and I take a deep breath. Fuck, this is hot. I’m on fire, restless and needy.

Christian licks his lower lip.

“Oh, we’re going to have some fun with this, Ana.” Reaching down he grasps the bar and twists it so I flip onto my front. It takes me by surprise.

“See what I can do to you?” he says darkly and twists it again abruptly, so I am once more on my back, gaping up at him, breathless.

“These other cuffs are for your wrists. I’ll think about that. Depends if you behave or not.”

“When do I not behave?”

“I can think of a few infractions,” he says softly, running his fingers up the soles of my feet. It tickles, but the bar holds me in place, though I try to writhe away from his fingers.

“Your BlackBerry, for one.”

I gasp. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I never disclose my plans.” He smirks, his eyes alight with pure mischief.

*Wow*. He’s so mind-bogglingly sexy, it takes my breath away. He crawls up the bed so that he’s kneeling between my legs, gloriously naked, and I’m helpless.

“Hmm. You are so exposed, Miss Steele.” He runs the fingers of both his hands up the inside of each of my legs, slowly, surely, making small circular patterns. Never breaking eye contact with me.

“It’s all about anticipation, Ana. What will I do to you?” His softly spoken words penetrate right to the deepest, darkest, part of me. I wriggle on the bed and moan. His fingers continue their slow assault up my legs, past the backs of my knees. Instinctively, I want to close my legs but I can’t.

“Remember, if you don’t like something, just tell me to stop,” he murmurs. Bending over, he kisses my belly, soft, sucking kisses, while his hands continue their slow tortuous journey north up my inner thighs, touching and teasing.

“Oh, please, Christian,” I plead.

“Oh, Miss Steele. I’ve discovered you can be merciless in your amorous

assaults upon me. I think I should return the favor."

My fingers clutch the comforter as I surrender myself to him, his mouth gently heading south, his fingers north, to the vulnerable and exposed apex of my thighs. I groan as he eases his fingers inside me, and buck my pelvis up to meet them. Christian moans in response.

"You never cease to amaze me, Ana. You're so wet," he murmurs against the line where my pubic hair joins my belly. My body bows as his mouth finds me.

*Oh my*.

He begins a slow and sensual assault, his tongue swirling around and around while his fingers move inside me. Because I can't close my legs, or move, it's intense, really intense. My back arches as I try to absorb the sensations.

"Oh, Christian," I cry.

"I know, baby," he whispers, and to ease up on me, he blows softly on the most sensitive part of my body.

"Arrgh! Please!" I beg.

"Say my name," he commands.

"Christian," I call, hardly recognizing my own voice—it's so high-pitched and needy.

"Again," he breathes.

"Christian, Christian, Christian Grey," I call out loudly.

"You are mine." His voice is soft and deadly and with one last flick of his tongue, I fall—spectacularly—embracing my orgasm, and because my legs are so far apart, it goes on and on and I am lost.

Vaguely, I'm aware that Christian has flipped me onto my stomach.

"We're going to try this, baby. If you don't like it, or it's too uncomfortable, tell me and we'll stop."

What? I am too lost in the afterglow to form any sentient or coherent thoughts. I am sitting on Christian's lap. How did that happen?

"Lean down, baby," he murmurs at my ear. "Head and chest on the bed."

In a daze I do as I'm told. He pulls both my hands backward and cuffs them to the bar, next to my ankles. *Oh* … My knees are drawn up, my ass in the air, utterly vulnerable, completely his.

"Ana, you look so beautiful." His voice is full of wonder, and I hear the rip of foil. He runs his fingers from the base of my spine down toward my sex and pauses a beat over my ass.

"When you're ready, I want this, too." His finger is hovering over me. I gasp loudly as I feel myself tense under his gentle probing. "Not today, sweet Ana, but one day … I want you every way. I want to possess every inch of you. You're mine."

I think about the butt plug, and everything tightens deep inside me. His words make me groan, and his fingers move down and around to more familiar territory.

Moments later, he's slamming into me. "Aagh! Gently," I cry, and he stills.

"You okay?"

"Gently … let me get used to this."

He eases slowly out of me then eases gently back, filling me, stretching me, twice, thrice, and I am helpless.

"Yes, good, I've got it now," I murmur, relishing the feeling.

He groans, and picks up his rhythm. Moving, moving … relentless … onward, inward, filling me … and it's exquisite. There's joy in my helplessness, joy in my surrender to him, and to know that he can lose himself in me the way he wants to. I can do this. He takes me to these dark places, places I didn't know existed, and together we fill them with blinding light. Oh yes … blazing, blinding light.

And I let go, glorying in what he does to me, finding my sweet, sweet release, as I come again, loudly, screaming his name. And he stills, pouring his heart and soul into me.

"Ana, baby," he cries and collapses beside me.

---

HIS FINGERS DEFTLY UNDO the straps, and he rubs my ankles then my wrists. When he's finished and I'm finally free, he pulls me into his arms and I drift, exhausted.

When I surface again, I am curled beside him and he's gazing at me. I have no idea what the time is.

"I could watch you sleep forever, Ana," he murmurs and he kisses my forehead.

I smile and shift languorously beside him.

"I never want to let you go," he says softly and wraps his arms around me.

*Hmm*. "I never want to go. Never let me go," I mutter sleepily, my eyelids refusing to open.

"I need you," he whispers, but his voice is a distant, ethereal part of my dreams. He needs me … needs me … and as I finally slip into the darkness, my last thoughts are of a small boy with gray eyes and dirty, messy, copper-colored hair smiling shyly at me.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hmm.

Christian is nuzzling my neck as I slowly wake.

"Morning, baby," he whispers and nips at my earlobe. My eyes flutter open and close again quickly. Bright early morning light floods the room, and his hand is softly caressing my breast, gently teasing me. Moving down he grasps my hip as he lies behind me, holding me close.

I stretch out beside him, relishing his touch, and feel his erection against my behind. *Oh my*. A Christian Grey wake-up call.

"You're pleased to see me," I mumble sleepily, squirming suggestively against him. I feel his grin against my jaw.

"I'm very pleased to see you," he says as he skates his hand over my stomach and down to cup my sex and explore with his fingers. "There are definite advantages to waking up beside you, Miss Steele," he teases and gently pulls me around so that I'm lying on my back.

"Sleep well?" he asks as his fingers continue their sensual torture. He's smiling down at me—his dazzling, all-American-drop-dead-male-model-perfect-teeth smile. He takes my breath away.

My hips begin to sway to the rhythm of the dance his fingers have begun. He kisses me chastely on the lips and then moves down my neck, nipping slowly, kissing, and sucking as he goes. I moan. He's gentle and his touch is light and heavenly. His intrepid fingers move down, and slowly he eases one inside me, hissing quietly in awe.

"Oh, Ana," he murmurs reverentially against my throat. "You're always ready." He moves his finger in time with his kisses as his lips journey leisurely across my clavicle and then down to my breast. He torments first one, then the other nipple with teeth and lips, but oh so gently, and they tighten and lengthen in sweet response.

I groan.

"Hmm," he growls softly and raises his head to give me a blazing gray-eyed look. "I want you now." He reaches over to the bedside table. He shifts on top of me, taking his weight on his elbows, and rubs his nose along mine while easing

my legs apart with his. He kneels up and rips open the foil packet.

"I can't wait until Saturday," he says, his eyes glowing with salacious delight.

"Your party?" I pant.

"No. I can stop using these fuckers."

"Aptly named." I giggle.

He smirks at me as he rolls on the condom. "Are you giggling, Miss Steele?"

"No." I try and fail to straighten my face.

"Now is not the time for giggling." He shakes his head in admonishment and his voice is low, stern, but his expression—*holy cow*—is glacial and volcanic at once.

My breath catches in my throat. "I thought you liked it when I giggle," I whisper hoarsely, gazing into the dark depths of his stormy eyes.

"Not now. There's a time and a place for giggling. This is neither. I need to stop you, and I think I know how," he says ominously, and his body covers mine.

"WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE for breakfast, Ana?"

"I'll just have some granola. Thank you, Mrs. Jones."

I flush as I take my place at the breakfast bar beside Christian. The last time I set eyes on the very prim and proper Mrs. Jones, I was being unceremoniously dragged into the bedroom over Christian's shoulder.

"You look lovely," Christian says softly. I'm wearing my gray pencil skirt and gray silk blouse again.

"So do you." I smile shyly at him. He's wearing a pale blue shirt and jeans, and he looks cool and fresh and perfect, as always.

"We should buy you some more skirts," he says matter-of-factly. "In fact—I'd love to take you shopping."

Hmm—shopping. I hate shopping. But with Christian, maybe it won't be so bad. I decide on distraction as the best form of defense.

"I wonder what will happen at work today?"

"They'll have to replace the sleazeball." Christian frowns, scowling as if he's just stepped in something extraordinarily unpleasant.

"I hope they take on a woman as my new boss."

"Why?"

"Well, you're less likely to object to me going away with her," I tease him.

His lips twitch and he starts on his omelet.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"You are. Eat your granola, all of it, if that's all you're having."

Bossy as ever. I purse my lips at him but dig in.

"SO, THE KEY GOES here." Christian points out the ignition beneath the gearshift.

"Strange place," I mutter. But I'm delighted with every little detail, practically bouncing like a small child in the comfortable leather seat. Christian is finally letting me drive my car.

He regards me coolly, though his eyes are alight with humor. "You're quite excited about this, aren't you?" he murmurs, amused.

I nod, grinning like a fool. "Just smell that new car smell. This is even better than the Submissive Special … um, the A3," I add quickly, blushing.

Christian's mouth twists. "Submissive Special, eh? You have such a way with words, Miss Steele." He leans back with a faux look of disapproval, but he can't fool me. I know he's enjoying himself.

"Well, let's go." He waves his hand toward the entrance of the garage.

I clap my hands, start the car, and the engine purrs to life. Putting the gearshift into drive, I ease my foot off the brake and the Saab moves smoothly forward. Taylor starts up the Audi behind us and once the garage barrier lifts, follows us out of Escala onto the street.

"Can we have the radio on?" I ask as we wait at the first stop sign.

"I want you to concentrate," he says sharply.

"Christian, please, I can drive with music on." I roll my eyes. He scowls for a minute and then reaches for the radio.

"You can play your iPod and MP3 discs as well as CDs on this," he murmurs.

The too-loud dulcet tones of the Police suddenly fill the car. Christian turns the music down. *Hmm* … "King of Pain."

"Your anthem," I tease him, then instantly regret it when his mouth tightens in a thin line. *Oh no*. "I have this album, somewhere." I continue hastily to distract him. Hmm … somewhere in the apartment I have spent very little time in.

I wonder how Ethan is. I should try to call him today. I won't have much to do at work.

Anxiety blooms in my stomach. What will happen when I get to the office? Will everyone know about Jack? Will everyone know of Christian's involvement? Will I still have a job? Sheesh, if I have no job, what will I do?

*Marry the gazillionaire, Ana!* My subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her—rapacious bitch.

"Hey, Miss Smart-mouth. Come back." Christian drags me into the here and now as I pull up at the next traffic light.

"You're very distracted. Concentrate, Ana," he scolds. "Accidents happen when you don't concentrate."

*Oh, for heaven's sake*—and suddenly I'm catapulted back in time to when Ray was teaching me to drive. I don't need another father. A husband maybe, a

kinky husband. *Hmm*.

"I'm just thinking about work."

"Baby, you'll be fine. Trust me." Christian smiles.

"Please don't interfere—I want to do this on my own. Christian, please. It's important to me," I say as gently as I can. I don't want to argue. His mouth sets once more into a hard stubborn line, and I think he's going to berate me again.

*Oh no*.

"Let's not argue, Christian. We've had such a wonderful morning. And last night was"—words fail me, last night was—"heaven."

He says nothing. I glance over at him and his eyes are closed.

"Yes. Heaven," he says softly. "I meant what I said."

"What?"

"I don't want to let you go."

"I don't want to go."

He smiles and it's this new, shy smile that dissolves everything in its path. Boy, it's powerful.

"Good," he says simply, and he visibly relaxes.

I drive into the parking lot half a block from SIP.

"I'll walk you to work. Taylor will take me from there," Christian offers. I climb awkwardly out of the car, restricted by my pencil skirt, while Christian climbs out gracefully, at ease with his body or at least giving the impression of someone at ease with his body. Hmm … someone who can't bear to be touched can't be that at ease. I frown at my errant thought.

"Don't forget we're seeing Flynn at seven this evening," he says as he holds his hand out to me. I press the remote door lock and take his hand.

"I won't forget. I'll compile a list of questions for him."

"Questions? About me?"

I nod.

"I can answer any questions you have about me." Christian looks affronted.

I smile at him. "Yes, but I want the unbiased, expensive charlatan's opinion."

He frowns and suddenly pulls me into his embrace, holding both my hands tightly behind my back.

"Is this a good idea?" he says, his voice low and husky. I lean back to see the anxiety looming large and wide in his eyes. It tears at my soul.

"If you don't want me to, I won't." I stare at him, blinking, wanting to caress the concern out of his face. I tug on one of my hands and he frees it. I touch his cheek tenderly—it's smooth from shaving this morning.

"What are you worried about?" I ask, my voice soft and soothing.

"That you'll go."

“Christian, how many times do I have to tell you—I’m not going anywhere. You’ve already told me the worst. I’m not leaving you.”

“Then why haven’t you answered me?”

“Answered you?” I murmur disingenuously.

“You know what I’m talking about, Ana.”

I sigh. “I want to know that I’m enough for you, Christian. That’s all.”

“And you won’t take my word for it?” he says, exasperated, releasing me.

“Christian, this has all been so quick. And by your own admission, you’re fifty shades of fucked-up. I can’t give you what you need,” I mutter. “It’s just not for me. But that makes me feel inadequate, especially seeing you with Leila. Who’s to say that one day you won’t meet someone who likes doing what you do? And who’s to say you won’t, you know … fall for her? Someone much better suited to your needs.” The thought of Christian with anyone else sickens me. I stare down at my knotted fingers.

“I knew several women who like doing what I like to do. None of them appealed to me the way you do. I’ve never had an emotional connection with any of them. It’s only ever been you, Ana.”

“Because you never gave them a chance. You’ve spent too long locked up in your fortress, Christian. Look, let’s discuss this later. I have to go to work. Maybe Dr. Flynn can offer us his insight.” This is all far too heavy a discussion for a parking lot at eight fifty in the morning, and Christian, for once, seems to agree. He nods but his eyes are wary.

“Come,” he orders, holding out his hand.

WHEN I REACH MY desk, I find a note asking me to go straight to Elizabeth’s office. My heart leaps into my mouth. Oh, this is it. I’m going to get fired.

“Anastasia.” Elizabeth smiles kindly, waving me into a chair before her desk. I sit and gaze at her expectantly, hoping that she can’t hear my thumping heart. She smoothes her thick black hair and regards me with somber, clear blue eyes.

“I have some rather sad news.”

*Sad! Oh no*.

“I’ve called you in to inform you that Jack has left the company rather suddenly.”

I flush. This isn’t sad for me. Should I tell her that I know?

“His rather hasty departure has left a vacancy, and we’d like you to fill it for now, until we find a replacement.”

What? I feel the blood rush from my head. *Me?*

“But I’ve only been here for a week or so.”

“Yes, Anastasia, I understand, but Jack was always a champion of your

abilities. He had high hopes for you."

I stop breathing. He had high hopes of getting me on my back, sure.

"Here's a detailed job description. Have a good look through it, and we can discuss it later today."

"But—"

"Please, I know this is sudden, but you've already made contact with Jack's key authors. Your chapter notes haven't gone unnoticed by the other editors. You have a shrewd mind, Anastasia. We all think you can do it."

"Okay." *This is unreal*.

"Look, think about it. In the meantime you can take Jack's office."

She stands, effectively dismissing me, and holds out her hand. I shake it in a complete daze.

"I'm glad he's gone," she whispers and a haunted look crosses her face. *Holy shit*. What did he do to her?

Back at my desk, I grab my BlackBerry and call Christian.

He answers on the second ring. "Anastasia. You okay?" he asks, concerned.

"They've just given me Jack's job—well, temporarily," I blurt out.

"You're kidding," he whispers, shocked.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" My voice is sharper than I mean it to be.

"No—no, not at all. I mean, with all due respect, Anastasia, you've only been there for a week or so—and I don't mean that unkindly."

"I know." I frown. "Apparently Jack really rated me."

"Did he, now?" Christian's tone is frosty and then he sighs.

"Well, baby, if they think you can do it, I'm sure you can. Congratulations. Perhaps we should celebrate after we've seen Flynn."

"Hmm. Are you sure you had nothing to do with this?"

He is silent for a minute, and then he says in a low menacing voice, "Do you doubt me? It angers me that you do."

I swallow. Boy, he gets mad so easily. "I'm sorry," I breathe, chastened.

"If you need anything, let me know. I'll be here. And Anastasia?"

"What?"

"Use your BlackBerry," he adds tersely.

"Yes, Christian."

He doesn't hang up as I expect him to but takes a deep breath.

"I mean it. If you need me, I'm here." His words are much softer, conciliatory. Oh, he's so mercurial … his mood swings are like a metronome set at presto.

"Okay," I murmur. "I'd better go. I have to move offices."

"If you need me. I mean it," he murmurs.

“I know. Thank you, Christian. I love you.”

I sense his grin at the other end of the phone. I’ve won him back.

“I love you, too, baby.” Oh, will I ever tire of him saying those words to me?

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Laters, baby.”

I hang up and glance at Jack’s office. My office. Holy cow—Anastasia Steele, Acting Editor. Who would have thought? I should ask for more money.

What would Jack think if he knew? I shudder at the thought and wonder idly how he’s spending his morning, obviously not in New York as he expected. I stroll into my new office, sit down at the desk, and start reading the job description.

At twelve thirty, Elizabeth buzzes me.

“Ana, we need you in a meeting at one o’clock in the boardroom. Jerry Roach and Kay Bestie will be there—you know, the company president and vice president? All the editors will be attending.”

Shit!

“Do I need to prepare anything?”

“No, this is just an informal gathering we do once a month. Lunch will be provided.”

“I’ll be there.” I hang up.

*Holy shit!* I check through the current roster of Jack’s authors. Yes, I’ve pretty much got those nailed. I have the five manuscripts he was championing, plus two more, which should really be considered for publication. I take a deep breath—I cannot believe it’s lunchtime already. The day has flown by, and I’m loving it. There has been so much to absorb this morning. A *ping* from my calendar announces an appointment.

Oh no—Mia! In all the excitement I have forgotten about our lunch. I fish out my BlackBerry and try frantically to find her phone number.

My phone buzzes.

“It’s him, in Reception.” Claire’s voice is hushed.

“Who?” For a second, I think it might be Christian.

“The blond god.”

“Ethan?”

Oh, what does he want? I immediately feel guilty for not having called him.

Ethan, dressed in a checked blue shirt, white T-shirt, and jeans, beams at me when I appear.

“Wow! You look hot, Steele,” he says, nodding appreciatively. He gives me a quick hug.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

He frowns. “Everything’s fine, Ana. I just wanted to see you. I haven’t heard from you in a while, and I wanted to check how Mr. Mogul was treating you.”

I flush and can’t help my smile.

“Okay!” Ethan exclaims, holding up his hands. “I can tell by the secret smile. I don’t want to know any more. I came by on the off chance you could do lunch. I’m enrolling at Seattle for psych courses in September. For my master’s.”

“Oh, Ethan. So much has happened. I have a ton to tell you, but right now I can’t. I have a meeting.” An idea hits me hard. “And I wonder if you can do me a really, really, really big favor?” I clasp my hands together in supplication.

“Sure,” he says, bemused by my pleading.

“I’m supposed to be having lunch with Christian and Elliot’s sister—but I can’t get hold of her, and this meeting’s just been sprung on me. Please will you take her for lunch? Please?”

“Aw, Ana! I don’t want to babysit some brat.”

“Please, Ethan.” I give him the biggest-bluest-longest-eyelashed look that I can manage. He rolls his eyes and I know I’ve got him.

“You’ll cook me something?” he mutters.

“Sure, whatever, whenever.”

“So where is she?”

“She’s due here now.” And as if on cue, I hear her voice.

“Ana!” she calls from the front door.

We both turn, and there she is—all curvaceous and tall with her sleek black bob—wearing a mint green minidress and matching high-heeled pumps with straps around her slim ankles. She looks stunning.

“The brat?” he whispers, gaping at her.

“Yes. The brat that needs babysitting,” I whisper back. “Hi, Mia.” I give her a quick hug as she stares rather blatantly at Ethan.

“Mia—this is Ethan, Kate’s brother.”

He nods, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Mia blinks several times as she gives him her hand.

“Delighted to meet you,” Ethan murmurs smoothly and Mia blinks again—silent for once. She blushes.

Oh my. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her blush.

“I can’t make lunch,” I say lamely. “Ethan has agreed to take you, if that’s okay? Can we have a rain check?”

“Sure,” she says quietly. Mia quiet, this is novel.

“Yeah, I’ll take it from here. Laters, Ana,” Ethan says, offering Mia his arm. She accepts it with a shy smile.

“Bye, Ana.” Mia turns to me and mouths, “Oh. My. God!” giving me an

exaggerated wink.

*She likes him!* I wave at them as they leave the building. I wonder what Christian's attitude is about his sister dating. The thought makes me uneasy. She's my age, so he can't object, can he?

*This is Christian we're dealing with*. My snarky subconscious is back, hatchet-mouthed, cardigan on, and purse in the crook of her arm. I shake off the image. Mia is a grown woman and Christian can be reasonable, can't he? I dismiss the thought and head back to Jack's … er … my office to prep for the meeting.

It's three thirty when I return. The meeting went well. I have even secured approval to accept the two manuscripts I was championing. It's a heady feeling.

On my desk is an enormous wicker basket crammed with stunning white and pale pink roses. Wow—the fragrance alone is heavenly. I smile as I pick up the card. I know who sent them.

*Congratulations, Miss Steele*
*And all on your own!*
*No help from your overfriendly, neighborhood, megalomaniac CEO*
*Love*
*Christian*

I pick up my BlackBerry to e-mail him.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Megalomaniac …

**Date:** June 16 2011 15:43

**To:** Christian Grey

… is my favorite type of maniac. Thank you for the beautiful flowers. They've arrived in a huge wicker basket that makes me think of picnics and blankets.

x

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Fresh Air

**Date:** June 16 2011 15:55

**To:** Anastasia Steele

Maniac, eh? Dr. Flynn may have something to say about that.

You want to go on a picnic?

We could have fun in the great outdoors, Anastasia …

How is your day going, baby?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh my. I flush reading his response.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Hectic
**Date:** June 16 2011 16:00
**To:** Christian Grey

The day has flown by. I have hardly had a moment to myself to think about anything other than work. I think I can do this! I'll tell you more when I'm home. Outdoors sounds … interesting.

Love you.

A x

PS: Don't worry about Dr. Flynn.

My phone buzzes. It's Claire from Reception, desperate to know who sent the flowers and what happened to Jack. Holed up in the office all day, I have missed the gossip. I tell her quickly that the flowers are from my boyfriend and that I know very little about Jack's departure. My BlackBerry buzzes and I have another e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** I'll try …
**Date:** June 16 2011 16:09
**To:** Anastasia Steele

… not to worry.

Laters, baby. x

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

At five thirty, I clean up my desk. I can't believe how quickly the day has gone. I have to get back to Escala and prepare to meet Dr. Flynn. I haven't even

had time to think of questions. Perhaps today we can have an initial meeting, and maybe Christian will let me see him again. I shrug off the thought as I dash out of the office, waving a quick good-bye to Claire.

I've also got Christian's birthday to think about. I know what I'm going to give him. I'd like him to have it tonight before we meet Flynn, but how? Beside the parking lot is a small store selling touristy trinkets. Inspiration hits me and I duck inside.

CHRISTIAN IS ON HIS BlackBerry, standing and staring out the glass wall as I enter the great room half an hour later. Turning, he beams at me and wraps up his call.

"Ros, that's great. Tell Barney and we'll go from there … Good-bye."

He strides over to me as I stand shyly in the entryway. He's changed now into a white T-shirt and jeans, all bad boy and smoldering. *Whoa*.

"Good evening, Miss Steele," he murmurs and he bends to kiss me. "Congratulations on your promotion." He wraps his arms around me. He smells delicious.

"You've showered."

"I've just had a workout with Claude."

"Oh."

"Managed to knock him on his ass twice." Christian beams, boyish and pleased with himself. His grin is infectious.

"That doesn't happen often?"

"No. Very satisfying when it does. Hungry?"

I shake my head.

"What?" He frowns at me.

"I'm nervous. About Dr. Flynn."

"Me, too. How was your day?" He releases me, and I give him a brief summary. He listens attentively.

"Oh—there's one more thing I should tell you," I add. "I was supposed to have lunch with Mia."

He raises his eyebrows, surprised. "You never mentioned that."

"I know, I forgot. I couldn't make it because of the meeting, and Ethan took her out to lunch instead."

His face darkens. "I see. Stop biting your lip."

"I'm going to freshen up," I say, changing the subject and turning to leave before he can react any further.

DR. FLYNN'S OFFICE IS a short drive from Christian's apartment. *Very handy*, I muse, *for emergency sessions*.

“I usually run here from home,” Christian says as he parks my Saab. “This is a great car.” He smiles at me.

“I think so, too.” I smile back at him. “Christian … I—” I gaze anxiously at him.

“What is it, Ana?”

“Here.” I pull the small black gift box from my purse. “This is for you for your birthday. I wanted to give it to you now—but only if you promise not to open it until Saturday, okay?”

He blinks at me in surprise and swallows. “Okay,” he murmurs cautiously.

Taking a deep breath, I hand it to him, ignoring his bemused expression. He shakes the box, and it produces a very satisfactory rattle. He frowns. I know he’s desperate to see what it contains. Then he grins, his eyes alight with youthful, carefree excitement. *Oh boy* … he looks his age—and so beautiful.

“You can’t open it until Saturday,” I warn him.

“I get it,” he says. “Why are you giving this to me now?” He pops the box into the inside pocket of his blue pinstriped jacket, close to his heart.

*How apt*, I muse. I smirk at him.

“Because I can, Mr. Grey.”

His mouth twists with wry amusement.

“Why, Miss Steele, you stole my line.”

We are ushered into Dr. Flynn’s palatial office by a brisk and friendly receptionist. She greets Christian warmly, a little too warmly for my taste—she’s old enough to be his mother—and he knows her name.

The room is understated: pale green with two dark green couches facing two leather winged chairs, and it has the atmosphere of a gentlemen’s club. Dr. Flynn is seated at a desk at the far end of the room.

As we enter, he stands and walks over to join us in the seating area. He wears black pants and a pale blue open-necked shirt—no tie. His bright blue eyes seem to miss nothing.

“Christian.” He smiles amicably.

“John.” Christian shakes his hand. “You remember Anastasia?”

“How could I forget? Anastasia, welcome.”

“Ana, please,” I mumble as he shakes my hand firmly. I do love his English accent.

“Ana,” he says kindly, ushering us toward the couches.

Christian gestures to one of them for me. I sit, trying to look relaxed, resting my hand on the armrest, and he sprawls on the other couch beside me so that we’re at right angles to each other. A small table with a simple lamp is between us. I note with interest a box of tissues beside the lamp.

This isn’t what I expected. I had in my mind’s eye a stark white room with a black leather chaise longue.

Looking relaxed and in control, Dr. Flynn takes a seat in one of the winged chairs and picks up a leather notepad. Christian crosses his legs, his ankle resting on his knee, and stretches one arm along the back of the couch. Reaching across with his other hand, he finds my hand on the armrest and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

“Christian has requested that you accompany him to one of our sessions,” Dr. Flynn begins gently. “Just so you know, we treat these sessions with absolute confidentiality—”

I raise my eyebrow at Flynn, halting him mid-speech.

“Oh—um … I’ve signed an NDA,” I murmur, embarrassed that he’s stopped. Both Flynn and Christian stare at me, and Christian releases my hand.

“A nondisclosure agreement?” Dr. Flynn’s brow furrows, and he glances quizzically at Christian.

Christian shrugs.

“You start all your relationships with women with an NDA?” Dr. Flynn asks him.

“The contractual ones, I do.”

Dr. Flynn’s lip twitches. “You’ve had other types of relationships with women?” he asks, and he looks amused.

“No,” Christian answers after a beat, and he looks amused, too.

“As I thought.” Dr. Flynn turns his attention back to me. “Well, I guess we don’t have to worry about confidentiality, but may I suggest that the two of you discuss this at some point? As I understand, you’re no longer entering into that kind of contractual relationship.”

“Different kind of contract, hopefully,” says Christian softly, glancing at me. I flush and Dr. Flynn narrows his eyes.

“Ana. You’ll have to forgive me, but I probably know a lot more about you than you think. Christian has been very forthcoming.”

I glance nervously at Christian. What has he said?

“An NDA?” he continues. “That must have shocked you.”

I blink at him. “Oh, I think the shock of that has paled into insignificance, given Christian’s most recent revelations,” I answer, my voice soft and hesitant. I sound so nervous.

“I’m sure.” Dr. Flynn smiles kindly at me. “So, Christian, what would you like to discuss?”

Christian shrugs like a surly teen. “Anastasia wanted to see you. Perhaps you should ask her.”

Dr. Flynn's face registers his surprise once more, and he gazes shrewdly at me.

*Holy shit*. This is mortifying. I gaze down at my fingers.

"Would you be more comfortable if Christian left us for a while?"

My eyes dart to Christian and he's gazing at me expectantly.

"Yes," I whisper.

Christian frowns and opens his mouth but closes it again quickly and stands in one swift graceful movement.

"I'll be in the waiting room," he says, his mouth a flat, grumpy line.

*Oh no*.

"Thank you, Christian," Dr. Flynn says impassively.

Christian gives me one long, searching look, then stalks out of the room—but he doesn't slam the door. Phew. I immediately relax.

"He intimidates you?"

"Yes. But not as much as he used to." I feel disloyal, but it's the truth.

"That doesn't surprise me, Ana. What can I help you with?"

I stare down at my knotted fingers. What can I ask?

"Dr. Flynn, I've never been in a relationship before, and Christian is … well, he's Christian. And over the last week or so, a great deal has happened. I haven't had a chance to think things through."

"What do you need to think through?"

I glance up at him, and his head is cocked to one side as he gazes at me with compassion, I think.

"Well … Christian tells me that he's happy to give up … er—" I stumble and pause. This is so much more difficult to discuss than I'd imagined.

Dr. Flynn sighs. "Ana, in the very limited time that you've known him, you've made more progress with my patient than I have in the last two years. You have had a profound effect on him. You must see that."

"He's had a profound effect on me, too. I just don't know if I'm enough. To fulfill his needs," I whisper.

"Is that what you need from me? Reassurance?"

I nod.

"Needs change," he says simply. "Christian has found himself in a situation where his methods of coping are no longer effective. Very simply, you've forced him to confront some of his demons and rethink."

I blink at him. This echoes what Christian has told me.

"Yes, his demons," I murmur.

"We don't dwell on them—they're in the past. Christian knows what his demons are, as do I—and now I'm sure you do, too. I'm much more concerned

with the future and getting Christian to a place where he wants to be."

I frown and he raises an eyebrow.

"The technical term is SFBT—sorry." He smiles. "That stands for Solution-Focused Brief Therapy. Essentially, it's goal oriented. We concentrate on where Christian wants to be and how to get him there. It's a dialectical approach. There's no point in breast-beating about the past—all that's been picked over by every physician, psychologist, and psychiatrist Christian's ever seen. We know why he's the way he is, but it's the future that's important. Where Christian envisages himself, where he wants to be. It took you walking out on him to make him take this form of therapy seriously. He realizes that his goal is a loving relationship with you. It's that simple, and that's what we're working on now. Of course there are obstacles—his haphephobia, for one."

*His what?* I gasp.

"I'm sorry. I mean his fear of being touched," Dr. Flynn says, shaking his head as if scolding himself. "Which I'm sure you're aware of."

I flush and nod. *Oh, that!*

"He has a morbid self-abhorrence. I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you. And of course there's the parasomnia … um—night terrors, sorry, to the layperson."

I blink at him, trying to absorb all these long words. I know about all of this. But Flynn hasn't mentioned my central concern.

"But he's a sadist. Surely, as such, he has needs that I can't fulfill."

Dr. Flynn actually rolls his eyes, and his mouth presses into a hard line. "That's no longer recognized as a psychiatric term. I don't know how many times I have told him that. It's not even classified as a paraphilia anymore, not since the nineties."

Dr. Flynn has lost me again. I blink at him. He smiles kindly at me.

"This is a pet peeve of mine." He shakes his head. "Christian just thinks the worst of any given situation. It's part of his self-abhorrence. Of course, there's such a thing as sexual sadism, but it's not a disease; it's a lifestyle choice. And if it's practiced in a safe, sane relationship between consenting adults, then it's a non-issue. My understanding is that Christian has conducted all of his BDSM relationships in this manner. You're the first lover who hasn't consented, so he's not willing to do it."

*Lover!*

"But surely it's not that simple."

"Why not?" Dr. Flynn shrugs good-naturedly.

"Well … the reasons he does it."

"Ana, that's the point. In terms of solution-focused therapy, it is that simple.

Christian wants to be with you. In order to do that, he needs to forgo the more extreme aspects of that kind of relationship. After all, what you're asking for is not unreasonable … is it?"

I flush. No, it's not unreasonable, is it?

"I don't think so. But I worry that he does."

"Christian recognizes that and has acted accordingly. He's not insane." Dr. Flynn sighs. "In a nutshell, he's not a sadist, Ana. He's an angry, frightened, brilliant young man, who was dealt a shit hand of cards when he was born. We can all beat our breasts about it, and analyze the who, the how, and the why to death—or Christian can move on and decide how he wants to live. He'd found something that worked for him for a few years, more or less, but since he met you, it no longer works. And as a consequence, he's changing his modus operandi. You and I have to respect his choice and support him in it."

I gape at him. "That's my reassurance?"

"As good as it gets, Ana. There are no guarantees in this life." He smiles. "And that is my professional opinion."

I smile, too, weakly. Doctor jokes … jeez.

"But he thinks of himself as a recovering alcoholic."

"Christian will always think the worst of himself. As I said, it's part of his self-abhorrence. It's in his makeup, no matter what. Naturally he's anxious about making this change in his life. He's potentially exposing himself to a whole world of emotional pain, which, incidentally, he had a taste of when you left him. Naturally he's apprehensive." Dr. Flynn pauses. "I don't mean to stress how important a role you have in his Damascene conversion—his road to Damascus. But you have. Christian would not be in this place if he had not met you. Personally I don't think that an alcoholic is a very good analogy, but if it works for him for now, then I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt."

Give Christian the benefit of the doubt. I frown at the thought.

"Emotionally, Christian is an adolescent, Ana. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has beyond all expectations. His emotional world has to play catch-up."

"So how do I help?"

Dr. Flynn laughs. "Just keep doing what you're doing." He grins at me. "Christian is head over heels. It's a delight to see."

I flush, and my inner goddess is hugging herself with glee, but something bothers me.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

“Of course.”

I take a deep breath. “Part of me thinks that if he wasn’t this broken he wouldn’t … want me.”

Dr. Flynn’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “That’s a very negative thing to say about yourself, Ana. And frankly it says more about you than it does about Christian. It’s not quite up there with his self-loathing, but I’m surprised by it.”

“Well, look at him … and then look at me.”

Dr. Flynn frowns. “I have. I see an attractive young man, and I see an attractive young woman. Ana, why don’t you think of yourself as attractive?”

*Oh no* … I don’t want this to be about me. I stare down at my fingers. There’s a sharp knock on the door that makes me jump. Christian comes back into the room, glaring at both of us. I flush and glance quickly at Flynn, who is smiling benignly at Christian.

“Welcome back, Christian,” he says.

“I think time is up, John.”

“Nearly, Christian. Join us.”

Christian sits down, beside me this time, and places his hand possessively on my knee. His action does not go unnoticed by Dr. Flynn.

“Did you have any other questions, Ana?” Dr. Flynn asks and his concern is obvious. Shit … I should not have asked that question. I shake my head.

“Christian?”

“Not today, John.”

Flynn nods.

“It may be beneficial if you both come again. I’m sure Ana will have more questions.”

Christian nods reluctantly.

I flush. Shit … he wants to delve. Christian clasps my hand and regards me intently.

“Okay?” he asks softly.

I smile at him, nodding. Yes, we’re going for the benefit of the doubt, courtesy of the good doctor from England.

Christian squeezes my hand and turns to Flynn.

“How is she?” he asks softly.

*Me?*

“She’ll get there,” he says reassuringly.

“Good. Keep me updated of her progress.”

“I will.”

*Holy fuck. They’re talking about Leila*.

“Should we go and celebrate your promotion?” Christian asks me pointedly.

I nod shyly as Christian stands.

We say our quick good-byes to Dr. Flynn, and Christian ushers me out with unseemly haste.

---

IN THE STREET, HE turns to me. “How was that?” His voice is anxious.

“It was good.”

He regards me suspiciously. I cock my head to one side.

“Mr. Grey, please don’t look at me that way. Under doctor’s orders I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ll see.”

His mouth twists and his eyes narrow. “Get in the car,” he orders while opening the passenger door of the Saab.

Oh, change of direction. My BlackBerry buzzes. I haul it out of my purse.

*Shit, José!*

“Hi!”

“Ana, hi …”

I stare at Fifty, who is eyeing me suspiciously. “José,” I mouth at him. He stares impassively at me, but his eyes harden. Does he think I don’t notice? I turn my attention back to José.

“Sorry I haven’t called you. Is it about tomorrow?” I ask José, but stare up at Christian.

“Yeah, listen—I spoke with some guy at Grey’s place, so I know where I’m delivering the photos, and I should get there between five and six … after that, I’m free.”

*Oh.*

“Well, I’m actually staying with Christian right now, and if you want to, he says you can stay at his place.”

Christian presses his mouth in a hard line. Hmm—some host he is.

José is silent for a minute, absorbing this news. I cringe. I haven’t had a chance to talk to him about Christian.

“Okay,” he says eventually. “This thing with Grey, it’s serious?”

I turn away from the car and pace to the other side of the sidewalk.

“Yes.”

“How serious?”

I roll my eyes and pause. Why does Christian have to be listening?

“Serious.”

“Is he with you now? That why you’re speaking in monosyllables?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So are you allowed out tomorrow?”

“Of course I am.” I hope. I automatically cross my fingers.

“So where should I meet you?”

“You could pick me up from work,” I offer.

“Okay.”

“I’ll text you the address.”

“What time?”

“Six?”

“Sure. I’ll see you then, Ana. Looking forward to it. I miss you.”

I grin. “Cool. I’ll see you then.” I switch the phone off and turn.

Christian is leaning against the car watching me carefully, his expression impossible to read.

“How’s your friend?” he asks coolly.

“He’s well. He’ll pick me up from work, and I think we’ll go for a drink. Would you like to join us?”

Christian hesitates, his gray eyes cool. “You don’t think he’ll try anything?”

“No!” My tone is exasperated—but I refrain from rolling my eyes.

“Okay.” Christian holds his hands up in defeat. “You hang out with your friend, and I’ll see you later in the evening.”

I was expecting a fight, and his easy acquiescence throws me off balance.

“See? I can be reasonable.” He smirks.

My mouth twists. We’ll see about that.

“Can I drive?”

Christian blinks at me, surprised by my request.

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Why, exactly?”

“Because I don’t like to be driven.”

“You managed this morning, and you seem to tolerate Taylor driving you.”

“I trust Taylor’s driving implicitly.”

“And not mine?” I put my hands on my hips. “Honestly—your control-freakishness knows no bounds. I’ve been driving since I was fifteen.”

He shrugs in response, as if this is of no consequence whatsoever. Oh—he’s so exasperating! Benefit of the doubt? Well, screw that.

“Is this my car?” I demand.

He frowns at me. “Of course it’s your car.”

“Then give me the keys, please. I’ve driven it twice, and only to and from work. Now you’re having all the fun.” I am in full-on pout mode. Christian’s lips twitch with a repressed smile.

“But you don’t know where we’re going.”

“I’m sure you can enlighten me, Mr. Grey. You’ve done a great job of it so far.”

He gazes at me, stunned, and then smiles, his new shy smile that totally disarms me and takes my breath away.

“Great job, eh?” he murmurs.

I blush. “Mostly yes.”

“Well, in that case.” He hands me the keys, walks around to the driver’s door, and opens it for me.

“LEFT HERE,” CHRISTIAN ORDERS, and we head north toward I-5. “Hell—gently, Ana.” He grabs hold of the dashboard.

Oh, for heaven’s sake. I roll my eyes but don’t turn to look at him. Van Morrison croons in the background over the car sound system.

“Slow down!”

“I am slowing down!”

Christian sighs. “What did Flynn say?” I hear his anxiety leaching into his voice.

“I told you. He says I should give you the benefit of the doubt.” Damn—maybe I should have let Christian drive. Then I could watch him. In fact … I signal to pull over.

“What are you doing?” he snaps, alarmed.

“Letting you drive.”

“Why?”

“So I can look at you.”

He laughs. “No, no—you wanted to drive. So, you drive, and I’ll look at you.”

I scowl at him. “Keep your eyes on the road!” he shouts.

My blood boils. Right! I pull over to the curb just before a traffic light and storm out of the car, slamming the door, and stand on the sidewalk, arms crossed. I glare at him. He climbs out of the car.

“What are you doing?” he asks angrily, staring down at me.

“No. What are you doing?”

“You can’t park here.”

“I know that.”

“So why have you?”

“Because I’ve had it with you barking orders. Either you drive or you shut up about my driving!”

“Anastasia, get back in the car before we get a ticket.”

“No.”

He blinks at me, at a total loss, then runs his hands through his hair, and his anger becomes bewilderment. He looks so comical all of a sudden, and I can't help but smile at him. He frowns.

"What?" he snaps once more.

"You."

"Oh, Anastasia! You are the most frustrating female on the planet." He throws his hands in the air. "Fine—I'll drive." I grab the edges of his jacket and pull him to me.

"No—you are the most frustrating man on the planet, Mr. Grey."

He gazes down at me, his eyes dark and intense, then he snakes his arms around my waist and embraces me, holding me close.

"Maybe we're meant for each other, then," he says softly and inhales deeply, his nose in my hair. I wrap my arms around him and close my eyes. For the first time since this morning, I feel myself relax.

"Oh … Ana, Ana, Ana," he breathes, his lips pressed against my hair. I tighten my arms around him, and we stand, immobile, enjoying a moment of unexpected tranquility, on the street. Releasing me, he opens the passenger door. I climb in and sit quietly, watching him walk around the car.

Restarting the car, Christian pulls out into the traffic, absentmindedly humming along to Van Morrison.

Whoa. I've never heard him sing, not even in the shower, ever. I frown. He has a lovely voice—of course. Hmm … has he heard me sing?

*He wouldn't be asking you to marry him if he had!* My subconscious has her arms crossed and is wearing Burberry check. The song finishes and Christian grins.

"You know, if we had gotten a ticket, the title of this car is in your name."

"Well, good thing I've been promoted—I can afford the fine," I say smugly, staring at his lovely profile. His lips twitch. Another Van Morrison song starts playing as he takes the on-ramp to I-5, heading north.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. What else did Flynn say?"

I sigh. "He talked about FFFSTB or something."

"SFBT. The latest therapy option," he mutters.

"You've tried others?"

Christian snorts. "Baby, I've been subjected to them all. Cognitivism, Freud, functionalism, Gestalt, behaviorism … You name it, over the years I've done it," he says and his tone betrays his bitterness. The rancor in his voice is distressing.

"Do you think this latest approach will help?"

"What did Flynn say?"

“He said not to dwell on your past. Focus on the future—on where you want to be.”

Christian nods but shrugs at the same time, his expression cautious.

“What else?” he persists.

“He talked about your fear of being touched, although he called it something else. And about your nightmares and your self-abhorrence.” I glance at him, and in the evening light, he’s pensive, chewing on his thumbnail as he drives. He glances quickly at me.

“Eyes on the road, Mr. Grey,” I admonish, my eyebrow cocked at him.

He looks amused and slightly exasperated. “You were talking forever, Anastasia. What else did he say?”

I swallow. “He doesn’t think you’re a sadist,” I whisper.

“Really?” Christian says quietly and frowns. The atmosphere in the car takes a nosedive.

“He says that term’s not recognized in psychiatry. Not since the nineties,” I mutter, quickly trying to rescue the mood between us.

Christian’s face darkens, and he exhales slowly.

“Flynn and I have differing opinions on this,” he says quietly.

“He said you always think the worst of yourself. I know that’s true,” I murmur. “He also mentioned sexual sadism—but he said that was a lifestyle choice, not a psychiatric condition. Maybe that’s what you’re thinking about.”

His eyes flash toward me again, and his mouth sets in a grim line.

“So—one talk with the good doctor and you’re an expert,” he says acidly and turns his eyes forward.

*Oh dear* … I sigh.

“Look—if you don’t want to hear what he said, don’t ask me,” I mutter softly.

I don’t want to argue. Anyway he’s right—what the hell do I know about all his shit? Do I even want to know? I can list the salient points—his control-freakishness, his possessiveness, his jealousy, his overprotectiveness—and I completely understand where he’s coming from. I can even understand why he doesn’t like to be touched—I’ve seen the physical scars. I can only imagine the mental ones, and I’ve only glimpsed his nightmares once. And Dr. Flynn said—

“I want to know what you discussed.” Christian interrupts my thoughts as he heads off I-5 on exit 172, heading west toward the slowly sinking sun.

“He called me your lover.”

“Did he, now?” His tone is conciliatory. “Well, he’s nothing if not fastidious about his terms. I think that’s an accurate description. Don’t you?”

“Did you think of your subs as lovers?”

Christian’s brow creases once more, but this time he’s thinking. He turns the

Saab smoothly north once again. *Where are we going?*

"No. They were sexual partners," he murmurs, his voice cautious again. "You're my only lover. And I want you to be more."

Oh … there's that magical word again, brimming with possibility. It makes me smile, and inside I hug myself, trying to contain my joy.

"I know," I whisper, trying hard to hide my excitement. "I just need some time, Christian. To get my head around these last few days." He glances at me oddly, perplexed, his head inclined to one side.

After a beat, the traffic light we're stopped at turns green. He nods and turns the music up, and our discussion is over.

Van Morrison is still singing—more optimistically now—about it being a marvelous night for moondancing. I gaze out the windows at the pines and spruce dusted gold by the fading light of the sun, their long shadows stretching across the road. Christian has turned onto a more residential street, and we're heading west toward the Sound.

"Where are we going?" I ask again as we turn onto a road. I catch a road sign —9TH AVE NW. I am baffled.

"Surprise," he says and smiles mysteriously.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Christian continues to drive past single-story, well-kept clapboard houses where kids play basketball in their yards or cycle and run around in the street. It all looks affluent and wholesome with the houses nestling among the trees. Perhaps we're going to visit someone? Who?

A few minutes later, Christian turns sharply left, and we're confronted by two ornate white metal gates set in a six-foot-high sandstone wall. Christian presses a button on his door handle and the electric window hums quietly down into the doorframe. He punches a number into the keypad and the gates swing open in welcome.

He glances at me, and his expression has changed. He looks uncertain, even nervous.

"What is it?" I ask, and I can't mask the concern in my voice.

"An idea," he says quietly and eases the Saab through the gates.

We head up a tree-lined lane just wide enough for two cars. On one side the trees ring a densely wooded area, and on the other there's a vast area of grassland where a once-cultivated field has been left fallow. Grass and wildflowers have reclaimed it, creating a rural idyll—a meadow, where the late evening breeze softly ripples through the grass and the evening sun gilds the wildflowers. It's lovely, utterly tranquil, and suddenly I imagine myself lying in the grass and gazing up at a clear blue summer sky. The thought is tantalizing, yet makes me feel homesick for some strange reason. How odd.

The lane curves around and opens into a sweeping driveway in front of an impressive Mediterranean-style house of soft pink sandstone. It's palatial. All the lights are on, each window brightly illuminated in the dusk. There's a smart black BMW parked in front of the four-car garage, but Christian pulls up outside the grand portico.

Hmm … I wonder who lives here. Why are we visiting?

Christian glances anxiously at me as he switches off the car engine.

"Will you keep an open mind?" he asks.

I frown.

"Christian, I've needed an open mind since the day I met you."

He smiles ironically and nods. “Fair point well made, Miss Steele. Let’s go.”

The dark wood doors open, and a woman with dark brown hair, a sincere smile, and a sharp lilac suit stands waiting. I’m grateful I changed into my new navy shift dress to impress Dr. Flynn. Okay, I’m not wearing killer heels like her—but still, I’m not in jeans.

“Mr. Grey.” She smiles warmly and they shake hands.

“Miss Kelly,” he says politely.

She smiles at me and holds out her hand, which I shake. Her isn’t-he-dreamily-gorgeous-wish-he-were-mine flush does not go unnoticed.

“Olga Kelly,” she announces breezily.

“Ana Steele,” I mutter back at her. Who is this woman? She stands aside, welcoming us into the house. It’s a shock when I step in. The place is empty—completely empty. We find ourselves in a large entrance hall. The walls are a faded primrose yellow with scuff marks where pictures must once have hung. All that remains are the old-fashioned crystal light fixtures. The floors are dull hardwood. There are closed doors to either side of us, but Christian gives me no time to assimilate what’s happening.

“Come,” he says, and taking my hand, he leads me through the archway in front of us into a larger inner vestibule. It’s dominated by a curved, sweeping staircase with an intricate iron balustrade, but still he doesn’t stop. He takes me through to the main living area, which is empty save for a large faded gold rug—the biggest rug I have ever seen. Oh—and there are four crystal chandeliers.

But Christian’s intention is now clear as we head across the room and outside through open French doors to a large stone terrace. Below us there’s half a football field of manicured lawn, but beyond that is the view. *Wow*.

The panoramic, uninterrupted vista is breathtaking—staggering even: twilight over the Sound. In the distance lies Bainbridge Island, and farther still on this crystal-clear evening, the setting sun sinks slowly, glowing blood and flame orange, beyond Olympic National Park. Vermilion hues bleed into the cerulean sky, with opals and aquamarines, and meld with the darker purples of the scant wispy clouds and the land beyond the Sound. It is nature’s best, a visual symphony orchestrated in the sky and reflected in the deep, still waters of the Sound. I am lost to the view—staring, trying to absorb such beauty.

I realize I’m holding my breath in awe, and Christian is still holding my hand. As I reluctantly turn my eyes away from the view, he’s gazing anxiously at me.

“You brought me here to admire the view?” I whisper.

He nods, his expression serious.

“It’s staggering, Christian. Thank you,” I murmur, letting my eyes feast on it once more. He releases my hand.

“How would you like to look at it for the rest of your life?” he breathes.

*What?* I whip my face back to his, startled blue eyes to pensive gray. I think my mouth drops open, and I gape at him blankly.

“I’ve always wanted to live on the coast. I sail up and down the Sound coveting these houses. This place hasn’t been on the market long. I want to buy it, demolish it, and build a new house—for us,” he whispers, and his eyes glow, translucent with his hopes and dreams.

*Holy cow*. Somehow I remain upright. I’m reeling. *Live here! In this beautiful haven! For the rest of my life …*

“It’s just an idea,” he adds cautiously.

I glance back to assess the interior of the house. How much is it worth? It must be what—five, ten million dollars? I have no idea. Holy shit.

“Why do you want to demolish it?” I ask, looking back at him. His face falls. *Oh no*.

“I’d like to make a more sustainable home, using the latest ecological techniques. Elliot could build it.”

I gaze back at the room again. Miss Olga Kelly is on the far side, hovering by the entrance. She’s the Realtor, of course. I notice the room is huge and double height, a little like the great room at Escala. There’s a balcony above—that must be the landing on the second floor. There’s a huge fireplace and a whole line of French doors opening onto the terrace. It has an old-world charm.

“Can we look around the house?”

He blinks at me. “Sure.” He shrugs, puzzled.

Miss Kelly’s face lights up like Christmas when we head back in. She’s delighted to take us on a tour and gives us the spiel.

The house is enormous: twelve thousand square feet on six acres of land. As well as the main living room, there’s the eat-in—no, banquet-in—kitchen with family room attached—*family!*—a music room, a library, a study and, much to my amazement, an indoor pool and exercise suite with sauna and steam room attached. Downstairs in the basement there’s a cinema—*jeez*—and game room. Hmm … what sort of games could we play in here?

Miss Kelly points out all sorts of features, but basically the house is beautiful and was obviously at one time a happy family home. It’s a little shabby now, but nothing that some TLC couldn’t cure.

As we follow Miss Kelly up the magnificent main stairs to the second floor, I can hardly contain my excitement … this house has everything I could ever wish for in a home.

“Couldn’t you make the existing house more ecological and self-sustaining?”

Christian blinks at me, nonplussed. “I’d have to ask Elliot. He’s the expert in

all this."

Miss Kelly leads us into the master suite, where full-height windows open onto a balcony, and the view is still spectacular. I could sit in bed and gaze out all day, watching the sailing boats and the changing weather.

There are five additional bedrooms on this floor. *Kids!* I push the thought hastily to one side. I have too much to process already. Miss Kelly is busily suggesting to Christian how the grounds could accommodate riding stables and a paddock. *Horses!* Terrifying images of my few riding lessons flash through my mind, but Christian doesn't appear to be listening.

"The paddock would be where the meadow is now?" I ask.

"Yes," Miss Kelly says brightly.

To me the meadow looks like somewhere to lie in the long grass and have picnics, not for some four-legged fiend of Satan to roam.

Back in the main room, Miss Kelly discreetly disappears, and Christian leads me out once more onto the terrace. The sun has set and lights from the towns on the Olympic peninsula are twinkling on the far side of the Sound.

Christian pulls me into his arms and tips my chin up with his index finger, staring intently down at me.

"Lot to take in?" he asks, his expression unreadable.

I nod.

"I wanted to check that you liked it before I bought it."

"The view?"

He nods.

"I love the view, and I like the house that's here."

"You do?"

I smile shyly. "Christian, you had me at the meadow."

His lips part as he inhales sharply, then his face transforms with a grin, and his hands are suddenly thrusting into my hair and his mouth is on mine.

BACK IN THE CAR as we head for Seattle, Christian's mood has lifted considerably.

"So, you're going to buy it?" I ask.

"Yes."

"You'll put Escala on the market?"

He frowns. "Why would I do that?"

"To pay for …" My voice trails off—of course. I flush.

He smirks at me. "Trust me, I can afford it."

"Do you like being rich?"

"Yes. Show me someone who doesn't," he says darkly.

Okay, get off that subject quickly.

“Anastasia, you’re going to have to learn to be rich, too, if you say yes,” he says softly.

“Wealth isn’t something I’ve ever aspired to, Christian.” I frown.

“I know. I love that about you. But then again, you’ve never been hungry,” he says simply. His words are sobering.

“Where are we going?” I ask brightly, changing the subject.

“To celebrate.” Christian relaxes.

*Oh!* “Celebrate what, the house?”

“Have you forgotten already? Your acting editor role.”

“Oh yes.” I grin. Unbelievably, I had forgotten.

“Where?”

“Up high at my club.”

“Your club?”

“Yes. One of them.”

THE MILE HIGH CLUB is on the seventy-sixth floor of Columbia Tower, higher even than Christian’s apartment. It’s very trendy and has the most head-spinning views over Seattle.

“Cristal, ma’am?” Christian hands me a glass of chilled champagne as I sit perched on a barstool.

“Why, thank you, *Sir*.” I stress the last word flirtatiously, batting my eyelashes at him deliberately.

He gazes at me and his face darkens. “Are you flirting with me, Miss Steele?”

“Yes, Mr. Grey, I am. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m sure I can think of something,” he says, his voice low. “Come—our table’s ready.”

As we approach the table, Christian stops me, his hand on my elbow.

“Go and take your panties off,” he whispers.

*Oh?* A delicious tingle runs down my spine.

“Go,” he commands quietly.

*Whoa*, *what?* He’s not smiling—he’s dead serious. Every muscle below my waistline tightens. I hand him my glass of champagne, turn sharply on my heel, and head for the restroom.

Shit. What’s he going to do? Perhaps this club is aptly named.

The restrooms are the height of modern design—all dark wood, black granite, and pools of light from strategically placed halogens. In the privacy of the stall, I smirk as I divest myself of my underwear. Again I’m grateful I changed into the navy blue shift dress. I thought it appropriate attire to meet the good Dr. Flynn—I hadn’t expected the evening to take this unexpected course.

I am excited already. Why does he affect me so? I slightly resent how easily I fall under his spell. I know now that we won't be spending the evening talking through all our issues and recent events … but how can I resist him?

Checking my appearance in the mirror, I am bright-eyed and flushed with excitement. *Issues, schmissues*.

I take a deep breath and head back out into the club. I mean, it's not as if I haven't gone pantyless before. My inner goddess is draped in a pink feather boa and diamonds, strutting her stuff in fuck-me shoes.

Christian stands politely when I return to the table, his expression unreadable. He looks his usual perfect, cool, calm, and collected self. Of course, I now know differently.

"Sit beside me," he says. I slide into the seat and he sits. "I've ordered for you. I hope you don't mind." He hands me my half-finished glass of champagne, regarding me intently, and under his scrutiny, my blood heats anew. He rests his hands on his thighs. I tense and part my legs slightly.

The waiter arrives with a dish of oysters on crushed ice. *Oysters*. The memory of the two of us in the private dining room at the Heathman fills my mind. We were discussing his contract. Oh, boy. We've come a long way since then.

"I think you liked oysters last time you tried them." His voice is low, seductive.

"Only time I've tried them." I'm all breathy, my voice exposing me. His lips twitch with a smile.

"Oh, Miss Steele—when will you learn?" he muses.

He takes an oyster from the dish and lifts his other hand from his thigh. I flinch in anticipation, but he reaches for a slice of lemon.

"Learn what?" I ask. Jeez, my pulse is racing. His long, skilled fingers gently squeeze the lemon over the shellfish.

"Eat," he says, holding the shell close to my mouth. I part my lips, and he gently places the shell on my bottom lip. "Tip your head back slowly," he murmurs. I do as he asks and the oyster slips down my throat. He doesn't touch me, only the shell does.

Christian helps himself to one, then feeds me another. We continue this torturous routine until all twelve are gone. His skin never connects with mine. It's driving me crazy.

"Still like oysters?" he asks as I swallow the final one.

I nod, flushed, craving his touch.

"Good."

I squirm in my seat. Why is this so hot?

He puts his hand casually on his own thigh again, and I melt. Now. Please.

Touch me. My inner goddess is on her knees, naked except for her panties—begging. He runs his hand up and down his thigh, lifts it, then places it back where it was.

The waiter tops up our champagne glasses and whisks away our plates. Moments later he's back with our entrées, sea bass—*I don't believe it*—served with asparagus, sautéed potatoes, and a hollandaise sauce.

"A favorite of yours, Mr. Grey?"

"Most definitely, Miss Steele. Though I believe it was cod at the Heathman." His hand moves up and down his thigh. My breathing spikes, but still he doesn't touch me. It's so frustrating. I try to concentrate on our conversation.

"I seem to remember we were in a private dining room then, discussing contracts."

"Happy days," he says, smirking. "This time I hope to get to fuck you." He moves his hand to pick up his knife.

*Gah!*

He takes a bite out of his sea bass. He's doing this on purpose.

"Don't count on it," I mutter with a pout and he glances at me, amused. "Speaking of contracts," I add. "The NDA."

"Tear it up," he says simply.

*Whoa*.

"What? Really?"

"Yes."

"You're sure I'm not going to run to the *Seattle Times* with an exposé?" I tease.

He laughs and it's a wonderful sound. He looks so young.

"No. I trust you. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt."

Oh. I grin shyly at him. "Ditto," I breathe.

His eyes light up. "I'm very glad you're wearing a dress," he murmurs. And bam—desire courses through my already overheated blood.

"Why haven't you touched me, then?" I hiss.

"Missing my touch?" he asks, grinning. He's amused … the bastard.

"Yes," I seethe.

"Eat," he orders.

"You're not going to touch me, are you?"

"No." He shakes his head.

*What?* I gasp out loud.

"Just imagine how you'll feel when we're home," he whispers. "I can't wait to get you home."

"It will be your fault if I combust here on the seventy-sixth floor," I mutter

through gritted teeth.

"Oh, Anastasia. We'd find a way to put the fire out," he says, grinning salaciously at me.

Fuming, I dig into my sea bass, and my inner goddess narrows her eyes in quiet, devious contemplation. We can play this game, too. I learned the basics during our meal at the Heathman. I take a bite out of my sea bass. It is melt-in-the-mouth delicious. I close my eyes, savoring the taste. When I open them, I begin my seduction of Christian Grey, very slowly hitching my skirt up, exposing more of my thighs.

Christian pauses momentarily, a forkful of fish suspended midair.

*Touch me*.

After a beat, he resumes eating. I take another bite of sea bass, ignoring him. Then, putting down my knife, I run my fingers up the inside of my lower thigh, lightly tapping my skin with my fingertips. It's distracting even to me, especially as I am craving his touch. Christian pauses once more.

"I know what you're doing." His voice is low and husky.

"I know that you know, Mr. Grey," I reply softly. "That's the point." I pick up an asparagus stalk, gaze sideways at him from beneath my lashes, then dip the asparagus into the hollandaise sauce, swirling the tip around and around.

"You're not turning the tables on me, Miss Steele." Smirking he reaches over and takes the spear from me—amazingly and annoyingly managing not to touch me again. No, this isn't right—this is not going according to plan. *Gah!*

"Open your mouth," he commands.

I am losing this battle of wills. I glance up at him again, and his eyes blaze bright gray. Parting my lips a fraction, I run my tongue across my lower lip. Christian smiles and his eyes darken further.

"Wider," he breathes, his lips parting so that I can see his tongue. I groan inwardly and bite my bottom lip, then do as he asks.

I hear his sharp intake of breath—he's not so immune. Good, I am finally getting to him.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I take the spear in my mouth, and suck gently … delicately … on the end. The hollandaise sauce is mouthwatering. I bite down, moaning quietly in appreciation.

Christian closes his eyes. *Yes!* When he opens them again, his pupils have dilated. The effect on me is immediate. I groan and reach out to touch his thigh. To my surprise, he uses his other hand to grab my wrist.

"Oh no you don't, Miss Steele," he murmurs softly. Raising my hand to his mouth, he gently brushes my knuckles with his lips, and I squirm. Finally! More, please.

“Don’t touch,” he scolds me quietly, and places my hand back on my knee. It’s so frustrating—this brief unsatisfactory contact.

“You don’t play fair.” I pout.

“I know.” He picks up his champagne glass to propose a toast, and I mirror his actions.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Miss Steele.” We clink glasses and I blush.

“Yes, kind of unexpected,” I mutter. He frowns as if some unpleasant thought has crossed his mind.

“Eat,” he orders. “I am not taking you home until you’ve finished your meal, and then we can really celebrate.” His expression is so heated, so raw, so commanding. I am melting.

“I’m not hungry. Not for food.”

He shakes his head, thoroughly enjoying himself, but narrows his eyes at me just the same.

“Eat, or I’ll put you across my knee, right here, and we’ll entertain the other diners.”

His words make me squirm. He wouldn’t dare! Him and his twitchy palm. I press my mouth into a hard line and stare at him. Picking up an asparagus stalk, he dips the head into the hollandaise.

“Eat this,” he murmurs, his voice low and seductive.

I willingly comply.

“You really don’t eat enough. You’ve lost weight since I’ve known you.” His tone is gentle.

I don’t want to think about my weight; truth is, I like being this slim. I swallow the asparagus.

“I just want to go home and make love,” I mutter disconsolately. Christian grins.

“So do I, and we will. Eat up.”

Reluctantly, I turn back to my food and start to eat. Honestly, I’ve taken my panties off and everything. I feel like a child who has been denied candy. He is such a tease, a delicious, hot, naughty tease, and all mine.

He quizzes me about Ethan. As it turns out, Christian does business with Kate and Ethan’s father. Hmm … it’s a small world. I’m relieved he doesn’t mention Dr. Flynn or the house, as I’m finding it difficult to concentrate on our conversation. I want to go home.

The carnal anticipation is unfurling between us. He’s so good at this. Making me wait. Setting the scene. Between bites, he places his hand on his thigh, so close to mine, but still doesn’t touch me just to tease me further.

Bastard! Finally I finish my food and place my knife and fork on the plate.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and those two words hold so much promise.

I frown at him. "What now?" I ask, desire clawing at my belly. Oh, I want this man.

"Now? We leave. I believe you have certain expectations, Miss Steele. Which I intend to fulfill to the best of my ability."

*Whoa!*

"The best … of your a … bil … ity?" I stutter. *Holy shit.*

He grins and stands.

"Don't we have to pay?" I ask, breathless.

He cocks his head to one side. "I am a member here. They'll bill me. Come, Anastasia, after you." He steps aside, and I stand to leave, conscious that I am not wearing my panties.

He gazes at me darkly, like he's undressing me, and I glory in his carnal appraisal. It just makes me feel so sexy—this beautiful man desires me. Will I always get a kick out of this? Deliberately stopping in front of him, I smooth my dress over my hips.

Christian whispers in my ear, "I can't wait to get you home." But he still doesn't touch me.

On the way out he murmurs something about the car to the maître d', but I'm not listening; my inner goddess is incandescent with anticipation. Jeez, she could light up Seattle.

Waiting by the elevators, we are joined by two middle-aged couples. When the doors open, Christian takes my elbow and steers me to the back. I glance around, and we're surrounded by dark smoked-glass mirrors. As the other couples enter, one man in a rather unflattering brown suit greets Christian.

"Grey." He nods politely. Christian nods in return but is silent.

The couples stand in front of us, facing the elevator doors. They are obviously friends—the women chat loudly, excited and animated after their meal. I think they're all a little tipsy.

As the doors close, Christian briefly stoops down beside me to tie his shoelace. Odd, his shoelaces aren't undone. Discreetly he places his hand on my ankle, startling me, and as he stands his hand travels swiftly up my leg, skating deliciously over my skin—whoa—right up. I have to stifle my gasp of surprise as his hand reaches my backside. Christian moves behind me.

*Oh my*. I gape at the people in front of us, staring at the backs of their heads. They have no idea what we're up to. Wrapping his free arm around my waist, Christian pulls me to him, holding me in place as his fingers explore. *Holy fucking shit … in here?* The elevator travels smoothly down, stopping at the

fifty-third floor to let some more people on, but I am not paying attention. I am focused on every little move his fingers make. Circling around … now moving forward, questing, as we shuffle back.

Again I stifle a groan when his fingers find their goal.

"Always so ready, Miss Steele," he whispers as he slips a finger inside me. I squirm and gasp. How can he do this with all these people here?

"Keep still and quiet," he warns, murmuring in my ear.

I'm flushed, warm, wanting, trapped in an elevator with seven people, six of them oblivious to what's occurring in the corner. His finger slides in and out of me, again and again. My breathing … Jeez, it's embarrassing. I want to tell him to stop … and continue … and stop. I sag against him, and he tightens his arm around me, his erection against my hip.

We halt again at the forty-fourth floor. *Oh … how long is this torture going to continue? In … out … in … out …* Subtly I grind myself against his persistent finger. After all this time of not touching me, he chooses now! Here! And it makes me feel so—wanton.

"Hush," he breathes, seemingly unaffected as yet two more people come aboard. The elevator is getting crowded. Christian moves us both farther back so that we're now pressed into the corner, holding me in place and torturing me further. He nuzzles my hair. I'm sure we look like a young couple in love, canoodling in the corner, if anyone could be bothered to turn around and see what we're doing … And he eases a second finger inside me.

*Fuck!* I groan, and I'm thankful that the gaggle of people in front of us are still chatting away, totally oblivious.

*Oh, Christian, what you do to me*. I lean my head against his chest, closing my eyes and surrendering to his unrelenting fingers.

"Don't come," he whispers. "I want that later." He splays his hand out on my belly, pressing down slightly, as he continues his sweet persecution. The feeling is exquisite.

Finally the elevator reaches the first floor. With a loud *ping* the doors open, and almost instantly the passengers start exiting. Christian slowly slips his fingers out of me and kisses the back of my head. I glance around at him, and he smiles, then nods again at Mr. Badly Fitted Brown Suit, who returns his nod of acknowledgment as he shuffles out of the elevator with his wife. I barely notice, concentrating instead on staying upright and trying to manage my panting. Jeez, I feel aching and bereft. Christian releases me, leaving me to stand on my own two feet without leaning on him.

Turning, I gaze up at him. He looks cool and unruffled, his usual composed self. Hmm … This is so not fair.

“Ready?” he asks. His eyes gleam wickedly as he slips first his index, then his middle finger into his mouth and sucks on them. “Mighty fine, Miss Steele,” he whispers. I nearly convulse on the spot.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I murmur, and I’m practically coming apart at the seams.

“You’d be surprised what I can do, Miss Steele,” he says. Reaching out, he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, a slight smile betraying his amusement.

“I want to get you home, but maybe we’ll only make it as far as the car.” He grins down at me as he takes my hand and leads me out of the elevator.

*What! Sex in the car?* Can’t we just do it here on the cool marble of the lobby floor … please?

“Come.”

“Yes, I want to.”

“Miss Steele!” he admonishes me with mock-amused horror.

“I’ve never had sex in a car,” I mumble. Christian halts and places those same fingers under my chin, tipping my head back and glaring down at me.

“I’m very pleased to hear that. I have to say I’d be very surprised, not to say mad, if you had.”

I flush, blinking up at him. Of course; I’ve only had sex with him. I frown.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” His tone is unexpectedly harsh.

“Christian, it was just an expression.”

“The famous expression, ‘I’ve never had sex in a car.’ Yes, it just trips off the tongue.”

*What’s his problem?*

“Christian, I wasn’t thinking. For heaven’s sake, you’ve just … um, done that to me in an elevator full of people. My wits are scattered.”

He raises his eyebrows. “What did I do to you?” he challenges.

I scowl at him. He wants me to say it.

“You turned me on, big time. Now take me home and fuck me.”

His mouth drops open then he laughs, surprised. Now he looks young and carefree. Oh, to hear him laugh. I love it because it’s so rare.

“You’re a born romantic, Miss Steele.” He takes my hand, and we head out of the building to where the valet stands by my Saab.

“SO YOU WANT SEX in a car,” Christian murmurs as he switches on the ignition.

“Quite frankly, I would have been happy with the lobby floor.”

“Trust me, Ana, so would I. But I don’t enjoy being arrested at this time of night, and I didn’t want to fuck you in a restroom. Well, not today.”

*What!* “You mean there was a possibility?”

“Oh yes.”

“Let’s go back.”

He turns to gaze at me and laughs. His laughter is infectious; soon we’re both laughing—wonderful, cathartic, head-held-back laughter. Reaching over, he places his hand on my knee, caressing it gently with skilled fingers. I stop laughing.

“Patience, Anastasia,” he murmurs and pulls into the Seattle traffic.

HE PARKS THE SAAB in the Escala garage and turns off the engine. Suddenly, in the confines of the car, the atmosphere between us changes. With wanton anticipation, I glance at him, trying to contain my palpitating heart. He’s turned toward me, leaning against the door, his elbow propped on the steering wheel.

He pulls his lower lip with his thumb and index finger. His mouth is so distracting. I want it on me. He’s watching me intently, his eyes dark gray. My mouth goes dry. He smiles a slow sexy smile.

“We will fuck in the car at a time and place of my choosing. Right now, I want to take you on every available surface of my apartment.”

It’s like he’s addressing me below the waist … my inner goddess performs four *arabesques* and a *pas de basque*.

“Yes.” Jeez, I sound so breathy, desperate.

He leans forward a fraction. I close my eyes, waiting for his kiss, thinking—finally. But nothing happens. After an interminable few seconds, I open my eyes to find him gazing at me. I can’t figure out what he’s thinking, but before I can say anything, he distracts me once more.

“If I kiss you now, we won’t make it into the apartment. Come.”

*Gah!* Could this man be any more frustrating? He climbs out of the car.

ONCE AGAIN, WE WAIT for the elevator, my body thrumming with anticipation. Christian holds my hand, running his thumb rhythmically across my knuckles, each stroke echoing through me. Oh, I want his hands on all of me. He’s tortured me long enough.

“So, what happened to instant gratification?” I murmur while we wait.

“It’s not appropriate in every situation, Anastasia.”

“Since when?”

“Since this evening.”

“Why are you torturing me so?”

“Tit for tat, Miss Steele.”

“How am I torturing you?”

“I think you know.”

I gaze up at him and his expression is difficult to read. *He wants my answer … that’s it.*

“I’m into delayed gratification, too,” I whisper, smiling shyly.

He tugs my hand unexpectedly, and suddenly I am in his arms. He grabs the hair at the nape of my neck, pulling gently so my head tips back.

“What can I do to make you say yes?” he asks fervently, throwing me off balance once more. I blink at him—at his lovely, serious, desperate expression.

“Give me some time … please,” I murmur. He groans and finally kisses me, long and hard. Then we’re in the elevator, and we’re all hands and mouths and tongues and lips and fingers and hair. Desire, thick and strong, lances through my blood, clouding all my reason. He pushes me against the wall, pinning me with his hips, one hand in my hair, the other at my chin, holding me in place.

“You own me,” he whispers. “My fate is in your hands, Ana.”

His words are intoxicating, and in my overheated state, I want to rip off his clothes. I push off his jacket, and as the elevator arrives at the apartment, we tumble out into the foyer.

Christian pins me to the wall by the elevator, his jacket falling to the floor, and his hand travels up my leg, his lips never leaving mine. He hoists up my dress.

“First surface here,” he breathes and abruptly he lifts me. “Wrap your legs around me.”

I do as I’m told, and he turns and lays me down on the foyer table, so he’s standing between my legs. I’m aware that the usual vase of flowers is missing. *Huh?* Reaching into his jeans pocket, he fishes out a foil packet and hands it to me, undoing his fly.

“Do you know how much you turn me on?”

“What?” I pant. “No … I …”

“Well, you do,” he mutters, “all the time.” He grabs the foil packet from my hands. Oh, this is so quick, but after all his tantalizing teasing, I want him badly—right now. He gazes down at me as he rolls on the condom, then puts his hands under my thighs, spreading my legs wider.

Positioning himself, he pauses. “Keep your eyes open. I want to see you,” he whispers, and clasping both my hands with his, he sinks slowly into me.

I try, I really do, but the feeling is so exquisite. What I’ve been waiting for after all his teasing. *Oh, the fullness, this feeling* … I groan and arch my back off the table.

“Open!” he growls, tightening his hands on mine and thrusting sharply into me so that I cry out.

I blink my eyes open, and he stares down at me wide-eyed. Slowly he withdraws, then sinks into me once more, his mouth slackening and then forming an *Ah* …, but he says nothing. Seeing his arousal, his reaction to me—I light up inside, my blood scorching through my veins. His gray eyes burn into mine. He picks up the rhythm, and I revel in it, glory in it, watching him, watching me—his passion, his love—as we come apart, together.

I call out as I explode around him, and Christian follows.

"Yes, Ana!" he cries. He collapses on me, releasing my hands and resting his head on my chest. My legs are still wrapped around him, and under the patient, maternal eyes of the Madonna paintings, I cradle his head against me and struggle to catch my breath.

He raises his head to look at me. "I'm not finished with you yet," he murmurs and leaning up, he kisses me.

I LIE NAKED IN Christian's bed, sprawled over his chest, panting. Holy cow—does his energy ever wane? Christian trails his fingers up and down my back.

"Satisfied, Miss Steele?"

I murmur my assent. I have no energy left for talking. Raising my head, I turn unfocused eyes to him and bask in his warm, fond gaze. Very deliberately, I angle my head down so he knows I am going to kiss his chest.

He tenses momentarily, and I plant a soft kiss in his chest hair, breathing in his unique Christian smell, mixed with sweat and sex. It's heady. He rolls onto his side so I'm lying beside him and gazes down at me.

"Is sex like this for everyone? I'm surprised anyone ever goes out," I murmur, feeling suddenly shy.

He grins. "I can't speak for everyone, but it's pretty damned special with you, Anastasia." He bends and kisses me.

"That's because you're pretty damned special, Mr. Grey," I agree, smiling and caressing his face. He blinks down at me, at a loss.

"It's late. Go to sleep," he says. He kisses me, then lies down and pulls me to him so we're spooning in bed.

"You don't like compliments."

"Go to sleep, Anastasia."

Hmm … But he is pretty damned special. Jeez … why doesn't he realize this?

"I loved the house," I murmur.

He says nothing for a minute, but I sense his grin.

"I love you. Go to sleep." He nuzzles my hair, and I drift into sleep, safe in his arms, dreaming of sunsets and French doors and wide staircases … and a small copper-haired boy running through a meadow, laughing and giggling as I chase

him.

---

"Gotta go, baby." Christian kisses me just below my ear.

I open my eyes; it's morning. I turn to face him, but he's up and dressed and fresh and delicious, leaning over me.

"What time is it?" *Oh no … I don't want to be late.*

"Don't panic. I have a breakfast meeting." He rubs his nose against mine.

"You smell good," I murmur, stretching out beneath him, my limbs pleasurably tight and creaky from all our exploits yesterday. I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Don't go."

He cocks his head to one side and raises his eyebrow. "Miss Steele—are you trying to keep a man from an honest day's work?"

I nod sleepily at him, and he smiles his new shy smile.

"As tempting as you are, I have to go." He kisses me and stands. He's wearing a really sharp dark navy suit, white shirt, and navy tie, and he looks every inch the CEO … the hot CEO.

"Laters, baby," he murmurs and he's off.

Glancing at the clock, I note it's already seven—I must have slept through the alarm. Well, time to get up.

IN THE SHOWER, INSPIRATION hits me. I've thought of another birthday present for Christian. It's so difficult to buy something for the man who has everything. I've already given him my main present, and I still have the other item I bought at the tourist shop, but this is one present that will really be for me. I hug myself in anticipation as I switch off the shower. I just have to prepare it.

In the walk-in closet, I put on a dark red fitted dress with a square neckline, cut quite low. Yes, this will do for work.

*Now for Christian's present.* I start rummaging through his drawers, looking for his ties. In the bottom drawer I find those faded, ripped jeans, the ones he wears in the playroom—the ones he looks so hot in. I stroke them gently, using my whole hand. Oh my, the material is so soft.

Beneath them, I find a large, black, flat cardboard box. It piques my interest immediately. What's in here? I stare at it, feeling like I'm trespassing again. Taking it out, I shake it. It's heavy as if it holds papers or manuscripts. I cannot resist, I open the lid—and quickly shut it again. Holy fuck—photographs from the Red Room. The shock makes me sit back on my heels as I try to wipe the image from my brain. *Why did I open the box? Why has he kept them?*

I shudder. My subconscious scowls at me—*this is before you. Forget them*.

She's right. When I stand up I notice his ties are hanging at the end of his clothes rail. I find my favorite and exit quickly.

Those photos are BA—Before Ana. My subconscious nods with approval, but it's with a heavier heart that I head into the main room for breakfast. Mrs. Jones smiles at me warmly and then frowns.

"Everything all right, Ana?" she asks kindly.

"Yes," I murmur, distracted. "Do you have a key to the … um, playroom?"

She pauses momentarily, surprised.

"Yes, of course." She unclips a small bunch of keys from her belt. "What would you like for breakfast, dear?" she asks as she hands me the keys.

"Just granola. I won't be long."

I feel more ambivalent about this gift now, but only since the discovery of those photographs. *Nothing's changed!* my subconscious barks at me again, glaring at me over her half-moon winged glasses. That one picture you saw was hot, my inner goddess chips in, and mentally I scowl at her. Yes it was—too hot for me.

What else does he have hidden away? Quickly I ferret through the museum chest, take what I need, and lock the playroom door behind me. Wouldn't do for José to discover this!

I hand the keys back to Mrs. Jones and sit down to devour my breakfast, feeling odd that Christian is absent. The photographic image dances, unwelcome, around my mind. I wonder who it was. Leila, perhaps?

ON MY DRIVE IN to work, I debate whether or not to tell Christian I found his photographs. *No*, screams my subconscious, her Edvard Munch face on. I decide she's probably right.

AS I SIT DOWN at my desk, my BlackBerry buzzes.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Surfaces

**Date:** June 17 2011 08:59

**To:** Anastasia Steele

I calculate that there are at least 30 surfaces to go. I am looking forward to each and every one of them. Then there's the floors, the walls—and let's not forget the balcony.

After that there's my office …

Miss you. x

Christian Grey

Priapic CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His e-mail makes me smile, and all my earlier reservations evaporate. It's me he wants now, and memories of last night's sex-capades flood my mind … *the elevator*, *the foyer*, *the bed*. Priapic is right. I wonder idly what the female equivalent might be?

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Romance?

**Date:** June 17 2011 09:03

**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

You have a one-track mind.

I missed you at breakfast.

But Mrs. Jones was very accommodating.

A x

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Intrigued

**Date:** June 17 2011 09:07

**To:** Anastasia Steele

What was Mrs. Jones accommodating about?

What are you up to, Miss Steele?

Christian Grey

Curious CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

How does he know?

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Tapping Nose

**Date:** June 17 2011 09:10

**To:** Christian Grey

Wait and see—it's a surprise.

I need to work … let me be.

Love you.

A x

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Frustrated
**Date:** June 17 2011 09:12
**To:** Anastasia Steele

I hate it when you keep things from me.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I stare at the small screen of my BlackBerry. The vehemence implicit in his e-mail takes me by surprise. Why does he feel like this? It's not like I'm hiding erotic photographs of my exes.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Indulging you
**Date:** June 17 2011 09:14
**To:** Christian Grey

It's for your birthday.

Another surprise.

Don't be so petulant.

A x

He doesn't reply immediately, and I'm called into a meeting so I can't dwell on it for too long.

WHEN I NEXT GLANCE at my BlackBerry, to my horror I realize it's four in the afternoon. Where has the day gone? Still no message from Christian. I decide to e-mail him

again.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Hello
**Date:** June 17 2011 16:03
**To:** Christian Grey

Are you not talking to me?

Don't forget I am going for a drink with José, and that he's staying with us tonight.

Please rethink about joining us.

A x

He doesn't reply, and I feel a frisson of unease. I hope he's okay. Calling his cell phone, I get his voice mail. The announcement simply says "Grey, leave a message" in his most clipped tone.

"Hi … um … it's me. Ana. Are you okay? Call me," I stutter through my message. I've never had to leave one for him before. I flush as I hang up. *Of course he'll know it's you, idiot!* My subconscious rolls her eyes at me. I am tempted to ring his PA, Andrea, but decide that's a step too far. Reluctantly I continue my work.

MY PHONE RINGS UNEXPECTEDLY and my heart jumps. *Christian!* But no—it's Kate, my best friend, finally!

"Ana!" she shouts from wherever she is.

"Kate! Are you back? I've missed you."

"Me, too. I have so much to tell you. We're at Sea-Tac—me and my man." She giggles in a most un-Kate-like way.

"Cool. I have so much to tell you, too."

"See you back at the apartment?"

"I'm having drinks with José. Join us."

"José's in town? Sure! Text me where."

"Okay." I beam.

"You good, Ana?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Still with Christian?"

"Yes."

"Good. Laters!"

Oh, not her, too. Elliot's influence knows no bounds.

"Yeah—laters, baby." I grin and she hangs up.

Wow. Kate is home. How am I going to tell her all that has happened? I should write it down so I don't forget anything.

AN HOUR LATER MY office phone rings—*Christian?* No, it's Claire.

"You should see the guy asking for you in Reception. How come you know all these hot guys, Ana?"

José must be here. I glance at the clock—it's five fifty-five, and a small thrill of excitement pulses through me. I haven't seen him in ages.

"Ana, wow! You look great. So grown-up." He grins at me.

Just because I'm wearing a smart dress … jeez!

He hugs me hard. "And tall," he mutters in amazement.

"It's just the shoes, José. You don't look so bad yourself."

He's wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black-and-white-checked flannel shirt.

"I'll grab my things and we can go."

"Cool. I'll wait here."

I PICK UP TWO Rolling Rocks from the crowded bar and head over to the table where José is seated.

"You found Christian's place okay?"

"Yeah. I haven't been inside. I just delivered the photos to the service elevator. Some guy named Taylor took them up. Looks like quite a place."

"It is. You should see inside."

"Can't wait. *Salud*, Ana. Seattle agrees with you."

I flush as we clink bottles. It's Christian that agrees with me. "*Salud*. Tell me about your show and how it went."

He beams and launches into the story. He sold all but three of his photos, which has taken care of his student loans and left him with some money to spare.

"And I've been commissioned to do some landscapes for the Portland Tourist Board. Pretty cool, huh?" he finishes proudly.

"Oh, José—that's wonderful. Not interfering with your studies though?" I frown at him.

"Nah. Now that you guys have gone, plus three of the guys I used to hang out with, I have more time."

"No hot babe to keep you busy? Last time I saw you, you had half a dozen women hanging on your every word." I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Nah, Ana. None of them are woman enough for me." He's all bravado.

“Oh sure. José Rodriguez, lady-killer.” I giggle.

“Hey—I have my moments, Steele.” He looks vaguely hurt, and I am chastened.

“Sure you do.” I mollify him.

“So, how’s Grey?” he asks, his tone changing, becoming cooler.

“He’s good. We’re good,” I murmur.

“Serious, you say?”

“Yes. Serious.”

“He’s not too old for you?”

“Oh, José. You know what my mom says—I was born old.”

José’s mouth twists wryly.

“How is your mom?” And like that, we are out of the danger zone.

“Ana!”

I turn and there’s Kate with Ethan. She looks gorgeous: bleached strawberry-blonde hair, golden tan, and beaming white smile, and so shapely in her white camisole and tight white jeans. All eyes are on Kate. I leap up from my seat to give her a hug. Oh, how I’ve missed this woman!

She pushes me away from her and holds me at arm’s length, examining me closely. I flush under her intense gaze.

“You’ve lost weight. A lot of weight. And you look different. Grown-up. What’s been going on?” she says, all mother hen. “I like your dress. Suits you.”

“A lot’s happened since you went away. I’ll tell you later, when we’re on our own.” I am not ready for the Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition just yet. She regards me suspiciously.

“You’re okay?” she asks gently.

“Yes.” I smile, though I’d be happier knowing where Christian is.

“Cool.”

“Hi, Ethan.” I grin at him, and he gives me a quick hug.

“Hi, Ana,” he whispers in my ear.

José frowns at him.

“How was lunch with Mia?” I ask Ethan.

“Interesting,” he says cryptically.

*Oh?*

“Ethan—you know José?”

“We’ve met once,” José mutters, assessing Ethan as they shake hands.

“Yeah, at Kate’s place in Vancouver,” Ethan says, smiling pleasantly at José. “Right—who’s for a drink?”

I MAKE MY WAY to the restrooms. While there I text Christian our location; perhaps he’ll

join us. There are no missed calls from him and no e-mails. This is not like him.

"Whassup, Ana?" José asks as I come back to the table.

"I can't reach Christian. I hope he's okay."

"He'll be fine. Like another beer?"

"Sure."

Kate leans across. "Ethan says some mad stalker ex-girlfriend was in the apartment with a gun?"

"Well … yeah." I shrug apologetically. Oh jeez—do we have to do this now?

"Ana—what the hell's been going on?" Kate stops abruptly and checks her phone.

"Hi, baby," she says when she answers it. *Baby!* She frowns and looks at me. "Sure," she says and turns to me. "It's Elliot … he wants to talk to you."

"Ana." Elliot's voice is clipped and quiet, and my scalp prickles ominously.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Christian. He's not back from Portland."

"What? What do you mean?"

"His helicopter has gone missing."

"*Charlie Tango*?" I whisper as all the breath leaves my body. "No!"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

I stare at the flames, mesmerized. They dance and weave bright blazing orange with tips of cobalt blue in the fireplace in Christian's apartment. And despite the heat pumping out of the fire and the blanket draped around my shoulders, I'm cold. Bone-chillingly cold.

I'm aware of hushed voices, many hushed voices. But they're in the background, a distant buzz. I don't hear the words. All I can hear, all I can focus on, is the soft hiss of the gas from the fire.

My thoughts turn to the house we saw yesterday and the huge fireplaces—real fireplaces for burning wood. I'd like to make love with Christian in front of a real fire. I'd like to make love with Christian in front of this fire. Yes, that would be fun. No doubt, he'd think of some way to make it memorable, like all the times we've made love. I snort wryly to myself, even the times when we were just fucking. Yes, those were pretty memorable, too. *Where is he?*

The flames shimmy and flicker, holding me captive, keeping me numb. I focus solely on their flaring, scorching beauty. They are bewitching.

*Anastasia, you've bewitched me*.

He said that the first time he slept with me in my bed. *Oh no* …

I wrap my arms around myself, and the world falls away from me and reality bleeds into my consciousness. The creeping emptiness inside expands some more. *Charlie Tango* is missing.

"Ana. Here," Mrs. Jones gently coaxes me, her voice bringing me back into the room, into the now, into the anguish. She gives me a cup of tea. I take the cup and saucer gratefully, the rattle betraying my shaking hands.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice hoarse from unshed tears and the large lump in my throat.

Mia sits across from me on the larger-than-large U-shaped couch, holding hands with Grace. They gaze at me, pain and anxiety etched on their lovely faces. Grace looks older—a mother worried for her son. I blink dispassionately at them. I can't offer a reassuring smile, a tear even—there's nothing, just blankness and the growing emptiness. I gaze at Elliot, José, and Ethan, who stand around the breakfast bar, all serious faces, talking quietly. Discussing

something in soft subdued voices. Behind them Mrs. Jones busies herself in the kitchen.

Kate is in the TV room, monitoring the local news. I hear the faint squawk from the big plasma TV. I can't bear to see the news item again—CHRISTIAN GREY MISSING—his beautiful face on TV.

Idly it occurs to me that I've never seen so many people in this room, yet they are still dwarfed by its sheer size. Little islands of lost, anxious people in my Fifty's home. What would he think about their being here?

Somewhere, Taylor and Carrick are talking to the authorities who are drip-feeding us information, but it's all meaningless. The fact is, he's missing. He's been missing for eight hours. No sign, no word from him. The search has been called off—this much I do know. It's just too dark. And we don't know where he is. He could be hurt, hungry, or worse. *No!*

I offer another silent prayer to God. *Please let Christian be okay. Please let Christian be okay*. I repeat it over and over in my head—my mantra, my lifeline, something concrete to cling to in my desperation. I refuse to think the worst. No, don't go there. There is hope.

*"You're my lifeline."*

Christian's words come back to haunt me. Yes, there is always hope. I must not despair. His words echo through my mind.

*"I'm now a firm advocate of instant gratification. Carpe diem, Ana."*

Why didn't I seize the day?

*"I'm doing this because I've finally met someone I want to spend the rest of my life with."*

I close my eyes in silent prayer, rocking gently. *Please let the rest of his life not be this short. Please, please*. We haven't had enough time … we need more time. We've done so much in the last few weeks, come so far. It can't end. All our tender moments: the lipstick, when he made love to me for the first time at the Olympic hotel, on his knees in front of me offering himself to me, finally touching him.

*"I am just the same, Ana. I love you and I need you. Touch me. Please."*

Oh, I love him so. I will be nothing without him, nothing but a shadow—all the light eclipsed. *No no no … my poor Christian*.

*"This is me, Ana. All of me … and I'm all yours. What do I have to do to make you realize that? To make you see that I want you any way I can get you. That I love you."*

And I you, my Fifty Shades.

I open my eyes and gaze unseeing into the fire once more, memories of our time together flitting through my mind: his boyish joy when we were sailing and

gliding; his suave, sophisticated, hot-as-hell look at the masked ball; dancing, oh yes, dancing here in the apartment to Sinatra, whirling around the room; his quiet, anxious hope yesterday at the house—that stunning view.

*"I will lay my world at your feet, Anastasia. I want you, body and soul, forever."*

Oh, please, let him be okay. He cannot be gone. He is the center of my universe.

An involuntary sob escapes my throat, and I clutch my hand to my mouth. No. I must be strong.

José is suddenly at my side, or has he been there a while? I have no idea.

"Do you want to call your mom or dad?" he asks gently.

No! I shake my head and clutch José's hand. I cannot speak, I know I will dissolve if I do, but the warmth and gentle squeeze of his hand offers me no solace.

Oh, Mom. My lip trembles at the thought of my mother. Should I call her? No. I couldn't deal with her reaction. Maybe Ray; he wouldn't get emotional—he never gets emotional, not even when the Mariners lose.

Grace rises to join the boys, distracting me. That must be the longest she's sat still. Mia comes to sit beside me, too, and grabs my other hand.

"He will come back," she says, her voice initially determined but cracking on the last word. Her eyes are wide and red-rimmed, her face pale and pinched from lack of sleep.

I gaze up at Ethan, who is watching Mia and Elliot, who has his arms around Grace. I glance at the clock. It's after eleven, heading toward midnight. *Damn time!* With each passing hour, the clawing emptiness expands, consuming me, choking me. I know deep down inside I am preparing myself for the worst. I close my eyes and offer up another silent prayer, clasping both Mia's and José's hands.

Opening my eyes again, I stare into the flames once more. I can see his shy smile—my favorite of all his expressions, a glimpse of the real Christian, my real Christian. He is so many people: control freak, CEO, stalker, sex god, Dom—and at the same time—such a boy with his toys. I smile. His car, his boat, his plane, his *Charlie Tango* helicopter … my lost boy, truly lost right now. My smile fades and pain lances through me. I remember him in the shower, wiping away the lipstick marks.

*"I'm nothing, Anastasia. I'm a husk of a man. I don't have a heart."*

The lump in my throat expands. Oh, Christian, you do, you do have a heart, and it's mine. I want to cherish it forever. Even though he's so complex and difficult, I love him. I will always love him. There will never be anyone else.

Ever.

I remember sitting in Starbucks weighing up my Christian pros and cons. All those cons, even those photographs I found this morning, melt into insignificance now. There's just him and whether he'll come back. *Oh please, Lord, bring him back, please let him be okay. I'll go to church … I'll do anything*. Oh, if I get him back, I shall seize the day. His voice echoes around in my head once more: *"Carpe diem, Ana."*

I gaze deeper into the fire, the flames still licking and curling around each other, blazing brightly. Then Grace shrieks, and everything goes into slow motion.

"Christian!"

I turn my head in time to see Grace barreling across the great room from where she had been pacing somewhere behind me, and there in the entrance stands a dismayed Christian. He's dressed in just his shirtsleeves and suit pants, and he's holding his navy jacket, shoes, and socks. He looks tired, dirty, and utterly beautiful.

*Holy fuck … Christian*. He's alive. I gaze numbly at him, trying to work out if I'm hallucinating or if he's really here.

His expression is one of utter bewilderment. He deposits his jacket and shoes on the floor in time to catch Grace, who throws her arms around his neck and kisses him hard on the cheek.

"Mom?"

Christian gazes down at her, completely at a loss.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Grace whispers, voicing our collective fear.

"Mom, I'm here." I hear the consternation in his voice.

"I died a thousand deaths today," she whispers, her voice barely audible, echoing my thoughts. She gasps and sobs, no longer able to hold back her tears. Christian frowns, horrified or mortified—I don't know which—then after a beat, envelops her in a huge hug, holding her close.

"Oh, Christian," she chokes, wrapping her arms around him, weeping into his neck—all self-restraint forgotten—and Christian doesn't balk. He just holds her, rocking to and fro, comforting her. Scalding tears pool in my eyes. Carrick hollers from the hallway.

"He's alive! Shit—you're here!" He appears from Taylor's office, clutching his cell phone, and embraces both of them, his eyes closed in sweet relief.

"Dad?"

Mia squeals something unintelligible from beside me, then she's up and runs to join her parents, hugging all of them, too.

Finally the tears start to cascade down my cheeks. He's here, he's fine. But I cannot move.

Carrick is the first to pull away, wiping his eyes and clapping Christian on the shoulder. Mia releases them then, and Grace steps back.

"Sorry," she mumbles.

"Hey, Mom—it's okay," Christian says, consternation still evident on his face.

"Where were you? What happened?" Grace cries and puts her head in her hands.

"Mom," Christian mutters. He draws her into his arms again and kisses the top of her head. "I'm here. I'm good. It's just taken me a hell of a long time to get back from Portland. What's with the welcoming committee?" He looks up and scans the room until his eyes lock with mine.

He blinks and glances briefly at José, who lets go of my hand. Christian's mouth tightens. I drink in the sight of him and relief courses through me, leaving me spent, exhausted, and completely elated. Yet my tears don't stop. Christian turns his attention back to his mother.

"Mom, I'm good. What's wrong?" Christian says reassuringly. She places her hands on either side of his face.

"Christian, you've been missing. Your flight plan—you never made it to Seattle. Why didn't you contact us?"

Christian's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "I didn't think it would take this long."

"Why didn't you call?"

"No power in my cell."

"You didn't stop … call collect?"

"Mom—it's a long story."

"Oh, Christian! Don't you ever do that to me again! Do you understand?" she half shouts at him.

"Yes, Mom." He wipes her tears away with his thumbs and hugs her once more. When she composes herself, he releases her to hug Mia, who slaps him hard on the chest.

"You had us so worried!" she blurts out, and she, too, is in tears.

"I'm here now, for heaven's sake," Christian mutters.

As Elliot comes forward, Christian relinquishes Mia to Carrick, who already has one arm around his wife. He curls the other around his daughter. Elliot hugs Christian briefly, much to Christian's surprise, and slaps him hard on the back.

"Great to see you," Elliot says loudly, if a little gruffly, trying to hide his emotion.

As the tears stream down my face, I can see it all. The great room is bathed in

it—unconditional love. He has it in spades; he's just never accepted it before, and even now he's at a total loss.

*Look, Christian, all these people love you! Perhaps now you'll start believing it.*

Kate is standing behind me—she must have left the TV room—and she gently strokes my hair.

"He's really here, Ana," she murmurs comfortingly.

"I'm going to say hi to my girl now," Christian tells his parents. Both of them nod, smile, and step aside.

He moves toward me, gray eyes bright though weary and still bemused. From somewhere deep inside, I find the strength to stagger to my feet and bolt into his open arms.

"Christian!" I sob.

"Hush," he says and holds me, burying his face in my hair and inhaling deeply. I raise my tearstained face to his, and he kisses me far too briefly.

"Hi," he murmurs.

"Hi," I whisper back, the lump in the back of my throat burning.

"Miss me?"

"A bit."

He grins. "I can tell." And with a gentle touch of his hand, he wipes away the tears that refuse to stop running down my cheeks.

"I thought … I thought—" I choke.

"I can see. Hush … I'm here. I'm here …" he murmurs and kisses me chastely again.

"Are you okay?" I ask, releasing him and touching his chest, his arms, his waist—oh, the feel of this warm, vital, sensual man beneath my fingers—reassures me that he's here, standing in front of me. He's back. He doesn't so much as flinch. He just regards me intently.

"I'm okay. I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, thank God." I clasp him around his waist again, and he hugs me once more. "Are you hungry? Do you need something to drink?"

"Yes."

I step back to get him something, but he doesn't let me go. He tucks me under his arm and extends a hand to José.

"Mr. Grey," says José evenly.

Christian snorts. "Christian, please," he says.

"Christian, welcome back. Glad you're okay … and, um—thanks for letting me stay."

"No problem." Christian narrows his eyes, but he's distracted by Mrs. Jones,

who is suddenly at his side. It only occurs to me now that she's not her usual smart self. I hadn't noticed it before. Her hair is loose, and she's in soft gray leggings and a large gray sweatshirt with WSU COUGARS emblazoned on the front that dwarfs her. She looks years younger.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Grey?" She wipes her eyes with a tissue.

Christian smiles fondly at her. "A beer, please, Gail—Budvar—and a bite to eat."

"I'll get it," I murmur, wanting to do something for my man.

"No. Don't go," he says softly, tightening his arm around me.

The rest of his family closes in, and Ethan and Kate join us. He shakes Ethan's hand and gives Kate a quick peck on the cheek. Mrs. Jones returns with a bottle of beer and a glass. He takes the bottle but shakes his head at the glass. She smiles and returns to the kitchen.

"Surprised you don't want something stronger," mutters Elliot. "So what the fuck happened to you? First I knew was when Dad called me to say the chopper was missing."

"Elliot!" Grace scolds.

"Helicopter," Christian growls, correcting Elliot, who grins, and I suspect this is a family joke.

"Let's sit and I'll tell you." Christian pulls me over to the couch, and everyone sits down, all eyes on Christian. He takes a long drink of his beer. He spies Taylor hovering at the entrance and nods. Taylor nods back.

"Your daughter?"

"She's fine now. False alarm, sir."

"Good." Christian smiles.

Daughter? What happened to Taylor's daughter?

"Glad you're back, sir. Will that be all?"

"We have a helicopter to pick up."

Taylor nods. "Now? Or will the morning do?"

"Morning, I think, Taylor."

"Very good, Mr. Grey. Anything else, sir?"

Christian shakes his head and raises his bottle to him. Taylor gives him a rare smile—rarer than Christian's, I think—and heads out, presumably to his office or up to his room.

"Christian, what happened?" Carrick demands.

Christian launches into his story. He was flying in *Charlie Tango* with Ros, his number two, to deal with a funding issue at WSU in Vancouver. I can barely keep up, I'm so dazed. I just hold Christian's hand and stare at his manicured fingernails, his long fingers, the creases on his knuckles, his wristwatch—an

Omega with three small dials. I gaze up at his beautiful profile as he continues his tale.

"Ros had never seen Mount Saint Helens, so on the way back as a celebration, we took a quick detour. I heard the temporary flight restriction was lifted a while back, and I wanted to take a look. Well, it's fortunate that we did. We were flying low, about two hundred feet above ground level, when the instrument panel lit up. We had a fire in the tail—I had no choice but to cut all the electronics and land." He shakes his head. "I set her down by Silver Lake, got Ros out, and managed to put the fire out."

"A fire? Both engines?" Carrick is horrified.

"Yep."

"Shit! But I thought—"

"I know," Christian interrupts him. "It was sheer luck I was flying so low," he murmurs. I shudder. He releases my hand and puts his arm around me.

"Cold?" he asks me. I shake my head.

"How did you put out the fire?" asks Kate, her Carla Bernstein instincts kicking in. Jeez, she sounds terse sometimes.

"Extinguisher. We have to carry them—by law," Christian answers levelly.

His words from long ago circle my mind. *I thank Divine Providence every day that it was you who came to interview me and not Katherine Kavanagh*.

"Why didn't you call or use the radio?" Grace asks.

Christian shakes his head. "With the electronics out, we had no radio. And I wasn't going to risk turning them on because of the fire. GPS was still working on the BlackBerry, so I was able to navigate to the nearest road. Took us four hours to walk there. Ros was in heels." Christian's mouth presses into a disapproving flat line.

"We had no cell reception. There's no coverage at Gifford. Ros's battery died first. Mine dried up on the way."

*Holy hell*. I tense and Christian pulls me into his lap.

"So how did you get back to Seattle?" Grace asks, blinking slightly at the sight of the two of us, no doubt. I flush.

"We hitched and pooled our resources. Between us, Ros and I had six hundred dollars, and we thought we'd have to bribe someone to drive us back, but a truck driver stopped and agreed to bring us home. He refused the money and shared his lunch with us." Christian shakes his head in dismay at the memory. "Took forever. He didn't have a cell—weird but true. I didn't realize." He stops, gazing at his family.

"That we'd worry?" Grace scoffs. "Oh, Christian!" she scolds him. "We've been going out of our minds!"

“You’ve made the news, bro.”

Christian rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I figured that much when I arrived to this reception and the handful of photographers outside. I’m sorry, Mom—I should have asked the driver to stop so I could phone. But I was anxious to be back.” He glances at José.

*Oh, that’s why, because José is staying here*. I frown at the thought. Jeez—all that worry.

Grace shakes her head. “I’m just glad you’re back in one piece, darling.”

I start to relax, resting my head against his chest. He smells outdoorsy, slightly sweaty, of body wash—of Christian, the most welcome scent in the world. Tears start to trickle down my face again, tears of gratitude.

“Both engines?” Carrick says again, frowning in disbelief.

“Go figure.” Christian shrugs and runs his hand down my back.

“Hey,” he whispers. He puts his fingers under my chin and tilts my head back. “Stop with the crying.”

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand in a most unladylike way. “Stop with the disappearing.” I sniff and his lips quirk up.

“Electrical failure … that’s odd, isn’t it?” Carrick says again.

“Yes, crossed my mind, too, Dad. But right now, I’d just like to go to bed and think about all that shit tomorrow.”

“So the media know that *the* Christian Grey has been found safe and well?” Kate says.

“Yes. Andrea and my PR people will deal with the media. Ros called her after we dropped her home.”

“Yes, Andrea called me to let me know you were still alive.” Carrick grins.

“I must give that woman a raise. Sure is late,” says Christian.

“I think that’s a hint, ladies and gentlemen, that my dear bro needs his beauty sleep,” Elliot scoffs suggestively. Christian grimaces at him.

“Cary, my son is safe. You can take me home now.”

*Cary?* Grace looks adoringly at her husband.

“Yes. I think we could use the sleep,” Carrick replies, smiling down at her.

“Stay,” Christian offers.

“No, sweetheart, I want to get home. Now that I know you’re safe.”

Christian reluctantly eases me onto the couch and stands. Grace hugs him once more, presses her head against his chest, and closes her eyes, content. He wraps his arms around her.

“I was so worried, darling,” she whispers.

“I’m okay, Mom.”

She leans back and studies him intently while he holds her. “Yes. I think you

are," she says slowly, glances at me, and smiles. I flush.

We follow Carrick and Grace as they make their way to the foyer. Behind me, I'm aware that Mia and Ethan are having a heated whispered conversation, but I can't hear it.

Mia is smiling shyly at Ethan, and he's gaping at her and shaking his head. Suddenly she crosses her arms and turns on her heel. He rubs his forehead with one hand, obviously frustrated.

"Mom, Dad—wait for me," Mia calls sullenly. Perhaps she's as mercurial as her brother.

Kate hugs me hard. "I can tell some serious shit's been going down while I've been blissfully ignorant in Barbados. It's kind of obvious you two are nuts about each other. I'm glad he's safe. Not just for him, Ana—for you, too."

"Thank you, Kate," I whisper.

"Yeah. Who knew we'd find love at the same time?" She grins. Wow. She's admitted it.

"With brothers!" I giggle.

"We could end up sisters-in-law," she quips.

I tense, then mentally kick myself as Kate stands back to gaze at me with her what-aren't-you-telling-me look. I flush. Damn, should I tell her he's asked me?

"Come on, baby," Elliot summons her from the elevator.

"Let's talk tomorrow, Ana. You must be exhausted."

I am reprieved. "Sure. You, too, Kate—you've traveled such a long distance today."

We hug once more, then she and Elliot follow the Greys into the elevator. Ethan shakes Christian's hand and gives me a quick hug. He looks distracted, but he follows them into the elevator and the doors close.

José is hovering in the hallway as we come out of the foyer.

"Look. I'll turn in … leave you guys," he says.

I blush. Why is this awkward?

"Do you know where to go?" Christian asks.

José nods.

"Yeah, the housekeeper—"

"Mrs. Jones," I prompt.

"Yeah, Mrs. Jones, she showed me earlier. Quite a place you have here, Christian."

"Thank you," Christian says politely as he comes to stand beside me, placing his arm around my shoulders. Leaning over, he kisses my hair.

"I'm going to eat whatever Mrs. Jones has put out for me. Good night, José." Christian wanders back into the great room, leaving José and me at the entrance.

Wow! Left alone with José.

“Well, good night.” José looks uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“Good night, José, and thank you for staying.”

“Sure, Ana. Any time your rich, hotshot boyfriend goes missing—I’ll be there.”

“José!” I admonish him.

“Only kidding. Don’t get mad. I’ll be leaving early in the morning. I’ll see you sometime, yeah? I’ve missed you.”

“Sure, José. Soon, I hope. Sorry tonight was so … shitty.” I smirk apologetically.

“Yeah.” He grins. “Shitty.” He hugs me. “Seriously, Ana, I’m glad you’re happy, but I’m here if you need me.”

I gaze up at him. “Thank you.”

He flashes me a sad, bittersweet smile, and then he goes upstairs.

I turn back to the great room. Christian stands beside the couch, watching me with an unreadable expression on his face. We’re finally alone and we gaze at each other.

“He’s still got it bad, you know,” he murmurs.

“And how would you know that, Mr. Grey?”

“I recognize the symptoms, Miss Steele. I believe I have the same affliction.”

“I thought I’d never see you again,” I whisper. There—the words are out. All my worst fears packaged neatly in one short sentence now exorcised.

“It wasn’t as bad as it sounds.”

I pick up his suit jacket and shoes from where they lie on the floor and move toward him.

“I’ll take that,” he whispers, reaching for his jacket.

Christian gazes down at me as if I’m his reason for living and mirrors my look, I’m sure. He is here, really here. He pulls me into his arms and wraps himself around me.

“Christian,” I gasp, and my tears start anew.

“Hush,” he soothes, kissing my hair. “You know … in the few seconds of sheer terror before I landed, all my thoughts were of you. You’re my talisman, Ana.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” I breathe. We stand, holding each other, reconnecting and reassuring each other. As I tighten my arms around him, I realize I’m still holding his shoes. I drop them noisily to the floor.

“Come and shower with me,” he murmurs.

“Okay.” I glance up at him. I don’t want to let go. Reaching down, he tilts my chin up with his fingers.

“You know, even tearstained, you are beautiful, Ana Steele.” He leans down and kisses me gently. “And your lips are so soft.” He kisses me again, deepening it.

*Oh my … and to think I could have lost … no …* I stop thinking and surrender myself.

“I need to put my jacket down,” he murmurs.

“Drop it,” I murmur against his lips.

“I can’t.”

I lean back to gaze up at him, puzzled.

He smirks at me. “This is why.” From the inside breast pocket he pulls out the small box I gave him that contains my present. He slings the jacket over the back of the couch and places the box on top.

*Seize the day, Ana*, my subconscious prods me. Well, it’s after midnight, so technically it’s his birthday.

“Open it,” I whisper, and my heart starts pounding.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he murmurs. “This has been driving me crazy.”

I grin impishly at him. I feel giddy. He gives me his shy smile, and I melt despite my thumping heart, delighting in his amused yet intrigued expression. With deft fingers, he unwraps and opens the box. His brow creases as he fishes out a small, rectangular, plastic key chain featuring a picture made up of tiny pixels that flash on and off like an LED screen. It depicts the Seattle skyline with the word SEATTLE written boldly across the landscape.

He stares at it for a minute and then gazes at me, bemused, a frown marring his lovely brow.

“Turn it over,” I whisper, holding my breath.

He does, and his eyes shoot to mine, wide and gray, alive with wonder and joy. His lips part in disbelief.

The word YES flashes on and off on the key ring.

“Happy birthday,” I whisper.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

You'll marry me?" he whispers, incredulous.

I nod nervously, flushing and anxious and not quite believing his reaction—this man whom I thought I'd lost. How could he not understand how much I love him?

"Say it," he orders softly, his gaze intense and hot.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He inhales sharply and moves suddenly, grabbing me and swinging me around in a most un-Fifty-like manner. He's laughing, young and carefree, radiating joyful elation. I grab his arms to hold on, feeling his muscles ripple beneath my fingers, and his infectious laughter sweeps me up—dizzy, addled, a girl totally and utterly smitten with her man. He puts me down and kisses me. Hard. His hands are on either side of my face, his tongue insistent, persuasive … arousing.

"Oh, Ana," he breathes against my lips, and it's an exultation that leaves me reeling. He loves me, of that I have no doubt, and I savor the taste of this delicious man, this man I thought I might never see again. His joy is evident—his eyes shining, his youthful smile—and his relief almost palpable.

"I thought I'd lost you," I murmur, still dazzled and breathless from his kiss.

"Baby, it will take more than a malfunctioning 135 to keep me away from you."

"135?"

"*Charlie Tango*. She's a Eurocopter EC135, the safest in its class." Some unnamed but dark emotion crosses his face briefly, distracting me. What isn't he saying? Before I can ask him, he stills and looks down at me, frowning, and for a second I think he's going to tell me. I blink up into his speculative gray eyes.

"Wait a minute. You gave this to me before we saw Flynn," he says, holding up the key chain. He looks almost horrified.

Oh dear, where's he going with this? I nod, keeping a straight face.

His mouth drops open.

I shrug apologetically. "I wanted you to know that whatever Flynn said, it wouldn't make a difference to me."

Christian blinks at me in disbelief. "So all yesterday evening, when I was

begging you for an answer, I had it already?" He's dismayed. I nod again, trying desperately to gauge his reaction. He gazes at me in stupefied wonder, but then narrows his eyes and his mouth twists with amused irony.

"All that worry," he whispers ominously. I grin at him and shrug once more. "Oh, don't try and get cute with me, Miss Steele. Right now, I want …" He runs his hand through his hair, then shakes his head and changes tack.

"I can't believe you left me hanging." His whisper is laced with disbelief. His expression alters subtly, his eyes gleaming wickedly, his mouth twitching into a carnal smile.

Holy hell. A thrill runs through me. What's he thinking?

"I believe some retribution is in order, Miss Steele," he says softly.

*Retribution? Oh shit!* I know he's playing—but I take a cautious step back from him anyway.

He grins. "Is that the game?" he whispers. "Because I will catch you." And his eyes burn with a bright playful intensity. "And you're biting your lip," he adds threateningly.

All of my insides tighten at once. *Oh my*. My future husband wants to play. I take another step back, then turn to run—but in vain. Christian grabs me in one easy swoop while I squeal with delight, surprise, and shock. He hoists me over his shoulder and heads down the hall.

"Christian!" I hiss, mindful that José is upstairs, though whether he can hear us is doubtful. I steady myself by clasping his lower back, then on a brave impulse, I swat his behind. He swats me right back.

"Ow!" I yelp.

"Shower time," he declares triumphantly.

"Put me down!" I try and fail to sound disapproving. My struggle is futile—his arm is firmly clamped over my thighs—and for some reason I cannot stop giggling.

"Fond of these shoes?" he asks, amused, as he opens the door to his bathroom.

"I prefer them to be touching the floor." I attempt to snarl at him, but it's not very effective as I can't keep the laughter out of my voice.

"Your wish is my command, Miss Steele." Without putting me down, he slips off both of my shoes and lets them clatter to the tile floor. Pausing by the vanity, he empties his pockets—dead BlackBerry, keys, wallet, the key chain. I can only imagine what I look like in the mirror from this angle. When he's finished, he marches directly into his oversized shower.

"Christian!" I scold loudly—his intent is now clear.

He switches the water on to max. *Jeez!* Arctic water spurts over my backside, and I squeal—then stop, mindful once more that José is above us. It's cold and

I'm fully clothed. The chilling water soaks into my dress, my panties, and my bra. I'm drenched and once more I cannot stop giggling.

"No!" I squeal. "Put me down!" I swat him again, harder this time, and Christian releases me, letting me slide down his now soaked body. His white shirt is stuck to his chest and his suit pants are sodden. I am soaked, too, flushed, giddy, and breathless, and he's grinning down at me, looking so … so unbelievably hot.

He sobers, his eyes shining, and cups my face again, drawing my lips to his. His kiss is gentle, cherishing, and totally distracting. I no longer care that I am fully clothed and soaking wet in Christian's shower. It's just the two of us beneath the cascading water. He's back, he's safe, he's mine.

My hands move involuntarily to his shirt as it clings to every line and sinew of his chest, revealing the hair scrunched beneath the white wetness. I yank the shirt hem out of his pants, and he groans against my mouth, but his lips do not leave mine. As I start to unbutton his shirt, he reaches for my zipper, slowly sliding the clasp down my dress. His lips become more insistent, more provocative, his tongue invading my mouth—and my body explodes with desire. I tug his shirt hard, ripping it open. The buttons fly everywhere, ricocheting off the tiles and disappearing onto the shower floor. As I strip the wet fabric off his shoulders and down his arms, I press him into the wall, hampering his attempts to undress me. "Cufflinks," he murmurs, holding up his wrists where his shirt hangs sodden and limp.

With scrambling fingers I release first one and then the other gold cufflink, letting them fall carelessly to the tiled floor, and his shirt follows. His eyes search mine through the cascading water, his gaze burning, carnal, heated like the water. I reach for the waistband of his pants, but he shakes his head and grabs my shoulders, spinning me around so I am facing away from him. He finishes the long journey south with my zipper, smoothes my wet hair away from my neck, and runs his tongue up my neck to my hairline and back again, kissing and sucking as he goes.

I moan and slowly he peels my dress off my shoulders and down past my breasts, kissing my neck beneath my ear. He unclasps my bra and pushes it off, freeing my breasts. His hands reach around and cup each one as he murmurs his appreciation in my ear.

"So beautiful," he whispers.

My arms are trapped by my bra and dress, which hang unfastened below my breasts; my arms are still in the sleeves, but my hands are free. I roll my head, giving Christian better access to my neck and push my breasts into his magical hands. I reach around behind me and welcome his sharp intake of breath as my

inquisitive fingers make contact with his erection. He pushes his groin into my welcoming hands. Dammit, why didn't he let me take his pants off?

He tugs on my nipples, and as they harden and stretch under his expert touch, all thoughts of his pants disappear and pleasure spikes sharp and libidinous in my belly. I lean my head back against him and groan.

"Yes," he breathes and turns me once more, capturing my mouth with his. He peels my bra, dress, and panties down so they join his shirt in a soggy heap on the shower floor.

I grab the body wash beside us. Christian stills as he realizes what I am about to do. Staring him straight in the eye, I squirt some of the sweet-smelling gel into my palm and hold my hand up in front of his chest, waiting for an answer to my unspoken question. His eyes widen, then he gives me an almost imperceptible nod.

Gently I place my hand on his sternum and start to rub the soap into his skin. His chest rises as he inhales sharply, but he stands stock-still. After a beat, his hands clasp my hips, but he doesn't push me away. He watches me warily, his look intense more than scared, but his lips are parted as his breathing increases.

"Is this okay?" I whisper.

"Yes." His short, breathy reply is almost a gasp. I am reminded of the many showers we've had together, but the one at the Olympic is a bittersweet memory. Well, now I can touch him. I wash him using gentle circles, cleaning my man, moving to his underarms, over his ribs, down his flat firm belly, toward his happy trail and the waistband of his pants.

"My turn," he whispers and reaches for the shampoo, shifting us out of range of the stream of water and squirting some onto the top of my head.

I think this is my cue to stop washing him, so I hook my fingers into his waistband. He works the shampoo into my hair, his firm, long fingers massaging my scalp. Groaning in appreciation, I close my eyes and give myself over to the heavenly sensation. After all the stress of the evening, this is just what I need.

He chuckles and I open one eye to find him smiling down at me. "You like?"

"Hmm …"

He grins. "Me, too," he says and leans over to kiss my forehead, his fingers continuing their sweet, firm kneading of my scalp. "Turn around," he says authoritatively. I do as I'm told, and his fingers slowly work over my head, cleansing, relaxing, loving me as they go. Oh, this is bliss. He reaches for more shampoo and gently washes the long tresses down my back. When he's finished, he pulls me back under the shower.

"Lean your head back," he orders quietly.

I willingly comply, and he carefully rinses out the suds. When he's done, I

face him once more and make a beeline for his pants.

"I want to wash all of you," I whisper. He smiles that lopsided smile and lifts his hands in a gesture that says "I'm all yours, baby." I grin; it feels like Christmas. I make short work of his zipper, and soon his pants and boxers join the rest of our clothing. I stand and reach for the body wash and the freshwater sponge.

"Looks like you're pleased to see me," I murmur dryly.

"I'm always pleased to see you, Miss Steele." He smirks at me.

I soap the sponge, then retrace my journey over his chest. He's more relaxed—maybe because I'm not actually touching him. I head south with the sponge, across his belly, along the happy trail, through his pubic hair, and over and up his erection.

I peek up at him, and he regards me with hooded eyes and sensual longing. *Hmm … I like this look*. I drop the sponge and use my hands, grasping him firmly. He closes his eyes, tips his head back, and groans, thrusting his hips into my hands.

Oh yes! It's so arousing. My inner goddess has resurfaced after her evening of rocking and weeping in the corner, and she's wearing harlot-red lipstick.

His burning eyes suddenly lock with mine. He's remembered something.

"It's Saturday," he exclaims, eyes alight with salacious wonder, and he grasps my waist, pulling me to him and kissing me savagely.

*Whoa—change of pace!*

His hands sweep down my slick, wet body, around to my sex, his fingers exploring, teasing, and his mouth is relentless, leaving me breathless. His other hand is in my wet hair, holding me in place while I bear the full force of his passion unleashed. His fingers move inside me.

"Ahh," I moan into his mouth.

"Yes," he hisses, and lifts me, his hands beneath my backside. "Wrap your legs around me, baby." My legs obey, and I cling like a limpet to his neck. He braces me against the wall of the shower and pauses, gazing down at me.

"Eyes open," he murmurs. "I want to see you."

I blink up at him, my heart hammering, my blood pulsing hot and heavy through my body, desire, real and rampant, surging through me. Then he eases into me oh so slowly, filling me, claiming me, skin against skin. I push down against him and groan loudly. Once fully inside me, he pauses once more, his face strained, intense.

"You are mine, Anastasia," he whispers.

"Always."

He smiles victoriously and shifts, making me gasp.

“And now we can let everyone know, because you said yes.” His voice is reverential, and he leans down, capturing my mouth with his, and starts to move … slow and sweet. I close my eyes and tilt my head back as my body bows, my will submitting to his, slave to his intoxicating slow rhythm.

His teeth graze my jaw, my chin, and down my neck as he picks up the pace, pushing me onward, upward—away from this earthly plane, the teeming shower, the evening’s chilling fright. It’s just me and my man moving in unison, moving as one—each completely absorbed in the other—our gasps and grunts mingling. I revel in the exquisite feeling of his possession as my body blooms and flowers around him.

*I could have lost him … and I love him …* I love him so much, and I’m suddenly overcome by the enormity of my love and the depth of my commitment to him. I will spend the rest of my life loving this man, and with that awe-inspiring thought, I detonate around him—a healing, cathartic orgasm, crying out his name as tears flow down my cheeks.

He reaches his climax and pours himself into me. With his face buried in my neck, he sinks to the floor, holding me tightly, kissing my face, and kissing away my tears as the warm water spills down around us, washing us clean.

“MY FINGERS ARE PRUNY,” I murmur, postcoital and sated as I lean against his chest. He raises my fingers to his lips and kisses each in turn.

“We should really get out of this shower.”

“I’m comfortable here.” I’m sitting between his legs and he’s holding me close. I don’t want to move.

Christian murmurs his assent. But suddenly I’m bone tired, world-weary. So much has happened this last week—enough for a lifetime of drama—and now I’m getting married. A disbelieving giggle escapes my lips.

“Something amusing you, Miss Steele?” he asks fondly.

“It’s been a busy week.”

He grins. “That it has.”

“I thank God you’re back in one piece, Mr. Grey,” I whisper, sobering at the thought of what might have been. He tenses and I immediately regret reminding him.

“I was scared,” he confesses much to my surprise.

“Earlier?”

He nods, his expression serious.

*Holy shit.* “So you made light of it to reassure your family?”

“Yes. I was too low to land well. But somehow I did.”

Crap. My eyes sweep up to his, and he looks grave as the water cascades over

us. “How close a call was it?” He gazes down at me.

“Close.” He pauses. “For a few awful seconds, I thought I’d never see you again.”

I hug him tightly. “I can’t imagine my life without you, Christian. I love you so much it frightens me.”

“Me, too,” he breathes. “My life would be empty without you. I love you so much.” His arms tighten around me and he nuzzles my hair. “I won’t ever let you go.”

“I don’t want to go, ever.” I kiss his neck, and he leans down and kisses me gently.

After a moment, he shifts. “Come—let’s get you dry and into bed. I’m exhausted and you look beat.”

I lean back and arch an eyebrow at his choice of words. He cocks his head to one side and smirks at me.

“You have something to say, Miss Steele?”

I shake my head and rise unsteadily to my feet.

I AM SITTING UP in bed. Christian insisted on drying my hair—he’s quite skilled at it. How that happened is an unpleasant thought, so I dismiss it immediately. It’s after two in the morning, and I am ready to sleep. Christian gazes down at me and reexamines the key chain before climbing into bed. He shakes his head, incredulous once more.

“This is so neat. The best birthday present I’ve ever had.” He glances at me, his eyes soft and warm. “Better than my signed Guiseppe DeNatale poster.”

“I would have told you earlier, but since it was going to be your birthday … What do you give the man who has everything? I thought I’d give you … me.”

He puts the key chain down on the bedside table and snuggles in beside me, pulling me into his arms against his chest so that we’re spooning.

“It’s perfect. Like you.”

I smirk, though he can’t see my expression. “I am far from perfect, Christian.”

“Are you smirking at me, Miss Steele?”

How does he know? “Maybe.” I giggle. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” He nuzzles my neck.

“You didn’t call on your trip back from Portland. Was that really because of José? You were worried about me being here alone with him?”

Christian says nothing. I turn to face him, and his eyes are wide as I reproach him.

“Do you know how ridiculous that is? How much stress you put your family

and me through? We all love you very much."

He blinks a couple of times and then gives me his shy smile. "I had no idea you'd all be so worried."

I purse my lips. "When are you going to get it through your thick skull that you are loved?"

"Thick skull?" His eyebrows widen in surprise.

I nod. "Yes. Thick skull."

"I don't think the bone density of my head is significantly higher than anywhere else in my body."

"I'm serious! Stop trying to make me laugh. I am still a little mad at you, though that's partially eclipsed by the fact that you're home safe and sound when I thought …" My voice fades as I recall those anxious few hours. "Well, you know what I thought."

His eyes soften and he reaches up to caress my face. "I'm sorry. Okay."

"Your poor mom, too. It was very moving, seeing you with her," I whisper.

He smiles shyly. "I've never seen her that way." He blinks at the memory. "Yes, that was really something. She's normally so self-possessed. It was quite a shock."

"See? Everyone loves you." I smile. "Perhaps now you'll start believing it." I lean down and kiss him gently. "Happy birthday, Christian. I'm glad you're here to share your day with me. And you haven't seen what I've got for you tomorrow … um … today." I smirk.

"There's more?" he says, astounded, and his face erupts into a breathtaking grin.

"Oh yes, Mr. Grey, but you'll have to wait until then."

I WAKE SUDDENLY FROM a dream or nightmare, and my pulse is thumping. I turn, panicked, and to my relief, Christian is fast asleep beside me. Because I've shifted, he stirs and reaches out in his sleep, draping his arm over me, and rests his head on my shoulder, sighing softly.

The room is flooded with light. It's eight o'clock. Christian never sleeps this late. I lie back and let my racing heart calm. Why the anxiety? Is it the aftermath of last night?

I turn and stare at him. He's here. He's safe. I take a deep steadying breath and gaze at his lovely face. A face that is now so familiar, all its dips and shadows eternally etched on my mind.

He looks much younger when he's asleep, and I grin because today he's a whole year older. I hug myself, thinking about my present. Oooh … what will he do? Perhaps I should start by bringing him breakfast in bed. Besides, José may

still be here.

I find José at the counter, eating a bowl of cereal. I can't help but flush when I see him. He knows I've spent the night with Christian. Why do I suddenly feel so shy? It's not as if I'm naked or anything. I'm wearing my floor-length silk wrap.

"Morning, José." I smile, brazening it out.

"Hey, Ana!" His face lights up, genuinely pleased to see me. There's no hint of teasing or salacious contempt in his expression.

"Sleep well?" I ask.

"Sure. Some view from up here."

"Yeah. It's pretty special." Like the owner of this apartment. "Want a real man's breakfast?" I tease.

"Love some."

"It's Christian's birthday today—I'm making him breakfast in bed."

"He awake?"

"No, I think he's fried from yesterday." I quickly glance away from him and head to the fridge so he can't see my blush. *Jeez, it's only José*. When I take the eggs and bacon out of the fridge, José is grinning at me.

"You really like him, don't you?"

I purse my lips. "I love him, José."

His eyes widen momentarily then he grins. "What's not to love?" he asks, gesturing around the great room.

I scowl at him. "Gee, thanks!"

"Hey, Ana, just kidding."

Hmm … will I always have this leveled at me? That I'm marrying Christian for his money?

"Seriously, I'm kidding. You've never been that kind of girl."

"Omelet good for you?" I ask, changing the subject. I don't want to argue.

"Sure."

"And me," Christian says as he saunters into the great room. Holy fuck, he's wearing only pajama bottoms that hang in that totally hot way off his hips.

"José." He nods.

"Christian." José returns his nod solemnly.

Christian turns to me and smirks as I stare. He's done this on purpose. I narrow my eyes, desperately trying to recover my equilibrium, and Christian's expression alters subtly. He knows that I know what he's up to, and he doesn't care.

"I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

Swaggering over, he wraps his arm around me, tilts my chin up, and plants a

loud wet kiss on my lips. Very un-Fifty!

"Good morning, Anastasia," he says. I want to scowl at him and tell him to behave—but it's his birthday. I flush. Why is he so territorial?

"Good morning, Christian. Happy birthday." I give him a smile, and he smirks at me.

"I'm looking forward to my other present," he says and that's it. I flush the color of the Red Room of Pain and glance nervously at José, who looks like he's swallowed something unpleasant. I turn away and start preparing the food.

"So what are your plans today, José?" Christian asks, seemingly casual as he sits down on a barstool.

"I'm heading up to see my dad and Ray, Ana's dad."

Christian frowns.

"They know each other?"

"Yeah, they were in the army together. They lost contact until Ana and I were in college together. It's kinda cute. They're best buds now. We're going on a fishing trip."

"Fishing?" Christian is genuinely interested.

"Yeah—some great catches in these coastal waters. The steelheads can grow way big."

"True. My brother, Elliot, and I landed a thirty-four-pound steelhead once."

They're talking fishing? What is it about fishing? I have never understood it.

"Thirty-four pounds? Not bad. Ana's father though, he holds the record. A forty-three-pounder."

"You're kidding! He never said."

"Happy birthday, by the way."

"Thanks. So, where do you like to fish?"

I zone out. This I do not need to know. But at the same time I'm relieved. See, Christian? José's not so bad.

BY THE TIME JOSÉ makes to leave, both of them are much more relaxed with each other. Christian quickly changes into T-shirt and jeans, and barefoot, he accompanies José and me to the foyer.

"Thanks for letting me crash here," José says to Christian as they shake hands.

"Anytime." Christian smiles.

José hugs me quickly. "Stay safe, Ana."

"Sure. Great to see you. Next time we'll have a real evening out."

"I'll hold you to that." He waves at us from inside the elevator and then he's gone.

"See, he's not so bad."

“He still wants into your panties, Ana. But can’t say I blame him.”

“Christian, that’s not true!”

“You have no idea, do you?” He smirks down at me. “He wants you. Big-time.”

I frown. “Christian, he’s just a friend, a good friend.” And I’m suddenly aware that I sound like Christian when he’s talking about Mrs. Robinson. The thought is unsettling.

Christian holds up his hands in a placating gesture.

“I don’t want to fight,” he says softly.

*Oh! We’re not fighting … are we?* “Me neither.”

“You didn’t tell him we were getting married.”

“No. I figured I ought to tell Mom and Ray first.” *Shit*. It’s the first time I’ve thought about this since I said yes. Jeez—what are my parents going to say?

Christian nods. “Yes, you’re right. And I … um, I should ask your father.”

I laugh. “Oh, Christian—this isn’t the eighteenth century.”

*Holy shit. What will Ray say?* The thought of that conversation fills me with horror.

“It’s traditional.” Christian shrugs.

“Let’s talk about that later. I want to give you your other present.” My aim is to distract him. The thought of my present is burning a hole in my consciousness. I need to give it to him and see how he reacts.

He gives me his shy smile, and my heart skips a beat. For as long as I live, I’ll never tire of looking at that smile.

“You’re biting your lip again,” he says and pulls on my chin.

A thrill runs through my body as his fingers touch me. Without a word, and while I still have a modicum of courage, I take his hand and lead him back to the bedroom. I drop his hand, leaving him standing by the bed, and from under my side of the bed, I take out the two remaining gift boxes.

“Two?” he says, surprised.

I take a deep breath. “I bought this before the, um … incident yesterday. I’m not sure about it now.” I quickly hand him one of the parcels before I can change my mind. He gazes at me, puzzled, sensing my uncertainty.

“Sure you want me to open it?”

I nod, anxious.

Christian tears off the packaging and gazes in surprise at the box.

*“Charlie Tango,”* I whisper.

He grins. The box contains a small wooden helicopter with a large, solar-powered rotor blade. He opens it up.

“Solar powered,” he murmurs. “Wow.” And before I know it he’s sitting on

the bed assembling it. It snaps together quickly, and Christian holds it up in the palm of his hand. A blue wooden helicopter. He looks up at me and gives me his glorious, all-American-boy smile, then heads to the window so that the little helicopter is bathed in sunlight and the rotor starts to spin.

"Look at that," he breathes, examining it closely. "What we can already do with this technology." He holds it at eye level, watching the blades spin. He's fascinated and fascinating to watch as he loses himself in thought, staring at the little helicopter. What is he thinking?

"You like it?"

"Ana, I love it. Thank you." He grabs me and kisses me swiftly, then turns back to watch the rotor spin. "I'll add it to the glider in my office," he says distractedly, watching the blades spin. He moves his hand out of the sunlight, and the blades slows down and comes to a stop.

I can't help my face-splitting grin, and I want to hug myself. He loves it. Of course, he's all about alternative technologies. I'd forgotten that in my haste to buy it. Placing it on the chest of drawers, he turns to face me.

"It'll keep me company while we salvage *Charlie Tango*."

"Is it salvageable?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I'll miss her, otherwise."

*Her?* I am shocked at myself for the small pang of jealousy I feel for an inanimate object. My subconscious snorts with derisive laughter. I ignore her.

"What's in the other box?" he asks, his eyes wide with almost childish excitement.

*Holy fuck.* "I'm not sure if this present is for you or me."

"Really?" he asks, and I know I have piqued his interest. Nervously I hand him the second box. He shakes it gently and we both hear a heavy rattle. He glances up at me.

"Why are you so nervous?" he asks, bemused. I shrug, embarrassed and excited as I flush. He raises an eyebrow.

"You have me intrigued, Miss Steele," he whispers, and his voice runs right through me, desire and anticipation spawning in my belly. "I have to say I'm enjoying your reaction. What have you been up to?" He narrows his eyes speculatively.

I remain tight-lipped as I hold my breath.

He removes the lid of the box and takes out a small card. The rest of the contents are wrapped in tissue. He opens the card, and his eyes dart quickly to mine—widening with shock or surprise, I just don't know.

"Do rude things to you?" he murmurs. I nod and swallow. He cocks his head to one side warily, assessing my reaction, and frowns. Then he turns his attention

back to the box. He tears through the pale blue tissue paper and fishes out an eye mask, some nipple clamps, a butt plug, his iPod, his silver gray tie—and last but by no means least—the key to his playroom.

He gazes at me, his expression dark, unreadable. *Oh shit*. Is this a bad move?

"You want to play?" he asks softly.

"Yes," I breathe.

"For my birthday?"

"Yes." Could my voice sound any smaller?

Myriad emotions cross his face, none of which I can place, but he settles for anxious. *Hmm* … Not quite the reaction I was expecting.

"You're sure?" he asks.

"Not the whips and stuff."

"I understand that."

"Yes, then. I'm sure."

He shakes his head and gazes down at the contents of the box. "Sex mad and insatiable. Well, I think we can do something with this lot," he murmurs almost to himself, then puts the contents back in the box. When he glances at me again, his expression has completely changed. Holy cow, his eyes burn, and his mouth lifts in a slow erotic smile. He holds out his hand.

"Now," he says, and it's not a request. My belly clenches, tight and hard, deep, deep down.

I put my hand in his.

"Come," he orders, and I follow him out of the bedroom, my heart in my mouth. Desire races slick and hot through my blood as my insides tighten with hungry anticipation. Finally!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Christian pauses outside the playroom.

"You're sure about this?" he asks, his gaze heated yet anxious.

"Yes," I murmur, smiling shyly at him.

His eyes soften. "Anything you don't want to do?"

I'm derailed by his unexpected question, and my mind goes into overdrive. One thought occurs. "I don't want you to take photos of me."

He stills, and his expression hardens as he cocks his head to one side and eyes me speculatively.

*Oh, shit*. I think he's going to ask me why, but fortunately he doesn't.

"Okay," he murmurs. His brow furrows as he unlocks the door, then stands aside to usher me into the room. I feel his eyes on me as he follows me inside and closes the door.

Placing the gift box on the chest of drawers, he takes out the iPod, switches it on, then waves at the music center on the wall so that the smoked glass doors glide silently open. He presses some buttons, and the sound of a subway train echoes around the room. He turns it down so that the slow, hypnotic electronic beat that follows becomes ambient. A woman starts to sing, I don't know who she is but her voice is soft yet rasping and the beat is measured, deliberate … erotic. *Oh my*. It's music to make love to.

Christian turns to face me as I stand in the middle of the room, my heart pounding, my blood singing in my veins, pulsing—or so it feels—in time to the music's seductive beat. He saunters casually over to me and tugs on my chin so I'm no longer biting my lip.

"What do you want to do, Anastasia?" he murmurs, planting a soft chaste kiss at the corner of my mouth, his fingers still grasping my chin.

"It's your birthday. Whatever you want," I whisper. He traces his thumb along my lower lip, his brow creased once more.

"Are we in here because you think I want to be in here?" His words are softly spoken, but he regards me intently.

"No," I whisper. "I want to be in here, too."

His gaze darkens, growing bolder as he assesses my response. After what

seems an eternity, he speaks.

"Oh, there are so many possibilities, Miss Steele." His voice is low, excited. "But let's start with getting you naked." He pulls the sash of my robe so that it falls open, revealing my silk nightdress, then steps back and sits down nonchalantly on the arm of the chesterfield couch.

"Take your clothes off. Slowly." He gives me a sensual, challenging look.

I swallow compulsively, pressing my thighs together. I'm already damp between my legs. My inner goddess is stripped naked and standing in line, ready and waiting and begging me to play catch-up. I pull the robe away from my shoulders, my eyes never leaving his, and shrug, letting it fall billowing to the floor. His mesmerizing gray eyes heat, and he runs his index finger over his lips as he gazes at me.

Slipping the spaghetti straps of my gown off my shoulders, I gaze at him for a beat, then release them. My nightdress skims and ripples softly down my body, pooling at my feet. I am naked and practically panting and oh-so-ready.

Christian pauses for a moment, and I marvel at the frankly carnal appreciation in his expression. Standing up, he makes his way over to the chest and picks up his silver gray tie—my favorite tie. He pulls it through his fingers as he turns and strolls casually toward me, a smile playing on his lips. When he stands in front of me, I expect him to ask for my hands, but he doesn't.

"I think you're underdressed, Miss Steele," he murmurs. He places the tie around my neck, and slowly but dexterously ties it in what I assume is a fine Windsor knot. As he tightens the knot, his fingers brush the base of my throat and electricity shoots through me, making me gasp. He leaves the wide end of the tie long, long enough so the tip skims my pubic hair.

"You look mighty fine now, Miss Steele," he says and bends to kiss me gently on my lips. It's a swift kiss, and I want more, desire spiraling wantonly through my body.

"What shall we do with you now?" he says, and then picking up the tie, he yanks sharply so that I'm forced forward into his arms. His hands dive into my hair and pull my head back, and he really kisses me, hard, his tongue unforgiving and merciless. One of his hands roams freely down my back to cup my behind. When he pulls away, he's panting too and gazing down at me, his eyes molten gray; I'm left wanting, gasping for breath, my wits thoroughly scattered. I'm sure my lips will be swollen after his sensual assault.

"Turn around," he orders gently and I obey. Pulling my hair free of the tie, he quickly braids and secures it. He tugs the braid so my head tilts up.

"You have beautiful hair, Anastasia," he murmurs and kisses my throat, sending shivers running up and down my spine. "You just have to say stop. You

know that, don't you?" he whispers against my throat.

I nod, my eyes closed, and relish his lips on me. He turns me around once more and picks up the end of the tie.

"Come," he says, tugging gently, leading me over to the chest where the rest of the box's contents are on display.

"Anastasia, these objects." He holds up the butt plug. "This is a size too big. As an anal virgin, you don't want to start with this. We want to start with this." He holds up his pinkie finger, and I gasp, shocked. Fingers … *there?* He smirks at me, and the unpleasant thought of the anal fisting mentioned in the contract comes to mind.

"Just finger—singular," he says softly with that uncanny ability he has to read my mind. My eyes dart to his. How does he do that?

"These clamps are vicious." He prods the nipple clamps. "We'll use these." He places a different pair of clamps on the chest. They look like giant black hairpins but with little jet jewels hanging down. "They're adjustable," Christian murmurs, his voice laced with gentle concern.

I blink up at him, wide-eyed. Christian, my sexual mentor. He knows so much more about all of this than I do. I'll never catch up. I frown. He knows more than me about most things … except cooking.

"Clear?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper, my mouth dry. "Are you going to tell me what you intend to do?"

"No. I'm making this up as I go along. This isn't a scene, Ana."

"How should I behave?"

His brow creases. "However you want to."

*Oh!*

"Were you expecting my alter ego, Anastasia?" he asks, his tone vaguely mocking and bemused at once. I blink at him.

"Well, yes. I like him," I murmur. He smiles his private smile and reaches up to run his thumb down my cheek.

"Do you now," he breathes and runs his thumb across my lower lip. "I'm your lover, Anastasia, not your Dom. I love to hear your laugh and your girlish giggle. I like you relaxed and happy, like you are in José's photos. That's the girl that fell into my office. That's the girl I fell in love with."

My mouth drops open, and a welcome warmth blooms in my heart. It's joy—pure joy.

"But having said all that, I also like to do rude things to you, Miss Steele, and my alter ego knows a trick or two. So, do as you're told and turn around." His eyes glint wickedly, and the joy moves sharply south, seizing me tightly and

gripping every sinew below my waist. I do as I'm told. Behind me, he opens one of the drawers and a moment later he's in front of me again.

"Come," he orders and tugs on the tie, leading me to the table. As we walk past the couch, I notice for the first time that all the canes have vanished. It distracts me. Were they there yesterday when I came in? I don't remember. Did Christian move them? Mrs. Jones? Christian interrupts my train of thought.

"I want you to kneel up on this," he says when we're at the table.

Oh, okay. What does he have in mind? My inner goddess can't wait to find out—she's already scissor-kicked onto the table and is watching him with adoration.

He gently lifts me onto the table, and I fold my legs beneath me and kneel in front of him, surprised by my own grace. Now we are eye to eye. He runs his hands down my thighs, grasps my knees, and pulls my legs apart and stands directly in front of me. He looks very serious, his eyes darker, hooded … lustful.

"Arms behind your back. I'm going to cuff you."

He produces some leather cuffs from his back pocket and reaches around me. This is it. Where's he going to take me this time?

His proximity is intoxicating. This man is going to be my husband. Can one lust after one's husband like this? I don't remember reading about that anywhere. I can't resist him, and I run my parted lips along his jaw, feeling the stubble, a heady combination of prickly and soft, under my tongue. He stills and closes his eyes. His breathing falters and he pulls back.

"Stop. Or this will be over far quicker than either of us wants," he warns. For a moment, I think he might be angry but then he smiles, and his heated eyes are alight with amusement.

"You're irresistible." I pout.

"Am I now?" he says dryly.

I nod.

"Well—don't distract me, or I'll gag you."

"I like distracting you," I whisper, looking mulishly at him, and he cocks his eyebrow at me.

"Or spank you."

Oh! I try to hide my smile. There was a time, not very long ago, when I would have been subdued by this threat. I would never have had the nerve to kiss him, unbidden, while he was in this room. I realize now, I'm no longer intimidated by him. It's a revelation. I grin mischievously, and he smirks at me.

"Behave," he growls and stands back, gazing at me and slaps the leather cuffs across his palm. And the warning is there, implicit in his actions. I try for contrite, and I think I succeed. He approaches me again.

“That’s better,” he breathes and leans behind me once more with the cuffs. I resist touching him but inhale his glorious Christian scent, still fresh from last night’s shower. *Hmm* … I should bottle this.

I expect him to cuff my wrists, but he attaches each cuff above my elbows. It makes me arch my back, pushing my breasts forward, though my elbows are by no means together. When he’s finished, he stands back to admire me.

“Feel okay?” he asks. It’s not the most comfortable of positions, but I’m so wired with anticipation to see where he’s going with this that I nod, weak with wanting.

“Good.” He pulls the mask from his back pocket.

“I think you’ve seen enough now,” he murmurs. He slides the mask over my head, covering my eyes. My breathing spikes. *Wow*. Why is not being able to see so erotic? I am here, trussed up and kneeling on a table, waiting—sweet anticipation hot and heavy deep in my belly. I can still hear, though, and the melodic steady beat of the track continues. It resonates through my body. I hadn’t noticed before. He must have it on repeat.

Christian steps away. What is he doing? He moves back to the chest and opens a drawer, then closes it again. A moment later he’s back, and I sense him in front of me. There’s a pungent, rich, musky scent in the air. It’s delicious, almost mouthwatering.

“I don’t want to ruin my favorite tie,” he murmurs. It slowly unravels as he undoes it.

I inhale sharply as the tail of the tie travels up my body, tickling me in its wake. Ruin his tie? I listen acutely to determine what he’s going to do. He’s rubbing his hands together. His knuckles suddenly brush over my cheek, down to my jaw following my jawline.

My body leaps to attention as his touch sends a delicious shiver through me. His hand flexes over my neck, and it’s slick with sweet-smelling oil so his hand glides smoothly down my throat, across my clavicle, and up to my shoulder, his fingers kneading gently as they go. Oh, I’m getting a massage. Not what I expected.

He places his other hand on my other shoulder and begins another slow teasing journey across my clavicle. I groan softly as he works his way down toward my increasingly aching breasts, aching for his touch. It’s tantalizing. I arch my body farther into his deft touch, but his hands glide to my sides, slow, measured, in time to the beat of the music, and studiously avoid my breasts. I groan, but I don’t know if it’s from pleasure or frustration.

“You are so beautiful, Ana,” he murmurs, his voice low and husky, his mouth next to my ear. His nose follows along my jaw as he continues to massage me—

beneath my breasts, across my belly, down … He kisses me fleetingly on my lips, then he runs his nose down my neck, my throat. *Holy cow, I'm on fire* … his nearness, his hands, his words.

"And soon you'll be my wife to have and to hold," he whispers.

*Oh my*.

"To love and to cherish." *Jeez*.

"With my body, I will worship you."

I tip my head back and moan. His fingers run through my pubic hair, over my sex, and he rubs the palm of his hand against my clitoris.

"Mrs. Grey," he whispers as his palm works against me.

I groan.

"Yes," he breathes as his palm continues to tease me. "Open your mouth."

My mouth is already open from panting. I open wider, and he slips a large cool metal object between my lips. Shaped like an oversized baby's pacifier, it has small grooves or carvings, and what feels like a chain at the end. It's big.

"Suck," he commands softly. "I'm going to put this inside you."

*Inside me? Inside me where?* My heart lurches into my mouth.

"Suck," he repeats and he stops palming me.

*No, don't stop!* I want to shout, but my mouth is full. His oiled hands glide back up my body and finally cup my neglected breasts.

"Don't stop sucking."

Gently he rolls my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, and they harden and lengthen under his expert touch, sending synaptic waves of pleasure all the way to my groin.

"You have such beautiful breasts, Ana," he murmurs, and my nipples harden further in response. He murmurs his approval and I moan. His lips move down from my neck toward one breast, trailing soft bites and sucks over and over, down toward my nipple, and suddenly I feel the pinch of the clamp.

"Ah!" I garble my groan through the device in my mouth. Holy cow, the feeling is exquisite, raw, painful, pleasurable … oh—the pinch. Gently, he laves the restrained nipple with his tongue, and as he does so, he applies the other. The bite of the second clamp is equally harsh … but just as good. I groan loudly.

"Feel it," he whispers.

*Oh, I do. I do. I do*.

"Give me this." He tugs gently on the ornate metal pacifier in my mouth, and I release it. His hands once more trail down my body toward my sex. He's reoiled his hands. They glide around to my backside.

I gasp. What's he going to do? I tense up on my knees as he runs his fingers between my buttocks.

“Hush, easy,” he breathes close to my ear and kisses my neck as his fingers stroke and tease me.

*What’s he going to do?* His other hand glides down my belly to my sex, palming me once more. He eases his fingers inside me, and I moan loudly, appreciatively.

“I’m going to put this inside you,” he murmurs. “Not here.” His fingers trail between my buttocks, spreading oil. “But here.” He moves his fingers around and around, in and out, hitting the front wall of my vagina. I moan and my restrained nipples swell.

“Ah.”

“Hush now.” Christian removes his fingers and slides the object into me. He cups my face and kisses me, his mouth invading mine, and I hear a very faint click. Instantly the plug inside me starts to vibrate—*down there*! I gasp. The feeling is extraordinary—beyond anything I’ve felt before.

“Ah!”

“Easy,” Christian calms me, stifling my gasps with his mouth. His hands move down and tug very gently on the clamps. I cry out loudly.

“Christian, please!”

“Hush, baby. Hang in there.”

This is too much—all this overstimulation, everywhere. My body starts to climb, and on my knees, I’m unable to control the buildup. *Oh my* … Will I be able to handle this?

“Good girl,” he soothes.

“Christian,” I pant, sounding desperate even to my own ears.

“Hush, feel it, Ana. Don’t be afraid.” His hands are now on my waist, holding me, but I can’t concentrate on his hands, what’s inside me, and the clamps, too. My body is building, building to an explosion—with the relentless vibrations and the sweet, sweet torture of my nipples. *Holy hell*. It will be too intense. His hands move from my hips, down and around, slick and oiled, touching, feeling, kneading my skin—kneading my behind.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs and suddenly he gently pushes an anointed finger inside me … *there!* Into my backside. *Fuck*. It feels alien, full, forbidden … but oh … so … good. And he moves slowly, easing in and out, while his teeth graze my upturned chin.

“So beautiful, Ana.”

I’m suspended high—high above a wide, wide ravine, and I’m soaring then falling giddily at the same time, plunging to the Earth. I can hold on no more, and I scream as my body convulses and climaxes at the overwhelming fullness. As my body explodes, I’m nothing but sensation—everywhere. Christian

releases first one and then the other clamp, causing my nipples to sing with a surge of sweet, sweet painful feeling, but it's oh-so-good and causing my orgasm, this orgasm, to go on and on. His finger stays where it is, gently easing in and out.

"Argh!" I cry out, and Christian wraps himself around me, holding me, as my body continues to pulse mercilessly inside.

*"No!"* I shout again, pleading, and this time he tugs the vibrator out of me, and his finger, too, as my body continues to convulse.

He unstraps one of the cuffs so that my arms fall forward. My head lolls on his shoulder, and I am lost, lost to all this overwhelming sensation. I'm all shattered breath, exhausted desire, and sweet, welcome oblivion.

Vaguely, I'm aware that Christian lifts me, carries me over to the bed, and lays me down on the cool satin sheets. After a moment, his hands, still oiled, gently rub the backs of my thighs, my knees, my calves, and my shoulders. I feel the bed dip as he stretches out beside me.

He pulls the mask off, but I don't have the energy to open my eyes. Finding my braid, he undoes the hair tie and leans forward, kissing me softly on my lips. Only my erratic breathing disturbs the silence in the room and steadies as I float gently back to Earth. The music has stopped.

"So beautiful," he murmurs.

When I persuade one eye to open, he's gazing down at me, smiling softly.

"Hi," he says. I manage a grunt in response, and his smile broadens. "Rude enough for you?"

I nod and give him a reluctant grin. Jeez, any ruder and I'd have to spank the pair of us.

"I think you're trying to kill me," I mutter.

"Death by orgasm." He smirks. "There are worse ways to go," he says but then frowns ever so slightly as an unpleasant thought crosses his mind. It distresses me. I reach up and caress his face.

"You can kill me like this anytime," I whisper. I notice that he's gloriously naked and ready for action. When he takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, I lean up and capture his face between my hands and pull his mouth to mine. He kisses me briefly, then stops.

"This is what I want to do," he murmurs and reaches beneath his pillow for the music center remote. He presses a button and the soft strains of a guitar echo around the walls.

"I want to make love to you," he says, gazing down at me, his gray eyes burning with bright, loving sincerity. Softly in the background, a familiar voice starts to sing "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." And his lips find mine.

AS I TIGHTEN AROUND him, finding my release once more, Christian unravels in my arms, his head thrown back as he calls out my name. He clasps me tightly to his chest as we sit nose to nose in the middle of his vast bed, me astride him. And in this moment—this moment of joy with this man to this music—the intensity of my experience this morning in here with him and all that has occurred during the past week overwhelms me anew, not just physically but emotionally. I am completely overcome with all these feelings. I am so deeply in love with him. For the first time I'm offered a glimmer of understanding as to how he feels about my safety.

Recalling his close call with *Charlie Tango* yesterday, I shudder at the thought and tears pool in my eyes. If anything ever happened to him—I love him so. My tears run unchecked down my cheeks. So many sides of Christian—his sweet, gentle persona and his rugged, I-can-do-what-I-fucking-well-like-to-you-and-you'll-come-like-a-train Dominant side—his fifty shades—all of him. All spectacular. All mine. And I'm aware we don't know each other well, and we have a mountain of issues to overcome, but I know for each other, we will—and we'll have a lifetime to do it.

"Hey," he breathes, clasping my head in his hands, gazing down at me. He's still inside me. "Why are you crying?" His voice is filled with concern.

"Because I love you so much," I whisper. He half closes his eyes as if drugged, absorbing my words. When he opens them again, they blaze with his love.

"And I you, Ana. You make me … whole." He kisses me gently as Roberta Flack finishes her song.

WE HAVE TALKED AND talked and talked, sitting upright together on the bed in the playroom, me in his lap, our legs curled around each other. The red satin sheet is draped around us like a royal cocoon, and I have no idea how much time has passed. Christian is laughing at my impersonation of Kate during the photo shoot at the Heathman.

"To think it could have been her who came to interview me. Thank the Lord for the common cold," he murmurs and kisses my nose.

"I believe she had the flu, Christian," I scold him, trailing my fingers idly through his chest hair and marveling that he's tolerating it so well. "All the canes have gone," I murmur, recalling my distraction from earlier. He tucks my hair behind my ear for the umpteenth time.

"I didn't think you'd ever get past that hard limit."

"No, I don't think I will," I whisper wide-eyed, then find myself glancing over at the whips, paddles, and floggers lining the opposite wall. He follows my gaze.

"You want me to get rid of them, too?" He's amused but sincere.

"Not the crop … the brown one. Or that suede flogger." I flush.

He smiles down at me.

"Okay, the crop and the flogger. Why, Miss Steele, you're full of surprises."

"As are you, Mr. Grey. It's one of the things I love about you." I kiss him gently at the corner of his mouth.

"What else do you love about me?" he asks and his eyes widen.

I know it's a huge deal for him to ask this question. It humbles me and I blink at him. I love everything about him—even his fifty shades. I know that life with Christian will never be boring.

"This." I stroke my index finger across his lips. "I love this, and what comes out of it, and what you do to me with it. And what's in here." I caress his temple. "You're so smart and witty and knowledgeable, competent in so many things. But most of all, I love what's in here." I press my palm gently against his chest, feeling his steady beating heart. "You are the most compassionate man I've met. What you do. How you work. It's awe-inspiring," I whisper.

"Awe-inspiring?" He's puzzled, but there's a trace of humor on his face. Then his face transforms, and his shy smile appears as if he's embarrassed, and I want to launch myself at him. So I do.

I AM DOZING, WRAPPED in satin and Grey. Christian nuzzles me awake.

"Hungry?" he whispers.

"Hmm, famished."

"Me, too."

I lean up to gaze down at him sprawled on the bed.

"It's your birthday, Mr. Grey. I'll cook you something. What would you like?"

"Surprise me." He runs his hand down my back, stroking me gently. "I should check my BlackBerry for all the messages I missed yesterday." He sighs and starts to sit up, and I know this special time is over … for now.

"Let's shower," he says.

Who am I to turn down the birthday boy?

CHRISTIAN IS IN HIS study on the phone. Taylor is with him, looking serious but casual in jeans and a tight black T-shirt. I busy myself in the kitchen fixing lunch. I have found salmon steaks in the fridge, and I'm poaching them in lemon, making a salad, and boiling some baby potatoes. I feel extraordinarily relaxed and happy, on top of the world—literally. Turning toward the large window, I stare out at the glorious blue sky. *All that talking … all that sexing … hmm*. A girl could get

used to that.

Taylor emerges from the study, interrupting my reverie. I turn down my iPod and take out an earbud.

“Hi, Taylor.”

“Ana.” He nods.

“Your daughter okay?”

“Yes, thanks. My ex-wife thought she had appendicitis, but she was overreacting as usual.” Taylor rolls his eyes, surprising me. “Sophie’s fine, though she has a nasty stomach bug.”

“I’m sorry.”

He smiles.

“Has *Charlie Tango* been located?”

“Yes. The recovery team is on its way. She should be back at Boeing Field late tonight.”

“Oh, good.”

He gives me a tight smile. “Will that be all, ma’am?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” I flush … will I ever get used to Taylor calling me ma’am? It makes me feel so old, at least thirty.

He nods and heads out of the great room. Christian is still on the phone. I am waiting for the potatoes to boil. It gives me an idea. Fetching my purse, I fish out my BlackBerry. There’s a text from Kate.

*C U this evening. Looking forward to a looooong chat*

I text back.

*Same here*

It will be good to talk to Kate.

Calling up the e-mail program, I type a quick message to Christian.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** Lunch

**Date:** June 18 2011 13:12

**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

I am e-mailing to inform you that your lunch is nearly ready.

And that I had some mind-blowing, kinky fuckery earlier today.

Birthday kinky fuckery is to be recommended.

And another thing—I love you.

A x

(Your fiancée)

I listen carefully for a reaction, but he's still on the phone. I shrug. Perhaps he's just too busy. My BlackBerry vibrates.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Kinky Fuckery
**Date:** June 18 2011 13:15
**To:** Anastasia Steele

What aspect was most mind-blowing?

I'm taking notes.

Christian Grey
Famished and Wasting Away After the Morning's
Exertions CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

PS: I love your signature

PPS: What happened to the art of conversation?

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Famished?
**Date:** June 18 2011 13:18
**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

May I draw your attention to the first line of my previous e-mail informing you that your lunch is indeed almost ready … so none of this famished and wasting away nonsense. With regard to the mind-blowing aspects of the kinky fuckery … frankly—all of it. I'd be interested in reading your notes. And I like my bracketed signature, too.

A x

(Your fiancée)

PS: Since when have you been so loquacious? And you're on the phone!

I press send and look up, and he's standing in front of me, smirking. Before I can say anything, he bounds around the kitchen island, sweeps me up in his arms, and kisses me soundly.

"That is all, Miss Steele," he says, releasing me, and he saunters—in his jeans, bare feet, and untucked white shirt—back to his office, leaving me breathless.

I'VE MADE A WATERCRESS, cilantro, and sour cream dip to accompany the salmon, and I've set the breakfast bar. I hate interrupting him while he's working, but now I stand in the doorway of his office. He's still on the phone, all thoroughly fucked hair and bright gray eyes—a visually nourishing feast. He looks up when he sees me and doesn't take his eyes off me. He frowns slightly, and I don't know if it's at me or because of his conversation.

"Just let them in and leave them alone. Do you understand, Mia?" he hisses and rolls his eyes. "Good."

I mime eating, and he grins at me and nods.

"I'll see you later." He hangs up. "One more call?" he asks.

"Sure."

"That dress is very short," he adds.

"You like it?" I give him a quick twirl. It's one of Caroline Acton's purchases. A soft turquoise sundress, probably more suitable for the beach, but it's such a lovely day on so many levels. He frowns and my face falls.

"You look fantastic in it, Ana. I just don't want anyone else to see you like that."

"Oh!" I scowl at him. "We're at home, Christian. No one but the staff."

His mouth twists, and either he's trying to hide his amusement or he really doesn't think that's funny. But eventually he nods, reassured. I shake my head at him—he's actually being serious? I head back to the kitchen.

Five minutes later, he's back in front of me, holding the phone.

"I have Ray for you," he murmurs, his eyes wary.

All the air leaves my body at once. I take the phone and cover the mouthpiece.

"You told him!" I hiss. Christian nods, and his eyes widen at my obvious look of distress.

*Shit!* I take a deep breath. "Hi, Dad."

"Christian has just asked me if he can marry you," Ray says.

The silence stretches between us as I desperately think of what to say. Ray as usual stays silent, giving me no clue as to his reaction to this news.

"What did you say?" I crack first.

"I said I wanted to talk to you. It's kind of sudden, don't you think, Annie? You've not known him long. I mean, he's a nice guy, knows his fishing … but so soon?" His voice is calm and measured.

"Yes. It is sudden … hang on." Hastily, I leave the kitchen area, away from Christian's anxious gaze, and head toward the great window. The doors to the balcony are open, and I step out into the sunshine. I can't quite walk to the edge. It's just too far up.

"I know it's sudden and all—but … well, I love him. He loves me. He wants to marry me, and there'll never be anyone else for me." I flush thinking this is probably the most intimate conversation I have ever had with my stepfather.

Ray is silent on the other end of the phone.

"Have you told your mother?"

"No."

"Annie … I know he's all kinds of rich and eligible, but marriage? It's such a big step. You're sure?"

"He's my happily ever after," I whisper.

"Whoa," Ray says after a moment, his tone softer.

"He's everything."

"Annie, Annie, Annie. You're such a headstrong young woman. I hope to God you know what you're doing. Hand me back to him, will you?"

"Sure, Dad, and will you give me away at the wedding?" I ask quietly.

"Oh, honey." His voice cracks, and he's quiet for a few moments, the emotion in his voice bringing tears to my eyes. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he says eventually.

*Oh, Ray. I love you so much* … I swallow to keep from crying. "Thank you, Dad. I'll hand you back to Christian. Be gentle with him. I love him," I whisper.

I think Ray is smiling on the other end of the line, but it's hard to tell. It's always hard to tell with Ray.

"Sure thing, Annie. And come and visit this old man and bring that Christian with you."

I march back into the room—pissed at Christian for not warning me—and hand him the phone, my expression letting him know just how annoyed I am. He's amused as he takes the phone and heads back into his study.

Two minutes later, he reappears.

"I have your stepfather's rather begrudging blessing," he says proudly, so proudly, in fact, that it makes me giggle, and he grins at me. He's acting like

he's just negotiated a major new merger or acquisition, which I suppose on one level, he has.

"DAMN, YOU'RE A GOOD cook, woman." Christian swallows his last mouthful and raises his glass of white wine to me. I blossom under his praise, and it occurs to me I'll only get to cook for him on weekends. I frown. I enjoy cooking. Perhaps I should have made him a cake for his birthday. I check my watch. I still have time.

"Ana?" He interrupts my thoughts. "Why did you ask me not to take your photo?" His question startles me all the more because his voice is deceptively soft.

*Oh … shit*. The photos. I stare down at my empty plate, twisting my fingers in my lap. What can I say? I'd promised myself not to mention that I'd found his version of *Penthouse Pets*.

"Ana," he snaps. "What is it?" He makes me jump, and his voice commands me to look at him. When did I think he didn't intimidate me?

"I found your photos," I whisper.

His eyes widen in shock. "You've been in the safe?" he asks, incredulous.

"Safe? No. I didn't know you had a safe."

He frowns. "I don't understand."

"In your closet. The box. I was looking for your tie, and the box was under your jeans … the ones you normally wear in the playroom. Except today." I flush.

He gapes at me, appalled, and nervously runs his hand through his hair as he processes this information. He rubs his chin, lost in thought, but he can't mask the perplexed annoyance etched on his face. Abruptly he shakes his head, exasperated—but amused, too—and a faint smile of admiration kisses the corner of his mouth. He steeples his hands in front of him and focuses on me once more.

"It's not what you think. I'd forgotten all about them. That box had been moved. Those photographs belong in my safe."

"Who moved them?" I whisper.

He swallows. "There's only one person who could have done that."

"Oh. Who? And what do you mean, 'It's not what I think'?"

He sighs and tilts his head to one side, and I think he's embarrassed. *So he should be!* my subconscious snarls.

"This is going to sound cold, but—they're an insurance policy," he whispers, steeling himself for my response.

"Insurance policy?"

“Against exposure.”

The penny drops and rattles uncomfortably around and around in my empty head.

“Oh,” I murmur, because I can’t think of what else to say. I close my eyes. This is it. This is fifty shades of fucked-up, right here, right now. “Yes. You’re right,” I mutter. “That does sound cold.” I stand to clear our dishes. I don’t want to know any more.

“Ana.”

“Do they know? The girls … the subs?”

He frowns. “Of course they know.”

Oh, well, that’s something. He reaches out, grabbing me and pulling me to him.

“Those photos are supposed to be in the safe. They’re not for recreational use.” He stops. “Maybe they were when they were taken originally. But—” He stops, imploring me. “They don’t mean anything.”

“Who put them in your closet?”

“It could only have been Leila.”

“She knows your safe combination?”

He shrugs. “It wouldn’t surprise me. It’s a very long combination, and I use it so rarely. It’s the one number I have written down and haven’t changed.” He shakes his head. “I wonder what else she knows and if she’s taken anything else out of there.” He frowns, then turns his attention back to me. “Look, I’ll destroy the photos. Now if you like.”

“They’re your photos, Christian. Do with them as you wish,” I mutter.

“Don’t be like that,” he says, taking my head in his hands and holding my gaze to his. “I don’t want that life. I want our life, together.”

*Holy cow*. How does he know that beneath my horror about these photos is my paranoia?

“Ana, I thought we exorcised all those ghosts this morning. I feel that way. Don’t you?”

I blink at him, recalling our very, very pleasurable and romantic and downright dirty morning in his playroom.

“Yes.” I smile. “Yes, I feel like that, too.”

“Good.” He leans forward and kisses me, folding me in his arms. “I’ll shred them,” he murmurs. “And then I have to go to work. I’m sorry, baby, but I have a mountain of business to get through this afternoon.”

“It’s cool. I have to call my mother.” I grimace. “Then I want to do some shopping and bake you a cake.”

He grins and his eyes light up like a small boy’s.

“A cake?”

I nod.

“A chocolate cake?”

“You want a chocolate cake?” His grin is infectious.

He nods.

“I’ll see what I can do, Mr. Grey.”

He kisses me once more.

CARLA IS STUNNED INTO silence.

“Mom, say something.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you, Ana?” she whispers in horror.

“No no no, nothing like that.” Disappointment slices through my heart, and I’m saddened that she would think that of me. But then I remember with an ever-sinking feeling that she was pregnant with me when she married my father.

“I’m sorry, darling. This is just so sudden. I mean, Christian is quite a catch, but you’re so young, and you should see a little of the world.”

“Mom, can’t you just be happy for me? I love him.”

“Darling, I just need to get used to the idea. It’s a shock. I could tell in Georgia that there was something very special between you two, but marriage …?”

In Georgia he wanted me to be his submissive, but I won’t tell her that.

“Have you set a date?”

“No.”

“I wish your father was alive,” she whispers. Oh no … not this. Not this, now.

“I know, Mom. I would have liked to know him, too.”

“He only held you once, and he was so proud. He thought you were the most beautiful girl in the world.” Her voice is a deathly hush as the familiar tale is retold … again. She will be in tears next.

“I know, Mom.”

“And then he died.” She sniffs, and I know this has set her off as it does every time.

“Mom,” I whisper, wanting to reach down the phone and hold her.

“I’m a silly old woman,” she murmurs and she sniffs again. “Of course I am happy for you, darling. Does Ray know?” she adds, and she seems to have recovered her equilibrium.

“Christian’s just asked him.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. Good.” She sounds melancholic, but she’s making an effort.

“Yes, it was,” I murmur.

“Ana, darling, I love you so much. I *am* happy for you. And you must both

visit."

"Yes, Mom. I love you, too."

"Bob is calling me, I have to go. Let me have a date. We need to plan … are you having a big wedding?"

Big wedding, crap. I haven't even thought about that. Big wedding? No. I don't want a big wedding.

"I don't know yet. As soon as I do, I'll call."

"Good. You take care now and be safe. You two need to have some fun … plenty of time for kids later."

Kids! *Hmm* … and there it is again—a not-so-veiled reference to the fact that she had me so early.

"Mom, I didn't really ruin your life, did I?"

She gasps. "Oh no, Ana, never think that. You were the best thing that ever happened to your father and me. I just wish he was here to see you so grown-up and getting married." She's wistful and maudlin again.

"I wish that, too." I shake my head, thinking about my mythical father. "Mom, I'll let you go. I'll call soon."

"Love you, darling."

"Me, too, Mom. Good-bye."

CHRISTIAN'S KITCHEN IS A dream to work in. For a man who knows nothing about cooking, he seems to have everything. I suspect Mrs. Jones loves to cook, too. The only thing I need is some high-quality chocolate for the frosting. I leave the two halves of the cake on a cooling rack, grab my purse, and pop my head around Christian's study door. He's concentrating on his computer screen. He looks up and smiles at me.

"I'm just heading to the store to pick up some ingredients."

"Okay." He frowns at me.

"What?"

"You going to put some jeans on or something?"

Oh, come on. "Christian, they're just legs."

He gazes at me, not amused. This is going to be a fight. And it's his birthday. I roll my eyes at him, feeling like an errant teenager.

"What if we were at the beach?" I take a different tack.

"We're not at the beach."

"Would you object if we were at the beach?"

He considers this for a moment. "No," he says simply.

I roll my eyes again and smirk at him. "Well, just imagine we are. Laters." I turn and bolt for the foyer. I make it to the elevator before he catches up with

me. As the doors close, I wave at him, grinning sweetly as he watches, helpless—but fortunately amused—with narrowed eyes. He shakes his head in exasperation, then I can see him no more.

Oh, that was exciting. Adrenaline is pounding through my veins, and my heart feels like it wants to exit my chest. But as the elevator descends, so do my spirits. Shit, what have I done?

I have a tiger by the tail. He's going to be mad when I get back. My subconscious is glaring at me over her half-moon glasses, a willow switch in her hand. Shit. I think about what little experience I have with men. I've never lived with a man before—well, except Ray—and for some reason he doesn't count. He's my dad … well, the man I consider my dad.

And now I have Christian. He's never really lived with anyone, I think. I'll have to ask him—if he's still talking to me.

But I feel strongly that I should wear what I like. I remember his rules. Yes, this must be hard for him, but he sure as hell paid for this dress. He should have given Neimans better instructions: nothing too short!

This skirt isn't that short, is it? I check in the large mirror in the lobby. Damn. Yes, it is quite short, but I've made a stand now. And no doubt I'll have to face the consequences. I wonder idly what he'll do, but first I need cash.

I STARE AT MY receipt from the ATM: $51,689.16. That's $50,000 too much! *Anastasia, you're going to have to learn to be rich, too, if you say yes*. And so it begins. I take my paltry fifty dollars and make my way to the store

I HEAD STRAIGHT TO the kitchen when I arrive back, and I can't help feeling a frisson of alarm. Christian is still in his study. Jeez, that's most of the afternoon. I decide my best option is to face him and see how much damage I've done. I peek cautiously around his study door. He's on the phone, staring out the window.

"And the Eurocopter specialist is due Monday afternoon? … Good. Just keep me informed. Tell them that I'll need their initial findings either Monday evening or Tuesday morning." He hangs up and swivels his chair around, but stills when he sees me, his expression impassive.

"Hi," I whisper. He says nothing, and my heart free-falls into my stomach. Gingerly I walk into his study and around his desk to where he's sitting. He still says nothing, his eyes never leaving mine. I stand in front of him, feeling fifty shades of foolish.

"I'm back. Are you mad at me?"

He sighs, reaches out for my hand, and pulls me into his lap, wrapping his arms around me. He buries his nose in my hair. "Yes," he says.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” I curl up in his lap, inhaling his heavenly Christian smell, feeling safe regardless of the fact that he’s mad.

“Me, neither. Wear what you like,” he murmurs. He runs his hand up my bare leg to my thigh. “Besides, this dress has its advantages.” He bends to kiss me, and as our lips touch, passion or lust or a deep-seated need to make amends lances through me and desire flares in my blood. I seize his head in my hands, thrusting my fingers in his hair. He groans as his body responds, and he hungrily nips at my lower lip—my throat, my ear, his tongue invading my mouth, and before I’m even aware of it he’s unzipping his pants, pulling me astride his lap, and sinking into me. I grasp the back of the chair, my feet just touching the ground … and we start to move.

“I LIKE YOUR VERSION of sorry,” he breathes into my hair.

“And I like yours.” I giggle, snuggling against his chest. “Have you finished?”

“Christ, Ana, you want more?”

“No! Your work.”

“I’ll be done in about half an hour. I heard your message on my voice mail.”

“From yesterday.”

“You sounded worried.”

I hug him tightly.

“I was. It’s not like you not to respond.”

He kisses my hair.

“Your cake should be ready in half an hour.” I smile at him and climb off his lap.

“Looking forward to it. It smelled delicious, evocative even, while it was baking.”

I smile shyly down at him, feeling a little self-conscious, and he mirrors my expression. Jeez, are we really so different? Perhaps it’s his early memories of baking. Leaning down, I plant a swift kiss on the corner of his mouth and make my way back to the kitchen.

I AM ALL PREPARED when I hear him come out of his study, and I light the solitary gold candle on his cake. He gives me an earsplitting grin as he saunters toward me, and I softly sing “Happy Birthday” to him. Then he leans over and blows it out, closing his eyes.

“I’ve made my wish,” he says as he opens them again, and for some reason his look makes me flush.

“The frosting is still soft. I hope you like it.”

“I can’t wait to taste it, Anastasia,” he murmurs, and he makes that sound so

sexy. I cut us each a slice, and we dig in with small pastry forks.

"Mmm," he groans in appreciation. "This is why I want to marry you."

And I laugh with relief … he likes it.

"READY TO FACE MY family?" Christian switches the R8 ignition off. We're parked in his parents' driveway.

"Yes. Are you going to tell them?"

"Of course. I'm looking forward to seeing their reactions." He smiles wickedly at me and climbs out of the car.

It is seven thirty, and though it's been a warm day, there's a cool evening breeze blowing off the bay. I pull my wrap around me as I step out of the car. I'm wearing an emerald green cocktail dress I found this morning while I was rummaging through the closet. It has a wide matching belt. Christian takes my hand, and we head to the front door. Carrick opens it wide before he can knock.

"Christian, hello. Happy birthday, son." He takes Christian's proffered hand but pulls him into a brief hug, surprising him.

"Er … thanks, Dad."

"Ana, how lovely to see you again." He hugs me, too, and we follow him into the house.

Before we can set foot in the living room, Kate comes barreling down the hallway toward the two of us. She looks furious.

*Oh no!*

"You two! I want to talk to you," she snarls in her you-better-not-fucking-mess-with-me voice. I glance nervously at Christian, who shrugs and decides to humor her as we follow her into the dining room, leaving Carrick bemused on the threshold of the living room. She shuts the door and turns on me.

"What the fuck is this?" she hisses and waves a piece of paper at me. Completely at a loss, I take it from her and scan it quickly. My mouth dries. *Holy shit.* It's my e-mail response to Christian, discussing the contract.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

All the color drains from my face as my blood turns to ice and fear lances through my body. Instinctively I step between her and Christian.

"What is it?" Christian murmurs, his tone wary.

I ignore him. I cannot believe Kate is doing this.

"Kate! This has nothing to do with you." I glare venomously at her, anger replacing my fear. How dare she do this? Not now, not today. Not on Christian's birthday. Surprised by my response, she blinks at me, green eyes wide.

"Ana, what is it?" Christian says again, his tone more menacing.

"Christian, would you just go, please?" I ask him.

"No. Show me." He holds out his hand, and I know he's not to be argued with—his voice is cold and hard. Reluctantly I give him the e-mail.

"What's he done to you?" Kate asks, ignoring Christian. She looks so apprehensive. I flush as myriad erotic images flit quickly across my mind.

"That's none of your business, Kate." I can't keep the exasperation out of my voice.

"Where did you get this?" Christian asks, his head cocked to one side, his face expressionless, but his voice … so menacingly soft. Kate flushes.

"That's irrelevant." At his stony glare, she hastily continues. "It was in the pocket of a jacket—which I assume is yours—that I found on the back of Ana's bedroom door." Faced with Christian's burning gray gaze, Kate's steeliness slips a little, but she seems to recover and scowls at him.

She's a beacon of hostility in a slinky, bright red dress. She looks magnificent. But why the hell is she going through my clothes? It's usually the other way around.

"Have you told anyone?" Christian's voice is like a silk glove.

"No! Of course not," Kate snaps, affronted. Christian nods and appears to relax. He turns and heads toward the fireplace. Wordlessly Kate and I watch as he picks up a lighter from the mantelpiece, sets fire to the e-mail, and releases it, letting it float afire slowly into the grate until it is no more. The silence in the room is oppressive.

"Not even Elliot?" I ask, turning my attention back to Kate.

“No one,” Kate says emphatically, and for the first time she looks puzzled and hurt. “I just want to know you’re okay, Ana,” she whispers.

“I’m fine, Kate. More than fine. Please, Christian and I are good, really good—this is old news. Please ignore it.”

“Ignore it?” she says. “How can I ignore that? What’s he done to you?” And her green eyes are so full of heartfelt concern.

“He hasn’t done anything to me, Kate. Honestly—I’m good.”

She blinks at me.

“Really?” she asks.

Christian wraps an arm around me and draws me close, not taking his eyes off Kate.

“Ana has consented to be my wife, Katherine,” he says quietly.

“Wife!” Kate squeaks, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“We’re getting married. We’re going to announce our engagement this evening,” he says.

“Oh!” Kate gapes at me. She’s stunned. “I leave you alone for sixteen days, and this happens? It’s very sudden. So yesterday, when I said—” She gazes at me, lost. “Where does that e-mail fit into all this?”

“It doesn’t, Kate. Forget it—please. I love him and he loves me. Don’t do this. Don’t ruin his party and our night,” I whisper. She blinks and unexpectedly her eyes are shining with tears.

“No. Of course I won’t. You’re okay?” She wants reassurance.

“I’ve never been happier,” I whisper. She reaches forward and grabs my hand regardless of Christian’s arm wrapped around me.

“You really are okay?” she asks hopefully.

“Yes.” I grin at her, my joy returning. She’s back onside. She smiles at me, my happiness reflecting back on her. I step out of Christian’s hold, and she hugs me suddenly.

“Oh, Ana—I was so worried when I read this. I didn’t know what to think. Will you explain it to me?” she whispers.

“One day, not now.”

“Good. I won’t tell anyone. I love you so much, Ana, like my own sister. I just thought … I didn’t know what to think. I’m sorry. If you’re happy, then I’m happy.” She looks directly at Christian and repeats her apology. He nods at her, his eyes glacial, and his expression does not change. Oh, shit, he’s still mad.

“I really am sorry. You’re right, it’s none of my business,” she whispers to me.

There’s a knock on the door that startles Kate and I apart. Grace pokes her head around.

“Everything okay, darling?” she asks Christian.

“Everything’s fine, Mrs. Grey,” Kate says immediately.

“Fine, Mom,” Christian says.

“Good.” Grace enters. “Then you won’t mind if I give my son a birthday hug.” She beams at both of us. He hugs her tightly and thaws immediately.

“Happy birthday, darling,” she says softly, closing her eyes in his embrace. “I’m so glad you’re still with us.”

“Mom, I’m fine.” Christian smiles down at her. She pulls back, looks at him closely, and grins.

“I’m so happy for you,” she says and caresses his face.

He grins at her—his thousand-megawatt smile.

*She knows! When did he tell her?*

“Well, kids, if you’ve all finished your tête-à-tête, there’s a throng of people here to check that you really are in one piece, Christian, and to wish you a happy birthday.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Grace glances anxiously at Kate and me and seems reassured by our smiles. She winks at me as she holds the door open for us. Christian holds out his hand to me and I take it.

“Christian, I really do apologize,” Kate says humbly. Humble Kate is something to behold. Christian nods at her, and we follow her out.

In the hallway, I gaze anxiously up at Christian. “Does your mother know about us?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” And to think our evening could have been derailed by the tenacious Miss Kavanagh. I shudder at the thought—the ramifications of Christian’s lifestyle revealed to all.

“Well, that was an interesting start to the evening.” I smile sweetly at him. He glances down at me—and it’s back, his amused look. Thank heavens.

“As ever, Miss Steele, you have a gift for understatement.” He raises my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles as we walk into the living room to a sudden, spontaneous, and deafening round of applause.

*Crap*. How many people are here?

I scan the room quickly: all the Greys, Ethan with Mia, Dr. Flynn and his wife, I assume. There’s Mac from the boat, a tall, handsome African American—I remember seeing him in Christian’s office the first time I met Christian—Mia’s bitchy friend Lily, two women I don’t recognize at all, and … *oh no*. My heart sinks. *That* woman … Mrs. Robinson.

Gretchen materializes with a tray of champagne. She’s wearing a low-cut

black dress, hair in an updo instead of pigtails, flushing and fluttering her eyelashes at Christian. The applause dies down, and Christian squeezes my hand as all eyes turn to him expectantly.

"Thank you, everyone. Looks like I'll need one of these." He grabs two drinks off Gretchen's tray and gives her a brief smile. I think Gretchen's going to expire or swoon. He hands a glass to me.

Christian raises his glass to the rest of the room, and immediately everyone surges forward. Leading the charge is the evil woman in black. Does she ever wear any other color?

"Christian, I was so worried." Elena gives him a brief hug and kisses both his cheeks. He doesn't let me go despite the fact I try to free my hand.

"I'm good, Elena," Christian mutters coolly.

"Why didn't you call me?" Her plea is desperate, her eyes searching his.

"I've been busy."

"Didn't you get my messages?"

Christian shifts uncomfortably and pulls me closer, putting his arm around me. His face remains impassive as he regards Elena. She can no longer ignore me, so she nods politely in my direction.

"Ana," she purrs. "You look lovely, dear."

"Elena," I purr back. "Thank you."

I catch Grace's eye. She frowns, watching the three of us.

"Elena, I need to make an announcement," Christian says, eyeing her dispassionately.

Her clear blue eyes cloud. "Of course." She fakes a smile and steps back.

"Everyone," Christian calls. He waits for a moment until the buzz in the room dies down and all eyes are once more on him.

"Thank you for coming today. I have to say I was expecting a quiet family dinner, so this is a pleasant surprise." He stares pointedly at Mia, who grins and gives him a little wave. Christian shakes his head in exasperation and continues.

"Ros and I"—he acknowledges the red-haired woman standing nearby with a small bubbly blonde—"we had a close call yesterday."

Oh, that's the Ros that works with him. She grins and raises her glass to him. He nods back at her.

"So I'm especially glad to be here today to share with all of you my very good news. This beautiful woman"—he glances down at me—"Miss Anastasia Rose Steele, has consented to be my wife, and I'd like you all to be the first to know."

There are general gasps of astonishment, the odd cheer, and then a round of applause! Jeez—this is really happening. I think I am the color of Kate's dress. Christian grasps my chin, lifts my lips to his, and kisses me quickly.

“You’ll soon be mine.”

“I am already,” I whisper.

“Legally,” he mouths at me and gives me a wicked grin.

Lily, who is standing beside Mia, looks crestfallen; Gretchen looks like she’s eaten something nasty and bitter. As I glance anxiously around at the assembled crowd, I catch sight of Elena. Her mouth is open. She’s stunned—horrified even, and I can’t help a small but intense feeling of satisfaction to see her dumbstruck. What the hell is she doing here, anyway?

Carrick and Grace interrupt my uncharitable thoughts, and soon I am being hugged and kissed and passed around by all the Greys.

“Oh, Ana—I am so delighted you’re going to be family,” Grace gushes. “The change in Christian … He’s … happy. I am so thankful to you.” I blush, embarrassed by her exuberance but secretly delighted, too.

“Where is the ring?” exclaims Mia as she embraces me.

“Um …” *A ring! Jeez.* I hadn’t even thought about a ring. I glance up at Christian.

“We’re going to choose one together.” Christian glowers at her.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Grey!” she scolds him, then wraps her arms around him. “I’m so thrilled for you, Christian,” she says. She’s the only person I know who is not intimidated by the Grey glower. It has me quailing … Well, it certainly used to.

“When will you get married? Have you set a date?” She beams up at Christian.

He shakes his head, his exasperation palpable. “No idea, and no we haven’t. Ana and I need to discuss all that,” he says irritably.

“I hope you have a big wedding—here,” she beams enthusiastically, ignoring his caustic tone.

“We’ll probably fly to Vegas tomorrow,” he growls at her, and he’s rewarded with a full-on Mia Grey pouty grimace. Rolling his eyes, he turns to Elliot, who gives him his second bear hug in as many days.

“Way to go, bro.” He claps Christian’s back.

The response from the room is overwhelming, and it’s a few minutes before I find myself back beside Christian with Dr. Flynn. Elena seems to have disappeared, and Gretchen is sullenly refilling champagne glasses.

Beside Dr. Flynn is a striking young woman with long, dark, almost black hair, impressive cleavage, and lovely hazel eyes.

“Christian,” says Flynn, holding out his hand. Christian shakes it gladly.

“John. Rhian.” He kisses the dark-haired woman on her cheek. She’s petite and pretty.

“Glad you’re still with us, Christian. My life would be most dull—and penurious—without you.”

Christian smirks.

“John!” Rhian scolds, much to Christian’s amusement.

“Rhian, this is Anastasia, my fiancée. Ana, this is John’s wife.”

“Delighted to meet the woman who has finally captured Christian’s heart.” Rhian smiles kindly at me.

“Thank you,” I mutter, embarrassed again.

“That was one googly you bowled there, Christian,” Dr. Flynn shakes his head in amused disbelief. Christian frowns at him.

“John—you and your cricket metaphors.” Rhian rolls her eyes. “Congratulations to the pair of you and happy birthday, Christian. What a wonderful birthday present.” She smiles broadly at me.

I had no idea Dr. Flynn would be here, or Elena. It’s a shock, and I rack my brains to see if I have anything to ask him, but a birthday party hardly seems the appropriate venue for a psychiatric consultation.

For a few minutes we make small talk. Rhian is a stay-at-home mom with two young boys. I deduce that she is the reason Dr. Flynn practices in the United States.

“She’s good, Christian, responding well to treatment. Another couple of weeks and we can consider an outpatient program.” Dr. Flynn’s and Christian’s voices are low, but I can’t help listening in, rather rudely tuning out Rhian.

“So it’s all playdates and diapers right now …”

“That must take up your time.” I flush, turning my attention back to Rhian, who laughs sweetly. I know Christian and Flynn are discussing Leila.

“Ask her something for me,” Christian murmurs.

“So, what do you do, Anastasia?”

“Ana, please. I work in publishing.”

Christian and Dr. Flynn lower their voices further; it’s so frustrating. But they stop when we’re joined by the two women I didn’t recognize earlier—Ros and the bubbly blonde whom Christian introduces as her partner, Gwen.

Ros is charming, and I soon discover they live almost opposite Escala. She is full of praise for Christian’s piloting skills. It was her first time in *Charlie Tango*, and she says she wouldn’t hesitate to go again. She’s one of the few women I’ve met who isn’t dazzled by him … well, the reason is obvious.

Gwen is giggly with a wry sense of humor, and Christian seems extraordinarily at ease with both of them. He knows them well. They don’t discuss work, but I can tell that Ros is one smart woman who can easily keep up with him. She also has a great, throaty, too-many-cigarettes laugh.

Grace interrupts our leisurely conversation to inform everyone that dinner is being served buffet-style in the Grey kitchen. Slowly the guests make their way toward the back of the house.

Mia collars me in the hallway. In her pale pink, frothy babydoll dress and killer heels, she towers over me like a Christmas tree fairy. She's holding two cocktail glasses.

"Ana," she hisses conspiratorially. I glance up at Christian, who releases me with a best-of-luck-I-find-her-impossible-to-deal-with-too look, and I sneak into the dining room with her.

"Here," she says mischievously. "This is one of my dad's special lemon martinis—much nicer than champagne." She hands me a glass and watches anxiously while I take a tentative sip.

"Hmm … delicious. But strong." What does she want? Is she trying to get me drunk?

"Ana, I need some advice. And I can't ask Lily—she's so judgmental about everything." Mia rolls her eyes then grins at me. "She is so jealous of you. I think she was hoping one day that she and Christian might get together." Mia bursts out laughing at the absurdity, and I quail inside.

This is something I will have to contend with for a long time—other women wanting my man. I push the unwelcome thought out of my head and distract myself with the matter in hand. I take another sip of my martini.

"I'll try and help. Fire away."

"As you know, Ethan and I met recently, thanks to you." She beams at me.

"Yes." Where the hell is she going with this?

"Ana—he doesn't want to date me." She pouts.

"Oh." I blink at her, stunned, and I think, *Maybe he's just not that into you*.

"Look, that sounded all wrong. He doesn't want to date because his sister is going out with my brother. You know—he thinks it's all kind of incestuous. But I know he likes me. What can I do?"

"Oh, I see," I mutter, trying to buy myself some time. What can I say? "Can you agree to be friends and give it some time? I mean you've only just met him."

She cocks her eyebrow.

"Look, I know I've only really just met Christian but …" I frown, not sure what I want to say. "Mia, this is something you and Ethan have to work out together. I would try the friendship route."

Mia grins.

"You've learned that look from Christian."

I flush. "If you want advice, ask Kate. She may have some insight as to how her brother feels."

“You think?” Mia asks.

“Yes.” I smile encouragingly.

“Cool. Thanks, Ana.” She gives me another hug and scuttles excitedly—and impressively, given her high heels—to the door, no doubt off to bother Kate. I take another sip of my martini, and I’m about to follow her when I am stopped in my tracks.

Elena breezes into the room, her face taut, set in grim, angry determination. She closes the door quietly behind her and scowls at me.

*Oh, crap.*

“Ana,” she sneers.

I summon all my self-possession, slightly fuzzy from two glasses of champagne and the lethal cocktail I hold in my hand. I think the blood has drained from my face, but I marshal both my subconscious and my inner goddess in order to appear as calm and as unflappable as I can.

“Elena.” My voice is small, but steady—despite my dry mouth. Why does this woman freak me out so much? And what does she want now?

“I would offer you my heartfelt congratulations, but I think that would be inappropriate.” Her piercing cold blue eyes stare frostily into mine, filled with loathing.

“I neither need nor want your congratulations, Elena. I’m surprised and disappointed to see you here.”

She arches an eyebrow. I think she’s impressed.

“I wouldn’t have thought of you as a worthy adversary, Anastasia. But you surprise me at every turn.”

“I haven’t thought of you at all,” I lie, coolly. Christian would be proud. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have much better things to do than waste my time with you.”

“Not so fast, missy,” she hisses, leaning against the door, effectively blocking it. “What on earth do you think you’re doing, consenting to marry Christian? If you think for one minute you can make him happy, you’re very much mistaken.”

“What I’m consenting to do with Christian is none of your concern.” I smile with sarcastic sweetness. She ignores me.

“He has needs—needs you cannot possibly begin to satisfy,” she gloats.

“What do you know of his needs?” I snarl. My sense of indignation flares brightly, burning inside me as adrenaline surges through my body. How dare this fucking bitch preach to me? “You’re nothing but a sick child molester, and if it were up to me, I’d toss you into the seventh circle of hell and walk away smiling. Now get out of my way—or do I have to make you?”

“You’re making a big mistake here, lady.” She shakes a long, skinny, finely

manicured finger at me. “How dare you judge our lifestyle? You know nothing, and you have no idea what you’re getting yourself into. And if you think he’s going to be happy with a mousy little gold digger like you …”

*That’s it!* I throw the rest of my lemon martini in her face, drenching her.

“Don’t you dare tell me what I’m getting myself into!” I shout at her. “When will you learn? It’s none of your goddamned business!”

She gapes at me, horror struck, wiping the sticky drink off her face. I think she’s about to lunge at me, but she’s suddenly shunted forward as the door opens.

Christian is standing in the doorway. It takes him a nanosecond to assess the situation—me ashen and shaking, her soaked and livid. His lovely face darkens and contorts with anger as he comes to stand between us.

“What the fuck are you doing, Elena?” he says, his voice glacial and laced with menace.

She blinks up at him. “She’s not right for you, Christian,” she whispers.

“What?” he shouts, startling both of us. I can’t see his face but his whole body has tensed, and he radiates animosity.

“How the fuck do you know what’s right for me?”

“You have needs, Christian,” she says her voice softer.

“I’ve told you before—this is none of your fucking business,” he roars. Oh crap—Very Angry Christian has reared his not-so-ugly head. People are going to hear.

“What is this?” He pauses, glaring at her. “Do you think it’s you? You? You think you’re right for me?” His voice is softer but drips contempt, and suddenly I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to witness this intimate encounter. I’m intruding. But I’m stuck—my limbs unwilling to move.

Elena swallows and seems to draw herself upright. Her stance changes subtly, becoming more commanding, and she steps toward him.

“I was the best thing that ever happened to you,” she hisses arrogantly at him. “Look at you now. One of the richest, most successful entrepreneurs in the United States—controlled, driven—you need nothing. You are master of your universe.”

He steps back as if he’s been struck and gapes at her in outraged disbelief.

“You loved it, Christian, don’t try and kid yourself. You were on the road to self-destruction, and I saved you from that, saved you from a life behind bars. Believe me, baby, that’s where you would have ended up. I taught you everything you know, everything you need.”

Christian blanches, staring at her in horror. When he speaks, his voice is low and incredulous.

“You taught me how to fuck, Elena. But it’s empty, like you. No wonder Linc left.”

Bile rises in my mouth. I should not be here. But I’m frozen to the spot, morbidly fascinated as they eviscerate each other.

“You never once held me,” Christian whispers. “You never once said you loved me.”

She narrows her eyes. “Love is for fools, Christian.”

“Get out of my house.” Grace’s implacable, furious voice startles us. Three heads swing rapidly to where Grace stands on the threshold of the room. She is glaring at Elena, who pales beneath her Saint-Tropez tan.

Time seems suspended as we collectively take a deep gasping breath, and Grace stalks deliberately into the room. Her eyes blaze with fury, never once leaving Elena, until she stands before her. Elena’s eyes widen in alarm, and Grace slaps her hard across the face, the sound of the impact resounding off the walls of the dining room.

“Take your filthy paws off my son, you whore, and get out of my house—now!” she hisses through gritted teeth.

Elena clutches her reddening cheek and stares in horror for a moment, shocked and blinking at Grace. Then she hurries from the room, not bothering to close the door behind her.

Grace turns slowly to face Christian and a tense silence settles like a thick blanket over us as Christian and Grace stare at each other. After a beat, Grace speaks.

“Ana, before I hand him over to you, would you mind giving me a minute or two alone with my son?” Her voice is quiet, husky, but oh-so-strong.

“Of course,” I whisper, and exit as quickly as I can, glancing anxiously over my shoulder. But neither of them looks at me as I leave. They continue to stare at each other, their unspoken communication blaringly loud.

In the hallway I am momentarily lost. My heart pounds and my blood races through my veins … I feel panicked and out of my depth. Holy fuck, that was heavy and now Grace knows. I can’t think what she’s going to say to Christian, and I know it’s wrong, but I lean against the door trying to listen.

“How long, Christian?” Grace’s voice is soft. I can barely hear her.

I cannot hear his reply.

“How old were you?” Her voice is more insistent. “Tell me. How old were you when this all started?” Again I can’t hear Christian.

“Everything okay, Ana?” Ros interrupts me.

“Yes. Fine. Thank you. I …”

Ros smiles. “I’m just going to get my purse. I need a cigarette.”

For a brief moment, I contemplate joining her.

"I'm off to the bathroom." I need to gather my wits and my thoughts, to process what I've just witnessed and heard. Upstairs seems the safest place to be on my own. I watch Ros stroll into the drawing room, and I bolt two stairs at a time to the second floor, then up to the third. There's only one place I want to be.

I open the door to Christian's childhood bedroom and shut it behind me, taking a huge gulping breath. Heading for his bed, I flop onto it and stare at the plain white ceiling.

*Holy cow*. That has to be, without doubt, one of the most excruciating confrontations I've ever had to endure, and now I feel numb. My fiancé and his ex-lover—no would-be bride should have to see that. Having said that, part of me is glad she's revealed her true self, and that I was there to bear witness.

My thoughts turn to Grace. Poor Grace, to hear all that. I clutch one of Christian's pillows. She'll have overheard that Christian and Elena had an affair—but not the nature of it. Thank heavens. I groan.

What am I doing? Perhaps the evil witch had a point.

No, I refuse to believe that. She's so cold and cruel. I shake my head. She's wrong. I am right for Christian. I am what he needs. And in a moment of stunning clarity, I don't question *how* he's lived his life until recently—but why. His reasons for doing what he's done to countless girls—I don't even want to know how many. The how isn't wrong. They were all adults. They were all—how did Flynn put it?—in safe, sane, consensual relationships. It's the why. The why was wrong. The why was from his place of darkness.

I close my eyes and drape my arm over them. But now he's moved on, left it behind, and we are both in the light. I'm dazzled by him, and he by me. We can guide each other. A thought occurs to me. *Shit!* A gnawing, insidious thought and I'm in the one place where I can lay this ghost to rest. I sit up. Yes, I must do this.

Shakily I get to my feet, kick off my shoes, walk over to his desk, and examine the bulletin board above it. The photos of young Christian are all still there—more poignant than ever, as I think of the spectacle I've just witnessed between him and Mrs. Robinson. And there in the corner is the small black-and-white photo—his mother, the crack whore.

I switch on the desk lamp and focus the light on her picture. I don't even know her name. She looks so much like him, but younger and sadder, and all I feel, looking at her sorrowful face, is compassion. I try to see the similarities between her face and mine. I squint at the picture, getting really, really close, and see none. Except maybe our hair, but I think hers is lighter than mine. I don't look like her at all. It's a relief.

My subconscious tuts at me, arms crossed, glaring over her half-moon glasses. *Why are you torturing yourself? You've said yes. You've made your bed*. I purse my lips at her. Yes I have, gladly so. I want to lie in that bed with Christian for the rest of my life. My inner goddess, sitting in the lotus position, smiles serenely. Yes. I've made the right decision.

I must find him—Christian will be worried. I have no idea how long I've been in his room; he'll think that I've fled. I roll my eyes as I contemplate his overreaction. I hope that he and Grace have finished. I shudder to think what else she might have said to him.

I meet Christian as he climbs the stairs to the second floor, looking for me. His face is strained and weary—not the carefree Fifty I arrived with. As I stand on the landing, he stops on the top stair so that we are eye to eye.

"Hi," he says cautiously.

"Hi," I answer warily.

"I was worried—"

"I know," I interrupt him. "I'm sorry—I couldn't face the festivities. I just had to get away, you know. To think." Reaching up, I caress his face. He closes his eyes and leans his face into my hand.

"And you thought you'd do that in my room?"

"Yes."

He reaches for my hand and pulls me into an embrace, and I go willingly into his arms, my favorite place in the whole world. He smells of fresh laundry, body wash, and Christian—the most calming and arousing scent on the planet. He inhales with his nose in my hair.

"I'm sorry you had to endure all that."

"It's not your fault, Christian. Why was she here?" He gazes down at me, and his mouth curls apologetically.

"She's a family friend."

I try not to react. "Not anymore. How's your mom?"

"Mom is pretty fucking mad at me right now. I'm really glad you're here, and that we're in the middle of a party. Otherwise I might be breathing my last."

"That bad, huh?"

He nods, his eyes serious, and I sense his bewilderment at her reaction.

"Can you blame her?" My voice is quiet, cajoling.

He hugs me tightly and he seems uncertain, processing his thoughts.

Finally he answers. "No."

*Whoa! Breakthrough*. "Can we sit?" I ask.

"Sure. Here?"

I nod and we both sit at the top of the stairs. "So, how do you feel?" I ask,

anxiously clutching his hand and gazing at his sad, serious face.

He sighs.

"I feel liberated." He shrugs, then beams—a glorious, carefree Christian smile, and the weariness and strain present moments ago have vanished.

"Really?" I beam back. Wow, I'd crawl over broken glass for that smile.

"Our business relationship is over. Done."

I frown at him. "Will you liquidate the salon business?"

He snorts. "I'm not that vindictive, Anastasia," he admonishes me. "No. I'll gift them to her. I'll talk to my lawyer Monday. I owe her that much."

I arch an eyebrow at him. "No more Mrs. Robinson?" His mouth twists in amusement and he shakes his head.

"Gone."

I grin.

"I'm sorry you lost a friend."

He shrugs then smirks. "Are you?"

"No," I confess, flushing.

"Come." He stands and offers me his hand. "Let's join the party in our honor. I might even get drunk."

"Do you get drunk?" I ask as I take his hand.

"Not since I was a wild teenager." We walk down the stairs.

"Have you eaten?" he asks.

*Oh, crap.*

"No."

"Well you should. From the look and smell of Elena, that was one of my father's lethal cocktails you threw on her." He gazes at me, trying and failing to keep the amusement off his face.

"Christian, I—"

He holds up his hand.

"No arguing, Anastasia. If you're going to drink—and toss alcohol on my exes—you need to eat. It's rule number one. I believe we've already had that discussion after our first night together."

Oh yes. The Heathman.

Back in the hallway, he pauses to caress my face, his fingers skimming my jaw.

"I lay awake for hours and watched you sleep," he murmurs. "I might have loved you even then."

*Oh.*

He leans down and kisses me softly, and I melt everywhere, all the tension of the last hour or so seeping languidly from my body.

“Eat,” he whispers.

“Okay,” I acquiesce because right now I’d probably do anything for him. Taking my hand, he leads me toward the kitchen where the party is in full swing.

**“GOOD NIGHT, JOHN, RHIAN.”**

“Congratulations again, Ana. You two will be just fine.” Dr. Flynn smiles kindly at us, standing arm in arm in the hallway as he and Rhian take their leave.

“Good night.”

Christian closes the door and shakes his head. He gazes down at me, his eyes suddenly bright with excitement.

*What’s this?*

“Just the family left. I think my mother has had too much to drink.” Grace is singing karaoke on some game console in the family room. Kate and Mia are giving her a run for her money.

“Do you blame her?” I smirk at him, trying to keep the atmosphere between us light. I succeed.

“Are you smirking at me, Miss Steele?”

“I am.”

“It’s been quite a day.”

“Christian, recently, every day with you has been quite a day.” My voice is sardonic.

He shakes his head. “Fair point well made, Miss Steele. Come—I want to show you something.” Taking my hand, he leads me through the house to the kitchen where Carrick, Ethan, and Elliot are talking Mariners, drinking the last of the cocktails, and eating leftovers.

“Off for a stroll?” Elliot teases suggestively as we make our way through the French doors. Christian ignores him. Carrick frowns at Elliot, shaking his head in a silent rebuke.

As we make our way up the steps to the lawn, I take off my shoes. The half moon shines brightly over the bay. It’s brilliant, casting everything in myriad shades of gray as the lights of Seattle twinkle in the distance. The lights of the boathouse are on, a soft glowing beacon in the cool cast of the moon.

“Christian, I’d like to go to church tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

“I prayed you’d come back alive and you did. It’s the least I could do.”

“Okay.”

We wander hand in hand in a relaxed silence for a few moments. Then something occurs to me.

“Where are you going to put the photos José took of me?”

“I thought we might put them in the new house.”

“You bought it?”

He stops to stare at me, and his voice full of concern. “Yes. I thought you liked it.”

“I do. When did you buy it?”

“Yesterday morning. Now we need to decide what to do with it,” he murmurs, relieved.

“Don’t knock it down. Please. It’s such a lovely house. It just needs some tender loving care.”

Christian glances at me and smiles. “Okay. I’ll talk to Elliot. He knows a good architect; she did some work on my place in Aspen. He can do the remodeling.”

I snort, suddenly remembering the last time we crossed the lawn under the moonlight to the boathouse. Oh, perhaps that’s what we’re going to do now. I grin.

“What?”

“I remember the last time you took me to the boathouse.”

Christian chuckles quietly. “Oh, that was fun. In fact …” He suddenly stops and scoops me over his shoulder, and I squeal, though we don’t have far to go.

“You were really angry, if I remember correctly,” I gasp.

“Anastasia, I’m always really angry.”

“No, you’re not.”

He swats my behind as he stops outside the wooden door. He slides me down his body back to the ground and takes my head in his hands.

“No, not anymore.” Leaning down, he kisses me, hard. When he pulls away, I’m breathless and desire is racing around my body.

He gazes down at me, and in the glow of the strip of light coming from inside the boathouse, I can see he’s anxious. My anxious man, not a white knight or a dark knight, but a man—a beautiful, not-quite-so-fucked-up man—whom I love. I reach up and caress his face, running my fingers through his sideburns and along his jaw to his chin, then let my index finger touch his lips. He relaxes.

“I’ve something to show you in here,” he murmurs and opens the door.

The harsh light of the fluorescents illuminates the impressive motor launch in the dock, bobbing gently on the dark water. There’s a rowboat beside it.

“Come.” Christian takes my hand and leads me up the wooden stairs. Opening the door at the top, he steps aside to let me in.

My mouth drops to the floor. The attic is unrecognizable. The room is filled with flowers … there are flowers everywhere. Someone has created a magical bower of beautiful wild meadow flowers mixed with glowing Christmas lights and miniature lanterns that glow soft and pale all around the room.

My face whips around to meet his, and he's gazing at me, his expression unreadable. He shrugs.

"You wanted hearts and flowers," he murmurs.

I blink at him, not quite believing what I'm seeing.

"You have my heart." And he waves toward the room.

"And here are the flowers," I whisper, completing his sentence. "Christian, it's lovely." I can't think of what else to say. My heart is in my mouth as tears prick my eyes.

Tugging my hand, he pulls me into the room, and before I know it, he's sinking to one knee in front of me. *Holy hell … I did not expect this!* I stop breathing.

From his inside jacket pocket he produces a ring and gazes up at me, his eyes bright gray and raw, full of emotion.

"Anastasia Steele. I love you. I want to love, cherish, and protect you for the rest of my life. Be mine. Always. Share my life with me. Marry me."

I blink down at him as my tears fall. My Fifty, my man. I love him so, and all I can say as the tidal wave of emotion hits me is, "Yes."

He grins, relieved, and slowly slides the ring on my finger. It's beautiful, an oval diamond in a platinum ring. *Whoa—it's big* … Big, yet simple and stunning in its simplicity.

"Oh, Christian," I sob, suddenly overwhelmed with joy, and I join him on my knees, my fingers fisting in his hair as I kiss him, kiss him with all my heart and soul. I kiss this beautiful man, who loves me as I love him; and he wraps his arms around me, his hands moving to my hair, his mouth on mine. I know deep down I will always be his, and he will always be mine. We've come so far together, we have so far to go, but we are made for each other. We are meant to be.

---

The cigarette end glows brightly in the darkness as he takes a deep pull. He blows the smoke out in a long exhale, finishing with two smoke rings that dissolve in front of him, pale and ghostly in the moonlight. He shifts in his seat, bored, and takes a quick shot of cheap bourbon from a bottle wrapped in shabby brown paper before resting it back between his thighs.

He can't believe he's still on the trail. His mouth twists in a sardonic sneer. The helicopter had been a rash and bold move. One of the most exhilarating things he'd ever done in his life. But to no avail. He rolls his eyes ironically. *Who would have thought the son of a bitch could actually fly the fucker?*

He snorts.

They have underestimated him. If Grey thought for one minute he'd go whimpering quietly into the dusk, that prick didn't know jack shit.

It had been the same all his life. People constantly underestimating him—just a man who reads books. Fuck that! A man with a photographic memory who reads books. Oh, the things he's learned, the things he knows. He snorts again. *Yeah, about you, Grey. The things I know about you*.

Not bad for a kid from the gutter end of Detroit.

Not bad for the kid who won a scholarship to Princeton.

Not bad for the kid who worked his ass off through college and got into publishing.

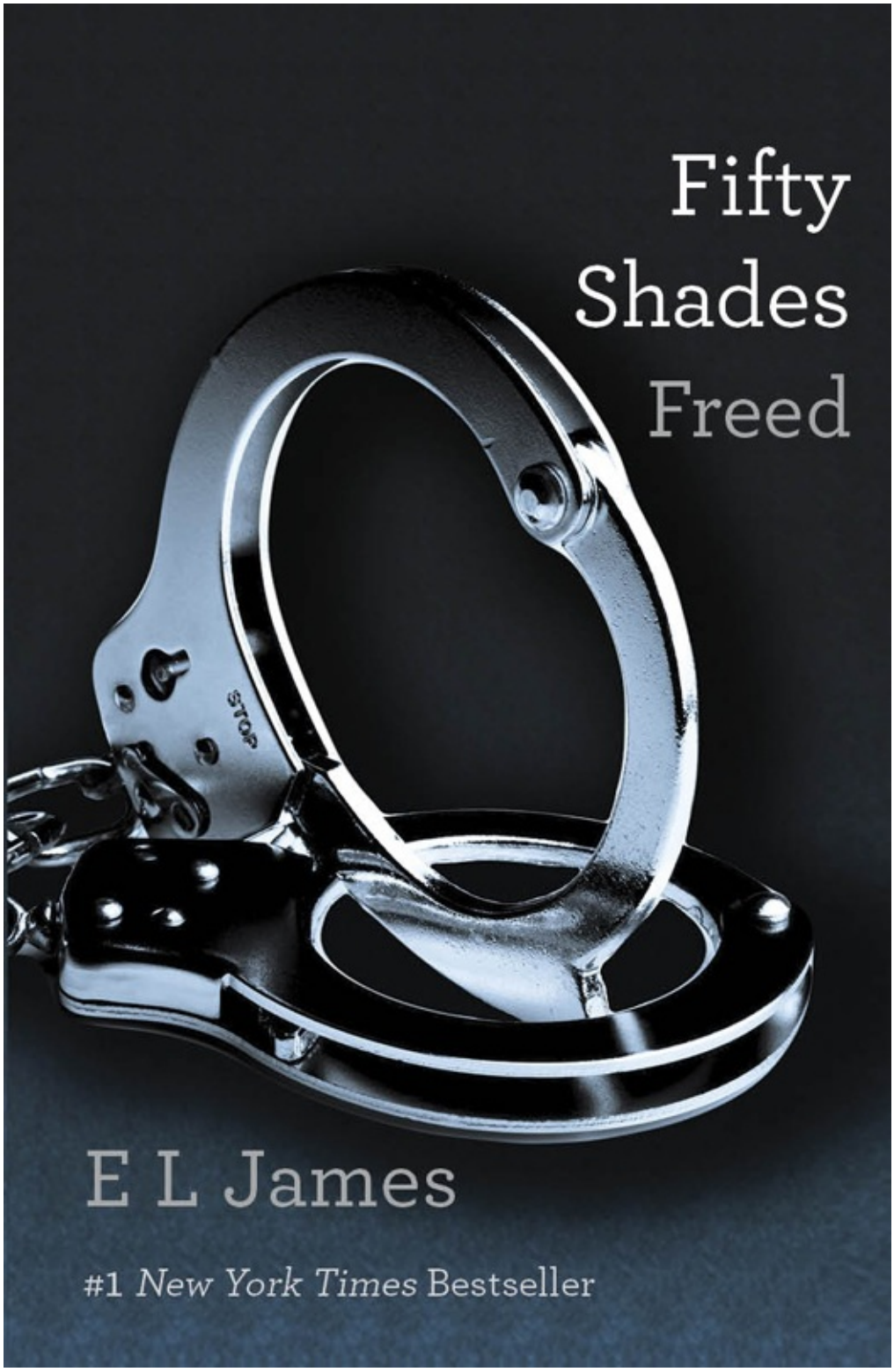
And now all of that's fucked, fucked because of Grey and his little bitch. He scowls at the house as if it represents everything he despises. But there's nothing doing. The only drama had been the stacked, blonde broad in black, teetering down the driveway in tears before she climbed into the white CLK and fucked off.

He chuckles mirthlessly, then winces. Fuck, his ribs. Still sore from the swift kicking Grey's henchman delivered.

He replays the scene in his mind. "*You fucking touch Miss Steele again, I'll fucking kill you.*"

That motherfucker will get it good, too. Yeah—get what's coming to him.

He settles back in his seat. *Looks like it's going to be a long night*. He'll stay, watch, and wait. He takes another drag off his Marlboro Red. His chance will come. His chance will come soon.


Fifty
Shades
Freed
STOP
E L James
#1 New York Times Bestseller

# FIFTY SHADES FREED

E L James

*Vintage Books*
*A Division of Random House, Inc. | New York*

Originally published in Australia by
The Writer's Coffee Shop Publishing House, in 2011

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, APRIL 2012

*Copyright © 2011 by Fifty Shades Ltd.*

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The author published an earlier serialized version of this story online with different characters as "Master of the Universe" under the pseudonym Snowqueen's Icedragon.

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at Library of Congress.

eISBN: 978-1-61213-061-3

*Cover design by Jennifer McGuire*
*Cover image © Random House, Inc., photo by Kineticimagery*

www.vintagebooks.com

v3.1

*Para mi Mamá con todo mi amor y gratitud*

*And for my beloved Father*

Daddy, I miss you every day

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Niall, my rock.

To Kathleen for just being a great sounding board, friend, confidante, and a technical wiz.

To Bee for endless moral support.

To Taylor (also a technical wiz), Susi, Pam, and Nora for showing a girl a good time.

And for their advice and tact I'd really like to thank:

Dr. Raina Sluder for help with all matters medical; Anne Forlines for the financial advice; Elizabeth de Vos for her kind counsel regarding the American adoption system.

Thanks to Maddie Blandino for her exquisite, inspirational art.

And to Pam and Gillian for Saturday morning coffee and hauling me back to real life.

Also thanks to my editing team, Andrea, Shay, and the ever lovely and only occasionally frothing Janine, who tolerates my frothing with patience, fortitude, and a great sense of humor.

Thanks to Amanda and all at The Writer's Coffee Shop Publishing House, and lastly a huge thank-you to everyone at Vintage.

# Contents

*Master - Table of Contents*

*Fifty Shades Freed*
*Copyright*
*Dedication*
*Acknowledgments*

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two
Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Epilogue

Shades of Christian
- Fifty’s First Christmas
- Meet Fifty Shades

# PROLOGUE

Mommy! Mommy! Mommy is asleep on the floor. She has been asleep for a long time. I brush her hair because she likes that. She doesn't wake up. I shake her. Mommy! My tummy hurts. It is hungry. He isn't here. I am thirsty. In the kitchen I pull a chair to the sink, and I have a drink. The water splashes over my blue sweater. Mommy is still asleep. Mommy wake up! She lies still. She is cold. I fetch my blankie, and I cover Mommy, and I lie down on the sticky green rug beside her. Mommy is still asleep. I have two toy cars. They race by the floor where Mommy is sleeping. I think Mommy is sick. I search for something to eat. In the freezer I find peas. They are cold. I eat them slowly. They make my tummy hurt. I sleep beside Mommy. The peas are gone. In the freezer is something. It smells funny. I lick it and my tongue is stuck to it. I eat it slowly. It tastes nasty. I drink some water. I play with my cars, and I sleep beside Mommy. Mommy is so cold, and she won't wake up. The door crashes open. I cover Mommy with my blankie. He's here. *Fuck. What the fuck happened here? Oh, the crazy fucked-up bitch. Shit. Fuck. Get out of my way, you little shit.* He kicks me, and I hit my head on the floor. My head hurts. He calls somebody and he goes. He locks the door. I lay down beside Mommy. My head hurts. The lady policeman is here. No. No. No. Don't touch me. Don't touch me. Don't touch me. I stay by Mommy. No. Stay away from me. The lady policeman has my blankie, and she grabs me. I scream. Mommy! Mommy! I want my mommy. The words are gone. I can't say the words. Mommy can't hear me. I have no words.

"Christian! Christian!" Her voice is urgent, pulling him from the depths of his nightmare, the depths of his despair. "I'm here. I'm here."

He wakes and she's leaning over him, grasping his shoulders, shaking him, her face etched with anguish, blue eyes wide and brimming with tears.

"Ana." His voice is a breathless whisper, the taste of fear tarnishing his mouth. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here."

"I had a dream …"

“I know. I’m here, I’m here.”

“Ana.” He breathes her name, and it’s a talisman against the black choking panic coursing through his body.

“Hush, I’m here.” She curls around him, her limbs cocooning him, her warmth leeching into his body, forcing back the shadows, forcing back the fear. She is sunshine, she is light … she is his.

“Please let’s not fight.” His voice is hoarse as he wraps his arms around her.

“Okay.”

“The vows. No obeying. I can do that. We’ll find a way.” The words rush out of his mouth in a tumble of emotion and confusion and anxiety.

“Yes. We will. We’ll always find a way,” she whispers, and her lips are on his, silencing him, bringing him back to the now.

## CHAPTER ONE

I stare up through gaps in the sea-grass parasol at the bluest of skies, summer blue, Mediterranean blue, with a contented sigh. Christian is beside me, stretched out on a sun lounge. My husband—my hot, beautiful husband, shirtless and in cut-off jeans—is reading a book predicting the collapse of the Western banking system. By all accounts, it's a page-turner. I haven't seen him sit this still, ever. He looks more like a student than the hotshot CEO of one of the top privately owned companies in the United States.

On the final leg of our honeymoon, we laze in the afternoon sun on the beach of the aptly named Beach Plaza Monte Carlo in Monaco, although we're not actually staying in this hotel. I open my eyes and gaze out at the *Fair Lady* anchored in the harbor. We are staying, of course, on board a luxury motor yacht. Built in 1928, she floats majestically on the water, queen of all the yachts in the harbor. She looks like a child's wind-up toy. Christian loves her—I suspect he's tempted to buy her. Honestly, boys and their toys.

Sitting back, I listen to the Christian Grey mix on my new iPod and doze in the late afternoon sun, idly remembering his proposal. Oh, his dreamy proposal in the boathouse … I can almost smell the scent of the meadow flowers …

---

"Can we marry tomorrow?" Christian murmurs softly in my ear. I am sprawled on his chest in the flowery bower in the boathouse, sated from our passionate lovemaking.

"Hmm."

"Is that a yes?" I hear his hopeful surprise.

"Hmm."

"A no?"

"Hmm."

I sense his grin. "Miss Steele, are you incoherent?"

I grin. "Hmm."

He laughs and hugs me tightly, kissing the top of my head. “Vegas, tomorrow, it is then.”

Sleepily I raise my head. “I don’t think my parents would be very happy with that.”

He thrums his fingertips up and down my naked back, caressing me gently.

“What do you want, Anastasia? Vegas? A big wedding with all the trimmings? Tell me.”

“Not big … Just friends and family.” I gaze up at him, moved by the quiet entreaty in his glowing gray eyes. *What does he want?*

“Okay.” He nods. “Where?”

I shrug.

“Could we do it here?” he asks tentatively.

“Your folks’ place? Would they mind?”

He snorts. “My mother would be in seventh heaven.”

“Okay, here. I’m sure my mom and dad would prefer that.”

He strokes my hair. Could I be any happier?

“So, we’ve established where, now the when.”

“Surely you should ask your mother.”

“Hmm.” Christian’s smile dips. “She can have a month, that’s it. I want you too much to wait any longer.”

“Christian, you have me. You’ve had me for a while. But okay—a month it is.” I kiss his chest, a soft chaste kiss, and smile up at him.

---

“You’ll burn,” Christian whispers in my ear, startling me from my doze.

“Only for you.” I give him my sweetest smile. The late afternoon sun has shifted, and I am under its full glare. He smirks and in one swift move pulls my sun lounge into the shade of the parasol.

“Out of the Mediterranean sun, Mrs. Grey.”

“Thank you for your altruism, Mr. Grey.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Grey, and I’m not being altruistic at all. If you burn, I won’t be able to touch you.” He raises an eyebrow, his eyes shining with mirth, and my heart expands. “But I suspect you know that and you’re laughing at me.”

“Would I?” I gasp, feigning innocence.

“Yes, you would and you do. Often. It’s one of the many things I love about you.” He leans down and kisses me, playfully biting my lower lip.

“I was hoping you’d rub me down with more sunscreen.” I pout against his

lips.

"Mrs. Grey, it's a dirty job … but that's an offer I can't refuse. Sit up," he orders, his voice husky. I do as I'm told, and with slow meticulous strokes from strong and supple fingers, he coats me in sunscreen.

"You really are very lovely. I'm a lucky man," he murmurs as his fingers skim over my breasts, spreading the lotion.

"Yes, you are, Mr. Grey." I gaze coyly up at him through my lashes.

"Modesty becomes you, Mrs. Grey. Turn over. I want to do your back."

Smiling, I roll over, and he undoes the back strap of my hideously expensive bikini.

"How would you feel if I went topless, like the other women on the beach?" I ask.

"Displeased," he says without hesitation. "I'm not very happy about you wearing so little right now." He leans down and whispers in my ear. "Don't push your luck."

"Is that a challenge, Mr. Grey?"

"No. It's a statement of fact, Mrs. Grey."

I sigh and shake my head. *Oh, Christian … my possessive, jealous, control freak Christian*.

When he's finished, he slaps my behind.

"You'll do, wench."

His ever-present, ever-active BlackBerry buzzes. I frown and he smirks.

"My eyes only, Mrs. Grey." He raises his eyebrow in playful warning, slaps my backside once more, and sits back down on his lounger to take the call.

My inner goddess purrs. Maybe tonight we could do some kind of floor show for his eyes only. She smirks knowingly, arching a brow. I grin at the thought and drift back into my afternoon siesta.

*"MAM'SELLE? UN PERRIER POUR moi, un* Coca-Cola light *pour ma femme, s'il vous plait. Et quelque chose a manger … laissez-moi voir la carte."*

Hmm … Christian speaking fluent French wakes me. My eyelashes flutter in the glare of the sun, and I find Christian watching me while a liveried young woman walks away, her tray held aloft, her high blonde ponytail swinging provocatively.

"Thirsty?" he asks.

"Yes," I mutter sleepily.

"I could watch you all day. Tired?"

I flush. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

“Me neither.” He grins, puts down his BlackBerry, and stands. His shorts fall a little and hang … in that way so his swim trunks are visible beneath. Christian takes his shorts off, stepping out of his flip-flops. I lose my train of thought.

“Come for a swim with me.” He holds out his hand while I look up at him, dazed. “Swim?” he says again, cocking his head to one side, an amused expression on his face. When I don’t respond, he shakes his head slowly.

“I think you need a wake-up call.” Suddenly he pounces and lifts me into his arms while I shriek, more from surprise than alarm.

“Christian! Put me down!” I squeal.

He chuckles. “Only in the sea, baby.”

Several sunbathers on the beach watch with that bemused disinterest so typical, I now realize, of the French, as Christian carries me to the sea, laughing, and wades in.

I clasp my arms around his neck. “You wouldn’t,” I say breathlessly, trying to stifle my giggling.

He grins. “Oh, Ana, baby, have you learned nothing in the short time we’ve known each other?” He kisses me, and I seize my opportunity, running my fingers through his hair, grasping two handfuls and kissing him back while invading his mouth with my tongue. He inhales sharply and leans back, eyes smoky but wary.

“I know your game,” he whispers and slowly sinks into the cool, clear water, taking me with him as his lips find mine once more. The chill of the Mediterranean is soon forgotten as I wrap myself around my husband.

“I thought you wanted to swim,” I murmur against his mouth.

“You’re very distracting.” Christian grazes his teeth along my lower lip. “But I’m not sure I want the good people of Monte Carlo to see my wife in the throes of passion.”

I run my teeth along his jaw, his stubble tickly against my tongue, not caring a dime for the good people of Monte Carlo.

“Ana,” he groans. He wraps my ponytail around his wrist and tugs gently, tilting my head back, exposing my throat. He trails kisses from my ear down my neck.

“Shall I take you in the sea?” he breathes.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Christian pulls away and gazes down at me, his eyes warm, wanting, and amused. “Mrs. Grey, you’re insatiable and so brazen. What sort of monster have I created?”

“A monster fit for you. Would you have me any other way?”

“I’ll take you any way I can get you, you know that. But not right now. Not

with an audience.” He jerks his head toward the shore.

*What?*

Sure enough, several sunbathers on the beach have abandoned their indifference and now regard us with interest. Suddenly, Christian grabs me around my waist and launches me into the air, letting me fall into the water and sink beneath the waves to the soft sand below. I surface, coughing, spluttering, and giggling.

“Christian!” I scold, glaring at him. I thought we were going to make love in the sea … and chalk up yet another first. He bites his lower lip to stifle his amusement. I splash him, and he splashes me right back.

“We have all night,” he says, grinning like a fool. “Laters, baby.” He dives beneath the sea and surfaces three feet away from me, then in a fluid, graceful crawl, swims away from the shore, away from me.

*Gah! Playful, tantalizing Fifty!* I shield my eyes from the sun as I watch him go. He’s such a tease … what can I do to get him back? While I swim to the shore, I contemplate my options. At the lounges our drinks have arrived, and I take a quick sip of Diet Coke. Christian is a faint speck in the distance.

*Hmm* … I lie down on my front and, fumbling with the straps, take my bikini top off and toss it casually onto Christian’s sun lounge. There … see how brazen I can be, Mr. Grey. Put this in your pipe and smoke it. I shut my eyes and let the sun warm my skin … warm my bones, and I drift away under its heat, my thoughts turning to my wedding day.

---

“You may kiss the bride,” Reverend Walsh announces.

I beam at my husband.

“Finally, you’re mine,” he whispers and pulls me into his arms and kisses me chastely on the lips.

I am married. I am Mrs. Christian Grey. I am giddy with joy.

“You look beautiful, Ana,” he murmurs and smiles, his eyes glowing with love … and something darker, something hot. “Don’t let anyone take that dress off but me, understand?” His smile heats a hundred degrees as his fingertips trail down my cheek, igniting my blood.

*Holy crap … How does he do this, even here with all these people staring at us?*

I nod mutely. Jeez, I hope no one can hear us. Luckily Reverend Walsh has discreetly stepped back. I glance at the throng gathered in their wedding

finery … My mom, Ray, Bob, and the Greys are all applauding—even Kate, my maid of honor, who looks stunning in pale pink as she stands beside Christian's best man, his brother Elliot. Who knew that even Elliot could scrub up so well? All wear huge, beaming smiles—except Grace, who weeps graciously into a dainty white handkerchief.

"Ready to party, Mrs. Grey?" Christian murmurs, giving me his shy smile. I melt. He looks divine in a simple black tux with silver waistcoat and tie. He's so … *dashing*.

"Ready as I'll ever be." I grin, a totally goofy smile on my face.

Later the wedding party is in full swing … Carrick and Grace have gone to town. They have the tent set up again and beautifully decorated in pale pink, silver, and ivory with its sides open, facing the bay. We have been blessed with fine weather, and the late afternoon sun shines over the water. There's a dance floor at one end of the tent, a lavish buffet at the other.

Ray and my mother are dancing and laughing with each other. I feel bittersweet watching them together. I hope Christian and I last longer. I don't know what I'd do if he left me. *Marry in haste, repent at leisure*. The saying haunts me.

Kate is beside me, looking so beautiful in her long silk gown. She glances at me and frowns. "Hey, this is supposed to be the happiest day of your life," she scolds.

"It is," I whisper.

"Oh, Ana, what's wrong? Are you watching your mom and Ray?"

I nod sadly.

"They're happy."

"Happier apart."

"You're having doubts?" Kate asks, alarmed.

"No, not at all. It's just … I love him so much." I freeze, unable or unwilling to articulate my fears.

"Ana, it's obvious he adores you. I know you had an unconventional start to your relationship, but I can see how happy you've both been over the past month." She grasps my hands, squeezing them. "Besides, it's too late now," she adds with a grin.

I giggle. Trust Kate to point out the obvious. She pulls me into a Katherine Kavanagh Special Hug. "Ana, you'll be fine. And if he hurts one hair on your head, he'll have me to answer to." Releasing me, she grins at whoever is behind me.

"Hi, baby." Christian puts his arms around me, surprising me, and kisses my temple. "Kate," he acknowledges. He's still cool toward her even after six

weeks.

“Hello again, Christian. I’m off to find your best man, who happens to be my best man, too.” With a smile to us both, she heads over to Elliot, who is drinking with her brother, Ethan, and our friend José.

“Time to go,” Christian murmurs.

“Already? This is the first party I’ve been to where I don’t mind being the center of attention.” I turn in his arms to face him.

“You deserve to be. You look stunning, Anastasia.”

“So do you.”

He smiles, his expression heating. “This beautiful dress becomes you.”

“This old thing?” I blush shyly and pull at the fine lace trim of the simple, fitted wedding dress designed for me by Kate’s mother. I love that the lace is just off the shoulder—demure, yet alluring, I hope.

He bends and kisses me. “Let’s go. I don’t want to share you with all these people anymore.”

“Can we leave our own wedding?”

“Baby, it’s our party, and we can do whatever we want. We’ve cut the cake. And right now, I’d like to whisk you away and have you all to myself.”

I giggle. “You have me for a lifetime, Mr. Grey.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Mrs. Grey.”

“Oh, there you two are! Such lovebirds.”

I groan inwardly … Grace’s mother has found us.

“Christian, darling—one more dance with your grandma?”

Christian purses his lips. “Of course, Grandmother.”

“And you, beautiful Anastasia, go and make an old man happy—dance with Theo.”

“Theo, Mrs. Trevelyan?”

“Grandpa Trevelyan. And I think you can call me Grandma. Now, you two seriously need to get working on my great-grandkids. I won’t last too much longer.” She gives us both a simpering smile.

Christian blinks at her in horror. “Come, Grandmother,” he says, hurriedly taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor. He glances back at me, practically pouting, and rolls his eyes. “Laters, baby.”

As I walk toward Grandpa Trevelyan, José accosts me.

“I won’t ask you for another dance. I think I monopolized too much of your time on the dance floor as it is … I’m happy to see you happy, but I’m serious, Ana. I’ll be here … If you need me.”

“José, thank you. You’re a good friend.”

“I mean it.” His dark eyes shine with sincerity.

“I know you do. Thank you, José. Now if you’ll please excuse me—I have a date with an old man.”

He furrows his brow in confusion.

“Christian’s grandfather,” I clarify.

He grins. “Good luck with that, Annie. Good luck with everything.”

“Thanks, José.”

After my dance with Christian’s ever-charming grandfather, I stand by the French doors, watching the sun sink slowly over Seattle, casting bright orange and aquamarine shadows across the bay.

“Let’s go,” Christian urges.

“I have to change.” I grasp his hand, meaning to pull him through the French windows and upstairs with me. He frowns, not understanding, and tugs gently on my hand, halting me.

“I thought you wanted to be the one to take this dress off,” I explain. His eyes light up.

“Correct.” He gives me a lascivious grin. “But I’m not undressing you here. We wouldn’t leave until … I don’t know …” He waves his long-fingered hand, leaving his sentence unfinished but his meaning quite clear.

I flush and let go of his hand.

“And don’t take your hair down either,” he murmurs darkly.

“But—”

“No buts, Anastasia. You look beautiful. And I want to be the one to undress you.”

Oh. I frown.

“Pack your going-away clothes,” he orders. “You’ll need them. Taylor has your main suitcase.”

“Okay.” What has he got planned? He hasn’t told me where we’re going. In fact, I don’t think anyone knows where we’re going. Neither Mia nor Kate has managed to inveigle the information out of him. I turn to where my mother and Kate are hovering nearby.

“I’m not changing.”

“What?” my mother says.

“Christian doesn’t want me to.” I shrug as if this should explain everything. Her brow furrows briefly.

“You didn’t promise to obey,” she reminds me tactfully. Kate tries to disguise her snort as a cough. I narrow my eyes at her. Neither she nor my mother have any idea of the fight Christian and I had about that. I don’t want to rehash that argument. *Jeez, can my Fifty Shades sulk … and have nightmares*. The memory is sobering.

“I know, Mom, but he likes this dress, and I want to please him.”

Her expression softens. Kate rolls her eyes and tactfully moves away to leave us alone.

“You look so lovely, darling.” Carla gently tugs at a loose tendril of my hair and strokes my chin. “I am so proud of you, honey. You’re going to make Christian a very happy man.” She pulls me into a hug.

*Oh, Mom!*

“I can’t believe how grown-up you look right now. Beginning a new life … Just remember that men are from a different planet, and you’ll be fine.”

I giggle. Christian is from a different universe, if only she knew.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Ray joins us, smiling sweetly at both Mom and me.

“You made a beautiful baby girl, Carla,” he says, his eyes glowing with pride. He looks so dapper in his black tux and pale pink waistcoat. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Oh no … so far I have managed not to cry.

“And you watched her and helped her grow up, Ray.” Carla’s voice is wistful.

“And I loved every single minute. You make one hell of a bride, Annie.” Ray tucks the same loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“Oh, Dad …” I stifle a sob, and he hugs me in his brief, awkward way.

“You’ll make one hell of a wife, too,” he whispers, his voice hoarse.

When he releases me, Christian is back at my side.

Ray shakes his hand warmly. “Look after my girl, Christian.”

“I fully intend to, Ray. Carla.” He nods at my stepdad and kisses my mom.

The rest of the wedding guests have formed a long human arch for us to travel through, leading around to the front of the house.

“Ready?” Christian says.

“Yes.”

Taking my hand, he leads me under their outstretched arms while our guests shout good luck and congratulations and shower us with rice. Waiting with smiles and hugs at the end of the arch are Grace and Carrick. They hug and kiss us both in turn. Grace is emotional again as we bid them hasty good-byes.

Taylor is waiting to whisk us away in the Audi SUV. As Christian holds the car door open for me, I turn and toss my bouquet of white and pink roses into the crowd of young women that has gathered. Mia triumphantly holds it aloft, grinning from ear to ear.

As I slide into the SUV, laughing at Mia’s audacious catch, Christian bends to gather the hem of my dress. Once I’m safely in, he bids the waiting crowd farewell.

Taylor holds the car door open for him. “Congratulations, sir.”

“Thank you, Taylor,” Christian replies as he seats himself beside me.

As Taylor pulls away, our wedding guests shower the vehicle with rice. Christian grasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“So far so good, Mrs. Grey?”

“So far so wonderful, Mr. Grey. Where are we going?”

“Sea-Tac,” he says simply and smiles a sphinxlike smile.

*Hmm* … what is he planning?

Taylor does not head for the departure terminal as I expect but through a security gate and directly onto the tarmac. What? And then I see her—Christian’s jet … *Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc*. in large blue lettering across her fuselage.

“Don’t tell me you’re misusing company property again!”

“Oh, I hope so, Anastasia.” Christian grins.

Taylor halts the Audi at the foot of the steps leading up to the plane and leaps out to open Christian’s door. They have a brief discussion, then Christian opens my door—and rather than stepping back to give me room to climb out, he leans in and lifts me.

*Whoa!* “What are you doing?” I squeak.

“Carrying you over the threshold,” he says.

“Oh.” *Isn’t that supposed to be at home?*

He carries me effortlessly up the steps, and Taylor follows with my small suitcase. He leaves it on the threshold of the plane before returning to the Audi. Inside the cabin, I recognize Stephan, Christian’s pilot, in his uniform.

“Welcome aboard, sir. Mrs. Grey.” He grins.

Christian puts me down and shakes Stephan’s hand. Beside Stephan stands a dark-haired woman in her—what? Early thirties? She’s also in uniform.

“Congratulations to you both,” Stephan continues.

“Thank you, Stephan. Anastasia, you know Stephan. He’s our captain today, and this is First Officer Beighley.”

She blushes as Christian introduces her and blinks rapidly. I want to roll my eyes. Another female completely captivated by my too-handsome-for-his-own-good husband.

“Delighted to meet you,” gushes Beighley. I smile kindly at her. After all—he is mine.

“All preparations complete?” Christian asks them both as I glance around the cabin. The interior is all pale maple and pale cream leather. It’s lovely. Another young woman in uniform stands at the other end of the cabin—a very *pretty* brunette.

“We have the all clear. Weather is good from here to Boston.”

*Boston?*

“Turbulence?”

“Not before Boston. There’s a weather front over Shannon that might give us a rough ride.”

*Shannon? Ireland?*

“I see. Well, I hope to sleep through it all,” says Christian matter-of-factly.

*Sleep?*

“We’ll get underway, sir,” Stephan says. “We’ll leave you in the capable care of Natalia, your flight attendant.” Christian glances in her direction and frowns, but turns to Stephan with a smile.

“Excellent,” he says. Taking my hand, he leads me to one of the sumptuous leather seats. There must be about twelve of them in total.

“Sit,” he says as he removes his jacket and undoes his fine sliver brocade vest. We sit in two single seats facing each other with a small, highly polished table between us.

“Welcome aboard, sir, ma’am, and congratulations.” Natalia is at our side, offering us each a glass of pink champagne.

“Thank you,” Christian says, and she smiles politely at us and retreats to the galley.

“Here’s to a happy married life, Anastasia.” Christian raises his glass to mine, and we clink. The champagne is delicious.

“Bollinger?” I ask.

“The same.”

“The first time I drank this it was out of teacups.” I grin.

“I remember that day well. Your graduation.”

“Where are we going?” I’m unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“Shannon,” Christian says, his eyes alight with excitement. He looks like a small boy.

“In Ireland?” We’re going to Ireland!

“To refuel,” he adds, teasing.

“Then?” I prompt.

His grin broadens and he shakes his head.

“Christian!”

“London,” he says, gazing intently at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

I gasp. *Holy cow*. I thought maybe we’d be going to New York or Aspen or maybe the Caribbean. I can hardly believe it. My lifetime ambition has been to visit England. I’m lit up from within, incandescent with happiness.

“Then Paris.”

*What?*

“Then the South of France.”

*Whoa!*

“I know you’ve always dreamed of going to Europe,” he says softly. “I want to make your dreams come true, Anastasia.”

“You are my dreams come true, Christian.”

“Back at you, Mrs. Grey,” he whispers.

*Oh my …*

“Buckle up.”

I grin and do as I’m told.

As the plane taxis out onto the runway, we sip our champagne, grinning inanely at each other. I can’t believe it. At twenty-two years old, I’m finally leaving the United States and going to Europe—to *London* of all places.

Once we’re airborne, Natalia serves us yet more champagne and prepares our wedding feast. And what a feast it is—smoked salmon, followed by roast partridge with a green bean salad and *dauphinoise* potatoes, all cooked and served by the ever-efficient Natalia.

“Dessert, Mr. Grey?” she asks.

He shakes his head and runs his finger across his bottom lip as he looks questioningly at me, his expression dark and unreadable.

“No, thank you,” I murmur, unable to break eye contact with him. His lips curl up in a small, secret smile, and Natalia retreats.

“Good,” he murmurs. “I’d rather planned on having you for dessert.”

*Oh … here?*

“Come,” he says, rising from the table and offering me his hand. He leads me to the back of the cabin.

“There’s a bathroom here.” He points to a small door, then leads me on down a short corridor and through a door at the end.

*Jeez … a bedroom*. The cabin is cream and maple and the small double bed is covered in gold and taupe cushions. It looks very comfortable.

Christian turns and pulls me into his arms, gazing down at me.

“I thought we’d spend our wedding night at thirty-five thousand feet. It’s something I’ve never done before.”

Another first. I gape at him, my heart pounding … the mile high club. I’ve heard about this.

“But first I have to get you out of this fabulous dress.” His eyes glow with love and something darker, something I love … something that calls to my inner goddess. He takes my breath away.

“Turn around.” His voice is low, authoritative, and sexy as hell. How can he infuse so much promise into those two words? Willingly I comply and his hands

move to my hair. Gently he pulls out each hairpin one at a time, his expert fingers making short work of the task. My hair falls in swaths over my shoulders, one lock at a time, covering my back and down to my breasts. I try to stand still and not squirm, but I'm aching for his touch. After our long, tiring but exciting day, I want him—all of him.

"You have such beautiful hair, Ana." His mouth is close to my ear and I feel his breath, though his lips don't touch me. When my hair is free of pins, he runs his fingers through it, gently massaging my scalp … *oh my* … I close my eyes and savor the sensation. His fingers travel on down, and he tugs, tilting my head back to expose my throat.

"You're mine," he breathes, and his teeth tug my ear lobe.

I groan.

"Hush now," he admonishes. He sweeps my hair over my shoulder and trails a finger across the top of my back from shoulder to shoulder, following the lace edge of my dress. I shiver in anticipation. He plants a tender kiss on my back above the first button on my dress.

"So beautiful," he says as he deftly undoes the first button. "You have made me the happiest man alive today." With infinite slowness, he unfastens each button, all the way down my back. "I love you so much." Trailing kisses from the nape of my neck to the edge of my shoulder. Between each kiss he murmurs, "I. Want. You. So. Much. I. Want. To. Be. Inside. You. You. Are. Mine."

Each word is intoxicating. I close my eyes and tilt my head, giving him easier access to my neck, and I fall further under the spell that is Christian Grey, my husband.

"Mine," he whispers once more. He peels my dress down my arms so that it pools at my feet in a cloud of ivory silk and lace.

"Turn around," he whispers, his voice suddenly hoarse. I do so and he gasps.

I'm dressed in a tight, blush-pink satin corset with garter straps, matching lacy briefs, and white silk stockings. Christian's eyes travel greedily down my body, but he says nothing. He just gazes at me, his eyes wide with want.

"You like?" I whisper, aware of the shy blush creeping across my cheeks.

"More than like, baby. You look sensational. Here." He holds out his hand and, taking it, I step out of my dress.

"Keep still," he murmurs, and without taking his darkening eyes off mine, he runs his middle finger over my breasts, following the line of my corset. My breath shallows, and he repeats the journey over my breasts once more, his tantalizing finger sending tingles down my spine. He stops and twirls his index finger in the air, indicating that he wants me to turn around.

For him, right now, I'd do anything.

“Stop,” he says. I’m facing the bed, away from him. His arm encircles my waist, pulling me against him, and he nuzzles my neck. Gently he cups my breasts, toying with them, while his thumbs circle over my nipples so that they strain against the fabric of my corset.

“Mine,” he whispers.

“Yours,” I breathe.

Leaving my breasts bereft he runs his hands down my stomach, over my belly, and down to my thighs, his thumbs skimming my sex. I stifle a moan. His fingers skate down each garter, and with his usual dexterity, he simultaneously unhooks each one from my stockings. His hands travel around to my behind.

“Mine,” he breathes as his hands spread across my backside, the tips of his fingers brushing my sex.

“Ah.”

“Hush.” His hands travel down the backs of my thighs, and once more he unclips my garters.

Leaning down, he pulls back the cover on the bed. “Sit down.”

In his thrall, I do as I’m told, and he kneels at my feet and gently tugs off each of my white bridal Jimmy Choos. He grasps the top of my left stocking and slowly peels it off, running his thumbs down my leg … He repeats the process with my other stocking.

“This is like unwrapping my Christmas presents.” He smiles up at me through his long dark lashes.

“A present you’ve had already …”

He frowns in admonishment. “Oh no, baby. This time it’s really mine.”

“Christian, I’ve been yours since I said yes.” I scoot forward, cupping his beloved face in my hands. “I’m yours. I will always be yours, husband of mine. Now, I think you’re wearing too many clothes.” I bend to kiss him, and suddenly he leans up, kisses my lips, and grasps my head with his hands, his fingers threading into my hair.

“Ana,” he breathes. “My Ana.” His lips claim mine once more, his tongue invasively persuasive.

“Clothes,” I whisper, our breath mingling as I push back his vest and he struggles out of it, releasing me for a moment. He pauses, gazing at me, eyes wide, eyes wanting.

“Let me, please.” My voice is soft and cajoling. I want to undress my husband, my Fifty.

He sits back on his heels, and leaning forward I grasp his tie—his silver-gray tie, my favorite tie—and slowly undo it and pull it free. He raises his chin to let me tackle the top button of his white shirt; then once it’s undone, I move on to

his cuffs. He's wearing platinum cuff links—engraved with an entwined A and C—my wedding present to him. When I've removed them, he takes the cuff links from me and fists them in his hand. Then he kisses his fist and shoves them into his pants pocket.

"Mr. Grey, so romantic."

"For you Mrs. Grey—hearts and flowers. Always."

I take his hand and, glancing up through my lashes, kiss his plain platinum wedding ring. He groans and closes his eyes.

"Ana," he whispers, and my name is a prayer.

Reaching up to his second shirt button and mirroring him from earlier, I plant a soft kiss on his chest as I undo each of them and whisper between each kiss, "You. Make. Me. So. Happy. I. Love. You."

He groans, and in one swift move, he clasps me around the waist and lifts me onto the bed, following me down on it. His lips find mine, his hands curling around my head, holding me, stilling me as our tongues glory in each other. Abruptly Christian kneels up, leaving me breathless and wanting more.

"You are so beautiful … wife." He runs his hands down my legs, then grasps my left foot. "You have such lovely legs. I want to kiss every inch of them. Starting here." He presses his lips against my big toe and then grazes the pad with his teeth. Everything south of my waistline convulses. His tongue glides up my instep and his teeth skim my heel and up to my ankle. He trails kisses up the inside of my calf; soft wet kisses. I wriggle beneath him.

"Still, Mrs. Grey," he warns, and suddenly he flips me onto my stomach and continues his leisurely journey with his mouth up the backs of my legs, to my thighs, my behind, and then he stops. I groan.

"Please …"

"I want you naked," he murmurs and slowly unhooks my corset, one hook at a time. When it's flat on the bed beneath me, he runs his tongue up the length of my spine.

"Christian, please."

"What do you want, Mrs. Grey?" His words are soft and close to my ear. He's almost lying on top of me … I can feel him hard against my behind.

"You."

"And I you, my love, my life …," he whispers, and before I know it, he's flipped me onto my back. He stands swiftly and in one efficient move dispenses with his pants and boxer briefs so that he's gloriously naked and looming large and ready over me. The small cabin is eclipsed by his dazzling beauty and his want and need of me. He leans down and peels off my panties, then gazes at me.

"Mine," he mouths.

“Please,” I beg and he grins … a salacious, wicked, tempting, all-Fifty grin.

He crawls back onto the bed and trails kisses up my right leg this time … until he reaches the apex of my thighs. He pushes my legs wider apart.

“Ah … wife of mine,” he murmurs, and then his mouth is on me. I close my eyes and surrender to his oh-so-adroit tongue. My hands fist in his hair as my hips swing and sway, slave to his rhythm, then buck off the small bed. He grabs my hips to still me … but doesn’t stop the delicious torture. I’m close, so close.

“Christian.” I moan.

“Not yet,” he breathes, and he moves up my body, his tongue dipping into my navel.

“No!” *Damn!* I sense his smile against my belly as his journey continues north.

“So impatient, Mrs. Grey. We have until we touch down on the Emerald Isle.” Reverentially he kisses my breasts and tugs my left nipple between his lips. Gazing up at me, his eyes are dark like a tropical storm as he teases me.

*Oh my* … I’d forgotten. *Europe*.

“Husband, I want you. Please.”

He looms up over me, his body covering mine, resting his weight on his elbows. He runs his nose down mine, and I run my hands down his strong, supple back to his fine, fine backside.

“Mrs. Grey … wife. We aim to please.” His lips brush. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Eyes open. I want to see you.”

“Christian … ah …,” I cry, as he slowly sinks into me.

“Ana, oh Ana,” he breathes, and he starts to move.

“WHAT THE HELL DO you think you’re doing?” Christian shouts, waking me from my very pleasant dream. He’s standing all wet and beautiful at the end of my sun lounge and glaring down at me.

What have I done? *Oh no … I’m lying on my back* … Crap, crap, crap, and he’s mad. Shit. He’s really mad.

## CHAPTER TWO

I am suddenly very awake, my erotic dream forgotten.

"I was on my front. I must have turned over in my sleep," I whisper weakly in my defense.

His eyes blaze with fury. He reaches down, scoops up my bikini top from his sun lounge, and tosses it at me.

"Put this on!" he hisses.

"Christian, no one is looking."

"Trust me. They're looking. I'm sure Taylor and the security crew are enjoying the show!" he snarls.

*Holy shit!* Why do I keep forgetting about them? I grasp my breasts in panic, hiding them. Ever since *Charlie Tango*'s sabotaged demise, we are constantly shadowed by damned security.

"Yes," Christian snarls. "And some sleazy fucking paparazzi could get a shot of you, too. Do you want to be all over the cover of *Star* magazine? Naked this time?"

*Shit! The paparazzi! Fuck!* As I hurriedly scramble into my top, all thumbs, the color drains from my face. I shudder. The unpleasant memory of being besieged by the paparazzi outside Seattle Independent Publishing after our engagement was leaked comes unwelcome to mind—all part of the Christian Grey package.

*"L'addition!"* Christian snaps at the passing waitress. "We're going," he says to me.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

Oh shit, he's not to be argued with.

He pulls on his shorts, even though his trunks are dripping wet, then his gray T-shirt. The waitress is back in a moment with his credit card and the check.

Reluctantly, I wriggle into my turquoise sundress and step into my flip-flops. Once the waitress has left, Christian snatches up his book and BlackBerry and masks his fury behind mirrored aviator sunglasses. He's bristling with tension and anger. My heart sinks. Every other woman on the beach is topless—it's not

that big a crime. In fact, I look odd with my top *on*. I sigh inwardly, my spirits sinking. I thought Christian would see the funny side … sort of … Maybe if I'd stayed on my front, but his sense of humor has evaporated.

"Please don't be mad at me," I whisper, taking his book and BlackBerry from him and placing them in my backpack.

"Too late for that," he says quietly—too quietly. "Come." Taking my hand, he signals up to Taylor and his two sidekicks, the French security officers Philippe and Gaston. Weirdly, they are identical twins. They have been patiently watching us and everyone else on the beach from the veranda. Why do I keep forgetting about them? How? Taylor is stony-faced behind his dark glasses. Shit, he's mad at me, too. I'm still not used to seeing him so casually dressed, in shorts and a black polo shirt.

Christian leads me into the hotel, through the lobby, and out onto the street. He remains silent, brooding and bad-tempered, and it's all my fault. Taylor and his team shadow us.

"Where are we going?" I ask tentatively, gazing up at him.

"Back to the boat." He doesn't look at me.

I have no idea of the time. I think it must be about five or six in the afternoon. When we reach the marina, Christian leads me onto the dock, where the motorboat and Jet Ski belonging to the *Fair Lady* are moored. As Christian unties the Jet Ski, I hand my backpack to Taylor. I glance nervously up at him, but like Christian, his expression gives nothing away. I flush, thinking about what he's seen on the beach.

"Here you go, Mrs. Grey." Taylor passes me a life vest from the motorboat, and I dutifully put it on. Why am I the only one who has to wear a life jacket? Christian and Taylor exchange some kind of look. Jeez, is he angry with Taylor, too? Christian then checks the straps on my life jacket, cinching the middle one tightly.

"You'll do," he mutters sullenly, still not turning to look at me. *Shit*.

He climbs gracefully onto the Jet Ski and holds out his hand for me to join him. Grasping it tightly, I manage to throw my leg over the seat behind him without falling into the water while Taylor and the twins clamber into the motorboat. Christian kicks the Jet Ski away from the dock, and it floats gently into the marina.

"Hold on," he orders, and I put my arms around him. This is my favorite part of traveling by Jet Ski. I hug him closely, my nose nuzzling into his back, marveling that there was a time when he would not have tolerated me touching him this way. He smells good … of Christian and the sea. *Forgive me, Christian, please?*

He stiffens. “Steady,” he says, his tone softer. I kiss his back and rest my cheek against him, looking back toward the dock where a few holidaymakers have gathered to watch the show.

Christian turns the key and the motor roars to life. With one twist of the accelerator, the Jet Ski bucks forward and speeds across the cool dark water, through the marina, and out to the center of the harbor toward the *Fair Lady*. I hold him tighter. I love this—it’s so exciting. Every muscle in Christian’s lean frame is evident as I cling to him.

Taylor pulls alongside in the motorboat. Christian glances at him, then accelerates again, and we shoot forward, whipping over the top of the water like an expertly tossed pebble. Taylor shakes his head in resigned exasperation and heads straight to the yacht, while Christian shoots past the *Fair Lady* and heads out toward the open water.

The sea spray is splashing us, the warm wind buffeting my face and flaying my ponytail crazily around me. This is so much *fun*. Maybe the thrill of this ride will dispel Christian’s bad mood. I can’t see his face, but I know he’s enjoying himself—carefree, acting his age for a change.

He steers in a huge semicircle and I study the shoreline—the boats in the marina, the mosaic of yellow, white, and sand-colored offices and apartments, and the craggy mountains behind. It looks so disorganized—not the regimented blocks that I am used to—but so picturesque. Christian glances over his shoulder at me, and there’s the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

“Again?” he shouts over the noise of the engine.

I nod enthusiastically. His answering grin is dazzling, and he opens the throttle and speeds around the *Fair Lady* and on out to sea once more … and I think I’m forgiven.

“YOU’VE CAUGHT THE SUN,” Christian says mildly as he undoes my life vest. I anxiously try to assess his mood. We are on deck aboard the yacht, and one of the stewards is standing quietly nearby, waiting for my life vest. Christian passes it to him.

“Will that be all, sir?” the young man asks. I love his French accent. Christian glances at me, takes off his shades, and slips them into the collar of his T-shirt, letting them hang.

“Would you like a drink?” he asks me.

“Do I need one?”

He cocks his head to one side. “Why would you say that?” His voice is soft.

“You know why.”

He frowns as if weighing something in his mind.

*Oh, what is he thinking?*

"Two gin and tonics, please. And some nuts and olives," he says to the steward, who nods and quickly vanishes.

"You think I'm going to punish you?" Christian's voice is silky.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll think of something. Maybe when you've had your drink." And it's a sensual threat. I swallow, and my inner goddess squints from her sun lounge where she's trying to catch rays with a silver reflector fanned out at her neck.

Christian frowns once more.

"You want to be?"

*How does he know?* "Depends," I mutter, flushing.

"On what?" He hides his smile.

"If you want to hurt me or not."

His mouth presses into a hard line, humor forgotten. He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

"Anastasia, you're my wife, not my sub. I don't ever want to hurt you. You should know that by now. Just … just don't take your clothes off in public. I don't want you naked all over the tabloids. You don't want that, and I'm sure your mom and Ray don't want that, either."

*Oh! Ray*. Holy shit, he'd have a coronary. What was I thinking? I mentally castigate myself.

The steward appears with our drinks and snacks and places them on the teak table.

"Sit," Christian commands. I do as he says and settle into a director's chair. Christian takes a seat beside me and passes me a gin and tonic.

"Cheers, Mrs. Grey."

"Cheers, Mr. Grey." I take a welcome sip. It's thirst-quenching, cold, and delicious. When I gaze at him, he's watching me carefully, his mood unreadable. It's very frustrating … I don't know if he's still mad at me. I deploy my patented distraction technique.

"Who owns this boat?" I ask.

"A British knight. Sir Somebody-or-Other. His great-grandfather started a grocery store. His daughter's married to one of the crown princes of Europe."

Oh. "Super-rich?"

Christian looks suddenly wary. "Yes."

"Like you," I murmur.

"Yes."

Oh.

"And like you," Christian whispers and pops an olive into his mouth. I blink rapidly … a vision of him in his tux and silver waistcoat comes to mind … his eyes burning with sincerity as he gazes down at me during our wedding ceremony.

"*All that is mine is now yours*," he says, his voice ringing out clearly, reciting his vows from memory.

*All mine?* "It's odd. Going from nothing to"—I wave my hand to indicate our opulent surroundings—"to everything."

"You'll get used to it."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it."

Taylor appears on deck. "Sir, you have a call." Christian frowns but takes the proffered BlackBerry.

"Grey," he snaps and rises from his seat to stand at the bow of the yacht.

I gaze out at the sea, tuning out his conversation with Ros—I think—his number two. I am rich … stinking rich. I have done nothing to earn this money … just married a rich man. I shudder as my mind drifts back to our conversation about prenups. It was the Sunday after his birthday, and we were seated at the kitchen table enjoying a leisurely breakfast … all of us. Elliot, Kate, Grace, and I were debating the merits of bacon versus sausage, while Carrick and Christian read the Sunday paper …

---

"Look at this," squeals Mia as she sets her netbook on the kitchen table in front of us. "There's a gossipy item on the Seattle Nooz Web site about you being engaged, Christian."

"Already?" Grace says in surprise. Then her mouth purses as some obviously unpleasant thought crosses her mind. Christian frowns.

Mia reads the column out loud. "Word has reached us here at the Nooz that Seattle's most eligible bachelor, *the* Christian Grey, has finally been snapped up and wedding bells are in the air. But who is the lucky, lucky lady? The Nooz is on the hunt. Bet she's reading one helluva prenup."

Mia giggles, then stops abruptly as Christian glares at her. Silence descends, and the atmosphere in the Grey kitchen plunges to below zero.

*Oh no! A prenup?* The thought has never crossed my mind. I swallow, feeling all the blood drain from my face. *Please ground, swallow me up now!* Christian shifts uncomfortably in his chair as I glance apprehensively at him.

“No,” he mouths at me.

“Christian,” Carrick says gently.

“I’m not discussing this again,” he snaps at Carrick, who glances at me nervously and opens his mouth to say something.

“No prenup!” Christian almost shouts at him and broodingly goes back to reading his paper, ignoring everyone else at the table. They look alternately at me and then him … then anywhere but at the two of us.

“Christian,” I murmur. “I’ll sign anything you and Mr. Grey want.” Jeez, it wouldn’t be the first time he’s made me sign something. Christian looks up and glares at me.

“No!” he snaps. I blanch once more.

“It’s to protect you.”

“Christian, Ana—I think you should discuss this in private,” Grace admonishes us. She glares at Carrick and Mia. Oh dear, looks like they’re in trouble, too.

“Ana, this is not about you,” Carrick murmurs reassuringly. “And please call me Carrick.”

Christian narrows cold eyes at his father and my heart sinks. *Hell … He’s really mad*.

Everyone erupts into animated conversation, and Mia and Kate leap up to clear the table.

“I definitely prefer sausage,” exclaims Elliot.

I stare down at my knotted fingers. Crap. I hope Mr. and Mrs. Grey don’t think I’m some kind of gold digger. Christian reaches over and grasps both my hands gently in one of his.

“Stop it.”

How does he know what I’m thinking?

“Ignore my dad,” Christian says so only I can hear him. “He’s really pissed about Elena. That stuff was all aimed at me. I wish my mom had kept her mouth shut.”

I know Christian is still smarting from his “talk” with Carrick about Elena last night.

“He has a point, Christian. You’re very wealthy, and I’m bringing nothing to our marriage but my student loans.”

Christian gazes at me, his eyes bleak. “Anastasia, if you leave me, you might as well take everything. You left me once before. I know how that feels.”

*Holy fuck!* “That was different,” I whisper, moved by his intensity. “But … you might want to leave me.” The thought makes me sick.

He snorts and shakes his head with mock disgust.

“Christian, you know I might do something exceptionally stupid—and you …” I glance down at my knotted hands, pain lancing through me, and I’m unable to finish my sentence. Losing Christian … *fuck*.

“Stop. Stop now. This subject is closed, Ana. We’re not discussing it anymore. No prenup. Not now—not ever.” He gives me a pointed give-it-up-now look, which silences me. Then he turns to Grace. “Mom,” he says. “Can we have the wedding here?”

---

And he’s not mentioned it again. In fact at every opportunity he’s tried to reassure me about his wealth … that it’s mine, too. I shudder as I recall the crazy shopping fest Christian demanded I go on with Caroline Acton—the personal shopper from Nieman Marcus—in preparation for this honeymoon. My bikini alone cost five hundred and forty dollars. I mean, it’s nice, but really—that’s a ridiculous amount of money for four triangular scraps of material.

“You will get used to it,” Christian interrupts my reverie as he resumes his place at the table.

“Used to it?”

“The money,” he says, rolling his eyes.

*Oh, Fifty, maybe with time*. I push the small dish of salted almonds and cashews toward him.

“Your nuts, sir,” I say with as straight a face as I can manage, trying to bring some humor to our conversation after my dark thoughts and my bikini top faux pas.

He smirks. “I’m nuts about you.” He takes an almond, his eyes sparkling with wicked humor as he enjoys my little joke. He licks his lips. “Drink up. We’re going to bed.”

*What?*

“Drink,” he mouths at me, his eyes darkening.

Oh my, the look he gives me could be solely responsible for global warming. I pick up my gin and drain the glass, not taking my eyes off him. His mouth drops open, and I glimpse the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He smiles lewdly at me. In one fluid move, he stands and bends over me, resting his hands on the arms of my chair.

“I’m going to make an example of you. Come. Don’t pee,” he whispers in my ear.

I gasp. *Don’t pee? How rude*. My subconscious looks up from her book—*The*

*Complete Works of Charles Dickens, volume 1*—with alarm.

"It's not what you think." Christian smirks, holding his hand out to me. "Trust me." He looks so sexy and genial. How can I resist?

"Okay." I place my hand in his, because quite simply, I'd trust him with my life. What has he got planned? My heart starts pounding in anticipation.

He leads me across the deck and through the doors into the plush, beautifully appointed main salon, along a narrow corridor, through the dining room, and down the stairs to the master cabin.

The cabin has been cleaned since this morning and the bed made. It's a lovely room. With two portholes on both the starboard and port sides, it's elegantly decorated in dark walnut furniture with cream walls and soft furnishings in gold and red.

Christian releases my hand, pulls his T-shirt over his head, and tosses it onto a chair. He steps out of his flip-flops and removes his shorts and trunks in one graceful move. *Oh my. Will I ever tire of looking at him naked?* He is utterly gorgeous and all mine. His skin glows—he's caught the sun, too, and his hair is longer, flopping over his forehead. I am one lucky, lucky girl.

He grasps my chin, pulling slightly so that I stop biting my lip, and runs his thumb along my lower lip.

"That's better." He turns and strides over to the impressive armoire that houses his clothes. He produces two pairs of metal handcuffs and an airline eye mask from the bottom drawer.

*Handcuffs!* We've never used handcuffs. I glance quickly and nervously at the bed. Where the hell is he going to attach those? He turns and gazes steadily at me, his eyes dark and luminous.

"These can be quite painful. They can bite into the skin if you pull too hard." He holds up one pair. "But I really want to use them on you now."

*Holy fuck.* My mouth goes dry.

"Here." He stalks gracefully forward and hands me a set. "Do you want to try them first?"

They feel solid, the metal cold. Vaguely, I hope I never have to wear a pair of these for real.

Christian is watching me intently.

"Where are the keys?" My voice wavers.

He holds out his palm, revealing a small metallic key. "This does both sets. In fact, all sets."

*How many sets does he have?* I don't remember seeing any in the museum chest.

He strokes my cheek with his index finger, trailing it down to my mouth. He

leans in as if to kiss me.

"Do you want to play?" he says, his voice low, and everything in my body heads south as desire unfurls deep in my belly.

"Yes," I breathe.

He smiles. "Good." He plants a featherlight kiss on my forehead. "We're going to need a safeword."

*What?*

" *'Stop'* won't be enough because you will probably say that, but you won't mean it." He runs his nose down mine—the only contact between us.

My heart starts pounding. *Shit* … How can he do this with just words?

"This is not going to hurt. It will be intense. Very intense, because I am not going to let you move. Okay?"

*Oh my*. This sounds so hot. My breathing is too loud. *Fuck, I am panting already*. Thank heavens I'm married to this man, otherwise this would be embarrassing. My eyes flick down to his arousal.

"Okay." My voice is barely audible.

"Choose a word, Ana."

*Oh* …

"A safeword," he says softly.

"Popsicle," I say, panting.

"Popsicle?" he says, amused.

"Yes."

He grins as he leans back to gaze down at me. "Interesting choice. Lift up your arms."

I do, and Christian grasps the hem of my sundress, lifts it over my head, and tosses it on the floor. He holds out his hand, and I give him back the handcuffs. He places both sets on the bedside table along with the blindfold and yanks the quilt off the bed, letting it fall to the floor.

"Turn around."

I turn, and he undoes my bikini top so that it falls to the floor.

"Tomorrow, I will staple this to you," he mutters and tugs on my hair tie, freeing my hair. He gathers it into one hand and yanks gently so I step back against him. Against his chest. Against his erection. I gasp as he pulls my head to one side and kisses my neck.

"You were very disobedient," he murmurs in my ear, sending delicious shivers through me.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Hmm. What are we going to do about that?"

"Learn to live with it," I breathe. His soft languid kisses are driving me wild.

He grins against my neck.

"Ah, Mrs. Grey. You are ever the optimist."

He straightens. Taking my hair, he carefully parts it into three strands, braids it slowly, and then fastens my hair tie to the end. He tugs my braid gently and leans down to my ear. "I am going to teach you a lesson," he murmurs.

Moving suddenly, he grabs me by the waist, sits down on the bed, and yanks me across his knee so that I feel his erection pressed against my belly. He smacks my backside once, hard. I yelp, then I'm on my back on the bed, and he's gazing down at me, his eyes molten gray. I'm going to combust.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" He trails his fingertips up my thigh so that I tingle … everywhere. Without taking his eyes off me, he gets up from the bed and gathers both sets of handcuffs. He grasps my left leg and snaps one cuff around my ankle.

*Oh!*

Lifting my right leg, he repeats the process so I have a pair of handcuffs attached to each ankle. I still have no idea where he's going to attach them.

"Sit up," he orders, and I comply immediately.

"Now hug your knees."

I blink at him, then draw my legs up so they are bent in front of me and wrap my arms around them. He reaches down, lifts my chin, and plants a soft wet kiss on my lips before slipping the blindfold over my eyes. I can see nothing; all I can hear is my rapid breathing and the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the yacht as she bobs gently on the sea.

*Oh my*. I am so aroused … already.

"What's the safeword, Anastasia?"

"Popsicle."

"Good." Taking my left hand, he snaps a cuff around my wrist then repeats the process with my right. My left hand is tied to my left ankle, my right hand to my right leg. I cannot straighten my legs. *Holy fuck.*

"Now," Christian breathes, "I'm going to fuck you till you scream."

*What?* And all the air leaves my body.

He grasps both of my heels and tips me back so that I fall backward on the bed. I have no choice but to keep my legs bent. The cuffs tighten as I pull against them. He's right … they cut into me almost to the point of pain … This feels weird—being trussed up and helpless—on a boat. He pulls my ankles apart, and I groan.

He kisses my inner thigh, and I want to squirm beneath him, but I can't. I have no purchase to move my hips. My feet are suspended. I cannot move.

"You're going to have to absorb all the pleasure, Anastasia. No moving," he

murmurs as he crawls up my body, kissing me along the edge of my bikini bottoms. He pulls the strings on each side, and the scraps of material fall away. I am now naked and at his mercy. He kisses my belly, nipping my navel with his teeth.

"Ah," I sigh. This is going to be tough … I had no idea. He traces soft kisses and little bites up to my breasts.

"Shhh …," he soothes. "You are so beautiful, Ana."

I groan, frustrated. Normally I'd be grinding my hips, responding to his touch with a rhythm of my own, but I cannot move. I moan, pulling on my restraints. The metal bites into my skin.

"Argh!" I cry. But I really don't care.

"You drive me crazy," he whispers. "So I am going to drive you crazy." He's resting on me now, his weight on his elbows, and he turns his attention to my breasts. Biting, sucking, rolling my nipples between his fingers and thumbs, driving me wild. He doesn't stop. It's maddening. *Oh. Please*. His erection pushes against me.

"Christian," I beg and feel his triumphant smile against my skin.

"Shall I make you come this way?" He murmurs against my nipple, causing it to harden some more. "You know I can." He suckles me hard and I cry out, pleasure lancing from my chest directly to my groin. I pull helplessly on the cuffs, swamped by the sensation.

"Yes," I whimper.

"Oh, baby, that would be too easy."

"Oh … please."

"Shh." His teeth scrape my chin as he trails his lips to my mouth, and I gasp. He kisses me. His skilled tongue invades my mouth, tasting, exploring, dominating, but my tongue meets his challenge, writhing against his. He tastes of cool gin and Christian Grey, and he smells of the sea. He grasps my chin, holding my head in place.

"Still, baby. I want you still," he whispers against my mouth.

"I want to see you."

"Oh no, Ana. You'll feel more this way." And, agonizingly slowly, he flexes his hips and pushes partway into me. I would normally tilt my pelvis up to meet him but I can't move. He withdraws.

"Ah! Christian, please!"

"Again?" he teases, his voice hoarse.

"Christian!"

He pushes fractionally into me again, then withdraws while kissing me, his fingers tugging at my nipple. It's pleasure overload.

“No!”

“Do you want me, Anastasia?”

“Yes,” I beg.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, his breathing harsh, and he teases me once more—in … and out.

“I want you,” I whimper. “Please.”

I hear his soft sigh against my ear.

“And have me you will, Anastasia.”

He rears up and slams into me. I scream, tilting my head back, pulling on the restraints as he hits my sweet spot, and I am all sensation, everywhere—a sweet, sweet agony, and I cannot move. He stills, then circles his hips, and the motion radiates deep inside me.

“Why do you defy me, Ana?”

“Christian, stop …”

He circles deep inside me again, ignoring my plea, easing out slowly and then slamming into me again.

“Tell me. Why?” he hisses, and I’m vaguely aware that it’s through gritted teeth.

I cry out in an incoherent wail … this is too much.

“Tell me.”

“Christian …”

“Ana, I need to know.”

He slams into me again, thrusting so deep, and I’m building … the feeling is so intense—it swamps me, spiraling out from deep within my belly, to each limb, to each biting metal restraint.

“I don’t know!” I cry out. “Because I can! Because I love you! Please, Christian.”

He groans loudly and thrusts deep, again and again, over and over, and I am lost, trying to absorb the pleasure. It’s mind-blowing … body blowing … I long to straighten my legs, to control my imminent orgasm, but I can’t … I’m helpless. I’m his, just his, to do with as he wills … Tears spring to my eyes. This is too intense. I can’t stop him. I don’t want to stop him … I want … I want … oh no, oh no … this is too …

“That’s it,” Christian growls. “Feel it, baby!”

I detonate around him, again and again, round and round, screaming loudly as my orgasm rips me apart, scorching through me like a wildfire, consuming everything. I am wrung ragged, tears streaming down my face—my body left pulsing and shaking.

And I’m aware that Christian kneels, still inside me, pulling me upright onto

his lap. He clutches my head with one hand and my back with the other, and he comes violently inside me while my insides continue to tremble with aftershocks. It's draining, it's exhausting, it's hell … it's heaven. It's hedonism gone wild.

Christian tears off the blindfold and kisses me. He kisses my eyes, my nose, my cheeks. He kisses away the tears, clutching my face between his hands.

"I love you, Mrs. Grey," he breathes. "Even though you make me so mad—I feel so alive with you." I don't have the energy to open either my eyes or my mouth to respond. Very gently, he lays me back on the bed and eases out of me.

I mouth some wordless protest. He climbs off the bed and undoes the handcuffs. When I'm free, he gently rubs my wrists and ankles, then lies down beside me again, pulling me into his arms. I stretch out my legs. Oh my, that feels good. I feel good. That was, without doubt, the most intense climax I have ever endured. Hmm … a Christian Grey Fifty Shades punishment fuck.

I really must misbehave more often.

A PRESSING NEED FROM my bladder wakes me. When I open my eyes, I'm disoriented. It's dark outside. *Where am I?* London? Paris? Oh—the boat. I feel her pitch and roll, and hear the quiet hum of the engines. We're on the move. *How odd*. Christian is beside me, working on his laptop, casually dressed in a white linen shirt and chino trousers, his feet bare. His hair is still wet, and I can smell his body wash fresh from the shower and his Christian smell … *Hmm*.

"Hi," he murmurs, gazing down at me, his eyes warm.

"Hi." I smile, feeling suddenly shy. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Just an hour or so."

"We're moving?"

"I figured since we ate out last night and went to the ballet and the casino that we'd dine on board tonight. A quiet night *à deux*."

I grin at him. "Where are we going?"

"Cannes."

"Okay." I stretch, feeling stiff. No amount of training with Claude could have prepared me for this afternoon.

I rise gingerly, needing the bathroom. Grabbing my silk robe, I hastily put it on. Why am I so shy? I feel Christian's eyes on me. When I glance at him, he returns to his laptop, his brow furrowed.

As I absentmindedly wash my hands at the vanity unit, recalling last night at the casino, my robe falls open. I stare at myself in the mirror, shocked.

*Holy fuck!* What has he done to me?

## CHAPTER THREE

I gaze in horror at the red marks all over my breasts. Hickeys! I have hickeys! I am married to one of the most respected businessmen in the United States, and he's given me goddamn hickeys. How did I not feel him doing this to me? I flush. The fact is I know exactly why—Mr. Orgasmic was using his fine-motor sexing skills on me.

My subconscious peers over her half-moon specs and tuts disapprovingly, while my inner goddess slumbers on her chaise longue, out for the count. I gape at my reflection. My wrists have red welts around them from the handcuffs. No doubt they'll bruise. I examine my ankles—more welts. Holy hell, I look like I've been in some sort of accident. I gaze at myself, trying to absorb how I look. My body is so different these days. It's changed subtly since I've known him … I've become leaner and fitter, and my hair is glossy and well cut. My nails are manicured, my feet pedicured, my eyebrows threaded and beautifully shaped. For the first time in my life, I'm well groomed—except for these hideous love bites.

I don't want to think about grooming at the moment. I'm too mad. How dare he mark me like this, like some teenager. In the short time we've been together, he's never given me hickeys. I look like hell. I know why he's done this. Damn control freak. *Right!* My subconscious folds her arms beneath her small bosom—he's gone too far this time. I stalk out of the en suite bathroom and into the walk-in closet, carefully avoiding even a glance in his direction. Slipping out of my robe, I pull on my sweatpants and a camisole. I undo the braid, pick up a hairbrush from the small vanity unit, and brush out my tangles.

"Anastasia," Christian calls and I hear his anxiety. "Are you okay?"

I ignore him. *Am I okay? No, I am not okay*. After what he's done to me, I doubt I'll be able to wear a swimsuit, let alone one of my ridiculously expensive bikinis, for the rest of our honeymoon. The thought is suddenly so infuriating. How *dare* he? I'll give him *are you okay*. I seethe as fury spikes through me. I can behave like an adolescent, too! Stepping back into the bedroom, I hurl the hairbrush at him, turn, and leave—though not before I see his shocked expression and his lightning reaction as he raises his arm to protect his head so

that the brush bounces ineffectively off his forearm and onto the bed.

I storm out of our cabin, bolt upstairs and out on deck, fleeing toward the bow. I need some space to calm down. It's dark and the air is balmy. The warm breeze carries the smell of the Mediterranean and the scent of jasmine and bougainvillea from the shore. The *Fair Lady* glides effortlessly through the calm cobalt sea as I rest my elbows on the wooden railing, gazing at the distant shore where tiny lights wink and twinkle. I take a deep, healing breath and slowly begin to calm. I'm aware of him behind me before I hear him.

"You're mad at me," he whispers.

"No shit, Sherlock!"

"How mad?"

"Scale of one to ten, I think I'm at fifty. Apt, huh?"

"That mad." He sounds surprised and impressed at once.

"Yes. Pushed to violence mad," I say through gritted teeth.

He stays silent as I turn and scowl at him, watching me with wide and wary eyes. I know from his expression and because he's made no move to touch me that he's out of his depth.

"Christian, you have to stop unilaterally trying to bring me to heel. You made your point on the beach. Very effectively, as I recall."

He shrugs minutely. "Well, you won't take your top off again," he murmurs petulantly.

And this justifies what he's done to me? I glare at him. "I don't like you leaving marks on me. Well, not this many, anyway. It's a hard limit!" I hiss at him.

"I don't like you taking your clothes off in public. That's a hard limit for me," he growls.

"I think we've established that," I hiss through my teeth. "Look at me!" I pull down my camisole to reveal the top of my breasts. Christian gazes at me, his eyes not leaving my face, his expression wary and uncertain. He's not used to seeing me this mad. Can't he see what he's done? Can't he see how ridiculous he is? I want to shout at him, but I refrain—I don't want to push him too far. Heaven knows what he'd do. Eventually, he sighs and holds his palms up in a resigned, conciliatory gesture.

"Okay," he says, his voice placating. "I get it."

*Hallelujah!*

"Good!"

He runs his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me." Finally, he looks contrite—using my own words back at me.

"You are such an adolescent sometimes," I scold him, mulishly, but the fight

has gone out of my voice, and he knows it. He steps closer and tentatively raises his hand to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I know," he acknowledges softly. "I have a lot to learn."

Dr. Flynn's words come back to me … *Emotionally, Christian is an adolescent, Ana. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has beyond all expectations. His emotional world has to play catch-up.*

My heart thaws a little.

"We both do." I sigh and cautiously raise my hand, placing it over his heart. He doesn't flinch like he used to, but he stiffens. He rests his hand over mine and smiles his shy smile.

"I've just learned that you've a good arm and a good aim, Mrs. Grey. I would never have figured that, but then I constantly underestimate you. You always surprise me."

I arch my eyebrow at him. "Target practice with Ray. I can throw and shoot straight, Mr. Grey, and you'd do well to remember that."

"I will endeavor to do that, Mrs. Grey, or ensure that all potential projectile objects are nailed down and that you don't have access to a gun." He smirks.

I smirk back, narrowing my eyes. "I'm resourceful."

"That you are," he whispers and releases my hand to circle his arms around me. Pulling me into an embrace, he buries his nose in my hair. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close, and feel the tension leave his body as he nuzzles me.

"Am I forgiven?"

"Am I?"

I feel his smile. "Yes," he answers.

"Ditto."

We stand holding each other, my pique forgotten. He does smell good, adolescent or not. How can I resist him?

"Hungry?" he says after a while. I have my eyes closed and my head against his chest.

"Yes. Famished. All the … er … activity has given me an appetite. But I'm not dressed for dinner." I'm sure my sweatpants and camisole would be frowned upon in the dining room.

"You look good to me, Anastasia. Besides, it's our boat for the week. We can dress how we like. Think of it as dress down Tuesday on the Cote D'Azur. Anyway, I thought we'd eat on deck."

"Yes, I'd like that."

He kisses me—an earnest forgive-me kiss—then we wander hand in hand

toward the bow, where our gazpacho awaits.

THE STEWARD SERVES OUR crème brulée and discreetly retires.

"Why do you always braid my hair?" I ask Christian out of curiosity. We're sitting adjacent to each other at the table, my lower leg curled around his. He pauses as he's about to pick up his dessertspoon and frowns.

"I don't want your hair catching in anything," he says quietly, and for a moment, he's lost in thought. "Habit, I think," he muses. Suddenly he frowns and his eyes widen, his pupils dilating with alarm.

*What's he remembered?* It's something painful, some early childhood memory, I guess. I don't want to remind him of that. Leaning over, I put my index finger over his lips.

"No, it doesn't matter. I don't need to know. I was just curious." I give him a warm, reassuring smile. His look is wary, but after a moment he visibly relaxes, his relief evident. I lean over to kiss the corner of his mouth.

"I love you," I murmur, and he smiles his heart-achingly shy smile, and I melt. "I will always love you, Christian."

"And I you," he says softly.

"In spite of my disobedience?" I raise my eyebrow.

"Because of your disobedience, Anastasia." He grins.

I crack my spoon through the burned sugar crust of my dessert and shake my head. Will I ever understand this man? Hmm—this crème brulée is delicious.

ONCE THE STEWARD HAS cleared our dessert plates, Christian reaches for the bottle of rosé and refills my glass. I check that we're alone and ask, "What's with the no going to the bathroom thing?"

"You really want to know?" He half smiles, his eyes alight with a salacious gleam.

"Do I?" I gaze at him through my lashes as I take a sip of my wine.

"The fuller your bladder, the more intense your orgasm, Ana."

I blush. "Oh. I see." Holy cow, that explains a lot.

He grins, looking far too knowing. Will I always be on the back foot with Mr. Sexpertise?

"Yes. Well …" I desperately hunt around for a change of subject. He takes pity on me.

"What do you want to do for the rest of the evening?" He cocks his head to one side and gives me his lopsided grin.

*Whatever you want, Christian. Put your theory to the test again?* I shrug.

"I know what I want to do," he murmurs. Grabbing his glass of wine, he rises and holds his hand out to me. "Come."

I take his hand and he leads me into the main salon.

His iPod is in the speaker dock on the dresser. He switches it on and selects a song.

"Dance with me." He pulls me into his arms.

"If you insist."

"I insist, Mrs. Grey."

A slinky, cheesy melody starts. Is this a Latin rhythm? Christian grins down at me and starts to move, sweeping me off my feet and taking me with him around the salon.

A man with a voice like warm melted caramel croons. It's a song I know but can't place. Christian dips me low, and I yelp in surprise and giggle. He smiles, his eyes filled with humor. Then he scoops me up and spins me under his arm.

"You dance so well," I say. "It's like I can dance."

He gives me a sphinxlike smile but says nothing, and I wonder if it's because he's thinking of her … Mrs. Robinson, the woman who taught him how to dance—and how to fuck. She hasn't crossed my mind for a while. Christian has not mentioned her since his birthday, and as far as I'm aware, their business relationship is over. Reluctantly though, I have to admit—she was some teacher.

He dips me low again and plants a swift kiss on my lips.

"I'd miss your love," I murmur, echoing the lyrics.

"I'd more than miss your love," he says and spins me once more. Then he sings the words softly in my ear, making me swoon.

The track ends and Christian gazes down at me, his eyes dark and luminous, all humor gone, and I'm suddenly breathless.

"Come to bed with me?" he whispers, and it's a heartfelt plea that tugs at my heart.

*Christian, you had me at "I do"—two and half weeks ago*. But I know this is his way of apologizing and making sure all is well between us after our spat.

WHEN I WAKE, THE sun is shining through the portholes and the water reflects shimmering patterns onto the cabin ceiling. Christian is nowhere to be seen. I stretch out and smile. Hmm … I'll take a punishment fuck followed by makeup sex any day. I marvel at what it is to go to bed with two different men—angry Christian and sweet let-me-make-it-up-to-you-in-any-way-I-can Christian. It's tricky to decide which of them I like the best.

I rise and head for the bathroom. Opening the door, I find Christian inside shaving, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist. He turns and beams, not fazed that I am interrupting him. I have discovered that Christian will never lock the door if he is the only person in the room—the reason is sobering, and not one I want to dwell on.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey," he says, radiating his good mood.

"Good morning yourself." I grin back as I watch him shave. I love watching him shave. He pulls up his chin and shaves beneath it, taking long deliberate strokes, and I find myself unconsciously mirroring his actions. Pulling my upper lip down just as he does, to shave his philtrum. He turns and smirks at me, one half of his face still covered in shaving soap.

"Enjoying the show?" he asks.

*Oh, Christian, I could watch you for hours*. "One of my all-time favorites," I murmur, and he leans down and kisses me quickly, smearing shaving soap on my face.

"Shall I do this to you again?" he whispers wickedly and holds up the razor.

I purse my lips at him. "No," I mutter, pretending to sulk. "I'll wax next time." I remember Christian's joy in London when he'd discovered that during his one meeting there, I'd shaved off my pubic hair out of curiosity. Of course I hadn't done it to Mr. Exacting's high standards …

---

"What the hell have you done?" Christian exclaims. He cannot keep his horrified amusement to himself. He sits up in bed in our suite at Brown's Hotel near Piccadilly, switches on the bedside light, and gazes down at me, his mouth a startled *O*. It must be midnight. I blush the color of the sheets in the playroom and try to pull down my satin nightdress so he can't see. He grabs my hand to stop me.

"Ana!"

"I—er … shaved."

"I can see that. Why?" He's grinning from ear to ear.

I cover my face with my hands. Why am I so embarrassed?

"Hey," he says softly and pulls my hand away. "Don't hide." He's biting his lip so that he won't laugh. "Tell me. Why?" His eyes dance with merriment. Why does he find this so funny?

"Stop laughing at me."

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm sorry. I'm … delighted," he says.

“Oh …”

“Tell me. Why?”

I take a deep breath. “This morning, after you left for your meeting, I took a shower and was remembering all your rules.”

He blinks. The humor in his expression has vanished, and he regards me cautiously.

“And I was ticking them off one by one and how I felt about them, and I remembered the beauty salon, and I thought … this is what you’d like. I wasn’t brave enough to get a wax.” My voice disappears into a whisper.

He stares at me, his eyes glowing—this time not with mirth at my folly, but with love.

“Oh, Ana,” he breathes. He leans down and kisses me tenderly. “You beguile me,” he whispers against my lips and kisses me once more, clasping my face in both his hands.

After a breathless moment, he pulls back and leans up on one elbow. The humor is back.

“I think I should do a thorough inspection of your handiwork, Mrs. Grey.”

“What? No.” *He has to be kidding!* I cover myself, protecting my recently deforested area.

“Oh, no you don’t, Anastasia.” He grasps my hands and pries them away, moving nimbly so he’s between my legs and pinning my hands to my sides. He gives me a scorching look that could light dry tinder, but before I combust, he bends and skims his lips down my naked belly directly to my sex. I squirm beneath him, reluctantly resigned to my fate.

“Well, what have we here?” Christian plants a kiss where, until this morning, I had pubic hair—then scrapes his bristly chin across me.

“Ah!” I exclaim. *Wow … that’s sensitive*.

Christian’s eyes dart to mine, full of salacious longing. “I think you missed a bit,” he mutters and tugs gently, right underneath.

“Oh … Damn,” I mutter, hoping this will put an end to his frankly intrusive scrutiny.

“I have an idea.” He leaps naked out of bed and heads to the bathroom.

*What on earth is he doing?* He returns moments later, carrying a glass of water, a mug, my razor, his shaving brush, soap, and a towel. He puts the water, brush, soap, and razor on the bedside table and gazes down at me, holding the towel.

*Oh no!* My subconscious slams down her *Complete Works of Charles Dickens*, leaps up from her armchair, and puts her hands on her hips.

“No. No. No,” I squeak.

“Mrs. Grey, if a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well. Lift your hips.” His eyes glow summer storm gray.

“Christian! You are not shaving me.”

He tilts his head to one side. “Why ever not?”

I flush … isn’t it obvious? “Because … It’s just too …”

“Intimate?” he whispers. “Ana, I crave intimacy with you—you know that. Besides, after some of the things we’ve done, don’t get all squeamish on me now. And I know this part of your body better than you do.”

I gape at him. Of all the arrogant … true, he does—but still. “It’s just wrong!” My voice is prissy and whiny.

“This isn’t wrong—this is hot.”

*Hot? Really?* “This turns you on?” I can’t keep the astonishment out of my voice.

He snorts. “Can’t you tell?” He glances down at his arousal. “I want to shave you,” he whispers

Oh, what the hell. I lie back, throwing my arm over my face so I don’t have to watch.

“If it makes you happy, Christian, go ahead. You are so kinky,” I mutter, as I lift my hips, and he slips the towel beneath me. He kisses my inner thigh.

“Oh, baby, how right you are.”

I hear the slosh of water as he dips the shaving brush in the glass of water, then the soft swirl of the brush in the mug. He grasps my left ankle and parts my legs, and the bed dips as he sits between my legs. “I’d really like to tie you up right now,” he murmurs.

“I promise to keep still.”

“Good.”

I gasp as he runs the lathered brush over my pubic bone. It’s warm. The water in the glass must be hot. I squirm a little. It tickles … but in a good way.

“Don’t move,” Christian admonishes and applies the brush again. “Or I *will* tie you down,” he adds darkly, and a delicious shiver runs down my spine.

“Have you done this before?” I ask tentatively when he reaches for the razor.

“No.”

“Oh. Good.” I grin.

“Another first, Mrs. Grey.”

“Hmm. I like firsts.”

“Me, too. Here goes.” And with a gentleness that surprises me, he runs the razor over my sensitive flesh. “Keep still,” he says distractedly, and I know he’s concentrating hard.

It’s only a matter of minutes before he grabs the towel and wipes all the

excess lather off me.

"There—that's more like it," he muses, and I finally lift my arm to look at him as he sits back to admire his handiwork.

"Happy?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

"Very." He grins wickedly and slowly eases a finger inside me.

---

"But that was fun," he says, his eyes gently mocking.

"For you maybe." I try to pout—but he's right … it was … arousing.

"I seem to recall the aftermath was very satisfying." Christian returns to finishing his shave. I glance quickly down at my fingers. Yes, it was. I had no idea that the absence of pubic hair could make such a difference.

"Hey, I'm just teasing. Isn't that what husbands who are hopelessly in love with their wives do?" Christian tips my chin up and gazes at me, his eyes suddenly filled with apprehension as he endeavors to read my expression.

Hmm … payback time.

"Sit," I mutter.

He stares, not understanding. I push him gently toward the lone white stool in the bathroom. Perplexed, he sits down, and I take the razor from him.

"Ana," he warns as he realizes my intention. I lean down and kiss him.

"Head back," I whisper.

He hesitates.

"Tit for tat, Mr. Grey."

He stares at me with wary, amused disbelief. "You know what you're doing?" he asks, his voice low. I shake my head slowly, deliberately, trying to look as serious as possible. He closes his eyes and shakes his head, then tilts it back in surrender.

*Holy shit, he's going to let me shave him*. Tentatively I slide my hand into the damp hair at his forehead, gripping tightly to hold him still. He clenches his eyes closed and parts his lips as he inhales. Very gently, I stroke his razor up from his neck to his chin, revealing a path of skin beneath the lather. Christian exhales.

"Did you think I was going to hurt you?"

"I never know what you're going to do, Ana, but no—not intentionally."

I run the razor up his neck again, clearing a wider path in the lather.

"I would never intentionally hurt you, Christian."

He opens his eyes and circles his arms around me as I gently drag the razor down his cheek from the bottom of his sideburn.

“I know,” he says, angling his face so I can shave the rest of his cheek. Two more strokes and I’ve finished.

“All done, and not a drop of blood spilled.” I grin proudly.

He runs his hand up my leg so that my nightdress rides up my thigh and pulls me onto his lap so that I’m astride him. I steady myself with my hands on his upper arms. He’s really very muscular.

“Can I take you somewhere today?”

“No sunbathing?” I arch a caustic brow at him.

He licks his lips nervously. “No. No sunbathing today. I thought you might prefer something else.”

“Well, since you’ve covered me in hickeys and effectively put the kibosh on that, sure, why not?”

Wisely he chooses to ignore my tone. “It’s a drive, but it’s worth a visit from what I’ve read. My dad recommended we visit. It’s a hilltop village called Saint-Paul-de-Vence. There are some galleries there. I thought we could pick out some paintings or sculptures for the new house, if we find anything we like.”

I lean back and gaze at him. Art … he wants to buy art. *How can I buy art?*

“What?” he asks.

“I know nothing about art, Christian.”

He shrugs and smiles at me indulgently. “We’ll buy only what we like. This isn’t about investment.”

*Investment? Jeez.*

“What?” he says again.

I shake my head.

“Look, I know we only got the architect’s drawings the other day—but there’s no harm in looking, and the town is an ancient, medieval place.”

Oh, the architect. He had to remind me of *her* … Gia Matteo, a friend of Elliot’s who worked on Christian’s place in Aspen. During our meetings, she’d been all over Christian like a rash.

“What now?” Christian exclaims. I shake my head. “Tell me,” he urges.

How can I tell him that I don’t like Gia? My dislike is irrational. I don’t want to come across as a jealous wife.

“You’re not still mad about what I did yesterday?” He sighs and nuzzles his face between my breasts.

“No. I’m hungry,” I mutter, knowing full well that this will distract him from this line of questioning.

“Why didn’t you say?” He eases me off his lap and stands.

SAINT-PAUL-DE-VENCE IS A FORTIFIED medieval hilltop village, one of the most picturesque places I have ever seen. I stroll arm in arm with Christian through the narrow cobblestone streets with my hand in the back pocket of his shorts. Taylor and either Gaston or Philippe—I can't tell the difference between them—trail behind us. We pass a tree-covered square where three old men, one wearing a traditional beret in spite of the heat, are playing boules. It's quite crowded with tourists, but I feel comfortable tucked under Christian's arm. There is so much to see—little alleys and passageways leading to courtyards with intricate stone fountains, ancient and modern sculptures, and fascinating little boutiques and shops.

In the first gallery, Christian gazes distractedly at the erotic photographs in front of us, sucking gently on the arm of his aviator specs. They are the work of Florence D'elle—naked women in various poses.

"Not quite what I had in mind," I mumble disapprovingly. They make me think of the box of photographs I found in his closet, our closet. I wonder if he ever did destroy them.

"Me neither," Christian says, grinning down at me. He takes my hand, and we stroll to the next artist. Idly, I wonder if I should let him take photos of me.

The next display is by a female painter who specializes in still lifes—fruit and vegetables super close up and in rich, glorious color.

"I like those." I point to three paintings of peppers. "They remind me of you chopping vegetables in my apartment." I giggle. Christian's mouth twists as he tries and fails to hide his amusement.

"I thought I managed that quite competently," he mutters. "I was just a bit slow, and anyway"—he pulls me into an embrace—"you were distracting me. Where would you put them?"

"What?"

Christian is nuzzling my ear. "The paintings—where would you put them?" He bites my earlobe and I feel it in my groin.

"Kitchen," I murmur.

"Hmm. Nice idea, Mrs. Grey."

I squint at the price. Five thousand euros each. *Holy shit!*

"They're really expensive!" I gasp.

"So?" He nuzzles me again. "Get used to it, Ana." He releases me and saunters over to the desk where a young woman dressed entirely in white is gaping at him. I want to roll my eyes, but turn my attention back to the paintings. Five thousand euros … jeez.

WE HAVE FINISHED LUNCH and are relaxing over coffee at the Hotel Le Saint Paul. The view

of the surrounding countryside is stunning. Vineyards and fields of sunflowers form a patchwork across the plain, interspersed here and there with neat little French farmhouses. It's such a clear, beautiful day we can see all the way to the sea, glinting faintly on the horizon. Christian interrupts my reverie.

"You asked me why I braid your hair," he murmurs. His tone alarms me. He looks … guilty.

"Yes." *Oh, shit.*

"The crack whore used to let me play with her hair, I think. I don't know if it's a memory or a dream."

*Whoa! His birth mom.*

He gazes at me, his expression unreadable. My heart leaps into my mouth. What do I say when he says things like this?

"I like it when you play with my hair." My voice is hesitant.

He regards me with uncertainty. "Do you?"

"Yes." It's the truth. I grasp his hand. "I think you loved your birth mother, Christian." His eyes widen and he stares at me impassively, saying nothing.

*Holy shit.* Have I gone too far? *Say something, Fifty—please.* But he remains resolutely mute, gazing at me with fathomless gray eyes while the silence stretches between us. He looks lost.

He glances down at my hand on his and he frowns.

"Say something," I whisper, because I cannot bear the silence any longer.

He shakes his head, exhaling deeply.

"Let's go." He releases my hand and stands, his expression guarded. Have I overstepped the mark? I have no idea. My heart sinks and I don't know whether to say anything else or just let it go. I decide on the latter and follow him dutifully out of the restaurant.

In the lovely narrow street, he takes my hand.

"Where do you want to go?"

*He speaks!* And he's not mad at me—thank heavens. I exhale, relieved, and shrug. "I am just glad you're still speaking to me."

"You know I don't like talking about all that shit. It's done. Finished," he says quietly.

*No, Christian, it isn't.* The thought saddens me, and for the first time I wonder if it will ever be finished. He'll always be Fifty Shades … my Fifty Shades. Do I want him to change? No, not really—only insofar as I want him to feel loved. Peeking up at him, I take a moment to admire his captivating beauty … and he's *mine*. And it's not just the allure of his fine, fine face and his body that has me spellbound. It's what's behind the perfection that draws me, that calls to me … his fragile, damaged soul.

He gives me that look, down his nose, half amused, half wary, wholly sexy, then tucks me under his arm, and we make our way through the tourists toward the spot where Philippe/Gaston has parked the roomy Mercedes. I slip my hand back into the back pocket of Christian's shorts, grateful that he isn't mad. But, honestly, what four-year-old child doesn't love his mom, no matter how bad a mom she is? I sigh heavily and hug him closer. I know behind us the security team lurks, and I wonder idly if they've eaten.

Christian stops outside a small boutique selling fine jewelry and gazes in the window, then down at me. He grasps my free hand and runs his thumb across the faded red line of the handcuff mark, inspecting it.

"It's not sore," I reassure him. He twists so that my other hand is freed from his pocket. He clasps that hand, too, turning it gently over to examine my wrist. The platinum Omega watch he gave me at breakfast on our first morning in London obscures the red line. The inscription still makes me swoon.

*Anastasia*
*You Are My More*
*My Love, My Life*
*Christian*

In spite of everything, all his Fiftyness, my husband can be so romantic. I gaze down at the faint marks on my wrist. Then again, he can be savage sometimes. Releasing my left hand, he tilts my chin up with his fingers and scrutinizes my expression, his eyes troubled.

"They don't hurt," I repeat. He pulls my hand to his lips and plants a soft apologetic kiss on the inside of my wrist.

"Come," he says and leads me into the shop.

"HERE." CHRISTIAN HOLDS OPEN the platinum bracelet he's just purchased. It's exquisite, so delicately crafted, the filigree in the shape of small abstract flowers with small diamonds at their hearts. He fastens it around my wrist. It's wide and cufflike and hides the red marks. *It also cost thirty thousand euros*, I think, though I couldn't really follow the conversation in French with the sales assistant. I have never worn anything so expensive.

"There, that's better," he murmurs.

"Better?" I whisper, gazing into luminous gray eyes, conscious that the stick-thin sales assistant is staring at us with a jealous and disapproving look.

"You know why," Christian says uncertainly.

"I don't need this." I shake my wrist and the cuff moves. It catches the afternoon light streaming through the boutique window and small sparkling rainbows dance off the diamonds all over the walls of the store.

“I do,” he says with utter sincerity.

Why? Why does he need this? Does he feel guilty? About what? The marks? His birth mother? Not confiding in me? *Oh, Fifty*.

“No, Christian, you don’t. You’ve given me so much already. A magical honeymoon, London, Paris, the Cote D’Azur … and you. I’m a very lucky girl,” I whisper, and his eyes soften.

“No, Anastasia, I’m a very lucky man.”

“Thank you.” Stretching up on tiptoes, I put my arms around his neck and kiss him … not for giving me the bracelet but for being mine.

BACK IN THE CAR he’s introspective, gazing out at the fields of bright sunflowers, their heads following and basking in the afternoon sun. One of the twins—I think it’s Gaston—is driving and Taylor is beside him up front. Christian is brooding about something. I clasp his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He glances at me before releasing my hand and caressing my knee. I’m wearing a short, full, blue and white skirt, and a blue, fitted, sleeveless shirt. Christian hesitates, and I don’t know if his hand is going to travel up my thigh or down my leg. I tense with anticipation at the gentle touch of his fingers and my breath catches. *What’s he going to do?* He chooses down, suddenly grasping my ankle and pulling my foot onto his lap. I swivel my backside so I am facing him in the back of the car.

“I want the other one, too.”

I glance nervously toward Taylor and Gaston, whose eyes are resolutely on the road ahead, and place my other foot on his lap. His eyes cool, he reaches over and presses a button located on his door. In front of us, a lightly tinted privacy screen slides out of a panel, and ten seconds later we are effectively on our own. Wow … no wonder the back of this car has so much legroom.

“I want to look at your ankles,” Christian offers his quiet explanation. His gaze is anxious. The cuff marks? *Jeez* … I thought we’d dealt with this. If there are marks, they are hidden by my sandal straps. I don’t recall seeing any this morning. Gently, he strokes his thumb up my right instep, making me wriggle. A smile plays on his lips and deftly he undoes one strap, and his smile fades as he’s confronted with the darker red marks.

“Doesn’t hurt,” I murmur. He glances at me and his expression is sad, his mouth a thin line. He nods once as if he’s taking me at my word while I shake my sandal loose so it falls to the floor, but I know I’ve lost him. He’s distracted and brooding again, mechanically caressing my foot while he turns away to gaze out the car window once more.

“Hey. What did you expect?” I ask softly. He glances at me and shrugs.

“I didn’t expect to feel like I do looking at these marks,” he says.

*Oh!* Reticent one minute and forthcoming the next? How … *Fifty!* How can I keep up with him?

“How *do* you feel?”

Bleak eyes gaze at me. “Uncomfortable,” he murmurs.

*Oh no*. I unbuckle my seat belt and scoot closer to him, leaving my feet in his lap. I want to crawl into his lap and hold him, and I would, if it were just Taylor in the front. But knowing Gaston is there cramps my style despite the partition. If only it were darker. I clutch his hands.

“It’s the hickeys I don’t like,” I whisper. “Everything else … what you did”—I lower my voice even further—“with the handcuffs, I enjoyed that. Well, more than enjoyed. It was mind-blowing. You can do that to me again anytime.”

He shifts in his seat. “Mind-blowing?” My inner goddess looks up, startled, from her Jackie Collins.

“Yes.” I grin. I flex my toes into his hardening crotch and see rather than hear his sharp intake of breath, his lips parting.

“You should really be wearing your seat belt, Mrs. Grey.” His voice is low, and I curl my toes around him once more. He inhales and his eyes darken, and he clasps my ankle in warning. Does he want me stop? Continue? He pauses, scowls, then fishes his ever-present BlackBerry out of his pocket to take an incoming call while glancing at his watch. His frown deepens.

“Barney,” he snaps.

*Crap*. Work interrupting us again. I try to remove my feet, but he tightens his fingers around my ankle.

“In the server room?” he says in disbelief. “Did it activate the fire suppression system?”

*Fire!* I take my feet off his lap and this time he lets me. I sit back in my seat, buckle my seat belt, and fiddle nervously with the thirty-thousand-euro bracelet. Christian presses the button on his door armrest again and the privacy glass slides down.

“Anyone injured? Damage? I see … When?” Christian glances at his watch again, then runs his fingers through his hair. “No. Not the fire department or the police. Not yet anyway.”

A fire? At Christian’s office? I gape at him, my mind racing. Taylor shifts so he can hear Christian’s conversation.

“Has he? Good … Okay. I want a detailed damage report. And a complete rundown of everyone who had access over the last five days, including the cleaning staff … Get hold of Andrea and get her to call me … Yeah, sounds like the argon is just as effective, worth its weight in gold.”

*Damage report? Argon?* It rings a distant bell from chemistry class—an element, I think.

"I realize it's early … E-mail me in two hours … No, I need to know. Thank you for calling me." Christian hangs up, then immediately punches a number into the BlackBerry.

"Welch … Good … When?" Christian glances at his watch yet again. "An hour then … yes … Twenty-four-seven at the offsite data store … good." He hangs up.

"Philippe, I need to be onboard within the hour."

*"Monsieur."*

Shit, it's Philippe, not Gaston. The car surges forward.

Christian glances at me, his expression unreadable.

"Anyone hurt?" I ask quietly.

Christian shakes his head. "Very little damage." He reaches over and clasps my hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "Don't worry about this. My team is on it." And there he is, the CEO, in command, in control, and not flustered at all.

"Where was the fire?"

"Server room."

"Grey House?"

"Yes."

His responses are clipped, so I know he doesn't want to talk about it.

"Why so little damage?"

"The server room is fitted with a state-of-the-art fire suppression system."

Of course it is.

"Ana, please … don't worry."

"I'm not worried," I lie.

"We don't know for sure that it was arson," he says, cutting to the heart of my anxiety. My hand clutches my throat in fear. *Charlie Tango* and now this?

*What next?*

## CHAPTER FOUR

I'm restless. Christian has been holed up in the onboard study for over an hour. I have tried reading, watching TV, sunbathing—fully dressed sunbathing—but I can't relax, and I can't rid myself of this edgy feeling. After changing into shorts and a T-shirt, I remove the ludicrously expensive cuff and go to find Taylor.

"Mrs. Grey," he says, startled from his Anthony Burgess novel. He's sitting in the small salon outside Christian's study.

"I'd like to go shopping."

"Yes ma'am." He stands.

"I'd like to take the Jet Ski."

His mouth drops open. "Erm." He frowns, at a loss for words.

"I don't want to bother Christian with this."

He represses a sigh. "Mrs. Grey … um … I don't think Mr. Grey would be very comfortable with that, and I'd like to keep my job."

*Oh, for heaven's sake!* I want to roll my eyes at him, but I narrow them instead, sighing heavily and expressing, I think, the right amount of frustrated indignation that I am not mistress of my own destiny. Then again, I don't want Christian to be mad at Taylor—or me, for that matter. Striding confidently past him, I knock on the study door and enter.

Christian is on his BlackBerry, leaning against the mahogany desk. He glances up. "Andrea, hold please," he mutters into phone, his expression serious. His gaze is politely expectant. Shit. Why do I feel like I've entered the principal's office? This man had me in handcuffs yesterday. I refuse to be intimidated by him, he's my husband, damn it. I square my shoulders and give him a broad smile.

"I'm going shopping. I'll take security with me."

"Sure, take one of the twins and Taylor, too," he says, and I know that whatever's happening is serious because he doesn't question me further. I stand staring at him, wondering if I can help.

"Anything else?" he asks. He wants me gone.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask. He smiles his sweet shy smile.

"No, baby, I'm good," he says. "The crew will look after me."

“Okay.” I want to kiss him. Hell, I can—he’s my husband. Strolling purposefully forward, I plant a kiss on his lips, surprising him.

“Andrea, I’ll call you back,” he mutters. He puts the BlackBerry down on the desk behind him, pulls me into his embrace, and kisses me passionately. I am breathless when he releases me. His eyes are dark and needy.

“You’re distracting me. I need to sort this out, so I can get back to my honeymoon.” He runs an index finger down my face and caresses my chin, tilting my face up.

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize, Mrs. Grey. I love your distractions.” He kisses the corner of my mouth.

“Go spend some money.” He releases me.

“Will do.” I smirk at him as I exit his study. My subconscious shakes her head and purses her lips. *You didn’t tell him you were going on the Jet Ski*, she chastises me in her singsongy voice. I ignore her … *Harpy*.

Taylor is patiently waiting.

“That’s all cleared with high command … Can we go?” I smile, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. Taylor doesn’t hide his admiring smile.

“Mrs. Grey, after you.”

TAYLOR PATIENTLY TALKS ME through the controls on the Jet Ski and how to ride it. He has a calm, gentle authority about him; he’s a good teacher. We are in the motor launch, bobbing and weaving on the calm waters of the harbor beside the *Fair Lady*. Gaston looks on, his expression hidden by his shades, and one of the *Fair Lady*’s crew is at the controls of the motor launch. Jeez—three people with me, just because I want to go shopping. It’s ridiculous.

Zipping up my life jacket, I give Taylor a beaming grin. He holds out his hand to assist me as I climb onto the Jet Ski.

“Fasten the strap of the ignition key around your wrist, Mrs. Grey. If you fall off, the engine will cut out automatically,” he explains.

“Okay.”

“Ready?”

I nod enthusiastically.

“Press the ignition when you’ve drifted about four feet away from the boat. We’ll follow you.”

“Okay.”

He pushes the Jet Ski away from the launch, and it floats gently into the main harbor. When he gives me the okay sign, I press the ignition button and the

engine roars into life.

"Okay, Mrs. Grey, easy does it!" Taylor shouts. I squeeze the accelerator. The Jet Ski lurches forward, then stalls. *Crap!* How does Christian make it look so easy? I try again, and once again, I stall. *Double crap!*

"Just steady on the gas, Mrs. Grey," Taylor calls.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I mutter under my breath. I try once more, very gently squeezing the lever, and the Jet Ski lurches forward—but this time it keeps going. *Yes!* It goes some more. *Ha ha! It still keeps going!* I want to shout and squeal in excitement, but I resist. I cruise gently away from the yacht into the main harbor. Behind me, I hear the throaty roar of the motor launch. When I squeeze the gas further, the Jet Ski leaps forward, skating across the water. With the warm breeze in my hair and a fine sea spray on either side of me, I feel free. This *rocks!* No wonder Christian never lets me drive.

Rather than head for the shore and curtail the fun, I veer around to do a circuit of the stately *Fair Lady*. Wow—this is so much *fun*. I ignore Taylor and the crew behind me and speed around the yacht for a second time. As I complete the circuit, I spot Christian on deck. I think he's gaping at me, though it's difficult to tell. Bravely, I lift one hand from the handlebars and wave enthusiastically at him. He looks like he's made of stone, but finally he raises his hand in the semblance of a stiff wave. I can't work out his expression, and something tells me I don't want to, so I head to the marina, speeding across the blue water of the Mediterranean, which shimmers in the late afternoon sun.

At the dock, I wait and let Taylor pull up ahead of me. His expression is bleak, and my heart sinks, though Gaston looks vaguely amused. I wonder briefly if something has happened to chill Gallic-American relations, but deep down I suspect the problem is probably me. Gaston leaps out of the motorboat and ties it to the moorings while Taylor directs me to come alongside. Very gently I ease the Jet Ski into position beside the boat and line up beside him. His expression softens a little.

"Just switch off the ignition, Mrs. Grey," he says calmly, reaching for the handlebars and holding out a hand to help me into the motorboat. I nimbly climb aboard, impressed that I don't fall in.

"Mrs. Grey," Taylor says nervously, his cheeks pink once more. "Mr. Grey is not entirely comfortable with you riding on the Jet Ski." He's practically squirming with embarrassment, and I realize he's had an irate call from Christian. *Oh, my poor, pathologically overprotective husband, what am I going to do with you?*

I smile serenely at Taylor. "I see. Well, Taylor, Mr. Grey is not here, and if he's not *entirely comfortable*, I'm sure he'll give me the courtesy of telling me

himself when I'm back on board."

Taylor winces. "Very good, Mrs. Grey," he says quietly, handing me my purse.

As I climb out of the boat, I catch a glimpse of his reluctant smile, and it makes me want to smile, too. I cannot believe how fond I am of Taylor, but I really don't appreciate being scolded by him—he's not my father or my husband.

*I sigh. Christian's mad—and he has enough to worry about at the moment. What was I thinking?* As I stand on the dock waiting for Taylor to climb up, I feel my BlackBerry vibrate in my purse and fish it out. Sade's "Your Love Is King" is my ring tone for Christian—only for Christian.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he says.

"I'll come back on the boat. Don't be mad."

I hear his small gasp of surprise. "Um …"

"It was fun, though," I whisper.

He sighs. "Well, far be it for me to curtail your fun, Mrs. Grey. Just be careful. Please."

*Oh my! Permission to have fun!* "I will. Anything you want from town?"

"Just you, back in one piece."

"I'll do my best to comply, Mr. Grey."

"I'm glad to hear it, Mrs. Grey."

"We aim to please," I respond with a giggle.

I hear the smile in his voice. "I have another call—laters, baby."

"Laters, Christian."

He hangs up. *Jet Ski crisis averted*, I think. The car is waiting, and Taylor holds the door open for me. I wink at him as I climb in, and he shakes his head in amusement.

In the car, I fire up the e-mail on my BlackBerry.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Thank You

**Date:** August 17 2011 16:55

**To:** Christian Grey

For not being too grouchy.

Your loving wife

xxx

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Trying to Stay Calm

**Date:** August 17 2011 16:59

**To:** Anastasia Grey

You're welcome.

Come back in one piece.

This is not a request.

x

Christian Grey

CEO & Overprotective Husband, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His response makes me smile. My control freak.

WHY DID I WANT to go shopping? I hate shopping. But deep down I know why, and I walk determinedly past Chanel, Gucci, Dior, and the other designer boutiques and eventually find the antidote to what ails me in a small, overstocked, touristy store. It's a little silver ankle bracelet with small hearts and little bells. It tinkles sweetly and it costs five euros. As soon as I've bought it, I put it on. This is me—this is what I like. Immediately I feel more comfortable. I don't want to lose touch with the girl who likes this, ever. Deep down I know that I'm not only overwhelmed by Christian himself but also by his wealth. Will I ever get used to it?

Taylor and Gaston follow me dutifully through the late afternoon crowds, and I soon forget they are there. I want to buy something for Christian, something to take his mind off what's happening in Seattle. But what do I buy for the man who has everything? I pause in a small modern square surrounded by stores and gaze at each one in turn. When I spy an electronics store, our visit to the gallery earlier today and our visit to the Louvre come back to me. We were looking at the *Venus de Milo* at the time … Christian's words echo in my head, "*We can all appreciate the female form. We love to look whether in marble or oils or satin or film.*"

It gives me an idea, a daring idea. I just need help choosing the right one, and there's only one person who can help me. I wrestle my BlackBerry out of my purse and call José.

"Who …?" he mumbles sleepily.

"José, it's Ana."

“Ana, hi! Where are you? You okay?” He sounds more alert now, concerned.

“I’m in Cannes in the South of France, and I’m fine.”

“South of France, huh? You in some fancy hotel?”

“Um … no. We’re staying on a boat.”

“A boat?”

“A big boat.” I clarify, sighing.

“I see.” His tone chills … Shit, I should not have called him. I don’t need this right now.

“José, I need your advice.”

“My advice?” He sounds stunned. “Sure,” he says, and this time he’s much more friendly. I tell him my plan.

TWO HOURS LATER, TAYLOR helps me out of the motor launch onto the steps up to the deck. Gaston is helping the deckhand with the Jet Ski. Christian is nowhere to be seen, and I scurry down to our cabin to wrap his present, feeling a childish sense of delight.

“You were gone some time.” Christian startles me just as I am applying the last piece of tape. I turn to find him standing in the doorway to the cabin, watching me intently. *Am I still in trouble over the Jet Ski?* Or is it the fire at his office?

“Everything in control at your office?” I ask tentatively.

“More or less,” he says, an annoyed frown flitting across his face.

“I did a little shopping,” I murmur, hoping to lighten his mood, and praying his annoyance is not directed at me. He smiles warmly, and I know we’re okay.

“What did you buy?”

“This,” I put my foot up on the bed and show him my ankle chain.

“Very nice,” he says. He steps over to me and fondles the tiny bells so that they jingle sweetly around my ankle. He frowns again and runs his fingers lightly along the mark, sending tingles up my leg.

“And this.” I hold out the box, hoping to distract him.

“For me?” he asks in surprise. I nod shyly. He takes the box and shakes it gently. He grins his boyish, dazzling smile and sits down beside me on the bed. Leaning over, he grasps my chin and kisses me.

“Thank you,” he says with shy delight.

“You haven’t opened it yet.”

“I’ll love it, whatever it is.” He gazes down at me, his eyes glowing. “I don’t get many presents.”

“It’s hard to buy you things. You have everything.”

“I have you.”

“You do.” I grin at him. *Oh, you so do, Christian.*

He makes short work of the wrapping paper. “A Nikon?” He glances up at me, puzzled.

“I know you have your compact digital camera but this is for … um … portraits and the like. It comes with two lenses.”

He blinks at me, still not understanding.

“Today in the gallery you liked the Florence D’elle photographs. And I remember what you said in the Louvre. And, of course, there were those other photographs.” I swallow, trying my best not to recall the images I found in his closet.

He stops breathing, his eyes widening as realization dawns, and I continue hurriedly before I lose my nerve.

“I thought you might, um … like to take pictures of … me.”

“Pictures. Of you?” He gapes at me, ignoring the box on his lap.

I nod, desperately trying to gauge his reaction. Finally he gazes back down at the box, his fingers tracing over the illustration of the camera on the front with fascinated reverence.

*What is he thinking?* Oh, this is not the reaction I was expecting, and my subconscious glares at me like I’m a domesticated farm animal. Christian *never* reacts the way I expect. He looks back up, his eyes filled with, what, pain?

“Why do you think I want this?” he asks, bemused.

*No, no, no! You said you’d love it …*

“Don’t you?” I ask, refusing to acknowledge my subconscious, who is questioning why anyone would want erotic photographs of me. Christian swallows and runs a hand through his hair, and he looks so lost, so confused. He takes a deep breath.

“For me, photos like those have usually been an insurance policy, Ana. I know I’ve objectified women for so long,” he says and pauses awkwardly.

“And you think taking pictures of me is … um, objectifying me?” All the air leaves my body, and the blood drains from my face.

He scrunches up his eyes. “I am so confused,” he whispers. When he opens his eyes again, they are wide and wary, full of some raw emotion.

*Shit.* Is it me? My questions earlier about his birth mom? The fire at his office?

“Why do you say that?” I whisper, panic rising in my throat. I thought he was happy. I thought we were happy. I thought I made him happy. I don’t want to *confuse* him. Do I? My mind starts racing. He hasn’t seen Flynn in nearly three weeks. Is that it? Is that the reason he’s unraveling? Shit, should I call Flynn?

And in a possibly unique moment of extraordinary depth and clarity, it comes to me—the fire, *Charlie Tango*, the Jet Ski … He's scared, he's scared for me, and seeing these marks on my skin must bring that home. He's been fussing about them all day, confusing himself because he's not used to feeling uncomfortable about inflicting pain. The thought chills me.

He shrugs and once more his eyes move down to my wrist, where the cuff he bought me this afternoon used to be. *Bingo!*

"Christian, these don't matter." I hold up my wrist, revealing the fading welt. "You gave me a safeword. Shit—yesterday was *fun*. I enjoyed it. Stop brooding about it—I like rough sex, I've told you that before." I blush scarlet as I try to quash my rising panic.

He gazes at me intently, and I have no idea what he's thinking. Maybe he's measuring my words. I stumble on.

"Is this about the fire? Do you think it's connected somehow to *Charlie Tango*? Is this why you're worried? Talk to me, Christian—please."

He stares at me, saying nothing, and the silence expands between us again as it did this afternoon. *Holy fucking crap!* He's not going to talk to me, I know.

"Don't overthink this Christian," I scold quietly, and the words echo, disturbing a memory from the recent past—his words to me about his stupid contract. I reach over, take the box from his lap, and open it. He watches me passively as if I'm a fascinating alien creature. Knowing that the camera is prepped by the overly helpful salesman in the store, and ready to go, I fish it out of the box and remove the lens cap. I point the camera at him so his beautiful anxious face fills the frame. I press the button and keep it pressed, and ten pictures of Christian's alarmed expression are captured digitally for posterity.

"I'll objectify you then," I murmur, pressing the shutter again. On the final still his lips twitch almost imperceptibly. I press again, and this time he smiles … a small smile, but a smile nevertheless. I hold down the button once more and see him physically relax in front of me and pout—a full-on, posed, ridiculous, "Blue Steel" pout, and it makes me giggle. *Oh, thank heavens*. Mr. Mercurial is back—and I've never been so pleased to see him.

"I thought it was *my* present," he mutters sulkily, but I think he's teasing.

"Well, it was supposed to be fun, but apparently it's a symbol of women's oppression." I snap away, taking more pictures of him, and watch the amusement grow on his face in super close-up. Then his eyes darken, and his expression changes to predatory.

"You want to be oppressed?" he murmurs silkily.

"Not oppressed. No," I murmur back, snapping again.

"I could oppress you big-time, Mrs. Grey," he threatens, his voice husky.

“I know you can, Mr. Grey. And you do, frequently.”

His face falls. *Shit*. I lower the camera and stare at him.

“What’s wrong, Christian?” My voice oozes frustration. *Tell me!*

He says nothing. *Gah!* He’s so infuriating. I lift the camera to my eye again.

“Tell me,” I insist.

“Nothing,” he says and abruptly disappears from the viewfinder. In one swift, smooth move, he sweeps the camera box onto the cabin floor, grabs me, and pushes me down onto the bed. He sits astride me.

“Hey!” I exclaim and take more photographs of him, smiling down at me with dark intent. He grabs the camera by the lens, and the photographer becomes the subject as he points the Nikon at me and presses the shutter release down.

“So, you want me to take pictures of you, Mrs. Grey?” he says, amused. All I can see of his face is his unruly hair and a broad grin on his sculptured mouth. “Well, for a start, I think you should be laughing,” he says, and he tickles me ruthlessly under my ribs, making me squeal and giggle and squirm beneath him until I grasp his wrist in a vain attempt to make him stop. His grin widens, and he renews his efforts while snapping pictures.

“No! Stop!” I scream.

“Are you kidding?” he growls and puts the camera down beside us so that he can torture me with both hands.

“Christian!” I splutter and gasp my laughing protest. He has never ever tickled me before. *Fuck—stop!* I thrash my head from side to side, trying to wiggle out from under him, giggling and pushing both of his hands away, but he’s unrelenting—grinning down at me, enjoying my torment.

“Christian, stop!” I plead and he stops suddenly. Grabbing both of my hands, he holds them down on either side of my head while looming over me. I am panting and breathless with laughter. His breathing mirrors mine, and he gazes down at me with … what? My lungs stop functioning. Wonder? Love? Reverence? *Holy cow. That look!*

“You. Are. So. Beautiful,” he breathes.

I stare up at his dear, dear face bathed in the intensity of his gaze, and it’s as if he’s seeing me for the first time. Leaning down, he closes his eyes and kisses me, enraptured. His response is a wake-up call to my libido … seeing him like this, undone, by me. *Oh my*. He releases my hands and curls his fingers around my head and into my hair, holding me gently in place, and my body rises and fills with my arousal, responding to his kiss. And suddenly the nature of his kiss alters, no longer sweet, reverential, and admiring, but carnal, deep, and devouring—his tongue invading my mouth, taking not giving, his kiss possessing a desperate, needy edge. As desire courses through my blood,

awakening every muscle and sinew in its wake, I feel a frisson of alarm.

*Oh, Fifty, what's wrong?*

He inhales sharply and groans. "Oh, what you do to me," he murmurs, lost and raw. He moves suddenly, lying down on top of me, pressing me into the mattress—one hand cupping my chin, the other skimming over my body, my breast, my waist, my hip, and around my behind. He kisses me again, pushing his leg between mine, raising my knee, and grinding against me, his erection straining against our clothes and my sex. I gasp and moan against his lips, losing myself to his fervent passion. I dismiss the distant alarm bells in the back of my mind, knowing that he wants me, that he needs me, and that when it comes to communicating with me, this is his favorite form of self-expression. I kiss him with renewed abandon, running my fingers through his hair, fisting my hands, holding tight. He tastes so good and smells of Christian, my Christian.

Abruptly, he stops, stands up, and pulls me off the bed so that I am standing in front of him, dazed. He undoes the button on my shorts and kneels quickly, yanking them and my panties down, and before I can breathe again, I am back on the bed beneath him and he's unbuttoning his fly. Whoa! He's not taking off his clothes or my T-shirt. He holds my head and with no preamble whatsoever he thrusts himself inside me, making me cry out—more in surprise than anything else—but I can still hear the hiss of his breath forced through his clenched teeth.

"Yessss," he hisses close to my ear. He stills, then swivels his hips once, pushing deeper, making me groan.

"I need you," he growls, his voice low and husky. He runs his teeth along my jaw, nipping and sucking, and then he's kissing me again, hard. I wrap my legs and arms around him, cradling and holding him hard against me, determined to wipe out whatever's worrying him, and he starts to move … move like he's trying to climb inside me. Over and over, frantic, primal, desperate, and before I lose myself in the insane rhythm and pace he's setting, I briefly wonder once more what's driving him, worrying him. But my body takes over, obliterating the thought, climbing and building so I am awash with sensation, meeting him thrust for thrust. Listening to his harsh breathing, labored and fierce at my ear. Knowing that he's lost in me … I groan loudly, panting. It's so erotic—his need for me. I am reaching … reaching … and he's driving me higher, overwhelming me, taking me, and I want this. I want this so much … for him and for me.

"Come with me," he gasps, and he rears up over me so I have to break my hold around him.

"Open your eyes," he orders. "I need to see you." His voice is urgent, implacable. My eyes flicker open momentarily, and the sight of him above me—his face taut with ardor, his eyes raw and glowing. His passion and his love is

my undoing, and on cue I come, throwing my head back as my body pulses around him.

"Oh, Ana," he cries and he joins my climax, driving into me, then stilling and collapsing onto me. He rolls over so that I'm sprawled on top of him, and he's still inside me. As I surface from my orgasm and my body steadies and calms, I want to make some quip about being objectified and oppressed, but hold my tongue, uncertain of his mood. I glance up from Christian's chest to examine his face. His eyes are closed and his arms are wrapped around me, clinging tight. I kiss his chest through the thin fabric of his linen shirt.

"Tell me, Christian, what's wrong?" I ask softly, and wait anxiously to see if even now, sated by sex, he'll tell me. I feel his arms tighten around me further, but it's his only response. He's not going to talk. Inspiration hits me.

"I give you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, to stand by your side in good times and in bad, to share your joy as well as your sorrow," I murmur.

He freezes. His only movement is to open wide his fathomless eyes and gaze at me as I continue my wedding vows.

"I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals and dreams, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, to share my hopes and dreams with you, and bring you solace in times of need." I pause, willing him to talk to me. He watches me, his lips parted, but says nothing.

"And to cherish you for as long as we both shall live." I sigh.

"Oh, Ana," he whispers and moves again, breaking our precious contact so that we're lying side by side. He strokes my face with the backs of his knuckles.

"I solemnly vow that I will safeguard and hold dear and deep in my heart our union and you," he whispers, his voice hoarse. "I promise to love you faithfully, forsaking all others, through the good times and the bad, in sickness and in health, regardless of where life takes us. I will protect you, trust you, and respect you. I will share your joys and sorrows and comfort you in times of need. I promise to cherish you and uphold your hopes and dreams and keep you safe at my side. All that is mine is now yours. I give you my hand, my heart, and my love from this moment on for as long as we both shall live."

Tears spring to my eyes. His face softens as he gazes at me.

"Don't cry," he murmurs, his thumb catching and dispatching a stray tear.

"Why won't you talk to me? Please, Christian."

He closes his eyes as if in pain.

"I vowed I would bring you solace in times of need. Please don't make me break my vows," I plea.

He sighs and opens his eyes, his expression bleak. "It's arson," he says

simply, and he looks suddenly so young and vulnerable.

*Oh fuck.*

"And my biggest worry is that they are after me. And if they are after me—" He stops, unable to continue.

"… They might get me," I whisper. He blanches, and I know that I have finally uncovered the root of his anxiety. I caress his face.

"Thank you," I murmur.

He frowns. "What for?"

"For telling me."

He shakes his head and a ghost of a smile touches his lips. "You can be very persuasive, Mrs. Grey."

"And you can brood and internalize all your feelings and worry yourself to death. You'll probably die of a heart attack before you're forty, and I want you around far longer than that."

"*You'll* be the death of me. The sight of you on the Jet Ski—I nearly did have a coronary." He flops back on the bed and puts his hand over his eyes, and I feel him shudder.

"Christian, it's a Jet Ski. Even kids ride Jet Skis. Can you imagine what you'll be like when we visit your place in Aspen and I go skiing for the first time?"

He gasps and turns to face me, and I want to laugh at the horror on his face.

"Our place," he says eventually.

I ignore him. "I'm a grown-up, Christian, and much tougher than I look. When are you going to learn this?"

He shrugs and his mouth thins. I decide to change the subject.

"So, the fire. Do the police know about the arson?"

"Yes." His expression is serious.

"Good."

"Security is going to get tighter," he says matter-of-factly.

"I understand." I glance down his body. He's still wearing his shorts and his shirt, and I still have my T-shirt on. Jeez—talk about *wham, bam, thank you ma'am*. The thought makes me giggle.

"What?" Christian asks, bemused.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You. Still dressed."

"Oh." He glances down at himself, then back at me, and his face erupts into an enormous smile.

"Well, you know how hard it is for me to keep my hands off you, Mrs. Grey—especially when you're giggling like a schoolgirl."

Oh yes—the tickling. *Gah!* The tickling. I move quickly so that I'm straddling him, but immediately understanding my evil intent, he grabs both of my wrists.

"No," he says, and he means it.

I pout at him but decide that he's not ready for this.

"Please don't," he whispers. "I couldn't bear it. I was never tickled as a child." He pauses and I relax my hands so he doesn't have to restrain me.

"I used to watch Carrick with Elliot and Mia, tickling them, and it looked like such fun, but I … I …"

I place my index finger on his lips.

"Hush, I know," I murmur and plant a soft kiss on his lips where my finger has just been, then curl up on his chest. The familiar painful ache swells inside me, and the profound sadness that I hold in my heart for Christian as a little boy seizes me once more. I know I would do anything for this man because I love him so.

He puts his arms around me and presses his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply as he gently strokes my back. I don't know how long we lie there, but eventually I break the comfortable silence between us.

"What is the longest you've gone without seeing Dr. Flynn?"

"Two weeks. Why? Do you have an incorrigible urge to tickle me?"

"No." I chuckle. "I think he helps you."

Christian snorts. "He should; I pay him enough." He pulls my hair gently, turning my face to look up at him. I lift my head and meet his gaze.

"Are you concerned for my well-being, Mrs. Grey?" he asks softly.

"Every good wife is concerned for her beloved husband's well-being, Mr. Grey," I admonish him teasingly.

"Beloved?" he whispers, and it's a poignant question hanging between us.

"Very much beloved." I scoot up to kiss him, and he smiles his shy smile.

"Do you want to go ashore to eat?"

"I want to eat wherever you're happiest."

"Good." He grins. "Aboard is where I can keep you safe. Thank you for my present." He reaches over and grabs the camera, and holding it at arm's length, he snaps the two of us in our post tickling, postcoital, postconfessional embrace.

"The pleasure is all mine." I smile and his eyes light up.

---

We wander through the opulent, gilt splendor of the eighteenth-century Palace of Versailles. Once a humble hunting lodge, it was transformed by the Roi Soleil

into a magnificent, lavish seat of power, but even before the eighteenth century ended it saw the last of those absolute monarchs.

The most stunning room by far is the Hall of Mirrors. The early afternoon light floods through windows to the west, lighting up the mirrors that line the east wall and illuminating the gold leaf decor and the enormous crystal chandeliers. It's breathtaking.

"Interesting to see what becomes of a despotic megalomaniac who isolates himself in such splendor," I murmur to Christian as he stands at my side. He gazes down and cocks his head to one side, regarding me with humor.

"Your point, Mrs. Grey?"

"Oh, merely an observation, Mr. Grey." I wave my hand airily at the surroundings. Smirking, he follows me to the center of the room, where I stand and gawk at the view—the spectacular gardens reflected in the looking glass and the spectacular Christian Grey, my husband, reflected back at me, his gaze bright and bold.

"I would build this for you," he whispers. "Just to see the way the light burnishes your hair, right here, right now." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "You look like an angel." He kisses me just below my earlobe, takes my hand in his, and murmurs, "We despots do that for the women we love."

I flush at his compliment, smiling shyly, and follow him through the vast room.

---

"What are you thinking about?" Christian asks softly, taking a sip of his after-dinner coffee.

"Versailles."

"Ostentatious, wasn't it?" He grins. I glance around the more understated grandeur of the *Fair Lady*'s dining room and purse my lips.

"This is hardly ostentatious," Christian says, a tad defensively.

"I know. It's lovely. The best honeymoon a girl could want."

"Really?" he says, genuinely surprised. And he smiles his shy smile.

"Of course it is."

"We've got only two more days. Is there anything you'd like to see or do?"

"Just be with you," I murmur. He rises from the table, comes around, and kisses me on the forehead.

"Well, can you do without me for about an hour? I need to check my e-mails, find out what's happening at home."

“Sure,” I say brightly, trying to hide my disappointment that I’ll be without him for an hour. Is it freaky that I want to be with him all the time?

“Thank you for the camera,” he murmurs and heads for the study.

BACK IN OUR CABIN I decide to catch up on my own correspondence and open my laptop. There are e-mails from my mom and from Kate, giving me the latest gossip from home and asking how the honeymoon is going. Well, great, until someone decided to burn down GEH, Inc.… As I finish my response to my mom, an e-mail from Kate hits my in-box.

---

**From:** Katherine L. Kavanagh
**Date:** August 17 2011 11:45
**To:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** OMG!!!!

Ana, just heard about the fire at Christian’s office.

Do you think it’s arson?

K xox

Kate is online! I jump onto my newfound toy—Skype messaging—and see that she’s available. I quickly type a message.

**Ana: Hey are you there?**

**Kate: Yes, Ana! How are you? How’s the honeymoon? Did you see my e-mail? Does Christian know about the fire?**

**Ana: I’m good. Honeymoon’s great. Yes, I saw your e-mail. Yes, Christian knows.**

**Kate: I thought he would. News is sketchy on what happened. And Elliot won’t tell me anything.**

**Ana: Are you fishing for a story?**

**Kate: You know me too well.**

**Ana: Christian hasn’t told me much.**

**Kate: Elliot heard from Grace!**

Oh no—I’m sure Christian doesn’t want this broadcast all over Seattle. I try my patented distract-tenacious-Kavanagh technique.

**Ana: How are Elliot and Ethan?**

**Kate: Ethan has been accepted into the psych course at Seattle for his master's degree. Elliot is adorable.**

**Ana: Way to go, Ethan.**

**Kate: How's our Favorite ex-dom?**

**Ana: Kate!**

**Kate: What?**

**Ana: YOU KNOW WHAT!**

**Kate: K. Sorry**

**Ana: He's fine. More than fine. ☺**

**Kate: Well, as long as you're happy, I'm happy.**

**Ana: I'm blissfully happy.**

**Kate: ☺ I have to run. Can we talk later?**

**Ana: Not sure. See if I am online. Time zones suck!**

**Kate: They do. Love you, Ana.**

**Ana: Love you, too. Laters. x**

**Kate: Laters. <3**

Trust Kate to be on the trail of this story. I roll my eyes and shut Skype down before Christian sees the chat. He wouldn't appreciate the ex-Dom comment, and I'm not sure he's entirely ex …

I sigh loudly. Kate knows everything, since our tipsy evening three weeks before the wedding when I finally succumbed to the Kavanagh inquisition. It was a relief to finally talk to someone.

I glance at my watch. It's been about an hour since dinner, and I am missing my husband. I head back on deck to see if he's finished his work.

---

I am in the Hall of Mirrors and Christian is standing beside me, smiling down at me with love and affection. *You look like an angel*. I beam back at him, but when I glance into the looking glass, I'm standing on my own and the room is gray and drab. *No!* My head whips back to his face, to find his smile is sad and wistful. He tucks my hair behind my ear. Then he turns wordlessly and walks

away slowly, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the mirrors as he paces the enormous room to the ornate double doors at the end … a man on his own, a man with no reflection … and I wake, gasping for air, as panic seizes me.

"Hey," he whispers from beside me in the darkness, his voice filled with concern.

*Oh, he's here. He's safe*. Relief courses through me.

"Oh, Christian," I mumble, trying to bring my pounding heartbeat under control. He wraps me in his arms, and it's only then that I realize I have tears streaming down my face.

"Ana, what is it?" He strokes my cheek, wiping away my tears, and I can hear his anguish.

"Nothing. A silly nightmare."

He kisses my forehead and my tearstained cheeks, comforting me. "Just a bad dream, baby," he murmurs. "I've got you. I'll keep you safe."

Drinking in his scent, I curl around him, trying to ignore the loss and devastation I felt in my dream, and in that moment, I know that my deepest, darkest fear would be losing him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I stir, instinctively reaching for Christian only to feel his absence. Shit! I wake instantly and look anxiously around the cabin. Christian is watching me from the small, upholstered armchair by the bed. Stooping down, he places something on the floor, then moves and stretches out on the bed beside me. He's dressed in his cut-offs and a gray T-shirt.

"Hey, don't panic. Everything's fine," he says, his voice gentle and soothing —like he's talking to a cornered wild animal. Tenderly, he smooths the hair back from my face and I calm immediately. I see him trying and failing to hide his own concern.

"You've been so jumpy these last couple of days," he murmurs, his eyes wide and serious.

"I'm okay, Christian." I give him my brightest smile because I don't want him to know how worried I am about the arson incident. The painful recollection of how I felt when *Charlie Tango* was sabotaged and Christian went missing—the hollow emptiness, the indescribable pain—keeps resurfacing; the memory nagging me and gnawing at my heart. Keeping the smile fixed on my face, I try to repress it.

"Were you watching me sleep?"

"Yes," he says, gazing at me steadily, studying me. "You were talking."

"Oh?" *Shit! What was I saying?*

"You're worried," he adds, his eyes filled with concern. Is there nothing I can keep from this man? He leans forward and kisses me between my brows.

"When you frown, a little *V* forms just here. It's soft to kiss. Don't worry, baby, I'll look after you."

"It's not me I'm worried about, it's you," I grumble. "Who's looking after you?"

He smiles indulgently at my tone. "I'm big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. Come. Get up. There's one thing I'd like to do before we head home." He grins at me, a big boyish yes-I'm-really-only-twenty-eight grin, and swats my behind. I yelp, startled, and realize that today we're going back to Seattle and my melancholy blossoms. I don't want to leave. I've relished being

with him 24/7, and I'm not ready to share him with his company and his family. We've had a blissful honeymoon. With a few ups and downs, I admit, but that's normal for a newly married couple, surely?

But Christian cannot contain his boyish excitement, and despite my dark thoughts, it's infectious. When he rises gracefully off the bed, I follow, intrigued. What has he got in mind?

CHRISTIAN STRAPS THE KEY to my wrist.

"You want me to drive?"

"Yes." Christian grins. "That's not too tight?"

"It's fine. Is that why you're wearing a life jacket?" I arch my eyebrow.

"Yes."

I can't help my giggle. "Such confidence in my driving capabilities, Mr. Grey."

"As ever, Mrs. Grey."

"Well, don't lecture me."

Christian holds his hands up in a defensive gesture, but he's smiling. "Would I dare?"

"Yes, you would, and yes, you do, and we can't pull over and argue on the sidewalk here."

"Fair point well made, Mrs. Grey. Are we going to stand on this platform all day debating your driving skills or are we going to have some fun?"

"Fair point well made, Mr. Grey." I grasp the handlebars of the Jet Ski and clamber on. Christian climbs on behind me and kicks us away from the yacht. Taylor and two of the deckhands look on in amusement. Sliding forward, Christian wraps his arms around me and snuggles his thighs against mine. *Yes, this is what I like about this form of transport*. I insert the ignition key and push the start button, and the engine roars into life.

"Ready?" I shout to Christian over the noise.

"As I'll ever be," he says, his mouth close to my ear.

Gently, I pull on the lever and the Jet Ski moves away from the *Fair Lady*, far too sedately for my liking. Christian tightens his embrace. I pull on the gas some more, we shoot forward, and I'm delighted when we don't stall.

"Whoa!" Christian calls from behind, but the exhilaration in his voice is palpable. I speed past the *Fair Lady* toward the open sea. We're anchored outside the Saint-Laurent-du-Var, and Nice Côte d'Azur Airport is nestled in the distance, built into the Mediterranean, or so it seems. I've heard the odd plane landing since we arrived last night. I decide we need to take a closer look.

We shoot toward it, skipping rapidly over the waves. I love this, and I'm thrilled Christian's letting me drive. All the worry I've felt over the past two days melts away as we skim toward the airport.

"Next time we do this we'll have two Jet Skis," Christian shouts. I grin because the thought of racing him is thrilling.

As we zoom over the cool blue sea toward what looks like the end of the runway, the thundering roar of a jet overhead suddenly startles me as it comes in to land. It's so loud I panic, swerving and hitting the throttle at the same time, mistaking it for a brake.

"Ana!" Christian shouts, but it's too late. I'm catapulted off the side of the Jet Ski, arms and legs flailing, taking Christian with me in a spectacular splash.

Screaming, I plunge into the crystal blue sea and swallow a nasty mouthful of the Mediterranean. The water is cold this far from the shore, but I surface within a split second, courtesy of my life jacket. Coughing and spluttering, I wipe the seawater from my eyes and look around for Christian. He's already swimming toward me. The Jet Ski floats inoffensively a few feet away from us, its engine silent.

"You okay?" His eyes are full of panic as he reaches me.

"Yes," I croak, but I cannot contain my elation. *See, Christian? That's the worst that can happen on a Jet Ski!* He pulls me into his embrace, then grabs my head between his hands, examining my face closely.

"See, that wasn't so bad!" I grin as we tread water.

Eventually he smirks at me, obviously relieved. "No, I guess it wasn't. Except I'm wet," he grumbles, but his tone is playful.

"I'm wet, too."

"I like you wet." He leers.

"Christian!" I scold, trying for faux righteous indignation. He grins, looking gorgeous, then leans in and kisses me hard. When he pulls away, I'm breathless.

"Come. Let's head back. Now we have to shower. I'll drive."

---

We laze in the British Airways first class lounge at Heathrow outside London, waiting for our connecting flight to Seattle. Christian is engrossed in the *Financial Times*. I pull out his camera, wanting to take some photographs of him. He looks so sexy in his trademark white linen shirt and jeans, with his aviator specs tucked into the V of his open shirt. The flash disturbs him. He blinks up at me and smiles his shy smile.

“How are you, Mrs. Grey?” he asks.

“Sad to be going home,” I murmur. “I like having you to myself.”

He clasps my hand and, lifting it to his lips, grazes my knuckles with a sweet kiss. “Me, too.”

“But?” I ask, hearing that small word unsaid at the end of his simple statement.

He frowns. “But?” he repeats disingenuously. I tilt my head to one side, gazing at him with the *tell me* expression I have been perfecting over the last couple of days. He sighs, putting his newspaper down. “I want this arsonist caught and out of our lives.”

“Oh.” That seems fair enough, but I’m surprised by his bluntness.

“I’ll have Welch’s balls on a platter if he lets anything like that happen again.” A shiver runs down my spine at his menacing tone. He gazes at me impassively, and I don’t know if he’s daring me to be flippant or what. I do the only thing I can think of to ease the sudden tension between us and raise the camera and snap another photograph.

---

“Hey, sleepyhead, we’re home,” Christian murmurs.

“Hmm,” I mumble, reluctant to leave my tantalizing dream of Christian and me on a picnic blanket at Kew Gardens. I am so tired. Traveling is exhausting, even in first class. We’ve been up for more than eighteen hours straight, I think —in my fatigue I’ve lost track. I hear my door open, and Christian is leaning over me. He unbuckles my seat belt and lifts me into his arms, waking me.

“Hey, I can walk,” I protest sleepily.

He snorts. “I need to carry you over the threshold.”

I put my arms around his neck. “Up all thirty floors?” I give him a challenging smile.

“Mrs. Grey, I am very pleased to announce that you’ve put on some weight.”

“What?”

He grins. “So if you don’t mind, we’ll use the elevator.” He narrows his eyes at me, though I know he’s teasing.

Taylor opens the doors to the Escala lobby and smiles. “Welcome home, Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey.”

“Thanks, Taylor,” says Christian.

I give Taylor the briefest of smiles and watch him head back to the Audi, where Sawyer waits at the wheel.

“What do you mean I’ve put on weight?” I glare at Christian. His grin broadens, and he clasps me closer to his chest as he carries me across the lobby.

“Not much,” he assures me, but his face darkens suddenly.

“What is it?” I try to keep the alarm in my voice under control.

“You’ve put on some of the weight you lost when you left me,” he says quietly as he summons the elevator. A bleak expression crosses his face.

His sudden, surprising anguish tugs at my heart. “Hey.” I curl my fingers around his face and into his hair, pulling him toward me. “If I hadn’t gone, would you be standing here, like this, now?”

His eyes melt, the color of a storm cloud, and he smiles his shy smile, my favorite smile. “No,” he says and steps into the elevator still holding me. He leans down and kisses me gently. “No, Mrs. Grey, I wouldn’t. But I would know I could keep you safe, because you wouldn’t defy me.”

He sounds vaguely regretful … *Shit.*

“I like defying you.” I test the waters.

“I know. And it’s made me so … happy.” He smiles down at me through his bemusement.

Oh, thank heavens. “Even though I’m fat?” I whisper.

He laughs. “Even though you’re fat.” He kisses me again, more heated this time, and I fist my fingers in his hair, holding him against me, our tongues twisting in a slow sensual dance with each other. When the elevator pings to a halt at the penthouse, we are both breathless.

“Very happy,” he murmurs. His smile is darker now, his eyes hooded and full of salacious promise. He shakes his head as if to recover himself and carries me into the foyer.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Grey.” He kisses me again, more chastely this time, and gives me the patented-Christian-Grey-full-gigawatt smile, his eyes dancing with joy.

“Welcome home, Mr. Grey.” I beam, my heart answering his call, brimming with my own joy.

I think Christian’s going to put me down, but he doesn’t. He carries me through the foyer, across the corridor, into the great room, and deposits me on the kitchen island, where I sit with my legs dangling. He retrieves two champagne flutes from the kitchen cupboard and a bottle of chilled champagne from the fridge—our favorite, Bollinger. He deftly opens the bottle, not spilling a drop, pours the pale pink champagne into each glass, and hands one to me. Taking up the other, he gently parts my legs and moves forward to stand between them.

“Here’s to us, Mrs. Grey.”

“To us, Mr. Grey,” I whisper, conscious of my shy smile. We clink glasses and take a sip.

“I know you’re tired,” he whispers, rubbing his nose against mine. “But I’d really like to go to bed … and not to sleep.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. “It’s our first night back here, and you’re really mine.” His voice drifts off as he plants soft kisses down my throat. It’s early evening in Seattle, and I am dog-tired, but desire blooms deep in my belly.

CHRISTIAN IS SLUMBERING PEACEFULLY beside me as I stare at the pink and golden streaks of the new dawn through the vast windows. His arm is draped loosely over my breasts, and I try to match his breathing in an effort to get back to sleep, but it’s hopeless. I’m wide-awake, my body clock on Greenwich mean time, my mind racing.

So much has happened in the last three weeks—*who am I kidding, the last three months*—that I feel that my feet haven’t touched the ground. And now here I am, Mrs. Christian Grey, married to the most delicious, sexy, philanthropic, absurdly wealthy mogul a woman could meet. How did this all happen so fast?

I shift onto my side to gaze at him. I know he watches me sleep, but I rarely get the opportunity to repay the compliment. He looks young and carefree in his sleep, his long lashes fanned against his cheek, a light smattering of stubble covering his jaw, and his sculptured lips slightly parted, relaxed as he breathes deeply. I want to kiss him, to push my tongue between his lips, run my fingers over his soft yet prickly stubble. I really have to fight the urge not to touch him, not to disturb him. Hmm … I could just tease his earlobe with my teeth and suck. My subconscious glares up at me over her half-moon spectacles, distracted from volume two of the *Complete Works of Charles Dickens*, and mentally chastises me. *Leave the poor man alone, Ana*.

I am back to work on Monday. We have today to get back into our routine. It will be odd not seeing Christian for a whole day after spending almost every minute together for the last three weeks. I lie back and stare at the ceiling. One would think that spending so much time together would be suffocating, but that’s just not the case. I’ve loved each and every minute, even our fighting. Every minute … except the news of the fire at Grey House.

My blood chills. Who could want to harm Christian? My mind gnaws at this mystery again. Someone in his business? An ex? A disgruntled employee? I have no idea, and Christian remains tight-lipped about it all, drip-feeding me the minimum information he can get away with in a bid to protect me. I sigh. My shining white-and-dark knight always trying to protect me. How am I going to make him open up more?

He stirs and I still, not wanting to wake him, but it has the opposite effect. *Damn!* Two bright eyes gaze at me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep." I try my reassuring smile. He stretches, rubs his face, and then grins at me.

"Jet lag?" he asks.

"Is that what this is? I can't sleep."

"I have the universal panacea right here, just for you, baby." He grins like a schoolboy, making me roll my eyes and giggle at the same time. And just like that my dark thoughts are swept aside and my teeth find his earlobe.

CHRISTIAN AND I CRUISE north on I-5 toward the 520 bridge in the Audi R8. We are going to have lunch at his parents', a welcome-home Sunday lunch. All the family will be there, plus Kate and Ethan. It will be strange to be in company when we've been on our own all this time. I haven't had an opportunity to talk to Christian most of the morning. He was holed up in his study while I unpacked. He said I didn't have to, that Mrs. Jones would do it. But that's something else I need to get used to—having domestic help. I run my fingers absentmindedly over the leather upholstery of the door to distract my wandering thoughts. I feel out of sorts. Is it the jet lag? The arson?

"Would you let me drive this?" I ask, surprised that I say the words out loud.

"Of course," Christian replies, smiling. "What's mine is yours. If you dent it, though, I will take you into the Red Room of Pain." He glances swiftly at me with a malicious grin.

*Shit!* I gape at him. Is this a joke?

"You're kidding. You'd punish me for denting your car? You love your car more than you love me?" I tease.

"It's close," he says and reaches across to squeeze my knee. "But she doesn't keep me warm at night."

"I'm sure it could be arranged. You could sleep in her," I snap.

Christian laughs. "We haven't been home one day and you're kicking me out already?" He seems delighted. I gaze at him and he gives me a face-splitting grin, and although I want to be mad at him, it's impossible when he's in this kind of mood. Now that I think about it, he's been in a better frame of mind ever since he left his study this morning. And it dawns on me that I'm being petulant because we have to go back to reality, and I don't know if he's going to revert to the more closed pre-honeymoon Christian, or if I'll get to keep the new improved version.

“Why are you so pleased?” I ask.

He flashes yet another grin at me. “Because this conversation is so … normal.”

“Normal!” I snort. “Not after three weeks of marriage! Surely.”

His smile slips.

“I’m kidding, Christian,” I mutter quickly, not wanting to kill his mood. It strikes me how unsure he is of himself sometimes. I suspect that he’s always been like this, but has just hidden his uncertainty beneath an intimidating exterior. He’s very easy to tease, probably because he’s not used to it. It’s a revelation, and I marvel again that we still have so much to learn about each other.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stick to the Saab,” I mutter and turn to stare out the window, trying to shake off my bad mood.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re so frustrating sometimes, Ana. Tell me.”

I turn and smirk at him. “Back at you, Grey.”

He frowns. “I’m trying,” he says softly.

“I know. Me, too.” I smile and my mood brightens a little.

CARRICK LOOKS RIDICULOUS IN his chef’s hat and *Licensed to Grill* apron as he stands at the barbecue. Every time I look at him, it makes me smile. In fact, my spirits have lifted considerably. We are all sitting around the table on the terrace of the Grey family home, enjoying the late summer sun. Grace and Mia are setting various salads out on the table, while Elliot and Christian trade friendly insults and discuss plans for the new house, and Ethan and Kate grill me about our honeymoon. Christian keeps hold of my hand, his fingers toying with my wedding and engagement rings.

“So if you can get the plans finalized with Gia, I have a window September through to mid-November and can get the whole crew on it,” Elliot says as he stretches and drops an arm around Kate’s shoulder, making her smile.

“Gia is due to come over to discuss the plans tomorrow evening,” replies Christian. “I hope we can finalize everything then.” He turns and looks expectantly at me.

Oh … this is news.

“Sure.” I smile at him, mostly for the benefit of his family, but my spirits take a nosedive again. Why does he make these decisions without telling me? Or is it the thought of Gia—all lush hips, full breasts, expensive designer clothes, and

perfume—smiling too provocatively at my husband? My subconscious glares at me. *He's given you no reason to be jealous*. Shit, I am up and down today. What's wrong with me?

"Ana," Kate exclaims, snapping me out of my reverie. "You still in the South of France?"

"Yes," I reply with a smile.

"You look so well," she says, though she frowns as she says it.

"You both do." Grace beams while Elliot refills our glasses.

"To the happy couple." Carrick grins and raises his glass, and everyone around the table echoes the sentiment.

"And congratulations to Ethan for getting into the psych program at Seattle," chips in Mia proudly. She gives him an adoring smile, and Ethan smirks at her. I wonder idly if she's made any headway with him. It's difficult to tell.

I listen to the banter around the table. Christian is running through our extensive itinerary over the last three weeks, embellishing here and there. He sounds relaxed and in control, the worry of the arsonist forgotten. I, on the other hand, don't seem to be able to shake my mood. I pick at my food. Christian said I was fat yesterday. *He was joking!* My subconscious glares at me again. Elliot accidentally knocks his glass onto the terrace, startling everyone, and there's a sudden flurry of activity to get it cleaned up.

"I am going to take you to the boathouse and finally spank you in there if you don't snap out of this mood," Christian whispers to me.

I gasp with shock, turn, and gape at him. *What?* Is he teasing me?

"You wouldn't dare!" I growl at him, and from deep inside I feel a familiar, welcome excitement. He cocks an eyebrow at me. Of course he would. I glance quickly at Kate across the table. She's watching us with interest. I turn back to Christian, narrowing my eyes at him.

"You'd have to catch me first—and I'm wearing flats," I hiss.

"I'd have fun trying," he whispers with a licentious grin, and I *think* he's joking.

I blush. Confusingly, I feel better.

As we finish our dessert of strawberries and cream, the heavens open. We all leap up to clear the plates and glasses from the table, depositing them in the kitchen.

"Good thing the weather held off till we finished," Grace says, pleased, as we drift into the back room. Christian sits down at the shiny black upright piano, presses the quiet pedal, and starts to play a familiar tune that I can't immediately place.

Grace asks me for my impressions of Saint-Paul-de-Vence. She and Carrick

had gone years ago during their honeymoon, and it occurs to me that this is a good omen, seeing how happy they are together now. Kate and Elliot are cuddling on one of the large overstuffed couches, while Ethan, Mia, and Carrick are deep in a conversation about psychology, I think.

Suddenly, as one, all the Greys stop talking and gape at Christian.

*What?*

Christian is singing softly to himself at the piano. Silence descends on us all as we strain to hear his soft, musical voice and the lyrics of "Wherever You Will Go." I've heard him sing before; haven't they? He stops, suddenly conscious of the deathly hush that's fallen over the room. Kate glances questioningly at me and I shrug. Christian turns on the stool and frowns, embarrassed to realize he's become the center of attention.

"Go on," Grace urges softly. "I've never heard you sing, Christian. Ever." She stares at him in wonder. He sits on the piano stool, looking absently at her, and after a beat, he shrugs. His eyes flicker nervously to me, then over to the French windows. The rest of the room suddenly erupts in self-conscious chatter, and I'm left watching my dear husband.

Grace distracts me, grasping my hands then suddenly folding me in her arms.

"Oh, darling girl! Thank you, thank you," she whispers, so only I can hear. It brings a lump to my throat.

"Um …" I hug her back, not really sure why I am being thanked. Grace smiles, her eyes shining, and kisses my cheek. *What have I done?*

"I am going to make some tea," she says, her voice hoarse with unshed tears.

I amble over to Christian, who is now standing, staring out through the French windows.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi." He puts his arm around my waist, pulling me to him, and I slip my hand into the back pocket of his jeans. We gaze out at the rain.

"Feeling better?"

I nod.

"Good."

"You certainly know how to silence a room."

"I do it all the time," he says, and he grins at me.

"At work, yes, but not here."

"True, not here."

"No one's ever heard you sing? Ever?"

"It appears not," he says dryly. "Shall we go?"

I gaze up at him, trying to gauge his mood. His eyes are soft and warm and slightly bemused. I decide to change the subject.

“You going to spank me?” I whisper, and suddenly there are butterflies in my stomach. Perhaps this is what I need … this is what I have been missing.

He gazes down at me, his eyes darkening.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m more than happy to play.”

I glance nervously around the large room, but we are out of earshot.

“Only if you misbehave, Mrs. Grey.” He bends and murmurs in my ear.

How can he put so much sensual promise into six words?

“I’ll see what I can do.” I grin.

ONCE WE’VE SAID OUR good-byes, we walk over to the car.

“Here.” Christian throws me the keys to the R8. “Don’t bend it”—he adds in all seriousness—“or I will be fucking pissed.”

My mouth goes dry. He’s letting me drive his car? My inner goddess whips on her leather driving gloves and flat shoes. *Oh yes!* she cries.

“Are you sure?” I mouth, stunned.

“Yes, before I change my mind.”

I don’t think I have ever grinned so hard. He rolls his eyes and opens the driver’s door so that I can climb in. I start the engine before he’s even reached the passenger side, and he jumps in quickly.

“Eager, Mrs. Grey?” he asks with a wry smile.

“Very.”

Slowly, I ease the car backward and turn it in the driveway. I manage not to stall it, surprising myself. Boy, is the clutch sensitive. Carefully navigating the driveway, I glance in my rearview mirror and see Sawyer and Ryan climb into the Audi SUV. I had no idea our security had followed us here. I pause before I set out onto the main road.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” Christian says tightly, telling me he’s not sure about this at all. *Oh, my poor, poor Fifty*. I want to laugh at both him and myself because I’m nervous and excited. A small part of me wants to lose Sawyer and Ryan just for the kicks. I check for traffic then inch the R8 out onto the road. Christian curls up with tension and I can’t resist. The road is clear. I put my foot down on the gas and we shoot forward.

“Whoa! Ana!” Christian shouts. “Slow down—you’ll kill us both.”

I immediately ease off the gas. Wow, can this car move!

“Sorry,” I mutter, trying to sound contrite and failing miserably. Christian smirks at me, to hide his relief, I think.

“Well, that counts as misbehaving,” he says casually, and I slow right down.

I glance in the rearview mirror. No sign of the Audi SUV, just a solitary dark car with tinted windows behind us. I imagine Sawyer and Ryan flustered, frantic to catch up, and for some reason this gives me a thrill. But not wanting to give my dear husband a coronary, I decide to behave and drive steadily, with growing confidence, toward the 520 bridge.

Suddenly, Christian swears and struggles to pull his BlackBerry from the pocket of his jeans.

"What?" he snaps angrily at whoever it is on the other end of the line. "No," he says and glances behind us. "Yes. She is."

I briefly check the rearview mirror, but I don't see anything odd, just a few cars behind us. The SUV is about four cars back, and we're all cruising at an even pace.

"I see." Christian sighs long and hard and rubs his forehead with his fingers; tension radiates off him. *Something's wrong*.

"Yes … I don't know." He glances at me and lowers the phone from his ear. "We're fine. Keep going," he says calmly, smiling at me, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes. *Shit!* Adrenaline spikes through my system. He picks the phone up again.

"Okay on the 520. As soon as we hit it … Yes … I will."

He slots the phone into the speaker cradle, putting it on hands-free.

"What's wrong, Christian?"

"Just look where you're going, baby," he says softly.

I'm heading for the on-ramp of the 520 in the direction of Seattle. When I glance at Christian, he's staring straight ahead.

"I don't want you to panic," he says calmly. "But as soon as we're on the 520 proper, I want you to step on the gas. We're being followed."

*Followed!* Holy shit. My heart lurches into my mouth, pounding, my scalp prickles and my throat constricts with panic. Followed by whom? My eyes dart to the rearview mirror and, sure enough, the dark car I saw earlier is still behind us. *Fuck! Is that it?* I squint through the tinted windshield to see who's driving, but I see nothing.

"Keep your eyes on the road, baby," Christian says gently, not in the truculent tone he normally uses where my driving is concerned.

*Get a grip!* I mentally slap myself to subdue the dread that's threatening to swamp me. Suppose whoever's following us is armed? Armed and after Christian! *Shit!* I'm hit by a wave of nausea.

"How do we know we're being followed?" My voice is a breathy, squeaky whisper.

"The Dodge behind us has false license plates."

*How does he know that?*

I signal as we approach the 520 from the on-ramp. It's late afternoon, and although the rain has stopped, the roadway is wet. Fortunately, the traffic is reasonably light.

Ray's voice echoes in my head from one of his many self-defense lectures. *"It's the panic that's gonna kill you or get you seriously hurt, Annie."* I take a deep breath, trying to bring my breathing under control. Whoever is following us is after Christian. As I take another deep steadying breath, my mind begins to clear and my stomach settles. I have to keep Christian safe. I wanted to drive this car, and I wanted to drive it fast. *Well, here's my chance*. I grip the steering wheel and take a final glance in my rearview mirror. The Dodge is closing on us.

I slow right down, ignoring Christian's sudden panicked glance at me, and time my entrance on to the 520 so that the Dodge has to slow and stop to wait for a gap in the traffic. I drop a gear and floor it. The R8 shoots forward, slamming us both into the backs of our seats. The speedometer whips up to seventy-five miles per hour.

"Steady, baby," Christian says calmly, though I'm sure he's anything but calm.

I weave between the two lanes of traffic like a black piece in a game of checkers, effectively jumping the cars and trucks. We're so close to the lake on this bridge, it's as if we're driving on the water. I studiously ignore the angry, disapproving looks from other drivers. Christian clutches his hands together in his lap, keeping as still as possible, and in spite of my fevered thoughts, I wonder vaguely if he's doing it so he doesn't distract me.

"Good girl," he breathes in encouragement. He glances behind him. "I can't see the Dodge."

"We're right behind the unsub, Mr. Grey." Sawyer's voice comes through the hands-free. "He's trying to catch up with you, sir. We're going to try and come alongside, put ourselves between your car and the Dodge."

*Unsub?* What does that mean?

"Good. Mrs. Grey is doing well. At this rate, provided the traffic remains light —and from what I can see it is—we'll be off the bridge in a few minutes."

"Sir."

We flash past the bridge control tower, and I know we're halfway across Lake Washington. When I check my speed, I'm still doing seventy-five.

"You're doing really well, Ana," Christian murmurs again as he gazes out the back of the R8. For a fleeting moment, his tone reminds me of our first encounter in his playroom when he patiently encouraged me through our first scene. The thought is distracting, and I dismiss it immediately.

“Where am I headed?” I ask, moderately calmer. I have the feel of the car now. It’s a joy to drive, so quiet and easy to handle it’s hard to believe how fast we are going. Driving at this speed in this car is easy.

“Mrs. Grey, head for I-5 and then south. We want to see if the Dodge follows you all the way,” Sawyer says over the hands-free. The traffic lights on the bridge are green—thank heavens—and I race onward.

I glance nervously at Christian, and he smiles reassuringly. Then his face falls.

“Shit!” he swears softly.

There is a line of traffic ahead as we come off the bridge, and I have to slow down. Glancing anxiously in the mirror once more, I think I spot the Dodge.

“Ten or so cars back?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Christian says, peering through the narrow rear window. “I wonder who the fuck it is?”

“Me too. Do we know if it’s a man driving?” I blurt out toward the cradled BlackBerry.

“No, Mrs. Grey. Could be a man or woman. The tint is too dark.”

“A woman?” Christian says.

I shrug. “Your Mrs. Robinson?” I suggest, not taking my eyes off the road.

Christian stiffens and lifts the BlackBerry out of its cradle. “She’s not my Mrs. Robinson,” he growls. “I haven’t spoken to her since my birthday. And Elena wouldn’t do this. It’s not her style.”

“Leila?”

“She’s in Connecticut with her parents. I told you.”

“Are you sure?”

He pauses. “No. But if she’d absconded, I’m sure her folks would have let Flynn know. Let’s discuss this when we’re home. Concentrate on what you’re doing.”

“But it might just be some random car.”

“I’m not taking any risks. Not where you’re concerned,” he snaps. He replaces the BlackBerry in its cradle so we’re back in contact with our security team.

*Oh shit*. I don’t want to rattle Christian right now … later maybe. I hold my tongue. Fortunately, the traffic is thinning a little. I am able to speed over the Mountlake intersection toward the I-5, weaving through the cars again.

“What if we get stopped by the cops?” I ask.

“That would be a good thing.”

“Not for my license.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he says. Unexpectedly, I hear humor in his voice.

I put my foot down again, and hit seventy-five. Boy, this car can move. I love it—she’s so easy. I touch eighty-five. I don’t think I have ever driven this fast. I

was lucky if my Beetle ever hit fifty miles an hour.

"He's cleared the traffic and picked up speed." Sawyer's disembodied voice is calm and informative. "He's doing ninety."

*Shit! Faster!* I press down on the gas and the car purrs to ninety-five miles per hour as we approach the I-5 intersection.

"Keep it up, Ana," Christian murmurs.

I slow momentarily as we glide onto I-5. The interstate is fairly quiet, and I'm able to cross straight over to the fast lane in a split second. As I put my foot down, the glorious R8 zooms forward, and we tear down the left lane, lesser mortals pulling over to let us pass. If I wasn't so frightened, I might really enjoy this.

"He's hit one hundred miles per hour, sir."

"Stay with him, Luke," Christian barks at Sawyer.

*Luke?*

A truck lurches into the fast lane—Shit!—and I have to slam on the brakes.

"Fucking idiot!" Christian curses the driver as we lurch forward in our seats. I am grateful for our seat belts.

"Go around him, baby," Christian says through clenched teeth. I check my mirrors and cut right across three lanes. We speed past the slower vehicles and then cut back to the fast lane.

"Nice move, Mrs. Grey," Christian murmurs appreciatively. "Where are the cops when you need them?"

"I don't want a ticket, Christian," I mutter, concentrating on the highway ahead. "Have you had a speeding ticket driving this?"

"No," he says, but glancing quickly at him, I can see his smirk.

"Have you been stopped?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Charm. It all comes down to charm. Now concentrate. Where's the Dodge, Sawyer?"

"He's just hit one hundred and ten, sir." Sawyer says.

*Holy fuck!* My heart leaps once more into my mouth. Can I drive any faster? I push my foot down once more and streak past the traffic.

"Flash the headlights," Christian orders when a Ford Mustang won't move.

"But that would make me an asshole."

"So be an asshole!" he snaps.

*Jeez. Okay!* "Um, where are the headlights?"

"The indicator. Pull it toward you."

I do it, and the Mustang moves aside, though not before the driver waves his

finger at me in a none-too-complimentary manner. I zoom past him.

"He's the asshole," Christian says under his breath, then barks at me, "Get off on Stewart."

*Yes, sir!*

"We're taking the Stewart Street exit," Christian says to Sawyer.

"Head straight to Escala, sir."

I slow, check my mirrors, signal, then move with surprising ease across four lanes of the highway and down the off-ramp. Merging onto Stewart Street, we head south. The street is quiet, with few vehicles. *Where is everyone?*

"We've been damned lucky with the traffic. But that means the Dodge has, too. Don't slow down, Ana. Get us home."

"I can't remember the way," I mutter, panicked by the fact that the Dodge is still on our tail.

"Head south on Stewart. Keep going until I tell you when." Christian sounds anxious again. I zoom past three blocks but the lights change to yellow on Yale Avenue.

"Run them, Ana," Christian shouts. I jump so hard I floor the gas pedal, throwing us both back in our seats, speeding through the now red light.

"He's taking Stewart," Sawyer says.

"Stay with him, Luke."

"Luke?"

"That's his name."

A quick glance and I can see Christian glaring at me as if I'm crazy. "Eyes on the road!" he snaps.

I ignore his tone. "Luke Sawyer."

"Yes!" He sounds exasperated.

"Ah." How did I not know this? The man has been following me to work for the last six weeks, and I didn't even know his first name.

"That's me, ma'am," Sawyer says, startling me, though he's speaking in the calm, monotone voice he always uses. "The unsub is heading down Stewart, sir. He's really picking up speed."

"Go, Ana. Less of the fucking chitchat," Christian growls.

"We're stopped at the first light on Stewart," Sawyer informs us.

"Ana—quick—in here," Christian shouts, pointing to a parking lot on the south side of Boren Avenue. I turn, the tires screeching in protest as I swerve into the crowded lot.

"Drive around. Quick," Christian orders. I drive as fast as I can to the back, out of sight of the street. "In there." Christian points to a space. *Shit!* He wants me to park it. *Crap!*

“Just fucking do it,” he says. So I do … perfectly. Probably the only time I have ever parked perfectly.

“We’re hidden in the parking lot between Stewart and Boren,” Christian says into the BlackBerry.

“Okay, sir.” Sawyer sounds irritated. “Stay where you are; we’ll follow the unsub.”

Christian turns to me, his eyes searching my face. “You okay?”

“Sure,” I whisper.

Christian smirks. “Whoever’s driving that Dodge can’t hear us, you know.”

And I laugh.

“We’re passing Stewart and Boren now, sir. I see the lot. He’s gone straight past you, sir.”

Both of us sag simultaneously with relief.

“Well done, Mrs. Grey. Good driving.” Christian gently strokes my face with his fingertips, and I jump at the contact, inhaling deeply. I had no idea I was holding my breath.

“Does this mean you’ll stop complaining about my driving?” I ask. He laughs—a loud cathartic laugh.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.”

“Thank you for letting me drive your car. Under such exciting circumstances, too.” I try desperately to keep my voice light.

“Maybe I should drive now.”

“To be honest, I don’t think I can climb out right now to let you sit here. My legs feel like Jell-O.” Suddenly I’m shuddering and shaking.

“It’s the adrenaline, baby,” he says. “You did amazingly well, as usual. You blow me away, Ana. You never let me down.” He touches my cheek tenderly with the back of his hand, his face full of love, fear, regret—so many emotions at once—and his words are my undoing. Overwhelmed, a strangled sob escapes from my constricted throat, and I start to cry.

“No, baby, no. Please don’t cry.” He reaches over and, despite the limited space we have, pulls me over the handbrake console to cradle me in his lap. Smoothing my hair off my face, he kisses my eyes, then my cheeks, and I curl my arms around him and sob quietly into his neck. He buries his nose in my hair and wraps me in his arms, holding me tight, and we sit, neither of us saying anything, just holding each other.

Sawyer’s voice startles us. “The unsub has slowed outside Escala. He’s casing the joint.”

“Follow him,” Christian snaps.

I wipe my nose on the back of my hand and take a deep steadying breath.

“Use my shirt.” Christian kisses my temple.

“Sorry,” I mutter, embarrassed by my crying.

“What for? Don’t be.”

I wipe my nose again. He tips my chin up and plants a gentle kiss on my lips. “Your lips are so soft when you cry, my beautiful, brave girl,” he whispers.

“Kiss me again.”

Christian stills, one hand on my back, the other on my behind.

“Kiss me,” I breathe, and I watch his lips part as he inhales sharply. Leaning across me, he takes the BlackBerry out of its cradle, and tosses it onto the driver’s seat beside my sandaled feet. Then his mouth is on me as he moves his right hand into my hair, holding me in place, and lifts his left to cradle my face. His tongue invades my mouth, and I welcome it. Adrenaline turns to lust and streaks through my body. I clasp his face, running my fingers over his sideburns, relishing the taste of him. He groans at my fevered response, low and deep in his throat, and my belly tightens swift and hard with carnal desire. His hand moves down my body, brushing my breast, my waist, and down to my backside. I shift fractionally.

“Ah!” he says and breaks away from me, breathless.

“What?” I mutter against his lips.

“Ana, we’re in a car lot in Seattle.”

“So?”

“Well, right now I want to fuck you, and you’re shifting around on me … it’s uncomfortable.”

My craving spirals out of control at his words, tightening all my muscles below my waist once more.

“Fuck me then.” I kiss the corner of his mouth. I want him. Now. That car chase was exciting. Too exciting. Terrifying … and the fear has jump-started my libido. He leans back to gaze at me, his eyes dark and hooded.

“Here?” His voice is husky.

My mouth goes dry. How can he turn me on with one word? “Yes. I want you. Now.”

He tilts his head to one side and stares at me for a few moments. “Mrs. Grey, how very brazen,” he whispers, after what feels like an eternity. His hand tightens around my hair at my nape, holding me firmly in place, and his mouth is on mine again, more forcefully this time. His other hand skims down my body, down over my behind and lower still to my mid-thigh. My fingers curl into his overlong hair.

“I’m so glad you’re wearing a skirt,” he murmurs as he slips his hand beneath my blue-and-white-patterned skirt to caress my thigh. I squirm once more on his

lap and the air hisses between his teeth.

"Keep still," he growls. He cups my sex with his hand, and I still immediately. His thumb brushes over my clitoris, and my breath catches in my throat as pleasure jolts like electricity deep, deep, deep inside me.

"Still," he whispers. He kisses me once more as his thumb circles gently around me through the sheer fine lace of my designer underwear. Slowly he eases two fingers past my panties and inside me. I groan and flex my hips toward his hand.

"Please," I whisper.

"Oh. You're so ready," he says, sliding his fingers in and out, torturously slowly. "Do car chases turn you on?"

"You turn me on."

He smiles a wolfish grin and withdraws his fingers suddenly, leaving me wanting. He scoops his arm under my knees and, taking me by surprise, he lifts me and swings me around to face the windshield.

"Place your legs either side of mine," he orders, putting his legs together in the middle of the footwell. I do as I'm told, placing my feet on the floor on either side of his. He runs his hands down my thighs, then back, pulling up my skirt.

"Hands on my knees, baby. Lean forward. Lift that glorious ass in the air. Mind your head."

*Shit!* We really are going to do this, in a public parking lot. I quickly scan the area in front of us and see no one, but feel a thrill coursing through me. I'm in a public lot! This is so *hot!* Christian shifts beneath me, and I hear the telltale sound of his zipper. Putting one arm around my waist and with his other hand tugging my lacy panties sideways, he impales me in one swift move.

"Ah!" I cry out, grinding down on him, and his breath hisses through his teeth. His arm snakes around me up to my neck and he grasps me under my chin. His hand spreads across my neck, pulling me back and tilting my head to one side so he can kiss my throat. His other hand grips my hip and together we start to move.

I push up with my feet, and he tilts himself into me—in and out. The sensation is … I groan loudly. It's so deep this way. My left hand curls around the hand brake, my right hand braced against the door. His teeth graze my earlobe and he tugs—it's almost painful. He bucks again and again into me. I rise and fall, and as we establish a rhythm, he moves his hand around beneath my skirt to the apex of my thighs, and his fingers gently tease my clitoris through the sheer finery of my panties.

"Ah!"

"Be. Quick," he breathes into my ear through gritted teeth, his hand still

curled around my neck beneath my chin. “We need to do this quick, Ana.” And he increases the pressure of his fingers against my sex.

“Ah!” I feel the familiar build of pleasure, bunching deep and thick inside me.

“Come on, baby,” he rasps at my ear. “I want to hear you.”

I moan again, and I am all sensation, my eyes tightly closed. His voice at my ear, his breath on my neck, pleasure radiating out from where his fingers tease my body and where he slams deep inside me, and I am lost. My body takes control, craving release.

“Yes,” Christian hisses in my ear, and I open my eyes briefly, staring wildly at the cloth roof of the R8, and I scrunch them closed again as I come around him.

“Oh, Ana,” he murmurs in wonder, and he wraps his arms around me and rams into me one last time and stills as he climaxes deep inside.

He runs his nose along my jaw and softly kisses my throat, my cheek, my temple as I lie on him, my head lolling against his neck.

“Tension relieved, Mrs. Grey?” Christian closes his teeth around my earlobe again and tugs. My body is drained, totally exhausted, and I mewl. I feel his smile against me.

“Certainly helped with mine,” he adds, shifting me off him. “Lost your voice?”

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Well, aren’t you the wanton creature? I had no idea you were such an exhibitionist.”

I sit up immediately, alarmed. He tenses. “No one’s watching, are they?” I glance anxiously around the car lot.

“Do you think I’d let anyone watch my wife come?” He strokes his hand down my back reassuringly, but the tone of his voice sends shivers down my spine. I turn to gaze at him and grin impishly.

“Car sex!” I exclaim.

He grins back and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Let’s head back. I’ll drive.”

He opens the door to let me climb off his lap and out into the parking lot. When I glance down he’s quickly doing up his fly. He follows me out and then holds the door open for me to climb back in. Strolling quickly around to the driver’s side, he climbs in beside me, retrieves the BlackBerry, and makes a call.

“Where’s Sawyer?” he snaps. “And the Dodge? How come Sawyer’s not with you?”

He listens intently to Ryan, I assume.

“Her?” he gasps. “Stick with her.” Christian hangs up and gazes at me.

*Her!* The driver of the car? Who could that be—Elena? Leila?

“The driver of the Dodge is female?”

“So it would appear,” he says quietly. His mouth presses into a thin angry line. “Let’s get you home,” he mutters. He starts up the R8 with a roar and reverses smoothly out of the space.

“Where’s the, er … unsub? What does that mean by the way? Sounds very BDSM.”

Christian smiles briefly as he eases the car out of the lot and back onto Stewart Street.

“It stands for Unknown Subject. Ryan is ex-FBI.”

“Ex-FBI?”

“Don’t ask.” Christian shakes his head. It’s obvious he’s deep in contemplation.

“Well, where is this female unsub?”

“On the I-5, heading south.” He glances at me, his eyes grim.

*Whoa*—from passionate to calm to anxious in the space of a few moments. I reach over and caress his thigh, running my fingers leisurely up the inside seam of his jeans, hoping to improve his mood. He takes his hand off the steering wheel and stops the slow ascent of my hand.

“No,” he says. “We’ve made it this far. You don’t want me to have an accident three blocks from home.” He raises my hand to his lips and plants a cool kiss on my index finger to take the sting out of his rebuke. Cool, calm, authoritative … My Fifty. And for the first time in a while he makes me feel like a wayward child. I withdraw my hand and sit quietly for a moment.

“Female?”

“Apparently so.” He sighs, turns into the underground garage at Escala, and punches the access code into the security keypad. The gate swings open and he drives on, smoothly parking the R8 in its designated space.

“I really like this car,” I murmur.

“Me too. And I like how you handled it—and how you managed not to break it.”

“You can buy me one for my birthday.” I smirk at him.

Christian’s mouth drops open as I climb out of the car.

“A white one, I think,” I add, leaning down and grinning at him.

He smiles. “Anastasia Grey, you never cease to amaze me.”

I shut the door and walk to the end of the car to wait for him. Gracefully he climbs out, watching me with that look … that look that calls to something deep inside me. I know this look well. Once he’s in front of me, he leans down and whispers, “You like the car. I like the car. I’ve fucked you in it … perhaps I should fuck you on it.”

I gasp. And a sleek silver BMW pulls into the garage. Christian glances at it anxiously, then with annoyance and gives me a sly smile.

"But it looks like we have company. Come." He grabs my hand and heads for the garage elevator. He pushes the "call" button and as we wait, the driver of the BMW joins us. He's young, casually dressed, with long, layered, dark hair. He looks like he works in the media.

"Hi," he says, smiling warmly at us.

Christian puts his arm around me and nods politely.

"I've just moved in. Apartment sixteen."

"Hello." I return his smile. He has kind, soft brown eyes.

The elevator arrives and we all walk in. Christian glances down at me, his expression unreadable.

"You're Christian Grey," the young man says.

Christian gives him a tight smile.

"Noah Logan." He holds out his hand. Reluctantly, Christian takes it. "Which floor?" Noah asks.

"I have to input a code."

"Oh."

"Penthouse."

"Oh." Noah smiles broadly. "Of course." He presses the button for the eighth floor and the doors close. "Mrs. Grey, I presume."

"Yes." I give him a polite smile and we shake hands. Noah flushes a little as he gazes at me a fraction too long. I mirror his flush and Christian's arm tightens around me.

"When did you move in?" I ask.

"Last weekend. I love the place."

There's an awkward pause before the elevator stops at Noah's floor.

"Great to meet you both," he says, sounding relieved, and steps out. The doors close silently behind him. Christian taps in the entry code and the elevator ascends again.

"He seemed nice," I murmur. "I've never met any of the neighbors before."

Christian scowls. "I prefer it that way."

"That's because you're a hermit. I thought he was pleasant enough."

"A hermit?"

"Hermit. Stuck in your ivory tower," I state matter-of-factly. Christian's lips twitch with amusement.

"Our ivory tower. And I think you have another name to add to the list of your admirers, Mrs. Grey."

I roll my eyes. "Christian, you think everyone is an admirer."

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

My pulse quickens. “I sure did,” I whisper, my breath catching in my throat.

He cocks his head to one side, wearing his smoldering, arrogant, amused expression. “What shall we do about that?”

“Something rough.”

He blinks to hide his surprise. “Rough?”

“Please.”

“You want more?”

I nod slowly. The doors to the elevator open and we’re home.

“How rough?” he breathes, his eyes darkening.

I gaze at him, saying nothing. He closes his eyes for a moment, and then grabs my hand and hauls me into the foyer.

When we burst through the double doors, Sawyer is standing in the hallway, looking expectantly at the two of us.

“Sawyer, I’d like to be debriefed in an hour,” Christian says.

“Yes, sir.” Turning, Sawyer heads back into Taylor’s office.

*We have an hour!*

Christian glances down at me. “Rough?”

I nod.

“Well, Mrs. Grey, you’re in luck. I’m taking requests today.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Do you have anything in mind?" Christian murmurs, pinning me with his bold gaze. I shrug, suddenly breathless and agitated. I don't know if it's the chase, the adrenaline, my earlier bad mood—I don't understand, but I want this, and I want it badly. A puzzled expression flits across Christian's face. "Kinky fuckery?" he asks, his words a soft caress.

I nod, feeling my face flame. Why am I embarrassed by this? I have done all manner of kinky fuckery with this man. *He's my husband, damn it!* Am I embarrassed because I want this and I'm ashamed to admit it? My subconscious glares at me. *Stop over-thinking*.

"Carte blanche?" He whispers the question, eyeing me speculatively as if he's trying to read my mind.

*Carte blanche?* Holy fuck—what will that entail? "Yes," I murmur nervously, as excitement blooms deep inside me. He smiles a slow, sexy smile.

"Come," he says and tugs me toward the stairs. His intention is clear. *Playroom!*

At the top of the stairs, he releases my hand and unlocks the playroom door. The key is on the *Yes Seattle* keychain that I gave him not so long ago.

"After you, Mrs. Grey," he says and swings the door open.

The playroom smells reassuringly familiar, of leather and wood and fresh polish. I blush, knowing that Mrs. Jones must have been in here cleaning while we were away on our honeymoon. As we enter, Christian switches on the lights and the dark red walls are illuminated with soft, diffused light. I stand gazing at him, anticipation running thick and heavy through my veins.

*What will he do?* He locks the door and turns. Inclining his head to one side, he regards me thoughtfully and then shakes his head, amused.

"What do you want, Anastasia?" he asks gently.

"You." My response is breathy.

He smirks. "You've got me. You've had me since you fell into my office."

"Surprise me then, Mr. Grey."

His mouth twists with repressed humor and carnal promise. "As you wish, Mrs. Grey." He folds his arms and raises one long index finger to his lips while

he appraises me. “I think we’ll start by ridding you of your clothes.” He steps forward. Grasping the front of my short denim jacket, he opens it and pushes it over my shoulders so it falls to the floor. He clasps the hem of my black camisole.

“Lift your arms.”

I obey, and he peels it off over my head. Leaning down, he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his eyes glowing with an alluring mix of lust and love. The camisole joins my jacket on the floor.

“Here,” I whisper, gazing nervously at him as I remove the hair tie from around my wrist and hold it up for him. He stills, and his eyes widen briefly but give nothing away. Finally, he takes the small band.

“Turn around,” he orders.

Relieved, I smile to myself and oblige immediately. Looks like we’ve overcome that little hurdle. He gathers my hair and braids it quickly and efficiently before fastening it with the tie. He tugs the braid, pulling my head back.

“Good thinking, Mrs. Grey,” he whispers in my ear, then nips my earlobe. “Now turn around and take your skirt off. Let it fall to the floor.” He releases me and steps back as I turn to face him. Not taking my eyes off his, I unbutton the waistband of my skirt and ease the zipper down. The full skirt fans out and falls to the floor, pooling at my feet.

“Step out from your skirt,” he orders. As I step toward him, he kneels swiftly down in front of me and grasps my right ankle. Deftly, he unbuckles my sandals one at a time while I lean forward, balancing myself with a hand on the wall under the pegs that used to hold all his whips, crops, and paddles. The flogger and the riding crop are the only implements that remain. I eye them with curiosity. *Will he use those?*

Having removed my shoes so I’m just in my lacy bra and panties, Christian sits back on his heels, gazing up at me. “You’re a fine sight, Mrs. Grey.” Suddenly he kneels up, grabs my hips, and pulls me forward, burying his nose in the apex of my thighs. “And you smell of you and me and sex,” he says, inhaling sharply. “It’s intoxicating.” He kisses me through my lace panties, while I gasp at his words—my insides liquefying. He’s just so … *naughty*. Gathering up my clothes and sandals, he stands in one swift, graceful move, like an athlete.

“Go and stand beside the table,” he says calmly, pointing with his chin. Turning, he strides over to the museum chest of wonder.

He glances back and smirks at me. “Face the wall,” he commands. “That way you won’t know what I’m planning. We aim to please, Mrs. Grey, and you wanted a surprise.”

I turn away from him, listening acutely—my ears suddenly sensitive to the slightest sound. He's good at this—building my expectations, stoking my desire … making me wait. I hear him put my shoes down and, I think, my clothes on the chest, followed by the telltale clatter of his shoes as they drop to the floor, one at a time. Hmm … love barefoot Christian. A moment later, I hear him pull open a drawer.

*Toys!* Oh, I love, love, love this anticipation. The drawer closes and my breathing spikes. How can the sound of a drawer render me a quivering mess? It makes no sense. The subtle hiss of the sound system coming to life tells me it's going to be a musical interlude. A lone piano starts, muted and soft, and mournful chords fill the room. It's not a tune I know. The piano is joined by an electric guitar. *What is this?* A man's voice speaks and I can just make out the words, something about not being frightened of dying.

Christian pads leisurely toward me, his bare feet slapping on the wooden floor. I sense him behind me as a woman starts to sing … wail … sing?

"Rough, you say, Mrs. Grey?" he breathes in my left ear.

"Hmm."

"You must tell me to stop if it's too much. If you say stop, I will stop immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I need your promise."

I inhale sharply. *Shit, what is he going to do?* "I promise," I murmur breathlessly, recalling his words from earlier: *I don't want to hurt you, but I'm more than happy to play*.

"Good girl." Leaning down, he plants a kiss on my naked shoulder, then hooks a finger beneath my bra strap and traces a line across my back beneath the strap. I want to moan. How does he make the slightest touch so erotic?

"Take it off," he whispers in my ear, and hurriedly I oblige and let my bra fall to the floor.

His hands skim down my back, and he hooks both of his thumbs into my panties and slides them down my legs.

"Step," he orders. Once more I do as I'm told, stepping out of my panties. He plants a kiss on my backside and stands.

"I am going to blindfold you so that everything will be more intense." He slips an airline eye mask over my eyes, and my world is plunged into darkness. The woman singing moans incoherently … a haunting, heartfelt melody.

"Bend down and lie flat on the table." His words are softly spoken. "Now."

Without hesitation, I bend over the side of the table and rest my torso on the highly polished wood, my face flush against the hard surface. It's cool against

my skin and it smells vaguely of beeswax with a citrus tang.

"Stretch your arms up and hold on to the edge."

*Okay* … Reaching forward, I clutch the far edge of the table. It's quite wide, so my arms are fully extended.

"If you let go, I will spank you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to spank you, Anastasia?"

Everything south of my waist tightens deliciously. I realize I've wanted this since he threatened me during lunch, and neither the car chase nor our subsequent intimate encounter has sated this need.

"Yes." My voice is a hoarse whisper.

"Why?"

Oh … do I have to have a reason? I shrug.

"Tell me," he coaxes.

"Um …"

And from out of nowhere he smacks me hard.

"Ah!" I cry out.

"Hush now."

He gently rubs my behind where he's hit me. Then he leans over me, his hips digging into my backside, plants a kiss between my shoulder blades, and trails kisses across my back. He's taken his shirt off, so his chest hair tickles my back, and his erection presses against me through the rough fabric of his jeans.

"Open your legs," he orders.

I move my legs apart.

"Wider."

I groan and spread my legs wider.

"Good girl," he breathes. He traces his finger down my back, along the crack between my buttocks, and over my anus, which shrinks at his touch.

"We're going to have with some fun with this," he whispers.

*Fuck!*

His finger continues down over my perineum and slowly slides into me.

"I see you're very wet, Anastasia. From earlier or from now?"

I groan and he eases his finger in and out of me, over and over. I push back on his hand, relishing the intrusion.

"Oh, Ana, I think it's both. I think you love being here, like this. Mine."

*I do—oh, I do*. He withdraws his finger and smacks me hard once more.

"Tell me," he whispers, his voice hoarse and urgent.

"Yes, I do," I whimper.

He smacks me hard once more so I cry out, then sticks two fingers inside me.

He withdraws them immediately, spreading the moisture up, over, and around my anus.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, breathless. *Oh my … is he going to fuck my ass?*

"It's not what you think," he murmurs reassuringly. "I told you, one step at time with this, baby." I hear the quiet spurt of some liquid, presumably from a tube, then his fingers are massaging me *there* again. Lubricating me … *there!* I squirm as my fear collides with my excitement of the unknown. He smacks me once more, lower, so he hits my sex. I groan. It feels … so good.

"Keep still," he says. "And don't let go."

"Ah."

"This is lube." He spreads some more on me. I try not to wriggle beneath him, but my heart is pounding, my pulse haywire, as desire and anxiety pump through me.

"I have wanted to do this to you for some time now, Ana."

I groan. And I feel something cool, metallically cool, run down my spine.

"I have a small present for you here," Christian whispers.

An image from our show-and-tell springs to mind. *Holy crap*. A butt plug. Christian runs it down the parting between my buttocks.

*Oh my*.

"I am going to push this inside you, very slowly."

I gasp, anticipation and anxiety charging through me.

"Will it hurt?"

"No, baby. It's small. Once it's inside you, I'm going to fuck you real hard."

I practically convulse. Bending over me, he kisses me once more between my shoulder blades.

"Ready?" he whispers.

*Ready?* Am I ready for this?

"Yes," I mutter quietly, my mouth dry. He runs another finger down past my ass and perineum and slips it inside me. Fuck, it's his thumb. He cups my sex and his fingers gently caress my clitoris. I moan … it feels … good. And gently, while his fingers and thumb work their magic, he pushes the cold plug slowly into me.

"Ah!" I groan loudly at the unfamiliar sensation, my muscles protesting at the intrusion. He circles his thumb inside me and pushes the plug harder, and it slips in easily, and I don't know if it's because I'm so turned on or if he's distracted me with his expert fingers, but my body seems to accept it. It's heavy … and strange … *there!*

"Oh, baby."

And I can feel it … where his thumb swirls inside me … and the plug presses against … oh, ah … He slowly twists the plug, eliciting a long drawn-out moan from me.

"Christian," I mumble, his name a garbled mantra, as I adjust to the sensation.

"Good girl," he murmurs. He runs his free hand down my side until it reaches my hip. Slowly he withdraws his thumb, and I hear the telltale sound of his zipper opening. Grasping my other hip, he pulls me back and parts my legs farther, his foot pushing against mine. "Don't let go of the table, Ana," he warns.

"No," I gasp.

"Something rough? Tell me if I'm too rough. Understand?"

"Yes," I whisper, and he slams into me and pulls me onto him at the same time, jolting the plug forward, deeper …

"Fuck!" I cry out.

He stills, his breathing harsher, and my panting matches his. I try to assimilate all the sensations: the delicious fullness, the tantalizing feeling that I am doing something forbidden, the erotic pleasure that spirals outward from deep within me. He pulls gently on the plug.

*Oh my* … I moan, and I hear his sharp intake of breath—a gasp of pure, unadulterated pleasure. It heats my blood. Have I ever felt so wanton … so—

"Again?" he whispers.

"Yes."

"Stay flat," he orders. He eases out of me and rams into me again.

*Oh … I wanted this*. "Yes," I hiss.

And he picks up the pace, his breathing more labored, matching my own as he thrashes into me.

"Oh, Ana," he gasps. He moves one of his hands from my hips and twists the plug again, tugging it slowly, pulling it out and pushing it back in. The feeling is indescribable, and I think I'm going to pass out on the table. He never misses a beat as he takes me, again and again, moving strong and hard inside me, my insides tightening and quivering.

"Oh fuck," I moan. This is going to rip me apart.

"Yes, baby," he hisses.

"Please," I beg him, and I don't know what for—to stop, to never stop, to twist the plug again. My insides are tightening around him and the plug.

"That's right," he breathes, and he slaps me hard on my right buttock, and I come—again and again, falling, falling, spinning, pulsing around and around—and Christian gently pulls the plug out.

*"Fuck!"* I scream, and Christian grabs my hips and climaxes loudly, holding me still.

THE WOMAN IS STILL singing. Christian always puts songs on repeat in here. Strange. I am curled in his arms on his lap, our legs tangled together, with my head resting against his chest. We're on the floor of the playroom by the table.

"Welcome back," he says, peeling the blindfold off me. I blink as my eyes adjust to the muted light. Tipping my chin back, he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his eyes focused on and anxiously searching mine. I reach up to caress his face. He smiles.

"Well, did I fulfill the brief?" he asks, amused.

I frown. "Brief?"

"You wanted rough," he says gently.

I grin, because I just can't help it. "Yes. I think you did …"

He raises his eyebrows and grins back at me. "I'm very glad to hear it. You look thoroughly well fucked and beautiful at this moment." He caresses my face, his long fingers stroking my cheek.

"I feel it," I purr.

He reaches down and kisses me tenderly, his lips soft and warm and giving against mine. "You never disappoint." He leans back to gaze down at me. "How do you feel?" His voice is soft with concern.

"Good," I murmur, feeling a flush creep across my face. "Thoroughly well fucked." I smile shyly.

"Why, Mrs. Grey, you have a dirty, dirty mouth." Christian feigns an offended expression, but I can hear his amusement.

"That's because I'm married to a dirty, dirty boy, Mr. Grey."

He grins a ridiculously stupid grin and it's infectious. "I'm glad you're married to him." He gently takes hold of my braid, lifts it to his lips, and kisses the end with reverence, his eyes glowing with love. Oh my … did I ever have a chance of resisting this man?

I reach for his left hand and plant a kiss on his wedding ring, a plain platinum band matching my own. "Mine," I whisper.

"Yours," he responds. He curls his arms around me and presses his nose into my hair. "Shall I run you a bath?"

"Hmm. Only if you join me in it."

"Okay," he says. He sets me onto my feet and stands up beside me. He's still wearing his jeans.

"Will you wear your … er … other jeans?"

He frowns down at me. "Other jeans?"

"The ones you used to wear in here."

"Those jeans?" he murmurs, blinking with perplexed surprise.

"You look very hot in them."

“Do I?”

“Yeah … I mean, really hot.”

He smiles shyly. “Well, for you, Mrs. Grey, maybe I will.” He bends to kiss me, then grabs the small bowl on the table that contains the butt plug, the tube of lubricant, the blindfold, and my panties.

“Who cleans these toys?” I ask as I follow him over to the chest.

He frowns at me, as if not understanding the question. “Me. Mrs. Jones.”

“What?”

He nods, amused and embarrassed, I think. He switches off the music. “Well —um …”

“Your subs used to do it?” I finish his sentence. He gives me an apologetic shrug.

“Here.” He hands me his shirt and I put it on, wrapping it around myself. His scent still clings to the linen, and my chagrin about butt plug washing is forgotten. He leaves the items on the chest. Taking my hand, he unlocks the playroom door, then leads me out and downstairs. I follow him meekly.

The anxiety, the bad mood, the thrill, fear, and excitement of the car chase have all gone. I’m relaxed—finally sated and calm. As we enter our bathroom, I yawn loudly and stretch … at ease with myself for a change.

“What is it?” Christian asks as he turns on the faucet.

I shake my head.

“Tell me,” he asks softly. He spills jasmine bath oil into the running water, filling the room with its sweet, sensual scent.

I flush. “I just feel better.”

He smiles. “Yes, you’ve been in a strange mood today, Mrs. Grey.” Standing, he pulls me into his arms. “I know you’re worrying about these recent events. I’m sorry you’re caught up in them. I don’t know if it’s a vendetta, an ex-employee, or a business rival. If anything were to happen to you because of me —” His voice drops to a pained whisper. I curl my arms around him.

“What if something happens to you, Christian?” I voice my fear.

He gazes down at me. “We’ll figure this out. Now let’s get you out of this shirt and into this bath.”

“Shouldn’t you talk to Sawyer?”

“He can wait.” His mouth hardens, and I feel a sudden pang of pity for Sawyer. What’s he done to upset Christian?

Christian helps me out of his shirt, then frowns as I turn to him. My breasts still bear faded bruises from the love bites he gave me during our honeymoon, but I decide not to tease him about them.

“I wonder if Ryan has caught up with the Dodge?”

“We’ll see, after this bath. Get in.” He holds his hand out for me. I climb into the hot, fragrant water and sit tentatively.

“Ow.” My ass is tender, and the hot water makes me wince.

“Easy, baby,” Christian warns, but as he says it, the uncomfortable sensation melts away.

Christian strips and climbs in behind me, pulling me against his chest. I nestle between his legs, and we lie idle and content in the hot water. I run my fingers down his legs, and gathering my braid in one hand, he twirls it gently between his fingers.

“We need to go over the plans for the new house. Later this evening?”

“Sure.” That woman is coming back again. My subconscious gazes up from volume three of *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens* and glowers. I’m with my subconscious. I sigh. Unfortunately, Gia Matteo’s designs are breathtaking.

“I must get my things ready for work,” I whisper.

He stills. “You know you don’t have to go back to work,” he murmurs.

Oh no … not this again. “Christian, we’ve been through this. Please don’t resurrect that argument.”

He tugs my braid so my face tilts up and back. “Just saying …” He plants a soft kiss on my lips.

I PULL ON SWEATPANTS and a camisole and decide to fetch my clothes from the playroom. As I make my way across the hallway, I hear Christian’s raised voice from his study. I freeze.

“Where the fuck were you?”

*Oh shit*. He’s shouting at Sawyer. Cringing, I dash upstairs to the playroom. I really don’t want to hear what he has to say to him—I still find shouty Christian intimidating. Poor Sawyer. At least I get to shout back.

I gather up my clothes and Christian’s shoes, then notice the small porcelain bowl with the butt plug still on top of the museum chest. *Well … I suppose I should clean it*. I add it to the pile and make my way back downstairs. I glance nervously through the great room, but all is quiet. Thank heavens.

Taylor will be back tomorrow evening, and Christian is generally calmer when he’s around. Taylor is spending some quality time today and tomorrow with his daughter. I wonder idly if I’ll ever get to meet her.

Mrs. Jones comes out of the utility room. We startle each other.

“Mrs. Grey—I didn’t see you there.” *Oh, I’m Mrs. Grey now!*

“Hello, Mrs. Jones.”

“Welcome home and congratulations.” She smiles.

“Please call me Ana.”

“Mrs. Grey, I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that.”

Oh! Why must everything change just because I have a ring on my finger?

“Would you like to run through the menus for the week?” she asks, looking at me expectantly.

*Menus?*

“Um …” This is not a question I have ever anticipated being asked.

She smiles. “When I first worked for Mr. Grey, every Sunday evening I would run through the menus for the upcoming week with him and list anything he might need from the grocery store.”

“I see.”

“Shall I take those for you?”

She holds out her hands for my clothes.

“Oh … um. Actually I haven’t finished with these.” *And they are hiding the bowl with the butt plug in it!* I turn crimson. It’s a wonder I can look Mrs. Jones in the eye. She knows what we do—she cleans the room. Jeez, it’s just weird having no privacy.

“When you’re ready, Mrs. Grey. I’d be more than happy to run through things with you.”

“Thank you.” We are interrupted by an ashen-faced Sawyer; he stalks out of Christian’s study and briskly crosses the great room. He gives us both a brief nod, not looking either of us in the eye, and slinks into Taylor’s study. I’m grateful for his intervention, as I don’t wish to discuss menus or butt plugs with Mrs. Jones right now. Offering her a brief smile, I scurry back to the bedroom. Will I ever get used to having domestic staff at my beck and call? I shake my head … one day, maybe.

I dump Christian’s shoes on the floor and my clothes on the bed, and take the bowl with the butt plug into the bathroom. I eye it suspiciously. It looks innocuous enough, and surprisingly clean. I don’t want to dwell on that, and I wash it quickly with soap and water. Will that be enough? I’ll have to ask Mr. Sexpert if it should be sterilized or something. I shudder at the thought.

I LIKE THAT CHRISTIAN has turned the library over to me. It now houses an attractive white wooden desk I can work at. I take out my laptop and check my notes on the five manuscripts I read on our honeymoon.

Yep, I have everything I need. Part of me dreads going back to work, but I can never tell Christian that. He’d seize on the opportunity to make me quit. I remember Roach’s apoplectic reaction when I told him I was getting married and

to whom, and how, shortly afterward, my position was confirmed. I realize now it was because I was marrying the boss. The thought is unwelcome. I am no longer acting editor—I am Anastasia Steele, editor.

I haven't yet plucked up the courage to tell Christian that I am not going to change my name at work. I think my reasons are solid. I need some distance from him, but I know there will be a fight when he finally realizes that. Perhaps I should discuss this with him tonight.

Sitting back in my chair, I start my final chore of the day. I glance at the digital clock on my laptop, which tells me it's seven in the evening. Christian still hasn't emerged from his study, so I have time. Taking the memory card out of the Nikon camera, I load it into the laptop to transfer the photographs. As the pictures upload, I reflect on the day. Is Ryan back? Or is he still on his way to Portland? Has he caught up with the mystery woman? Has Christian heard from him? I want some answers. I don't care that he's busy; I want to know what's going on, and I suddenly feel a tad resentful that he's keeping me in the dark. I rise, intending to go and confront him in his study, but as I do the photos from the last few days of our honeymoon pop up onscreen.

*Holy crap!*

Picture after picture of me. Asleep, so many of me asleep, my hair over my face or fanned out across the pillow, lips parted … shit—sucking my thumb. I haven't sucked my thumb for years! So many photos. I had no idea he'd taken these. There are a few candid long shots, including one of me leaning over the rail of the yacht, staring moodily into the distance. How did I not notice him taking this? I smile at the photos of me curled up beneath him and laughing—my hair flying as I struggle, fighting his tickling, tormenting fingers. And there's the one of him and me on the bed in the master cabin that he took at arm's length. I am cuddled on his chest and he gazes at the camera, young, wide-eyed … in love. His other hand cups my head, and I am smiling like a love-struck fool, but I cannot take my eyes off Christian. Oh, my beautiful man, his ruffled just-fucked hair, his gray eyes glowing, his lips parted and smiling. My beautiful man who cannot bear to be tickled, who could not bear to be touched just a short while ago, yet now he tolerates my touch. I must ask him if he likes it, or whether he lets me touch him for my pleasure rather than his.

I frown, gazing down at his image, suddenly overwhelmed by my feelings for him. Someone out there wants to harm him—first *Charlie Tango*, then the fire at GEH, and that damned car chase. I gasp, putting my hand to my mouth as an involuntary sob escapes. Abandoning my computer, I leap up to find him—not to confront him now—just to check that he's safe.

Not bothering to knock, I barge into his study. Christian is sitting at his desk

and talking on the phone. He looks up in surprised annoyance, but the irritation on his face disappears when he sees it's me.

"So you can't enhance it further?" he says, continuing his phone conversation, though he doesn't take his eyes off me. Without hesitation, I walk around his desk, and he turns in his chair to face me, frowning. I can tell he's thinking, *What does she want?* When I crawl onto his lap, his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I put my arms around his neck and cuddle into him. Gingerly, he puts his arm around me.

"Um … yes, Barney. Could you hold one moment?" He cups the phone against his shoulder.

"Ana, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. Tipping my chin up, he gazes into my eyes. I pull my head free from his hold, tuck it beneath his chin, and curl up smaller on his lap. Bemused, he wraps his free arm more tightly around me and kisses the top of my head.

"Okay, Barney, what were you saying?" He continues, wedging the phone between his ear and his shoulder, and taps a key on his laptop. A grainy black-and-white CCTV image appears on the screen. A man with dark hair wearing pale coveralls comes on the screen. Christian presses another key, and the man walks toward the camera, but with his head bowed. When the man is closer to the camera, Christian freezes the frame. He's standing in a bright white room with what looks like a long line of tall black cabinets to his left. This must be GEH's server room.

"Okay Barney, one more time."

The screen springs to life. A box appears around the head of the man in the CCTV footage and suddenly we zoom in. I sit up, fascinated.

"Is Barney doing this?" I ask quietly.

"Yes," Christian answers. "Can you sharpen the picture at all?" he says to Barney.

The picture blurs, then refocuses moderately sharper on the man consciously gazing down and avoiding the camera. As I stare at him, a chill of recognition sweeps up my spine. There is something familiar in the line of his jaw. He has scruffy short black hair that looks odd and unkempt … and in the newly sharpened picture, I see an earring, a small hoop.

*Holy crap! I know who it is.*

"Christian," I whisper. "That's Jack Hyde."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

You think?" Christian asks, surprised.

"It's the line of his jaw." I point at the screen. "And the earrings and the shape of his shoulders. He's the right build, too. He must be wearing a wig—or he's cut and dyed his hair."

"Barney, are you getting this?" Christian puts the phone down on his desk and switches to hands-free. "You seem to have studied your ex-boss in some detail, Mrs. Grey," he murmurs, sounding none too pleased. I scowl at him, but I'm saved by Barney.

"Yes, sir. I heard Mrs. Grey. I'm running face recognition software on all the digitized CCTV footage right now. See where else this asshole—I'm sorry ma'am—this man has been within the organization."

I glance anxiously at Christian, who ignores Barney's expletive. He's studying the CCTV picture closely.

"Why would he do this?" I ask Christian.

He shrugs. "Revenge, perhaps. I don't know. You can't fathom why some people behave the way they do. I'm just angry that you ever worked so closely with him." Christian's mouth presses into a hard, thin line and he encircles my waist with his arm.

"We have the contents of his hard drive, too, sir," Barney adds.

"Yes, I remember. Do you have an address for Mr. Hyde?" Christian says sharply.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Alert Welch."

"Sure will. I'm also going to scan the city CCTV and see if I can track his movements."

"Check what vehicle he owns."

"Sir."

"Barney can do all this?" I whisper.

Christian nods and gives me a smug smile.

"What was on his hard drive?" I whisper.

Christian's face hardens and he shakes his head. "Nothing much," he says,

tight-lipped, his smile forgotten.

"Tell me."

"No."

"Was it about you, or me?"

"Me." He sighs.

"What sort of things? About your lifestyle?"

Christian shakes his head and puts his index finger against my lips to silence me. I scowl at him. But he narrows his eyes, and it's a clear warning that I should hold my tongue.

"It's a 2006 Camaro. I'll send the license details to Welch, too," Barney says excitedly from the phone.

"Good. Let me know where else that fucker has been in my building. And check this image against the one from his SIP personnel file." Christian gazes at me skeptically. "I want to be sure we have a match."

"Already done, sir, and Mrs. Grey is correct. This is Jack Hyde."

I grin. *See?* I can be useful. Christian rubs his hand down my back.

"Well done, Mrs. Grey." He smiles, his earlier rancor forgotten. To Barney he says, "Let me know when you've tracked all his movements at HQ. Also check out any other GEH property he may have had access to, and let the security teams know so they can make another sweep of all those buildings."

"Sir."

"Thanks, Barney." Christian hangs up.

"Well, Mrs. Grey, it seems that you are not only decorative, but useful, too." Christian's eyes light up with wicked amusement. I know he's teasing.

"Decorative?" I scoff, teasing him back.

"Very," he says quietly, pressing a soft, sweet kiss on my lips.

"You're much more decorative than I am, Mr. Grey."

He grins and kisses me more forcefully, winding my braid around his wrist and wrapping his arms around me. When we come up for air, my heart is racing.

"Hungry?" he asks.

"No."

"I am."

"What for?"

"Well—food actually."

"I'll make you something." I giggle.

"I love that sound."

"Of me offering you food?"

"Your giggling." He kisses my hair, then I stand.

"So what would you like to eat, Sir?" I ask sweetly.

He narrows his eyes. “Are you being cute, Mrs. Grey?”

“Always, Mr. Grey … Sir.”

He smiles a sphinxlike smile. “I can still put you over my knee,” he murmurs seductively.

“I know.” I grin. Placing my hands on the arms of his office chair, I lean down and kiss him. “That’s one of the things I love about you. But stow your twitching palm—you’re hungry.”

He smiles his shy smile and my heart clenches. “Oh, Mrs. Grey, what am I going to do with you?”

“You’re going to answer my question. What would you like to eat?”

“Something light. Surprise me,” he says, mirroring my words from the playroom earlier.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I sashay out of his study and into the kitchen. My heart sinks when I see Mrs. Jones is there.

“Hello, Mrs. Jones.”

“Mrs. Grey. Are you ready for something to eat?”

“Um …”

She is stirring something in a pot on the stove that smells delicious.

“I was going to make subs for Mr. Grey and me.”

She pauses for a heartbeat. “Sure,” she says. “Mr. Grey likes French bread—there is some in the freezer cut to sub length. I’d be happy to make it for you, ma’am.”

“I know. But I’d like to do this.”

“I understand. I’ll give you some room.”

“What are you cooking?”

“This is a Bolognese sauce. It can be eaten anytime. I’ll freeze it.” She smiles warmly and turns the heat right down.

“Um—so what does Christian like in a, um … sub?” I frown, struck by what I’ve just said. Does Mrs. Jones understand the inference?

“Mrs. Grey, you could put just about anything in a sandwich, and as long as it’s on French bread, he’ll eat it.” We grin at each other.

“Okay, thank you.” I skip to the freezer and find the French bread cut to size in Ziploc bags. I place two of them on a plate, pop them in the microwave, and set it to defrost.

Mrs. Jones has disappeared. I frown as I return to the fridge to search for ingredients. I suppose it will be up to me to set the parameters by which Mrs. Jones and I will work together. I like the idea of cooking for Christian on the weekends. Mrs. Jones is more than welcome to do it during the week—the last thing I’ll want to do when I come home from work is cook. Hmm … a bit like

Christian's routine with his submissives. I shake my head. I mustn't overthink this. I find some ham in the fridge, and in the crisper a perfectly ripe avocado.

As I am adding a touch of salt and lemon to the mashed avocado, Christian emerges from his study with the plans for the new house in his hands. He puts them on the breakfast bar, saunters toward me, and wraps his arms around me, kissing my neck.

"Barefoot and in the kitchen," he murmurs.

"Shouldn't that be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen?" I smirk.

He stills, his whole body tensing against me. "Not yet," he declares, apprehension clear in his voice.

"No! Not yet!"

He relaxes. "On that we can agree, Mrs. Grey."

"You do want kids though, don't you?"

"Sure, yes. Eventually. But I'm not ready to share you yet." He kisses my neck again.

Oh … *share?*

"What are you making? Looks good." He kisses me behind my ear, and I know it's to distract me. A delicious tingle travels down my spine.

"Subs." I smirk, recovering my sense of humor.

He smiles against my neck and nips my earlobe. "My favorite."

I poke him with my elbow.

"Mrs. Grey, you wound me." He clutches his side as if in pain.

"Wimp," I mutter disapprovingly.

"Wimp?" he utters in disbelief. He slaps my behind, making me yelp. "Hurry up with my food, wench. And later I'll show you how wimpy I can be." He slaps me playfully once more and goes to the fridge.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" he asks.

"Please."

CHRISTIAN SPREADS GIA'S PLANS out over the breakfast bar. She really has some spectacular ideas.

"I love her proposal to make the entire downstairs back wall glass, but …"

"But?" Christian prompts.

I sigh. "I don't want to take all the character out of the house."

"Character?"

"Yes. What Gia is proposing is quite radical, but … well … I fell in love with the house as it is … warts and all."

Christian's brow furrows as if this is anathema to him.

“I kind of like it the way it is,” I whisper. Is this going to make him mad?

He regards me steadily. “I want this house to be the way you want. Whatever you want. It’s yours.”

“I want you to like it, too. To be happy in it, too.”

“I’ll be happy wherever you are. It’s that simple, Ana.” His gaze holds mine. He is utterly, utterly sincere. I blink at him as my heart expands. *Holy cow, he really does love me.*

“Well”—I swallow, fighting the small knot of emotion that catches in my throat—“I like the glass wall. Maybe we could ask her to incorporate it into the house a little more sympathetically.”

Christian grins. “Sure. Whatever you want. What about the plans for upstairs and the basement?”

“I’m cool with those.”

“Good.”

Okay … I steel myself to ask the million-dollar question. “Do you want to put in a playroom?” I feel the oh-so-familiar flush creep up my face as I ask. Christian’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Do you?” he replies, surprised and amused at once.

I shrug. “Um … if you want.”

He regards me for a moment. “Let’s leave our options open for the moment. After all, this will be a family home.”

I’m surprised by the stab of disappointment I feel. I guess he’s right … although when are we going to have a family? It could be years.

“Besides, we can improvise.”

“I like improvising,” I whisper.

He grins. “There’s something I want to discuss.” Christian points to the master bedroom, and we start a detailed discussion on bathrooms and separate walk-in closets.

WHEN WE FINISH, IT’S nine thirty in the evening.

“Are you going back to work?” I ask as Christian rolls up the plans.

“Not if you don’t want me to.” He smiles. “What would you like to do?”

“We could watch TV.” I don’t want to read, and I don’t want to go to bed … yet.

“Okay,” Christian agrees willingly, and I follow him into the TV room.

We have sat here three, maybe four times total, and Christian usually reads a book. He’s not interested in television at all. I curl up beside him on the couch, tucking my legs beneath me and resting my head against his shoulder. He

switches on the flat-screen television with the remote and flicks mindlessly through the channels.

"Any specific drivel you want to see?"

"You don't like TV much, do you?" I mutter sardonically.

He shakes his head. "Waste of time. But I'll watch something with you."

"I thought we could make out."

He whips his face to mine. "Make out?" He gazes at me as if I've grown two heads. He stops the endless flicking, leaving the TV on an overlit Spanish soap opera.

"Yes." *Why is he so horrified?*

"We could go to bed and make out."

"We do that all the time. When was the last time you made out in front of the TV?" I ask, shy and teasing at the same time.

He shrugs and shakes his head. Pressing the remote again, he flicks through another few channels before settling on an old episode of *The X-Files*.

"Christian?"

"I've never done that," he says quietly.

"Never?"

"No."

"Not even with Mrs. Robinson?"

He snorts. "Baby, I did a lot of things with Mrs. Robinson. Making out was not one of them." He smirks at me and then narrows his eyes with amused curiosity. "Have you?"

I flush. "Of course." Well, kind of …

"What! Who with?"

*Oh no*. I do not want to have this discussion.

"Tell me," he persists.

I gaze down at my knotted fingers. He gently covers my hands with one of his. When I glance up at him, he's smiling at me.

"I want to know. So I can beat whoever it was to a pulp."

I giggle. "Well, the first time …"

"The first time! There's more than one fucker?" He growls.

I giggle again. "Why so surprised, Mr. Grey?"

He frowns briefly, runs a hand through his hair, and looks at me as if seeing me in a completely different light. He shrugs. "I just am. I mean—given your lack of experience."

I flush. "I've certainly made up for that since I met you."

"You have." He grins. "Tell me. I want to know."

I gaze into patient gray eyes, trying to gauge his mood. Is this going to make

him mad, or does he genuinely want to know? I don't want him sulking … he's impossible when he's sulking.

"You really want me to tell you?"

He nods slowly once, and his lips twitch with an amused, arrogant smile.

"I was briefly in Texas with Mom and Husband Number Three. I was in tenth grade. His name was Bradley, and he was my lab partner in physics."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

"And what's he doing now?"

"I don't know."

"What base did he get to?"

"Christian!" I scold—and suddenly he grabs my knees, then my ankles, and tips me up so I fall back onto the couch. He slides smoothly on top of me, trapping me beneath him, one leg between mine. It's so sudden that I cry out in surprise. He grabs my hands and raises them above my head.

"So, this Bradley—did he get to first base?" he murmurs, running his nose down the length of mine. He plants soft kisses at the corner of my mouth.

"Yes," I murmur against his lips. He releases one of his hands so that he can clasp my chin and hold me still while his tongue invades my mouth, and I surrender to his ardent kissing.

"Like this?" Christian breathes when he comes up for air.

"No … nothing like that," I manage as all the blood in my body heads south.

Releasing my chin, he runs his hand down over my body and back up to my breast.

"Did he do this? Touch you like this?" His thumb skims over my nipple, through my camisole, softly, repeatedly, and it hardens under his expert touch.

"No." I writhe beneath him.

"Did he get to second base?" he murmurs in my ear. His hand moves down across my ribs, past my waist to my hip. He takes my earlobe between his teeth and gently tugs.

"No," I breathe.

Mulder blurts from the television something about the FBI's most unwanted.

Christian pauses, leans up, and presses "mute" on the remote. He gazes down at me.

"What about Joe Schmo number two? Did he make it past second base?"

His eyes are smoldering hot … angry? Turned on? It's difficult to say which. He shifts to my side and slides his hand beneath my sweatpants.

"No," I whisper, trapped in his carnal gaze. Christian smiles wickedly.

"Good." His hand cups my sex. "No underwear, Mrs. Grey. I approve." He

kisses me again as his fingers weave more magic, his thumb skimming over my clitoris, tantalizing me, as he pushes his index finger inside me with exquisite slowness.

"We're supposed to be making out." I groan.

Christian stills. "I thought we were?"

"No. No sex."

"What?"

"No sex …"

"No sex, huh?" He withdraws his hand from my sweatpants. "Here." He traces my lips with his index finger, and I taste my slick saltiness. He pushes his finger into my mouth, mirroring what he was doing a moment earlier. Then he shifts so he's between my legs, and his erection pushes against me. He thrusts, once, twice, and again. I gasp as the material of my sweatpants rubs in just the right way. He pushes once more, grinding into me.

"This what you want?" he murmurs and moves his hips rhythmically, rocking against me.

"Yes." I moan.

His hand moves back to concentrate on my nipple once more and his teeth scrape along my jaw. "Do you know how hot you are, Ana?" His voice is hoarse as he rocks harder against me. I open my mouth to articulate a response and fail miserably, groaning loudly. He captures my mouth once more, tugging at my bottom lip with his teeth before plunging his tongue into my mouth again. He releases my other wrist and my hands travel greedily up his shoulders and into his hair as he kisses me. When I pull on his hair, he groans and raises his eyes to mine.

"Ah …"

"Do you like me touching you?" I whisper.

His brow furrows briefly as if he doesn't understand the question. He stops grinding against me. "Of course I do. I love you touching me, Ana. I'm like a starving man at a banquet when it comes to your touch." His voice hums with passionate sincerity.

*Holy cow …*

He kneels between my legs and drags me up to haul off my top. I'm naked beneath it. Grabbing the hem of his shirt, he yanks it over his head and tosses it on the floor, then pulls me onto his kneeling lap, his arms clasped just above my behind.

"Touch me," he breathes.

*Oh my …* Tentatively I reach up and brush the tips of my fingers through the smattering of chest hair over his sternum, over his burn scars. He inhales sharply

and his pupils dilate, but it's not with fear. It's a sensual response to my touch. He watches me intently as my fingers float delicately over his skin, first to one nipple and then the other. They pucker beneath my caress. Leaning forward, I plant soft kisses on his chest, and my hands move to his shoulders, feeling the hard, sculptured lines of sinew and muscle. Whoa … he's in good shape.

"I want you," he murmurs, and it's a green light to my libido. My fingers move into his hair, pulling his head back so I can claim his mouth, fire licking hot and high in my belly. He groans and pushes me back onto the couch. He sits up and rips off my sweatpants, undoing his fly at the same time.

"Home run," he whispers, and swiftly he fills me.

"Ah …" I groan and he stills, grabbing my face between his hands.

"I love you, Mrs. Grey," he murmurs and very slowly, very gently, he makes love to me until I come apart at the seams, calling his name and wrapping myself around him, never wanting to let him go.

I LAY SPRAWLED ON his chest. We're on the floor of the TV room.

"You know, we completely bypassed third base." My fingers trace the line of his pectoral muscles.

He laughs. "Next time." He kisses the top of my head.

I look up to stare at the television screen, where the end credits for *The X-Files* play. Christian reaches for the remote and switches the sound back on.

"You liked that show?" I ask.

"When I was a kid."

Oh … Christian as a kid … kickboxing and *X Files* and no touching.

"You?" he asks.

"Before my time."

"You're so young." Christian smiles fondly. "I like making out with you, Mrs. Grey."

"Likewise, Mr. Grey." I kiss his chest, and we lie silently watching as *The X-Files* finish and the commercials come on.

"It's been a heavenly three weeks. Car chases and fires and psycho ex-bosses notwithstanding. Like being in our own private bubble," I mutter dreamily.

"Hmm," Christian hums deep in his throat. "I'm not sure I'm ready to share you with the rest of the world yet."

"Back to reality tomorrow," I murmur, trying to keep the melancholy from my voice.

Christian sighs and runs his other hand through his hair. "Security will be tight —" I put my finger over his lips. I don't want to hear this lecture again.

“I know. I’ll be good. I promise.” Which reminds me … I shift, propping myself up on my elbows to see him better. “Why were you shouting at Sawyer?”

He stiffens immediately. *Oh shit.*

“Because we were followed.”

“That wasn’t Sawyer’s fault.”

He gazes at me levelly. “They should never have let you get so far in front. They know that.”

I blush guiltily and resume my position, resting on his chest. It was my fault. I wanted to get away from them.

“That wasn’t—”

“Enough!” Christian is suddenly curt. “This is not up for discussion, Anastasia. It’s a fact, and they won’t let it happen again.”

*Anastasia!* I am Anastasia when I am in trouble just like at home with my mother.

“Okay,” I mutter, placating him. I don’t want to fight. “Did Ryan catch up with the woman in the Dodge?”

“No. And I’m not convinced it was a woman.”

“Oh?” I look up again.

“Sawyer saw someone with their hair tied back, but it was a brief look. He assumed it was a woman. Now, given that you’ve identified that fucker, maybe it was him. He wore his hair like that.” The disgust in Christian’s voice is palpable.

I don’t know what to make of this news. Christian runs his hand down my naked back, distracting me.

“If anything happened to you …,” he murmurs, his eyes wide and serious.

“I know,” I whisper. “I feel the same about you.” I shiver at the thought.

“Come. You’re getting cold,” he says, sitting up. “Let’s go to bed. We can cover third base there.” He smiles a lascivious smile, as mercurial as ever, passionate, angry, anxious, sexy—my Fifty Shades. I take his hand and he pulls me to my feet, and without a stitch on, I follow him through the great room to the bedroom.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, CHRISTIAN squeezes my hand as we pull up outside SIP. He looks very much the powerful executive in his dark navy suit and matching tie, and I smile. He’s not been this smart since the ballet in Monte Carlo.

“You know you don’t have to do this?” Christian murmurs. I am tempted to roll my eyes at him.

“I know,” I whisper, not wanting Sawyer and Ryan to overhear me from the front of the Audi. He frowns and I smile.

“But I want to,” I continue. “You know this.” I lean up and kiss him. His frown doesn’t disappear. “What’s wrong?”

He glances uncertainly at Ryan as Sawyer climbs out of the car. “I’ll miss having you to myself.”

I reach up to caress his face. “Me, too.” I kiss him. “It was a wonderful honeymoon. Thank you.”

“Go to work, Mrs. Grey.”

“You, too, Mr. Grey.”

Sawyer opens the door. I squeeze Christian’s hand once more before I climb out onto the sidewalk. As I head into the building, I give him a little wave. Sawyer holds open the door and follows me in.

“Hi, Ana.” Claire smiles from behind the reception desk.

“Claire, hello.” I smile back.

“You look wonderful. Good honeymoon?”

“The best, thank you. How’s it been here?”

“Old man Roach is the same, but security has been stepped up and our server room is being overhauled. But Hannah will tell you.”

Sure she will. I give Claire a friendly smile and head to my office.

Hannah is my assistant. She is tall, slim, and ruthlessly efficient to the point that sometimes I find her a little intimidating. But she’s sweet to me, in spite of the fact that she’s a couple of years older. She has my latte waiting—the only coffee I let her get for me.

“Hi, Hannah,” I say warmly.

“Ana, how was your honeymoon?”

“Fantastic. Here—for you.” I pop the small bottle of perfume I bought for her onto her desk, and she claps her hands with glee.

“Oh, thank you!” she says enthusiastically. “Your urgent correspondence is on your desk, and Roach would like to see you at ten. That’s all I have to report for now.”

“Good. Thank you. And thanks for the coffee.” Wandering into my office, I rest my briefcase on my desk and gaze at the piled up letters. I have a lot to do.

JUST BEFORE TEN THERE’S a timid tap on my door.

“Come in.”

Elizabeth looks around the door. “Hi, Ana. I just wanted to say welcome back.”

“Hey. I have to say, reading through all this correspondence, I wish I was back in the South of France.”

Elizabeth laughs, but her laughter is off, forced, and I cock my head to one side and gaze at her like Christian does to me.

"Glad you're back safely," she says. "I'll see you in a few minutes at the meeting with Roach."

"Okay," I murmur, and she shuts the door behind her. I frown at the closed door. *What was that about?* I shrug it off. My e-mail pings—it's a message from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Errant Wives
**Date:** August 22 2011 09:56
**To:** Anastasia Steele

Wife

I sent the e-mail below and it bounced.

And it's because you haven't changed your name.

Something you want to tell me?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

***Attachment:***

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**FW Subject:** Bubble
**Date:** August 22 2011 09:32
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey
Love covering all the bases with you.
Have a great first day back.
Miss our bubble already.

x

Christian Grey
Back in the Real World CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Shit. I hit reply immediately.

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele
**Subject:** Don't Burst the Bubble
**Date:** August 22 2011 09:58
**To:** Christian Grey

Husband

I am all for a baseball metaphor with you, Mr. Grey.

I want to keep my name here.

I'll explain this evening.

I am going in to a meeting now.

Miss our bubble, too …

PS: Thought I had to use my BlackBerry?

Anastasia Steele
Editor, SIP

This is going to be such a fight. I can feel it. Sighing, I gather up my papers for the meeting.

THE MEETING LASTS FOR two hours. All the editors are there, plus Roach and Elizabeth. We discuss personnel, strategy, marketing, security, and year-end. As the meeting progresses, I grow more and more uncomfortable. There's a subtle change in how my colleagues are treating me—a distance and deference that wasn't there before I left for my honeymoon. And from Courtney, who heads up the nonfiction division, there's downright hostility. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but it goes some way to explaining Elizabeth's odd greeting this morning.

My mind drifts back to the yacht, then to the playroom, then to the R8 speeding away from the mystery Dodge on I-5. Perhaps Christian's right … perhaps I can't do this anymore. The thought is depressing—this is all I've ever wanted to do. If I can't do this, what will I do? As I walk back to my office, I try to dismiss these dark thoughts.

When I sit down at my desk, I quickly check my e-mails. Nothing from Christian. I check my BlackBerry … Still nothing. Good. At least there's been no adverse reaction to my e-mail. Perhaps we'll discuss this tonight per my request. I find that hard to believe, but ignoring my uneasy feeling, I open the marketing plan I was given at the meeting.

AS IS OUR RITUAL on a Monday, Hannah comes into my office with a plate for my packed

lunch courtesy of Mrs. Jones, and we sit and eat our lunches together, discussing what we want to achieve during the week. She brings me up to date with the office gossip, too, which—considering I've been away for three weeks—is sorely lacking. As we're chatting, there's a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Roach opens the door, and standing beside him is Christian. I'm momentarily struck dumb. Christian shoots me a blazing look and stalks in, before smiling politely at Hannah.

"Hello, you must be Hannah. I'm Christian Grey," he says. Hannah scrambles to her feet and holds out her hand.

"Mr. Grey. H-how nice to meet you," she stutters as they shake hands. "Can I fetch you a coffee?"

"Please," he says warmly. With a quick puzzled glance at me, she scuttles out of the office past Roach, who stands as dumbstruck as me on the threshold of my office.

"If you'll excuse me, Roach, I'd like a word with *Ms*. Steele." Christian hisses the *S* sibilantly … sarcastically.

*This is why he's here … Oh shit.*

"Of course, Mr. Grey. Ana," Roach mutters, shutting the door to my office as he departs. I recover my power of speech.

"Mr. Grey, how nice to see you." I smile, far too sweetly.

"*Ms*. Steele, may I sit down?"

"It's your company." I wave at the chair Hannah vacated.

"Yes, it is." He smiles wolfishly at me, the smile not reaching his eyes. His tone is clipped. He's bristling with tension—I can feel it all around me. *Fuck*. My heart sinks.

"Your office is very small," he says as he sits down facing my desk.

"It suits me."

He regards me neutrally, but I know he's mad. I take a deep breath. This is not going to be fun.

"So what can I do for you, Christian?"

"I'm just looking over my assets."

"Your assets? All of them?"

"All of them. Some of them need rebranding."

"Rebranding? In what way?"

"I think you know." His voice is menacingly quiet.

"Please—don't tell me you have interrupted your day after three weeks away to come over here and fight with me about my name." *I am not a freaking asset!*

He shifts and crosses his legs. "Not exactly fight. No."

“Christian, I’m working.”

“Looked like you were gossiping with your assistant to me.”

My cheeks heat. “We were going through our schedules,” I snap. “And you haven’t answered my question.”

There’s a knock on the door. “Come in!” I shout, too loudly.

Hannah opens the door and brings in a small tray. Milk jug, sugar bowl, coffee in a French press—she’s gone all out. She places the tray on my desk.

“Thank you, Hannah,” I mutter, embarrassed that I have just shouted so loudly.

“Do you need anything else, Mr. Grey?” she asks, all breathless. I want to roll my eyes at her.

“No, thank you. That’s all.” He smiles his dazzling, panty-dropping smile at her. She flushes and exits simpering. Christian turns his attention back to me.

“Now, *Ms*. Steele, where were we?”

“You were rudely interrupting my work day to fight with me about my name.”

Christian blinks once—surprised, I think, by the vehemence in my voice. Deftly, he picks at an invisible piece of lint on his knee with long skilled fingers. It’s distracting. He’s doing it on purpose. I narrow my eyes at him.

“I like to make the odd impromptu visit. It keeps management on their toes, wives in their place. You know.” He shrugs, his mouth set in an arrogant line.

*Wives in their place!* “I had no idea you could spare the time,” I snap.

His eyes frost. “Why don’t you want to change your name here?” he asks, his voice deathly quiet.

“Christian, do we have to discuss this now?”

“I’m here. I don’t see why not.”

“I have a ton of work to do, having been away for the last three weeks.”

His eyes are cool and assessing—distant even. I marvel that he can appear so cold after last night, after the last three weeks. *Shit*. He must be mad—really mad. When will he learn not to overreact?

“Are you ashamed of me?” he asks, his voice deceptively soft.

“No! Christian, of course not.” I scowl. “This is about me—not you.” Jeez, he’s exasperating sometimes. Silly overbearing megalomaniac.

“How is this not about me?” He cocks his head to one side, genuinely perplexed, some of his detachment slipping as he stares at me with wide eyes, and I realize that he’s hurt. *Holy fuck*. I’ve hurt his feelings. Oh no … he’s the last person I want to hurt. I have to make him see my logic. I have to explain my reasoning for my decision.

“Christian, when I took this job, I’d only just met you,” I say patiently, struggling to find the right words. “I didn’t know you were going to buy the

company—”

What can I say about that event in our brief history? His deranged reasons for doing so—his control freakery, his stalker tendencies gone mad, given completely free rein because he is so wealthy. I know he wants to keep me safe, but it’s his ownership of SIP that is the fundamental problem here. If he’d never interfered, I could continue as normal and not have to face the disgruntled and whispered recriminations of my colleagues. I put my head in my hands just to break eye contact with him.

“Why is it so important to you?” I ask, desperately trying to hold on to my fraying temper. I look up at his impassive stare, his eyes luminous, giving nothing away, his earlier hurt now hidden. But even as I ask the question, deep down I know the answer before he says it.

“I want everyone to know that you’re mine.”

“I am yours—look.” I hold up my left hand, showing my wedding and engagement rings.

“It’s not enough.”

“Not enough that I married you?” My voice is barely a whisper.

He blinks, registering the horror on my face. Where can I go from here? What else can I do?

“That’s not what I mean,” he snaps and runs a hand through his overlong hair so that it flops onto his forehead.

“What *do* you mean?”

He swallows. “I want your world to begin and end with me,” he says, his expression raw. His comment completely derails me. It’s like he’s punched me hard in the stomach, winding and wounding me. And the vision comes to mind of a small, frightened, copper-haired, gray-eyed boy in dirty, mismatched, ill-fitting clothes.

“It does,” I say without guile, because it’s the truth. “I’m just trying to establish a career, and I don’t want to trade on your name. I have to do *something*, Christian. I can’t stay imprisoned at Escala or the new house with nothing to do. I’ll go crazy. I’ll suffocate. I’ve always worked, and I enjoy this. This is my dream job; it’s all I’ve ever wanted. But doing this doesn’t mean I love you less. You are the world to me.” My throat swells and tears prick the backs of my eyes. I must not cry, not here. I repeat it over and over in my head. *I must not cry. I must not cry*.

He stares at me, saying nothing. Then a frown crosses his face as if he’s considering what I’ve said.

“I suffocate you?” His voice is bleak, and it’s an echo of a question he’s asked me before.

“No … yes … no.” This is such an exasperating conversation—not one that I want to have now, here. I close my eyes and rub my forehead, trying to fathom how we got to this.

“Look, we were talking about my name. I want to keep my name here because I want to put some distance between you and me … but only here, that’s all. You know everyone thinks I got the job because of you, when the reality is—” I stop when his eyes widen. *Oh no … it is because of him?*

“Do you want to know why you got the job, Anastasia?”

*Anastasia? Shit*. “What? What do you mean?”

He shifts in his chair as if steeling himself. Do I want to know?

“The management here gave you Hyde’s job to babysit. They didn’t want the expense of hiring a senior executive when the company was mid-sale. They had no idea what the new owner would do with it once it passed into his ownership, and wisely, they didn’t want an expensive redundancy. So they gave you Hyde’s job to caretake until the new owner”—he pauses, and his lips twitch in an ironic smile—“namely me, took over.”

*Holy crap!* “What are you saying?” So it *was* because of him. *Fuck!* I’m horrified.

He smiles and shakes his head at my alarm. “Relax. You’ve more than risen to the challenge. You’ve done very well.” There’s the tiniest hint of pride in his voice, and it’s almost my undoing.

“Oh,” I murmur incoherently, reeling from this news. I sit right back in my chair, open-mouthed, staring at him. He shifts again.

“I don’t want to suffocate you, Ana. I don’t want to put you in a gilded cage. Well …” He pauses, his face darkening. “Well, the rational part of me doesn’t.” He strokes his chin thoughtfully as his mind concocts some plan.

*Oh, where is he going with this?* Christian looks up suddenly, as if he’s had a eureka moment. “So one of the reasons I’m here—apart from dealing with my errant wife,” he says, narrowing his eyes, “is to discuss what I am going to do with this company.”

*Errant wife!* I am not errant, and I’m not an asset! I scowl at Christian again and the threat of tears subsides.

“So what are your plans?” I incline my head to one side, mirroring him, and I can’t help my sarcastic tone. His lips twitch with the hint of a smile. Whoa—change of mood, again! How can I ever keep up with Mr. Mercurial?

“I’m changing the name of the company—to Grey Publishing.”

*Holy shit*.

“And in a year’s time, it will be yours.”

My mouth drops open once more—wider this time.

“This is my wedding present to you.”

I shut my mouth then open it, trying to articulate something—but there’s nothing there. My mind is blank.

“So, do I need to change the name to Steele Publishing?”

He’s serious. Holy fuck.

“Christian,” I whisper when my brain finally reconnects with my mouth. “You gave me a watch … I can’t run a business.”

He tilts his head to one side and gives me a censorious frown. “I ran my own business from the age of twenty-one.”

“But you’re … you. Control freak and whiz-kid extraordinaire. Jeez, Christian, you majored in economics at Harvard before you dropped out. At least you have some idea. I sold paint and cable ties for three years on a part-time basis, for heaven’s sake. I’ve seen so little of the world, and I know next to nothing!” My voice rises, growing louder and higher, as I complete my tirade.

“You’re also the most well-read person I know,” he counters earnestly. “You love a good book. You couldn’t leave your job while we were on our honeymoon. You read how many manuscripts? Four?”

“Five,” I whisper.

“And you wrote full reports on all of them. You’re a very bright woman, Anastasia. I’m sure you’ll manage.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Crazy for you,” he whispers.

And I snort because it’s the only expression I can manage. He narrows his eyes.

“You’ll be a laughingstock. Buying a company for the little woman, who has only had a full-time job for a few months of her adult life.”

“Do you think I give a fuck what people think? Besides, you won’t be on your own.”

I gape at him. He really has lost his marbles this time. “Christian, I …” I put my head in my hands—my emotions have been through a wringer. *Is he crazy?* And from somewhere dark and deep inside I have the sudden, inappropriate need to laugh. When I look up at him again, his eyes widen.

“Something amusing you, Ms. Steele?”

“Yes. You.”

His eyes widen further, shocked but also amused. “Laughing at your husband? That will never do. And you’re biting your lip.” His eyes darken … in that way. Oh no—I know that look. Sultry, seductive, salacious … No, no, no! Not here.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn, alarm clear in my voice.

“Think about what, Anastasia?”

“I know that look. We’re at work.”

He leans forward, his eyes glued to mine, molten gray and hungry. *Holy shit!* I swallow instinctively.

“We’re in a small, reasonably sound-proofed office with a lockable door,” he whispers.

“Gross moral turpitude.” I enunciate each word carefully.

“Not with your husband.”

“With my boss’s boss’s boss,” I hiss.

“You’re my wife.”

“Christian, no. I mean it. You can fuck me seven shades of Sunday this evening. But not now. Not here!”

He blinks and narrows his eyes once more. Then, unexpectedly, he laughs.

“Seven shades of Sunday?” He arches an eyebrow, intrigued. “I may hold you to that, Ms. Steele.”

“Oh, stop with the Ms. Steele!” I snap and thump the desk, startling us both. “For heaven’s sake, Christian. If it means so much to you, I’ll change my name!”

His mouth pops open as he inhales sharply. And then he grins, a radiant, all-teeth-showing, joyous grin. *Wow* …

“Good.” He claps his hands, and all of a sudden he stands.

*What now?*

“Mission accomplished. Now, I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Grey.”

Gah—this man is so maddening! “But—”

“But what, Mrs. Grey?”

I sag. “Just go.”

“I intend to. I’ll see you this evening. I’m looking forward to seven shades of Sunday.”

I scowl.

“Oh, and I have a stack of business-related social engagements coming up, and I’d like you to accompany me.”

I gape at him. *Will you just go?*

“I’ll have Andrea call Hannah to put the dates in your calendar. There are some people you need to meet. You should get Hannah to handle your schedule from now on.”

“Okay,” I mumble, completely bemused, bewildered, and shell-shocked.

He leans over my desk. *What now?* I am caught in his hypnotic gaze.

“Love doing business with you, Mrs. Grey.” He leans in closer as I sit paralyzed, and he plants a soft tender kiss on my lips. “Laters, baby,” he

murmurs. He stands abruptly, winks at me, and leaves.

I lay my head on my desk, feeling like I've been run over by a freight train—the freight train that is my beloved husband. He has to be the most frustrating, annoying, contrary man on the planet. I sit up and frantically rub my eyes. *What have I just agreed to?* Okay, Ana Grey running SIP—I mean, Grey Publishing. The man is insane. There's a knock on the door, and Hannah pokes her head around.

"You okay?" she asks.

I just stare at her. She frowns.

"I know you don't like me doing this—but can I make you some tea?"

I nod.

"Twinings English Breakfast, weak and black?"

I nod.

"Coming right up, Ana."

I stare blankly at my computer screen, still in shock. How can I make him understand? E-mail!

---

**From:** Anastasia Steele

**Subject:** NOT AN ASSET!

**Date:** August 22 2011 14:23

**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

Next time you come and see me, make an appointment, so I can at least have some prior warning of your adolescent overbearing megalomania.

Yours

Anastasia Grey <——please note name.

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Seven Shades of Sunday

**Date:** August 22 2011 14:34

**To:** Anastasia Steele

My Dear Mrs. Grey (emphasis on My)

What can I say in my defense? I was in the neighborhood.

And no, you are not an asset, you are my beloved wife.

As ever, you make my day.

Christian Grey
CEO & Overbearing Megalomaniac, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

He’s trying to be funny, but I am in no mood to laugh. I take a deep breath and go back to my correspondence.

CHRISTIAN IS QUIET WHEN I climb into the car that evening. “Hi,” I murmur.

“Hi,” he responds, warily—as he should.

“Disrupt anyone else’s work today?” I ask too sweetly.

A ghost of a smile crosses his face. “Only Flynn’s.”

*Oh.*

“Next time you go to see him, I’ll give you a list of topics I want covered,” I hiss.

“You seem out of sorts, Mrs. Grey.”

I glare steadily at the backs of Ryan’s and Sawyer’s heads in front of me. Christian shifts beside me.

“Hey,” he says softly and reaches for my hand. All afternoon, when I should have been concentrating on work, I was trying to figure out what to say to him. But I became angrier and angrier with each passing hour. I’ve had enough of his cavalier, petulant, and, frankly, childish behavior. I snatch my hand out of his—in a cavalier, petulant, and childish manner.

“You’re mad at me?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I hiss. Folding my arms protectively across my body, I gaze out my window. He shifts beside me once more, but I will not let myself look at him. I don’t understand why I’m so mad at him—but I am. Really fucking mad.

As soon as we pull up outside Escala, I break protocol and leap out of the car with my briefcase. I stomp into the building, not checking to see who is following. Ryan scuttles into the foyer behind me and dashes to the elevator to press the “call” button.

“What?” I snap when I’m alongside him. His cheeks redden.

“Apologies, ma’am,” he mutters.

Christian comes and stands beside me to wait for the elevator, and Ryan retreats.

“So it’s not just me you’re mad at?” Christian murmurs dryly. I glare up at him and see a trace of a smile on his face.

“Are you laughing at me?” I narrow my eyes.

“I wouldn’t dare,” he says, holding his hands up like I’m threatening him at gunpoint. He’s in his navy suit, looking crisp and clean with floppy sex hair and

a guileless expression.

"You need a haircut," I mutter. Turning away from him, I step into the elevator.

"Do I?" he says while brushing his hair off his forehead. He follows me in.

"Yes." I tap the code for our apartment into the keypad.

"So you're talking to me now?"

"Just."

"What exactly are you mad about? I need an indication," he asks cautiously.

I turn and gape at him.

"Do you really have no idea? Surely, for someone so bright, you must have an inkling? I can't believe you're that obtuse."

He takes an alarmed step back. "You really are mad. I thought we had sorted all this in your office," he murmurs, perplexed.

"Christian, I just capitulated to your petulant demands. That's all."

The elevator doors open and I storm out. Taylor is standing in the hallway. He takes a step back and quickly shuts his mouth as I steam past him.

"Hi, Taylor," I mutter.

"Mrs. Grey," he murmurs.

Dropping my briefcase in the hallway, I head into the great room. Mrs. Jones is at the stove.

"Good evening, Mrs. Grey."

"Hi, Mrs. Jones," I mutter. I head straight to the fridge and pull out a bottle of white wine. Christian follows me into the kitchen and watches me like a hawk as I take a glass down from the cupboard. He removes his jacket and casually places it on the countertop.

"Do you want a drink?" I ask super sweetly.

"No thanks," he says, not taking his eyes off me, and I know that he's helpless. He does not know what to do with me. It's comical on one level and tragic on another. *Well, screw him!* I am having trouble locating my compassionate self since our meeting this afternoon. Slowly, he removes his tie and then opens the top button of his shirt. I pour myself a large glass of sauvignon blanc, and Christian runs a hand through his hair. When I turn around, Mrs. Jones has disappeared. *Shit!* She's my human shield. I take a slug of wine. *Hmm*. It tastes good.

"Stop this," Christian whispers. He takes the two steps between us so he's standing in front of me. Gently he tucks my hair behind my ear and caresses my earlobe with his fingertips, sending a shiver through me. Is this what I've missed all day? His touch? I shake my head, causing him to release my ear and gaze up at him.

“Talk to me,” he murmurs.

“What’s the point? You don’t listen to me.”

“Yes I do. You’re one of the few people I do listen to.”

I take another swig of wine.

“Is this about your name?”

“Yes and no. It’s about how you dealt with the fact that I disagreed with you.” I glare up at him, expecting him to be angered.

His brow furrows. “Ana, you know I have … issues. It’s hard for me to let go where you’re concerned. You know that.”

“But I’m not a child, and I’m not an asset.”

“I know.” He sighs.

“Then stop treating me as though I am,” I whisper, imploring him.

He brushes the backs of his fingers down my cheek and runs the tip of his thumb across my bottom lip.

“Don’t be mad. You’re so precious to me. Like a priceless asset, like a child,” he whispers, a somber reverent expression on his face. His words distract me. *Like a child*. Precious like a child … a child would be precious to him!

“I’m neither of those things, Christian. I’m your wife. If you were hurt that I wasn’t going to take your name, you should have said.”

“Hurt?” He frowns deeply, and I know that he’s exploring the possibility in his mind. He straightens suddenly, still frowning, and glances quickly at his wristwatch. “The architect will be here in just under an hour. We should eat.”

*Oh no*. I groan inwardly. He hasn’t answered me, and now I have to deal with Gia Matteo. My shitty day just got shittier. I scowl at Christian.

“This discussion isn’t finished,” I mutter.

“What else is there to discuss?”

“You could sell the company.”

Christian snorts. “Sell it?”

“Yes.”

“You think I’d find a buyer in today’s market?”

“How much did it cost you?”

“It was relatively cheap.” His tone is guarded.

“So if it folds?”

He smirks. “We’ll survive. But I won’t let it fold, Anastasia. Not while you’re there.”

“And if I leave?”

“And do what?”

“I don’t know. Something else.”

“You’ve already said this is your dream job. And forgive me if I’m wrong, but

I promised before God, Reverend Walsh, and a congregation of our nearest and dearest to ‘cherish you, uphold your hopes and dreams, and keep you safe at my side.’ ”

“Quoting your wedding vows to me is not playing fair.”

“I’ve never promised to play fair where you’re concerned. Besides,” he adds, “you’ve wielded your vows at me like a weapon before.”

I scowl. This is true.

“Anastasia, if you’re still angry with me, take it out on me in bed later.” His voice is suddenly low and full of sensual longing, his eyes heated.

*What? Bed? How?*

He smiles indulgently down at my expression. Is he expecting me to tie him up? *Holy crap!*

“Seven shades of Sunday,” he whispers. “Looking forward to it.”

*Whoa!*

“Gail!” he shouts abruptly, and four seconds later, Mrs. Jones appears. Where was she? Taylor’s office? Listening? Oh no.

“Mr. Grey?”

“We’d like to eat now, please.”

“Very good, sir.”

Christian doesn’t take his eyes off me. He watches me vigilantly as if I’m some exotic creature about to bolt. I take a sip of my wine.

“I think I’ll join you in a glass,” he says, sighing, and runs a hand through his hair again.

“YOU’RE NOT GOING TO finish?”

“No.” I gaze down at my barely touched plate of fettuccini to avoid Christian’s darkening expression. Before he can say anything, I stand and clear our plates from the dining table.

“Gia will be with us shortly,” I mutter. Christian’s mouth twists in an unhappy scowl, but he says nothing.

“I’ll take those, Mrs. Grey,” says Mrs. Jones as I walk into the kitchen.

“Thank you.”

“You didn’t like it?” she asks, concerned.

“It was fine. I’m just not hungry.”

Giving me a small sympathetic smile, she turns to clear my plate and put everything in the dishwasher.

“I’m going to make a couple of calls,” Christian announces, giving me an assessing look before he disappears into his study.

I let out a sigh of relief and head to our bedroom. Dinner was awkward. I'm still mad at Christian, and he doesn't seem to think he's done anything wrong. *Has he?* My subconscious cocks an eyebrow at me and gazes benignly over her half-moon glasses. Yes, he has. He's made it even more awkward for me at work. He didn't wait to discuss this issue with me when we were in the relative privacy of our own home. How would he feel if I came barging into his office, laying down the law? And to cap it all, he wants to give me SIP! How the hell could I run a company? I know next to nothing about business.

I gaze out at the Seattle skyline bathed in the pearly pink light of dusk. And as usual, he wants to solve our differences in the bedroom … um … foyer … playroom … TV room … kitchen countertop … *Stop!* It always comes back to sex with him. Sex is his coping mechanism.

I wander into the bathroom and scowl at my reflection in the mirror. Coming back to the real world is hard. We managed to skate over all our differences while we were in our bubble because we were so wrapped up in each other. But now? Briefly I am dragged back to my wedding, remembering my concerns that day—marry in haste … No, I mustn't think like this. I knew he was Fifty Shades when I married him. I just have to hang in there and try to talk this through with him.

I squint at myself in the mirror. I look pale, and now I have that woman to deal with.

I'm wearing my gray pencil skirt and a sleeveless blouse. *Right!* My inner goddess gets out her harlot-red nail polish. I undo two buttons, exposing a little cleavage. I wash my face, then carefully redo my makeup, applying more mascara than usual and putting extra gloss on my lips. Bending down, I brush my hair vigorously from root to tip. When I stand, my hair is a chestnut haze around me that tumbles to my breasts. I tuck it artfully behind my ears and go in search of my pumps, rather than my flats.

When I reemerge into the great room, Christian has the house plans spread out on the dining table. He has music playing through the sound system. It stops me in my tracks.

"Mrs. Grey," he says warmly, then looks quizzically at me.

"What's this?" I ask. The music is stunning.

"Fauré's Requiem. You look different," he says, distracted.

"Oh. I've not heard it before."

"It's very calming, relaxing," he says and raises an eyebrow. "Have you done something to your hair?"

"Brushed it," I mutter. I'm transported by the haunting voices. Abandoning

the plans on the table, he walks toward me, a slow saunter in time to the music.

"Dance with me?" he murmurs.

"To this? It's a requiem." I squeak, shocked.

"Yes." He pulls me into his arms and holds me, burying his nose in my hair and swaying gently from side to side. He smells his heavenly self.

Oh … I've missed him. I wrap my arms around him and fight the urge to cry. *Why are you so infuriating?*

"I hate fighting with you," he whispers.

"Well, stop being such an arse."

He chuckles and the captivating sound reverberates through his chest. He tightens his hold on me. "Arse?"

"Ass."

"I prefer *arse*."

"You should. It suits you."

He laughs once more and kisses the top of my head.

"A requiem?" I murmur, a little shocked that we are dancing to it.

He shrugs. "It's just a lovely piece of music, Ana."

Taylor coughs discreetly at the entranceway, and Christian releases me.

"Miss Matteo is here," he says.

*Oh joy!*

"Show her in," Christian says. He reaches over and clasps my hand as Miss Gia Matteo enters the room.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Gia Matteo is a good-looking woman—a tall, good-looking woman. She wears her short, salon-blonde, perfectly layered and coiffed hair like a sophisticated crown. She's dressed in a pale gray pantsuit; the slacks and fitted jacket hug her lush curves. Her clothes look expensive. At the base of her throat, a solitary diamond glints, matching the single-carat studs in her ears. She is well groomed—one of those women who grew up with money and breeding, though her breeding seems to be lacking this evening; her pale blue blouse is undone too far. Like mine. I flush.

"Christian. Ana." She beams, showing perfect white teeth, and holds out a manicured hand to shake first Christian's, then my hand. It means I have to release Christian's hand to reciprocate. She's a fraction shorter than Christian, but then she's in killer heels.

"Gia," Christian says politely. I smile coolly.

"You both look so well after your honeymoon," she says smoothly, her brown eyes gazing at Christian through long mascaraed lashes. Christian puts his arm around me, holding me close.

"We had a wonderful time, thank you." He brushes his lips against my temple, taking me by surprise.

*See … he's mine*. Annoying—infuriating, even—but mine. I grin. *Right now I really love you, Christian Grey*. I slip my hand around his waist, then into his rear pocket of his pants and squeeze his behind. Gia gives us a thin smile.

"Have you managed to look over the plans?"

"We have," I murmur. I gaze up at Christian, who grins down at me, one eyebrow raised in wry amusement. Amused at what? My reaction to Gia or my squeezing his butt?

"Please," Christian says. "The plans are here." He gestures toward the dining table. Taking my hand, he leads me to it, Gia following in our wake. I finally remember my manners.

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask. "A glass of wine?"

"That would be lovely," Gia says. "Dry white if you have it."

*Shit!* Sauvignon blanc—that's a dry white, isn't it? Reluctantly leaving my

husband's side, I head over to the kitchen. I hear the iPod hiss as Christian switches off the music.

"Would you like some more wine, Christian?" I call.

"Please, baby," he croons, grinning at me. Wow, he can be so swoon-worthy at times yet so aggravating at others.

Reaching up to open the cupboard, I'm aware his eyes are on me, and I'm gripped by the uncanny feeling that Christian and I are putting on a show, playing a game together—but this time we're on the same side pitted against Ms. Matteo. Does he know that she's attracted to him and is being too obvious about it? It gives me a small rush of pleasure when I realize maybe he's trying to reassure me. Or maybe he's just sending a message loud and clear to this woman that he's taken.

Mine. *Yeah, bitch—mine*. My inner goddess is wearing her gladiatrix outfit, and she's taking no prisoners. Smiling to myself I collect three glasses from the cupboard, take the opened bottle of sauvignon blanc from the fridge, and place them all on the breakfast bar. Gia is leaning over the table while Christian stands beside her and points at something on the plans.

"I think Ana has some opinions on the glass wall, but generally we're both pleased with the ideas you've come up with."

"Oh, I'm glad," Gia gushes, obviously relieved, and as she says it, she briefly touches his arm in a small, flirty gesture. Christian stiffens immediately but subtly. She doesn't even seem to notice.

*Leave him the fuck alone, lady. He doesn't like to be touched*.

Stepping casually aside so he's out of her reach, Christian turns to me. "Thirsty here," he says.

"Coming right up." He *is* playing the game. She makes him uncomfortable. Why didn't I see that before? That's why I don't like her. He's used to how women react to him. I've seen it often enough, and usually he thinks nothing of it. Touching is something else. Well, Mrs. Grey to the rescue.

I hastily pour the wine, gather all three glasses in my hands, and hurry back to my knight in distress. Offering a glass to Gia, I deliberately position myself between them. She smiles courteously as she accepts it. I hand the second to Christian, who takes it eagerly, his expression one of amused gratitude.

"Cheers," Christian says to us both, but looking at me. Gia and I raise our glasses and answer in unison. I take a welcome sip of wine.

"Ana, you have some issues with the glass wall?" Gia asks.

"Yes. I love it—don't get me wrong. But I was hoping that we could incorporate it more organically into the house. After all, I fell in love with the house as it was, and I don't want to make any radical changes."

“I see.”

“I just want the design to be sympathetic, you know … more in keeping with the original house.” I glance up at Christian, who is gazing at me thoughtfully.

“No major renovations?” he murmurs.

“No.” I shake my head to emphasize my point.

“You like it as it is?”

“Mostly, yes. I always knew it just needed some TLC.”

Christian’s eyes glow warmly.

Gia glances at the pair of us, and her cheeks pink. “Okay,” she says. “I think I get where you’re coming from, Ana. How about if we retain the glass wall, but have it open out onto a larger deck that’s in keeping with the Mediterranean style. We have the stone terrace there already. We can put in pillars in matching stone, widely spaced so you’ll still have the view. Add a glass roof, or tile it as per the rest of the house. It’ll also make a sheltered *alfresco* dining and seating area.”

Got to give the woman her due … she’s good.

“Or instead of the deck, we could incorporate a wood color of your choice into the glass doors—that might help to keep the Mediterranean spirit,” she continues.

“Like the bright blue shutters in the South of France,” I murmur to Christian, who is watching me intently. He takes a sip of wine and shrugs, very noncommittal. *Hmm*. He doesn’t like that idea but he doesn’t overrule me, shoot me down, or make me feel stupid. God, this man is a mass of contradictions. His words from yesterday come to mind: “*I want this house to be the way you want. Whatever you want. It’s yours*.” He wants me to be happy—happy in everything I do. Deep down I think I know this. It’s just—I stop myself. *Don’t think about our argument now*. My subconscious glares at me.

Gia is looking at Christian, waiting for him to make the decision. I watch as her pupils dilate and her glossed lips part. Her tongue darts quickly over her top lip before she takes a sip of her wine. When I turn to Christian, he’s still looking at me—not at her at all. *Yes!* I am going to have words with Ms. Matteo.

“Ana, what do you want to do?” Christian murmurs, very clearly deferring to me.

“I like the deck idea.”

“Me, too.”

I turn back to Gia. *Hey, lady, look at me, not him. I’m the one making the decisions on this*. “I think I’d like to see revised drawings showing the bigger deck and pillars that are in keeping with the house.”

Reluctantly, Gia drags her greedy eyes away from my husband and smiles

down at me. Does she think I'm not going to notice?

"Sure," she acquiesces pleasantly. "Any other issues?"

*Other than you eye-fucking my husband?* "Christian wants to remodel the master suite," I murmur.

There's a discreet cough from the entrance to the great room. We three turn as one to find Taylor standing there.

"Taylor?" Christian asks.

"I need to confer with you on an urgent matter, Mr. Grey."

Christian clasps my shoulders from behind and addresses Gia.

"Mrs. Grey is in charge of this project. She has absolute carte blanche. Whatever she wants, it's hers. I completely trust her instincts. She's very shrewd." His voice alters subtly. In it I hear pride and a veiled warning—a warning to Gia?

He trusts my instincts? Oh, this man's exasperating. My instincts let him run roughshod over my feelings this afternoon. I shake my head in frustration but I'm grateful that he's telling Miss Provocative-and-Unfortunately-Good-at-Her-Job just who's in charge. I caress his hand as it rests on my shoulder.

"If you'll excuse me." Christian squeezes my shoulders before following Taylor. I wonder idly what's going on.

"So … the master suite?" Gia asks nervously.

I gaze up at her, pausing for a moment to ensure that Christian and Taylor are out of earshot. Then, calling on all my inner strength and the fact that I've been seriously piqued for the last five hours, I let her have it.

"You're right to be nervous, Gia, because right now your work on this project hangs in the balance. But I'm sure we'll be fine as long as you keep your hands off my husband."

She gasps.

"Otherwise, you're fired. Understand?" I enunciate each word clearly.

She blinks rapidly, utterly stunned. She cannot believe what I've said. *I* cannot believe what I've just said. But I hold my ground, gazing impassively into her widening brown eyes.

*Don't back down. Don't back down!* I've learned this maddening impassive expression from Christian, who does impassive like no one else. I know that renovating the Greys' main residence is a prestigious project for Gia's architectural firm—a resplendent feather in her cap. She can't lose this commission. And right now I don't give a hoot that she's Elliot's friend.

"Ana—Mrs. Grey … I-I'm so sorry. I never—" She flushes, unsure what else she can say.

"Let me be clear. My husband is not interested in you."

“Of course,” she murmurs, the blood draining from her face.

“As I said, I just wanted to be clear.”

“Mrs. Grey, I sincerely apologize if you think … I have—” She stops, still floundering for something to say.

“Good. As long as we understand each other, we’ll be fine. Now, I’ll let you know what we have in mind for the master suite, then I’d like a run down on all the materials you intend to use. As you know, Christian and I are determined that this house should be ecologically sustainable, and I’d like to reassure him as to where all the materials are coming from and what they are.”

“Of c-course,” she stutters, wide-eyed and frankly a little intimidated by me. This is a first. My inner goddess runs around the arena, waving to the frenzied crowd.

Gia pats her hair into place, and I realize this is a nervous gesture.

“The master suite?” she prompts anxiously, her voice a breathless whisper. Now that I have the upper hand, I feel myself relax for the first time since my meeting with Christian this afternoon. I can do this. My inner goddess is celebrating her inner bitch.

CHRISTIAN JOINS US JUST as we’re finishing up.

“All done?” he asks. He puts his arm around my waist and turns to Gia.

“Yes, Mr. Grey.” Gia smiles brightly, though her smile looks brittle. “I’ll have the revised plans to you in a couple of days.”

“Excellent. You’re happy?” he asks me directly, his eyes warm and probing. I nod and blush for some reason that I don’t understand.

“I’d better be going,” Gia says, again too brightly. She offers her hand to me first this time, then to Christian.

“Until next time, Gia,” I murmur.

“Yes, Mrs. Grey. Mr. Grey.”

Taylor appears at the entrance of the great room.

“Taylor will see you out.” My voice is loud enough for him to hear. Patting her hair once more, she turns on her high heels and leaves the great room, followed closely by Taylor.

“She was noticeably cooler,” Christian says, looking quizzically at me.

“Was she? I didn’t notice.” I shrug, trying to remain neutral. “What did Taylor want?” I ask, partly because I’m curious and partly because I want to change the subject.

Frowning, Christian releases me and begins to roll up the plans on the table. “It was about Hyde.”

“What about Hyde?” I whisper.

“It’s nothing to worry about, Ana.” Abandoning the plans, Christian draws me into his arms. “It turns out he hasn’t been in his apartment for weeks, that’s all.” He kisses my hair, then releases me and finishes his task.

“So what did you decide on?” he asks, and I know it’s because he doesn’t want me to pursue the Hyde line of inquiry.

“Only what you and I discussed. I think she likes you,” I say quietly.

He snorts. “Did you say something to her?” he asks, and I flush. How does he know? At a loss for what to say, I stare down at my fingers.

“We were Christian and Ana when she arrived, and Mr. and Mrs. Grey when she left.” His tone is dry.

“I may have said something,” I mumble. When I peek up at him, he’s regarding me warmly, and for an unguarded moment he looks … pleased. He drops his gaze, shaking his head, and his expression changes.

“She’s only reacting to this face.” He sounds vaguely bitter, disgusted even.

*Oh, Fifty, no!*

“What?” He’s bemused by my perplexed expression. His eyes grow wide in alarm. “You’re not jealous, are you?” he asks, horrified.

I blush and swallow, then stare down at my knotted fingers. *Am I?*

“Ana, she’s a sexual predator. Not my type at all. How can you be jealous of her? Of anyone? Nothing about her interests me.” When I glance up, he’s gaping at me as if I’ve grown an additional limb. He runs a hand through his hair. “It’s only you, Ana,” he says quietly. “It will only ever be you.”

*Oh my*. Abandoning the plans once more, Christian moves toward me and clasps my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“How can you think otherwise? Have I ever given you any indication that I could be remotely interested in anyone else?” His eyes blaze as he stares into mine.

“No,” I whisper. “I’m being silly. It’s just today … you …” All my conflicting emotions from earlier resurface. How can I tell him how confused I am? I’ve been confounded and frustrated by his behavior this afternoon in my office. One minute he wants me to stay at home, the next he’s gifting me a company. How am I supposed to keep up?

“What about me?”

“Oh, Christian”—my bottom lip trembles—“I’m trying to adapt to this new life that I had never imagined for myself. Everything is being handed to me on a plate—the job, you, my beautiful husband, who I never … I never knew I’d love this way, this hard, this fast, this … indelibly.” I take a deep, steadying breath, as his mouth drops open.

“But you’re like a freight train, and I don’t want to get railroaded because the girl you fell in love with will be crushed. And what’ll be left? All that would be left is a vacuous social X-ray, flitting from charity function to charity function.” I pause once more, struggling to find the words to convey how I feel. “And now you want me to be a company CEO, which has never even been on my radar. I’m bouncing between all these ideas, struggling. You want me at home. You want me to run a company. It’s so confusing.” I stop, tears threatening, and I force back a sob.

“You’ve got to let me make my own decisions, take my own risks, and make my own mistakes, and let me learn from them. I need to walk before I can run, Christian, don’t you see? I want some independence. That’s what my name means to me.” There, that’s what I wanted to say this afternoon.

“You feel railroaded?” he whispers.

I nod.

He closes his eyes, agitated. “I just want to give you the world, Ana, everything and anything you want. And save you from it, too. Keep you safe. But I also want everyone to know you’re mine. I panicked today when I got your e-mail. Why didn’t you tell me about your name?”

I flush. He has a point.

“I only thought about it while we were on our honeymoon, and well, I didn’t want to burst the bubble, and I forgot about it. I only remembered yesterday evening. And then Jack … you know, it was distracting. I’m sorry, I should have told you or discussed it with you, but I could never seem to find the right time.”

Christian’s intense gaze is unnerving. It’s as if he’s trying to will his way into my skull, but he says nothing.

“Why did you panic?” I ask.

“I just don’t want you to slip through my fingers.”

“For heaven’s sake, I’m not going anywhere. When are you going to get that through your incredibly thick skull? I. Love. You.” I wave my hand in the air like he does sometimes to emphasize my point. “More than … ‘eyesight, space, or liberty.’ ”

His eyes widen. “A daughter’s love?” He gives me an ironic smile.

“No.” I laugh, despite myself. “It’s the only quote that came to mind.”

“Mad King Lear?”

“Dear, dear mad King Lear.” I caress his face, and he leans into my touch, closing his eyes. “Would you change your name to Christian Steele so everyone would know that you belong to me?”

Christian’s eyes fly open, and he gazes at me as if I’ve just said the world is flat. He frowns. “Belong to you?” he murmurs, testing the words.

“Mine.”

“Yours,” he says, repeating the words we spoke in the playroom only yesterday. “Yes, I would. If it meant that much to you.”

*Oh my*.

“Does it mean that much to you?”

“Yes.” He is unequivocal.

“Okay.” I will do this for him. Give him the reassurance he still needs.

“I thought you’d already agreed to this.”

“Yes, I have, but now that we’ve discussed it further, I’m happier with my decision.”

“Oh,” he mutters, surprised. Then he smiles his beautiful, boyish yes-I-am-really-kinda-young smile, and he takes my breath away. Grabbing me by the waist, he swings me around. I squeal and start to giggle, and I don’t know if he’s just happy or relieved or … what?

“Mrs. Grey, do you know what this means to me?”

“I do now.”

He leans down and kisses me, his fingers moving into my hair, holding me in place.

“It means seven shades of Sunday,” he murmurs against my lips, and he runs his nose along mine.

“You think?” I lean back to gaze at him.

“Certain promises were made. An offer extended, a deal brokered,” he whispers, his eyes sparkling with wicked delight.

“Um …” I am still reeling, trying to follow his mood.

“You reneging on me?” he asks uncertainly, and a speculative look crosses his face. “I have an idea,” he adds.

*Oh, what kinky fuckery is this?*

“A really important matter to attend to,” he continues, suddenly all serious once more. “Yes, Mrs. Grey. A matter of the gravest importance.”

Hang on—he’s laughing at me.

“What?” I breathe.

“I need you to cut my hair. Apparently it’s overlong, and my wife doesn’t like it.”

“I can’t cut your hair!”

“Yes, you can.” Christian grins and shakes his head so his overlong hair covers his eyes.

“Well, if Mrs. Jones has a pudding bowl.” I giggle.

He laughs. “Okay, good point well made. I’ll get Franco to do it.”

*No!* Franco works for the bitch troll! Maybe I could give him a trim. After all,

I cut Ray's hair for years, and he never complained.

"Come." I grab his hand. His eyes widen. I lead him all the way to our bathroom, where I release him and grab the white wooden chair that stands in the corner. I place it in front of the sink. When I look at Christian, he's gazing at me with ill-disguised amusement, thumbs tucked in the front belt loops of his pants, but his eyes are smoking hot.

"Sit." I gesture to the empty chair, trying to maintain the upper hand.

"Are you going to wash my hair?"

I nod. He arches one brow in surprise, and for a moment I think he's going to back down. "Okay." Slowly he begins to undo each button of his white shirt, starting with the one beneath his throat. Nimble, deft fingers move to each button in turn until his shirt hangs open.

*Oh my* … My inner goddess pauses in her celebratory jaunt around the arena.

Christian holds out a cuff with an "undo this now" gesture, and his mouth twitches in that challenging, sexy way he has.

*Oh, cuff links*. I take his proffered wrist and remove the first one, a platinum disc with his initials engraved in a simple italic script—and then remove its matching twin. As I finish I glance at him, and his amused expression is gone, replaced by something hotter … much hotter. I reach up and push his shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

"Ready?" I whisper.

"For whatever you want, Ana."

My eyes stray from his eyes to his lips. Parted so that he can inhale more deeply. Sculptured, chiseled, whatever, it is a beautiful mouth and he knows exactly what to do with it. I find myself leaning up to kiss him.

"No," he says and places both of his hands on my shoulders. "Don't. If you do that, I'll never get my hair cut."

*Oh!*

"I want this," he continues. And his eyes are round and raw for some inexplicable reason. It's disarming.

"Why?" I whisper.

He stares at me for a beat, and his eyes grow wider. "Because it'll make me feel cherished."

My heart practically lurches to a halt. *Oh, Christian … my Fifty*. And before I know it I've circled him in my arms, and I kiss his chest before nuzzling my cheek into his tickly chest hair.

"Ana. My Ana," he whispers. He wraps his arms around me and we stand immobile, holding each other in our bathroom. Oh, how I love to be in his arms. Even if he is an overbearing, megalomaniac arse, he's *my* overbearing

megalomaniac arse in need of a lifetime dose of TLC. I lean back without releasing him.

"You really want me to do this?"

He nods and gives me his shy smile. I grin back at him and step out of his embrace.

"Then sit," I repeat.

He dutifully does, sitting with his back to the sink. I take off my shoes and kick them over to where his shirt lies crumpled on the bathroom floor. From the shower I retrieve his Chanel shampoo. We bought it in France.

"Would Sir like this?" I hold it up in both hands like I'm selling it on QVC. "Hand-delivered from the South of France. I like the smell of this … it smells of you," I add in a whisper, slipping out of my television presenter mode.

"Please." He grins.

I grab a small towel off the towel warmer. Mrs. Jones sure knows how to keep the towels supersoft.

"Lean forward," I order, and Christian complies. Draping the towel around his shoulders, I then turn on the taps and fill the sink with a mix of warm water.

"Lean back." Oh, I like being in charge. Christian leans back, but he's too tall. He shifts the seat forward, then tilts back the entire chair until the top rests against the sink. Perfect distance. He tips back his head. Bold eyes gaze up at me, and I smile. Taking one of the drinking glasses we keep on the vanity, I dip it into the water and tip it over Christian's head, soaking his hair. I repeat the process, leaning over him.

"You smell so good, Mrs. Grey," he murmurs and closes his eyes.

As I methodically wet his hair, I freely gaze at him. *Holy cow*. Will I ever tire of this? Long dark lashes fan across his cheeks; his lips part a little, creating a small, dark diamond shape, and he inhales softly. Hmm … how I long to poke my tongue—

I splash water into his eyes. *Shit!* "Sorry!"

He grabs the corner of the towel and laughs as he wipes the water out of his eyes.

"Hey, I know I'm an arse, but don't drown me."

I lean down and kiss his forehead, giggling. "Don't tempt me."

He curls his hand behind my head and shifts so that he captures my lips with his. He kisses me briefly, making a low contented sound in his throat. The noise connects to the muscles deep in my belly. It's a very seductive sound. He releases me and lies back obediently, gazing up at me with expectation. For a moment he looks vulnerable, like a child. It tugs at my heart.

I squirt some shampoo into my palm and massage it into his scalp, beginning

at his temples and working over the top of his head and down the sides, circling my fingers rhythmically. He closes his eyes and makes that low humming sound again.

"That feels good," he says after a moment and relaxes beneath the firm touch of my fingers.

"Yes, it does." I kiss his forehead once more.

"I like it when you scratch my scalp with your fingernails." His eyes are still closed, but his expression is one of blissful contentment—no trace of his vulnerability remains. Jeez, how much his mood has changed, and I take comfort knowing it's me that's done this.

"Head up," I command, and he obeys. Hmm—a girl could get used to this. I rub the suds into the back of his hair, scraping my nails into his scalp.

"Back."

He leans back, and I rinse off the lather, using the glass. This time I manage not to splash him.

"Once more?" I ask.

"Please." His eyes flutter open and his serene gaze finds mine. I grin down at him.

"Coming right up, Mr. Grey."

I turn to the sink that Christian normally uses and fill it with warm water.

"For rinsing," I say when his look turns quizzical.

I repeat the process with the shampoo, listening to his deep even breaths. Once he's all lathered up, I take another moment to appreciate the fine face of my husband. I cannot resist him. Tenderly, I caress his cheek, and he opens his eyes, watching me almost sleepily through his long lashes. Leaning forward I plant a soft, chaste kiss on his lips. He smiles, closes his eyes, and breathes out a sigh of utter contentment.

Who would have thought after our argument this afternoon he could be this relaxed? Without sex? I lean right over him.

"Hmm," he murmurs appreciatively as my breasts brush his face. Resisting the urge to shimmy, I pull the plug so the sudsy water drains away. His hands move to my hips and around to my behind.

"No fondling the help," I murmur, feigning disapproval.

"Don't forget I'm deaf," he says, keeping his eyes closed, as he runs his hands down past my behind and starts to hitch up my skirt. I swat his arm. I'm enjoying playing hairdresser. He grins, big and boyish, like I've caught him doing something illicit that he's secretly proud of.

I reach for the glass again, but this time use the water from the neighboring sink to carefully rinse all the shampoo from his hair. I continue to lean over him,

and he keeps his hands on my backside, thrumming his fingers back and forward, up and down … back and forth … hmm. I wiggle. He growls low in his throat.

"There. All rinsed."

"Good," he declares. His fingers tighten on my behind, and all at once he sits up, his soaked hair dripping all over him. He pulls me down onto his lap, his hands moving from my behind up to the nape of my neck, then to my chin, holding me in place. I gasp with surprise and his lips are on mine, his tongue hot and hard in my mouth. My fingers curl around his wet hair, and drops of water run down my arms; and as he deepens the kiss, his hair bathes my face. His hand moves from my chin down to the top button of my blouse.

"Enough of this primping. I want to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, and we can do it in here or in the bedroom. You decide."

Christian's eyes blaze, hot and full of promise, his hair dripping water onto us both. My mouth goes dry.

"What's it to be, Anastasia?" he asks as he holds me in his lap.

"You're wet," I respond.

He bends his head suddenly, running his dripping hair all down the front of my blouse. I squeal and try to wriggle off him. He tightens his grip around me.

"Oh, no you don't, baby." When he raises his head he's grinning salaciously at me, and I am Miss Wet Blouse 2011. My top is soaked and totally see-through. I'm wet … everywhere.

"Love the view," he murmurs and leans down to run his nose around and around one wet nipple. I squirm.

"Answer me, Ana. Here or the bedroom?"

"Here," I whisper frantically. To hell with the haircut—I'll do it later. He smiles slowly, his lips curling into a sensuous smile full of licentious promise.

"Good choice, Mrs. Grey," he breathes against my lips. He releases my chin and his hand moves to my knee. It glides smoothly up my leg, lifting my skirt and skating over my skin, making me tingle. His lips trail soft kisses from the base of my ear along my jaw.

"Oh, what shall I do to you?" he whispers. His fingers halt at my stocking tops. "I like these," he says. He runs a finger underneath the top and skims it around to my inner thigh. I gasp and squirm once more in his lap.

He groans, low in his throat. "If I'm going to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, I want you to keep still."

"Make me," I challenge, my voice soft and breathy.

Christian inhales sharply. He narrows his eyes and regards me with a hot, hooded expression.

“Oh, Mrs. Grey. You have only to ask.” His hand moves from my stocking tops up to my panties. “Let’s divest you of these.” He tugs gently and I shift to help him. His breath hisses through his teeth as I do.

“Keep still,” he grumbles.

“I’m helping,” I pout, and he seizes my lower lip gently between his teeth.

“Still,” he growls. He slides my panties down my legs and off. Tugging my skirt up so that it’s bunched around my hips, he moves both hands to my waist and lifts me. He still has my panties in his hand.

“Sit. Astride me,” he orders, staring intently into my eyes. I shift, straddling him, and regard him provocatively. *Bring it on, Fifty!*

“Mrs. Grey,” he warns. “Are you goading me?” He gazes at me, amused but aroused. It’s a seductive combination.

“Yes. What are you going to do about it?”

His eyes light up with salacious delight at my challenge, and I feel his arousal beneath me. “Clasp your hands together behind your back.”

*Oh!* I comply obediently, and he deftly binds my wrists together with my panties.

“My panties? Mr. Grey, you have no shame,” I admonish.

“Not where you’re concerned, Mrs. Grey, but you know that.” His look is intense and hot. Putting his hands around my waist, he shifts me so I am sitting a little farther back on his lap. Water still drips down his neck and over his chest. I want to bend forward and lick the drips off, but it’s trickier now that I am restrained.

Christian caresses both of my thighs and skims his hands down to my knees. Gently he pushes them farther apart and widens his own legs, holding me in that position. His fingers move to the buttons of my blouse.

“I don’t think we need this,” he says. He starts methodically undoing each button on my clinging wet blouse, his eyes never leaving mine. They get darker and darker as he finishes the task, taking his own sweet time about it. My pulse quickens and my breathing shallows. I can’t believe it—he’s hardly touched me, and I feel like this—hot, bothered … ready. I want to squirm. He leaves my damp blouse hanging open and, using both hands, he caresses my face with his fingers, his thumb skimming across my bottom lip. Suddenly, he thrusts his thumb into my mouth.

“Suck,” he orders in a whisper, stressing the *s*. I close my mouth around him and do exactly that. Oh … I like this game. He tastes good. What else would I like to suck? The muscles in my belly clench at the thought. His lips part when I scrape my teeth and bite the soft pad of his thumb.

He groans and slowly extracts his wet thumb from my mouth and trails it

down my chin, down my throat, over my sternum. He hooks it into the cup of my bra and yanks the cup down, freeing my breast.

Christian's gaze never leaves mine. He's watching each reaction that his touch elicits from me, and I'm watching him. It's hot. Consuming. Possessive. I love it. He mirrors his actions with his other hand so both my breasts are free and, cupping them gently, he skims each thumb over a nipple, circling slowly, teasing and taunting each one so that they harden and distend beneath his skillful touch. I try, I really try not to move, but my nipples are hotwired to my groin, so I moan and throw my head back, closing my eyes and surrendering to the sweet, sweet torture.

"Shh." Christian's soothing voice is at odds with the teasing, even-tempo rhythm of his wicked fingers. "Still, baby, still." Releasing one breast, he reaches up behind me and splays his hand around the nape of my neck. Leaning forward, he takes my now bereft nipple into his mouth and sucks hard, his wet hair tickling me. At the same time, his thumb stops skimming across my other elongated nipple. Instead, he takes it between his thumb and forefinger and tugs and twists it gently.

"Ah! Christian!" I groan and buck forward on his lap. But he doesn't stop. He continues the slow, leisurely, agonizing tease. And my body is burning as the pleasure takes a darker turn.

"Christian, please," I whimper.

"Hmm," he hums low in his chest. "I want you to come like this." My nipple gets a brief respite as his words caress my skin, and it's like he's calling to a deep, dark part of my psyche that only he knows. When he resumes with his teeth this time, the pleasure is almost intolerable. Moaning loudly, I writhe on his lap, trying to find some precious friction against his pants. I pull uselessly against my restraining panties, itching to touch him, but I'm lost—lost in this treacherous sensation.

"Please," I whisper, pleading, and pleasure flies through my body, from my neck, right down to my legs, to my toes, tightening all in its wake.

"You have such beautiful breasts, Ana." He groans. "One day I'll fuck them."

*What the hell does that mean?* Opening my eyes, I gape down at him as he suckles me, my skin singing under his touch. I no longer feel my sodden blouse, his wet hair … nothing except the burn. And it burns deliciously hot and low, deep inside me, and all thought evaporates as my body tightens and clenches … ready, reaching … pining for release. And he doesn't stop—teasing, pulling, driving me wild. I want … I want …

"Let go," he breathes—and I do, loudly, my orgasm convulsing through my body, and he stops his sweet torture and wraps his arms around me, clutching me

to him as my body spirals down from my climax. When I open my eyes, he is gazing down at me where I rest against his chest.

"God, I love to watch you come, Ana." His voice is full of wonder.

"That was …" Words fail me.

"I know." He leans forward and kisses me, his hand still at the nape of my neck, holding me just so, angling my head so he can kiss me deeply—with love, with reverence.

I am lost in his kiss.

He pulls away to draw breath, his eyes the color of a tropical storm.

"Now I'm going to fuck you, hard," he murmurs.

*Holy cow*. Grabbing me around the waist, he lifts me from his thighs down to the edge of his knees and reaches with his right hand for the button on the waistband of his navy pants. He runs the fingers of his left hand up and down my thigh, stopping at my stocking tops each time. He's watching me intently. We're face to face and I'm helpless, trussed up in my bra and by my panties, and this has to be one of the most intimate times we've had—me sitting on his lap, staring into his beautiful gray eyes. It makes me feel wanton, but also so connected to him—I am not embarrassed or shy. This is Christian, my husband, my lover, my overbearing megalomaniac, my Fifty—the love of my life. He reaches for his zipper, and my mouth goes dry as his erection springs free.

He smirks. "You like?" he whispers.

"Hmm," I murmur appreciatively. He wraps his hand around himself and moves it up and down … *Oh my*. I gaze up at him through my lashes. Fuck, he's so sexy.

"You're biting your lip, Mrs. Grey."

"That's because I'm hungry."

"Hungry?" His mouth opens in surprise, and his eyes widen a fraction.

"Hmm …" I agree and lick my lips.

He gives me his enigmatic smile and bites his lower lip as he continues to stroke himself. Why is the sight of my husband pleasuring himself such a turn-on?

"I see. You should have eaten your dinner." His tone is mocking and censorious at once. "But maybe I can oblige." He puts his hands on my waist. "Stand," he says softly, and I know what he's going to do. I get to my feet, my legs no longer shaking.

"Kneel."

I do as I'm told and kneel down on the cool tiled floor of the bathroom. He slides forward on the seat of the chair.

"Kiss me," he utters, holding his erection. I glance up at him, and he runs his

tongue over his top teeth. It's arousing, very arousing, to see his desire, his naked desire for me and my mouth. Leaning forward, my eyes on his, I kiss the tip of his erection. I watch him inhale sharply and clench his teeth. Christian cups the side of my head, and I run my tongue over the tip, tasting the small bead of dew on the end. Hmm … he tastes good. His mouth drops open farther as he gasps and I pounce, pulling him into my mouth and sucking hard.

"Ah—" The air hisses through his teeth, and he flexes his hips forward, thrusting into my mouth. But I don't stop. Sheathing my teeth behind my lips, I push down and then pull up on him. He moves both hands so that he fully cups my head, burying his fingers in my hair, and slowly eases himself in and out of my mouth, his breathing quickening, growing harsher. I twirl my tongue around his tip and push down again in perfect counterpoint to him.

"Jesus, Ana." He sighs and screws his eyes shut tightly. He's lost and it's heady, his response to me. *Me*. And very slowly I draw my lips back, so it's just my teeth.

"Ah!" Christian stops moving. Leaning forward he grabs me and pulls me up onto his lap.

"Enough!" he growls. Reaching behind me, he frees my hands with one tug on my panties. I flex my wrists and stare from under my lashes into scorching eyes that gaze back at me with love and longing and lust. And I realize it's me that wants to fuck him seven shades of Sunday. I want him badly. I want to watch him come apart beneath me. I grab his erection and scoot over him. Placing my other hand on his shoulder, very gently and slowly, I ease myself onto him. He makes a guttural, feral noise deep in his throat and, reaching up, pulls off my blouse, letting it fall to the floor. His hands move to my hips.

"Still," he rasps, his hands digging into my flesh. "Please, let me savor this. Savor you."

I stop. *Oh my* … he feels so good inside me. He caresses my face, his eyes wide and wild, his lips parted as he breathes. He flexes beneath me and I moan, closing my eyes.

"This is my favorite place," he whispers. "Inside you. Inside my wife."

*Oh fuck. Christian.* I cannot hold back. My fingers glide into his wet hair, my lips seek his, and I start to move. Up and down on my toes, savoring him, savoring me. He groans loudly, and his hands are in my hair and around my back, and his tongue invades my mouth greedily, taking all that I willingly give. After all our arguing today, my frustration with him, his with me—we still have this. We will always have this. I love him so much, it's almost overwhelming. His hands move to my backside and he controls me, moving me up and down, again and again, at his pace—his hot, slick tempo.

“Ah,” I groan helplessly into his mouth as I’m carried away.

“Yes. Yes, Ana,” he hisses, and I rain kisses on his face, his chin, his jaw, his neck. “Baby,” he breathes, capturing my mouth once more.

“Oh, Christian, I love you. I will always love you.” I’m breathless, wanting him to know, wanting him to be sure of me after our battle of wills today.

He moans loudly and wraps his arms around me tightly as he climaxes with a mournful sob, and it’s enough—enough to push me over the brink once more. I clutch my arms around his head and let go, and I come around him, tears springing to my eyes because I love him so.

“HEY,” HE WHISPERS, TIPPING my chin back and gazing at me with quiet concern. “Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I mutter reassuringly. He smoothes my hair off my face, wipes away a lone tear with his thumb, and tenderly kisses my lips. He is still inside me. He shifts, and I wince as he pulls out of me.

“What’s wrong, Ana? Tell me.”

I sniff. “It’s just … it’s just sometimes I’m overwhelmed by how much I love you,” I whisper.

After a beat, he smiles his special shy smile—reserved for me, I think. “You have the same effect on me,” he whispers, and kisses me once more. I smile, and inside my joy unfurls and stretches lazily.

“Do I?”

He smirks. “You know you do.”

“Sometimes I know. Not all the time.”

“Back at you, Mrs. Grey.”

I grin and gently place feather light kisses over his chest. I nuzzle his chest hair. Christian caresses my hair and runs a hand down my back. He unclasps my bra and pulls the strap down one arm. I shift, and he tugs the strap down the other arm and drops my bra on the floor.

“Hmm. Skin on skin,” he murmurs appreciatively and folds me in his arms again. He kisses my shoulder and runs his nose up to my ear. “You smell like heaven, Mrs. Grey.”

“So do you, Mr. Grey.” I nuzzle him again and inhale his Christian smell, which is now mixed with the heady scent of sex. I could stay wrapped in his arms like this, sated and happy, forever. It’s just what I need after a full day of back-to-work, arguing, and bitch-slapping. This is where I want to be, and in spite of his control freakery, his megalomania, this is where I belong. Christian buries his nose in my hair and inhales deeply. I let out a contented sigh, and I

feel his smile. And we sit, arms clasped around each other, saying nothing.

Eventually reality intrudes.

"It's late," Christian says, his fingers methodically stroking my back.

"Your hair still needs cutting."

He chuckles. "That it does, Mrs. Grey. Do you have the energy to finish the job you started?"

"For you, Mr. Grey, anything." I kiss his chest once more and reluctantly stand.

"Don't go." Grabbing my hips, he turns me around. He straightens then undoes my skirt, letting it drop to the floor. He holds his hand out to me. I take it and step out of my skirt. Now I am dressed solely in stockings and garter belt.

"You are a mighty fine sight, Mrs. Grey." He sits back in the chair and crosses his arms, giving me a full and frank appraisal.

I hold out my hands and twirl for him.

"God, I'm a lucky son of a bitch," he says admiringly.

"Yes, you are."

He grins. "Put my shirt on and you can cut my hair. Like this, you'll distract me, and we'll never get to bed."

I can't help my answering smile. Knowing that he's watching my every move, I sashay over to where we left my shoes and his shirt. Bending slowly, I reach down, pick up his shirt, smell it—*hmm*—then shrug it on.

Christian's eyes are round. He's redone his fly and is watching me intently.

"That's quite a floor show, Mrs. Grey."

"Do we have any scissors?" I ask innocently, batting my eyelashes.

"My study," he croaks.

"I'll go search." Leaving him, I walk into our bedroom and grab my comb from the dressing table before heading to his study. As I enter the main corridor, I notice the door to Taylor's office is open. Mrs. Jones is standing just beyond the door. I stop, rooted to the spot.

Taylor is running his fingers down her face and smiling sweetly at her. Then he leans down and kisses her.

*Holy shit! Taylor and Mrs. Jones?* I gape in astonishment—I mean, I thought … well, I kind of suspected. But obviously they are together! I flush, feeling like a voyeur, and manage to get my feet to move. I scamper across the great room and into Christian's study. Switching on the light, I walk to his desk. Taylor and Mrs. Jones … Wow! I'm reeling. I always thought Mrs. Jones was older than Taylor. Oh, I have to get my head around this. I open the top drawer and am immediately distracted when I find a gun. *Christian has a gun!*

A revolver. *Holy fuck!* I had no idea Christian owned a gun. I take it out, slip

the release, and check the cylinder. It's fully loaded, but light … too light. It must be carbon fiber. What does Christian want with a gun? Jeez, I hope he knows how to use it. Ray's perpetual warnings about handguns run quickly through my mind. His army training was never lost. *These will kill you, Ana. You need to know what you're doing when you're handling a firearm*. I put the gun back and find the scissors. Retrieving them quickly, I bolt back to Christian, my head buzzing. Taylor and Mrs. Jones … the revolver …

At the entrance to the great room, I run into Taylor.

"Mrs. Grey, excuse me." His face reddens as he quickly takes in my attire.

"Um, Taylor, hi … um. I'm cutting Christian's hair!" I blurt out, embarrassed. Taylor is as mortified as I am. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it quickly and stands aside.

"After you, ma'am," he says formally. I think I'm the color of my old Audi, the submissive special. Could this be more embarrassing?

"Thank you," I mutter and dash down the hallway. *Crap!* Will I ever get used to the fact that we're not alone? I dash into the bathroom, breathless.

"What's wrong?" Christian is standing in front of the mirror, holding my shoes. All of my scattered clothes are now neatly piled beside the sink.

"I just ran into Taylor."

"Oh." Christian frowns. "Dressed like that."

*Oh shit!* "That's not Taylor's fault."

Christian's frown deepens. "No. But still."

"I'm dressed."

"Barely."

"I don't know who was more embarrassed, me or him." I try my distraction technique. "Did you know he and Gail are … well, together?"

Christian laughs. "Yes, of course I knew."

"And you never told me?"

"I thought you knew, too."

"No."

"Ana, they're adults. They live under the same roof. Both unattached. Both attractive."

I flush, feeling foolish for not having noticed.

"Well, if you put it like that … I just thought Gail was older than Taylor."

"She is, but not by much." He gazes at me, perplexed. "Some men like older women—" He stops abruptly and his eyes widen.

I scowl at him. "I know that," I snap.

Christian looks contrite. He smiles fondly at me. Yes! My distraction technique was successful! My subconscious rolls her eyes at me—but at what

cost? Now the unmentionable Mrs. Robinson is looming over us.

"That reminds me," he says brightly.

"What?" I mutter petulantly. Grabbing the chair, I turn it to face the mirror above the sinks. "Sit," I order. Christian regards me with indulgent amusement, but does as he's told and sits back down in the chair. I start to comb through his now merely damp hair.

"I was thinking we could convert the rooms over the garages for them at the new place," Christian continues. "Make it a home. Then maybe Taylor's daughter could stay with him more often." He watches me carefully in the mirror.

"Why doesn't she stay here?"

"Taylor's never asked me."

"Perhaps you should offer. But we'd have to behave ourselves."

Christian's brow furrows. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Perhaps that's why Taylor hasn't asked. Have you met her?"

"Yes. She's a sweet thing. Shy. Very pretty. I pay for her schooling."

Oh! I stop combing and stare at him in the mirror.

"I had no idea."

He shrugs. "Seemed the least I could do. Also, it means he won't quit."

"I'm sure he likes working for you."

Christian stares at me blankly, then shrugs. "I don't know."

"I think he's very fond of you, Christian." I resume combing and glance at him. His eyes don't leave mine.

"You think?"

"Yes. I do."

He snorts a dismissive yet content sound as if he's secretly pleased that his staff may like him.

"Good. Will you talk to Gia about the rooms over the garage?"

"Yes, of course." I don't feel the same irritation I did before at the mention of her name. My subconscious nods sagely at me. *Yes … we done good today*. My inner goddess gloats. Now she'll leave my husband alone and not make him uncomfortable.

I am ready to cut Christian's hair. "You sure about this? Your last chance to bail."

"Do your worst, Mrs. Grey. I don't have to look at me, you do."

I grin. "Christian, I could look at you all day."

He shakes his head, exasperated. "It's just a pretty face, baby."

"And behind it is a very pretty man." I kiss his temple. "My man."

He grins shyly.

Lifting the first lock, I comb it upward and snare it between my index and middle finger. I put the comb in my mouth, take the scissors, and make the first snip, cutting an inch off the length. Christian closes his eyes and sits like a statue, sighing contentedly as I continue. Occasionally he opens his eyes, and I catch him watching me intently. He doesn't touch me while I work, and I'm grateful. His touch is … distracting.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm done.

"Finished." I'm pleased with the result. He looks as hot as ever, his hair still floppy and sexy … just a bit shorter.

Christian gazes at himself in the mirror, looking pleasantly surprised. He grins. "Great job, Mrs. Grey." He turns his head from side to side and snakes his arm around me. Pulling me to him, he kisses and nuzzles my belly.

"Thank you," he says.

"My pleasure." I bend and kiss him briefly.

"It's late. Bed." He gives my behind a playful slap.

"Ah! I should clean up in here." There is hair all over the floor.

Christian frowns, as if the thought would never have occurred to him. "Okay, I'll get the broom," he says wryly. "I don't want you embarrassing the staff with your lack of appropriate attire."

"Do you know where the broom is?" I ask innocently.

This stops Christian in his tracks. "Um … no."

I laugh. "I'll go."

AS I CLIMB INTO bed and wait for Christian to join me, I reflect on how differently this day could have ended. I was so mad at him earlier, and he with me. How am I going to deal with this running-a-company nonsense? I have no desire to run my own company. I am not him. I need to head this off at the pass. Perhaps I should have a safeword for when he's being overbearing and domineering, for when he's being an arse. I giggle. Perhaps the safeword should be *arse*. I find the thought very appealing.

"What?" he says as he climbs into bed beside me wearing only his pajama pants.

"Nothing. Just an idea."

"What idea?" He stretches out beside me.

Here goes nothing. "Christian, I don't think I want to run a company."

He props himself up on his elbow and gazes down at me. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's not something that has ever appealed to me."

“You’re more than capable, Anastasia.”

“I like to read books, Christian. Running a company will take me away from that.”

“You could be the creative head.”

I frown.

“You see,” he continues, “running a successful company is all about embracing the talent of the individuals you have at your disposal. If that’s where your talents and your interests lie, then you structure the company to enable that. Don’t dismiss it out of hand, Anastasia. You’re a very capable woman. I think you could do anything you wanted if you put your mind to it.”

*Whoa!* How can he possibly know that I’d be any good at this?

“I’m also worried it will take up too much of my time.”

Christian frowns.

“Time I could devote to you.” I deploy my secret weapon.

His gaze darkens. “I know what you’re doing,” he murmurs, amused.

*Damn it!*

“What?” I feign innocence.

“You’re trying to distract me from the issue at hand. You always do that. Just don’t dismiss the idea, Ana. Think about it. That’s all I ask.” He leans down and kisses me chastely, then skims his thumb down my cheek. This argument is going to run and run. I smile up at him—and something he said earlier today pops unbidden into my mind.

“Can I ask you something?” My voice is soft, tentative.

“Of course.”

“Earlier today you said if I was angry with you, I should take it out on you in bed. What did you mean?”

He stills. “What did you think I meant?”

*Holy shit!* I should just say it. “That you wanted me to tie you up.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Um … no. That’s not what I meant at all.”

“Oh.” I’m surprised by my slight twinge of disappointment.

“You want to tie me up?” he asks, obviously reading my expression correctly. He sounds shocked. I blush.

“Well …”

“Ana, I—” he stops, and something dark crosses his face.

“Christian,” I whisper, alarmed. I move so that I am lying on my side, propped up on my elbow like him. I caress his face. His eyes are large and fearful. He shakes his head sadly.

*Shit!* “Christian, stop. It doesn’t matter. I thought that’s what you meant.”

He takes my hand and places it on his pounding heart. *Fuck!* What is it?

“Ana, I don’t know how I’d feel about you touching me if I were restrained.”

My scalp prickles. It’s like he’s confessing something deep and dark.

“This is still too new.” His voice is low and raw.

Fuck. It was just a question, and I realize that he’s come a long way, but he still has a long way to go. *Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.* Anxiety grips my heart. I lean over and he freezes, but I plant a soft kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“Christian, I got the wrong idea. Please don’t worry about it. Please don’t think about it.” I kiss him. He closes his eyes, groans, and reciprocates, pushing me down into the mattress, his hands clasping my chin. And soon we’re lost … lost in each other again.

## CHAPTER NINE

When I wake before the alarm the following morning, Christian is wrapped around me like ivy, his head on my chest, his arm around my waist, and his leg between mine. And he's on my side of the bed. It's always the same, if we argue the night before, this is how he ends up, coiled around me, making me hot and bothered.

*Oh, Fifty*. He is so needy on some level. Who would have thought? The familiar vision of Christian as a dirty, wretched little boy haunts me. Gently, I stroke his shorter hair and my melancholy recedes. He stirs, and his sleepy eyes meet mine. He blinks a couple of times as he wakes.

"Hi," he murmurs and smiles.

"Hi." I love waking to that smile.

He nuzzles my breasts and hums appreciatively deep in his throat. His hand travels down from my waist, skimming over the cool satin of my nightgown.

"What a tempting morsel you are," he mutters. "But, tempting though you are," he glances at the alarm, "I have to get up." He stretches out, untangles himself from me, and rises.

I lie back, put my hands behind my head, and enjoy the show—Christian stripping for his shower. He is perfect. I wouldn't change a hair on his head.

"Admiring the view, Mrs. Grey?" Christian arches a sardonic brow at me.

"It's a mighty fine view, Mr. Grey."

He grins and throws his pajama pants at me so they almost land on my face, but I catch them in time, giggling like a schoolgirl. With a wicked grin, he pulls the duvet off, puts one knee on the bed, grabs my ankles, and drags me toward him so that my nightdress rides up. I squeal, and he crawls up my body, trailing little kisses on my knee, my thigh … my … oh … *Christian!*

"GOOD MORNING, MRS. GREY," Mrs. Jones greets me. I flush, embarrassed, remembering her tryst with Taylor the night before.

"Good morning," I respond as she hands me a cup of tea. I sit on the barstool beside my husband, who just looks radiant: freshly showered, his hair damp,

wearing a crisp white shirt and that silver-gray tie. My favorite tie. I have fond memories of that tie.

"How are you, Mrs. Grey?" he asks, his eyes warm.

"I think you know, Mr. Grey." I gaze up at him through my lashes.

He smirks. "Eat," he orders. "You didn't eat yesterday."

*Oh, bossy Fifty!*

"That's because you were being an arse."

Mrs. Jones drops something that clatters into the sink, making me jump. Christian seems oblivious to the noise. Ignoring her, he stares at me impassively.

"Arse or not—eat." His tone is serious. No arguing with him.

"Okay! Picking up spoon, eating granola," I mutter like a petulant teenager. I reach for the Greek yogurt and spoon some onto my cereal, followed by a handful of blueberries. I glance at Mrs. Jones and she catches my eye. I smile, and she responds with a warm smile of her own. She has provided me with my breakfast of choice, which was introduced to me on our honeymoon.

"I may have to go to New York later in the week." Christian's announcement interrupts my reverie.

"Oh."

"It'll mean an overnight. I want you to come with me."

"Christian, I won't get the time off."

He gives me his oh-really-but-I'm-the-boss stare.

I sigh. "I know you own the company, but I've been away for three weeks. Please. How can you expect me to run the business if I'm never there? I'll be fine here. I'm assuming you'll take Taylor with you, but Sawyer and Ryan will be here—" I stop, because Christian is grinning at me. "What?" I snap.

"Nothing. Just you," he says.

I frown. Is he laughing at me? Then a nasty thought pops into my mind. "How are you getting to New York?"

"The company jet, why?"

"I just wanted to check if you were taking *Charlie Tango*." My voice is quiet, and a shiver runs down my spine. I remember the last time he flew his helicopter. A wave of nausea hits me as I recall the anxious hours I spent waiting for news. That was possibly the lowest point in my life. I notice Mrs. Jones has stilled, too. I try to dismiss the idea.

"I wouldn't fly to New York in *Charlie Tango*. She doesn't have that kind of range. Besides, she won't be back from the engineers for another two weeks."

*Thank heavens*. My smile is partly from relief, but also the knowledge that the demise of *Charlie Tango* has occupied a great deal of Christian's thoughts and time over the last few weeks.

“Well, I’m glad she’s nearly fixed, but—” I stop. Can I tell him how nervous I’ll be when he flies next time?

“What?” he asks as he finishes his omelet.

I shrug.

“Ana?” he says, more sternly.

“I just … you know. Last time you flew in her … I thought, we thought, you’d —” I can’t finish the sentence, and Christian’s expression softens.

“Hey.” He caresses my face with the backs of his knuckles. “That was sabotage.” A dark expression crosses his face, and for a moment I wonder if he knows who was responsible.

“I couldn’t bear to lose you,” I murmur.

“Five people have been fired because of that, Ana. It won’t happen again.”

“Five?”

He nods, his face serious.

*Holy crap!*

“That reminds me. There’s a gun in your desk.”

He frowns at my non sequitur and probably at my accusatory tone, though I don’t mean it that way.

“It’s Leila’s,” he says finally.

“It’s fully loaded.”

“How do you know?” His frown deepens.

“I checked it yesterday.”

He scowls at me. “I don’t want you messing with guns. I hope you put the safety back on.”

I blink at him, momentarily stupefied. “Christian, there’s no safety on that revolver. Don’t you know anything about guns?”

His eyes widen. “Um … no.”

Taylor coughs discreetly from the entrance. Christian nods at him.

“We have to go,” Christian says. He stands, distracted, and slips on his gray jacket. I follow him into the hallway.

*He has Leila’s gun*. I am stunned by this news and briefly wonder what’s happened to her. Is she still in—where is it? East somewhere. New Hampshire? I can’t remember.

“Good morning, Taylor,” Christian says.

“Good morning, Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey.” He nods at us both, but he’s careful not to look me in the eye. I’m grateful, recalling my state of undress when we bumped into each other last night.

“I am just going to brush my teeth,” I mutter. Christian always brushes his teeth before breakfast. I don’t understand why.

"YOU SHOULD ASK TAYLOR to teach you how to shoot," I say as we travel down in the elevator. Christian gazes down at me, amused.

"Should I now?" he says dryly.

"Yes."

"Anastasia, I despise guns. My mom has patched up too many victims of gun crime, and my dad is vehemently antigun. I grew up with their ethos. I support at least two gun control initiatives here in Washington."

"Oh. Does Taylor carry a gun?"

Christian's mouth thins.

"Sometimes."

"You don't approve?" I ask, as Christian ushers me out of the elevator on the ground floor.

"No," he says, tight-lipped. "Let's just say that Taylor and I hold very different views with regard to gun control." I'm with Taylor on this.

Christian holds the foyer door open for me and I head out to the car. He has not let me drive alone to SIP since he found out that *Charlie Tango* was sabotaged. Sawyer smiles pleasantly, holding the door open for me as Christian and I climb into the car.

"Please." I reach across and grasp Christian's hand.

"Please what?"

"Learn how to shoot."

He rolls his eyes at me. "No. End of discussion, Anastasia."

And again I am a child to be scolded. I open my mouth to say something cutting, but decide I don't want to start my workday in a bad mood. I fold my arms instead and glimpse Taylor regarding me in the rearview mirror. He looks away, concentrating on the road in front, but shakes his head a little, in obvious frustration.

*Hmm … Christian drives him crazy, too, sometimes*. The thought makes me smile, and my mood is saved.

"Where is Leila?" I ask as Christian gazes out of his window.

"I told you. She's in Connecticut with her folks." He glances at me.

"Did you check? After all, she does have long hair. It could have been her driving the Dodge."

"Yes, I checked. She's enrolled in an art school in Hamden. She started this week."

"You've spoken to her?" I whisper, all the blood draining from my face.

Christian whips his head around at the tone of my voice.

"No. Flynn has." He searches my face for a clue to my thoughts.

"I see," I murmur, relieved.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Christian sighs. “Ana. What is it?”

I shrug, not wanting to admit to my irrational jealousy.

Christian continues, “I’m keeping tabs on her, checking that she stays on her side of the continent. She’s better, Ana. Flynn has referred her to a shrink in New Haven, and all the reports are very positive. She’s always been interested in art, so …” He stops, his face still searching mine. And in that moment I suspect that he is paying for her art classes. Do I want to know? Should I ask him? I mean, it’s not as if he can’t afford it, but why does he feel the obligation? I sigh. Christian’s baggage hardly compares to Bradley Kent from biology class and his half-assed attempts to kiss me. Christian reaches for my hand.

“Don’t sweat this, Anastasia,” he murmurs, and I return his reassuring squeeze. I know he’s doing what he thinks is right.

MIDMORNING I HAVE A break in meetings. As I pick up the phone to call Kate, I notice an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Flattery

**Date:** August 23 2011 09:54

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

I have received three compliments on my new haircut. Compliments from my staff are new. It must be the ridiculous smile I’m wearing whenever I think about last night. You are indeed a wonderful, talented, beautiful woman.

And all mine.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I melt reading it.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Trying to Concentrate Here

**Date:** August 23 2011 10:48

**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

I am trying to work and don’t want to be distracted by delicious memories.

Is now the time to confess that I used to cut Ray's hair regularly? I had no idea it would be such useful training.

And yes, I am yours and you, my dear, overbearing husband who refuses to exercise his constitutional right under the Second Amendment to bear arms, are mine. But don't worry because I shall protect you. Always.

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Annie Oakley

**Date:** August 23 2011 10:53

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

I am delighted to see you have spoken to the IT dept and changed your name. :D

I shall sleep safe in my bed knowing that my gun-toting wife sleeps beside me.

Christian Grey

CEO & Hoplophobe, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

# Hoplophobe? What the hell is that?

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Long Words

**Date:** August 23 2011 10:58

**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

Once more you dazzle me with your linguistic prowess.

In fact, your prowess in general, and I think you know what I'm referring to.

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Gasp!

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:01

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

Are you flirting with me?

Christian Grey

Shocked CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Would you rather …

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:04

**To:** Christian Grey

I flirted with someone else?

Anastasia Grey

Brave Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Grrrrr

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:09

**To:** Anastasia Grey

NO!

Christian Grey

Possessive CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Wow …

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:14

**To:** Christian Grey

Are you growling at me? 'Cause that's kinda hot.

Anastasia Grey

Squirming (in a good way) Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Beware

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:16

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Flirting and toying with me, Mrs. Grey?

I may pay you a visit this afternoon.

Christian Grey

Priapic CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Oh No!

**Date:** August 23 2011 11:20

**To:** Christian Grey

I'll behave. I wouldn't want my boss's boss's boss getting on top of me at work. ;)

Now let me get on with my job. My boss's boss's boss may fire my ass.

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** &*%$&*&*
**Date:** August 23 2011 11:23
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Believe me when I say there are a great many things he'd like to do to your ass right now. Firing you is not one of them.

Christian Grey
CEO & Ass man, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

His response makes me giggle.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Go Away!
**Date:** August 23 2011 11:26
**To:** Christian Grey

Don't you have an empire to run?

Stop bothering me.

My next appointment is here.

I thought you were a breast man …

Think about my ass, and I'll think about yours …

ILY x

Anastasia Grey
Now Moist Editor, SIP

---

I cannot help my despondent mood as Sawyer drives me to the office on Thursday. Christian's threatened business trip to New York has happened, and though he's been gone only a few hours, I miss him already. I fire up my

computer, and there’s an e-mail waiting for me. My mood lifts immediately.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Miss You Already
**Date:** August 25 2011 04:32
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

You were adorable this morning.

Behave while I’m away.

I love you.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

This will be the first night we’ve slept apart since our wedding. I intend to have a few cocktails with Kate—that should help me sleep. Impulsively, I e-mail him back, although I know that he’s still flying.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Behave Yourself!
**Date:** August 25 2011 09:03
**To:** Christian Grey

Let me know when you land—I’ll worry until you do.

And I shall behave. I mean how much trouble can I get into with Kate?

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

I hit “send” and sip my latte, courtesy of Hannah. Who knew I’d grow to love coffee? Despite the fact that I’m going out this evening with Kate, I feel like a chunk of me is missing. At the moment, it’s thirty-five thousand feet somewhere above the Midwest en route to New York. I didn’t know I would feel this unsettled and anxious just because Christian’s away. Surely over time I won’t feel this loss and uncertainty, will I? I let out a heavy sigh and continue with my work.

Around lunchtime, I start manically checking my e-mail and my BlackBerry for a text. Where is he? Has he landed safely? Hannah asks if I want lunch, but I’m too apprehensive and wave her away. I know it’s irrational, but I need to be

sure he's arrived safely.

My office phone rings, startling me. "Ana St—Grey."

"Hi." Christian's voice is warm with a trace of amusement. Relief floods through me.

"Hi." I'm grinning from ear to ear. "How was your flight?"

"Long. What are you doing with Kate?"

*Oh no*. "We're just going out for a quiet drink."

Christian says nothing.

"Sawyer and the new woman—Prescott—are coming to watch over us," I offer, trying to placate him.

"I thought Kate was coming to the apartment."

"She is after a quick drink." *Please let me go out!*

Christian sighs heavily. "Why didn't you tell me?" he says quietly. Too quietly.

I mentally kick myself. "Christian, we'll be fine. I have Ryan, Sawyer, and Prescott here. It's only a quick drink."

Christian remains resolutely silent, and I know he's not happy. "I've seen her only a few times since you and I met. Please. She's my best friend."

"Ana, I don't want to keep you from your friends. But I thought she was coming back to the apartment."

"Okay," I acquiesce. "We'll stay in."

"Only while this lunatic is out there. Please."

"I've said okay," I mutter in exasperation, rolling my eyes.

Christian snorts softly down the phone. "I always know when you're rolling your eyes at me."

I scowl at the receiver. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I'll tell Kate."

"Good," he breathes, his relief evident. I feel guilty for worrying him.

"Where are you?"

"On the tarmac at JFK."

"Oh, so you just landed."

"Yes. You asked me to call the moment I landed."

I smile. My subconscious glares at me. *See? He does what he says he's going to do*.

"Well, Mr. Grey, I'm glad one of us is punctilious."

He laughs. "Mrs. Grey, your gift for hyperbole knows no bounds. What am I going to do with you?"

"I am sure you'll think of something imaginative. You usually do."

"Are you flirting with me?"

“Yes.”

I sense his grin. “I’d better go. Ana, do as you’re told, please. The security team knows what they’re doing.”

“Yes, Christian, I will.” I sound exasperated again. *Jeez, I get the message*.

“I’ll see you tomorrow evening. I’ll call you later.”

“To check up on me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Christian!” I scold him.

“*Au revoir*, Mrs. Grey.”

“*Au revoir*, Christian. I love you.”

He inhales sharply. “And I you, Ana.”

Neither of us hangs up.

“Hang up, Christian,” I whisper.

“You’re a bossy little thing, aren’t you?”

“Your bossy little thing.”

“Mine,” he breathes. “Do as you’re told. Hang up.”

“Yes, Sir.” I hang up and grin stupidly at the phone.

A few moments later, an e-mail appears in my in-box.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Twitching Palms

**Date:** August 25 2011 13:42 EDT

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

You are as entertaining as ever on the phone.

I mean it. Do as you’re told.

I need to know you’re safe.

I love you.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Honestly, he’s the bossy one. But one phone call and all my anxiety has disappeared. He’s arrived safely and he’s fussing about me as usual. I hug myself momentarily. God, I love that man. Hannah knocks on my door, distracting me, and brings me back to the now.

KATE LOOKS GORGEOUS. In her tight white jeans and red camisole, she's ready to rock the town. She's chatting animatedly with Claire in Reception when I make my entrance.

"Ana!" she cries, scooping me up in a Kate hug. She holds me at arm's length.

"Don't you look the mogul's wife? Who would have thought, little Ana Steele? You look so … sophisticated!" She grins. I roll my eyes at her. I'm wearing a pale cream shift dress with a navy belt and navy pumps.

"It's good to see you, Kate." I hug her back.

"So, where are we going?"

"Christian wants us to go back to the apartment."

"Aw, really? Can't we sneak a quick cocktail at the Zig Zag Café? I've booked us a table."

I open my mouth to protest.

"Please?" she whines and pouts prettily. She must be picking this up from Mia. She never pouts normally. I'd really like a cocktail at the Zig Zag. We had such fun the last time we went there, and it's close to Kate's apartment.

I hold up my index finger. "One."

She grins. "One." She links her arm in mine, and we stroll out to the car, which is parked at the curb with Sawyer at the wheel. We're followed by Miss Belinda Prescott, who's new to the security team—a tall African American with a no-nonsense attitude. I've yet to warm to her, maybe because she's too cool and professional. The jury's definitely out, but like the rest of the team, she's been hand-picked by Taylor. She's dressed like Sawyer, in a dark somber pantsuit.

"Can you take us to the Zig Zag, please, Sawyer?"

Sawyer turns to look at me, and I know he wants to say something. He's obviously been given his orders. He hesitates.

"The Zig Zag Café. We'll have only one drink."

I give Kate a sideways glance, and she's glaring at Sawyer. Poor man.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mr. Grey requested you go back to the apartment," Prescott pipes up.

"Mr. Grey isn't here," I snap. "The Zig Zag, please."

"Ma'am," Sawyer replies with a sideways glance at Prescott, who wisely holds her tongue.

Kate gapes at me as if she can't believe her eyes and ears. I purse my lips and shrug. Okay, so I'm a little more assertive than I used to be. Kate nods as Sawyer pulls out into the early evening traffic.

"You know the additional security is driving Grace and Mia crazy," Kate says casually.

I gawk at her, baffled.

"You didn't know?" She seems incredulous.

"Know what?"

"Security for all of the Greys has been tripled. Gazillioned, even."

"Really?"

"He hasn't told you?"

I flush. "No." *Damn it, Christian!* "Do you know why?"

"Jack Hyde."

"What about Jack? I thought he was just after Christian." I gasp. *Jeez. Why hasn't he told me?*

"Since Monday," Kate says.

Last Monday? *Hmm … we identified Jack on Sunday. But why all the Greys?*

"How do you know all this?"

"Elliot."

Of course.

"Christian hasn't told you any of this, has he?"

I flush once more. "No."

"Oh, Ana, how annoying."

I sigh. As ever, Kate has hit the nail squarely on the head in her usual sledgehammer style. "Do you know why?" If Christian's not going to tell me, then maybe Kate will.

"Elliot said it's something to do with information stored on Jack Hyde's computer when he was at SIP."

*Holy crap*. "You're kidding." A surge of anger pulses through me. How does Kate know about this when I don't?

I glance up to see Sawyer eyeing me in the rearview mirror. The red light turns to green and he surges forward, focusing on the road ahead. I hold my finger up to my lips and Kate nods. I bet Sawyer knows, too, and I don't.

"How's Elliot?" I ask to change the subject.

Kate grins stupidly, telling me all I need to know.

Sawyer pulls up at the end of the passageway that leads down to the Zig Zag Café, and Prescott opens my door. I scoot out and Kate slides out after me. We link arms and meander down the passage, followed by Prescott, who's wearing a thunderous expression on her face. Oh, for heaven's sake, it's just a drink. Sawyer drives off to park the car.

"SO HOW DOES ELLIOT know Gia?" I ask, taking a sip of my second strawberry mojito. The bar is intimate and cozy, and I don't want to leave. Kate and I have not stopped

talking. I had forgotten how much I like hanging with her. It's liberating to be out, relaxing, enjoying Kate's company. I contemplate texting Christian, then dismiss the idea. He'll just be mad and make me go home like an errant child.

"Don't talk to me about that bitch!" Kate splutters.

Kate's reaction makes me laugh.

"What's so funny, Steele?" she snaps, but not seriously.

"I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Yes. She was all over Christian."

"She had a fling with Elliot." Kate pouts.

"No!"

She nods, her lips pressed together in the patented Katherine Kavanagh scowl.

"It was brief. Last year, I think. She's a social climber. No wonder she has her sights set on Christian."

"Christian is taken. I told her to leave him alone or I would fire her."

Kate gapes at me once more, stunned. I nod proudly, and she lifts her glass to salute me, impressed and beaming.

"Mrs. Anastasia Grey! Way to go!" We clink.

"DOES ELLIOT OWN A gun?"

"No. He's very antigun." Kate stirs her third drink.

"Christian, too. I think it was Grace and Carrick's influence," I mutter. I'm feeling a little tipsy.

"Carrick's a good man." Kate nods.

"He wanted a prenup," I mutter sadly.

"Oh, Ana." She reaches across the table and grasps my arm. "He was only looking out for his boy. As we both know, you have *gold digger* tattooed on your forehead." She smiles at me, and I poke my tongue out at her, then giggle.

"Mature, Mrs. Grey," she says, grinning. She sounds like Christian. "You'll do the same for your son one day."

"My son?" It hadn't even crossed my mind that my kids will be rich. Holy crap. They'll want for nothing. I mean … nothing. This needs further thought—but not right now. I glance at Prescott and Sawyer seated nearby, watching us and the evening crowd from a side table while they each nurse a glass of sparkling mineral water.

"Do you think we should eat?" I ask.

"No. We should drink," Kate says.

"Why are you in such a drinking mood?"

“Because I don’t see enough of you anymore. I didn’t know you’d up and marry the first guy who turned your head.” She pouts again. “Honestly, you married so quickly that I thought you were pregnant.”

I giggle. “Everyone thought I was pregnant. Let’s not rehash that conversation again. Please! And I have to use the restroom.”

Prescott accompanies me. She says nothing. She doesn’t have to. Disapproval radiates off her like a lethal isotope.

“I haven’t been out on my own since I got married,” I mutter wordlessly at the closed stall door. I make a face, knowing that she’s standing on the other side of the door, waiting while I pee. What precisely is Hyde going to do in a bar anyway? Christian is just overreacting as usual.

“KATE, IT’S LATE. WE should go.”

It’s ten fifteen, and I have downed my fourth strawberry mojito. I am definitely feeling the effects of the alcohol, warm and fuzzy. Christian will be fine. Eventually.

“Sure, Ana. It’s been so good to see you. You just seem so much more, I don’t know … confident. Marriage obviously agrees with you.”

My face warms. Coming from Miss Katherine Kavanagh, this is indeed a compliment.

“It does,” I whisper, and because I’ve probably had too much to drink, tears prick the backs of my eyes. Could I be any happier? In spite of all his baggage, his nature, his Fiftyness, I have met and married the man of my dreams. I quickly change the subject to stem my sentimental thoughts, because I know I will cry otherwise.

“I have really enjoyed this evening.” I grasp Kate’s hand. “Thank you for dragging me out!” We hug. As she releases me, I nod at Sawyer and he hands Prescott the keys to the car.

“I’m sure Miss Goody-Two-Shoes Prescott has told Christian I’m not at home. He’ll be mad,” I mutter to Kate. And maybe he’ll think of some delicious way to punish me … hopefully.

“Why are you grinning like a loon, Ana? You like making Christian mad?”

“No. Not really. But it’s easily done. He’s very controlling sometimes.” *Most of the time*.

“I’ve noticed,” Kate says wryly.

WE PULL UP OUTSIDE Kate’s apartment. She hugs me hard.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she whispers and kisses my cheek. Then she’s out of the car. I wave, feeling strangely homesick. I have missed girl talk. It’s fun and relaxing, and it reminds me that I’m still young. I must make more of an effort to see Kate, but the truth is, I love being in my bubble with Christian. Last night we attended a charity dinner together. There were so many men in suits and well-groomed elegant women talking about real estate prices and the failing economy and the plunging stock markets. I mean, it was dull, really dull. So it’s refreshing to let my hair down with someone my own age.

My stomach rumbles. I still haven’t eaten. *Shit—Christian!* I scramble through my purse and fish out my BlackBerry. *Holy crap—five missed calls!* One text …

*WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?*

And one e-mail.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Angry. You’ve Not Seen Angry
**Date:** August 26 2011 00:42 EST
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Anastasia

Sawyer tells me that you are drinking cocktails in a bar when you said you wouldn’t.

Do you have any idea how mad I am at the moment?

I’ll see you tomorrow.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

My heart sinks. Oh shit! I really am in trouble. My subconscious glares at me, then shrugs, wearing her you-made-your-bed-you-lie-in-it face. What did I expect? I contemplate calling him, but it’s late and he’s probably asleep … or pacing. I decide a quick text may be enough.

*I’M STILL IN ONE PIECE. I HAD A NICE TIME.
MISSING YOU—PLEASE DON’T BE MAD*

I gaze at my BlackBerry, willing him to respond, but it’s ominously silent. I sigh.

Prescott pulls up outside Escala and Sawyer gets out to hold the door open for me. As we stand waiting for the elevator, I take the opportunity to quiz him.

“What time did Christian call you?”

Sawyer flushes. “About nine thirty, ma’am.”

“Why didn’t you interrupt my conversation with Kate so I could speak with him?”

“Mr. Grey told me not to.”

I purse my lips. The elevator arrives, and we ride up in silence. I’m suddenly grateful that Christian has a whole night to recover from his conniption, and that he’s on the other side of the country. It gives me some time. On the other hand … I miss him.

The doors to the elevator open, and for a split second I stare at the foyer table.

*What is wrong with this picture?*

The vase of flowers lies smashed into fragments all over the floor of the foyer, water and flowers and chunks of china are strewn everywhere, and the table is overturned. My scalp prickles and Sawyer grabs my arm and pulls me back into the elevator.

“Stay there,” he hisses, drawing a gun. He steps into the foyer and disappears from my field of vision.

I cower in the back of the elevator.

“Luke!” I hear Ryan call from inside the great room. “Code blue!”

*Code blue?*

“You have the perp?” Sawyer calls back. “Jesus H. Christ!”

I flatten myself against the elevator wall. *What the hell is going on?* Adrenaline spikes through my body, and my heart leaps into my throat. I hear soft voices, and a moment later Sawyer reappears in the foyer, standing in the puddle of water. He holsters his gun.

“You can come in, Mrs. Grey,” he says gently.

“What’s happened, Luke?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“We’ve had a visitor.” He takes my elbow, and I’m grateful for the support—my legs have turned to jelly. I walk with him through the open double doors.

Ryan is standing at the entrance of the great room. A cut above his eye is bleeding, and there’s another on his mouth. He looks roughed up, his clothes disheveled. But what’s more shocking is Jack Hyde slumped at his feet.

## CHAPTER TEN

My heart is pounding and blood thrums loudly in my eardrums; the alcohol flowing through my system amplifies the sound.

"Is he—" I gasp, unable to finish the sentence and gazing wide-eyed and terrified at Ryan. I can't even look at the prone figure on the floor.

"No, ma'am. Just knocked out cold."

Relief floods through me. *Oh, thank God.*

"And you?" I ask, gazing at Ryan. I realize I don't know his first name. He's panting as if he's run a marathon. He wipes the corner of his mouth, removing the trace of blood, and a faint bruise is forming on his cheek.

"He put up one hell of a fight, but I'm okay, Mrs. Grey." He smiles reassuringly. If I knew him better, I'd say he looked a little smug.

"And Gail? Mrs. Jones?" *Oh no … is she okay? Has she been harmed?*

"I'm here, Ana." Glancing behind me, I see she's in a nightdress and robe, her hair loose, her face ashen and her eyes wide—like mine, I imagine.

"Ryan woke me. Insisted I come in here." She points behind her into Taylor's office. "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

I nod briskly and realize she's probably just come out of the panic room that adjoins Taylor's office. Who knew we'd need it so soon? Christian had insisted on its installation shortly after our engagement—and I had rolled my eyes. Now, seeing Gail standing in the doorway, I'm grateful for his foresight.

A creak from the door to the foyer distracts me. It's hanging off its hinges. What the hell happened to that?

"Was he alone?" I ask Ryan.

"Yes, ma'am. You wouldn't be standing here if he wasn't, I can assure you." Ryan sounds vaguely affronted.

"How did he get in?" I ask, ignoring his tone.

"Through the service elevator. He's got quite a pair, ma'am."

I stare down at Jack's slumped figure. He's wearing a uniform of sorts—coveralls, I think.

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. I caught him on the security monitor. He was

wearing gloves … kinda strange in August. I recognized him and decided to give him access. That way I knew we'd have him. You weren't here and Gail was safe, so I figured it was now or never." Ryan looks very pleased with himself once more, and Sawyer scowls at him in disapproval.

*Gloves?* The thought distracts me, and I glance once more at Jack. Yes, he's wearing brown leather gloves. Creepy.

"What now?" I try to dismiss the ramifications from my mind.

"We need to secure him," Ryan replies.

"Secure him?"

"In case he wakes." Ryan glances at Sawyer.

"What do you need?" asks Mrs. Jones, stepping forward. She's recovered her composure.

"Something to restrain him—cord or rope," Ryan replies.

*Cable ties*. I flush as memories of the night before invade my mind. Reflexively, I rub my wrists and glance quickly down at them. No, no bruising. Good.

"I have something. Cable ties. Will they do?"

All eyes turn to me.

"Yes, ma'am. Perfect," Sawyer says, serious and straight-faced. I want the floor to swallow me up, but I turn and head for our bedroom. Sometimes you just have to brazen things out. Perhaps it's the combination of fear and alcohol making me audacious.

When I return, Mrs. Jones is surveying the mess in the foyer and Miss Prescott has joined the security team. I hand the ties to Sawyer, who slowly, and with unnecessary care, ties Hyde's hands behind his back. Mrs. Jones disappears into the kitchen and returns with a first aid kit. She takes Ryan's arm, leads him into the doorway of the great room, and starts tending to the cut above his eye. He flinches as she dabs it with an antiseptic wipe. Then I notice the Glock on the floor with a silencer attached. *Holy shit! Jack was armed?* Bile rises in my throat and I fight it down.

"Don't touch, Mrs. Grey," says Prescott when I bend to pick it up. Sawyer emerges from Taylor's office wearing latex gloves.

"I'll take care of that, Mrs. Grey," he says.

"It's his?" I ask.

"Yes, ma'am," says Ryan, wincing once more from Mrs. Jones's ministrations. Holy crap. Ryan fought an armed man in my home. I shudder at the thought. Sawyer bends and gingerly picks up the Glock.

"Should you be doing that?" I ask.

"Mr. Grey would expect it, ma'am." Sawyer slides the gun into a Ziploc bag

then squats to pat down Jack. He pauses and partially pulls a roll of duct tape from the man's pocket. Sawyer blanches and pushes the tape back into Hyde's pocket.

*Duct tape?* My mind idly registers as I watch the proceedings with fascination and an odd detachment. Then bile rises to my throat again as I realize the implications. Rapidly, I dismiss them from my head. *Don't go there, Ana!*

"Should we call the police?" I mutter, trying to hide my fear. I want Hyde out of my home, sooner rather than later.

Ryan and Sawyer glance at each other.

"I think we should call the police," I say, rather more forcefully, wondering what's going on between Ryan and Sawyer.

"I've just tried Taylor, and he's not answering his cell. Maybe he's asleep." Sawyer checks his watch. "It's one forty-five in the morning on the East Coast."

*Oh no*.

"Have you called Christian?" I whisper.

"No, ma'am."

"Were you calling Taylor for instructions?"

Sawyer looks momentarily embarrassed. "Yes, ma'am."

Part of me bristles. This man—I glance down at Hyde again—has invaded my home, and he needs to be removed by the police. But looking at the four of them, into their anxious eyes, I decide I must be missing something, so I decide to call Christian. My scalp prickles. I know he's mad at me—really, really mad at me—and I falter at the thought of what he'll say. And how he'll stress because he's not here and can't be here until tomorrow evening. I know I've worried him enough this evening. Perhaps I shouldn't call him. And then it occurs to me. Shit. *What if I'd been here?* I pale at the thought. Thank heavens I was out. Maybe I won't be in so much trouble after all.

"Is he okay?" I ask, pointing at Jack.

"He'll have an aching skull when he wakes," Ryan says, gazing down at Jack with contempt. "But we need paramedics here to make sure."

I reach into my purse and pull out my BlackBerry, and before I can give too much thought to the extent of Christian's anger, I dial his number. It goes straight to voice mail. He must have switched it off because he's so mad. I cannot think what to say. Turning away, I walk down the hallway a little, away from everyone.

"Hi. It's me. Please don't be mad. We've had an incident at the apartment. But it's under control, so don't worry. No one is hurt. Call me." I hang up.

"Call the police," I tell Sawyer. He nods, takes out his cell, and makes the call.

OFFICER SKINNER IS DEEP in conversation with Ryan at the dining room table. Officer Walker is with Sawyer in Taylor's office. I don't know where Prescott is, perhaps in Taylor's office. Detective Clark is barking questions at me as we sit on the couch in the great room. He's tall, dark, and would be good-looking if it weren't for his permanent scowl. I suspect he's been woken and dragged from his warm bed because the home of one of Seattle's most influential and wealthy businessmen has been breached.

"He used to be your boss?" Clark asks tersely.

"Yes."

I am tired—beyond tired—and I want to go to bed. I still haven't heard from Christian. On the plus side, the paramedics have removed Hyde. Mrs. Jones hands Detective Clark and me each a cup of tea.

"Thanks." Clark turns to me. "And where is Mr. Grey?"

"New York. On business. He'll be back tomorrow evening—I mean this evening." It's after midnight.

"Hyde is known to us," Detective Clark murmurs. "I'll need you to come down to the station to make a statement. But that can wait. It's late and there are a couple of reporters camped out on the sidewalk. Do you mind if I look around?"

"Of course not," I offer, relieved his questioning is finished. I shudder at the thought of the photographers outside. Well, they won't be a problem until tomorrow. I remind myself to call Mom and Ray just in case they hear anything and worry.

"Mrs. Grey, may I suggest you go to bed?" Mrs. Jones says, her voice warm and full of concern.

Looking into her warm, kind eyes, I suddenly feel an overwhelming need to cry. She reaches over and rubs my shoulder.

"We're safe now," she murmurs. "This will all look better in the morning, once you've had some sleep. And Mr. Grey will be back tomorrow evening."

I glance nervously up at her, keeping my tears at bay. Christian is going to be so mad.

"Can I get you anything before you go to bed?" she asks.

I realize how hungry I am. "I'd love something to eat."

She smiles broadly. "Sandwich and some milk?"

I nod with gratitude, and she heads into the kitchen. Ryan is still with Officer Skinner. In the foyer, Detective Clark is examining the mess outside the elevator. He looks thoughtful, despite his scowl. And suddenly I feel homesick—homesick for Christian. Holding my head in my hands, I wish fervently that he were here. He'd know what to do. *What an evening.* I want to crawl into his

lap, have him hold me and tell me that he loves me, even though I don't do as I'm told—but that won't be possible until this evening. Inwardly I roll my eyes … Why didn't he tell me about the increased security for everyone? What exactly is on Jack's computer? He's so frustrating, but right now, I just don't care. I want my husband. I miss him.

"Here you are, Ana dear." Mrs. Jones interrupts my inner turmoil. When I glance up at her, she hands me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her eyes twinkling. I haven't had one of these for years. I smile shyly and dig in.

When I finally crawl into bed, I curl up on Christian's side, dressed in his T-shirt. Both his pillow and his T-shirt smell of him, and as I drift off I silently wish him safe passage home … and a good mood.

I WAKE WITH A start. It's light and my head is aching, throbbing at my temples. Oh no. I hope I don't have a hangover. Cautiously, I open my eyes and notice the bedroom chair has moved, and Christian is sitting in it. He's wearing his tux, and the end of his bow tie is peeping out of the breast pocket. I wonder if I'm dreaming. His left arm is draped over the chair, and in his hand he holds a cut-glass tumbler of amber liquid. Brandy? Whiskey? I have no idea. One long leg is crossed at the ankle over his knee. He's wearing black socks and dress shoes. His right elbow rests on the arm of the chair, his hand up to his chin, and he's slowly running his index finger rhythmically back and forth over his lower lip. In the early morning light, his eyes burn with grave intensity, but his general expression is completely unreadable.

My heart almost stops. He's here. How did he get here? He must have left New York last night. How long has he been here watching me sleep?

"Hi," I whisper.

He regards me coolly, and my heart stutters once more. *Oh no*. He moves his long fingers away from his mouth, tosses back the remainder of his drink, and places the glass on the bedside table. I half expect him to kiss me, but he doesn't. He sits back, continuing to regard me, his expression impassive.

"Hello," he says finally, his voice hushed. And I know he's still mad. Really mad.

"You're back."

"It would appear so."

Slowly I pull myself up into a sitting position, not taking my eyes off him. My mouth is dry. "How long have you been sitting there watching me sleep?"

"Long enough."

"You're still mad." I can hardly speak the words.

He gazes at me, as if considering his response. “Mad,” he says, as if testing the word, weighing up its nuances, its meaning. “No, Ana. I am way, *way* beyond mad.”

*Holy crap*. I try to swallow, but it’s hard with a dry mouth.

“Way beyond mad … that doesn’t sound good.”

He gazes at me, completely impassive, and doesn’t respond. A stark silence stretches between us. I reach over to my glass of water and take a welcome sip, trying to bring my erratic heart rate under control.

“Ryan caught Jack.” I try a different tack, and I place my glass beside his on the bedside table.

“I know,” he says icily.

Of course, he knows. “Are you going to be monosyllabic for long?”

His eyebrows move fractionally, registering his surprise as if he hadn’t expected this question. “Yes,” he says finally.

Oh … okay. What to do? Defense—the best form of attack. “I’m sorry I stayed out.”

“Are you?”

“No,” I mutter after a pause, because it’s true.

“Why say it then?”

“Because I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

He sighs heavily, as if he’s been holding this tension for a thousand hours, and runs his hand through his hair. He looks beautiful. Mad, but beautiful. I drink him in—Christian’s back—angry, but in one piece.

“I think Detective Clark wants to talk to you.”

“I’m sure he does.”

“Christian, please …”

“Please what?”

“Don’t be so cold.”

His eyebrows rise in surprise once more. “Anastasia, cold is not what I’m feeling at the moment. I’m burning. Burning with rage. I don’t know how to deal with these”—he waves his hand, searching for the word—“feelings.” His tone is bitter.

*Oh shit*. His honesty disarms me. All I want to do is crawl into his lap. It’s all I’ve wanted to do since I came home last night. *To hell with this*. I move, taking him by surprise and climbing awkwardly into his lap, where I curl up. He doesn’t push me away, which is what I’d feared. After a beat, he folds his arms around me and buries his nose in my hair. He smells of whiskey. *How much did he drink?* He smells of body wash, too. He smells of Christian. I wrap my arms around his neck and nuzzle his throat, and he sighs once more, deeply this time.

“Oh, Mrs. Grey. What am I going to do with you?” He kisses the top of my head. I close my eyes, relishing the contact with him.

“How much have you had to drink?”

He stills. “Why?”

“You don’t normally drink hard liquor.”

“This is my second glass. I’ve had a trying night, Anastasia. Give a man a break.”

I smile. “If you insist, Mr. Grey,” I breathe into his neck. “You smell heavenly. I slept on your side of the bed because your pillow smells of you.”

He nuzzles my hair. “Did you now? I wondered why you were on this side. I’m still mad at you.”

“I know.”

His hand rhythmically strokes my back.

“And I’m mad at you,” I whisper.

He pauses. “And what, pray, have I done to deserve your ire?”

“I’ll tell you later when you’re no longer burning with rage.” I kiss his throat. He closes his eyes and leans into my kiss but makes no move to kiss me back. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me.

“When I think of what might have happened …” His voice is barely a whisper. Broken, raw.

“I’m okay.”

“Oh, Ana.” It’s almost a sob.

“I’m okay. We’re all okay. A bit shaken. But Gail is fine. Ryan is fine. And Jack is gone.”

He shakes his head. “No thanks to you,” he mutters.

*What?* I lean back and glare at him. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to argue about it right now, Ana.”

I blink. Well, maybe *I* do, but I decide against it. At least he’s talking to me. I nestle into him once more. His fingers move to my hair and start playing with it.

“I want to punish you,” he whispers. “Really beat the shit out of you,” he adds.

My heart leaps into my mouth. *Fuck*. “I know,” I whisper as my scalp prickles.

“Maybe I will.”

“I hope not.”

He hugs me tighter. “Ana, Ana, Ana. You’d try the patience of a saint.”

“I could accuse you of many things, Mr. Grey, but being a saint isn’t one of them.”

Finally I am blessed with his reluctant chuckle. “Fair point well made as ever,

Mrs. Grey.” He kisses my forehead and shifts.

“Back to bed. You had a late night, too.” He moves quickly, picking me up and depositing me back on the bed.

“Lie down with me?”

“No. I have things to do.” He reaches down and collects the glass. “Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you in a couple of hours.”

“Are you still mad at me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go back to sleep, then.”

“Good.” He pulls the duvet over me and kisses my forehead once more. “Sleep.”

And because I’m so groggy from the night before, relieved that he’s back, and emotionally fatigued by our early morning encounter, I do exactly as I’m told. As I drift off, I’m curious though grateful, given the nasty taste in my mouth, to know why he hasn’t deployed his usual coping mechanism and leaped on me to have his wicked way.

“THERE’S SOME ORANGE JUICE for you here,” Christian says, and my eyes flutter open again. I have had the most restful two hours of sleep I can remember, and I wake refreshed, my head no longer throbbing. The orange juice is a welcome sight—as is my husband. He’s in his sweats. And I’m momentarily zapped back to the Heathman Hotel and the first time I ever woke up with him. His gray tank top is damp with his sweat. Either he’s been working out in the basement gym or he’s been for a run, but he shouldn’t look this good after a workout.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he murmurs and disappears into the bathroom. I frown. He’s still distant. He’s either distracted by all that’s happened, or still mad, or … what? I sit up and reach for the orange juice, drinking it down too quickly. It’s delicious, ice cold, and it makes my mouth a much better place. I clamber out of bed, anxious to close the distance—real and metaphysical—between my husband and me. I glance quickly at the alarm. It’s eight o’clock. I strip off Christian’s T-shirt and follow him into the bathroom. He’s in the shower, washing his hair, and I don’t hesitate. I slip in behind him, and he stiffens the moment I wrap my arms around him—my front to his wet, muscular back. I ignore his reaction, holding him tightly, and press my cheek flat against him, closing my eyes. After a moment, he shifts so we are both under the cascade of hot water and carries on washing his hair. I let the water wash over me as I cradle the man I love. I think of all the times he’s fucked me and all the times he’s made love to me in here. I frown. He’s never been this quiet. Turning

my head, I start to trail kisses across his back. His body stiffens again.

"Ana," he warns.

"Hmm."

My hands travel slowly down over his taut stomach to his belly. He places both his hands on mine and brings them to an abrupt halt. He shakes his head.

"Don't," he warns.

I release him, immediately. *He's saying no?* My mind goes into free fall—has this ever happened before? My subconscious shakes her head, her lips pursed. She glares at me over her half-moon glasses, wearing her you've-really-fucked-up-this-time look. I feel like I've been slapped, hard. Rejected. And a lifetime of insecurity spawns the ugly thought that *he doesn't want me anymore*. I gasp as the pain sears through me. Christian turns, and I'm relieved to see he's not completely oblivious to my charms. Grasping my chin, he tilts my head back, and I find myself gazing into his wary, gray eyes.

"I'm still fucking mad at you," he says, his voice quiet and serious. *Shit!* Leaning down, he rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes. I reach up and caress his face.

"Don't be mad at me, please. I think you're overreacting," I whisper.

He straightens, blanching. My hand falls free to my side.

"Overreacting?" he snarls. "Some fucking lunatic gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife, and you think I'm overreacting!" The restrained menace in his voice is frightening, and his eyes blaze as he stares at me as if *I'm* the fucking lunatic.

"No … um, that's not what I was referring to. I thought this was about me staying out."

He closes his eyes once more as if in pain and shakes his head.

"Christian, I wasn't here." I try to appease and reassure him.

"I know," he whispers, opening his eyes. "And all because you can't follow a simple, fucking request." His tone is bitter and it's my turn to blanch. "I don't want to discuss this now, in the shower. I am still fucking mad at you, Anastasia. You're making me question my judgment." He turns and promptly leaves the shower, grabbing a towel on the way and stalking out of the bathroom, leaving me bereft and chilled under the hot water.

*Crap. Crap. Crap.*

Then the significance of what he's just said dawns on me. *Kidnap?* Fuck. Jack wanted to kidnap me? I recall the duct tape and not wanting to think too deeply about why Jack had it. Does Christian have more information? Hurriedly I wash myself, then shampoo and rinse my hair. I want to know. I need to know. I am not going to let him keep me in the dark about this.

Christian's not in the bedroom when I come out. Jeez, he dresses quickly. I do the same, throwing on my favorite plum dress and black sandals, and I'm conscious that I've chosen this outfit because Christian likes it. I vigorously towel-dry my hair, then braid it and wind it into a bun. Fitting diamond studs into my ears, I dash to the bathroom to apply a little mascara and glance at myself in the mirror. *I'm pale. I'm always pale*. I take a deep steadying breath. I need to face the consequences of my rash decision to actually enjoy myself with my friend. I sigh, knowing that Christian won't see it that way.

Christian is nowhere to be seen in the great room. Mrs. Jones is busying herself in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Ana," she says sweetly.

"Morning." I smile broadly at her. I am Ana again!

"Tea?"

"Please."

"Anything to eat?"

"Please. I'd like an omelet this morning."

"With mushrooms and spinach?"

"And cheese."

"Coming up."

"Where's Christian?"

"Mr. Grey's in his study."

"Has he had breakfast?" I glance at the two places set on the breakfast bar.

"No, ma'am."

"Thanks."

Christian is on the phone, dressed in a white shirt with no tie, looking every bit the relaxed CEO. How deceptive appearances can be. Perhaps he's not going into the office after all. He glances up when I appear in the doorway but shakes his head at me, indicating that I am not welcome. *Shit* … I turn and wander dejectedly back to the breakfast bar. Taylor appears, snappily dressed in a somber suit, looking like he's had eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

"Morning, Taylor," I murmur, trying to gauge his mood and see if he'll offer me any visual cues about what has been going on.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey," he replies, and I hear the sympathy in those four words. I smile compassionately back at him, knowing he had to endure an angry, frustrated Christian returning to Seattle way ahead of schedule.

"How was the flight?" I dare to ask.

"Long, Mrs. Grey." His brevity speaks volumes. "May I ask how you are?" he adds, his tone softening.

"I'm good."

He nods. “If you’ll excuse me.” He heads toward Christian’s study. Hmm. Taylor’s allowed in, but not me.

“Here you go.” Mrs. Jones places my breakfast in front of me. My appetite has vanished, but I eat anyway, not wishing to offend her.

By the time I’ve finished what I can of my breakfast, Christian has still not emerged from his study. Is he avoiding me?

“Thanks, Mrs. Jones,” I murmur, sliding off the barstool and making my way to the bathroom to clean my teeth. As I brush them, I’m reminded of Christian’s sulk over the wedding vows. He holed up in his study then, too. Is that what this is? Him sulking? I shudder as I recall his subsequent nightmare. Will that happen again? We really need to talk. I need to know about Jack and about the increased security for the Greys—all the details that have been kept from me, but not from Kate. Obviously Elliot talks to her.

I glance at my watch. It’s eight fifty—I’m late for work. I finish brushing my teeth, apply a little lip gloss, grab my lightweight black jacket, and head back to the great room. I am relieved to see Christian there, eating his breakfast.

“You’re going?” he says when he sees me.

“To work? Yes, of course.” Bravely, I walk toward him and rest my hands on the edge of the breakfast bar. He gazes at me blankly.

“Christian, we’ve hardly been back a week. I have to go to work.”

“But—” He stops and rakes his hand through his hair. Mrs. Jones walks quietly out of the room. *Discreet, Gail, discreet.*

“I know we have a great deal to talk about. Perhaps if you’ve calmed down, we can do it this evening.”

His mouth pops open with dismay. “Calmed down?” His voice is eerily soft.

I flush. “You know what I mean.”

“No, Anastasia, I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t want to fight. I was coming to ask you if I could take my car.”

“No. You can’t,” he snaps.

“Okay.” I acquiesce immediately.

He blinks. He was obviously expecting a fight. “Prescott will accompany you.” His tone is slightly less belligerent.

Damn it, not Prescott. I want to pout and protest but decide against it. Surely now that Jack has been caught we can cut back on our security.

I remember my mom’s “words of wisdom” talk the day before my wedding. *Ana, honey, you really have to choose your battles. It’ll be the same with your kids when you have them*. Well, at least he’s letting me go to work.

“Okay,” I mutter. And because I don’t want to leave him like this with so much unresolved and so much tension between us, I step tentatively toward him.

He stiffens, his eyes widening, and for a moment he looks so vulnerable it pulls at some deep, dark place in my heart. *Oh, Christian, I'm so sorry*. I kiss him chastely on the side of his mouth. He closes his eyes as if relishing my touch.

"Don't hate me," I whisper.

He grabs my hand. "I don't hate you."

"You haven't kissed me," I whisper.

He eyes me suspiciously. "I know," he mutters.

I'm desperate to ask him why, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer. Abruptly he stands and grabs my face between his hands, and in a flash his lips are hard on mine. I gasp with surprise, inadvertently granting his tongue access. He takes full advantage, invading my mouth, claiming me, and just as I'm beginning to respond he releases me, his breathing quickening.

"Taylor will take you and Prescott to SIP," he says, his eyes flaring with need. "Taylor!" he calls. I flush, trying to recover some composure.

"Sir." Taylor is standing in the doorway.

"Tell Prescott Mrs. Grey is going to work. Can you drive them, please?"

"Certainly." Turning on his heel, Taylor disappears.

"If you could try to stay out of trouble today, I would appreciate it," Christian mutters.

"I'll see what I can do." I smile sweetly. A reluctant half smile tugs at Christian's lips, but he doesn't give in to it.

"I'll see you later, then," he says coolly.

"Laters," I whisper.

Prescott and I take the service elevator down to the basement garage in order to avoid the media outside. Jack's arrest and the fact that he was apprehended in our apartment are now public knowledge. As I settle into the Audi, I wonder if there will be more paparazzi waiting at SIP like the day our engagement was announced.

We drive a while in silence, until I remember to call first Ray and then my mom to reassure them that Christian and I are safe. Mercifully, both calls are short, and I hang up just as we arrive outside SIP. As I feared, there's a small crowd of reporters and photographers lying in wait. They turn as one, looking expectantly at the Audi.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mrs. Grey?" Taylor asks. Part of me just wants to go home, but that means spending the day with Mr. Burning Rage. I hope that with a little time, he will gain some perspective. Jack is in police custody, so Fifty should be happy, but he's not. Part of me understands why; too much of this is out of his control, including me, but I don't have time to think about this now.

“Take me around to the delivery entrance, please, Taylor.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

IT’S ONE O’CLOCK AND I’ve managed to immerse myself in work all morning. There’s a knock and Elizabeth pops her head around the door.

“Can I have a moment?” she asks brightly.

“Sure,” I mutter, surprised at her unscheduled visit.

She enters and sits down, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder. “I just wanted to check you’re okay. Roach asked me to pay you a visit,” she adds hurriedly as her face reddens. “I mean with all that went on last night.”

Jack Hyde’s arrest is all over the newspapers, but no one seems to have made the connection yet with the fire at GEH.

“I’m fine,” I answer, trying not to think too deeply about how I feel. Jack wanted to harm me. Well, that’s not news. He’s tried before. It’s Christian I’m more concerned about.

I glance quickly at my e-mail. There’s still nothing from him. I don’t know if I were to send him an e-mail, whether I’d just be provoking Mr. Burning Rage further.

“Good,” Elizabeth answers, and her smile actually touches her eyes for a change. “If there’s anything I can do—anything you need—let me know.”

“Will do.”

Elizabeth stands. “I know how busy you are, Ana. I’ll let you get back to it.”

“Um … thanks.”

That has to have been the briefest, most pointless meeting in the Western Hemisphere today. Why did Roach send her here? Perhaps he’s worried, given I’m his boss’s wife. I shake off the dark thoughts and reach for my BlackBerry in the hope that there might be a message from Christian. As I do, my work e-mail pings.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Statement

**Date:** August 26 2011 13:04

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Anastasia

Detective Clark will be visiting your office today at 3 pm to take your statement.

I have insisted that he should come to you, as I don’t want you going to the police station.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I gaze at his e-mail for a full five minutes, trying to think of a light and witty response to lift his mood. I draw a complete blank, and opt for brevity instead.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Statement

**Date:** August 26 2011 13:12

**To:** Christian Grey

Okay.

A x

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

I stare at the screen for another five minutes, anxious for his response, but there's nothing. Christian is not in the mood to play today.

I sit back. Can I blame him? My poor Fifty was probably frantic, back in the early hours of this morning. Then a thought occurs to me. He was in his tux when I woke this morning. What time did he decide to come back from New York? He normally leaves functions between ten and eleven. Last night at that hour, I was still at large with Kate.

Did Christian come home because I was out or because of the Jack incident? If he left because I was out having a good time, he would have had no idea about Jack, about the police, nothing—until he landed in Seattle. It's suddenly very important to me to find out. If Christian came back merely because I was out, then he was overreacting. My subconscious sucks her teeth, wearing her harpy face. Okay, I'm glad he's back, so maybe it's irrelevant. But still—Christian must have had one hell of a shock when he landed. No wonder he's so confused today. His earlier words come back to me. *"I am still fucking mad at you, Anastasia. You're making me question my judgment."*

I have to know—did he come back because of Cocktailgate or because of the fucking lunatic?

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Your Flight

**Date:** August 26 2011 13:24

**To:** Christian Grey

What time did you decide to come back to Seattle yesterday?

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Your Flight
**Date:** August 26 2011 13:26
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Why?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Your Flight
**Date:** August 26 2011 13:29
**To:** Christian Grey

Call it curiosity.

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Your Flight
**Date:** August 26 2011 13:32
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Curiosity killed the cat.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Huh?
**Date:** August 26 2011 13:35
**To:** Christian Grey

What is that oblique reference to? Another threat?

You know where I am going with this, don’t you?

Did you decide to return because I went out for a drink with my friend after you asked me not to, or did you return because a madman was in your apartment?

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

I stare at my screen. There's no response. I glance at the clock on my computer. One forty-five and still no response.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Here's the Thing …

**Date:** August 26 2011 13:56

**To:** Christian Grey

I will take your silence as an admission that you did indeed return to Seattle because I CHANGED MY MIND. I am an adult female and went for a drink with my friend. I did not understand the security ramifications of CHANGING MY MIND because YOU NEVER TELL ME ANYTHING. I found out from Kate that security has, in fact, been stepped up for all the Greys, not just us. I think you generally overreact where my safety is concerned, and I understand why, but you're like the boy crying wolf.

I never have a clue about what is a real concern or merely something that is perceived as a concern by you. I had two of the security detail with me. I thought both Kate and I would be safe. Fact is, we were safer in that bar than at the apartment. Had I been FULLY INFORMED of the situation, I would have taken a different course of action.

I understand your concerns are something to do with material that was on Jack's computer here—or so Kate believes. Do you know how annoying it is to find out my best friend knows more about what's going on with you than I do? And I am your WIFE. So are you going to tell me? Or will you continue to treat me like a child, guaranteeing that I continue to behave like one?

You are not the only one who is fucking pissed. Okay?

Ana

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

I hit "send." *There—stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Grey*. I take a deep breath. I have worked myself up into quite a rage. Here I was feeling sorry and guilty for behaving badly. Well, no longer.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Here's the Thing …

**Date:** August 26 2011 13:59

**To:** Anastasia Grey

As ever, Mrs. Grey, you are forthright and challenging in e-mail.

Perhaps we can discuss this when you get home to **OUR** apartment.

You should watch your language. I am still fucking pissed, too.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Watch my language!* I scowl at my computer, realizing this is getting me nowhere. I don't respond, but pick up a manuscript recently received from a promising new author and begin to read.

MY MEETING WITH DETECTIVE Clark is uneventful. He is less growly than the night before, maybe because he's managed some sleep. Or maybe he just prefers working during the day.

"Thank you for your statement, Mrs. Grey."

"You're welcome, Detective. Is Hyde in police custody yet?"

"Yes, ma'am. He was released from the hospital earlier this morning. With what he's charged with, he should be with us for a while." He smiles, his dark eyes crinkling in the corners.

"Good. This has been an anxious time for my husband and me."

"I spoke at length with Mr. Grey this morning. He's very relieved. Interesting man, your husband."

*You have no idea*.

"Yes, I think so." I offer him a polite smile, and he knows he's being dismissed.

"If you think of anything, you can call me. Here's my card." He wrestles a card out of his wallet and hands it to me.

"Thank you, Detective. I'll do that."

"Good day to you, Mrs. Grey."

"Good day."

As he leaves, I wonder exactly what Hyde has been charged with. No doubt Christian won't tell me. I purse my lips.

---

WE RIDE IN SILENCE to Escala. Sawyer is driving this time, Prescott at his side, and my heart grows heavier and heavier as we head back. I know Christian and I are going to have an almighty fight, and I don't know if I have the energy.

As I ride in the elevator from the garage with Prescott beside me, I try to marshal my thoughts. What do I want to say? I think I said it all in my e-mail. Perhaps he'll give me some answers. I hope so. I can't help my nerves. My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry, and my palms are sweaty. I don't want to fight. But sometimes he's so difficult, and I need to stand my ground.

The elevator doors slide open, revealing the foyer, and it's once more neat and tidy. The table is upright and a new vase is in place with a gorgeous array of pale pink and white peonies. I quickly check the paintings as we wander through—the Madonnas all look to be intact. The broken foyer door is fixed and operational once more, and Prescott kindly opens it for me. She's been so quiet today. I think I prefer her this way.

I drop my briefcase in the hall and head into the great room. I stop. *Holy fuck.*

"Good evening, Mrs. Grey," Christian says softly. He's standing by the piano, dressed in a tight black T-shirt and jeans … *those* jeans—the ones he wore in the playroom. *Oh my*. They are overwashed pale blue denim, snug, ripped at the knee, and hot. He saunters over to me, his feet bare, the top button of the jeans undone, his smoldering eyes never leaving mine.

"Good to have you home. I've been waiting for you."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Have you now?" I whisper. My mouth goes drier still, my heart pounding in my chest. Why's he dressed like this? What does it mean? Is he still sulking?

"I have." His voice is kitten soft, but he's smirking as he strolls closer to me.

He looks hot—his jeans hanging that way from his hips. Oh no, I'm not going to be distracted by Mr. Sex-on-Legs. I try to gauge his mood as he stalks toward me. Angry? Playful? Lustful? *Gah!* It's impossible to tell.

"I like your jeans," I murmur. He grins a disarming wolfish grin that doesn't reach his eyes. *Shit—he's still mad.* He's wearing these to distract me. He halts in front of me, and I'm seared by his intensity. He gazes down, wide unreadable eyes burning into mine. I swallow.

"I understand you have issues, Mrs. Grey," he says silkily, and he pulls something from the back pocket of his jeans. I can't tear my gaze from his, but hear him unfold a piece of paper. He holds it up, and glancing briefly in its direction, I recognize my e-mail. My gaze returns to his, as his eyes blaze bright with anger.

"Yes, I have issues," I whisper, feeling breathless. I need distance if we're going to discuss this. But before I can step back, he leans down and runs his nose along mine. My eyes flutter to a close as I welcome his unexpected, gentle touch.

"So do I," he whispers against my skin, and I open my eyes at his words. He straightens and gazes intently at me once more.

"I think I'm familiar with your issues, Christian." My voice is wry, and he narrows his eyes, suppressing the amusement that sparks there momentarily. Are we going to fight? I take a precautionary step back. I must physically distance myself from him—from his smell, his look, his distracting body in those hot jeans. He frowns as I move away.

"Why did you fly back from New York?" I whisper. Let's get this over and done with.

"You know why." His tone carries a warning ring.

"Because I went out with Kate?"

"Because you went back on your word, and you defied me, putting yourself at

unnecessary risk."

"Went back on my word? Is that how you see it?" I gasp, ignoring the rest of his sentence.

"Yes."

*Holy crap. Talk about overreaction!* I start to roll my eyes but stop when he scowls at me. "Christian, I changed my mind," I explain slowly, patiently, as if he's a child. "I'm a woman. We're renowned for it. That's what we do."

He blinks at me as if he doesn't comprehend this.

"If I had thought for one minute that you would cancel your business trip …" Words fail me. I realize I don't know what to say. I am momentarily catapulted back to the argument over our vows. *I never promised to obey you, Christian*. But I hold my tongue, because deep down I'm glad he came back. In spite of his fury, I'm glad he's here in one piece, angry and smoldering in front of me.

"You changed your mind?" He can't hide his contemptuous disbelief.

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to call me?" He glares at me, incredulous, before continuing. "What's more, you left the security detail short here and put Ryan at risk."

Oh. I hadn't thought about that.

"I should have called, but I didn't want to worry you. If I had, I'm sure you would have forbidden me to go, and I've missed Kate. I wanted to see her. Besides, it kept me out of the way when Jack was here. Ryan shouldn't have let him in." This is so confusing. If Ryan hadn't, Jack would still be at large.

Christian's eyes gleam wildly, then shut, his face tightening as if in pain. *Oh no*. He shakes his head, and before I know it he has folded me in his arms, pulling me hard against him.

"Oh, Ana," he whispers as he tightens his hold on me so that I can barely breathe. "If something were to happen to you—" His voice is barely a whisper.

"It didn't," I manage to say.

"But it could have. I've died a thousand deaths today thinking about what might have happened. I was so mad, Ana. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. I can't remember being this angry … except—" He stops again.

"Except?" I prompt.

"Once in your old apartment. When Leila was there."

*Oh*. I don't want to think about that.

"You were so cold this morning," I murmur. My voice cracks on the last word as I remember the hideous feeling of rejection in the shower. His hands move to the nape of my neck, loosening their grip on me, and I take a deep breath. He pulls my head back.

“I don’t know how to deal with this anger. I don’t think I want to hurt you,” he says, his eyes wide and wary. “This morning, I wanted to punish you, badly, and—” He stops, lost for words I think, or too afraid to say them.

“You were worried you’d hurt me?” I finish his sentence for him, not believing that he’d hurt me for a minute, but relieved, too. A small vicious part of me feared it was because he didn’t want me anymore.

“I didn’t trust myself,” he says quietly.

“Christian, I know you’d never hurt me. Not physically, anyway.” I clasp his head between my hands.

“Do you?” he asks, and there’s skepticism in his voice.

“Yes. I knew what you said was an empty, idle threat. I know you’re not going to beat the shit out of me.”

“I wanted to.”

“No you didn’t. You just thought you did.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” he murmurs.

“Think about it,” I urge, wrapping my arms around him once more and nuzzling his chest through the black T-shirt. “About how you felt when I left. You’ve told me often enough what that did to you. How it altered your view of the world, of me. I know what you’ve given up for me. Think about how you felt about the cuff marks on our honeymoon.”

He stills, and I know he’s processing this information. I tighten my arms around him, my hands on his back, feeling his taut, toned muscles beneath his T-shirt. Gradually he relaxes as the tension slowly ebbs away.

Is this what’s been worrying him? That he’ll hurt me? Why do I have more faith in him than he has in himself? I don’t understand; surely we’ve moved on. He’s normally so strong, so in control, but without that, he’s lost. *Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty—I’m sorry*. He kisses my hair, I turn my face up to his, and his lips find mine, searching, taking, giving, begging—for what, I don’t know. I just want to feel his mouth on mine, and I return his kiss passionately.

“You have such faith in me,” he whispers after he breaks away.

“I do.” He strokes my face with the backs of his knuckles and the tip of his thumb, gazing intently into my eyes. His anger has gone. My Fifty is back from wherever he’s been. It’s good to see him. I glance up and smile shyly.

“Besides,” I whisper, “you don’t have the paperwork.”

His mouth drops open in amused shock, and he clutches me to his chest again.

“You’re right. I don’t.” He laughs.

We stand in the middle of the great room, locked in our embrace, just holding each other.

“Come to bed,” he whispers, after heaven knows how long.

*Oh my* …

"Christian, we need to talk."

"Later," he urges softly.

"Christian, please. Talk to me."

He sighs. "About what?"

"You know. You keep me in the dark."

"I want to protect you."

"I'm not a child."

"I am fully aware of that, Mrs. Grey." He runs his hands down my body and cups my backside. Flexing his hips, he presses his growing erection into me.

"Christian!" I scold. "Talk to me."

He sighs once more with exasperation. "What do you want to know?" His voice is resigned as he releases me. I balk—*I didn't mean you had to let me go*. Taking my hand, he reaches down to pick up my e-mail from the floor.

"Lots of things," I mutter, as I let him lead me to the couch.

"Sit," he orders. Some things never change, I muse, doing as I'm told. Christian sits beside me, and leaning forward, puts his head in his hands.

*Oh no*. Is this too hard for him? Then he sits up, rakes both hands through his hair, and turns to me, at once expectant and reconciled to his fate.

"Ask me," he says simply.

Oh. Well, that was easier than I thought. "Why the additional security for your family?"

"Hyde was a threat to them."

"How do you know?"

"From his computer. It held personal details about me and the rest of my family. Especially Carrick."

"Carrick? Why him?"

"I don't know yet. Let's go to bed."

"Christian, tell me!"

"Tell you what?"

"You are so … exasperating."

"So are you." He glares.

"You didn't ramp up the security when you first found out there was information about your family on the computer. So what happened? Why now?"

Christian narrows his eyes at me.

"I didn't know he was going to attempt to burn down my building, or—" He stops. "We thought it was an unwelcome obsession, but you know"—he shrugs—"when you're in the public eye, people are interested. It was random stuff: news reports on me from when I was at Harvard—my rowing, my career.

Reports on Carrick—following his career, following my mom's career—and to some extent, Elliot and Mia."

*How strange*.

"You said *or*," I prompt.

"Or what?"

"You said, 'attempt to burn down my building, or …' Like you were going to say something else."

"Are you hungry?"

*What?* I frown at him, and my stomach rumbles.

"Did you eat today?" His voice is sterner and his eyes frost.

I'm betrayed by my flush.

"As I thought." His voice is clipped. "You know how I feel about you not eating. Come," he says. He stands and holds out his hand. "Let me feed you." And he shifts again … this time his voice full of sensual promise.

"Feed me?" I whisper, as everything south of my navel liquefies. *Hell*. This is such a typically mercurial diversion from what we've been discussing. *Is that it? Is that all I'm getting out of him for now?* Leading me over to the kitchen, Christian grabs a barstool and hefts it around to the other side of the island.

"Sit," he says.

"Where's Mrs. Jones?" I ask, noticing her absence for the first time as I perch on the stool.

"I've given her and Taylor the night off."

*Oh*.

"Why?"

He gazes at me for a beat, and his arrogant amusement is back. "Because I can."

"So you're going to cook?" My voice betrays my incredulity.

"Oh, ye of little faith, Mrs. Grey. Close your eyes."

Wow. I thought we were going to have a full-on fight, and here we are, playing in the kitchen.

"Close them," he orders.

I roll them first, then oblige.

"Hmm. Not good enough," he mutters. I open one eye and see him take a plum-colored silk scarf out of the back pocket of his jeans. It matches my dress. *Holy cow*. I look quizzically at him. *When did he get that?*

"Close," he orders again. "No peeking."

"You're going to blindfold me?" I mutter, shocked. All of a sudden I'm breathless.

"Yes."

“Christian—” He places a finger upon my lips, silencing me.

*I want to talk.*

“We’ll talk later. I want you to eat now. You said you were hungry.” He lightly kisses my lips. The silk of the scarf is soft against my eyelids as he ties it securely at the back of my head.

“Can you see?” he asks.

“No,” I mutter, figuratively rolling my eyes. He chuckles softly.

“I can tell when you’re rolling your eyes … and you know how that makes me feel.”

I purse my lips. “Can we just get this over and done with?” I snap.

“Such impatience, Mrs. Grey. So eager to talk.” His tone is playful.

“Yes!”

“I must feed you first,” he says and brushes his lips over my temple, calming me instantly.

*Okay … have it your way*. I resign myself to my fate and listen to his movements around the kitchen. The fridge door opens, and Christian places various dishes on the countertop behind me. He pads over to the microwave, pops something in, and turns it on. My curiosity is piqued. I hear the toaster lever drop, the turn of the control, and the quiet tick of the timer. Hmm—toast?

“Yes. I am eager to talk,” I murmur, distracted. An assortment of exotic, spicy aromas fills the kitchen, and I shift in my chair.

“Be still, Anastasia.” He’s close to me again. “I want you to behave …,” he whispers.

*Oh my*.

“And don’t bite your lip.” Gently he tugs my bottom lip free of my teeth, and I can’t help my smile.

Next, I hear the sharp pop of a cork being drawn from a bottle and the gentle glug of wine being poured into a glass. Then a moment of silence followed by a quiet click and the soft hiss of white noise from the surround-sound speakers as they come to life. A loud twang of a guitar begins a song I don’t know. Christian turns the volume down to background level. A man starts to sing, his voice deep, low, and sexy.

“A drink first, I think,” Christian whispers, diverting me from the song. “Head back.” I tip my head back. “Farther,” he prompts.

I oblige, and his lips are on mine. Cool crisp wine flows into my mouth. I swallow reflexively. *Oh my*. Memories flood back of not so long ago—me trussed up on my bed in Vancouver before I graduated with a hot, angry Christian not appreciating my e-mail. *Hmm … have times changed?* Not much. Except now I recognize the wine, Christian’s favorite—a Sancerre.

“Hmm,” I murmur in appreciation.

“You like the wine?” he whispers, his breath warm on my cheek. I’m bathed in his proximity, his vitality, the heat radiating from his body, even though he doesn’t touch me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“More?”

“I always want more, with you.”

I almost hear his grin. It makes me grin, too. “Mrs. Grey, are you flirting with me?”

“Yes.”

His wedding ring clinks against the glass as he takes another sip of wine. Now that is a sexy sound. This time he pulls my head right back, cradling me. He kisses me once more, and greedily I swallow the wine he gives me. He smiles as he kisses me again. “Hungry?”

“I think we’ve already established that, Mr. Grey.”

The troubadour on the iPod is singing about wicked games. *Hmm … How apt.*

The microwave pings, and Christian releases me. I sit upright. The food smells spicy: garlic, mint, oregano, rosemary, and lamb, I think. The door to the microwave opens, and the appetizing smell grows stronger.

“Shit! Christ!” Christian curses, and a dish clatters onto the countertop.

*Oh Fifty!* “You okay?”

“Yes!” he snaps, his voice tight. A moment later, he’s standing beside me once more.

“I just burned myself. Here.” He eases his index finger into my mouth. “Maybe you could suck it better.”

“Oh.” Clasping his hand, I draw his finger slowly from my mouth. “There, there,” I soothe, and leaning forward I blow, cooling his finger, then kiss it gently twice. He stops breathing. I reinsert it into my mouth and suck gently. He inhales sharply, and the sound travels straight to my groin. He tastes as delicious as ever, and I realize that this is his game—the slow seduction of his wife. I thought he was mad, and now …? This man, my husband, is so confusing. But this is how I like him. Playful. Fun. Sexy as hell. He’s given me some answers, but I’m greedy. I want more, but I want to play, too. After the anxiety and tension of today, and the nightmare of last night with Jack, this is a welcome diversion.

“What are you thinking?” Christian murmurs, stopping my thoughts in their tracks as he pulls his finger out of my mouth.

“How mercurial you are.”

He stills beside me. “Fifty Shades, baby,” he says eventually and plants a

tender kiss at the corner of my mouth.

"My Fifty Shades," I whisper. Grabbing his T-shirt, I pull him back to me.

"Oh no you don't, Mrs. Grey. No touching … not yet." He takes my hand, pries it off his T-shirt, and kisses each finger in turn.

"Sit up," he commands.

I pout.

"I will spank you if you pout. Now open wide."

*Oh shit*. I open my mouth, and he pops in a forkful of spicy hot lamb covered in a cool, minty, yogurt sauce. Mmm. I chew.

"You like?"

"Yes."

He makes an appreciative noise, and I know he's eating and enjoying, too.

"More?"

I nod. He gives me another forkful, and I chew it enthusiastically. He puts the fork down and he tears … bread, I think.

"Open," he orders.

This time it's pita bread and hummus. I realize Mrs. Jones—or maybe even Christian—has been shopping at the delicatessen I discovered about five weeks ago only two blocks from Escala. I chew gratefully. Christian in a playful mood increases my appetite.

"More?" he asks.

I nod. "More of everything. Please. I'm starving."

I hear his delighted grin. Slowly and patiently he feeds me, occasionally kissing a morsel of food from the corner of my mouth or wiping it off with his fingers. Intermittently, he offers me a sip of wine in his unique way.

"Open wide, then bite," he murmurs. I follow his command. Hmm—one of my favorites, stuffed vine leaves. Even cold they are delicious, though I prefer them heated up, but I don't want to risk Christian burning himself again. He feeds it to me slowly, and when I've finished I lick his fingers clean.

"More?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

I shake my head. I'm full.

"Good," he whispers against my ear, "because it's time for my favorite course. You." He scoops me up in his arms, surprising me so much I squeal.

"Can I take the blindfold off?"

"No."

I almost pout, then remember his threat and think better of it.

"Playroom," he murmurs.

*Oh—I don't know if that's a good idea*.

"You up for the challenge?" he asks. And because he's used the word

*challenge*, I can't say no.

"Bring it on," I murmur, desire and something that I don't want to name thrumming through my body. He carries me through the door, then up the stairs to the second floor.

"I think you've lost weight," he mutters disapprovingly. I have? Good. I remember his comment when we arrived back from our honeymoon, and how much it smarted. Jeez—was that just a week ago?

Outside the playroom, he slides me down his body and sets me on my feet, but keeps his arm wrapped around my waist. Briskly he unlocks the door.

It always smells the same: polished wood and citrus. It's actually become a comforting smell. Releasing me, Christian turns me around until I'm facing away from him. He undoes the scarf, and I blink in the soft light. Gently, he pulls the hairpins from my updo, and my braid falls free. He grasps it and tugs gently so I have to step back against him.

"I have a plan," he whispers in my ear, sending delicious shivers down my spine.

"I thought you might," I answer. He kisses me beneath my ear.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, I do." His tone is soft, mesmerizing. He tugs my braid to the side and plants a trail of soft kisses down my throat.

"First we have to get you naked." His voice hums low in his throat and resonates through my body. I want this—whatever he has planned. I want to connect the way we know how. He turns me around to face him. I glance down at his jeans, the top button still undone, and I can't help myself. I brush my index finger around the waistband, avoiding his T-shirt, feeling the hairs of his happy trail tickle my knuckle. He inhales sharply, and I look up to meet his eyes. I stop at the unfastened button. His eyes darken to a deeper gray … *oh my*.

"You should keep these on," I whisper.

"I fully intend to, Anastasia."

And he moves, grabbing me with one hand on the back of my neck and the other around my backside. He pulls me against him, then his mouth is on mine, and he's kissing me like his life depends on it.

*Whoa!*

He walks me backward, our tongues entwined, until I feel the wooden cross behind me. He leans into me, the contours of his body pressing into mine.

"Let's get rid of this dress," he says, peeling my dress up my thighs, my hips, my belly … deliciously slowly, the material skimming over my skin, skimming over my breasts.

"Lean forward," he says.

I comply, and he pulls my dress over my head and discards it on the floor,

leaving me in my sandals, panties, and bra. His eyes blaze as he grasps both my hands and raises them over my head. He blinks once and tilts his head to one side, and I know he's asking for my permission. *What is he going to do to me?* I swallow, then nod, and a trace of an admiring, almost proud, smile touches his lips. He clips my wrists into the leather cuffs on the bar above and produces the scarf once more.

"Think you've seen enough." He wraps it around my head, blindfolding me again, and I feel a frisson run through me as all my other senses heighten; the sound of his soft breathing, my own excited response, the blood pulsing in my ears, Christian's scent mixed with the citrus and polish in the room—all are brought into sharper focus because I can't see. His nose touches mine.

"I'm going to drive you wild," he whispers. His hands grasp my hips, and he moves down, removing my panties as his hands glide down my legs. *Drive me wild … wow*.

"Lift your feet, one at a time." I oblige and he removes first my panties, then each sandal in turn. Gently grasping my ankle, he tugs my leg gently to the right.

"Step," he says. He cuffs my right ankle to the cross, then proceeds to do the same with my left. I am helpless, spread-eagled on the cross. Standing, Christian steps toward me, and my body is bathed in his warmth once more, though he doesn't touch me. After a moment he grasps my chin, tilts my head up, and kisses me chastely.

"Some music and toys, I think. You look beautiful like this, Mrs. Grey. I may take a moment to admire the view." His voice is soft. Everything clenches deep inside.

After a moment, maybe two, I hear him pad quietly to the museum chest and open one of the drawers. The butt drawer? I have no idea. He takes something out and places it on the top, followed by something else. The speakers spring to life, and after a moment the strains of a single piano playing a soft, lilting melody fill the room. It's familiar—Bach, I think—but I don't know what piece it is. Something about the music makes me apprehensive. Perhaps because the music is too cool, too detached. I frown, trying to grasp why it unsettles me, but Christian grasps my chin, startling me, and tugs gently so that I release my bottom lip. I smile, trying to reassure myself. Why do feel uneasy? Is it the music?

Christian runs his hand from my chin, along my throat, and down my chest to my breast. Using his thumb he pulls on the cup, freeing my breast from the restraint of my bra. He makes a low, appreciative humming noise in his throat and kisses my neck. His lips follow the path of his fingers to my breast, kissing and sucking all the way. His fingers move to my left breast, releasing it from my

bra. I moan as he skates his thumb across my left nipple, and his lips close around my right, tugging and teasing gently until both nipples are long and hard.

"Ah."

He doesn't stop. With exquisite care, he slowly increases the intensity on each. I pull fruitlessly against my restraints as sharp pleasure spikes from my nipples to my groin. I try to squirm but I can hardly move, and it makes the torture all the more intense.

"Christian," I plead.

"I know," he murmurs, his voice hoarse. "This is what you make me feel."

*What?* I groan, and he begins again, subjecting my nipples to his sweet agonizing touch over and over—taking me closer.

"Please," I mewl.

He makes a low primal sound in his throat, then stands, leaving me bereft, breathless, and squirming against my restraints. He runs his hands down my sides, one pausing on my hip while the other travels down my belly.

"Let's see how you're doing," he croons softly. Gently, he cups my sex, brushing his thumb across my clitoris and making me cry out. Slowly, he inserts one, then two fingers inside me. I groan and thrust my hips forward, eager to meet his fingers and the palm of his hand.

"Oh, Anastasia, you're so ready," he says.

He circles his fingers inside me, around and around, while his thumb strokes my clitoris, back and forth, once more. It's the only point on my body where he's touching me, and all the tension, all the anxiety of the day, is concentrated on this one part of my anatomy.

*Holy shit … it's intense … and strange … the music … I begin to build …* Christian shifts, his hand still moving against and in me, and I hear a low buzzing noise.

"What?" I gasp.

"Hush," he soothes, and his lips are on mine, effectively silencing me. I welcome the warmer, more intimate contact, kissing him voraciously. He breaks the contact and the buzzing noise gets nearer.

"This is a wand, baby. It vibrates."

He holds it against my chest, and it feels like a large ball-like object vibrating against me. I shiver as it moves across my skin, down between my breasts, across to first one, then the other nipple, and I'm awash with sensation, tingling everywhere, synapses firing as dark, dark need pools at the base of my belly.

"Ah," I groan while Christian's fingers continue to move inside me. *I'm close … all this stimulation …* Tilting my head back, I moan loudly and Christian stills his fingers. All sensation stops.

“No! Christian,” I plead, trying to thrust my hips forward for some friction.

“Still, baby,” he says while my impending orgasm melts away. He leans forward once more and kisses me.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?” he murmurs.

*Oh no!* Suddenly I understand his game.

“Christian, please.”

“Hush,” he says and kisses me. And he starts to move again—wand, fingers, thumb—a lethal combination of sensual torture. He shifts so his body brushes against mine. He’s still dressed, and the soft denim of his jeans brushes against my leg, his erection at my hip. So tantalizingly close. He brings me to the brink again, my body singing with need, and stops.

“No,” I mewl loudly.

He plants soft wet kisses on my shoulder as he withdraws his fingers from me, and moves the wand down. It oscillates over my stomach, my belly, onto my sex, against my clitoris. Fuck, it’s intense.

“Ah!” I cry out, pulling hard on the restraints.

My body is so sensitized I feel I am going to explode, and just as I am, Christian stops again.

“Christian!” I cry out.

“Frustrating, yes?” he murmurs against my throat. “Just like you. Promising one thing and then …” His voice trails off.

“Christian, please!” I beg.

He pushes the wand against me again and again, stopping just at the vital moment each time. *Ah!*

“Each time I stop, it feels more intense when I start again. Right?”

“Please,” I whimper. My nerve endings are screaming for release.

The buzzing stops and Christian kisses me. He runs his nose down mine. “You are the most frustrating woman I have ever met.”

*No, No, No*.

“Christian, I never promised to obey you. Please, please—”

He moves in front of me, grabs my behind and pushes his hips against me, making me gasp—his groin rubbing into mine, the buttons of his jeans pressing into me, barely containing his erection. With one hand he pulls off the blindfold and grasps my chin, and I blink up into his scorching eyes.

“You drive me crazy,” he whispers, flexing his hips against me once, twice, three times more, causing my body to spark—ready to burn. And again he denies me. I want him so badly. I need him so badly. I close my eyes and mutter a prayer. I can’t help but feel I’m being punished. I’m helpless and he’s ruthless. Tears spring to my eyes. I don’t know how far he’s going to take this.

“Please,” I whisper once more.

But he gazes down at me, implacable. He’s just going to continue. For how long? Can I play this game? *No. No. No—I can’t do this*. I know he’s not going to stop. He’s going to continue to torture me. His hand travels down my body once more. *No* … And the dam bursts—all the apprehension, the anxiety, and the fear from the last couple of days overwhelming me anew as tears spring to my eyes. I turn away from him. This is not love. It’s revenge.

“Red,” I whimper. “Red. Red.” The tears course down my face.

He stills. “No!” He gasps, stunned. “Jesus Christ, no.”

He moves quickly, unclipping my hands, clasping me around my waist and leaning down to unclip my ankles, while I put my head in my hands and weep.

“No, no, no. Ana, please. No.”

Picking me up, he moves to the bed, sitting down and cradling me in his lap while I sob inconsolably. I’m overwhelmed … my body wound up to breaking point, my mind a blank, and my emotions scattered to the wind. He reaches behind him, drags the satin sheet off the four-poster bed, and drapes it around me. The cool sheets feel alien and unwelcome against my sensitized skin. He wraps his arms around me, hugging me close, rocking me gently backward and forward.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Christian murmurs, his voice raw. He kisses my hair over and over again. “Ana, forgive me, please.”

Turning my face into his neck, I continue to cry, and it’s a cathartic release. So much has happened over the last few days—fires in computer rooms, car chases, careers planned out for me, slutty architects, armed lunatics in the apartment, arguments, his anger—and Christian has been away. I hate Christian going away … I use the corner of the sheet to wipe my nose and gradually become aware that the clinical tones of Bach are still echoing around the room.

“Please switch the music off.” I sniff.

“Yes, of course.” Christian shifts, not letting me go, and pulls the remote out of his back pocket. He presses a button and the piano music ceases, to be replaced by my shuddering breaths. “Better?” he asks.

I nod, my sobs easing. Christian wipes my tears away gently with his thumb.

“Not a fan of Bach’s Goldberg Variations?” he asks.

“Not that piece.”

He gazes down at me, trying and failing to hide the shame in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“Why did you do that?” My voice is barely audible as I try to process my scrambled thoughts and feelings.

He shakes his head sadly and closes his eyes. “I got lost in the moment,” he

says unconvincingly.

I frown at him, and he sighs. “Ana, orgasm denial is a standard tool in— You never—” He stops. I shift in his lap, and he winces.

*Oh*. I flush. “Sorry,” I mutter.

He rolls his eyes, then leans back suddenly, taking me with him, so that we’re both lying on the bed, me in his arms. My bra is uncomfortable, and I adjust it.

“Need a hand?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head. I don’t want him to touch my breasts. He shifts so he’s looking down at me, and tentatively raising his hand, he strokes his fingers gently down my face. Tears pool in my eyes again. How can he be so callous one minute and so tender the next?

“Please don’t cry,” he whispers.

I’m dazed and confused by this man. My anger has deserted me in my hour of need … I feel numb. I want to curl up in a ball and withdraw. I blink, trying to hold back my tears as I gaze into his harrowed eyes. I take a shuddering breath, my eyes not leaving his. What am I going to do with this controlling man? Learn to be controlled? I don’t think so …

“I never what?” I ask.

“Do as you’re told. You changed your mind; you didn’t tell me where you were. Ana, I was in New York, powerless and livid. If I’d been in Seattle I’d have brought you home.”

“So you are punishing me?”

He swallows, then closes his eyes. He doesn’t have to answer, and I know that punishing me was his exact intention.

“You have to stop doing this,” I murmur.

His brow furrows.

“For a start, you only end up feeling shittier about yourself.”

He snorts. “That’s true,” he mutters. “I don’t like to see you like this.”

“And I don’t like feeling like this. You said on the *Fair Lady* that you hadn’t married a submissive.”

“I know. I know.” His voice is soft and raw.

“Well stop treating me like one. I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I won’t be so selfish again. I know you worry about me.”

He gazes at me, scrutinizing me closely, his eyes bleak and anxious. “Okay. Good,” he says eventually. He leans down, but pauses before his lips touch mine, silently asking if it’s allowed. I raise my face to his, and he kisses me tenderly.

“Your lips are always so soft when you’ve been crying,” he murmurs.

“I never promised to obey you, Christian,” I whisper.

“I know.”

“Deal with it, please. For both our sakes. And I will try to be more considerate of your … controlling tendencies.”

He looks lost and vulnerable, completely at sea.

“I’ll try,” he murmurs, his voice burning with sincerity.

I sigh, a long shuddering sigh. “Please do. Besides, if I *had* been here …”

“I know,” he says and blanches. Lying back, he puts his free arm over his face. I curl around him and lay my head on his chest. We both lie silent for a few moments. His hand moves to the end of my braid. He pulls the tie from it, freeing my hair, and gently, rhythmically combs his fingers through it. This is what this is really about—his fear … his irrational fear for my safety. An image of Jack Hyde slumped on the floor in the apartment with a Glock comes to mind … well, maybe not so irrational, which reminds me …

“What did you mean earlier, when you said or?” I ask.

“Or?”

“Something about Jack.”

He peers down at me. “You don’t give up, do you?”

I rest my chin on his sternum, enjoying the soothing caress of his fingers in my hair.

“Give up? Never. Tell me. I don’t like being kept in the dark. You seem to have some overblown idea that I need protecting. You don’t even know how to shoot—I do. Do you think I can’t handle whatever it is you won’t tell me, Christian? I’ve had your stalker ex-sub pull a gun on me, your pedophile ex-lover harass me—and don’t look at me like that,” I snap when he scowls at me. “Your mother feels the same way about her.”

“You talked to my mother about Elena?” Christian’s voice raises a few octaves.

“Yes, Grace and I talked about her.”

He gapes at me.

“She’s very upset about it. Blames herself.”

“I can’t believe you spoke to my mother. Shit!” He lies down and puts his arm over his face again.

“I didn’t go into any specifics.”

“I should hope not. Grace doesn’t need all the gory details. Christ, Ana. My dad, too?”

“No!” I shake my head vehemently. I don’t have that kind of relationship with Carrick. His comments about the prenup still sting. “Anyway, you’re trying to distract me—again. Jack. What about him?”

Christian lifts his arm briefly and gazes at me, his expression unreadable.

Sighing, he puts his arm back over his face.

"Hyde is implicated in *Charlie Tango*'s sabotage. The investigators found a partial print—just partial, so they couldn't make a match. But then you recognized Hyde in the server room. He has convictions as a minor in Detroit, and the prints matched his."

My mind reels as I try to absorb this information. Jack brought down *Charlie Tango*? But Christian is on a roll. "This morning, a cargo van was found in the garage here. Hyde was the driver. Yesterday, he delivered some shit to that new guy who's moved in. The guy we met in the elevator."

"I don't remember his name."

"Me neither." Christian says. "But that's how Hyde managed to get into the building legitimately. He was working for a delivery company—"

"And? What's so important about the van?"

Christian says nothing.

"Christian, tell me."

"The cops found … things in the van." He stops again and tightens his hold around me.

"What things?"

He's quiet for several moments, and I open my mouth to prompt him, but he speaks. "A mattress, enough horse tranquilizer to take down a dozen horses, and a note." His voice has softened to barely a whisper while horror and revulsion roll off him.

*Holy fuck.*

"Note?" My voice mirrors his.

"Addressed to me."

"What did it say?"

Christian shakes his head, indicating he doesn't know or that he won't divulge its contents.

*Oh.*

"Hyde came here last night with the intention of kidnapping you." Christian freezes, his face taut with tension. As he says those words, I recall the duct tape, and a shudder runs through me, though deep down this is not news to me.

"Shit," I mutter.

"Quite," Christian says tightly.

I try to remember Jack in the office. Was he always insane? How did he think he could get away with this? I mean, he was pretty creepy, but this unhinged?

"I don't understand why," I murmur. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"I know. The police are digging further, and so is Welch. But we think Detroit is the connection."

“Detroit?” I gaze at him, confused.

“Yeah. There’s something there.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Christian lifts his face and gazes at me, his expression unreadable. “Ana, I was born in Detroit.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I thought you were born here in Seattle," I murmur. My mind races. What does this have to do with Jack? Christian raises the arm covering his face, reaches behind him, and grabs one of the pillows. Placing it under his head, he settles back and gazes at me with a wary expression. After a moment he shakes his head.

"No. Elliot and I were both adopted in Detroit. We moved here shortly after my adoption. Grace wanted to be on the West Coast, away from the urban sprawl, and she got a job at Northwest Hospital. I have very little memory of that time. Mia was adopted here."

"So Jack is from Detroit?"

"Yes."

*Oh* … "How do you know?"

"I ran a background check when you went to work for him."

Of course he did. "Do you have a manila file on him, too?" I smirk.

Christian's mouth twists as he hides his amusement. "I think it's pale blue." His fingers continue to run through my hair. It's soothing.

"What does it say in his file?"

Christian blinks. Reaching down he strokes my cheek. "You really want to know?"

"Is it that bad?"

He shrugs. "I've known worse," he whispers.

*No!* Is he referring to himself? And the image I have of Christian as a small, dirty, fearful, lost boy comes to mind. I curl around him, holding him tighter, pulling the sheet over him, and I lay my cheek against his chest.

"What?" he asks, puzzled by my reaction.

"Nothing," I murmur.

"No, no. This works both ways, Ana. What is it?"

I glance up, assessing his apprehensive expression. Resting my cheek upon his chest once more, I decide to tell him. "Sometimes I picture you as a child … before you came to live with the Greys."

Christian stiffens. "I wasn't talking about me. I don't want your pity,

Anastasia. That part of my life is done. Gone."

"It's not pity," I whisper, appalled. "It's sympathy and sorrow—sorrow that anyone could do that to a child." I take a deep steadying breath as my stomach twists and tears prick my eyes anew. "That part of your life is not done, Christian—how can you say that? You live every day with your past. You told me yourself—fifty shades, remember?" My voice is barely audible.

Christian snorts and runs his free hand through his hair, though he remains silent and tense beneath me.

"I know it's why you feel the need to control me. Keep me safe."

"And yet you choose to defy me," he murmurs, baffled, his hand stilling in my hair.

I frown. *Holy cow! Do I do that deliberately?* My subconscious removes her half-moon glasses and chews the end, pursing her lips and nodding. I ignore her. This is confusing—I'm his wife, not his submissive, not some company he's acquired. I'm not the crack whore who was his mother … *Fuck.* The thought is sickening. Dr. Flynn's words come back to me:

*"Just keep doing what you're doing. Christian is head over heels … It's a delight to see."*

That's it. I'm just doing what I've always done. Isn't that what Christian found attractive in the first place?

*Oh, this man is so confusing*.

"Dr. Flynn said I should give you the benefit of the doubt. I think I do—I'm not sure. Perhaps it's my way of bringing you into the here and now—away from your past," I whisper. "I don't know. I just can't seem to get a handle on how far you'll overreact."

He's silent for a moment. "Fucking Flynn," he mutters to himself.

"He said I should continue to behave the way I've always behaved with you."

"Did he now?" Christian says dryly.

Okay. Here goes nothing. "Christian, I know you loved your mom, and you couldn't save her. It wasn't your job to do that. But I'm not her."

He freezes again. "Don't," he whispers.

"No, listen. Please." I raise my head to stare into wide eyes that are paralyzed with fear. He's holding his breath. *Oh, Christian* … My heart constricts. "I'm not her. I'm much stronger than she was. I have you, and you're so much stronger now, and I know you love me. I love you, too," I whisper.

His brow creases as if my words were not what he expected. "Do you still love me?" he asks.

"Of course I do. Christian, I will always love you. No matter what you do to me." Is this the reassurance he wants?

He exhales and closes his eyes, placing his arm over his face again, but hugging me closer, too.

"Don't hide from me." Reaching up, I grasp his hand and pull his arm away from his face. "You've spent your life hiding. Please don't, not from me."

He looks at me with incredulity and frowns. "Hiding?"

"Yes."

He shifts suddenly, rolling over onto his side and moving me so that I am lying beside him on the bed. He reaches up, smoothes my hair off my face, and tucks it behind my ear.

"You asked me earlier today if I hated you. I didn't understand why, and now —" He stops, staring down at me as if I'm a complete conundrum.

"You still think I hate you?" Now my voice is incredulous.

"No." He shakes his head. "Not now." He looks relieved. "But I need to know … why did you safe-word, Ana?"

I blanch. What can I tell him? That he frightened me. That I didn't know if he'd stop. That I begged him—and he didn't stop. That I didn't want things to escalate … like—like that one time in here. I shudder as I recall him whipping me with his belt.

I swallow. "Because … because you were so angry and distant and … cold. I didn't know how far you'd go."

His expression is unreadable.

"Were you going to let me come?" My voice is barely a whisper, and I feel a blush steal over my cheeks, but I hold his gaze.

"No," he says eventually.

*Holy crap*. "That's … harsh."

His knuckle gently grazes my cheek. "But effective," he murmurs. He gazes down at me as if he's trying to see into my soul, his eyes darkening. After an eternity, he murmurs, "I'm glad you did."

"Really?" I don't understand.

His lips twist in a sad smile. "Yes. I don't want to hurt you. I got carried away." He reaches down and kisses me. "Lost in the moment." He kisses me again. "Happens a lot with you."

Oh? And for some bizarre reason the thought pleases me … I grin. Why does that make me happy? He grins, too.

"I don't know why you're grinning, Mrs. Grey."

"Me neither."

He wraps himself around me and places his head on my chest. We are a tangle of naked and denim-clad limbs and satin red sheets. I stroke his back with one hand and run the fingers of my other hand through his hair. He sighs and relaxes

in my arms.

"It means I can trust you … to stop me. I never want to hurt you," he murmurs. "I need—" He halts.

"You need what?"

"I need control, Ana. Like I need you. It's the only way I can function. I can't let go of it. I can't. I've tried … And yet, with you …" He shakes his head in exasperation.

I swallow. This is the heart of our dilemma—his need for control and his need for me. I refuse to believe these are mutually exclusive.

"I need you, too," I whisper, hugging him tighter. "I'll try, Christian. I'll try to be more considerate."

"I want you to need me," he murmurs.

*Holy cow!*

"I do!" My voice is impassioned. I need him so much. I love him so much.

"I want to look after you."

"You do. All the time. I missed you so much while you were away."

"You did?" He sounds so surprised.

"Yes, of course. I hate you going away."

I sense his smile. "You could have come with me."

"Christian, please. Let's not rehash that argument. I want to work."

He sighs as I run my fingers gently through his hair.

"I love you, Ana."

"I love you, too, Christian. I will always love you."

We both lie still in the quiet after our storm. Listening to the steady beat of his heart, I drift exhausted into sleep.

I WAKE WITH A start, disoriented. Where am I? The playroom. The lights are still on, softly illuminating the bloodred walls. Christian moans again, and I realize this is what woke me.

"No," he groans. He's sprawled out beside me, his head back, his eyes screwed shut, his face contorted in anguish.

*Holy shit*. He's having a nightmare.

"No!" he cries out again.

"Christian, wake up." I struggle to sit up, kicking off the sheet. Kneeling beside him, I grab his shoulders and shake him as tears spring to my eyes.

"Christian, please. Wake up!"

His eyes spring open, gray and wild, his pupils enlarged with fear. He stares vacantly up at me.

“Christian, you’re having a nightmare. You’re home. You’re safe.”

He blinks, looks around frantically, and frowns as he takes in our surroundings. Then his eyes are back on mine. “Ana,” he breathes, and with no preamble whatsoever he grabs my face with both hands, pulls me down onto his chest, and kisses me. Hard. His tongue invades my mouth, and he tastes of desperation and need. Barely giving me a chance to breathe, he rolls over, his lips locked to mine so that he’s pressing me into the hard mattress of the four-poster. One of his hands clasps my jaw, the other spreads out on top of my head, keeping me still as his knee parts my legs and he nestles, still clothed in his jeans, between my thighs.

“Ana,” he gasps, as if he can’t believe I’m there with him. He gazes down at me for a split second, allowing me a moment to breathe. Then his lips are on mine again, plundering my mouth, taking all I have to give. He groans loudly, flexing his hips into me. His erection sheathed in denim pushes into my soft flesh. *Oh* … I moan, and all the pent-up sexual tension of earlier erupts, resurfacing with a vengeance, flushing my system with desire and need. Driven by his demons, he urgently kisses my face, my eyes, my cheeks, along my jaw.

“I’m here,” I whisper, trying to calm him, our heated, panting breath mingling. I wrap my arms around his shoulders as I grind my pelvis against his in welcome.

“Oh, Ana,” he pants, his voice rough and low. “I need you.”

“Me, too,” I whisper urgently, my body desperate for his touch. I want him. I want him now. I want to heal him. I want to heal me … I need this. His hand reaches down and tugs on the button of his fly, fumbling momentarily, then freeing his erection.

*Holy shit*. I was asleep less than a minute ago.

He shifts, staring down at me for a split second, suspended above me.

“Yes. Please,” I breathe, my voice hoarse and needy.

And in one swift move he buries himself inside me.

“Ah!” I cry out, not from any pain, but from surprise at his alacrity.

He groans, and his lips find mine again as he pushes into me, over and over, his tongue possessing me, too. He moves frantically, compelled by his fear, his lust, his desire, his—love? I don’t know, but I meet him thrust for thrust, welcoming him.

“Ana,” he growls almost inarticulately, and he comes powerfully, pouring himself into me, his face strained, his body rigid, before he collapses with his full weight onto me, panting, and he leaves me hanging … again.

*Holy shit*. This is not my night. I hold him, drawing in a lungful of air and practically writhing with need beneath him. He eases out of me and holds me for

minutes … many minutes. Finally he shakes his head and leans up on his elbows, taking some of his weight. He gazes down at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"Oh, Ana. Sweet Jesus." He bends and kisses me tenderly.

"You okay?" I breathe, caressing his lovely face. He nods, but he looks shaken and most definitely stirred. My own lost boy. He frowns and stares intently into my eyes as if finally registering where he is.

"You?" he asks, concern in his voice.

"Um …" I wriggle beneath him, and after a moment he smiles, a slow carnal smile.

"Mrs. Grey, you have needs," he murmurs. He kisses me swiftly, then scoots off the bed.

Kneeling on the floor at the end of the bed, he reaches up, grabs me just above the knees, and pulls me toward him so my behind is on the edge of the bed.

"Sit up," he murmurs. I struggle into a sitting position, my hair falling like a veil around me, down to my breasts. His gray gaze holds mine as he gently pushes my legs apart as far as they'll go. I lean back on my hands—knowing full well what he's going to do. But … he's just … um …

"You are so fucking beautiful, Ana," he breathes, and I watch his copper-haired head dip and plant a trail of kisses up my right thigh, heading north. My whole body clenches in anticipation. He glances up at me, his eyes darkening through long lashes.

"Watch," he rasps, then his mouth is on me.

*Oh my*. I cry out as the world is concentrated at the apex of my thighs, and it's so erotic—*Fuck*—watching him. Watching his tongue against what feels like the most sensitive part of my body. And he shows no mercy, teasing and taunting, worshipping me. My body tenses and my arms start to tremble from the strain of staying upright.

"No … ah," I murmur. Gently, he eases one long finger inside me, and I can bear it no more, collapsing back onto the bed, relishing his mouth and fingers on and in me. Slowly and gently, he massages that sweet, sweet spot deep inside me. And that's it—I'm gone. I explode around him, crying out an incoherent rendition of his name as my intense orgasm arches my back off the bed. I think I see stars it's such a visceral primal feeling … Vaguely I'm aware that he's nuzzling my belly, giving me soft, sweet kisses. Reaching down, I caress his hair.

"I'm not finished with you yet," he murmurs. And before I've fully come back to Seattle, planet Earth, he's reaching for me, grasping my hips, and pulling me off the bed to where's he's kneeling, into his waiting lap and onto his waiting

erection.

I gasp as he fills me. *Holy cow* …

"Oh, baby," he breathes as he wraps his arms around me and stills, cradling my head and kissing my face. He flexes his hips, and pleasure spikes hot and hard from deep within me. He reaches for my behind and lifts me, rocking his groin upward.

"Ah," I moan, and his lips are on mine again as he slowly, oh so slowly, lifts and rocks … lifts and rocks. I throw my arms around his neck, surrendering to his gentle rhythm and to wherever he'll take me. I flex my thighs, riding him … he feels so good. Leaning backward, I tilt my head back, my mouth open wide in a silent expression of my pleasure, reveling in his sweet lovemaking.

"Ana," he breathes, and he leans down, kissing my throat. Holding me tight, slowly easing in and out, pushing me … higher and higher … so exquisitely timed—a fluid carnal force. Blissful pleasure radiates outward from deep, deep inside me as he holds me so intimately.

"I love you, Ana," he whispers close to my ear, his voice low and harsh, and he lifts me again—up, down, up, down. I curl my hands back around his neck into his hair.

"I love you, too, Christian." Opening my eyes, I find he's gazing at me, and all I see is his love, shining bright and bold in the soft glow of the playroom light, his nightmare seemingly forgotten. And as I feel my body build toward my release, I realize this is what I wanted—this connection, this demonstration of our love.

"Come for me, baby," he whispers, his voice low. I screw my eyes shut as my body tightens at the low sound of his voice, and I come loudly, spiraling into an intense climax. He stills, his forehead against mine, as he softly whispers my name, wraps his arms around me, and finds his own release.

HE LIFTS ME GENTLY and lays me on the bed. I lie in his arms, wrung out and finally sated. He nuzzles my neck.

"Better now?" he whispers.

"Hmm."

"Shall we go to bed, or do you want to sleep here?"

"Hmm."

"Mrs. Grey, talk to me." He sounds amused.

"Hmm."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"Hmm."

“Come. Let me put you to bed. I don’t like sleeping here.”

Reluctantly, I shift and turn to face him. “Wait,” I whisper. He blinks at me, looking all wide-eyed and innocent, and at the same time thoroughly fucked and pleased with himself.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He nods, smiling smugly like an adolescent boy. “I am now.”

“Oh, Christian,” I scold and gently stroke his lovely face. “I was talking about your nightmare.”

His expression freezes momentarily, then he closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

“Don’t,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and raw. My heart lurches and twists once more in my chest, and I clutch him tightly, running my hands down his back and through his hair.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, alarmed by his reaction. Holy fuck—how can I keep up with these mood swings? What the hell was his nightmare about? I don’t want to cause him any more pain by making him relive the details. “It’s okay,” I murmur softly, desperate to bring him back to the playful boy of a moment ago. “It’s okay,” I repeat over and over soothingly.

“Let’s go to bed,” he says quietly after a while, and he pulls away from me, leaving me empty and aching as he rises from the bed. I scramble after him, keeping the satin sheet wrapped around me, and bend to pick up my clothes.

“Leave those,” he says, and before I know it, he’s scooped me up in his arms. “I don’t want you to trip over this sheet and break your neck.” I put my arms around him, marveling that he’s recovered his composure, and nuzzle him as he carries me downstairs to our bedroom.

MY EYES SPRING OPEN. Something is wrong. Christian is not in bed, though it’s still dark. Glancing at the radio alarm, I see it’s three twenty in the morning. Where’s Christian? Then I hear the piano.

Quickly slipping out of bed, I grab my robe and run down the hallway to the great room. The tune he’s playing is so sad—a mournful lament that I’ve heard him play before. I pause in the doorway and watch him in a pool of light while the achingly sorrowful music fills the room. He finishes, then starts the piece again. Why such a plaintive tune? I wrap my arms around myself and listen spellbound as he plays. But my heart aches. *Christian, why so sad? Is it because of me? Did I do this?* When he finishes, only to start a third time, I can bear it no longer. He doesn’t look up as I near the piano, but shifts to one side so I can sit beside him on the piano bench. He continues to play, and I put my head on his

shoulder. He kisses my hair but doesn't stop playing until he's finished the piece. I peek up at him and he's staring down at me, warily.

"Did I wake you?" he asks.

"Only because you were gone. What's that piece called?"

"It's Chopin. It's one of his preludes in E minor." Christian pauses. "It's called 'Suffocation' …"

Reaching over, I take his hand. "You're really shaken by all this, aren't you?"

He snorts. "A deranged asshole gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife. She won't do as she's told. She drives me crazy. She safe-words on me." He closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them again, they are stark and raw. "Yeah, I'm pretty shaken up."

I squeeze his hand. "I'm sorry."

He presses his forehead against mine. "I dreamed you were dead," he whispers.

What?

"Lying on the floor—so cold—and you wouldn't wake up."

*Oh, Fifty.*

"Hey—it was just a bad dream." Reaching up, I clasp his head in my hands. His eyes burn into mine and the anguish in them is sobering. "I'm here and I'm cold without you in bed. Come back to bed, please." I take his hand and stand, waiting to see if he'll follow me. Finally he stands, too. He's wearing his pajama bottoms, and they hang in that way he has, and I want to run my fingers along the inside of his waistband, but I resist and lead him back to the bedroom.

WHEN I WAKE HE'S curled around me, sleeping peacefully. I relax and enjoy his enveloping heat, his skin on my skin. I lie very still, not wanting to disturb him.

Boy, what an evening. I feel like I've been run over by a train—the freight train that is my husband. Hard to believe that the man lying beside me, looking so serene and young in his sleep, was so tortured last night … and so tortured me last night. I gaze up at the ceiling, and it occurs to me that I always think of Christian as strong and dominating—yet the reality is he's so fragile, my lost boy. And the irony is that he looks upon me as fragile—and I don't think I am. Compared to him *I'm* strong.

But am I strong enough for both of us? Strong enough to do what I'm told and give him some peace of mind? I sigh. He's not asking that much of me. I flit through our conversation of last night. Did we decide anything other than to both try harder? The bottom line is that I love this man, and I need to chart a course for both of us. One that lets me keep my integrity and independence but still be

more for him. I am his *more*, and he is mine. I resolve to make a special effort this weekend not to give him cause for concern.

Christian stirs and lifts his head off my chest, looking sleepily at me.

"Good morning, Mr. Grey." I smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey. Did you sleep well?" He stretches out beside me.

"Once my husband stopped making that terrible racket on the piano, yes, I did."

He smiles his shy smile, and I melt. "Terrible racket? I'll be sure to e-mail Miss Kathie and let her know."

"Miss Kathie?"

"My piano teacher."

I giggle.

"That's a lovely sound," he says. "Shall we have a better day today?"

"Okay," I agree. "What do you want to do?"

"After I have made love to my wife, and she's cooked me breakfast, I'd like to take her to Aspen."

I gape at him. "Aspen?"

"Yes."

"Aspen, Colorado?"

"The very same. Unless they've moved it. After all, you did pay twenty-four thousand dollars for the experience."

I grin at him. "That was your money."

"Our money."

"It was your money when I made the bid." I roll my eyes.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, you and your eye rolling," he whispers as he runs his hand up my thigh.

"Won't it take hours to get to Colorado?" I ask to distract him.

"Not by jet," he says silkily as his hand reaches my behind.

Of course, my husband has a jet. How could I forget? His hand continues to skim up my body, lifting my nightdress as it goes, and soon I've forgotten everything.

TAYLOR DRIVES US ONTO the tarmac at Sea-Tac and around to where the GEH jet is waiting. It's a gray day in Seattle, but I refuse to let the weather dampen my soaring spirits. Christian is in a much better mood. He's excited about something—lit up like Christmas and twitching like a small boy with a big secret. I wonder what scheme he's concocted. He looks dreamy, all tousled hair, white T-shirt, and black jeans. Not CEO-like at all today. He takes my hand as Taylor glides to a

stop at the foot of the jet steps.

"I have a surprise for you," he murmurs and kisses my knuckles.

I grin at him. "Good surprise?"

"I hope so." He smiles warmly.

Hmm … what can it be?

Sawyer leaps out from the front and opens my door. Taylor opens Christian's, then retrieves our cases from the trunk. Stephan is waiting at the top of the stairs when we enter the aircraft. I glance into the cockpit and see First Officer Beighley flipping switches on the imposing instrument panel.

Christian and Stephan shake hands. "Good morning, sir." Stephan smiles.

"Thanks for doing this on such short notice." Christian grins back at him. "Our guests here?"

"Yes, sir."

*Guests?* I turn and gasp. Kate, Elliot, Mia, and Ethan are all smiling and sitting in the cream-colored leather seats. Wow! I spin around to Christian.

"Surprise!" he says.

"How? When? Who?" I mumble inarticulately, trying to contain my delight and elation.

"You said you didn't see enough of your friends." He shrugs and gives me a lopsided, apologetic smile.

"Oh, Christian, thank you." I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him hard in front of everyone. He puts his hands on my hips, hooking his thumbs through the belt loops of my jeans, and deepens the kiss.

*Oh my*.

"Keep this up and I'll drag you into the bedroom," he murmurs.

"You wouldn't dare," I whisper against his lips.

"Oh, Anastasia." He grins, shaking his head. He releases me and without further preamble, stoops down, grabs my thighs, and lifts me over his shoulder.

"Christian, put me down!" I smack his behind.

I briefly catch Stephan's smile as he turns and heads into the cockpit. Taylor is standing at the doorway, trying to stifle his grin. Ignoring my pleas and my futile struggles, Christian strides through the narrow cabin past Mia and Ethan, who are facing each other in the single seats, and past Kate and Elliot, who is whooping like a demented gibbon.

"If you'll excuse me," he says to our four guests. "I need to have a word with my wife in private."

"Christian!" I shout. "Put me down!"

"All in good time, baby."

I have a brief view of Mia, Kate, and Elliot laughing. *Damn it!* This is not

funny, it's embarrassing. Ethan gawks at us, mouth open and utterly shocked, as we disappear into the cabin.

Christian closes the cabin door behind him and releases me, letting me slide down his body slowly, so that I feel every hard sinew and muscle. He gives me his boyish grin, thoroughly pleased with himself.

"That was quite a show, Mr. Grey." I cross my arms and regard him with faux indignation.

"That was fun, Mrs. Grey." And his grin widens. *Oh boy*. He looks so young.

"Are you going to follow through?" I arch a brow, unsure how I feel about this. I mean, the others will hear us, for heaven's sake. Suddenly, I feel shy. Glancing anxiously at the bed, I feel a blush steal across my cheeks as I recall our wedding night. We talked so much yesterday, did so much yesterday. I feel as if we leaped some unknown hurdle—but that's the problem. It's unknown. My eyes find Christian's intense but amused gaze, and I'm unable to keep a straight face. His grin is too infectious.

"I think it might be rude to keep our guests waiting," he says silkily as he steps toward me. *When did he start to care what people think?* I step back against the cabin wall and he imprisons me, the heat from his body holding me in place. He leans down and runs his nose along mine.

"Good surprise?" he whispers, and there's a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Oh, Christian, fantastic surprise." I run my hands up his chest, curl them around his neck, and kiss him.

"When did you organize this?" I ask when I pull away from him, stroking his hair.

"Last night, when I couldn't sleep. I e-mailed Elliot and Mia, and here they are."

"It's very thoughtful. Thank you. I'm sure we'll have a great time."

"I hope so. I thought it would be easier to avoid the press in Aspen than at home."

The paparazzi! He's right. If we'd stayed in Escala, we'd have been imprisoned. A shiver runs down my spine as I recollect the snapping cameras and dazzling flashes of the few photographers Taylor sped through this morning.

"Come. We'd better take our seats—Stephan will be taking off shortly." He offers me his hand and together we walk back into the cabin.

Elliot cheers as we enter. "That sure was speedy in-flight service!" he calls mockingly.

Christian ignores him.

"Please be seated, ladies and gentlemen, as we'll shortly begin taxiing for takeoff." Stephan's voice echoes calmly and authoritatively around the cabin.

The brunette woman—*um … Natalie?*—who was on the flight for our wedding night appears from the galley and gathers up the discarded coffee cups. *Natalia … Her name's Natalia*.

"Good morning Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey," she says with a purr. Why does she make me uncomfortable? Maybe it's that she's a brunette. By his own admission, Christian doesn't usually employ brunettes because he finds them attractive. He gives Natalia a polite smile as he slides in behind the table and sits down facing Elliot and Kate. I swiftly hug Kate and Mia and give Ethan and Elliot a wave before sitting down and buckling up beside Christian. He puts his hand on my knee and gives it an affectionate squeeze. He seems relaxed and happy, even though we're with company. Idly, I wonder why he can't always be like this—not controlling at all.

"Hope you packed your hiking boots," he says, his voice warm.

"We're not going skiing?"

"That would be a challenge, in August," he says, amused.

Oh, of course.

"Do you ski, Ana?" Elliot interrupts us.

"No."

Christian moves his hand from my knee to clasp my hand.

"I'm sure my little brother can teach you." Elliot winks at me. "He's pretty fast on the slopes, too."

And I can't help my blush. When I glance up at Christian, he's gazing impassively at Elliot, but I think he's trying to suppress his mirth. The plane surges forward and starts taxiing toward the runway.

Natalia runs through the plane's safety procedures in a clear, ringing voice. She's dressed in a neat navy short-sleeved shirt and matching pencil skirt. Her makeup is immaculate—she really is quite pretty. My subconscious raises a plucked-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life eyebrow at me.

"You okay?" Kate asks me pointedly. "I mean, following the Hyde business?"

I nod. I don't want to think or talk about Hyde, but Kate seems to have other plans.

"So why did he go postal?" she asks, cutting to the heart of the matter in her inimitable style. She tosses her hair behind her as she prepares to investigate further.

Eyeing her coolly, Christian shrugs. "I fired his ass," he says bluntly.

"Oh? Why?" Kate tilts her head to one side, and I know she's in full Nancy Drew mode.

"He made a pass at me," I mutter. I try to kick Kate's ankle beneath the table and miss. Shit!

“When?” Kate glares at me.

“Ages ago.”

“You never told me he made a pass at you!” she splutters.

I shrug apologetically.

“It can’t just be a grudge about that, surely. I mean his reaction is way too extreme,” Kate continues, but now she directs her questions at Christian. “Is he mentally unstable? What about all the information he has on you Greys?” Her grilling Christian this way makes my hackles rise, but she’s already established that I know nothing, so she can’t ask me. The thought is annoying.

“We think there’s a connection with Detroit,” Christian says mildly. Too mildly. *Oh no, Kate, please give it up for now*.

“Hyde is from Detroit, too?”

Christian nods.

The plane accelerates, and I tighten my grip on Christian’s hand. He glances at me reassuringly. He knows I hate takeoffs and landings. He squeezes my hand and his thumb strokes my knuckles, calming me.

“What *do* you know about him?” Elliot asks, oblivious to the fact that we are hurtling down the runway in a small jet about to launch itself into the sky, and equally oblivious to Christian’s growing exasperation with Kate. Kate leans forward, listening attentively.

“This is off the record,” Christian says directly to her. Kate’s mouth sets in a subtle but thin line. I swallow. *Oh shit*.

“We know a little about him,” Christian continues. “His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid … in and out of trouble, too. Mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie. His mom got back on track through some outreach program, and Hyde turned himself around. Won a scholarship to Princeton.”

“Princeton?” Kate’s curiosity is piqued.

“Yep. He’s a bright boy.” Christian shrugs.

“Not that bright. He got caught,” Elliot mutters.

“But surely he can’t have pulled this stunt alone?” Kate asks.

Christian stiffens beside me. “We don’t know yet.” His voice is very quiet. *Holy crap*. There could be someone working with him? I turn and gape in horror at Christian. He squeezes my hand once more but doesn’t look me in the eye. The plane lifts smoothly into the air, and I get that horrible sinking feeling in my stomach.

“How old is he?” I ask Christian, leaning close so only he can hear. Much as I’d like to know what’s going on, I don’t want to encourage Kate’s questions. I know they’re irritating Christian, and I’m sure she’s on his shit list since

Cocktailgate.

"Thirty-two. Why?"

"Curious, that's all."

Christian's jaw tightens. "Don't be curious about Hyde. I'm just glad the fucker's locked up." It's almost a reprimand, but I choose to ignore his tone.

"Do *you* think he's working with someone?" The thought that someone else might be involved makes me sick. It would mean this isn't over.

"I don't know," Christian answers, and his jaw tightens once more.

"Maybe someone who has a grudge against you?" I suggest. Holy shit. I hope it's not the bitch troll. "Like Elena?" I whisper. I realize I've muttered her name out loud, but only he can hear. I glance anxiously at Kate, but she's deep in conversation with Elliot, who looks pissed at her. Hmm.

"You do like to demonize her, don't you?" Christian rolls his eyes and shakes his head in disgust. "She may hold a grudge, but she wouldn't do this kind of thing." He pins me with a steady gray gaze. "Let's not discuss her. I know she's not your favorite topic of conversation."

"Have you confronted her?" I whisper, not sure if I really want to know.

"Ana, I haven't spoken to her since my birthday party. Please, drop it. I don't want to talk about her." He raises my hand and brushes my knuckles with his lips. His eyes burn into mine, and I know I shouldn't pursue this line of questioning right now.

"Get a room," Elliot teases. "Oh right—you already have, but you didn't need it for long."

Christian glances up and pins Elliot with a cool glare. "Fuck off, Elliot," he says without malice.

"Dude, just telling you how it is." Elliot's eyes light up with mirth.

"Like you'd know," Christian murmurs sardonically, raising an eyebrow.

Elliot grins, enjoying the banter. "You married your first girlfriend." Elliot gestures at me.

Oh shit. Where is this going? I flush.

"Can you blame me?" Christian kisses my hand again.

"No." Elliot laughs and shakes his head.

I flush, and Kate slaps Elliot's thigh.

"Stop being an ass," she scolds him.

"Listen to your girlfriend," Christian says to Elliot, grinning, and his earlier concern seems to have disappeared. My ears pop as we gain altitude, and the tension in the cabin dissipates as the plane levels out. Kate scowls at Elliot. Hmm … is something up between them? I'm not sure.

Elliot is right. I snort at the irony. I am—was—Christian's first girlfriend, and

now I’m his wife. The fifteen and the evil Mrs. Robinson—they don’t count. But then Elliot doesn’t know about them, and clearly Kate hasn’t told him. I smile at her, and she gives me a conspiratorial wink. My secrets are safe with Kate.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be cruising at an altitude of approximately thirty-two thousand feet, and our estimated flight time is one hour and fifty-six minutes,” Stephan announces. “You are now free to move around the cabin.”

Natalia appears abruptly from the galley.

“May I offer anyone coffee?” she asks.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We land smoothly at Sardy Field at 12:25 p.m. (MST). Stephan brings the plane to a halt a little way from the main terminal, and through the windows I spot a large VW minivan waiting for us.

"Good landing." Christian grins and shakes Stephan's hand as we get ready to file out of the jet.

"It's all about the density altitude, sir." Stephan smiles back. "Beighley here is good at math."

Christian nods at Stephan's first officer. "You nailed it, Beighley. Smooth landing."

"Thank you, sir." She grins smugly.

"Enjoy your weekend, Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey. We'll see you tomorrow." Stephan steps aside to let us disembark and, taking my hand, Christian leads me down the aircraft steps to where Taylor is waiting by the vehicle.

"Minivan?" says Christian in surprise as Taylor slides open the door.

Taylor gives him a tight, contrite smile and a slight shrug.

"Last minute, I know," Christian says, immediately placated. Taylor returns to the plane to retrieve our luggage.

"Want to make out in the back of the van?" Christian murmurs to me, a mischievous gleam in his eye.

I giggle. Who is this man, and what has he done with Mr. Unbelievably Angry of the last couple of days?

"Come on, you two. Get in," Mia says from behind us, oozing impatience beside Ethan. We climb in, stagger to the double seat at the back, and sit down. I snuggle against Christian, and he puts his arm around the back of my seat. "Comfortable?" he murmurs as Mia and Ethan take the seat in front of us.

"Yes." I smile and he kisses my forehead. And for some unfathomable reason I feel shy with him today. *Why?* Last night? Being with company? I can't put my finger on it.

Elliot and Kate join us last as Taylor opens the liftgate to load the luggage. Five minutes later, we are on our way.

I gaze out the window as we head toward Aspen. The trees are green, but a

whisper of the coming fall is evident here and there in the yellowing tips of the leaves. The sky is a clear crystal blue, though there are darkening clouds to the west. All around us in the distance loom the Rockies, the highest peak directly ahead. They're lush and green, and the highest are capped with snow and look like a child's drawing of mountains.

We're in the winter playground of the rich and famous. *And I own a house here*. I can barely believe it. And from deep within my psyche, the familiar unease that's always present when I try to wrap my head around Christian's wealth looms and taunts me, making me feel guilty. What have I done to deserve this lifestyle? I've done nothing, nothing except fall in love.

"Have you been to Aspen before, Ana?" Ethan turns and asks, dragging me out of my reverie.

"No, first time. You?"

"Kate and I used to come here a lot when we were teens. Dad's a keen skier. Mom less so."

"I'm hoping my husband will teach me how to ski." I glance up at my man.

"Don't bet on it," Christian mutters.

"I won't be that bad!"

"You might break your neck." His grin gone.

*Oh*. I don't want to argue and sour his good mood, so I change the subject. "How long have you had this place?"

"Nearly two years. It's yours now, too, Mrs. Grey," he says softly.

"I know," I whisper. But somehow I don't feel the courage of my convictions. Leaning in, I kiss his jaw and nestle once more at his side, listening to him laugh and joke with Ethan and Elliot. Mia chimes in occasionally, but Kate is quiet, and I wonder if she's brooding about Jack Hyde or something else. Then I remember. Aspen … Christian's house here was redesigned by Gia Matteo and rebuilt by Elliot. I wonder if that's what's preoccupying Kate. I can't ask her in front of Elliot, given his history with Gia. Does Kate even know about Gia's connection to the house? I frown, wondering what could be bothering her, and resolve to ask her when we're on our own.

We drive through the center of Aspen and my mood brightens as I take in the town. There are squat buildings of mostly redbrick, Swiss-style chalets, and numerous little turn-of-the-century houses painted in fun colors. Plenty of banks and designer shops, too, betraying the affluence of the local populace. Of course Christian fits in here.

"Why did you choose Aspen?" I ask him.

"What?" He regards me quizzically.

"To buy a place."

“Mom and Dad used to bring us here when we were kids. I learned to ski here, and I like the place. I hope you do, too—otherwise we’ll sell the house and choose somewhere else.”

*Simple as that!*

He tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “You look lovely today,” he murmurs.

My cheeks heat. I’m just wearing my traveling gear: jeans and a T-shirt with a lightweight navy blue jacket. *Damn it*. Why does he make me feel shy?

He kisses me, a tender, sweet, loving kiss.

Taylor drives us on out of town, and we start to climb the other side of the valley, twisting along a mountain road. The higher we go, the more excited I get, and Christian tenses beside me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as we round a bend.

“I hope you like it,” he says quietly. “We’re here.”

Taylor slows and turns through a gateway made of gray, beige, and red stones. He heads down the driveway and finally pulls up outside the impressive house. Double fronted with high-pitched roofs and built of dark wood and the same mixed stone as the gateway. It’s stunning—modern and stark, very much Christian’s style.

“Home,” he mouths at me as our guests start piling out of the van.

“Looks good.”

“Come. See,” he says, an excited, though anxious, gleam in his eyes as if he’s about to show me his science project or something.

Mia runs up the steps to where a woman stands in the doorway. She’s tiny and her raven-colored hair is dusted with gray. Mia flings her arms around her neck and hugs her tightly.

“Who’s that?” I ask as Christian helps me out of the van.

“Mrs. Bentley. She lives here with her husband. They look after the place.”

*Holy cow … more staff?*

Mia is making introductions—Ethan, then Kate. Elliot hugs Mrs. Bentley, too. As Taylor unloads the van, Christian takes my hand and leads me to the front door.

“Welcome back, Mr. Grey.” Mrs. Bentley smiles.

“Carmella, this is my wife, Anastasia,” Christian says proudly. His tongue caresses my name, making my heart stutter.

“Mrs. Grey.” Mrs. Bentley nods a respectful greeting. I hold out my hand and we shake. It’s no surprise to me that she’s much more formal with Christian than the rest of the family.

“I hope you’ve had a pleasant flight. The weather is supposed to be fine all

weekend, though I'm not sure." She eyes the darkening gray clouds behind us. "Lunch is ready whenever you want." She smiles again, her dark eyes twinkling, and I warm to her immediately.

"Here." Christian grabs me and lifts me off my feet.

"What are you doing?" I squeal.

"Carrying you over yet another threshold, Mrs. Grey."

I grin as he carries me into the wide hallway, and after a brief kiss, he sets me gently down onto the hardwood floor. The interior decor is stark and reminds me of the great room at Escala—all white walls, dark wood, and contemporary abstract art. The hallway opens up into a large sitting area where three off-white leather couches surround a stone fireplace that dominates the room. The only color is from the soft cushions scattered on the couches. Mia grabs Ethan's hand and drags him farther into the house. Christian narrows his eyes at their departing figures, his mouth thinning. He shakes his head, then turns to me.

Kate whistles loudly. "Nice place."

I glance around to see Elliot helping Taylor with our luggage. I wonder again if she knows that Gia had a hand in this place.

"Tour?" Christian asks me, and whatever was going through his mind about Mia and Ethan is gone. He's radiating excitement—or is it anxiety? It's difficult to tell.

"Sure." Once again I'm overwhelmed by the wealth. How much did this place cost? And I have contributed nothing to it. Briefly I'm transported back to the first time Christian took me to Escala. I was overwhelmed then. *You got used to it*, my subconscious hisses at me.

Christian frowns but takes my hand, leading me through the various rooms. The state-of-the-art kitchen is all pale marble countertops and black cupboards. There's an impressive wine cellar, and an expansive den downstairs, complete with a large plasma screen TV, soft couches … and a billiards table. I gape at it and blush when Christian catches me.

"Fancy a game?" he asks, a wicked gleam in his eye. I shake my head, and his brow furrows once more. Taking my hand again, he leads me up to the first floor. There are four bedrooms upstairs, each with an en suite bathroom.

The master suite is something else. The bed is huge, bigger than the bed at home, and faces an enormous picture window looking out over Aspen and toward the verdant mountains.

"That's Ajax Mountain … or Aspen Mountain, if you like," Christian says, eyeing me warily. He's standing in the doorway, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops on his black jeans.

I nod.

“You’re very quiet,” he murmurs.

“It’s lovely, Christian.” And suddenly I’m aching to be back at Escala.

In five long strides he’s standing in front of me, tugging at my chin, and releasing my lower lip from the grip of my teeth. “What is it?” he asks, his eyes searching mine. “You’re very rich.”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes, it just takes me by surprise how wealthy you are.”

“We are.”

“We are,” I mutter automatically.

“Don’t stress about this, Ana, please. It’s just a house.”

“And what did Gia do here, exactly?”

“Gia?” He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Yes. She remodeled this place?”

“She did. She designed the den downstairs. Elliot did the build.” He rakes his hand through his hair and frowns at me. “Why are we talking about Gia?”

“Did you know she had a fling with Elliot?”

Christian gazes at me for a moment, his expression unreadable. “Elliot’s fucked most of Seattle, Ana.”

I gasp.

“Mainly women, I understand,” Christian jokes. I think he’s amused by my expression.

“No!”

Christian nods. “It’s none of my business.” He holds his palms up.

“I don’t think Kate knows.”

“I’m not sure he broadcasts that information. Kate seems to be holding her own.”

I’m shocked. Sweet, unassuming, blond, blue-eyed Elliot? I stare in disbelief.

Christian tilts his head to one side, scrutinizing me. “This can’t just be about Gia’s or Elliot’s promiscuity.”

“I know. I’m sorry. After all that’s happened this week, it’s just …” I shrug, feeling tearful all of a sudden. Christian seems to sag with relief. Pulling me into his arms, he holds me tightly, his nose in my hair.

“I know. I’m sorry, too. Let’s relax and enjoy ourselves, okay? You can stay here and read, watch god-awful TV, shop, go hiking—fishing even. Whatever you want to do. And forget what I said about Elliot. That was indiscreet of me.”

“Goes some way to explain why he’s always teasing you,” I murmur, nuzzling his chest.

“He really has no idea about my past. I told you, my family assumed I was gay. Celibate, but gay.”

I giggle and begin to relax in his arms. “I thought you were celibate. How wrong I was.” I wrap my arms around him, marveling at the ridiculousness of Christian’s being gay.

“Mrs. Grey, are you smirking at me?”

“Maybe a little.” I acquiesce. “You know, what I don’t understand is why you have this place.”

“What do you mean?” He kisses my hair.

“You have the boat, which I get, you have the place in New York for business—but why here? It’s not like you shared it with anyone.”

Christian stills and is silent for several beats. “I was waiting for you,” he says softly, his eyes dark gray and luminous.

“That’s … that’s such a lovely thing to say.”

“It’s true. I didn’t know it at the time.” He smiles his shy smile.

“I’m glad you waited.”

“You are worth waiting for, Mrs. Grey.” He tips my chin up with his finger, leans down, and kisses me tenderly.

“So are you.” I smile. “Though I feel like I cheated. I didn’t have to wait long for you at all.”

He grins. “Am I that much of a prize?”

“Christian, you are the state lottery, the cure for cancer, and the three wishes from Aladdin’s lamp all rolled into one.”

He raises a brow.

“When will you realize this?” I scold him. “You were a very eligible bachelor. And I don’t mean all this.” I wave dismissively at our plush surroundings. “I mean in here.” I place my hand over his heart, and his eyes widen. My confident, sexy husband has gone, and I’m facing my lost boy. “Believe me, Christian, please,” I whisper and clasp his face, pulling his lips to mine. He groans, and I don’t know if it’s hearing what I’ve said or his usual primal response. I claim him, my lips moving against his, my tongue invading his mouth.

When we’re both breathless, he pulls away, eyeing me doubtfully.

“When are you going to get it through your exceptionally thick skull that I love you?” I ask, exasperated.

He swallows. “One day,” he says.

This is progress. I smile and am rewarded with his answering shy smile.

“Come. Let’s have some lunch—the others will be wondering where we are. We can discuss what we all want to do.”

“OH NO!” KATE SAYS suddenly.

All eyes turn to her.

“Look,” she says, pointing to the picture window. Outside, rain has started pouring down. We are sitting around the dark wood table in the kitchen, having consumed an Italian feast of a mixed antipasto, prepared by Mrs. Bentley, and a bottle or two of Frascati. I’m replete and a little buzzed from the alcohol.

“There goes our hike,” Elliot mutters, sounding vaguely relieved. Kate scowls at him. Something is definitely up with them. They have been relaxed with all of us but not with each other.

“We could go into town,” Mia pipes up. Ethan smirks at her.

“Perfect weather for fishing,” Christian suggests.

“I’ll go fish,” Ethan says.

“Let’s split up.” Mia claps her hands. “Girls, shopping—boys, outdoor boring stuff.”

I glance at Kate, who regards Mia indulgently. Fishing or shopping? Jeez, what a choice.

“Ana, what do you want to do?” Christian asks.

“I don’t mind,” I lie.

Kate catches my eye and mouths “shopping.” Perhaps she wants to talk.

“But I’m more than happy to go shopping.” I smile wryly at Kate and Mia. Christian smirks. He knows I hate shopping.

“I can stay here with you, if you’d like,” he murmurs, and something dark unfurls in my belly at his tone.

“No, you go fish,” I answer. Christian needs boy time.

“Sounds like a plan,” Kate says, rising from the table.

“Taylor will accompany you,” Christian says, and it’s a given—not up for discussion.

“We don’t need babysitting,” Kate retorts bluntly, direct as ever.

I put my hand on Kate’s arm. “Kate, Taylor should come.”

She frowns, then shrugs, and for once in her life holds her tongue.

I smile timidly at Christian. His expression remains impassive. Oh, I hope he’s not mad at Kate.

Elliot frowns. “I need to pick up a battery for my watch in town.” He glances quickly at Kate, and I spot his slight blush. She doesn’t notice because she is pointedly ignoring him.

“Take the Audi, Elliot. When you come back we can go fishing,” Christian says.

“Yeah,” Elliot mutters, but he seems distracted. “Good plan.”

"IN HERE." GRABBING MY hand, Mia hauls me into a designer boutique that's all pink silk and faux-French distressed rustic furniture. Kate follows us while Taylor waits outside, sheltering under the awning from the rain. Aretha is belting out "Say a Little Prayer" over the store's hi-fi system. I love this song. I should put it on Christian's iPod.

"This will look wonderful on you, Ana." Mia holds up a scrap of silver material. "Here, try it on."

"Um … it's a bit short."

"You'll look fantastic in it. Christian will love it."

"You think?"

Mia beams at me. "Ana, you have legs to die for, and if we go clubbing tonight"—she smiles, sensing an easy kill—"you'll look hot for your husband."

I blink at her, slightly shocked. We're going *clubbing*? I don't do clubbing.

Kate laughs at my expression. She seems more relaxed now that she's away from Elliot. "We should throw some shapes this evening," she says.

"Go try it on," Mia orders, and reluctantly I head for the changing room.

WHILE I WAIT FOR Kate and Mia to emerge from the dressing room, I stroll to the shop window and look out, unseeing, across the main street. The soul compilation continues: Dionne Warwick is singing "Walk on By." Another great song—one of my mother's favorites. I glance down at The Dress in my hand. *Dress* is perhaps an overstatement. It's backless and very short, but Mia has declared it a winner, perfect for dancing the night away. Apparently, I need shoes, too, and a large chunky necklace, which we'll source next. Rolling my eyes, I reflect once more on how lucky I am to have Caroline Acton, my own personal shopper.

Through the boutique window I'm distracted by the sight of Elliot. He has appeared on the other side of the leafy main street, climbing out of a large Audi. He dives into a store as if to duck out of the rain. Looks like a jewelry store … maybe he's looking for that watch battery. He emerges a few minutes later and not alone—with a woman.

Fuck! He's talking to Gia! *What the hell is she doing here?*

As I watch, they hug briefly and she holds her head back, laughing animatedly at something he says. He kisses her cheek and then runs to the waiting car. She turns and heads down the street, and I gape after her. *What was that about?* I turn anxiously toward the dressing rooms, but there's still no sign of Kate or Mia.

I glance at Taylor, where he's waiting outside the store. He catches my eye, then shrugs. He's witnessed Elliot's little encounter, too. I blush, embarrassed to

have been caught snooping. Turning back, Mia and Kate emerge, both of them laughing. Kate looks at me quizzically.

"What's wrong, Ana?" she asks. "You gone cold on the dress? You look sensational in it."

"Um, no."

"Are you okay?" Kate's eyes widen.

"I'm fine. Shall we pay?" I head to the cashier, joining Mia, who has chosen two skirts.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." The young sales assistant—who has more gloss coating her lips than I have ever seen in one place—smiles at me. "That'll be eight hundred and fifty dollars."

*What? For this scrap of material!* I blink at her and meekly hand over my black Amex.

"Mrs. Grey," Ms. Lip Gloss purrs.

I follow Kate and Mia in a daze for the next two hours, warring with myself. Should I tell Kate? My subconscious firmly shakes her head. Yes, I should tell her. No, I shouldn't. It could just have been an innocent meeting. *Shit*. What should I do?

"WELL, DO YOU LIKE the shoes, Ana?" Mia has her fists on her hips.

"Um … yeah, sure."

I end up with a pair of unfeasibly high Manolo Blahniks with straps that look like they are made from mirrors. They match the dress perfectly and set Christian back just over a thousand dollars. I'm luckier with the long silver chain that Kate insists I buy; it's a bargain at eighty-four dollars.

"Getting used to having money?" Kate asks, not unkindly, as we walk back to the car. Mia has skipped ahead.

"You know this isn't me, Kate. I'm kind of uncomfortable about all this. But I'm reliably informed it's part of the package." I purse my lips at her, and she puts her arm around me.

"You'll get used to it, Ana," she says sympathetically. "You'll look great."

"Kate, how are you and Elliot getting along?" I ask.

Her wide blue eyes dart to mine.

*Oh no*.

She shakes her head. "I don't want to talk about it now." She nods toward Mia. "But things are—" She doesn't finish her sentence.

This is unlike my tenacious Kate. *Shit*. I knew something was up. Do I tell her what I saw? What did I see? Elliot and Miss Well-Groomed-Sexual-Predator

talking, hugging, and that kiss on the cheek. Surely they are just old friends? No, I won't tell her. Not right now. I give her my I-completely-understand-and-will-respect-your-privacy nod. She reaches for my hand and gives it a grateful squeeze, and there it is—a swift glimpse of pain and hurt in her eyes that she quickly stifles with a blink. I feel a sudden surge of protectiveness for my dear friend. What the hell is Elliot Manwhore Grey playing at?

ONCE BACK AT THE house, Kate decides we deserve cocktails after our shopping extravaganza and whips up some strawberry daiquiris for us. We curl up on the sitting room couches in front of the blazing log fire.

"Elliot has just been a little distant lately," Kate murmurs, gazing into the flames. Kate and I finally have a moment to ourselves as Mia puts away her purchases.

"Oh?"

"And I think I'm in trouble for getting you into trouble."

"You heard about that?"

"Yes. Christian called Elliot; Elliot called me."

I roll my eyes. *Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.*

"I'm sorry. Christian is … protective. You haven't seen Elliot since Cocktailgate?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I really like him, Ana," she whispers. And for one dreadful minute I think she's going to cry. This is not like Kate. Does this mean the return of the pink pajamas? She turns to me.

"I've fallen in love with him. At first I thought it was just the great sex. But he's charming and kind and warm and funny. I could see us growing old together—you know … kids, grandkids—the works."

"Your happily ever after," I whisper.

She nods sadly.

"Maybe you should talk to him. Try to find some alone time here. Find out what's eating him."

*Who's eating him*, my subconscious snarls. I slap her down, shocked at the waywardness of my own thoughts.

"Perhaps you guys could go for a walk tomorrow morning?"

"We'll see."

"Kate, I hate seeing you like this."

She smiles weakly, and I lean over to hug her. I resolve not to mention Gia,

though I might mention it to the manwhore himself. How can he mess with my friend's affections like this?

Mia returns, and we move on to safer territory.

THE FIRE HISSES AND spits sparks onto the hearth as I feed it the last log. We're almost out of wood. Even though it's summer, the fire is very welcome on this wet day.

"Mia, do you know where the wood for the fire is kept?" I ask as she sips her daiquiri.

"I think it's in the garage."

"I'll go find some. It'll give me an opportunity to explore."

The rain has eased off when I venture outside and head to the three-car garage adjoining the house. The side door is unlocked and I enter, switching on the light to fight the gloom. The fluorescent strips ping noisily to life.

There's a car in the garage, and I realize it's the Audi I saw Elliot in this afternoon. There are also two snowmobiles. But what really grabs my attention are the two trail bikes, both 125cc. Memories of Ethan bravely endeavoring to teach me how to ride last summer flash through my mind. Unconsciously, I rub my arm where I badly bruised it in a fall.

"You ride?" Elliot asks from behind me.

I whirl around. "You're back."

"It would appear so." He grins, and I realize that Christian might say the same thing to me—but without the huge, heart-melting grin. "Well?" he asks.

*Manwhore!* "Sort of."

"Do you want a go?"

I snort. "Um, no … I don't think Christian would be very happy if I did."

"Christian's not here." Elliot smirks—*oh, it's a family trait*—and waves his arm to indicate we're alone. He strolls toward the nearest bike and swings a long denim-clad leg over the saddle, sitting astride and grabbing the handlebars.

"Christian has, um … issues about my safety. I shouldn't."

"You always do what he says?" Elliot has a wicked sparkle in his baby-blue eyes, and I see a glimmer of the bad boy … the bad boy Kate has fallen in love with. The bad boy from Detroit.

"No." I arch an admonishing brow at him. "But I'm trying to put that right. He has enough to worry about without adding me to the mix. Is he back?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't go fishing?"

Elliot shakes his head. "I had some business to deal with in town."

*Business! Holy shit—groomed blonde business!* I inhale sharply and gape at

him.

"If you don't want to ride, what are you doing in the garage?" Elliot is intrigued.

"I'm looking for wood for the fire."

"There you are. Oh, Elliot—you're back." Kate interrupts us.

"Hey, baby." He smiles broadly.

"Catch anything?"

I scrutinize Elliot's reaction. "No. I had a few things to take care of in town." And for one brief moment, I see a flash of uncertainty cross his face.

*Oh shit.*

"I came out to see what was keeping Ana." Kate looks at us, confused.

"We were just shooting the breeze," Elliot says, and the tension crackles between them.

We all pause as we hear a car pull up outside. *Oh! Christian's back. Thank heavens.* The garage door opener whirs loudly into action, startling us all, and the door slowly lifts to reveal Christian and Ethan unloading a black flatbed truck. Christian stops when he sees us standing in the garage.

"Garage band?" he asks sardonically as he wanders in, heading straight for me.

I grin. I am relieved to see him. Beneath his wading jacket, he's wearing the coveralls I sold him at Clayton's.

"Hi," he says, looking quizzically at me and ignoring both Kate and Elliot.

"Hi. Nice coveralls."

"Lots of pockets. Very handy for fishing." His voice is soft and seductive, for my ears only, and when he gazes down at me, his expression is hot.

I flush, and he smiles a huge, no-holds-barred, all-for-me smile.

"You're wet," I murmur.

"It was raining. What are you guys doing in the garage?" Finally he acknowledges that we are not alone.

"Ana came to fetch some wood." Elliot arches an eyebrow. Somehow he manages to make that sentence sound smutty. "I tried to tempt her to take a ride." He is master of the double entendre.

Christian's face falls, and my heart stills.

"She said no. That you wouldn't like it," Elliot says kindly—and innuendo-free.

Christian's gray gaze swings back to me. "Did she, now?" he murmurs.

"Listen, I'm all for standing around discussing what Ana did next, but shall we go back inside?" Kate snaps. She stoops down, snatches up two logs, and turns on her heel, stomping toward the door. Oh shit. Kate is mad—but I know

it’s not at me. Elliot sighs and, without a word, follows her out. I gaze after them, but Christian distracts me.

“You can ride a motorcycle?” he asks, his voice laced with disbelief.

“Not very well. Ethan taught me.”

His eyes frost immediately. “You made the right decision,” he says, his voice much cooler. “The ground’s very hard at the moment, and the rain’s made it treacherous and slippery.”

“Where do you want the fishing gear?” Ethan calls from outside.

“Leave it, Ethan—Taylor will take care of it.”

“What about the fish?” Ethan continues, his voice vaguely taunting.

“You caught a fish?” I ask, surprised.

“Not me. Kavanagh did.” And Christian pouts … prettily.

I burst out laughing.

“Mrs. Bentley will deal with that,” he calls back. Ethan grins and heads into the house.

“Am I amusing you, Mrs. Grey?”

“Very much so. You’re wet … Let me run you a bath.”

“As long as you join me.” He leans down and kisses me.

I FILL THE LARGE egg-shaped tub in the en suite bathroom and pour in some expensive bath oil, which starts to foam immediately. The aroma is heavenly … jasmine, I think. Back in the bedroom, I start to hang The Dress while the bath fills.

“Did you have a good time?” Christian asks as he enters the room. He’s just in a T-shirt and sweatpants, his feet bare. He closes the door behind him.

“Yes,” I murmur, drinking him in. I have missed him. Ridiculous—it’s only been what, a few hours?

He cocks his head to one side and gazes at me. “What is it?”

“I was thinking how much I’ve missed you.”

“You sound like you have it bad, Mrs. Grey.”

“I have, Mr. Grey.”

He strolls toward me until he’s standing in front of me. “What did you buy?” he whispers, and I know it’s to change the topic of conversation.

“A dress, some shoes, a necklace. I spent a great deal of your money.” I glance up at him guiltily.

He’s amused. “Good,” he murmurs and tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “And for the billionth time, our money.” He tugs my chin, releasing my lip from my teeth, and runs his index finger down the front of my T-shirt, down my sternum, between my breasts, down my stomach, and over my belly to the hem.

“You won’t be needing this in the bath,” he whispers, and gripping the hem of my T-shirt in both hands slowly pulls it up. “Lift your arms.”

I comply, not taking my eyes off his, and he drops my T-shirt on the floor.

“I thought we were just having a bath.” My pulse quickens.

“I want to make you good and dirty first. I’ve missed you, too.” He leans down and kisses me.

“SHIT, THE WATER!” I struggle to sit up, all postorgasmic and dazed.

Christian doesn’t release me.

“Christian, the bath!” I gaze down at him from my prone position across his chest.

He laughs. “Relax—it’s a wet room.” He rolls over and kisses me quickly. “I’ll switch off the faucet.”

He climbs gracefully off the bed and strolls into the bathroom. My eyes greedily follow him all the way. Hmm … my husband, naked and soon to be wet. I bound out of bed.

---

WE SIT AT OPPOSITE ends of the bath, which is very full—so full that whenever we move, water laps over the side and splashes to the floor. It’s very decadent. Even more decadent is Christian washing my feet, massaging the soles, pulling gently on my toes. He kisses each one and gently bites my little toe.

“Aaah!” I feel it—*there*, in my groin.

“Like that?” he breathes.

“Hmm,” I mumble incoherently.

He starts massaging again. Oh, this feels good. I close my eyes.

“I saw Gia in town,” I murmur.

“Really? I think she has a place here,” he says dismissively. He’s not interested in the slightest.

“She was with Elliot.”

Christian stops massaging. That got his attention. When I open my eyes his head is inclined to one side, like he doesn’t understand.

“What do you mean with Elliot?” he asks, perplexed rather than concerned.

I explain what I saw.

“Ana, they’re just friends. I think Elliot is pretty stuck on Kate.” He pauses, then adds more quietly, “In fact, I *know* he’s pretty stuck on her.” And he gives me his I-have-no-idea-why look.

“Kate is gorgeous.” I bristle, championing my friend.

He snorts. “Still glad it was you who fell into my office.” He kisses my big toe, releases my left foot, and picks up my right before beginning the massage process again. His fingers are so strong and supple, I relax again. I do not want to fight about Kate. I close my eyes and let his fingers work their magic on my feet.

I GAPE AT MYSELF in the full-length mirror, not recognizing the vixen that stares back at me. Kate has gone all out and played Barbie with me this evening, styling my hair and makeup. My hair is full and straight, my eyes ringed with kohl, my lips scarlet red. I look … hot. I’m all legs, especially in the high-heeled Manolos and my indecently short dress. I need Christian to approve, though I have a horrible feeling he won’t like so much of my flesh exposed. In view of our *entente cordiale*, I decide I should ask him. I pick up my BlackBerry.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Does My Butt Look Big in This?
**Date:** August 27 2011 18:53 MST
**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

I need your sartorial advice.

Yours

Mrs. G x

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Peachy
**Date:** August 27 2011 18:55 MST
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

I seriously doubt it.

But I will come and give your butt a thorough examination just to make sure.

Yours in anticipation

Mr. G x

Christian Grey,

CEO Grey Enterprises Holdings and Butt Inspectorate, Inc.

As I read his e-mail, the bedroom door opens, and Christian freezes on the threshold. His mouth pops open and his eyes widen.

Holy crap … this could go either way.

"Well?" I whisper.

"Ana, you look … Wow."

"You like it?"

"Yes, I guess so." He's a little hoarse. Slowly he steps into the room and closes the door. He's wearing black jeans and a white shirt, but with a black jacket. He looks divine. He stalks slowly toward me, but as soon as he reaches me, he puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me around to face the full-length mirror, while he stands behind me. My gaze finds his in the glass, then he glances down, fascinated by my naked back. His finger glides down my spine and reaches the edge of my dress at the small of my back, where pale flesh meets silver cloth.

"This is very revealing," he murmurs.

His hand skims lower, over my backside and down to my naked thigh. He pauses, gray eyes burning intently into blue. Then slowly he trails his fingers back up to the hem of my skirt.

Watching his long fingers move lightly, teasingly across my skin, feeling the tingles they leave in their wake, my mouth forms a perfect *O*.

"It's not far from here." He touches the hem, then moves his fingers higher. "To here," he whispers. I gasp as his fingers stroke my sex, moving tantalizingly over my panties, feeling me, teasing me.

"And your point is?" I whisper.

"My point is … it's not far from here"—his fingers glide over my panties, then one is inside, against my soft dampened flesh—"to here. And then … to here." He slips a finger inside me.

I gasp and make a soft mewling sound.

"This is mine," he murmurs in my ear. Closing his eyes, he moves his finger slowly in and out of me. "I don't want anyone else to see this."

My breath stutters, my panting matching the rhythm of his finger. Watching him in the mirror, doing this … it's beyond erotic.

"So be a good girl and don't bend down, and you should be fine."

"You approve?" I whisper.

"No, but I'm not going to stop you from wearing it. You look stunning, Anastasia." Abruptly he withdraws his finger, leaving me wanting more, and he

moves around to face me. He places the tip of his invading finger on my lower lip. Instinctively, I pucker my lips and kiss it, and I'm rewarded with a wicked grin. He puts his finger in his mouth and his expression informs me that I taste good … real good. I flush. Will it always shock me when he does that?

He grasps my hand.

"Come," he orders softly. I want to retort that I was about to, but in light of what happened in the playroom yesterday, I decide against it.

WE ARE WAITING FOR dessert in a plush, exclusive restaurant in town. It's been a lively evening so far, and Mia is determined it should continue and that we must go clubbing. Right now she's sitting silently for once, hanging on Ethan's every word as he and Christian talk. Mia is obviously infatuated with Ethan, and Ethan is … well, it's difficult to tell. I don't know if they are just friends or if there's something more.

Christian seems at ease. He's been talking animatedly with Ethan. They obviously bonded over the fly-fishing. They're talking about psychology, mainly. Ironically, Christian sounds the more knowledgeable. I snort softly as I half listen to their conversation, sadly acknowledging that his expertise is the result of his experience with so many shrinks.

*You're the best therapy*. His words, whispered while we were making love once, echo in my head. Am I? *Oh, Christian, I hope so*.

I glance over at Kate. She looks beautiful, but then she always does. She and Elliot are less lively. He seems nervous, his jokes a little too loud and his laugh a little off. Have they had a fight? What's eating him? Is it that woman? My heart sinks at the thought that he might hurt my best friend. I glance at the entrance, half expecting to see Gia calmly saunter her well-groomed ass across the restaurant to us. My mind is playing tricks, I suspect it's the amount of alcohol I've had. My head is beginning to ache.

Abruptly, Elliot startles us all by standing and pulling his chair back so it scrapes across the tile floor. All eyes turn to him. He gazes down at Kate for one moment and then drops to one knee beside her.

*Oh. My. God*.

He reaches for her hand, and silence settles like a blanket over the entire restaurant as everyone stops eating, stops talking, stops walking, and stares.

"My beautiful Kate, I love you. Your grace, your beauty, and your fiery spirit have no equal, and you have captured my heart. Spend your life with me. Marry me."

*Holy shit!*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The attention of the entire restaurant is trained on Kate and Elliot, waiting with bated breath as one. The anticipation is unbearable. Silence stretches like a taut rubber band. The atmosphere is oppressive, apprehensive, and yet hopeful.

Kate stares blankly at Elliot as he gazes up at her, his eyes wide with longing—fear even. *Holy crap, Kate! Put him out of his misery. Please*. Jeez—he could have asked her privately.

A single tear trickles down her cheek, though she remains expressionless. Shit! Kate crying? Then she smiles, a slow disbelieving I've-found-Nirvana smile.

"Yes," she whispers, a breathy, sweet acceptance—not Kate-like at all. For one nanosecond there's a pause as the entire restaurant exhales a collective sigh of relief, and then the noise is deafening. Spontaneous applause, cheering, catcalls, whooping, and suddenly I have tears rolling down my face, smudging my Barbie-meets-Joan-Jett makeup.

Oblivious to the commotion around them, the two are locked in their own little world. From his pocket Elliot produces a small box, opens it, and presents it to Kate. A ring. And from what I can see, an exquisite ring, but I need a closer look. Is that what he was doing with Gia? Choosing a ring? *Shit!* Oh, I'm so glad I didn't tell Kate.

Kate looks from the ring to Elliot, then throws her arms around his neck. They kiss, remarkably chaste for them, and the crowd goes wild. Elliot stands and acknowledges the approbation with a surprisingly graceful bow and then, wearing a huge self-satisfied grin, sits back down. I can't take my eyes off them. Taking the ring out of its box, Elliot gently slides it onto Kate's finger, and they kiss once more.

Christian squeezes my hand. I didn't realize I'd been gripping his so tightly. I release him, a little embarrassed, and he shakes his hand, mouthing, "Ow."

"Sorry. Did you know about this?" I whisper.

Christian smiles, and I know that he did. He summons the waiter. "Two bottles of the Cristal please. The 2002 if you have it."

I smirk at him.

“What?” he asks.

“Because the 2002 is so much better than the 2003,” I tease.

He laughs. “To the discerning palate, Anastasia.”

“You have a very discerning palate, Mr. Grey, and singular tastes.” I smile.

“That I do, Mrs. Grey.” He leans in close. “You taste best,” he whispers, and he kisses a certain spot behind my ear, sending little shivers down my spine. I blush scarlet and fondly remember his earlier demonstration of the quite literal shortcomings of my dress.

Mia is the first up to hug Kate and Elliot, and we all take turns congratulating the happy couple. I clutch Kate in a fierce hug.

“See? He was just worried about his proposal,” I whisper.

“Oh, Ana.” She giggle-sobs.

“Kate, I am so happy for you. Congratulations.”

Christian is behind me. He shakes Elliot’s hand, then—surprising both Elliot and me—pulls him into a hug. I can only just catch what he says.

“Way to go, Lelliot,” he murmurs. Elliot says nothing, for once stunned into silence, then warmly returns his brother’s hug.

*Lelliot?*

“Thanks, Christian,” Elliot chokes out.

Christian gives Kate a brief, if awkward, almost arm’s-length hug. I know that Christian’s attitude toward Kate is tolerant, at best, and ambivalent most of the time, so this is progress. Releasing her, he says, so quietly only she and I can hear, “I hope you are as happy in your marriage as I am in mine.”

“Thank you, Christian. I hope so, too,” she says graciously.

The waiter has returned with the champagne, which he proceeds to open with an understated flourish.

Christian holds his champagne flute aloft.

“To Kate and my dear brother, Elliot—congratulations.”

We all sip, well, I glug. Hmm, Cristal tastes so good, and I’m reminded of the first time I drank it at Christian’s club and later, our eventful elevator journey to the first floor.

Christian frowns at me. “What are you thinking about?” he whispers.

“The first time I drank this champagne.”

His frown becomes more quizzical.

“We were at your club,” I prompt.

He grins. “Oh yes. I remember.” He winks at me.

“Elliot, have you set a date?” Mia pipes up.

Elliot gives his sister an exasperated stare. “I’ve only just asked Kate, so we’ll get back to you on that, ’kay?”

“Oh, make it a Christmas wedding. That would be so romantic, and you’d have no trouble remembering your anniversary.” Mia claps her hands.

“I’ll take that under advisement.” Elliot smirks at her.

“After the champagne, can we please go clubbing?” Mia turns and gives Christian her biggest, brown-eyed look.

“I think we should ask Elliot and Kate what they’d like to do.”

As one, we turn expectantly to them. Elliot shrugs and Kate turns puce. Her carnal intent toward her fiancé is so clear I nearly spit four-hundred-dollar champagne all over the table.

ZAX IS THE MOST exclusive nightclub in Aspen—or so says Mia. Christian strolls to the front of the short line with his arm wrapped around my waist and is immediately granted access. I wonder briefly if he owns the place. I glance at my watch—eleven thirty in the evening, and I’m feeling fuzzy. The two glasses of champagne and several glasses of Pouilly-Fumé during our meal are starting to have an effect, and I’m grateful Christian has his arm around me.

“Mr. Grey, welcome back,” says a very attractive, leggy blonde in black satin hot pants, matching sleeveless shirt, and a little red bow tie. She smiles broadly, revealing perfect all-American teeth between scarlet lips that match her bow tie. “Max will take your coat.”

A young man dressed entirely in black, fortunately not satin, smiles as he offers to take my coat. His dark eyes are warm and inviting. I am the only one wearing a coat—Christian insisted I take Mia’s trench coat to cover my behind—so Max has to deal only with me.

“Nice coat,” he says, gazing at me intently.

Beside me Christian bristles and fixes Max with a back-off-now glare. He reddens and quickly hands Christian my coat check ticket.

“Let me show you to your table.” Miss Satin Hot Pants flutters her eyelashes at my husband, flicks her long blonde hair, and sashays through the entryway. I tighten my grip around Christian, and he gazes down at me questioningly for a moment, then smirks as we follow Miss Satin Hot Pants into the bar.

The lighting is muted, the walls are black, and the furnishings deep red. There are booths flanking two sides of the walls and a large U-shaped bar in the middle. It’s busy, given that we’re here off-season, but not too crowded with the well-heeled of Aspen out for a good time on a Saturday night. The dress code is relaxed, and for the first time I feel a little over … um, underdressed. I’m not sure which. The floor and walls vibrate with the music pulsing from the dance floor behind the bar, and lights are whirling and flashing on and off. In my heady

state, I idly think it's an epileptic's nightmare.

Satin Hot Pants leads us to a corner booth that's been roped off. It's near the bar with access to the dance floor. Clearly the best seats in the house.

"There'll be someone along to take your order shortly." She gives us her full megawatt smile and, with a final flutter of eyelashes at my husband, sashays back from where she came. Mia is already jigging from foot to foot, itching to get onto the dance floor, and Ethan takes pity on her.

"Champagne?" Christian asks as they head off, holding hands, toward the dance floor. Ethan gives him a thumbs-up and Mia nods enthusiastically.

Kate and Elliot sit back on the soft velvet seating, hand in hand. They look so happy, their features soft and radiant in the glow from the tea lights flickering in crystal holders on the low table. Christian gestures for me to sit, and I scoot in beside Kate. He takes a seat beside me and anxiously scans the room.

"Show me your ring." I raise my voice over the music. I will be hoarse by the time we leave. Kate beams at me and holds up her hand. The ring is exquisite, a single solitaire in a fine elaborate claw with tiny diamonds on either side. It has a retro Victorian look to it.

"It's beautiful."

She nods in delight and, reaching over, squeezes Elliot's thigh. He leans down and kisses her.

"Get a room," I call out.

Elliot grins.

A young woman with short dark hair and a mischievous smile, wearing the regulation black satin hot pants, comes to take our order.

"What do you want to drink?" Christian asks.

"You're not picking up the tab for this, too," Elliot grumbles.

"Don't start that shit, Elliot," Christian says mildly.

Despite the objections of Kate, Elliot, and Ethan, Christian has paid for the meal we just consumed. He simply waved them aside and would not hear of anyone else paying. I gaze at him lovingly. My Fifty Shades … always in control.

Elliot opens his mouth to say something but, wisely perhaps, closes it again.

"I'll have a beer," he says.

"Kate?" Christian asks.

"More champagne, please. The Cristal is delicious. But I'm sure Ethan would prefer a beer." She smiles sweetly—*yes, sweetly*—at Christian. She is incandescent with happiness. I feel it radiating off her, and it's a pleasure to bask in her joy.

"Ana?"

“Champagne, please.”

“Bottle of Cristal, three Peronis, and a bottle of iced mineral water, six glasses,” he says in his usual authoritative, no-nonsense manner.

*It’s kinda hot.*

“Thank you, sir. Coming right up.” Miss Hot Pants Number Two gives him a gracious smile, but he’s spared the fluttering of eyelashes, though her cheeks redden a little.

I shake my head in resignation. *He’s mine, girlfriend*.

“What?” he asks me.

“She didn’t flutter her eyelashes at you.” I smirk.

“Oh. Was she supposed to?” he asks, failing to hide his mirth.

“Women usually do.” My tone is ironic.

He grins. “Mrs. Grey, are you jealous?”

“Not in the slightest.” I pout at him. And I realize in that moment that I am beginning to tolerate women ogling my husband. Almost. Christian clasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“You have nothing to be jealous of, Mrs. Grey,” he murmurs close to my ear, his breath tickling me.

“I know.”

“Good.”

The waitress returns, and moments later I’m sipping another glass of champagne.

“Here.” Christian hands me a glass of water. “Drink this.”

I frown at him and see, rather than hear, his sigh.

“Three glasses of white wine at dinner and two of champagne, after a strawberry daiquiri and two glasses of Frascati at lunchtime. Drink. Now, Ana.”

How does he know about the cocktails this afternoon? I scowl at him. But actually he does have a point. Taking the glass of water, I down it in a most unladylike manner to register my protest at being told what to do … again. I wipe my hand across the back of my mouth.

“Good girl,” he says, smirking. “You’ve vomited on me once already. I don’t wish to experience that again in a hurry.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You got to sleep with me.”

He smiles and his eyes soften. “Yeah, I did.”

Ethan and Mia are back.

“Ethan’s had enough, for now. Come on, girls. Let’s hit the floor. Strike a pose, throw some shapes, work off the calories from the chocolate mousse.”

Kate stands immediately. “Coming?” she asks Elliot.

“Let me watch you,” he says. And I have to look away quickly, blushing at the

look he gives her. She grins as I stand.

"I'm going to burn some calories," I say, and leaning down I whisper in Christian's ear, "You can watch me."

"Don't bend over," he growls.

"Okay." I stand abruptly. Whoa! Head rush, and I clutch Christian's shoulder as the room shifts and tilts a little.

"Perhaps you should have some more water," Christian murmurs, a warning clear in his voice.

"I'm fine. These seats are low and my heels are high."

Kate takes my hand, and taking a deep breath I follow her and Mia, perfectly poised, onto the dance floor.

The music is pulsing, a techno beat with a thumping bass line. The dance floor isn't crowded, which means we have some space. The mix is eclectic—young and old alike dancing the night away. I have never been a good dancer. In fact, it's only since I've been with Christian that I dance at all. Kate hugs me.

"I'm so happy," she shouts over the music, and she starts to dance. Mia is doing what Mia does, grinning at the pair of us, throwing herself around. Jeez, she's taking up a lot of room on the dance floor. I glance back toward the table. Our men are watching us. I start to move. It's a pulsing rhythm. I close my eyes and surrender to it.

I open my eyes to find the dance floor filling up. Kate, Mia, and I are forced closer together. And to my surprise I find I'm actually enjoying myself. I begin to move a little more … bravely. Kate gives me two thumbs up, and I beam back at her.

I close my eyes. Why did I spend the first twenty years of my life not doing this? I chose reading over dancing. *Jane Austen didn't have great music to move to and Thomas Hardy … jeez, he'd have felt guilty as sin that he wasn't dancing with his first wife*. I giggle at the thought.

It's Christian. He has given me this confidence in my body and how I can move it.

Suddenly, there are two hands on my hips. I grin. Christian has joined me. I wiggle, and his hands move to my behind and squeeze, then back to my hips.

I open my eyes. And Mia is gaping at me in horror. *Shit … Am I that bad?* I reach down to hold Christian's hands. They're hairy. *Fuck!* They're not his. I whirl around, and towering over me is a blond giant with more teeth than is natural and a leering smile to showcase them.

"Get your hands off me!" I scream over the pounding music, apoplectic with rage.

"Come on, sugar, it's just some fun." He smiles, holding his apelike hands up,

his blue eyes gleaming under the pulsing ultraviolet lights.

Before I know what I'm doing, I slap him hard across the face.

*Ow! Shit … my hand*. It stings. "Get away from me!" I shout. He gazes down at me, cupping his red cheek. I thrust my uninjured hand in front of his face, spreading my fingers to show him my rings.

"I'm married, you asshole!"

He shrugs rather arrogantly and gives me a halfhearted, apologetic smile.

I glance around frantically. Mia is at my right, glaring at Blond Giant. Kate is lost in the moment doing her thing. Christian is not at the table. *Oh, I hope he's gone to the restroom*. I step back into a front I know well. *Oh shit*. Christian puts his arm around my waist and moves me to his side.

"Keep your fucking hands off my wife," he says. He's not shouting, but somehow he can be heard over the music.

*Holy shit!*

"She can take care of herself," Blond Giant shouts. His hand moves from his cheek where I've slapped him, and Christian hits him. It's like I'm watching it in slow motion. A perfectly timed punch to the chin that moves at such speed, but with so little wasted energy, Blond Giant doesn't see it coming. He crumples to the floor like the scumbag he is.

*Fuck.*

"Christian, no!" I gasp in panic, standing in front of him to hold him back. Shit, he'll kill him. "I already hit him," I shout over the music. Christian doesn't look at me. He's glaring at my assailant with a malevolence I've not seen before flaring in his eyes. Well, maybe once before after Jack Hyde made a pass at me.

The other dancers move outward like a ripple in a pond, clearing space around us, keeping a safe distance. Blond Giant scrambles to his feet as Elliot joins us.

*Oh no!* Kate is with me, gaping at all of us. Elliot grasps Christian's arm as Ethan appears, too.

"Take it easy, okay? Didn't mean any harm." Blond Giant holds his hands up in defeat, beating a hasty retreat. Christian's eyes follow him off the dance floor. He does not look at me.

The song changes from the explicit lyrics of "Sexy Bitch" to a pulsing techno dance number with a woman singing with an impassioned voice. Elliot looks down at me, then across at Christian, and, releasing Christian, pulls Kate into a dance. I put my arms around Christian's neck until he finally makes eye contact, his eyes still blazing—primal and feral. A glimpse of a brawling adolescent. *Holy shit.*

He scrutinizes my face. "Are you okay?" he asks finally.

"Yes." I rub my palm, trying to dispel the sting, and bring my hands down to

his chest. My hand is throbbing. I have never slapped anyone before. What possessed me? Touching me wasn't the worst crime against humanity. Was it?

Yet deep down I know why I hit him. It's because I instinctively knew how Christian would react to seeing some stranger pawing me. I knew he'd lose his precious self-control. And the thought that some stupid nobody could derail my husband, my love, well, it makes me mad. Really mad.

"Do you want to sit down?" Christian asks over the pulsing beat.

*Oh, come back to me, please*.

"No. Dance with me."

He looks at me impassively, saying nothing.

*Touch me* … the woman sings.

"Dance with me." He's still mad. "Dance. Christian, please." I take his hands. Christian glares after the guy, but I start to move against him, weaving myself around him.

The throng of dancers has circled us once more, although there's now a two-foot exclusion zone around us.

"You hit him?" Christian asks, standing stock-still. I take his fisted hands.

"Of course I did. I thought it was you, but his hands were hairier. Please dance with me."

As Christian gazes at me, the fire in his eyes slowly changes, evolves into something else, something darker, something hotter. Suddenly, he grabs my wrists and pulls me flush against him, pinning my hands behind my back.

"You wanna dance? Let's dance," he growls close to my ear, and as he rolls his hips around into me, I can do nothing but follow, his hands holding mine against my backside.

Oh … Christian can move, really move. He keeps me close, not letting me go, but his hands gradually relax on mine, freeing me. My hands creep around, up his arms, feeling his bunched muscles through his jacket, up to his shoulders. He presses me against him, and I follow his moves as he slowly, sensually dances with me in time to the pulsing beat of the club music.

The moment he grabs my hand and spins me first one way, then the other, I know he's back with me. I grin. He grins.

We dance together and it's liberating—fun. His anger forgotten, or suppressed, he whirls me around with consummate skill in our small space on the dance floor, never letting go. He makes me graceful, that's his skill. He makes me sexy, because that's what he is. He makes me feel loved, because in spite of his fifty shades, he has a wealth of love to give. Watching him now, enjoying himself … one could be forgiven for thinking he doesn't have a care in the world. I know his love is clouded with issues of overprotectiveness and

control, but it doesn't make me love him any less.

I am breathless when the song morphs to another.

"Can we sit?" I gasp.

"Sure." He leads me off the dance floor.

"You've made me rather hot and sweaty," I whisper as we return to the table.

He pulls me into his arms. "I like you hot and sweaty. Though I prefer to make you hot and sweaty in private," he purrs, and a lascivious smile tugs at his lips.

As I sit, it's as if the incident on the dance floor never happened. I'm vaguely surprised we haven't been thrown out. I glance around the bar. No one is looking at us, and I can't see Blond Giant. Maybe he left, or maybe he's been thrown out. Kate and Elliot are being indecent on the dance floor, Ethan and Mia less so. I take another sip of champagne.

"Here." Christian puts another glass of water before me and regards me intently. His expression is expectant—*drink it. Drink it now*.

I do as I'm told. Besides, I'm thirsty.

He lifts a bottle of Peroni from the ice bucket on the table and takes a long drink.

"What if there had been press here?" I ask.

Christian knows immediately that I'm referring to his knocking Blond Giant on his ass.

"I have expensive lawyers," he says coolly, all at once arrogance personified.

I frown at him. "But you're not above the law, Christian. I did have the situation under control."

His eyes frost. "No one touches what's mine," he says with chilling finality, as if I'm missing the obvious.

*Oh* … I take another sip of my champagne. All of a sudden I feel overwhelmed. The music is loud, pounding, my head and feet are aching, and I feel woozy.

He grasps my hand. "Come, let's go. I want to get you home," he says. Kate and Elliot join us.

"You going?" Kate asks, and her voice is hopeful.

"Yes," Christian says.

"Good, we'll come with you."

AS WE WAIT AT the coat check for Christian to retrieve my trench coat, Kate quizzes me.

"What happened with that guy on the dance floor?"

"He was feeling me up."

“I opened my eyes and you’d hit him.”

I shrug. “Well, I knew Christian would go thermonuclear, and that could potentially ruin your evening.” I’m still processing how I feel about Christian’s behavior. At the time, I was worried that it could have been worse.

“Our evening,” she clarifies. “He is rather hot-headed, isn’t he?” Kate adds dryly, staring at Christian as he collects my coat.

I snort and smile. “You could say that.”

“I think you handle him well.”

“Handle?” I frown. Do I *handle* Christian?

“Here.” Christian holds my coat open for me so that I can put it on.

“WAKE UP, ANA.” CHRISTIAN is shaking me gently. We’ve arrived back at the house. Reluctantly I open my eyes and stagger from the minivan. Kate and Elliot have disappeared, and Taylor is standing patiently beside the vehicle.

“Do I need to carry you?” Christian asks.

I shake my head.

“I’ll fetch Miss Grey and Mr. Kavanagh,” Taylor says.

Christian nods, then leads me to the front door. My feet are throbbing, and I stumble after him. At the front door he bends down, grasps my ankle, and gently pries off first one shoe, then the other. *Oh, the relief.* He straightens and gazes down at me, holding my Manolos.

“Better?” he asks, amused.

I nod.

“I had delightful visions of these around my ears,” he murmurs, staring down wistfully at my shoes. He shakes his head and, taking my hand once more, leads me through the darkened house and up the stairs to our bedroom.

“You’re wrecked, aren’t you?” he says softly, staring down at me.

I nod. He starts to unbuckle the belt on my trench coat.

“I’ll do it,” I mutter, making a halfhearted attempt to brush him off.

“Let me.”

I sigh. I had no idea I was this tired.

“It’s the altitude. You’re not used to it. And the drinking, of course.” He smirks, divests me of my coat, and throws it on one of the bedroom chairs. Taking my hand, he leads me into the bathroom. *Why are we going in here?*

“Sit,” he says.

I sit on the chair and close my eyes. I hear him as he messes around with bottles on the vanity unit. I am too tired to open my eyes to find out what he’s doing. A moment later he tips my head back, and I open my eyes in surprise.

“Eyes closed,” Christian says. *Holy crap*, he’s holding a cotton ball! Gently, he wipes it over my right eye. I sit stunned as he methodically removes my makeup.

“Ah. There’s the woman I married,” he says after a few wipes.

“You don’t like makeup?”

“I like it well enough, but I prefer what’s beneath it.” He kisses my forehead. “Here. Take these.” He puts some Advil into my palm and hands me a glass of water.

I look and pout.

“Take them,” he orders.

I roll my eyes, but do as I’m told.

“Good. Do you need a private moment?” he asks sardonically.

I snort. “So coy, Mr. Grey. Yes, I need to pee.”

He laughs. “You expect me to leave?”

I giggle. “You want to stay?”

He cocks his head to one side, his expression amused.

“You are one kinky son of a bitch. Out. I don’t want you to watch me pee. That’s a step too far.” I stand and wave him out of the bathroom.

WHEN I EMERGE FROM the bathroom, he’s changed into his pajama bottoms. Hmm … Christian in PJs. Mesmerized, I gaze at his abdomen, his muscles, his happy trail. It’s distracting. He strides over to me.

“Enjoying the view?” he asks wryly.

“Always.”

“I think you’re slightly drunk, Mrs. Grey.”

“I think, for once, I have to agree with you, Mr. Grey.”

“Let me help you out of what little there is of this dress. It really should come with a health warning.” He turns me around and undoes the single button at the neck.

“You were so mad,” I murmur.

“Yes. I was.”

“At me?”

“No. Not at you.” He kisses my shoulder. “For once.”

I smile. *Not mad at me*. This is progress. “Makes a nice change.”

“Yes. It does.” He kisses my other shoulder, then tugs my dress down over my backside and onto the floor. He removes my panties at the same time, leaving me naked. Reaching up, he takes my hand.

“Step,” he commands, and I step out of the dress, holding his hand for

balance.

He stands and tosses my dress and panties onto the chair with Mia's trench coat.

"Arms up," he says softly. He slips his T-shirt over my head and pulls it down, covering me up. I am ready for bed.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me, my minty breath mingling with his.

"As much as I'd love to bury myself in you, Mrs. Grey—you've had too much to drink, you're at nearly eight thousand feet, and you didn't sleep well last night. Come. Get into bed." He pulls back the duvet and I climb in. He covers me up and kisses my forehead once more.

"Close your eyes. When I come back to bed, I'll expect you to be asleep." It's a threat, a command … it's Christian.

"Don't go," I plead.

"I have some calls to make, Ana."

"It's Saturday. It's late. Please."

He runs his hands through his hair. "Ana, if I come to bed with you now, you won't get any rest. Sleep." He's adamant. I close my eyes and his lips brush my forehead once more.

"Good night, baby," he breathes.

Images of the day flash through my mind … Christian hauling me over his shoulder in the plane. His anxiety as to whether or not I'd like the house. Making love this afternoon. The bath. His reaction to my dress. Decking Blond Giant—my palm tingles at the memory. And then Christian putting me to bed.

Who would have thought? I grin widely, the word *progress* running around my brain as I drift.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I am too warm. Christian warm. His head is on my shoulder, and he's breathing softly on my neck while he sleeps, his legs threaded through mine, his arm around my waist. I linger on the edge of consciousness, aware that if I wake fully I'll wake him, too, and he doesn't sleep enough. Hazily my mind wanders through the events of yesterday evening. I drank too much—boy, did I drink too much. I'm amazed Christian let me. I smile as I remember him putting me to bed. That was sweet, real sweet, and unexpected. I conduct a quick mental inventory of how I'm feeling. Stomach? Fine. Head? Surprisingly, fine, but fuzzy. My palm is still red from last night. Sheesh. Idly I think about Christian's palms when he's spanked me. I squirm and he wakes.

"What's wrong?" Sleepy gray eyes search mine.

"Nothing. Good morning." I run the fingers of my uninjured hand through his hair.

"Mrs. Grey, you look lovely this morning," he says, kissing my cheek, and I light up from within.

"Thank you for taking care of me last night."

"I like taking care of you. It's what I want to do," he says quietly, but his eyes betray him as triumph flares in their gray depths. It's like he's won the World Series or the Super Bowl.

*Oh, my Fifty*.

"You make me feel cherished."

"That's because you are," he murmurs, and my heart clenches.

He clasps my hand and I wince. He releases me immediately, alarmed. "The punch?" he asks. His eyes frost as he scrutinizes mine, and his voice is laced with sudden anger.

"I slapped him. I didn't punch him."

"That fucker!"

*I thought we'd dealt with this last night*.

"I can't bear that he touched you."

"He didn't hurt me, he was just inappropriate. Christian, I'm okay. My hand's a little red, that's all. Surely you know what that's like?" I smirk, and his

expression changes to one of amused surprise.

"Why, Mrs. Grey, I am very familiar with that." His lips twist in amusement. "I could reacquaint myself with that feeling this minute, should you so wish."

"Oh, stow your twitching palm, Mr. Grey." I stroke his face with my injured hand, my fingers caressing his sideburn. Gently I tug the little hairs. It distracts him, and he takes my hand and plants a tender kiss on my palm. Miraculously, the pain disappears.

"Why didn't you tell me this hurt last night?"

"Um … I didn't really feel it last night. It's okay now."

His eyes soften and his mouth twists. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than I deserve."

"That's quite a right arm you have there, Mrs. Grey."

"You'd do well to remember that, Mr. Grey."

"Oh, really?" He rolls suddenly so that he's fully on top of me, pressing me into the mattress, holding my wrists above my head. He gazes down at me.

"I'd fight you any day, Mrs. Grey. In fact, subduing you in bed is a fantasy of mine." He kisses my throat.

*What?*

"I thought you subdued me all the time." I gasp as he nibbles my earlobe.

"Hmm … but I'd like some resistance," he murmurs, his nose skirting my jaw.

*Resistance?* I still. He stops, releasing my hands, and leans up on his elbows.

"You want me to fight you? Here?" I whisper, trying to contain my surprise. Okay—my shock. He nods, his eyes hooded but wary as he gauges my reaction.

"Now?"

He shrugs, and I see the idea flit through his mind. He gives me his shy smile and nods again, slowly.

*Oh my* … He's tense, lying on top of me, and his growing erection is digging tantalizingly into my soft, willing flesh, distracting me. What's this about? Brawling? Fantasy? Will he hurt me? My inner goddess shakes her head —*Never*.

"Is this what you meant about coming to bed angry?"

He nods once more, his eyes still wary.

Hmm … my Fifty wants to rumble.

"Don't bite your lip," he warns.

Compliantly, I release my lip. "I think you have me at a disadvantage, Mr. Grey." I bat my lashes and squirm provocatively beneath him. This could be fun.

"Disadvantage?"

"Surely you've already got me where you want me?"

He smirks and presses his groin into mine once more.

“Good point well made, Mrs. Grey,” he whispers and quickly kisses my lips. Abruptly he shifts and takes me with him, rolling over so I’m straddling him. I grab his hands, pinning them to the side of his head, and ignore the protesting ache from my hand. My hair falls in a chestnut veil around us, and I move my head so that the strands tickle his face. He jerks his face away but doesn’t try to stop me.

“So, you want to play rough?” I ask, skimming my crotch over his.

His mouth opens and he inhales sharply.

“Yes.” He hisses, and I release him.

“Wait.” I reach over for the glass of water beside the bed. Christian must have left it here. It’s cool and sparkling—too cool to have been sitting here for long—and I wonder when he came to bed.

As I take a long draft, Christian trails his fingers in small circles up my thighs, leaving tingling skin in their wake before he cups and squeezes my naked behind. Hmm.

Taking a leaf from his impressive repertoire, I lean forward and kiss him, pouring clear cool water into his mouth.

He drinks. “Very tasty, Mrs. Grey,” he murmurs, sporting a boyish and playful grin.

After placing the glass back on the bedside table, I remove his hands from my backside and pin them by his head once more.

“So I’m supposed to be unwilling?” I smirk.

“Yes.”

“I’m not much of an actress.”

He grins. “Try.”

I lean down and kiss him chastely. “Okay, I’ll play,” I whisper, trailing my teeth along his jaw, feeling his prickly stubble beneath my teeth and my tongue.

Christian makes a low, sexy sound in his throat and moves, tossing me onto the bed beside him. I cry out in surprise, then he’s on top of me, and I start to struggle as he makes a grab for my hands. Roughly, I place my hands on his chest, pushing with all my might, trying to move him, while he endeavors to pry my legs apart with his knee.

I continue pushing at his chest—*Jeez, he’s heavy*—but he doesn’t flinch, doesn’t freeze as he once might have. *He’s enjoying this!* He attempts to grab my wrists, and finally captures one, despite my valiant attempts to twist it free. It’s my sore hand, so I surrender it to him, but I grab his hair with my other hand and pull hard.

“Ah!” He yanks his head free and gazes down at me, his eyes wild and carnal.

“Savage,” he whispers, his voice laced with salacious delight.

In response to this one whispered word, my libido explodes, and I stop acting. Again I struggle in vain to wrest my hand out of his hold. At the same time I try to hook my ankles together and attempt to buck him off me. He's too heavy. *Gah!* It's frustrating and hot.

With a groan, Christian captures my other hand. He holds both my wrists in his left hand, and his right travels leisurely—insolently, almost—down my body, fondling and feeling as it goes, tweaking my nipple on the way.

I yelp in response, pleasure spiking short, sharp, and hot from my nipple to my groin. I make another fruitless attempt to buck him off, but he's just too *on me*.

When he tries to kiss me I jerk my head to the side so he can't. Promptly his insolent hand moves from the hem of my T-shirt up to my chin, holding me in place as he runs his teeth along my jaw, mirroring what I did to him earlier.

"Oh, baby, fight me," he murmurs.

I twist and writhe, trying to free myself from his merciless hold, but it's hopeless. He's much stronger than me. He's gently biting at my lower lip as his tongue tries to invade my mouth. And I realize I don't want to resist him. I want him—now, like I always do. I stop fighting and fervently return his kiss. I don't care that I haven't brushed my teeth. I don't care that we're supposed to be playing some game. Desire, hot and hard, surges through my bloodstream, and I'm lost. Unhooking my ankles, I wrap my legs around his hips and use my heels to push his pajamas down over his behind.

"Ana," he breathes, and he kisses me everywhere. And we're no longer wrestling, but all hands and tongues and touch and taste, quick and urgent.

"Skin," he murmurs hoarsely, his breathing labored. He drags me up and tugs off my T-shirt in one swift move.

"You," I whisper while I'm upright, because it's all I can think of to say. I seize the front of his pajamas and yank them down, freeing his erection. I grab and squeeze him. He's hard. The air whistles through his teeth as he inhales sharply, and I revel in his response.

"Fuck," he murmurs. He leans back, lifting my thighs, tipping me down onto the bed as I pull and squeeze him tightly, running my hand up and down him. Feeling a bead of moisture on his tip, I swirl it around with my thumb. As he lowers me to the mattress, I slip my thumb in my mouth to taste him while his hands travel up my body, caressing my hips, my stomach, my breasts.

"Taste good?" he asks as he hovers over me, eyes blazing.

"Yes. Here." I push my thumb into his mouth, and he sucks and bites the pad. I groan, grasp his head, and pull him down to me so I can kiss him. Wrapping my legs around him, I push his pajamas off his legs with my feet, then cradle

him with my legs around his waist. His lips trail from across my jaw to my chin, nipping softly.

"You're so beautiful." He dips his head lower to the base of my throat. "Such beautiful skin." His breath is soft as his lips glide down to my breasts.

*What?* I am panting, confused—wanting, now waiting. I thought this was going to be quick.

"Christian." I hear the quiet plea in my voice and reach down, fisting my hands in his hair.

"Hush," he whispers and circles my nipple with his tongue before pulling it into his mouth and tugging hard.

"Ah!" I moan and squirm, tilting my pelvis up to tempt him. He grins against my skin and turns his attention to my other breast.

"Impatient, Mrs. Grey?" He then sucks hard on my nipple. I tug his hair. He groans and peers up. "I'll restrain you," he warns.

"Take me," I beg.

"All in good time," he murmurs against my skin. His hand travels down at an infuriatingly slow speed to my hip as he worships my nipple with his mouth. I moan loudly, my breath short and shallow, and I try once more to entice him into me, rocking against him. He's thick and heavy and close, but he's taking his own sweet leisurely time with me.

*Fuck this*. I struggle and twist, determined to buck him off me again.

"What the—"

Grabbing my hands, Christian pins them down on the bed, my arms spread wide, and rests his full body weight on me, completely subduing me. I am breathless, wild.

"You wanted resistance," I say, panting. He rears up over me and gazes down, his hands still locked around my wrists. I place my heels under his behind and push. He doesn't move. *Gah!*

"You don't want to play nice?" he asks, astonished, his eyes alight with excitement.

"I just want you to make love to me, Christian." Could he be any more obtuse? First we're fighting and wrestling, then he's all tender and sweet. It's confusing. I'm in bed with Mr. Mercurial.

"Please." I press my heels against his backside once more. Burning gray eyes search mine. *Oh, what is he thinking?* He looks momentarily bewildered and confused. He releases my hands and sits back on his heels, pulling me into his lap.

"Okay, Mrs. Grey, we'll do this your way." He lifts me up and slowly lowers me onto him so I'm straddling him.

“Ah!” This is it. This is what I want. This is what I need. Curling my arms around his neck, I twist my fingers in his hair, glorying in the feeling of him inside me. I start to move. Taking control, taking him at my pace, at my speed. He moans, and his lips find mine, and we’re lost.

I TRAIL MY FINGERS through the hair on Christian’s chest. He lies on his back, still and quiet beside me as we both catch our breath. His hand thrums rhythmically down my back.

“You’re quiet,” I whisper and kiss his shoulder. He turns and looks at me, his expression giving nothing away. “That was fun.” *Shit, is something wrong?*

“You confound me, Ana.”

“Confound you?”

He shifts so that we’re face to face. “Yes. You. Calling the shots. It’s … different.”

“Good different or bad different?” I trail a finger over his lips. His brow furrows, as if he doesn’t quite understand the question. Absentmindedly, he kisses my finger.

“Good different,” he says, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

“You’ve never indulged this little fantasy before?” I blush as I say it. Do I really want to know any more about my husband’s colorful … um, kaleidoscopic sex life before me? My subconscious eyes me warily over her tortoiseshell half-moon specs. *Do you really want to go there?*

“No, Anastasia. You can touch me.” It’s a simple explanation that speaks volumes. Of course, the fifteen couldn’t.

“Mrs. Robinson could touch you.” I murmur the words before my brain registers what I’ve said. *Shit. Why did I mention her?*

He stills. His eyes widen with his oh-no-where’s-she-going-with-this expression. “That was different,” he whispers.

Suddenly I want to know. “Good different or bad different?”

He gazes at me. Doubt and possibly pain flit across his face, and fleetingly he looks like a man drowning.

“Bad, I think.” His words are barely audible.

*Holy shit!*

“I thought you liked it.”

“I did. At the time.”

“Not now?”

He gazes at me, eyes wide, then slowly shakes his head.

*Oh my* … “Oh, Christian.” I’m overwhelmed by the feelings that swamp me.

My lost boy. I launch myself at him and kiss his face, his throat, his chest, his little round scars. He groans, pulls me to him, and kisses me passionately. And very slowly, and tenderly, at his pace, he makes love to me once more.

"ANA TYSON. PUNCHING ABOVE your weight!" Ethan applauds as I head into the kitchen for breakfast. He's sitting with Mia and Kate at the breakfast bar while Mrs. Bentley cooks waffles. Christian is nowhere to be seen.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey." Mrs. Bentley smiles. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Good morning. Whatever's going, thank you. Where's Christian?"

"Outside." Kate gestures with her head toward the backyard. I wander over to the window that looks out over the yard and the mountains beyond. It's a clear, powder-blue summer day, and my beautiful husband is about twenty feet away in deep discussion with some guy.

"That's Mr. Bentley he's talking to," calls Mia from the breakfast bar. I turn to look at her, distracted by her sulky tone. She looks venomously at Ethan. *Oh dear*. I wonder once more what's going on between them. Frowning, I turn my attention back to my husband and Mr. Bentley.

Mrs. Bentley's husband is fair-haired, dark eyed, and wiry, dressed in work pants and an Aspen Fire Department T-shirt. Christian is dressed in his black jeans and T-shirt. As the two men amble across the lawn toward the house, lost in their conversation, Christian casually bends to pick up what looks like a bamboo cane that must have been blown over or discarded in the flower bed. Pausing, Christian absentmindedly holds out the cane at arm's length as if weighing it carefully and swipes it through the air, just once.

*Oh …*

Mr. Bentley appears to see nothing odd in his behavior. They continue their discussion, nearer to the house this time, then pause once more, and Christian repeats the gesture. The tip of the cane hits the ground. Glancing up, Christian sees me standing at the window. Suddenly I feel as if I'm spying on him. He stops. I give him an embarrassed wave, then turn and walk back to the breakfast bar.

"What were you doing?" asks Kate.

"Just watching Christian."

"You have got it bad." She snorts.

"And you don't, oh soon-to-be sister-in-law?" I reply, grinning and trying to bury the disquieting visual of Christian wielding a cane. I am startled when Kate leaps up and hugs me.

“Sister!” she exclaims, and it’s hard not to be swept up in her joy.

---

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Christian wakes me. “We’re about to land. Buckle up.”

I fumble sleepily for my seat belt, but Christian fastens it for me. He kisses my forehead before settling back into his seat. I lean my head on his shoulder again and close my eyes.

An impossibly long hike and a picnic lunch on top of a spectacular mountain have exhausted me. The rest of our party is quiet, too—even Mia. She looks despondent, as she has all day. I wonder how her campaign with Ethan is going. I don’t even know where they slept last night. My eyes catch hers, and I give a small are-you-okay smile. She gives me a brief sad smile in return and goes back to her book. I peek up at Christian through my lashes. He’s working on a contract or something, reading it through and annotating the margins. But he seems relaxed. Elliot is snoring softly beside Kate.

I have yet to corner Elliot and quiz him about Gia, but it’s been impossible to pry him away from Kate. Christian isn’t interested enough to ask, which is irritating, but I haven’t pressed him. We’ve been enjoying ourselves too much. Elliot rests his hand possessively on Kate’s knee. She looks radiant, and to think that only yesterday afternoon she was so unsure of him. What did Christian call him? Lelliot. Perhaps that’s a family nickname? It was sweet, better than manwhore. Abruptly, Elliot opens his eyes and gazes straight at me. I blush, caught staring.

He grins. “I sure love your blush, Ana,” he teases, stretching. Kate gives me her self-satisfied, cat-ate-the-canary smile.

First Officer Beighley announces our approach to Sea-Tac, and Christian clasps my hand.

---

“How was your weekend, Mrs. Grey?” Christian asks once we’re in the Audi heading back to Escala. Taylor and Ryan are up front.

“Good, thank you.” I smile, feeling shy all of a sudden.

“We can go anytime. Take anyone you wish to take.”

“We should take Ray. He’d like the fishing.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“How was it for you?” I ask.

“Good,” he says after a moment, surprised by my question, I think. “Real good.”

“You seemed to relax.”

He shrugs. “I knew you were safe.”

I frown. “Christian, I’m safe most of the time. I’ve told you before, you’ll keel over at forty if you keep up this level of anxiety. And I want to grow old and gray with you.” I grasp his hand. He looks at me as if he can’t comprehend what I’m saying. He gently kisses my knuckles and changes the subject.

“How’s your hand?”

“It’s better, thank you.”

He smiles. “Very good, Mrs. Grey. You ready to face Gia again?”

Oh crap. I’d forgotten we were seeing her this evening to go over the final plans. I roll my eyes. “I might want to keep you out of the way, keep you safe.” I smirk.

“Protecting me?” Christian is laughing at me.

“As ever, Mr. Grey. From all sexual predators,” I whisper.

---

Christian is brushing his teeth when I crawl into bed. Tomorrow we go back to reality—back to work, the paparazzi, and to Jack in custody but with the possibility that he has an accomplice. *Hmm* … Christian was vague about that. Does he know? And if he did know, would he tell me? I sigh. Getting information out of Christian is like pulling teeth, and we’ve had such a lovely weekend. Do I want to ruin the feel-good moment by trying to drag the information out of him?

It’s been a revelation to see him out of his normal environment, outside this apartment, relaxed and happy with his family. I wonder vaguely if it’s because we’re here in this apartment with all its memories and associations that he gets wound up. Maybe we should move.

I snort. *We are moving*—we’re having a huge house refurbished on the coast. Gia’s plans are complete and approved, and Elliot’s team starts building next week. I chuckle as I recall Gia’s shocked expression when I told her that I’d seen her in Aspen. Turns out it was nothing but coincidence. She’d camped out at her holiday place to work solely on our plans. For one awful moment I’d thought she’d had a hand in choosing the ring, but apparently not. But I still don’t trust Gia. I want to hear the same story from Elliot. At least she kept her distance

from Christian this time.

I look out at the night sky. I will miss this view. This panoramic vista … Seattle at our feet, so full of possibilities, yet so far removed. Maybe that's Christian's problem—he's been too isolated from real life for too long, thanks to his self-imposed exile. Yet with his family around him, he is less controlling, less anxious—freer, happier. I wonder what Flynn would make of all that. Holy crap! Maybe that's the answer. Maybe he needs his own family. I shake my head in denial—we're too young, too new to all this. Christian strides into the room, looking his usual gorgeous but pensive self.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He nods distractedly as he climbs into bed.

"I'm not looking forward to going back to reality," I murmur.

"No?"

I shake my head and caress his lovely face. "I had a wonderful weekend. Thank you."

He smiles softly. "You're my reality, Ana," he murmurs and kisses me.

"Do you miss it?"

"Miss what?" he asks, perplexed.

"You know. The caning … and stuff," I whisper, embarrassed.

He stares at me, his gaze impassive. Then doubt crosses his face, his where-is-she-going-with-this look.

"No Anastasia, I don't." His voice is steady and quiet. He caresses my cheek. "Dr. Flynn said something to me when you left, something that's stayed with me. He said I couldn't be that way if you weren't so inclined. It was a revelation." He stops and frowns. "I didn't know any other way, Ana. Now I do. It's been educational."

"Me, educate you?" I scoff.

His eyes soften. "Do you miss it?" he asks.

*Oh!* "I don't want you to hurt me, but I like to play, Christian. You know that. If you wanted to do something …" I shrug, gazing at him.

"Something?"

"You know, with a flogger or your crop—" I stop, blushing.

He raises his brow, surprised. "Well … we'll see. Right now, I'd like some good old-fashioned vanilla." His thumb skirts my bottom lip, and he kisses me once more.

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Good Morning
**Date:** August 29 2011 09:14
**To:** Christian Grey

Mr. Grey

I just wanted to tell you that I love you.

That is all. Yours Always

A x

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Banishing Monday Blues
**Date:** August 29 2011 09:18
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

What gratifying words to hear from one's wife (errant or not) on a Monday morning.

Let me assure you that I feel exactly the same way.

Sorry about the dinner this evening. I hope it won't be too tedious for you.

x

Christian Grey,
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh yes. The American Shipbuilding Association dinner. I roll my eyes … More stuffed shirts. Christian really does take me to the most fascinating functions.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Ships That Pass in the Night
**Date:** August 29 2011 09:26
**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

I am sure you can think of a way to spice up the dinner …

Yours in anticipation

Mrs. G. x

Anastasia (nonerrant) Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Variety Is the Spice of Life
**Date:** August 29 2011 09:35
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

I have a few ideas …

x

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. Now Impatient for the ASA Dinner, Inc.

All the muscles in my belly clench. Hmm … I wonder what he'll dream up. Hannah knocks on the door, interrupting my reverie.

"Ready to go through your schedule for this week, Ana?"

"Sure. Sit." I smile, recovering my equilibrium, and minimize my e-mail program. "I've had to move a couple of appointments. Mr. Fox next week and Dr.—"

My phone rings, interrupting her. It's Roach. He asks me up to his office.

"Can we pick this up in twenty minutes?"

"Of course."

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Last Night
**Date:** August 30 2011 09:24
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Was … fun.

Who would have thought the ASA annual dinner could be so stimulating?

As ever, you never disappoint, Mrs. Grey.

I love you.

x

Christian Grey

In awe, CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** I Love a Good Ball Game …

**Date:** August 30 2011 09:33

**To:** Christian Grey

Dear Mr. Grey

I have missed the silver balls.

*You* never disappoint.

That is all.

Mrs. G. x

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

Hannah taps on my door, interrupting my erotic thoughts of the previous evening. *Christian's hands … his mouth*.

"Come in."

"Ana, Mr. Roach's PA just called. He'd like you to attend a meeting this morning. It means I have to move some of your appointments again. Is that okay?"

*His tongue*.

"Sure. Yes," I mutter, trying to halt my wayward thoughts. She grins and ducks out of my office … leaving me with my delicious memory of last night.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Hyde

**Date:** September 1 2011 15:24

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Anastasia

For your information, Hyde has been refused bail and remanded in custody. He's charged with attempted kidnapping and arson. As yet no date has been set for the trial.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Hyde

**Date:** September 1 2011 15:53

**To:** Christian Grey

That’s good news.

Does this mean you’ll lighten up on security?

I really don’t see eye to eye with Prescott.

Ana x

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Hyde

**Date:** September 1 2011 15:59

**To:** Anastasia Grey

No. Security will remain in place. No arguments.

What’s wrong with Prescott? If you don’t like her, we’ll replace her.

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I scowl at his high-handed e-mail. Prescott isn’t that bad.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Keep Your Hair On!

**Date:** September 1 2011 16:03

**To:** Christian Grey

I was just asking (rolls eyes). And I’ll think about Prescott.

Stow that twitchy palm!

Ana x

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Don't Tempt Me
**Date:** September 1 2011 16:11
**To:** Anastasia Grey

I can assure you, Mrs. Grey, that my hair is very firmly attached—has this not been demonstrated often enough by your good self?

My palm, however, is twitching.

I might do something about that tonight.

x

Christian Grey
Not bald yet CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Squirm
**Date:** September 1 2011 16:20
**To:** Christian Grey

Promises, promises …

Now stop pestering me. I am trying to work; I have an impromptu meeting with an author. Will try not to be distracted by thoughts of you during the meeting.

A x

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Sailing & Soaring & Spanking
**Date:** September 5 2011 09:18
**To:** Christian Grey

Husband

You sure know how to show a girl a good time.

I shall of course be expecting this kind of treatment every weekend.

You are spoiling me. I love it.

Your wife

xox

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** My Life's Mission …

**Date:** September 5 2011 09:25

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Is to spoil you, Mrs. Grey.

And keep you safe because I love you.

Christian Grey

Smitten CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh my. Could he be any more romantic?

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** My Life's Mission …

**Date:** September 5 2011 09:33

**To:** Christian Grey

Is to let you—because I love you, too.

Now stop being so sappy.

You are making me cry.

Anastasia Grey

Equally Smitten Editor, SIP

---

The following day, I gaze at the calendar on my desk. Only five days until September 10—my birthday. I know we are driving out to the house to see how Elliot and his crew are progressing. Hmm … I wonder if Christian has any other plans? I smile at the thought. Hannah taps on my door.

"Come in."

Prescott is hovering outside. *Odd* …

"Hi, Ana," says Hannah. "There's a Leila Williams here to see you? She says it's personal."

"Leila Williams? I don't know a …" My mouth goes dry, and Hannah's eyes widen at my expression.

*Leila?* Fuck. What does she want?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Do you want me to send her away?" Hannah asks, alarmed at my expression.

"Um, no. Where is she?"

"In Reception. She's not alone. She's accompanied by another young woman."

*Oh!*

"And Miss Prescott wants to talk to you," Hannah adds.

I'm sure she does. "Send her in."

Hannah stands aside, and Prescott enters my office. She's on a mission, bristling with professional efficiency.

"Give me a moment, Hannah. Prescott, take a seat."

Hannah closes the door, leaving Prescott and me alone.

"Mrs. Grey, Leila Williams is on your proscribed list of visitors."

"What?" *I have a proscribed list?*

"On our watch list, ma'am. Taylor and Welch have been quite specific about not letting her come into contact with you."

I frown, not understanding. "Is she dangerous?"

"I can't say, ma'am."

"Why do I even know that she's here?"

Prescott swallows and for a moment looks awkward. "I was on a restroom break. She came in, spoke directly to Claire, and Claire called Hannah."

"Oh. I see." I realize that even Prescott has to pee, and I laugh. "Oh dear."

"Yes, ma'am." Prescott gives me an embarrassed grin, and it's the first time I've seen a chink in her armor. She has a lovely smile.

"I need to talk to Claire about protocol again," she says, her tone weary.

"Sure. Does Taylor know she's here?" I cross my fingers unconsciously, hoping she hasn't told Christian.

"I left a brief voice message for him."

*Oh*. "Then I have only a short time. I'd like to know what she wants."

Prescott gazes at me for a moment. "I must advise against it, ma'am."

"She's here to see me for a reason."

"I'm supposed to prevent that, ma'am." Her voice is soft but resigned.

“I really want to hear what she has to say.” My tone is more forceful than I intend.

Prescott stifles her sigh. “I’d like to search them both before you do.”

“Okay. Can you do that?”

“I’m here to protect you, Mrs. Grey, so yes, I can. I’d also like to stay with you while you talk.”

“Okay.” I’ll grant her this concession. Besides, last time I met Leila, she was armed. “Go ahead.”

Prescott rises.

“Hannah,” I call.

Hannah opens the door too quickly. She must have been hovering outside.

“Can you check to see if the meeting room is free, please?”

“I already have, and it’s good to go.”

“Prescott, can you search them in there? Is it private enough?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes, then. Hannah, show Leila Williams and whomever she’s with into the meeting room.”

“Will do.” Hannah looks anxiously from Prescott to me. “Shall I cancel your next meeting? It’s at four, but it’s across town.”

“Yes,” I murmur, distracted. Hannah nods and then leaves.

What the hell does Leila want? I don’t think she’s here to do me any harm. She didn’t in the past when she had the opportunity. *Christian is going to go nuts*. My subconscious purses her lips, primly crosses her legs, and nods. I need to tell him that I am doing this. I type a quick e-mail, then pause, checking the time. I feel a momentary pang of regret. We’ve been getting along so well since Aspen. I press “send.”

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Visitors

**Date:** September 6 2011 15:27

**To:** Christian Grey

Christian

Leila is here to see me. I will see her with Prescott.

I’ll use my newly acquired slapping skills with my now-healed hand, should I need to.

Try, and I mean try, not to worry.

I am a big girl.

Will call once we've spoken.

A x

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

Hurriedly, I hide my BlackBerry in my desk drawer. I stand, smoothing my gray pencil skirt over my hips, pinch my cheeks to give them some color, and undo the next button on my gray silk blouse. Okay, I'm ready. After taking a deep breath, I head out of my office to meet the infamous Leila, ignoring "Your Love Is King" humming gently from inside my desk.

Leila looks much better. More than better—she's very attractive. There's a rosy bloom to her cheeks, and her brown eyes are bright, her hair clean and shiny. She's dressed in a pale pink blouse and white pants. She stands as soon as I enter the meeting room, as does her friend—another dark-haired young woman with soft brown eyes, the color of brandy. Prescott hovers in the corner, not taking her eyes off Leila.

"Mrs. Grey, thank you so much for seeing me." Leila's voice is soft but clear.

"Um … Sorry about the security," I mutter, because I cannot think what else to say. I wave a hand distractedly at Prescott.

"This is my friend, Susi."

"Hi." I nod at Susi. She looks like Leila. She looks like me. *Oh no. Another one*.

"Yes," Leila says, as if reading my thoughts. "Susi knows Mr. Grey, too."

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I give her a polite smile.

"Please, sit," I murmur.

There's a knock on the door. It's Hannah. I motion her in, knowing full well why she's disturbing us.

"Sorry to interrupt, Ana. I have Mr. Grey on the line?"

"Tell him I'm busy."

"He was quite insistent," she says fearfully.

"I am sure he was. Would you apologize to him, and say I'll call him back very shortly?"

Hannah hesitates.

"Hannah, please."

She nods and scurries out of the room. I turn back to the two women sitting in front of me. They are both staring at me in awe. It's uncomfortable.

“What can I do for you?” I ask.

Susi speaks. “I know this is all kinds of weird, but I wanted to meet you, too. The woman who captured Chris—”

I hold up my hand, stopping her in mid-sentence. I do not want to hear this. “Um … I get the picture,” I mutter.

“We call ourselves the sub club.” She grins at me, her eyes shining with mirth.

*Oh my God.*

Leila gasps and gapes at Susi, at once amused and appalled. Susi winces. I suspect Leila’s kicked her under the table.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I glance nervously at Prescott, who remains impassive, her eyes never leaving Leila.

Susi seems to remember herself. She blushes, then nods and stands. “I’ll wait in Reception. This is Lulu’s show.” I can tell she’s embarrassed.

*Lulu?*

“You’ll be okay?” she asks Leila, who smiles up at her. Susi gives me a large, open, genuine smile and exits the room.

*Susi and Christian* … it’s not a thought I wish to dwell on. Prescott takes her phone out of her pocket and answers it. I didn’t hear it ring.

“Mr. Grey,” she says. Leila and I turn to look at her. Prescott closes her eyes as if in pain.

“Yes, sir,” she says, stepping forward, and hands me the phone.

I roll my eyes. “Christian,” I murmur, trying to contain my exasperation. I stand and stride briskly out of the room.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” he shouts. He’s seething.

“Don’t shout at me.”

“What do you mean don’t shout at you?” he shouts, louder this time. “I gave specific instructions which you have completely disregarded—again. Hell, Ana, I am fucking furious.”

“When you are calmer, we will talk about this.”

“Don’t you hang up on me,” he hisses.

“Good-bye, Christian.” I hang up and switch off Prescott’s phone.

*Holy shit.* I don’t have long with Leila. Taking a deep breath, I reenter the meeting room. Both Leila and Prescott look up at me expectantly, and I hand Prescott her phone.

“Where were we?” I ask Leila as I sit back down opposite her. Her eyes widen slightly.

Yes. Apparently, I *handle* him, I want to say to her. But I don’t think she wants to hear that.

Leila fiddles nervously with the ends of her hair. “First, I wanted to

apologize," she says softly.

*Oh …*

She glances up and registers my surprise. "Yes," she says quickly. "And to thank you for not pressing charges. You know—for your car and in your apartment."

"I know you weren't … um, well," I murmur, reeling. I hadn't expected an apology.

"No, I wasn't."

"You're feeling better now?" I ask gently.

"Much. Thank you."

"Does your doctor know you're here?"

She shakes her head.

*Oh.*

She looks suitably guilty. "I know I'll have to deal with the fallout for this later. But I had to get some things, and I wanted to see Susi, and you, and … Mr. Grey."

"You want to see Christian?" My stomach free-falls to the floor. *That's why she's here.*

"Yes. I wanted to ask you if that would be okay."

*Holy fuck.* I gape at her, and I want to tell her that it's not okay. I don't want her anywhere near my husband. Why is she here? To assess the opposition? To unsettle me? Or perhaps she needs this as some sort of closure?

"Leila." I flounder, exasperated. "It's not up to me, it's up to Christian. You'll need to ask him. He doesn't need my permission. He's a grown man … most of the time."

She gazes at me for a fraction of a beat as if surprised by my reaction and then laughs softly, nervously twiddling the ends of her hair.

"He's repeatedly refused all my requests to see him," she says quietly.

*Oh shit.* I'm in more trouble than I thought.

"Why is it so important for you to see him?" I ask gently.

"To thank him. I'd be rotting in a stinking prison psychiatric facility if it wasn't for him. I know that." She glances down and runs her finger along the edge of the table. "I suffered a serious psychotic episode, and without Mr. Grey and John—Dr. Flynn …" She shrugs and gazes at me once more, her face full of gratitude.

Once again I'm speechless. What does she expect me to say? Surely she should be saying these things to Christian, not me.

"And for art school. I can't thank him enough for that."

*I knew it!* Christian *is* funding her classes. I remain expressionless, tentatively

exploring my feelings for this woman now that she's confirmed my suspicions about Christian's generosity. To my surprise, I feel no ill will toward her. It's a revelation, and I'm glad she's better. Now, hopefully, she can move on with her life and out of ours.

"Are you missing classes right now?" I ask, because I'm interested.

"Only two. I head home tomorrow."

Oh good. "What are your plans, while you're here?"

"Pick up my belongings from Susi, return to Hamden. Continue painting and learning. Mr. Grey already has a couple of my paintings."

*What the hell!* My stomach plunges into the basement once more. *Are they hanging in my living room?* I bridle at the thought.

"What sort of painting do you do?"

"Abstracts, mainly."

"I see." My mind flits through the now-familiar paintings in the great room. Two by his ex-sub … possibly.

"Mrs. Grey, can I speak frankly?" she asks, completely oblivious to my warring emotions.

"By all means," I mutter, glancing at Prescott, who looks like she's relaxed a little. Leila leans forward as if to impart a long-held secret.

"I loved Geoff, my boyfriend who died earlier this year." Her voice drops to a sad whisper.

Holy shit, she's getting personal.

"I'm so sorry," I mutter automatically, but she continues as if she hasn't heard me.

"I loved my husband … and one other," she murmurs.

"My husband." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Yes." She mouths the word.

This is not news to me. When she lifts her brown eyes to mine, they are wide with conflicting emotions, and the overriding one seems to be apprehension … of my reaction, perhaps? But my overwhelming response to this poor young woman is compassion. Mentally I run through all the classical literature I can think of that deals with unrequited love. Swallowing hard, I clutch the moral high ground.

"I know. He's very easy to love," I whisper.

Her wide eyes widen further in surprise, and she smiles. "Yes. He is—was." She corrects herself quickly and blushes. Then she giggles so sweetly that I can't help myself. I giggle, too. Yes, Christian Grey makes us giggly. My subconscious rolls her eyes at me in despair and goes back to reading her dog-eared copy of *Jane Eyre*. I glance at my watch. Deep down I know Christian will

be here soon.

"You'll get your chance to see Christian."

"I thought I would. I know how protective he can be." She smiles.

So this is her scheme. She's very shrewd. *Or manipulative*, whispers my subconscious. "This is why you're here to see me?"

"Yes."

"I see." And Christian is playing right into her hands. Reluctantly, I have to acknowledge that she knows him well.

"He seemed very happy. With you," she says.

*What?* "How would you know?"

"From when I was in the apartment," she adds cautiously.

Oh hell … how could I forget that?

"Were you there often?"

"No. But he was very different with you."

Do I want to hear this? A shudder runs through me. My scalp prickles as I recall my fear when she was the unseen shadow in our apartment.

"You know it's against the law. Trespassing."

She nods, gazing down at the table. She runs a fingernail along the edge. "It was only a few times, and I was lucky not to get caught. Again, I need to thank Mr. Grey for that. He could have had me thrown in jail."

"I don't think he'd do that," I murmur.

Suddenly there is a flurry of activity outside the meeting room, and instinctively I know that Christian is in the building. A moment later he bursts through the door, and before he closes it, I catch Taylor's eye as he stands patiently outside. Taylor's mouth is set in a grim line, and he doesn't return my tight smile. Oh hell, even he's mad at me.

Christian's burning gray gaze pins first me then Leila to our chairs. His demeanor is quietly determined, but I know better, and I suspect Leila does, too. The menacing cool glint in his eyes reveals the truth—he's emanating rage, though he hides it well. In his gray suit, with his dark tie loosened and the top button of his white shirt undone, he looks at once businesslike and casual … and hot. His hair is in disarray—no doubt because he's been running his hands through it in exasperation.

Leila looks nervously down at the edge of the table, running her index finger along the edge again as Christian looks from me to her and then to Prescott.

"You," he says to Prescott in a soft tone. "You're fired. Get out now."

I blanch. Oh no—this isn't fair.

"Christian—" I make to stand up.

He holds his index finger up at me in warning. "Don't," he says, his voice so

ominously quiet that I'm immediately silenced and rooted to my seat. Bowing her head, Prescott walks briskly out of the room to join Taylor. Christian shuts the door behind her and walks to the edge of the table. *Crap! Crap! Crap!* That was my fault. Christian stands opposite Leila, and, placing both hands on the wooden surface, he leans forward.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he growls at her.

"Christian!" I gasp. He ignores me.

"Well?" he demands.

Leila peeks up at him through long lashes, her eyes wide, her face ashen, her rosy glow gone.

"I wanted to see you, and you wouldn't let me," she whispers.

"So you came here to harass my wife?" His voice is quiet. Too quiet.

Leila looks down at the table again.

He stands, glowering at her. "Leila, if you come anywhere near my wife again, I will cut off all support. Doctors, art school, medical insurance—all of it—gone. Do you understand?"

"Christian—" I try again. But he silences me with a chilling look. Why is he being so unreasonable? My compassion for this sad woman blooms.

"Yes," she says, her voice just audible.

"What's Susannah doing in Reception?"

"She came with me."

He runs a hand through his hair, glaring at her.

"Christian, please," I beg him. "Leila just wants to say thank you. That's all."

He ignores me, concentrating his wrath on Leila. "Did you stay with Susannah while you were sick?"

"Yes."

"Did she know what you were doing while you were staying with her?"

"No. She was away on vacation."

He strokes his index finger over his lower lip. "Why do you need to see me? You know you should send any requests through Flynn. Do you need something?" His tone has softened, maybe by a fraction.

Leila runs her finger along the edge of the table again.

*Stop bullying her, Christian!*

"I had to know." And for the first time she looks up directly at him.

"Had to know what?" he snaps.

"That you're okay."

He gapes at her. "That I'm okay?" he scoffs, disbelieving.

"Yes."

"I'm fine. There, question answered. Now Taylor will run you to Sea-Tac so

you can go back to the East Coast. And if you take one step west of the Mississippi, it's all gone. Understand?"

*Holy fuck … Christian!* I gape at him. What the fuck is eating him? He cannot confine her to one side of the country.

"Yes. I understand," Leila says quietly.

"Good." Christian's tone is more conciliatory.

"It might not be convenient for Leila to go back now. She has plans," I object, outraged on her behalf.

Christian glares at me. "Anastasia," he warns, his voice icy, "this does not concern you."

I scowl at him. Of course it concerns me. She's in my office. There must be more to this than I know. He's not being rational.

*Fifty Shades*, my subconscious hisses at me.

"Leila came to see me, not you," I murmur petulantly.

Leila turns to me, her eyes impossibly wide.

"I had my instructions, Mrs. Grey. I disobeyed them." She glances nervously at my husband, then back at me.

"This is the Christian Grey I know," she says, her tone sad and wistful. Christian frowns at her, while all the breath evaporates from my lungs. I can't breathe. Was Christian like this with her all the time? Was he like this with me, at first? I find it hard to remember. Giving me a forlorn smile, Leila rises from the table.

"I'd like to stay until tomorrow. My flight is at noon," she says quietly to Christian.

"I'll have someone collect you at ten to take you to the airport."

"Thank you."

"You're at Susannah's?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

I glare at Christian. He can't dictate to her like this … and how does he know where Susannah lives?

"Good-bye, Mrs. Grey. Thank you for seeing me."

I stand and hold out my hand. She takes it gratefully and we shake.

"Um … good-bye. Good luck," I mutter, because I'm not sure what the protocol is for saying farewell to my husband's ex-submissive.

She nods and turns to him. "Good-bye, Christian."

Christian's eyes soften a little. "Good-bye, Leila." His voice is low. "Dr. Flynn, remember."

"Yes, Sir."

He opens the door to usher her out, but she halts in front of him and looks up. He stills, watching her warily.

"I'm glad you're happy. You deserve to be," she says and leaves before he can reply. He frowns after her, then nods to Taylor, who follows Leila toward the reception area. Closing the door, Christian gazes uncertainly at me.

"Don't even think about being angry with me," I hiss. "Call Claude Bastille and kick the shit out of him or go see Flynn."

His mouth drops open; he's surprised by my outburst and his brow creases once more.

"You promised you wouldn't do this." Now his tone is accusatory.

"Do what?"

"Defy me."

"No I didn't. I said I'd be more considerate. I told you she was here. I had Prescott search her, and your other little friend, too. Prescott was with me the entire time. Now you've fired the poor woman, when she was only doing what I asked. I told you not to worry, yet here you are. I don't remember receiving your papal bull decreeing that I couldn't see Leila. I didn't know that my visitors were subject to a proscribed list." My voice rises with indignation as I warm to my cause. Christian regards me, his expression unreadable. After a moment his mouth twists.

"Papal bull?" he says, amused, and he visibly relaxes. I wasn't aiming to lighten our conversation, yet here he is smirking at me, and that makes me madder. The exchange between him and his ex was painful to witness. How could he be so cold with her?

"What?" he asks, exasperated, as my face remains resolutely straight.

"You. Why were you so callous toward her?"

He sighs and shifts, stepping toward me and perching on the table.

"Anastasia," he says, as if to a child, "you don't understand. Leila, Susannah—all of them—they were a pleasant, diverting pastime. But that's all. You are the center of my universe. And the last time you two were in a room together, she had you at gunpoint. I don't want her anywhere near you."

"But, Christian, she was ill."

"I know that, and I know she's better now, but I'm not giving her the benefit of the doubt anymore. What she did was unforgivable."

"But you've just played right into her hands. She wanted to see you again, and she knew you'd come running if she came to see me."

Christian shrugs as if he doesn't care. "I don't want you tainted with my old life."

*What?*

“Christian … you are who you are because of your old life, your new life, whatever. What touches you, touches me. I accepted that when I agreed to marry you, because I love you.”

He stills. I know he finds it hard to hear this.

“She didn’t hurt me. She loves you, too.”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

I gape at him, shocked. And I’m shocked that he still has the capacity to shock me. *This is the Christian Grey I know*. Leila’s words rattle around my head. His reaction to her was so cold, so much at odds with the man I’ve come to know and love. I frown, recalling the remorse he felt when she had her breakdown, when he thought he might in some way be responsible for her pain. I swallow, remembering, too, that he bathed her. My stomach twists painfully at the thought, and bile rises in my throat. How can he say he doesn’t care about her? He did back then. What’s changed? Sometimes, like now, I just don’t understand him. He operates on a level far, far removed from mine.

“Why are you championing her cause all of a sudden?” he asks, mystified and irritable.

“Look, Christian, I don’t think Leila and I will be swapping recipes and knitting patterns anytime soon. But I didn’t think you’d be so heartless to her.”

His eyes frost. “I told you once, I don’t have a heart,” he mutters.

I roll my eyes—oh, now he *is* being adolescent.

“That’s just not true, Christian. You’re being ridiculous. You do care about her. You wouldn’t be paying for art classes and the rest of that stuff if you didn’t.”

Suddenly, it’s my lifetime ambition to make him realize this. It’s painstakingly obvious that he cares. Why does he deny it? It’s like his feelings for his birth mother. *Oh shit—of course*. His feelings for Leila and his other submissives are tangled up with his feelings for his mother. *I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore*. No wonder he’s so mad. I sigh and shake my head. Paging Dr. Flynn, please. How can he not see this?

My heart swells for him momentarily. My lost boy … Why is it so hard for him to get back in touch with the humanity, the compassion, he showed Leila when she had her breakdown?

He glares at me, his eyes glittering with anger. “This discussion is over. Let’s go home.”

I glance at my watch. It’s four twenty-three. I have work to do. “It’s too early,” I mutter.

“Home,” he insists.

“Christian.” My voice is weary. “I’m tired of having the same argument with you.”

He frowns as if he doesn’t understand.

“You know,” I elucidate, “I do something you don’t like, and you think of some way to get back at me. Usually involving some of your kinky fuckery, which is either mind-blowing or cruel.” I shrug, resigned. This is exhausting and confusing.

“Mind-blowing?” he asks.

*What?*

“Usually, yes.”

“What was mind-blowing?” he asks, his eyes now shimmering with amused sensual curiosity. And I know he’s trying to distract me.

Crap! I do not want to discuss this in SIP’s meeting room. My subconscious examines her finely manicured nails with disdain. *Shouldn’t have brought the subject up, then*.

“You know.” I blush, irritated with both him and myself.

“I can guess,” he whispers.

Holy crap. I’m trying to castigate him and he’s confounding me. “Christian, I __”

“I like to please you.” He delicately traces his thumb over my bottom lip.

“You do,” I acknowledge, my voice a whisper.

“I know,” he says softly. He leans forward and whispers in my ear, “It’s the one thing I do know.” Oh, he smells good. He leans back and gazes down at me, his lips curled in an arrogant, I-so-own-you smile.

Pursing my lips, I strive to appear unaffected by his touch. He is so artful at diverting me from anything painful, or anything he doesn’t want to address. *And you let him*, my subconscious pipes up unhelpfully, gazing over her copy of *Jane Eyre*.

“What was mind-blowing, Anastasia?” he prompts, a wicked gleam in his eye.

“You want the list?” I ask.

“There’s a list?” He’s pleased.

Oh, this man is exhausting. “Well, the handcuffs,” I mumble, my mind catapulting back to our honeymoon.

He furrows his brow and grasps my hand, tracing the pulse point on my wrist with his thumb.

“I don’t want to mark you.”

*Oh …*

His lips curl in a slow carnal smile. “Come home.” His tone is seductive.

“I have work to do.”

“Home,” he says, more insistent.

We gaze at each other, molten gray into bewildered blue, testing each other, testing our boundaries and our wills. I search his eyes for some understanding, trying to fathom how this man can go from raging control freak to seductive lover in one breath. His eyes grow larger and darker, his intention clear. Softly, he caresses my cheek.

“We could stay here.” His voice is low and husky.

Oh no. No. No. No. Not in the office. “Christian, I don’t want to have sex here. Your mistress has just been in this room.”

“She was never my mistress,” he growls, his mouth flattening into a grim line.

“That’s just semantics, Christian.”

He frowns, his expression puzzled. The seductive lover has gone. “Don’t overthink this, Ana. She’s history,” he says dismissively.

I sigh … maybe he’s right. I just want him to admit to himself that he cares for her. A chill grips my heart. *Oh no*. This is why it’s important to me. Suppose *I* do something unforgivable. Suppose I don’t conform. Will I be history, too? If he can turn like this, when he was so concerned and upset when Leila was ill … could he turn against me? I gasp, recalling the fragments of a dream: gilt mirrors and the sound of his heels clicking on the marbled floor as he leaves me standing alone in opulent splendor.

“No …” The word is out of my mouth in whispered horror before I can stop it.

“Yes,” he says, and grasping my chin, he leans down and plants a tender kiss on my lips.

“Oh, Christian, you scare me sometimes.” I grasp his head in my hands, twist my fingers into his hair, and pull his lips to mine. He stills for a moment as his arms fold around me.

“Why?”

“You could turn away from her so easily …”

He frowns. “And you think I might turn away from you, Ana? Why the hell would you think that? What’s brought this on?”

“Nothing. Kiss me. Take me home,” I plead. And as his lips touch mine, I am lost.

---

“Oh please,” I beg, as Christian blows gently on my sex.

“All in good time,” he murmurs.

I pull on my restraints and groan loudly in protest from his carnal assault. I’m

trussed up in soft leather cuffs, each elbow bound to each knee, and Christian's head bobs and weaves between my legs, his masterful tongue teasing me, relentless. I open my eyes and gaze unseeing at our bedroom ceiling, which is bathed in the soft late afternoon light. His tongue moves round and round, swirling and curling over and around the center of my universe. I want to straighten my legs and struggle in a vain attempt to control the pleasure. But I can't. My fingers fist in his hair and I tug hard to fight his sublime torture.

"Don't come," he murmurs in warning against me, his soft breath on my warm, wet flesh as he resists my fingers. "I will spank you if you come."

I moan.

"Control, Ana. It's all about control." His tongue renews its erotic incursion.

*Oh, he knows what he's doing*. I am helpless to resist or stop my slavish reaction, and I try—really try—but my body detonates under his merciless ministrations, and his tongue doesn't stop as he wrings every last ounce of debilitating pleasure from me.

"Oh, Ana," he scolds. "You came." His voice is soft with his triumphant reprimand. He flips me onto my front, and I shakily support myself on my forearms. He smacks me hard on my behind.

"Ah!" I cry out.

"Control," he admonishes, and, grabbing my hips, he thrusts himself into me. I cry out again, my flesh still quivering from the aftershocks of my orgasm. He stills while deep inside me and, leaning over, unclips first one, then the second cuff. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me into his lap, his front to my back, and his hand curls beneath my chin around my throat. I revel in the feeling of fullness.

"Move," he orders.

I moan and rise up and down on his lap.

"Faster," he whispers.

And I move faster and faster. He groans and his hand tips my head back as he nibbles my neck. His other hand travels leisurely across my body, from my hip, down to my sex, down to my clitoris … still sensitive from his earlier lavish attention. I whimper as his fingers close around me, teasing me once more.

"Yes, Ana," he rasps softly in my ear. "You are mine. Only you."

"Yes," I breathe as my body tightens again, closing around him, cradling him in the most intimate way.

"Come for me," he demands.

And I let go, my body obediently following his command. He holds me still as my climax rips through me and I call out his name.

"Oh, Ana, I love you," he groans and follows my lead as he bucks into me,

finding his own release.

HE KISSES MY SHOULDER and smoothes my hair from my face. “Does that make the list, Mrs. Grey?” he murmurs. I am lying, barely conscious, flat on my belly on our bed. Christian gently kneads my backside. He’s propped up beside me on one elbow.

“Hmm.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Hmm.” I smile.

He grins and kisses me again, and reluctantly I roll on my side to face him.

“Well?” he asks.

“Yes. It makes the list. But it’s a long list.”

His face nearly splits in two, and he leans forward to kiss me gently. “Good. Shall we have dinner?” His eyes glow with love and humor.

I nod. I am famished. I reach over to gently pull the little hairs on his chest. “I want you to tell me something,” I whisper.

“What?”

“Don’t get mad.”

“What is it, Ana?”

“You do care.”

His eyes widen, and all trace of his good humor vanishes.

“I want you to admit that you care. Because the Christian I know and love would care.”

He stills, his eyes not leaving mine, and I’m witness to his internal struggle as if he’s about to make the judgment of Solomon. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again as some fleeting emotion crosses his face … pain, maybe.

*Say it*, I will him.

“Yes. Yes, I care. Happy?” His voice is barely a whisper.

Oh, thank fuck for that. It’s a relief. “Yes. Very.”

He frowns. “I can’t believe I’m talking to you now, here in our bed, about—”

I put my finger to his lips. “We’re not. Let’s eat. I’m hungry.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “You beguile and bewilder me, Mrs. Grey.”

“Good.” I lean up and kiss him.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** The List

**Date:** September 9 2011 09:33
**To:** Christian Grey

That's definitely at the top.

:D

A x

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Tell Me Something New
**Date:** September 9 2011 09:42
**To:** Anastasia Grey

You've said that for the last three days.

Make your mind up.

Or … we could try something else.

;)

Christian Grey
CEO, Enjoying This Game, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I grin at my screen. The last few evenings have been … entertaining. We have relaxed again, Leila's brief interruption forgotten. I haven't quite worked up the courage to ask if any of her paintings hang on the walls—and frankly, I don't really care. My BlackBerry buzzes and I answer, expecting Christian.

"Ana?"

"Yes?"

"Ana, honey. It's José Senior."

"Mr. Rodriguez! Hi!" My scalp prickles. What does José's dad want with me?

"Honey, I'm sorry to call you at work. It's Ray." His voice falters.

"What is it? What's happened?" My heart leaps into my throat.

"Ray's been in an accident."

*Oh no. Daddy*. I stop breathing.

"He's in the hospital. You'd better get here quick."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mr. Rodriguez, what's happened?" My voice is hoarse and thick with unshed tears. *Ray. Sweet Ray. My dad.*

"He's been in a car accident."

"Okay, I'll come … I'll come now." Adrenaline has flooded my bloodstream, leaving panic in its wake. I'm finding it difficult to breathe.

"They've transferred him to Portland."

*Portland? What the hell is he doing in Portland?*

"They airlifted him, Ana. I'm heading there now. OHSU. Oh, Ana, I didn't see the car. I just didn't see it …" His voice cracks.

*Mr. Rodriguez—no!*

"I'll see you there." Mr. Rodriguez chokes and the line goes dead.

A dark dread seizes me by the throat, overwhelming me. Ray. No. No. I take a deep steadying breath, pick up the phone, and call Roach. He answers on the second ring.

"Ana?"

"Jerry. It's my father."

"Ana, what happened?"

I explain, barely pausing to breathe.

"Go. Of course, you must go. I hope your father's okay."

"Thank you. I'll keep you informed." Inadvertently I slam the phone down, but right now I couldn't care less.

"Hannah!" I call, aware of the anxiety in my voice. Moments later she pokes her head around the door to find me packing my purse and grabbing papers to stuff into my briefcase.

"Yes, Ana?" She frowns.

"My father has been in an accident. I have to go."

"Oh dear—"

"Cancel all my appointments today. And Monday. You'll have to finish prepping the e-book presentation—notes are in the shared file. Get Courtney to help if you have to."

"Yes," Hannah whispers. "I hope he's okay. Don't worry about anything here.

We'll muddle through."

"I have my BlackBerry."

The concern etched on her pinched, pale face is almost my undoing.

*Daddy*.

I grab my jacket, purse, and briefcase. "I'll call you if I need anything."

"Do, please. Good luck, Ana. Hope he's okay."

I give her a small tight smile, fighting to maintain my composure, and exit my office. I try hard not to run all the way to Reception. Sawyer leaps to his feet when I arrive.

"Mrs. Grey?" he asks, confused by my sudden appearance.

"We're going to Portland—now."

"Okay, ma'am," he says, frowning, but opens the door.

Moving is good.

"Mrs. Grey," Sawyer asks as we race toward the parking lot. "Can I ask why we're making this unscheduled trip?"

"It's my dad. He's been in an accident."

"I see. Does Mr. Grey know?"

"I'll call him from the car."

Sawyer nods and opens the rear door to the Audi SUV, and I climb in. With shaking fingers, I reach for my BlackBerry and dial Christian's cell.

"Mrs. Grey." Andrea's voice is crisp and businesslike.

"Is Christian there?" I breathe.

"Um … he's somewhere in the building, ma'am. He's left his BlackBerry charging with me."

I groan silently with frustration.

"Can you tell him I called, and that I need to speak with him? It's urgent."

"I could try to track him down. He does have a habit of wandering off sometimes."

"Just get him to call me, please," I beg, fighting back tears.

"Certainly, Mrs. Grey." She hesitates. "Is everything all right?"

"No," I whisper, not trusting my voice. "Please, just get him to call me."

"Yes, ma'am."

I hang up. I cannot contain my anguish any longer. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I curl up on the rear seat, and tears ooze, unwelcome, down my cheeks.

"Where in Portland, Mrs. Grey?" Sawyer asks gently.

"OHSU," I choke out. "The big hospital."

Sawyer pulls out into the street and heads for the I-5, while I keen softly in the back of the car, muttering wordless prayers. *Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay*.

My phone rings, “Your Love Is King” startling me from my mantra.

“Christian,” I gasp.

“Christ, Ana. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ray—he’s been in an accident.”

“Shit!”

“Yes. I am on my way to Portland.”

“Portland? Please tell me Sawyer is with you.”

“Yes, he’s driving.”

“Where is Ray?”

“At OHSU.”

I hear a muffled voice in the background. “Yes, Ros,” Christian snaps angrily. “I know! Sorry, baby—I can be there in about three hours. I have business I need to finish here. I’ll fly down.”

*Oh shit. Charlie Tango* is back in commission and last time Christian flew her …

“I have a meeting with some guys over from Taiwan. I can’t blow them off. It’s a deal we’ve been hammering out for months.”

Why do I know nothing about this?

“I’ll leave as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” I whisper. And I want to say that it’s okay, stay in Seattle and sort out your business, but the truth is I want him with me.

“Oh, baby,” he whispers.

“I’ll be okay, Christian. Take your time. Don’t rush. I don’t want to worry about you, too. Fly safely.”

“I will.”

“Love you.”

“I love you, too, baby. I’ll be with you as soon as I can. Keep Luke close.”

“Yes, I will.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.” After hanging up, I hug my knees once more. I know nothing about Christian’s business. What the hell is he doing with the Taiwanese? I gaze out the window as we pass King County International Airport/Boeing Field. He must fly safely. My stomach knots anew and nausea threatens. Ray *and* Christian. I don’t think my heart could take that. Leaning back, I start my mantra again: *Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay*.

“MRS. GREY.” SAWYER’S VOICE rouses me. “We’re on the hospital grounds. I just have to find the ER.”

“I know where it is.” My mind flits back to my last visit to OHSU, when, on my second day, I fell off a stepladder at Clayton’s, twisting my ankle. I recall Paul Clayton hovering over me and shudder at the memory.

Sawyer pulls up to the drop-off point and leaps out to open my door.

“I’ll go park, ma’am, and come find you. Leave your briefcase, I’ll bring it.”

“Thank you, Luke.”

He nods, and I walk briskly into the buzzing ER reception area. The receptionist at the desk gives me a polite smile, and within a few moments, she’s located Ray and is sending me to the OR on the third floor.

*OR? Fuck!* “Thank you,” I mutter, trying to focus on her directions to the elevators. My stomach lurches as I almost run toward them.

*Let him be okay. Please let him be okay.*

The elevator is agonizingly slow, stopping on each floor. *Come on … Come on!* I will it to move faster, scowling at the people strolling in and out and preventing me from getting to my dad.

Finally, the doors open on the third floor, and I rush to another reception desk, this one staffed by nurses in navy uniforms.

“Can I help you?” asks one officious nurse with a myopic stare.

“My father, Raymond Steele. He’s just been admitted. He’s in OR 4, I think.” Even as I say the words, I am willing them not to be true.

“Let me check, Miss Steele.”

I nod, not bothering to correct her as she gazes intently at her computer screen.

“Yes. He’s been in for a couple of hours. If you’d like to wait, I’ll let them know that you’re here. The waiting room’s there.” She points toward a large white door helpfully labeled WAITING ROOM in bold blue lettering.

“Is he okay?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

“You’ll have to wait for one of the attending doctors to brief you, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” I mutter—but inside I am screaming, *I want to know now!*

I open the door to reveal a functional, austere waiting room, where Mr. Rodriguez and José are seated.

“Ana!” Mr. Rodriguez gasps. His arm is in a cast, and his cheek is bruised on one side. He’s in a wheelchair with one of his legs in a cast, too. I gingerly wrap my arms around him.

“Oh, Mr. Rodriguez,” I sob.

“Ana, honey.” He pats my back with his uninjured arm. “I’m so sorry,” he mumbles, his hoarse voice cracking.

*Oh no.*

“No, Papa,” José says softly in admonishment as he hovers behind me. When

I turn, he pulls me into his arms and holds me.

"José," I mutter. And I'm lost—tears falling as all the tension, fear, and heartache of the last three hours surface.

"Hey, Ana, don't cry." José gently strokes my hair. I wrap my arms around his neck and softly weep. We stand like this for ages, and I'm so grateful that my friend is here. We pull apart when Sawyer joins us in the waiting room. Mr. Rodriguez hands me a tissue from a conveniently placed box, and I dry my tears.

"This is Mr. Sawyer. Security," I murmur. Sawyer nods politely to José and Mr. Rodriguez, then moves to take a seat in the corner.

"Sit down, Ana." José ushers me to one of the vinyl-covered armchairs.

"What happened? Do we know how he is? What are they doing?"

José holds up his hands to halt my barrage of questions and sits down beside me. "We don't have any news. Ray, Dad, and I were on a fishing trip to Astoria. We were hit by some stupid fucking drunk—"

Mr. Rodriguez tries to interrupt, stammering an apology.

"*Cálmate*, Papa!" José snaps. "I don't have a mark on me, just a couple of bruised ribs and a knock on the head. Dad … well, Dad broke his wrist and ankle. But the car hit the passenger side and Ray."

Oh no, *no* … Panic swamps my limbic system again. No, no, no. My body shudders and chills as I imagine what's happening to Ray in the OR.

"He's in surgery. We were taken to the community hospital in Astoria, but they airlifted Ray here. We don't know what they're doing. We're waiting for news."

I start to shake.

"Hey, Ana, you cold?"

I nod. I'm in my white sleeveless shirt and black summer jacket, and neither provides warmth. Gingerly, José pulls off his leather jacket and wraps it around my shoulders.

"Shall I get you some tea, ma'am?" Sawyer is by my side. I nod gratefully, and he disappears from the room.

"Why were you fishing in Astoria?" I ask.

José shrugs. "The fishing's supposed to be good there. We were having a boys' get-together. Some bonding time with my old man before academia heats up for my final year." José's dark eyes are large and luminous with fear and regret.

"You could have been hurt, too. And Mr. Rodriguez … worse." I gulp at the thought. My body temperature drops further, and I shiver once more. José takes my hand.

"Hell, Ana, you're freezing."

Mr. Rodriguez inches forward and takes my other hand in his good one.

"Ana, I am so sorry."

"Mr. Rodriguez, please. It was an accident …" My voice fades to a whisper.

"Call me José," he corrects me. I give him a weak smile, because that's all I can manage. I shiver once more.

"The police took the asshole into custody. Seven in the morning and the guy was out of his skull," José hisses in disgust.

Sawyer reenters, bearing a paper cup of hot water and a separate tea bag. *He knows how I take my tea!* I'm surprised, and glad for the distraction. Mr. Rodriguez and José release my hands as I gratefully take the cup from Sawyer.

"Do either of you want anything?" Sawyer asks Mr. Rodriguez and José. They both shake their heads, and Sawyer resumes his seat in the corner. I dunk my tea bag in the water and, rising shakily, dispose of the used bag in a small trashcan.

"What's taking them so long?" I mutter to no one in particular as I take a sip.

*Daddy … Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay*.

"We'll know soon enough, Ana," José says gently. I nod and take another sip. I take my seat again beside him. We wait … and wait. Mr. Rodriguez with his eyes closed, praying I think, and José holding my hand and squeezing it every now and then. I slowly sip my tea. It's not Twinings, but some cheap nasty brand, and it tastes disgusting.

I remember the last time I waited for news. The last time I thought all was lost, when *Charlie Tango* went missing. Closing my eyes, I offer up a silent prayer for the safe passage of my husband. I glance at my watch: 2:15 p.m. He should be here soon. My tea is cold … Ugh!

I stand up and pace, then sit down again. Why haven't the doctors been to see me? I take José's hand, and he gives mine another reassuring squeeze. *Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay*.

Time crawls so slowly.

Suddenly the door opens, and we all glance up expectantly, my stomach knotting. *Is this it?*

Christian strides in. His face darkens momentarily when he notices my hand in José's.

"Christian!" I gasp and leap up, thanking God he's arrived safely. Then I'm wrapped in his arms, his nose in my hair, and I'm inhaling his scent, his warmth, his love. A small part of me feels calmer, stronger, and more resilient because he's here. Oh, the difference his presence makes to my peace of mind.

"Any news?"

I shake my head, unable to speak.

"José." He nods a greeting.

“Christian, this is my father, José Senior.”

“Mr. Rodriguez—we met at the wedding. I take it you were in the accident, too?”

José briefly retells the story.

“Are you both well enough to be here?” Christian asks.

“We don’t want to be anywhere else,” Mr. Rodriguez says, his voice quiet and laced with pain. Christian nods. Taking my hand, he sits me down, then takes a seat beside me.

“Have you eaten?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Are you hungry?”

I shake my head.

“But you’re cold?” he asks, eyeing José’s jacket.

I nod. He shifts in his chair, but wisely says nothing.

The door opens again, and a young doctor in bright blue scrubs enters. He looks exhausted and harrowed.

All the blood disappears from my head as I stumble to my feet.

“Ray Steele,” I whisper as Christian stands beside me, putting his arm around my waist.

“You’re his next of kin?” the doctor asks. His bright blue eyes almost match his scrubs, and under any other circumstances I would have found him attractive.

“I’m his daughter, Ana.”

“Miss Steele—”

“Mrs. Grey,” Christian interrupts him.

“My apologies,” the doctor stammers, and for a moment I want to kick Christian. “I’m Dr. Crowe. Your father is stable, but in critical condition.”

*What does that mean?* My knees buckle beneath me, and only Christian’s supporting arm prevents me from falling to the floor.

“He suffered severe internal injuries,” Dr. Crowe says, “principally to his diaphragm, but we’ve managed to repair them, and we were able to save his spleen. Unfortunately, he suffered a cardiac arrest during the operation because of blood loss. We managed to get his heart going again, but this remains a concern. However, our gravest concern is that he suffered severe contusions to the head, and the MRI shows that he has swelling in his brain. We’ve induced a coma to keep him quiet and still while we monitor the brain swelling.”

*Brain damage? No.*

“It’s standard procedure in these cases. For now, we just have to wait and see.”

“And what’s the prognosis?” Christian asks coolly.

“Mr. Grey, it’s difficult to say at the moment. It’s possible he could make a complete recovery, but that’s in God’s hands now.”

“How long will you keep him in a coma?”

“That depends on how his brain responds. Usually seventy-two to ninety-six hours.”

*Oh, so long!* “Can I see him?” I whisper.

“Yes, you should be able to see him in about half an hour. He’s been taken to the ICU on the sixth floor.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Dr. Crowe nods, turns, and leaves us.

“Well, he’s alive,” I whisper to Christian. And the tears start to roll down my face once more.

“Sit down,” Christian orders gently.

“Papa, I think we should go. You need to rest. We won’t know anything for a while,” José murmurs to Mr. Rodriguez, who gazes blankly at his son. “We can come back this evening, after you’ve rested. That’s okay, isn’t it, Ana?” José turns, imploring me.

“Of course.”

“Are you staying in Portland?” Christian asks. José nods.

“Do you need a ride home?”

José frowns. “I was going to order a cab.”

“Luke can take you.”

Sawyer stands, and José looks confused.

“Luke Sawyer,” I murmur in clarification.

“Oh … Sure. Yeah, we’d appreciate it. Thanks, Christian.”

Standing, I hug Mr. Rodriguez and José in quick succession.

“Stay strong, Ana,” José whispers in my ear. “He’s a fit and healthy man. The odds are in his favor.”

“I hope so.” I hug him hard. Then, releasing him, I shrug off his jacket and hand it back to him.

“Keep it, if you’re still cold.”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks.” Glancing nervously up at Christian, I see that he’s regarding us impassively. Christian takes my hand.

“If there’s any change, I’ll let you know right away,” I say as José pushes his father’s wheelchair toward the door Sawyer is holding open.

Mr. Rodriguez raises his hand, and they pause in the doorway. “He’ll be in my prayers, Ana.” His voice wavers. “It’s been so good to reconnect with him after all these years. He’s become a good friend.”

“I know.”

And with that they leave. Christian and I are alone. He caresses my cheek. “You’re pale. Come here.” He sits down on the chair and pulls me onto his lap, folding me into his arms again, and I go willingly. I snuggle up against him, feeling oppressed by my stepfather’s misfortune, but grateful that my husband is here to comfort me. He gently strokes my hair and holds my hand.

“How was *Charlie Tango*?” I ask.

He grins. “Oh, she was yar,” he says, quiet pride in his voice. It makes me smile properly for the first time in several hours, and I glance at him, puzzled.

“Yar?”

“It’s a line from *The Philadelphia Story*. Grace’s favorite film.”

“I don’t know it.”

“I think I have it on Blu-Ray at home. We can watch it and make out.” He kisses my hair and I smile once more.

“Can I persuade you to eat something?” he asks.

My smile disappears. “Not now. I want to see Ray first.”

His shoulders slump, but he doesn’t push me.

“How were the Taiwanese?”

“Amenable,” he says.

“Amenable how?”

“They let my buy their shipyard for less than the price I was willing to pay.”

*He’s bought a shipyard?* “That’s good?”

“Yes. That’s good.”

“But I thought you had a shipyard, over here.”

“I do. We’re going to use that to do the fitting-out. Build the hulls in the Far East. It’s cheaper.”

*Oh*. “What about the workforce at the shipyard here?”

“We’ll redeploy. We should be able to keep redundancies to a minimum.” He kisses my hair. “Shall we check on Ray?” he asks, his voice soft.

THE ICU ON THE sixth floor is a stark, sterile, functional ward with whispered voices and bleeping machinery. Four patients are each housed in their own separate hi-tech area. Ray is at the far end.

*Daddy*.

He looks so small in his large bed, surrounded by all this technology. It’s a shock. My dad has never been so diminished. There’s a tube in his mouth, and various lines pass through drips into a needle in each arm. A small clamp is attached to his finger. I wonder vaguely what that’s for. His leg is on top of the sheets, encased in a blue cast. A monitor displays his heart rate: *beep, beep,*

*beep*. It's beating strong and steady. This I know. I move slowly toward him. His chest is covered in a large, pristine bandage that disappears beneath the thin sheet that protects his modesty.

I realize that the tube pulling at the right corner of his mouth leads to a ventilator. Its noise is weaving with the *beep, beep, beep* of his heart monitor into a percussive rhythmic beat. Sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling in time with the beeps. There are four lines on the screen of his heart monitor, each moving steadily across, demonstrating clearly that Ray is still with us.

*Oh, Daddy*.

Even though his mouth is distorted by the ventilator tube, he looks peaceful, lying there fast asleep.

A petite young nurse stands to one side, checking his monitors.

"Can I touch him?" I ask her, tentatively reaching for his hand.

"Yes." She smiles kindly. Her badge says KELLIE RN, and she must be in her twenties. She's blonde with dark, dark eyes.

Christian stands at the end of the bed, watching me carefully as I clasp Ray's hand. It's surprisingly warm, and that's my undoing. I sink onto the chair by the bed, place my head gently against Ray's arm, and start to sob.

"Oh, Daddy. Please get better," I whisper. "Please."

Christian puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

"All Mr. Steele's vitals are good," Nurse Kellie says quietly.

"Thank you," Christian murmurs. I glance up in time to see her gape. She's finally gotten a good look at my husband. I don't care. She can gape at Christian all she likes as long as she makes my father well again.

"Can he hear me?" I ask.

"He's in a deep sleep. But who knows?"

"Can I sit for a while?"

"Sure thing." She smiles at me, her cheeks pink from a telltale blush. Incongruously, I find myself thinking blonde is not her true color.

Christian gazes down at me, ignoring her. "I need to make a call. I'll be outside. I'll give you some alone time with your dad."

I nod. He kisses my hair and walks out of the room. I hold Ray's hand, marveling at the irony that it's only now when he's unconscious and can't hear me that I really want to tell him how much I love him. This man has been my constant. My rock. And I've never thought about it until now. I'm not flesh of his flesh, but he's my dad, and I love him so very much. My tears trail down my cheeks. *Please, please get better*.

Very quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, I tell him about our weekend in

Aspen and about last weekend when we were soaring and sailing aboard *The Grace*. I tell him about our new house, our plans, about how we hope to make it ecologically sustainable. I promise to take him with us to Aspen so he can go fishing with Christian and assure him that Mr. Rodriguez and José will both be welcome, too. *Please be here to do that, Daddy. Please*.

Ray remains immobile, the ventilator sucking and expelling and the monotonous but reassuring *beep, beep, beep* of his heart monitor his only response.

When I look up, Christian is sitting quietly at the end of the bed. I don't know how long he's been there.

"Hi," he says, his eyes glowing with compassion and concern.

"Hi."

"So, I'm going fishing with your dad, Mr. Rodriguez, and José?" he asks.

I nod.

"Okay. Let's go eat. Let him sleep."

I frown. I don't want to leave him.

"Ana, he's in a coma. I've given our cell numbers to the nurses here. If there's any change, they'll call us. We'll eat, check into a hotel, rest up, then come back this evening."

THE SUITE AT THE Heathman looks just as I remember it. How often have I thought about that first night and morning I spent with Christian Grey? I stand in the entrance to the suite, paralyzed. Jeez, it all started here.

"Home away from home," says Christian, his voice soft, putting my briefcase down beside one of the overstuffed couches.

"Do you want a shower? A bath? What do you need, Ana?" Christian gazes at me, and I know he's rudderless—my lost boy dealing with events beyond his control. He's been withdrawn and contemplative all afternoon. This is a situation he cannot manipulate and predict. This is real life in the raw, and he's kept himself from that for so long, he's exposed and helpless now. My sweet, sheltered Fifty Shades.

"A bath. I'd like a bath," I murmur, aware that keeping him busy will make him feel better, useful even. *Oh, Christian—I'm numb and I'm cold and I'm scared, but I'm so glad you're here with me*.

"Bath. Good. Yes." He strides into the bedroom and out of sight into the palatial bathroom. A few moments later, the roar of water gushing to fill the tub echoes from the room.

Finally, I galvanize myself to follow him into the bedroom. I'm dismayed to

see several bags from Nordstrom on the bed. Christian reenters, sleeves rolled up, tie and jacket discarded.

"I sent Taylor to get some things. Nightwear. You know," he says, eyeing me warily.

Of course he did. I nod my approval to make him feel better. *Where is Taylor?*

"Oh, Ana," Christian murmurs. "I've not seen you like this. You're normally so brave and strong."

I don't know what to say. I merely gaze wide-eyed at him. I have nothing to give right now. I think I'm in shock. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep the pervading cold at bay, even though I know it's a fruitless task as this cold comes from within. Christian pulls me into his arms.

"Baby, he's alive. His vital signs are good. We just have to be patient," he murmurs. "Come." He takes my hand and leads me into the bathroom. Gently, he slips my jacket off my shoulders and places it on the bathroom chair, then, turning back, he undoes the buttons on my shirt.

THE WATER IS DELICIOUSLY warm and fragrant, the smell of lotus blossom heavy in the warm, sultry air of the bathroom. I lie between Christian's legs, my back to his front, my feet resting on top of his. We're both quiet and introspective, and I'm finally feeling warm. Intermittently Christian kisses my hair as I absentmindedly pop the bubbles in the foam. His arm is wrapped around my shoulders.

"You didn't get into the bath with Leila, did you? That time you bathed her?" I ask.

He stiffens and snorts, his hand tightening on my shoulder where it rests. "Um … no." He sounds astounded.

"I thought so. Good."

He tugs gently at my hair knotted in a crude bun, tilting my head around so he can see my face. "Why do you ask?"

I shrug. "Morbid curiosity. I don't know … seeing her this week."

His face hardens. "I see. Less of the morbid." His tone is reproachful.

"How long are you going to support her?"

"Until she's on her feet. I don't know." He shrugs. "Why?"

"Are there others?"

"Others?"

"Exes who you support."

"There was one, yes. No longer though."

"Oh?"

"She was studying to be a doctor. She's qualified now and has someone else."

“Another Dominant?”

“Yes.”

“Leila says you have two of her paintings,” I whisper.

“I used to. I didn’t really care for them. They had technical merit, but they were too colorful for me. I think Elliot has them. As we know, he has no taste.”

I giggle, and he wraps his other arm around me, sloshing water over the side of the bath.

“That’s better,” he whispers and kisses my temple.

“He’s marrying my best friend.”

“Then I’d better shut my mouth,” he says.

I FEEL MORE RELAXED after our bath. Wrapped in my soft Heathman robe, I gaze at the various bags on the bed. Jeez, this must be more than nightwear. Tentatively, I peek into one. A pair of jeans and a pale blue hooded sweatshirt, my size. Holy cow … Taylor’s bought a whole weekend’s worth of clothes, and he knows what I like. I smile, remembering this is not the first time he’s shopped for clothes for me when I was at the Heathman.

“Apart from harassing me at Clayton’s, have you ever actually gone into a store and just bought stuff?”

“Harassing you?”

“Yes. Harassing me.”

“You were flustered, if I recall. And that young boy was all over you. What was his name?”

“Paul.”

“One of your many admirers.”

I roll my eyes, and he smiles a relieved, genuine smile and kisses me.

“There’s my girl,” he whispers. “Get dressed. I don’t want you getting cold again.”

“READY,” I MURMUR. CHRISTIAN is working on the Mac in the study area of the suite. He’s dressed in black jeans and a gray cable-knit sweater, and I’m wearing the jeans, the hoodie, and a white T-shirt.

“You look so young,” Christian says softly, glancing up, his eyes glowing. “And to think you’ll be a whole year older tomorrow.” His voice is wistful. I give him a sad smile.

“I don’t feel much like celebrating. Can we go see Ray now?”

“Sure. I wish you’d eat something. You barely touched your food.”

“Christian, please. I’m just not hungry. Maybe after we’ve seen Ray. I want to wish him good night.”

AS WE ARRIVE AT the ICU, we meet José leaving. He’s alone.

“Ana, Christian, hi.”

“Where’s your dad?”

“He was too tired to come back. He was in a car accident this morning,” José grins ruefully. “And his painkillers have kicked in. He was out for the count. I had to fight to get in to see Ray since I’m not next of kin.”

“And?” I ask anxiously.

“He’s good, Ana. Same … but all good.”

Relief floods my system. No news is good news.

“See you tomorrow, birthday girl?”

“Sure. We’ll be here.”

José eyes Christian quickly, then pulls me into a brief hug. “*Mañana.*”

“Good night, José.”

“Good-bye, José,” Christian says. José nods and walks down the corridor. “He’s still nuts about you,” Christian says quietly.

“No he’s not. And even if he is …” I shrug because right now I just don’t care.

Christian gives me a tight smile, and my heart melts.

“Well done,” I murmur.

He frowns.

“For not frothing at the mouth.”

He gapes at me, wounded—but amused, too. “I’ve never frothed. Let’s see your dad. I have a surprise for you.”

“Surprise?” My eyes widen in alarm.

“Come.” Christian takes my hand, and we push open the double doors of the ICU.

Standing at the end of Ray’s bed is Grace, deep in discussion with Crowe and a second doctor, a woman I’ve not seen before. Seeing us, Grace grins.

*Oh, thank heavens*.

“Christian.” She kisses his cheek, then turns to me and folds me in her warm embrace.

“Ana. How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. It’s my father I’m worried about.”

“He’s in good hands. Dr. Sluder is an expert in her field. We trained together at Yale.”

Oh …

"Mrs. Grey," Dr. Sluder greets me very formally. She's short-haired and elfin with a shy smile and a soft southern accent. "As the lead physician for your father, I'm pleased to tell you that all is on track. His vital signs are stable and strong. We have every faith that he'll make a complete recovery. The brain swelling has stopped, and shows signs of decreasing. This is very encouraging after such a short time."

"That's good news," I murmur.

She smiles warmly at me. "It is, Mrs. Grey. We're taking real good care of him.

"Great to see you again, Grace."

Grace smiles. "Likewise, Lorraina."

"Dr. Crowe, let's leave these good people to visit with Mr. Steele." Crowe follows in Dr. Sluder's wake to the exit.

I glance over at Ray, and for the first time since his accident, I feel more hopeful. Dr. Sluder and Grace's kind words have rekindled my hope.

Grace takes my hand and squeezes gently. "Ana, sweetheart, sit with him. Talk to him. It's all good. I'll visit with Christian in the waiting room."

I nod. Christian smiles his reassurance, and he and his mother leave me with my beloved father sleeping peacefully to the gentle lullaby of his ventilator and heart monitor.

I SLIP CHRISTIAN'S WHITE T-shirt on and get into bed.

"You seem brighter," Christian says cautiously as he pulls on his pajamas.

"Yes. I think talking to Dr. Sluder and your mom made a big difference. Did you ask Grace to come here?"

Christian slides into bed and pulls me into his arms, turning me to face away from him.

"No. She wanted to come and check on your dad herself."

"How did she know?"

"I called her this morning."

Oh.

"Baby, you're exhausted. You should sleep."

"Hmm," I murmur in agreement. He's right. I'm so tired. It's been an emotional day. I crane my head around and gaze at him a beat. *We're not going to make love?* And I'm relieved. In fact, he's had a totally hands-off approach with me all day. I wonder if I should be alarmed by this turn of events, but since my inner goddess has left the building and taken my libido with her, I'll think

about it in the morning. I turn over and snuggle against Christian, wrapping my leg over his.

"Promise me something," he says softly.

"Hmm?" It's a question that I am too tired to articulate.

"Promise me you'll eat something tomorrow. I can just about tolerate you wearing another man's jacket without frothing at the mouth, but, Ana … you must eat. Please."

"Hmm," I acquiesce. He kisses my hair. "Thank you for being here," I mumble and sleepily kiss his chest.

"Where else would I be? I want to be wherever you are, Ana. Being here makes me think of how far we've come. And the night I first slept with you. What a night that was. I watched you for hours. You were just … yar," he breathes. I smile against his chest.

"Sleep," he murmurs, and it's a command. I close my eyes and drift.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I stir, opening my eyes to a bright September morning. Warm and comfortable between clean, crisp sheets, I take a moment to orient myself and am overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu. Of course, I'm at the Heathman.

"Shit! Daddy!" I gasp out loud, recalling with a gut-wrenching surge of apprehension that twists my heart and starts it pounding why I'm in Portland.

"Hey." Christian is sitting on the edge of the bed. He strokes my cheek with his knuckles, instantly calming me. "I called the ICU this morning. Ray had a good night. It's all good," he says reassuringly.

"Oh, good. Thank you," I mutter, sitting up.

He leans in and presses his lips to my forehead. "Good morning, Ana," he whispers and kisses my temple.

"Hi," I mutter. He's up and dressed in a black T-shirt and blue jeans.

"Hi," he replies, his eyes soft and warm. "I want to wish you happy birthday. Is that okay?"

I offer him a tentative smile and caress his cheek. "Yes, of course. Thank you. For everything."

His brow furrows. "Everything?"

"Everything."

He looks momentarily confused, but it's fleeting and his eyes widen with anticipation. "Here." He hands me a small, exquisitely wrapped box with a tiny gift card.

In spite of the worry I feel about my father, I sense Christian's anxiety and excitement, and it's infectious. I read the card.

*For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife.*
*I love you.*
*C x*

Oh my, how sweet is that? "I love you, too," I murmur, smiling at him.

He grins. "Open it."

Unwrapping the paper carefully so it doesn't tear, I find a beautiful red leather box. *Cartier*. It's familiar, thanks to my second-chance earrings and my watch. Cautiously, I open the box to discover a delicate charm bracelet of silver or

platinum or white gold—I don't know, but it's absolutely enchanting. Attached to it are several charms: the Eiffel Tower; a London black cab; a helicopter—*Charlie Tango*; a glider—the soaring, a catamaran—*The Grace*; a bed; and an ice cream cone? I look up at him, bemused.

"Vanilla?" He shrugs apologetically, and I can't help but laugh. Of course.

"Christian, this is beautiful. Thank you. It's yar." He grins.

My favorite is the heart. It's a locket.

"You can put a picture or whatever in that."

"A picture of you." I glance at him through my lashes. "Always in my heart."

He smiles his lovely, heartbreakingly shy smile.

I fondle the last two charms: a letter C—oh yes, I was his first girlfriend to use his first name. I smile at the thought. And finally, there's a key.

"To my heart and soul," he whispers.

Tears prick my eyes. I launch myself at him, curling my arms around his neck and settling into his lap. "It's such a thoughtful present. I love it. Thank you," I murmur against his ear. Oh, he smells so good—clean, of fresh linen, body wash, and Christian. Like home, my home. My threatened tears begin to fall.

He groans softly and enfolds me in his embrace.

"I don't know what I'd do without you." My voice cracks as I try to hold back the overwhelming swell of emotion.

He swallows hard and tightens his hold on me. "Please don't cry."

I sniff in a rather unladylike way. "I'm sorry. I'm just so happy and sad and anxious at the same time. It's bittersweet."

"Hey." His voice is feather soft. Tipping my head back, he plants a gentle kiss on my lips. "I understand."

"I know," I whisper, and I'm rewarded with his shy smile again.

"I wish we were in happier circumstances and at home. But we're here." He shrugs apologetically once more. "Come, up you go. After breakfast, we'll check on Ray."

ONCE DRESSED IN MY new jeans and T-shirt, my appetite makes a brief but welcome return during breakfast in our suite. I know Christian is pleased to see me eating my granola and Greek yogurt.

"Thank you for ordering my favorite breakfast."

"It's your birthday," Christian says softly. "And you have to stop thanking me." He rolls his eyes in exasperation, but fondly, I think.

"I just want you to know that I appreciate it."

"Anastasia, it's what I do." His expression is serious—of course, Christian in

command and control. How could I forget … Would I want him any other way?

I smile. “Yes, it is.”

He gives me a puzzled look, then shakes his head. “Shall we go?”

“I’ll just brush my teeth.”

He smirks. “Okay.”

Why is he smirking? The thought nags me as I head into the bathroom. A memory springs unbidden to my mind. I used his toothbrush after I first spent the night with him. I smirk and grab his toothbrush in homage to that first time. Gazing at myself as I brush my teeth, I’m pale, too pale. But then I’m always pale. The last time I was here I was single, and now I’m married at twenty-two! I’m getting old. I rinse out my mouth.

Holding up my wrist, I shake it, and the charms on my bracelet give a satisfying rattle. How does my sweet Fifty always know exactly the right thing to give me? I take a deep breath, attempting to stem the emotion still lurking in my system, and gaze down at the bracelet once more. I bet it cost a fortune. *Ah … well*. He can afford it.

As we walk to the elevators, Christian takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, his thumb brushing over *Charlie Tango* on my bracelet. “You like?”

“More than like. I love it. Very much. Like you.”

He smiles and kisses my knuckles once more. I feel lighter than I did yesterday. Perhaps because it’s morning and the world always seems a more hopeful place than it does in the dead of night. Or maybe it’s my husband’s sweet wake-up. Or maybe it’s knowing that Ray is no worse.

As we step into the empty elevator, I glance up at Christian. His eyes flicker quickly down to mine, and he smirks again.

“Don’t,” he whispers as the doors shut.

“Don’t what?”

“Look at me like that.”

“Fuck the paperwork,” I mutter, grinning.

He laughs, and it’s such a carefree, boyish sound. He tugs me into his arms and tilts my head up. “Someday, I’ll rent this elevator for a whole afternoon.”

“Just the afternoon?” I arch my brow.

“Mrs. Grey, you are greedy.”

“When it comes to you, I am.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” He kisses me gently.

And I don’t know if it’s because we are in *this* elevator or because he’s not touched me in more than twenty-four hours or if he’s just my intoxicating husband, but desire unwinds and stretches lazily deep in my belly. I run my fingers into his hair and deepen the kiss, pushing him against the wall and

bringing my body flush against his.

He groans into my mouth and cups my head, cradling me as we kiss—really kiss, our tongues exploring the oh-so-familiar but still oh-so-new, oh-so-exciting territory that is the other's mouth. My inner goddess swoons, bringing my libido back from purdah. I caress his dear, dear face in my hands. "Ana," he breathes.

"I love you, Christian Grey. Don't forget that," I whisper as I gaze into darkening gray eyes.

The elevator comes smoothly to a halt and the doors open.

"Let's go and see your father before I decide to rent this today." He kisses me quickly, takes my hand, and leads me into the lobby.

As we walk past the concierge, Christian gives a discreet signal to the kindly middle-aged man standing behind the desk. He nods and picks up his phone. I glance questioningly at Christian, and he gives me his secret smile. I frown at him, and for a moment he looks nervous.

"Where's Taylor?" I ask.

"We'll see him shortly."

Of course, he's probably fetching the car. "Sawyer?"

"Running errands." *What errands?*

Christian avoids the revolving door, and I know it's so he doesn't have to release my hand. The thought warms me. Outside it's a mild late-summer morning, but the scent of the coming fall is in the breeze. I glance around, looking for the Audi SUV and Taylor. No sign. Christian's hand tightens around mine, and I look up at him. He seems anxious.

"What is it?"

He shrugs. The hum of an approaching car engine distracts me. It's throaty … familiar. As I turn to find the source of the noise, it stops suddenly. Taylor is climbing out of a sleek white sports car parked in front of us.

*Oh shit!* It's an R8. I whip my head back to Christian, who's watching me warily. *"You can buy me one for my birthday … a white one, I think."*

"Happy birthday," he says, and I know he's gauging my reaction. I gape at him because that's all I can do. He holds out a key.

"You are completely over the top," I whisper. *He's bought me a fucking Audi R8! Holy shit. Just like I asked!* My face splits in a huge grin, and I jump up and down on the spot in a moment of unguarded and unbridled overexcitement. Christian's expression mirrors mine, and I dance forward into his waiting arms. He swings me around.

"You have more money than sense!" I whoop. "I love it! Thank you." He stops and dips me low suddenly, startling me, so that I have to grasp his upper arms.

“Anything for you, Mrs. Grey.” He grins down at me. *Oh my*. What a very public display of affection. He bends and kisses me. “Come. Let’s go see your dad.”

“Yes. And I get to drive?”

He grins down at me. “Of course. It’s yours.” He stands me up and releases me, and I hurry around to the driver’s door.

Taylor opens it for me, smiling broadly. “Happy birthday, Mrs. Grey.”

“Thank you, Taylor.” I startle him by giving him a swift hug, which he returns awkwardly. He’s still blushing when I climb into the car, and he closes the door promptly once I’m inside.

“Drive safe, Mrs. Grey,” he says gruffly. I beam up at him, barely able to contain my excitement.

“Will do,” I promise, putting the key in the ignition as Christian stretches out beside me.

“Take it easy. Nobody chasing us now,” he warns. When I turn the key, the engine thunders to life. I check the rearview and side mirrors, and spotting a rare moment of clear traffic, execute a huge perfect U-turn and roar off in the direction of OSHU.

“Whoa!” Christian exclaims, alarmed.

“What?”

“I don’t want you in the ICU beside your father. Slow down,” he growls, not to be argued with. I ease off the accelerator and grin at him.

“Better?”

“Much,” he mutters, trying hard to look stern—and failing miserably.

---

RAY’S CONDITION IS THE same. Seeing him grounds me after the heady road trip here. *I really should drive more carefully*. You can’t legislate for every drunk driver in this world. I must ask Christian what’s become of the asshole who hit Ray—I’m sure he knows. In spite of the tubes, my father looks comfortable, and I think he has a little more color in his cheeks. While I tell him about my morning, Christian wanders off to the waiting room to make phone calls.

Nurse Kellie hovers, checking Ray’s lines and making notes on his chart. “All his signs are good, Mrs. Grey.” She smiles kindly at me.

“That’s very encouraging.”

A little later Dr. Crowe appears with two nursing assistants and says warmly, “Mrs. Grey, time to take your father up to radiology. We’re giving him a CT

scan. To see how his brain is doing."

"Will you be long?"

"Up to an hour."

"I'll wait. I'd like to know."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Grey."

I wander into the thankfully empty waiting room where Christian is talking on the phone, pacing. As he speaks, he gazes out the window at the panoramic view of Portland. He turns to me when I shut the door, and he looks angry.

"How far above the limit? … I see … All charges, everything. Ana's father is in the ICU—I want you to throw the fucking book at him, Dad … Good. Keep me informed." He hangs up.

"The other driver?"

He nods. "Some drunken trailer trash from southeast Portland." He sneers, and I'm shocked by his terminology and his derisory tone. He walks over to me, and his tone softens.

"Finished with Ray? Do you want to go?"

"Um … no." I peer up at him, still reeling at his display of contempt.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Ray's being taken to radiology for a CT scan to check the swelling in his brain. I'd like to wait for the results."

"Okay. We'll wait." He sits down and holds out his arms. As we're alone, I go willingly and curl up in his lap.

"This is not how I envisaged spending today," Christian murmurs into my hair.

"Me neither, but I'm feeling more positive now. Your mom was very reassuring. It was kind of her to come last night."

Christian strokes my back and rests his chin on my head. "My mom is an amazing woman."

"She is. You're very lucky to have her."

Christian nods.

"I should call my mom. Tell her about Ray," I murmur and Christian stiffens. "I'm surprised she hasn't called me." I frown in a moment of realization. In fact, I feel hurt. It's my birthday after all, and she was there when I was born. Why hasn't she called?

"Maybe she did," Christian says. I fish my BlackBerry out of my pocket. It shows no missed calls, but quite a few texts: happy birthdays from Kate, José, Mia, and Ethan. Nothing from my mother. I shake my head despondently.

"Call her now," he says softly. I do, but there's no reply, just the answering machine. I don't leave a message. How can my own mother forget my birthday?

“She’s not there. I’ll call later when I know the results of the brain scan.”

Christian tightens his arms around me, nuzzling my hair once more, and wisely makes no comment on my mother’s lack of maternal concern. I feel rather than hear the buzz of his BlackBerry. He doesn’t let me stand up but fishes it awkwardly out of his pocket.

“Andrea,” he snaps, businesslike again. I make another move to stand and he stops me, frowning and holding me tightly around my waist. I nestle back against his chest and listen to the one-sided conversation.

“Good … ETA is what time? … And the other, um … packages?” Christian glances at his watch. “Does the Heathman have all the details? … Good … Yes. It can hold until Monday morning, but e-mail it just in case—I’ll print, sign, and scan it back to you … They can wait. Go home, Andrea … No, we’re good, thank you.” He hangs up.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes.”

“Is this your Taiwan thing?”

“Yes.” He shifts beneath me.

“Am I too heavy?”

He snorts. “No, baby.”

“Are you worried about the Taiwan thing?”

“No.”

“I thought it was important.”

“It is. The shipyard here depends on it. There are lots of jobs at stake.”

*Oh!*

“We just have to sell it to the unions. That’s Sam and Ros’s job. But the way the economy’s heading, none of us have a lot of choice.”

I yawn.

“Am I boring you, Mrs. Grey?” He nuzzles my hair again, amused.

“No! Never … I’m just very comfortable on your lap. I like hearing about your business.”

“You do?” He sounds surprised.

“Of course.” I lean back to gaze directly at him. “I like hearing any bit of information you deign to share with me.” I smirk, and he regards me with amusement and shakes his head.

“Always hungry for more information, Mrs. Grey.”

“Tell me,” I urge him as I snuggle up against his chest again.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Work the way you do.”

“A guy’s got to earn a living.” He’s amused.

“Christian, you earn more than a living.” My voice is full of irony. He frowns and is quiet for a moment. I think he’s not going to divulge any secrets, but he surprises me.

“I don’t want to be poor,” he says, his voice low. “I’ve done that. I’m not going back there again. Besides … it’s a game,” he murmurs. “It’s about winning. A game I’ve always found very easy.”

“Unlike life,” I murmur to myself. Then I realize I said the words out loud.

“Yes, I suppose.” He frowns. “Though it’s easier with you.”

*Easier with me?* I hug him tightly. “It can’t all be a game. You’re very philanthropic.”

He shrugs, and I know he’s growing uncomfortable. “About some things, maybe,” he says quietly.

“I love philanthropic Christian,” I murmur.

“Just him?”

“Oh, I love megalomaniac Christian, too, and control freak Christian, sexpertise Christian, kinky Christian, romantic Christian, shy Christian … the list is endless.”

“That’s a whole lot of Christians.”

“I’d say at least fifty.”

He laughs. “Fifty Shades,” he murmurs into my hair.

“My Fifty Shades.”

He shifts, tipping my head back, and kisses me. “Well, Mrs. Shades, let’s see how your dad is doing.”

“Okay.”

“CAN WE GO FOR a drive?”

Christian and I are back in the R8, and I’m feeling giddily buoyant. Ray’s brain is back to normal—all swelling gone. Dr. Sluder has decided to wake him from his coma tomorrow. She says she’s pleased with his progress.

“Sure.” Christian grins at me. “It’s your birthday—we can do anything you want.”

Oh! His tone makes me turn and gaze at him. His eyes are dark.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

How much promise can he load into one word? “Well, I want to drive.”

“Then drive, baby.” He grins, and I grin back.

My car handles like a dream, and as we hit the I-5, I subtly put my foot down, forcing us both back in our seats.

"Steady, baby," Christian warns.

AS WE DRIVE BACK into Portland, an idea occurs to me.

"Have you planned lunch?" I ask Christian tentatively.

"No. You're hungry?" He sounds hopeful.

"Yes."

"Where do you want to go? It's your day, Ana."

"I know just the place."

I pull up near the gallery where José exhibited his work and park right outside Le Picotin restaurant, where we went after José's show.

Christian grins. "For one minute I thought you were going to take me to that dreadful bar you drunk dialed me from."

"Why would I do that?"

"To check the azaleas are still alive." He arches a sardonic brow.

I blush. "Don't remind me! Besides … you still took me to your hotel room." I smirk.

"Best decision I ever made," he says, his eyes soft and warm.

"Yes. It was." I lean over and kiss him.

"Do you think that supercilious fucker is still waiting tables?" Christian asks.

"Supercilious? I thought he was fine."

"He was trying to impress you."

"Well, he succeeded."

Christian's mouth twists in amused disgust.

"Shall we go see?" I offer.

"Lead on, Mrs. Grey."

AFTER LUNCH AND A quick detour to the Heathman to pick up Christian's laptop, we return to the hospital. I spend the afternoon with Ray, reading aloud from one of the manuscripts I've been sent. My only accompaniment is the sound of the machinery keeping him alive, keeping him with me. Now that I know he's making progress, I can breathe a little easier and relax. I'm hopeful. He just needs time to get well. I've got time—I can give him that. I wonder idly if I should try calling Mom again, but decide to do it later. I hold Ray's hand loosely as I read to him, squeezing it occasionally, willing him to be well. His fingers feel soft and warm beneath my touch. He still has the indentation on his finger

where he wore his wedding ring—even after all this time.

An hour or two later, I don't know how long, I glance up to see Christian, laptop in hand, standing at the end of Ray's bed with Nurse Kellie.

"It's time to go, Ana."

Oh. I clasp Ray's hand tightly. I don't want to leave him.

"I want to feed you. Come. It's late." Christian sounds insistent.

"I'm about to give Mr. Steele a sponge bath," Nurse Kellie says.

"Okay." I concede. "We'll be back tomorrow morning."

I kiss Ray on his cheek, feeling his unfamiliar stubble beneath my lips. I don't like it. *Keep getting better, Daddy. I love you.*

"I THOUGHT WE'D DINE downstairs. In a private room," Christian says, a gleam in his eye as he opens the door to our suite.

"Really? Finish what you started a few months ago?"

He smirks. "If you're very lucky, Mrs. Grey."

I laugh. "Christian, I don't have anything dressy to wear."

He smiles, holds out his hand, and leads me into the bedroom. He opens the wardrobe to reveal a large white dress bag hanging inside.

"Taylor?" I ask.

"Christian," he replies, forceful and wounded at once. His tone makes me laugh. Unzipping the bag, I find a navy satin dress and ease it out. It's gorgeous—fitted, with thin straps. It looks small.

"It's lovely. Thank you. I hope it fits."

"It will," he says confidently. "And here"—he picks up a shoebox—"shoes to match." He gives me a wolfish smile.

"You think of everything. Thank you." I stretch up and kiss him.

"I do." He hands me yet another bag.

I gaze at him quizzically. Inside is a black strapless bodysuit with a central panel of lace. He caresses my face, tilts my chin, and kisses me.

"I look forward to taking this off you later."

FRESH OUT OF MY bath, washed, shaved, and feeling pampered, I sit on the edge of the bed and start up the hair dryer. Christian wanders into the bedroom. I think he's been working.

"Here, let me," he says, pointing to the chair in front of the dressing table.

"Dry my hair?"

He nods. I blink at him.

“Come,” he says, regarding me intently. I know that expression, and I know better than to disobey. Slowly and methodically he dries my hair, one lock at a time with his usual skill.

“You’re no stranger to this,” I murmur. His smile is reflected in the mirror, but he says nothing and continues to brush through my hair. Hmm … it’s very relaxing.

WHEN WE STEP INTO the elevator on our way to dinner, we are not alone. Christian looks delicious in his signature white linen shirt, black jeans and jacket. No tie. The two women inside shoot admiring glances at him and less generous ones at me. I hide my smile. *Yes, ladies, he’s mine*. Christian takes my hand and pulls me close as we travel in silence down to the mezzanine level.

It’s busy, full of people dressed up for the evening, sitting around chatting and drinking, starting their Saturday night. I am grateful that I fit in. The dress hugs me, skimming over my curves and holding everything in place. I have to say, I feel … attractive wearing it. I know Christian approves.

At first, I think we’re heading for the private dining room where we first discussed the contract, but he leads me past that doorway and on to the far end, where he opens the door to another woodpaneled room.

*“Surprise!”*

*Oh my*. Kate and Elliot, Mia and Ethan, Carrick and Grace, Mr. Rodriguez and José, and my mother and Bob are all there raising their glasses. I stand gaping at them, speechless. *How? When?* I turn in consternation to Christian, and he squeezes my hand. My mom steps forward and wraps her arms around me. *Oh, Mom!*

“Darling, you look beautiful. Happy birthday.”

“Mom!” I sob, embracing her. *Oh, Mommy*. Tears stream down my face despite the audience, and I bury my face in her neck.

“Honey, darling. Don’t cry. Ray will be okay. He’s such a strong man. Don’t cry. Not on your birthday.” Her voice cracks, but she maintains her composure. She grasps my face in her hands and with her thumbs wipes away my tears.

“I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Oh, Ana! How could I? Seventeen hours of labor is not something you easily forget.”

I giggle through my tears, and she smiles.

“Dry your eyes, honey. Lots of people are here to share your special day.”

I sniffle, not wanting to look at anyone else in the room, embarrassed and thrilled that everyone has made such an effort to come and see me.

“How did you get here? When did you arrive?”

“Your husband sent his plane, darling.” She grins, impressed.

And I laugh. “Thank you for coming, Mom.” She wipes my nose with a tissue as only a mother would. “Mom!” I scold, composing myself.

“That’s better. Happy birthday, darling.” She steps aside while everyone lines up to hug me and wish me happy birthday.

“He’s doing well, Ana. Dr. Sluder is one of the best in the country. Happy birthday, angel.” Grace hugs me.

“You cry all you want to, Ana—it’s your party.” José embraces me.

“Happy birthday, darling girl.” Carrick smiles, cupping my face.

“S’up babe? Your old man will be fine.” Elliot enfolds me in his arms. “Happy birthday.”

“Okay.” Taking my hand, Christian pulls me from Elliot’s embrace. “Enough fondling my wife. Go fondle your fiancée.”

Elliot grins wickedly at him and winks at Kate.

A waiter I hadn’t noticed before presents Christian and me with glasses of pink champagne.

Christian clears his throat. “This would be a perfect day if Ray were here with us, but he’s not far away. He’s doing well, and I know he’d like you to enjoy yourself, Ana. To all of you, thank you for coming to share my beautiful wife’s birthday, the first of many to come. Happy birthday, my love.” Christian raises his glass to me amid a chorus of “happy birthday’s”, and I have to fight again to keep my tears at bay.

I WATCH THE ANIMATED conversations around the dinner table. It’s strange to be cocooned in the bosom of my family, knowing the man I consider my father is on a life support machine in the cold clinical environs of the ICU. I’m detached from the proceedings but grateful that they’re all here. Watching the sparring between Elliot and Christian, José’s ready warm wit, Mia’s excitement and her enthusiasm for the food, Ethan slyly watching her. I think he likes her … though it’s hard to tell. Mr. Rodriguez is sitting back, like me, enjoying the conversations. He looks better. Rested. José is very attentive to him, cutting his food, keeping his glass filled. Having his surviving parent come so close to death has made José appreciate Mr. Rodriguez more … I know.

I gaze at Mom. She’s in her element, charming, witty, and warm. I love her so much. I must remember to tell her. Life is so precious, I realize that now.

“You okay?” Kate asks in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.

I nod and clasp her hand. “Yes. Thanks for coming.”

“You think Mr. Megabucks could keep me away from you on your birthday? We got to fly in the helicopter!” She grins.

“Really?”

“Yes. All of us. And to think Christian can fly it.” I nod.

“That’s kinda hot.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

We grin.

“Are you staying here tonight?” I ask.

“Yes. We all are, I think. You knew nothing about this?”

I shake my head.

“Smooth, isn’t he?”

I nod.

“What did he get you for your birthday?”

“This.” I hold up my bracelet.

“Oh, cute!”

“Yes.”

“London, Paris … ice cream?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I can guess.”

We laugh, and I blush, recalling Ben & Jerry’s & Ana.

“Oh … and an R8.”

Kate spits her wine rather unattractively down her chin, making us both laugh some more.

“Over the top bastard, isn’t he?” She giggles.

FOR DESSERT I AM presented with a sumptuous chocolate cake blazing with twenty-two silver candles and a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday.” Grace watches Christian singing with the rest of my friends and family, and her eyes shine with love. Catching my eye, she blows me a kiss.

“Make a wish,” Christian whispers to me. In one breath I blow out all the candles, fervently willing my father better. *Daddy, get well. Please get well. I love you so*.

AT MIDNIGHT, MR. RODRIGUEZ and José take their leave.

“Thank you so much for coming.” I hug José tightly.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Glad Ray’s heading in the right direction.”

“Yes. You, Mr. Rodriguez, and Ray have to come fishing with Christian in

Aspen."

"Yeah? Sounds cool." José grins before he leaves to fetch his father's coat, and I crouch down to say good-bye to Mr. Rodriguez.

"You know, Ana, there was a time … well, I thought you and José …" His voice fades, and he looks at me, his dark gaze intense but loving.

*Oh no*.

"I'm very fond of your son, Mr. Rodriguez, but he's like a brother to me."

"You would have made one fine daughter-in-law. And you do. To the Greys." He smiles wistfully and I blush.

"I hope you'll settle for friend."

"Of course. Your husband is a fine man. You chose well, Ana."

"I think so," I whisper. "I love him so." I hug Mr. Rodriguez.

"Treat him good, Ana."

"I will," I promise.

CHRISTIAN CLOSES THE DOOR to our suite.

"Alone at last," he murmurs, leaning back against the door, watching me.

I step toward him and run my fingers over the lapels of his jacket. "Thank you for a wonderful birthday. You really are the most thoughtful, considerate, generous husband."

"My pleasure."

"Yes … your pleasure. Let's do something about that," I whisper. Tightening my hands around his lapels, I pull his lips to mine.

---

After a communal breakfast, I open all my presents, then give a series of cheery good-byes to all the Greys and Kavanaghs who will be returning to Seattle via *Charlie Tango*. My mom, Christian, and I head up to the hospital with Taylor driving, since the three of us would not fit into my R8. Bob has declined to visit, and I'm secretly glad. It'd be just too weird, and I'm sure Ray wouldn't appreciate Bob seeing him at anything less than his best.

Ray looks much the same. Hairier. Mom is shocked when she sees him, and together we cry a little more.

"Oh, Ray." She squeezes his hand and gently strokes his face, and I'm moved to see her love for her ex-husband. I'm glad I have tissues in my purse. We sit beside him, me holding her hand while she holds his.

“Ana, there was a time when this man was the center of my world. The sun rose and set with him. I’ll always love him. He’s taken such good care of you.”

“Mom—” I choke, and she strokes my face and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

“You know I’ll always love Ray. We just drifted apart.” She sighs. “And I just couldn’t live with him.” She gazes down at her fingers, and I wonder if she’s thinking about Steve, Husband Number Three, who we don’t talk about.

“I know you love Ray,” I whisper, drying my eyes. “They’re going to bring him out of his coma today.”

“Good. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He’s so stubborn. I think you learned it from him.”

I smile. “Have you been talking to Christian?”

“Does he think you’re stubborn?”

“I believe so.”

“I’ll tell him it’s a family trait. You look so good together, Ana. So happy.”

“We are, I think. Getting there, anyway. I love him. He’s the center of my world. The sun rises and sets with him for me, too.”

“He obviously adores you, darling.”

“And I adore him.”

“Make sure you tell him. Men need to hear that stuff just like we do.”

I INSIST ON GOING to the airport with Mom and Bob to say good-bye. Taylor follows in the R8, and Christian drives the SUV. I’m sorry they can’t stay longer, but they have to get back to Savannah. It’s a tearful good-bye.

“Take good care of her, Bob,” I whisper as he hugs me.

“Sure will, Ana. And you look after yourself.”

“Will do.” I turn to my mother. “Good-bye, Mom. Thank you for coming,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “I love you so much.”

“Oh, my darling girl, I love you, too. And Ray will be fine. He’s not ready to shuffle off this mortal coil just yet. There’s probably a Mariners game he can’t miss.”

I giggle. She’s right. I resolve to read the sports pages of the Sunday newspaper to Ray that evening. I watch her and Bob climb the steps into the GEH jet. She gives me a tearful wave, then she’s gone. Christian wraps his arm around my shoulder.

“Let’s head back, baby,” he murmurs.

“Will you drive?”

“Sure.”

WHEN WE RETURN TO the hospital that evening, Ray looks different. It takes me a moment to realize that the suck and push of the ventilator has vanished. Ray is breathing on his own. Relief floods through me. I stroke his stubbly face and take out a tissue to gently wipe the spittle from his mouth.

Christian stalks off to find Dr. Sluder or Dr. Crowe for an update, while I take my familiar seat beside his bed to keep a watchful vigil.

I unfold the sports section of the Sunday *Oregonian* and conscientiously begin reading out the report about the Sounders soccer game against Real Salt Lake. By all accounts, it was a wild game, but the Sounders were defeated by an own goal from Kasey Keller. I grip Ray's hand firmly in mine as I read it through.

"And the final score, Sounders one, Real Salt Lake two."

"Hey, Annie, we lost? No!" Ray rasps, and he squeezes my hand.

*Daddy!*

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tears stream down my face. He's back. My daddy is back.

"Don't cry, Annie." Ray's voice is hoarse. "What's happening?"

I take up his hand in both of mine and cradle it against my face. "You've been in an accident. You're in the hospital in Portland."

Ray frowns, and I don't know if it's because he's uncomfortable with my uncharacteristic display of affection or because he can't remember the accident.

"Do you want some water?" I ask, though I'm not sure if I'm allowed to give him any. He nods, bewildered. My heart swells. I stand up and lean over him, kissing his forehead. "I love you, Daddy. Welcome back."

He waves his hand, embarrassed. "Me, too, Annie. Water." I run the short distance to the nurses' station.

"My dad—he's awake!" I beam at Nurse Kellie, who smiles back.

"Page Dr. Sluder," she says to her colleague and hurriedly makes her way around the desk.

"He wants water."

"I'll bring him some."

I skip back to my father's bed, I feel so lighthearted. His eyes are closed when I reach him, and I immediately worry that he's slipped back into a coma.

"Daddy?"

"I'm here," he mutters, and his eyes flutter open as Nurse Kellie appears with a jug of ice chips and a glass.

"Hello, Mr. Steele. I'm Kellie, your nurse. Your daughter tells me you're thirsty."

---

IN THE WAITING ROOM, Christian is staring fixedly at his laptop, deep in concentration. He glances up when I close the door.

"He's awake," I announce. He smiles, and the tension around his eyes vanishes. Oh … I hadn't noticed before. Has he been tense all this time? He sets

his laptop aside, stands, and embraces me.

"How is he?" he asks as I wrap my arms around him.

"Talking, thirsty, bewildered. He doesn't remember the accident at all."

"That's understandable. Now that he's awake, I want to get him moved to Seattle. Then we can go home, and my mom can keep an eye on him."

*Already?*

"I'm not sure he's well enough to be moved."

"I'll talk to Dr. Sluder. Get her opinion."

"You miss home?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"YOU HAVEN'T STOPPED SMILING," Christian says as I pull up outside the Heathman.

"I'm very relieved. And happy."

Christian grins. "Good."

The light is fading, and I shiver as I step out into the cool, crisp evening and hand my key to the parking valet. He's eyeing my car with lust, and I don't blame him. Christian puts his arm around me.

"Shall we celebrate?" he asks as we enter the foyer.

"Celebrate?"

"Your dad."

I giggle. "Oh, him."

"I've missed that sound." Christian kisses my hair.

"Can we just eat in our room? You know, have a quiet night in?"

"Sure. Come." Taking my hand, he leads me to the elevators.

---

"THAT WAS DELICIOUS," I murmur with satisfaction as I push my plate away, replete for the first time in ages. "They sure know how to make a fine tarte tatin here."

I am freshly bathed and wearing only Christian's T-shirt and my panties. In the background, Christian's iPod is on shuffle and Dido is warbling on about white flags.

Christian eyes me speculatively. His hair is still damp from our bath, and he's wearing just his black T-shirt and jeans. "That's the most I've seen you eat the entire time we've been here," he says.

"I was hungry."

He leans back in his chair with a self-satisfied smirk and takes a sip of his white wine. “What would you like to do now?” His voice is soft.

“What do you want to do?”

He raises an eyebrow, amused. “What I always want to do.”

“And that is?”

“Mrs. Grey, don’t be coy.”

Reaching across the dining table, I grasp his hand, turn it over, and skim my index finger over his palm. “I’d like you to touch me with this.” I run my finger up his index finger.

He shifts in his chair. “Just that?” His eyes darken and heat at once.

“Maybe this?” I run my finger up his middle finger and back to his palm. “And this.” My nail traces his ring finger. “Definitely this.” My finger stops at his wedding ring. “This is very sexy.”

“Is it, now?”

“It sure is. It says *this man is mine*.” And I skim the small callus that has already formed on his palm beneath the ring. He leans forward and cups my chin with his other hand.

“Mrs. Grey, are you seducing me?”

“I hope so.”

“Anastasia, I’m a given.” His voice is low. “Come here.” He tugs my hand, pulling me onto his lap. “I like having unfettered access to you.” He runs a hand up my thigh to my behind. He grasps the nape of my neck with his other hand and kisses me, holding me firmly in place.

He tastes of white wine and apple pie and Christian. I run my fingers through his hair, holding him to me while our tongues explore and curl and twist around each other, my blood heating in my veins. We’re breathless when Christian pulls away.

“Let’s go to bed,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Bed?”

He pulls back farther and tugs my hair so I am looking up at him. “Where would you prefer, Mrs. Grey?”

I shrug, feigning indifference. “Surprise me.”

“You’re feisty this evening.” He runs his nose along mine.

“Maybe I need to be restrained.”

“Maybe you do. You’re getting mighty bossy in your old age.” He narrows his eyes, but can’t disguise the latent humor there.

“What are you going to do about it?” I challenge.

His eyes glitter. “I know what I’d like to do about it. Depends if you’re up to it.”

“Oh, Mr. Grey, you’ve been very gentle with me these last couple of days. I’m not made of glass, you know.”

“You don’t like gentle?”

“With you, of course. But you know … variety is the spice of life.” I bat my lashes at him.

“You’re after something less gentle?”

“Something life-affirming.”

He raises his brows in surprise. “Life-affirming,” he repeats, astonished humor in his voice.

I nod. He gazes at me for a moment. “Don’t bite your lip,” he whispers, then rises suddenly with me in his arms. I gasp and grab his biceps, fearful that he’ll drop me. He walks over to the smallest of the three couches and deposits me on it.

“Wait here. Don’t move.” He gives me a brief, hot, intense look and turns on his heel, stalking toward the bedroom. Oh … Christian barefoot. Why are his feet so hot? He’s back a few moments later, taking me by surprise as he leans over me from behind.

“I think we’ll dispense with this.” He grabs my T-shirt and drags it over my head, leaving me naked except for my panties. He pulls my ponytail back and kisses me.

“Stand up,” he orders against my lips and releases me. I comply immediately. He lays a towel out on the sofa.

*Towel?*

“Take your panties off.”

I swallow but do as I’m told, discarding them by the sofa.

“Sit.” He grabs my ponytail again and pulls my head back. “You’ll tell me to stop if this gets too much, yes?”

I nod.

“Say it.” His voice is stern.

“Yes,” I squeak.

He smirks. “Good. So, Mrs. Grey … by popular demand, I’m going to restrain you.” His voice drops to a breathless whisper. Desire streaks through my body like lightning simply at those words. Oh, my sweet Fifty—on the sofa?

“Bring your knees up,” he commands softly. “And sit right back.”

I rest my feet on the edge of the sofa, my knees up in front of me. He reaches for my left leg, and taking the belt from one of the bathroom robes, he ties one end above my knee.

“Bathrobes?”

“I’m improvising.” He smirks again and fastens the slipknot above my knee

and ties the other end of the soft belt around the finial at the back corner of the sofa, effectively parting my legs.

"Don't move," he warns and repeats the process with my right leg, tying the second cord to the other finial.

*Oh my* … I am sitting up, splayed out on the sofa, legs spread wide.

"Okay?" Christian asks softly, gazing down at me from behind the sofa.

I nod, expecting him to tie my hands, too. But he refrains. He bends and kisses me.

"You have no idea how hot you look right now," he murmurs and rubs his nose against mine. "Change of music, I think." He stands and strolls casually over to the iPod dock.

How does he do this? Here I am, trussed up and horny as hell, while he's so cool and calm. He's just in my field of vision, and I watch the flex and pull of the muscles of his back under his T-shirt as he changes the song. Immediately, a sweet, almost childlike female voice starts to sing about watching me.

Oh, I like this song.

Christian turns and his eyes lock on mine as he moves around to the front of the sofa and sinks gracefully to his knees in front of me.

Suddenly, I feel very exposed.

"Exposed? Vulnerable?" he asks with his uncanny ability to voice my unspoken words. His hands are on his knees. I nod.

Why doesn't he touch me?

"Good," he murmurs. "Hold out your hands." I can't look away from his mesmerizing eyes as I do what he asks. Christian pours a little oily liquid onto each palm from a small clear bottle. It's scented—a rich, musky, sensuous scent that I can't place.

"Rub your hands." I squirm beneath his hot, heavy gaze. "Keep still," he warns.

*Oh my*.

"Now, Anastasia, I want you to touch yourself."

Holy cow.

"Start at your throat and work down."

I hesitate.

"Don't be shy, Ana. Come. Do it." The humor and challenge in his expression is plain to see, along with his desire.

The sweet voice sings that there's nothing sweet about her. I place my hands against my throat and let them slide down to the top of my breasts. The oil makes them glide effortlessly over my skin. My hands are warm.

"Lower," Christian murmurs, his eyes darkening. He doesn't touch me.

My hands cup my breasts.

"Tease yourself."

*Oh my*. I tug gently on my nipples.

"Harder," Christian urges. He sits immobile between my thighs, just watching me. "Like I would," he adds, his eyes shining darkly. My muscles clench deep in my belly. I groan in response and pull harder on my nipples, feeling them stiffen and lengthen beneath my touch.

"Yes. Like that. Again."

Closing my eyes I pull hard, rolling and twisting them between my fingers. I moan.

"Open your eyes."

I blink up at him.

"Again. I want to see you. See you enjoy your touch."

Oh fuck. I repeat the process. This is so … erotic.

"Hands. Lower."

I squirm.

"Keep still, Ana. Absorb the pleasure. Lower." His voice is low and husky, tempting and beguiling at once.

"You do it," I whisper.

"Oh, I will—soon. You. Lower. Now." Christian, exuding sensuality, runs his tongue along his teeth. *Holy fuck* … I writhe, pulling on the restraints.

He shakes his head, slowly. "Still." He rests his hands on my knees, holding me in place. "Come on, Ana—lower."

My hands glide down over my belly.

"Lower," he mouths, and he is carnality personified.

"Christian, please."

His hands glide down from my knees, skimming my thighs, moving toward my sex. "Come on, Ana. Touch yourself."

My left hand skims over my sex, and I rub in a slow circle, my mouth an *O* as I pant.

"Again," he whispers.

I groan louder and repeat the move and tip my head back, gasping.

"Again."

I moan loudly, and Christian inhales sharply. Grabbing my hands, he bends down, running his nose and then his tongue back and forth at the apex of my thighs.

"Ah!"

I want to touch him, but when I try to move my hands, his fingers tighten around my wrists.

“I’ll restrain these, too. Keep still.”

I groan. He releases me, then eases his middle two fingers inside me, the heel of his hand resting against my clitoris.

“I’m going to make you come quickly, Ana. Ready?”

“Yes,” I pant.

He starts to move his fingers, his hand, up and down, rapidly, assaulting both that sweet spot inside me and my clitoris at the same time. Ah! The feeling is intense—really intense. Pleasure builds and spikes throughout the lower half of my body. I want to stretch my legs, but I can’t. My hands claw at the towel beneath me.

“Surrender,” Christian whispers.

I explode around his fingers, crying out incoherently. He presses the heel of his hand against my clitoris as the aftershocks run through my body, prolonging the delicious agony. Vaguely, I’m aware that he’s untying my legs.

“My turn,” he murmurs, and flips me over so I am facedown on the sofa with my knees on the floor. He spreads my legs and slaps me hard across my behind.

“Ah!” I yelp, and he slams into me.

“Oh, Ana,” he hisses through clenched teeth as he starts to move. His fingers grip me hard around my hips as he grinds into me over and over. And I’m building again. *No* … *Ah* …

“Come on, Ana!” Christian shouts, and I shatter once more, pulsing around him and crying out as I come.

“LIFE-AFFIRMING ENOUGH FOR YOU?” Christian kisses my hair.

“Oh yes,” I murmur, gazing up at the ceiling. I am lying on my husband, my back to his front, both of us on the floor beside the sofa. He’s still dressed.

“I think we should go again. No clothes for you this time.”

“Christ, Ana. Give a man a chance.”

I giggle and he chuckles. “I’m glad Ray’s conscious. Seems all your appetites are back,” he says, not disguising the smile in his voice.

I turn over and scowl at him. “Are you forgetting about last night and this morning?” I pout.

“Nothing forgettable about either of those.” He grins, and when he does, he looks so young and carefree and happy. He cups my behind. “You have a fantastic ass, Mrs. Grey.”

“So do you.” I arch a brow at him. “Though yours is still under cover.”

“And what are you going to do about that, Mrs. Grey?”

“Why, I’m going to undress you, Mr. Grey. All of you.”

He grins.

"And I think there's a lot that's sweet about you," I murmur, referring to the song still playing on repeat. His smile fades.

*Oh no*.

"You are," I whisper. I lean down and kiss the corner of his mouth. He closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me.

"Christian, you are. You made this weekend so special—in spite of what happened to Ray. Thank you."

He opens his large, serious gray eyes, and his expression tugs at my heart.

"Because I love you," he murmurs.

"I know. I love you, too." I caress his face. "And you're precious to me, too. You do know that, don't you?"

His stills, looking lost.

*Oh, Christian … my sweet Fifty*.

"Believe me," I whisper.

"It's not easy." His voice is almost inaudible.

"Try. Try hard, because it's true." I stroke his face once more, my fingers brushing against his sideburns. His eyes are gray oceans of loss and hurt and pain. I want to climb into his body and hold him. Anything to stop that look. When will he realize that he means the world to me? That he's more than worthy of my love, the love of his parents—his siblings? I have told him over and over, and yet here we are as Christian gives me his lost, abandoned look. Time. It will just take time.

"You'll get cold. Come." He rises gracefully to his feet and pulls me up to stand beside him. I slip my arm around his waist as we wander back into the bedroom. I won't push him, but since Ray's accident, it's become more important to me that he knows how much I love him.

As we enter the bedroom, I frown, desperate to recover the very welcome lighthearted mood of only a few moments ago.

"Shall we watch TV?" I ask.

Christian snorts. "I was hoping for round two." And my mercurial Fifty is back. I arch my brow and stop by the bed.

"Well, in that case, I think I'll be in charge."

He gapes at me, and I push him onto the bed and quickly straddle him, pinning his hands down beside his head.

He grins up at me. "Well, Mrs. Grey, now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?"

I lean down and whisper in his ear, "I am going to fuck you with my mouth."

He closes his eyes, inhaling sharply, and I run my teeth gently along his jaw.

Christian is working at the computer. It's a bright early morning, and he's tapping out an e-mail, I think.

"Good morning," I murmur shyly from the doorway. He turns and smiles at me.

"Mrs. Grey. You're up early." He holds open his arms.

I bolt across the suite and curl into his lap. "As are you."

"I was just working." He shifts as he kisses my hair.

"What?" I ask, sensing something wrong.

He sighs. "I got an e-mail from Detective Clark. He wants to talk to you about that fucker Hyde."

"Really?" I sit back to gaze at Christian.

"Yes. I told him you're in Portland for the time being, so he'll have to wait. But he says he'd like to interview you here."

"He's coming here?"

"Apparently so." Christian looks bemused.

I frown. "What's so important that it can't wait?"

"Exactly."

"When's he coming?"

"Today. I'll e-mail him back."

"I have nothing to hide. I wonder what he wants to know?"

"We'll find out when he gets here. I'm intrigued, too." Christian shifts again. "Breakfast will be here shortly. Let's eat, then we can go and see your dad."

I nod. "You can stay here if you want. I can see you're busy."

He scowls. "No, I want to come with you."

"Okay." I grin, wrap my arms around his neck, and kiss him.

RAY IS BAD-TEMPERED. It's a joy. He's itchy, scratchy, impatient, and uncomfortable.

"Dad, you've been in a major car accident. It will take time to heal. Christian and I want to move you to Seattle."

"I don't know why you're bothering with me. I'll be fine here on my own."

"Don't be ridiculous." I squeeze his hand fondly, and he has the grace to smile at me.

"Do you need anything?"

"I could murder a doughnut, Annie."

I grin indulgently at him. "I'll get you a doughnut or two. We'll go to Voodoo."

“Great!”

“You want some decent coffee, too?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Okay, I’ll go get some.”

---

CHRISTIAN IS ONCE MORE in the waiting room, talking on the phone. He really should set up office in here. Weirdly, he’s by himself, although the other ICU beds are occupied. I wonder if Christian’s frightened off the other visitors. He hangs up.

“Clark will be here at four this afternoon.”

I frown. What could be so urgent? “Okay. Ray wants coffee and doughnuts.”

Christian laughs. “I think I would too if I’d been in an accident. Ask Taylor to go.”

“No, I’ll go.”

“Take Taylor with you.” His voice is stern.

“Okay.” I roll my eyes and he glares. Then he smirks and cocks his head to one side.

“There’s no one here.” His voice is deliciously low, and I know he’s threatening to spank me. I am about to dare him, when a young couple enters the room. She is weeping softly.

I shrug apologetically at Christian, and he nods. He picks up his laptop, takes my hand, and leads me out of the room. “They need the privacy more than we do,” Christian murmurs. “We’ll have our fun later.”

Outside Taylor is waiting patiently. “Let’s all go get coffee and doughnuts.”

---

At four o’clock precisely there’s a knock on the suite door. Taylor ushers in Detective Clark, who looks more bad-tempered than usual. He always seems to look bad-tempered. Perhaps it’s the way his face is set.

“Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey, thank you for seeing me.”

“Detective Clark.” Christian shakes his hand and directs him to a seat. I sit down on the sofa where I enjoyed myself so much last night. The thought makes me blush.

“It’s Mrs. Grey I wish to see,” Clark says pointedly to Christian and to Taylor, who is stationed beside the door. Christian glances and then nods almost

imperceptibly at Taylor, who turns and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"Anything you wish to say to my wife you can say in front of me." Christian's voice is cool and businesslike. Detective Clark turns to me.

"Are you sure you'd like your husband to be present?"

I frown at him. "Of course. I have nothing to hide. You are just interviewing me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'd like my husband to stay."

Christian sits beside me, radiating tension.

"All right," murmurs Clark, resigned. He clears his throat. "Mrs. Grey, Mr. Hyde maintains that you sexually harassed him and made several lewd advances toward him."

*Oh!* I almost burst out laughing, but put my hand on Christian's thigh to restrain him as he shifts forward in his seat.

"That's preposterous," Christian splutters. I squeeze Christian's leg to silence him.

"That's not true," I state calmly. "In fact, it was the other way around. He propositioned me in a very aggressive manner, and he was fired."

Detective Clark's mouth flattens briefly into a thin line before he continues.

"Hyde alleges that you fabricated a tale about sexual harassment in order to get him fired. He says that you did this because he refused your advances and because you wanted his job."

I frown. *Holy crap*. Jack is even more delusional than I thought.

"That's not true." I shake my head.

"Detective, please don't tell me you have driven all this way to harass my wife with these ridiculous accusations."

Detective Clark turns his steely blue glare on Christian. "I need to hear this from Mrs. Grey, sir," he says with quiet restraint. I squeeze Christian's leg once more, silently imploring him to keep his cool.

"You don't have to listen to this shit, Ana."

"I think I should let Detective Clark know what happened."

Christian gazes at me impassively for a beat, then waves his hand in a gesture of resignation.

"What Hyde says is simply not true." My voice sounds calm, although I feel anything but. I'm bewildered by these accusations and nervous that Christian might explode. *What's Jack's game?* "Mr. Hyde accosted me in the office kitchen one evening. He told me that it was thanks to him that I had been hired and that he expected sexual favors in return. He tried to blackmail me, using e-mails that I'd sent to Christian, who wasn't my husband then. I didn't know

Hyde had been monitoring my e-mails. He's delusional—he even accused me of being a spy sent by Christian, presumably to help him take over the company. He didn't know that Christian had already bought SIP." I shake my head as I recall my distressing, tense encounter with Hyde. "In the end, I-I took him down."

Clark's eyebrows rise in surprise. "Took him down?"

"My father is ex-army. Hyde … um, touched me, and I know how to defend myself."

Christian glances at me with a brief look of pride.

"I see." Clark leans back on the sofa, sighing heavily.

"Have you spoken to any of Hyde's former personal assistants?" Christian asks almost genially.

"Yes, we have. But the truth is we can't get any of his assistants to talk to us. They all say he was an exemplary boss, even though none of them lasted more than three months."

"We've had that problem, too," Christian murmurs.

Oh? I gape at Christian, as does Detective Clark.

"My security chief. He's interviewed Hyde's past five PAs."

"And why's that?"

Christian gives him a steely glare. "Because my wife worked for him, and I run security checks on anyone my wife works with."

Detective Clark flushes. I shrug apologetically at him with a welcome-to-my-world smile.

"I see," Clark murmurs. "I think there's more to this than meets the eye, Mr. Grey. We are conducting a more thorough search of his apartment tomorrow, so maybe something will present itself then. Though by all accounts he hasn't lived there for some time."

"You've searched already?"

"Yes. We're doing it again. A fingertip search this time."

"You've still not charged him with the attempted murder of Ros Bailey and myself?" Christian says softly.

*What?*

"We're hoping to find more evidence in regard to the sabotage of your aircraft, Mr. Grey. We need more than a partial print, and while he's in custody, we can build a case."

"Is this all you came down here for?"

Clark bristles. "Yes, Mr. Grey, it is, unless you've had any further thoughts about the note?"

*Note?* What note?

“No. I told you. It means nothing to me.” Christian cannot hide his irritation. “And I don’t see why we couldn’t have done this over the phone.”

“I think I told you I prefer a hands-on approach. And I’m visiting my great-aunt, who lives in Portland—two birds … one stone.” Clark remains stony faced and unfazed by my husband’s bad temper.

“Well, if we’re all done, I have work to attend to.” Christian stands and Detective Clark follows his cue.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Grey,” he says politely. I nod.

“Mr. Grey.” Christian opens the door, and Clark leaves. I sag into the sofa.

“Can you believe that asshole?” Christian explodes.

“Clark?”

“No. That fucker, Hyde.”

“No, I can’t.”

“What’s his fucking game?” Christian whispers through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know. Do you think Clark believed me?”

“Of course he did. He knows Hyde is a fucked-up asshole.”

“You’re very sweary.”

“Sweary?” Christian smirks. “Is that even a word?”

“It is now.”

Unexpectedly he grins and sits down beside me, pulling me into his arms.

“Don’t think about that fucker. Let’s go see your dad and try to talk about the move tomorrow.”

“He was adamant that he wanted to stay in Portland and not be a bother.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“I want to travel with him.”

Christian gazes at me, and for a moment, I think he’s going to say no. “Okay. I’ll come, too. Sawyer and Taylor can take the cars. I’ll let Sawyer drive your R8 tonight.”

---

The following day Ray is examining his new surroundings—an airy, light room in the rehabilitation center of Northwest Hospital in Seattle. It’s noon, and he looks sleepy. The journey, via helicopter no less, has exhausted him.

“Tell Christian I appreciate this,” he says quietly.

“You can tell him yourself. He’ll be along this evening.”

“Aren’t you going to work?”

“Probably. I just want to make sure you’re settled in here.”

“You get along. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I like worrying about you.”

My BlackBerry buzzes. I check the number—it’s not one I recognize.

“You going to answer that?” Ray asks.

“No. I don’t know who it is. The voice mail can take it for me. I brought you something to read.” I indicate the pile of sports magazines on his bedside table.

“Thanks, Annie.”

“You’re tired, aren’t you?”

He nods.

“I’ll let you get some sleep.” I kiss his forehead. “Laters, Daddy,” I murmur.

“I’ll see you later, honey. And thank you.” Ray catches my hand and squeezes it gently. “I like that you call me Daddy. Takes me back.”

*Oh, Daddy*. I return his squeeze.

AS I HEAD OUT the main doors toward the SUV where Sawyer is waiting, I hear my name being called.

“Mrs. Grey! Mrs. Grey!”

Turning, I see Dr. Greene hurrying toward me, looking her usual immaculate self, if a little flustered.

“Mrs. Grey, how are you? Did you get my message? I called earlier.”

“No.” My scalp prickles.

“Well, I was wondering why you’d canceled four appointments.”

*Four appointments?* I gape at her. *I’ve missed four appointments! How?*

“Perhaps we should talk about this in my office. I was going out for lunch—do you have time right now?”

I nod meekly. “Sure. I …” Words fail me. I’ve missed four appointments? *I’m late for my shot. Shit.*

In a daze, I follow her back into the hospital and up to her office. How did I miss four appointments? I vaguely remember one being moved—Hannah mentioned it—but *four?* How could I miss four?

Dr. Greene’s office is spacious, minimalistic, and well appointed.

“I’m so grateful you caught me before I left,” I mumble, still shell-shocked. “My father’s been in a car accident, and we’ve just moved him here from Portland.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. How’s he doing?”

“He’s doing okay, thank you. On the mend.”

“That’s good. And it explains why you canceled on Friday.”

Dr. Greene wiggles the mouse on her desk, and her computer comes to life.

“Yes … it’s been over thirteen weeks. You’re cutting it a bit close. We’d better do a test before we give you another shot.”

“A test?” I whisper, all the blood rushing from my head.

“A pregnancy test.”

*Oh no*.

She reaches into the drawer of her desk. “You know what to do with this.” She hands me a small container. “The restroom is just outside my office.”

I get up as if in a trance, my whole body operating as if on automatic pilot, and stumble to the restroom.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit*. How could I have let this happen … again? I suddenly feel sick and offer a silent prayer. *Please no. Please no. It’s too soon. It’s too soon. It’s too soon*.

When I reenter Dr. Greene’s office, she gives me a tight smile and waves me to the seat in front of her desk. I sit down and wordlessly hand her my sample. She dips a small white stick into it and watches. She raises her eyebrows as it turns pale blue.

“What does blue mean?” The tension is almost choking me.

She looks up at me, her eyes serious. “Well, Mrs. Grey, it means you’re pregnant.”

*What? No. No. No. Fuck*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I gape at Dr. Greene, my world collapsing around me. A baby. A baby. I don't want a baby … not yet. *Fuck*. And I know deep down that Christian is going to freak.

"Mrs. Grey, you're very pale. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Please." My voice is barely audible. My mind is racing. Pregnant? When?

"I take it you're surprised."

I nod mutely at the good doctor as she hands me a glass of water from her conveniently placed water cooler. I take a welcome sip. "Shocked," I whisper.

"We could do an ultrasound to see how advanced the pregnancy is. Judging by your reaction, I suspect you're just a couple of weeks or so from conception—four or five weeks pregnant. I take it you haven't been suffering any symptoms?"

I shake my head mutely. *Symptoms?* I don't think so. "I thought … I thought this was a reliable form of contraceptive."

Dr. Greene arches a brow. "It normally is, *when* you remember to have the shot," she says coolly.

"I must have lost track of time." *Christian is going to freak*. I know it.

"Have you been bleeding at all?"

I frown. "No."

"That's normal for the Depo. Let's do an ultrasound shall we? I have time."

I nod, bewildered, and Dr. Greene directs me toward a black leather exam table behind a screen.

"If you'll just slip off your skirt, underwear, and cover yourself with the blanket on the table, we'll go from there," she says briskly.

*Underwear?* I was expecting an ultrasound scan over my belly. Why do I need to remove my panties? I shrug in consternation, then quickly do as she says and lie down beneath the soft white blanket.

"That's good." Dr. Greene appears at the end of the table, pulling the ultrasound machine closer. It's a hi-tech stack of computers. Sitting down, she positions the screen so that we can both see it and jogs the trackball on the keyboard. The screen pings into life.

“If you could lift and bend your knees, then part them wide,” she says matter-of-factly.

I frown warily.

“This is a transvaginal ultrasound. If you’re only just pregnant, we should be able to find the baby with this.” She holds up a long white probe.

*Oh, you have* got *to be kidding!*

“Okay,” I mutter, mortified, and do as she says. Greene pulls a condom over the wand and lubricates it with clear gel.

“Mrs. Grey, if you could relax.”

*Relax?* I’m pregnant, damn it! How do you expect me to relax? I blush and endeavor to find my happy place … which has relocated somewhere near the lost island of Atlantis.

Slowly and gently she inserts the probe.

*Holy fuck!*

All I can see on the screen is the visual equivalent of white noise—although it’s more sepia in color. Slowly, Dr. Greene moves the probe about, and it’s very disconcerting.

“There,” she murmurs. She presses a button, freezing the picture on the screen, and points to a tiny blip in the sepia storm.

*It’s a little blip*. There’s a tiny little blip in my belly. Tiny. *Wow*. I forget my discomfort as I stare dumbfounded at the blip.

“It’s too early to see the heartbeat, but yes, you’re definitely pregnant. Four or five weeks, I would say.” She frowns. “Looks like the shot ran out early. Oh well, that happens sometimes.”

I am too stunned to say anything. The little blip is a baby. A real honest to goodness baby. Christian’s baby. My baby. Holy cow. *A baby!*

“Would you like me to print out a picture for you?”

I nod, still unable to speak, and Dr. Greene presses a button. Then she gently removes the wand and hands me a paper towel to clean myself.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Grey,” she says as I sit up. “We’ll need to make another appointment. I suggest in four weeks’ time. Then we can ascertain the exact age of your baby and set a likely due date. You can get dressed now.”

“Okay.” I’m reeling and I dress hurriedly. I have a blip, a little blip. When I emerge from behind the screen, Dr. Greene is back at her desk.

“In the meantime, I’d like you to start this course of folic acid and prenatal vitamins. Here’s a leaflet of dos and don’ts.”

As she hands me a package of pills and a leaflet, she continues to talk at me, but I’m not listening. I’m in shock. Overwhelmed. Surely I should be happy. Surely I should be thirty … at least. This is too soon—far too soon. I try to quell

my rising sense of panic.

I wish Dr. Greene a polite good-bye and head back down to the exit and out into the cool fall afternoon. I'm gripped suddenly by a creeping cold and deep sense of foreboding. Christian is going to freak, I know, but how much and how far, I have no idea. His words haunt me. *"I'm not ready to share you yet."* I pull my jacket tighter around me, trying to shake off the cold.

Sawyer leaps out of the SUV and holds open the door. He frowns when he sees my face, but I ignore his concerned expression.

"Where to, Mrs. Grey?" he asks gently.

"SIP." I nestle into the backseat of the car, closing my eyes and leaning my head on the headrest. I should be happy. I know I should be happy. But I'm not. This is too early. Far too early. What about my job? What about SIP? What about Christian and me? No. No. *No*. We'll be fine. He'll be fine. He loved baby Mia—I remember Carrick telling me—he dotes on her now. Perhaps I should warn Flynn … Perhaps I shouldn't tell Christian. Perhaps I … perhaps I should end this. I halt my thoughts on that dark path, alarmed at the direction they're taking. Instinctively my hand sweeps down to rest protectively over my belly. *No. My little Blip*. Tears spring to my eyes. What am I going to do?

A vision of a little boy with copper-colored hair and bright gray eyes running through the meadow at the new house invades my thoughts, teasing and tantalizing me with possibilities. He's giggling and squealing with delight as Christian and I chase him. Christian swings him high in his arms and carries him on his hip as we walk hand in hand back to the house.

My vision morphs into Christian turning away from me in disgust. I'm fat and awkward, heavy with child. He paces the long hall of mirrors, away from me, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the silvered glass, walls, and floor. *Christian …*

I jerk awake. *No*. He's going to freak out.

When Sawyer pulls up outside SIP, I leap out and head into the building.

"Ana, great to see you. How's your dad?" Hannah asks as soon as I reach my office. I regard her coolly.

"He's better, thank you. Can I see you in my office?"

"Sure." She looks surprised as she follows me in. "Is everything okay?"

"I need to know if you've moved or canceled any appointments with Dr. Greene."

"Dr. Greene? Yes, I have. About two or three of them. Mostly because you were in other meetings or running late. Why?"

*Because now I'm fucking pregnant!* I scream at her in my head. I take a deep, steadying breath. "If you move any appointments, will you make sure I know? I

don’t always check my calendar.”

“Sure,” Hannah says quietly. “I’m sorry. Have I done something wrong?”

I shake my head and sigh loudly. “Can you make me some tea? Then let’s discuss what’s been happening while I’ve been away.”

“Sure. I’ll jump to it.” Brightening, she heads out of the office.

I gaze after her departing figure. “You see that woman?” I talk quietly to the blip. “She might be the reason you’re here.” I pat my belly, then feel like a complete idiot, because I am talking to the blip. *My* tiny little Blip. I shake my head, exasperated at myself and at Hannah … though deep down I know I can’t really blame Hannah. Despondently I switch on my computer. There’s an e-mail from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Missing You

**Date:** September 13 2011 13:58

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. Grey

I’ve been back in the office for only three hours, and I’m missing you already.

Hope Ray has settled into his new room okay. Mom is going to see him this afternoon and check up on him.

I’ll collect you around six this evening, and we can go and see him before heading home.

Sound good?

Your loving husband

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

I type a quick response.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey

**Subject:** Missing You

**Date:** September 13 2011 14:10

**To:** Christian Grey

Sure.

x

Anastasia Grey

Editor, SIP

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** Missing You
**Date:** September 13 2011 14:14
**To:** Anastasia Grey

Are you okay?

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

No, Christian, I'm not. I'm freaking out about you freaking out. I don't know what to do. But I am not going to tell you via e-mail.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** Missing You
**Date:** September 13 2011 14:17
**To:** Christian Grey

Fine. Just busy.

See you at six.

x

Anastasia Grey
Editor, SIP

When will I tell him? Tonight? Maybe after sex? Maybe during sex. No, that might be dangerous for both of us. When he's asleep? I put my head in my hands. What the hell am I going to do?

"Hi," Christian says warily as I climb into the SUV.

"Hi," I murmur.

"What's wrong?" He frowns. I shake my head as Taylor sets off toward the hospital.

"Nothing." *Maybe now?* I could tell him now when we're in a contained space and Taylor is with us.

"Is work all right?" Christian continues to probe.

"Yes. Fine. Thanks."

"Ana, what's wrong?" His tone is a little more forceful, and I chicken out.

"I've just missed you, that's all. And I've been worried about Ray."

Christian visibly relaxes. "Ray's good. I spoke to Mom this afternoon and she's impressed with his progress." Christian grasps my hand. "Boy, your hand is cold. Have you eaten today?"

I blush.

"Ana," Christian scolds me, annoyed.

*Well, I haven't eaten because I know you're going to go bat-shit crazy when I tell you I'm pregnant.*

"I'll eat this evening. I haven't really had time."

He shakes his head in frustration. "Do you want me to add 'feed my wife' to the security detail's list of duties?"

"I'm sorry. I'll eat. It's just been a weird day. You know, moving Dad and all."

His lips press into a hard line, but he says nothing. I gaze out the window. *Tell him!* My subconscious hisses. No. I'm a coward.

Christian interrupts my reverie. "I may have to go to Taiwan."

"Oh. When?"

"Later this week. Maybe next week."

"Okay."

"I want you to come with me."

I swallow. "Christian, please. I have my job. Let's not rehash this argument again."

He sighs and pouts like a sulky teenager. "Thought I'd ask," he mutters petulantly.

"How long will you go for?"

"Not more than a couple of days. I wish you'd tell me what's bothering you."

*How can he tell?* "Well, now that my beloved husband is going away …"

Christian kisses my knuckles. "I won't be away for long."

"Good." I smile weakly at him.

RAY IS MUCH BRIGHTER and a lot less grumpy when we see him. I'm touched by his quiet gratitude to Christian, and for a moment I forget about my impending news as I sit and listen to them talk fishing and the Mariners. But he tires easily.

"Daddy, we'll leave you to sleep."

"Thanks, Ana honey. I like that you drop by. Saw your mom today, too, Christian. She was very reassuring. And she's a Mariners fan."

“She’s not crazy about fishing, though,” Christian says wryly as he rises.

“Don’t know many women who are, eh?” Ray grins.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” I kiss him. My subconscious purses her lips. *That’s provided Christian hasn’t locked you away … or worse*. My spirits take a nosedive.

“Come.” Christian holds out his hand, frowning at me. I take it and we leave the hospital.

I PICK AT MY food. It’s Mrs. Jones’s chicken chasseur, but I’m just not hungry. My stomach is knotted in a tight ball of anxiety.

“Damn it! Ana, will you tell me what’s wrong?” Christian pushes his empty plate away, irritated. I gaze at him. “Please. You’re driving me crazy.”

I swallow and try to subdue the panic rising in my throat. I take a deep, steadying breath. It’s now or never. “I’m pregnant.”

He stills, and very slowly all the color drains from his face. “What?” he whispers, ashen.

“I’m pregnant.”

His brow furrows with incomprehension. “How?”

How … *how*? What sort of ridiculous question is that? I blush and give him a quizzical how-do-you-think look.

His stance changes immediately, his eyes hardening to flint. “Your shot?” he snarls.

*Oh, shit.*

“Did you forget your shot?”

I just gaze at him, unable to speak. Fuck, he’s mad—really mad.

“Christ, Ana!” He bangs his fist on the table, making me jump, and stands so abruptly he almost knocks the dining chair over. “You have one thing, one thing to remember. Shit! I don’t fucking believe it. How could you be so stupid?”

*Stupid!* I gasp. Shit. I want to tell him that the shot was ineffective, but words fail me. I gaze down at my fingers. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Sorry? Fuck!” he says again.

“I know the timing’s not very good.”

“Not very good!” he shouts. “We’ve known each other five fucking minutes. I wanted to show you the fucking world and now … Fuck. Diapers and vomit and shit!” He closes his eyes. I think he’s trying to contain his temper and losing the battle.

“Did you forget? Tell me. Or did you do this on purpose?” His eyes blaze and anger emanates off him like a force field.

“No,” I whisper. I can’t tell him about Hannah—he’d fire her.

“I thought we’d agreed on this!” he shouts.

“I know. We had. I’m sorry.”

He ignores me. “This is why. This is why I like control. So shit like this doesn’t come along and fuck everything up.”

No … Little Blip. “Christian, please don’t shout at me.” Tears start to slip down my face.

“Don’t start with waterworks now,” he snaps. “Fuck.” He runs a hand through his hair, pulling at it as he does. “You think I’m ready to be a father?” His voice catches, and it’s a mixture of rage and panic.

And it all becomes clear, the fear and loathing writ large in his eyes—his rage is that of a powerless adolescent. *Oh, Fifty, I am so sorry. It’s a shock for me, too*.

“I know neither one of us is ready for this, but I think you’ll make a wonderful father,” I choke. “We’ll figure it out.”

“How the fuck do you know!” he shouts, louder this time. “Tell me how!” His eyes burn as so many emotions cross his face. It’s fear that’s most prominent.

“Oh, fuck this!” Christian bellows dismissively and holds his hands up in a gesture of defeat. He turns on his heel and stalks toward the foyer, grabbing his jacket as he leaves the great room. His footsteps echo off the wooden floor, and he disappears through the double doors into the foyer, slamming the door behind him and making me jump once more.

I am alone with the silence—the still, silent emptiness of the great room. I shudder involuntarily as I gaze numbly at the closed doors. *He’s walked out on me. Shit!* His reaction is far worse than I could ever have imagined. I push my plate away and fold my arms on the table, letting my head sink into them while I weep.

“ANA, DEAR.” MRS. JONES is hovering beside me.

I sit up quickly, dashing the tears from my face.

“I heard. I’m sorry,” she says gently. “Would you like an herbal tea or something?”

“I’d like a glass of white wine.”

Mrs. Jones pauses for a fraction of a second, and I remember Blip. Now I can’t drink alcohol. Can I? I must study the dos and don’ts Dr. Greene gave me.

“I’ll get you a glass.”

“Actually, I’ll have a cup of tea, please.” I wipe my nose. She smiles kindly.

“Cup of tea coming up.” She clears our plates and heads over to the kitchen

area. I follow her and perch on a stool, watching her prepare my tea.

She places a steaming mug in front of me. “Is there anything else I can get for you, Ana?”

“No, this is fine, thank you.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t eat much.”

I gaze up at her. “I’m just not hungry.”

“Ana, you should eat. It’s not just you anymore. Please let me fix you something. What would you like?” She looks so hopefully at me. But really, I can’t face anything.

My husband has just walked out on me because I’m pregnant, my father has been in a major car accident, and there’s Jack Hyde the nutcase trying to make out that I sexually harassed him. I suddenly have an uncontrollable urge to giggle. *See what you’ve done to me, Little Blip!* I caress my belly.

Mrs. Jones smiles indulgently at me. “Do you know how far along you are?” she asks softly.

“Very newly pregnant. Four or five weeks, the doctor isn’t sure.”

“If you won’t eat, then at least you should rest.”

I nod, and taking my tea, I head into the library. It’s my refuge. I dig my BlackBerry out of my purse and contemplate calling Christian. I know it’s a shock for him—but he really did overreact. *When does he not overreact?* My subconscious arches a finely plucked brow at me. I sigh. Fifty Shades of fucked up.

“Yes, that’s your daddy, Little Blip. Hopefully he’ll cool off and come back … soon.”

I pull out the leaflet of dos and don’ts and sit down to read.

I can’t concentrate. Christian’s never walked out on me before. He’s been so thoughtful and kind over the last few days, so loving and now … Suppose he never comes back? *Shit!* Perhaps I should call Flynn. I don’t know what to do. I’m at a loss. He’s so fragile in so many ways, and I knew he’d react badly to the news. He was so sweet this weekend. All those circumstances way beyond his control, yet he managed fine. But this news was too much.

Ever since I met him, my life has been complicated. Is it him? Is it the two of us together? Suppose he doesn’t get past this? Suppose he wants a divorce? Bile rises in my throat. No. I mustn’t think this way. He’ll be back. He will. I know he will. I know, regardless of the shouting and his harsh words, that he loves me … yes. And he’ll love you, too, Little Blip.

Leaning back in my chair, I start to doze.

I WAKE COLD AND disoriented. Shivering, I check my watch: eleven in the evening. *Oh yes … You*. I pat my belly. Where's Christian? Is he back? Stiffly I ease out of the armchair and go in search of my husband.

Five minutes later, I realize he's not home. I hope nothing's happened to him. Memories of the long wait when *Charlie Tango* went missing flood back.

*No, no, no. Stop thinking like this. He's probably gone to … where?* Who would he go and see? Elliot? Or maybe he's with Flynn. I hope so. I find my BlackBerry back in the library, and I text him.

*Where are you?*

I head into the bathroom and run myself a bath. I am so cold.

HE STILL HASN'T RETURNED when I climb out of the bath. I change into one of my 1930s-style satin nightdresses and my robe and head to the great room. On the way, I pop into the spare bedroom. Perhaps this could be Little Blip's room. I am startled by the thought and stand in the doorway, contemplating this reality. Will we paint it blue or pink? The sweet thought is soured by the fact that my errant husband is so pissed at the idea. Grabbing the duvet from the spare bed, I head into the great room to keep vigil.

SOMETHING WAKES ME. A sound.

"Shit!"

It's Christian in the foyer. I hear the table scrape across the floor again.

"Shit!" he repeats, more muffled this time.

I scramble up in time to see him stagger through the double doors. *He's drunk.* My scalp prickles. *Shit, Christian drunk?* I know how much he hates drunks. I leap up and run toward him.

"Christian, are you okay?"

He leans against the jamb of the foyer doors. "Mrs. Grey," he slurs.

Crap. He's *very* drunk. I don't know what to do.

"Oh … you look mighty fine, Anastasia."

"Where have you been?"

He puts his finger to his lips and smiles crookedly at me. "Shh!"

"I think you'd better come to bed."

"With you …" He snickers.

*Snickering!* Frowning, I gently put my arm around his waist because he can hardly stand, let alone walk. Where has he been? How did he get home?

“Let me help you to bed. Lean on me.”

“You are very beautiful, Ana.” He leans on me and sniffs my hair, almost knocking both of us over.

“Christian, walk. I am going to put you to bed.”

“Okay,” he says, as if he’s trying to concentrate.

We stumble down the corridor and finally make it into the bedroom.

“Bed,” he says, grinning.

“Yes, bed.” I maneuver him to the edge, but he holds me.

“Join me,” he says.

“Christian, I think you need some sleep.”

“And so it begins. I’ve heard about this.”

I frown. “Heard about what?”

“Babies mean no sex.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. Otherwise we’d all come from one-child families.”

He gazes down at me. “You’re funny.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Yes.” He smiles, but his smile changes as he thinks about it, and a haunted expression crosses his face, a look that chills me to the bone.

“Come on, Christian,” I say gently. I hate his expression. It speaks of horrid, ugly memories that no child should see. “Let’s get you into bed.” I push him gently, and he flops down onto the mattress, sprawling in all directions and grinning up at me, his haunted expression gone.

“Join me,” he slurs.

“Let’s get you undressed first.”

He grins widely, drunkenly. “Now you’re talking.”

Holy cow. Drunk Christian is cute and playful. I’ll take him over mad-as-hell Christian anytime.

“Sit up. Let me take your jacket off.”

“The room is spinning.”

Shit … is he going to throw up? “Christian, sit up!”

He smirks up at me. “Mrs. Grey, you are a bossy little thing …”

“Yes. Do as you’re told and sit up.” I put my hands on my hips. He grins again, struggles up onto his elbows, then sits up in a most un-Christian-like, gawky fashion. Before he can flop down again, I grab his tie and wrestle him out of his gray jacket, one arm at a time.

“You smell good.”

“You smell of hard liquor.”

“Yes … bour-bon.” He pronounces the syllables with such exaggeration that I have to stifle a giggle. Discarding his jacket on the floor beside me, I make a

start on his tie. He rests his hands on my hips.

"I like the feel of this fabric on you, Anastay-shia," he says, slurring his words. "You should always be in satin or silk." He runs his hands up and down my hips, then jerks me forward, pressing his mouth against my belly.

"And we have an invader in here."

I stop breathing. Holy cow. He's talking to Little Blip.

"You're going to keep me awake, aren't you?" he says to my belly.

*Oh my*. Christian looks up at me through his long dark lashes, gray eyes blurred and cloudy. My heart constricts.

"You'll choose him over me," he says sadly.

"Christian, you don't know what you're talking about. Don't be ridiculous—I am not choosing anyone over anyone. And he might be a she."

He frowns. "A she … Oh, God." He flops back down on the bed and covers his eyes with his arm. I have managed to loosen his tie. I undo one shoelace and yank off his shoe and sock, then the other. When I stand, I see why I've met no resistance—Christian has passed out completely. He's sound asleep and snoring softly.

I stare at him. He's so goddamned beautiful, even drunk and snoring. His sculptured lips parted, one arm above his head, ruffling his messy hair, his face relaxed. He looks young—but then he is young; my young, stressed-out, drunk, unhappy husband. The thought rests heavily in my heart.

Well, at least he's home. I wonder where he went. I'm not sure I have the energy or the strength to move him or undress him any further. He's on top of the duvet, too. Heading back into the great room, I pick up the duvet I was using and bring it back to our bedroom.

He's still fast asleep, still wearing his tie and his belt. I climb onto the bed beside him, remove his tie, and gently undo the top button of his shirt. He mumbles something incoherently in his sleep, but he doesn't wake. Carefully, I unbuckle his belt and pull it through the belt loops, and after some difficulty it's off. His shirt has come dislodged from his pants, revealing a hint of his happy trail. I can't resist. I bend and kiss it. He shifts, flexing his hips forward, but stays asleep.

I sit up and gaze at him again. *Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty … what am I going to do with you?* I brush my fingers through his hair—it's so soft—and kiss his temple.

"I love you, Christian. Even when you're drunk and you've been out God knows where, I love you. I'll always love you."

"Hmm," he murmurs. I kiss his temple once more, then get off the bed and cover him up with the spare duvet. I can sleep beside him, sideways across the bed … *Yes, I'll do that.*

First I’ll sort out his clothes, though. I shake my head and pick up his socks and tie and fold his jacket over my arm. As I do, his BlackBerry falls to the floor. I pick it up and inadvertently unlock it. It opens on the texts screen. I can see my text, and above it, another.

Fuck. My scalp prickles.

*It was good to see you. I understand now.
Don’t fret. You’ll make a wonderful father.*

It’s from *her*. Mrs. Elena Bitch Troll Robinson. Shit.

That’s where he went. He’s been to see *her*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I gape at the text, then look up at the sleeping form of my husband. He's been out until one thirty in the morning drinking—with *her*! He snores softly, sleeping the sleep of a seemingly innocent, oblivious drunk. He looks so serene.

*Oh no, no, no*. My legs turn to jelly, and I sink slowly to the chair beside the bed in disbelief. Raw, bitter, humiliating betrayal lances through me. How could he? How could he go to her? Scalding, angry tears ooze down my cheeks. His wrath and fear, his need to lash out at me I can understand, and forgive—just. But this … this treachery is too much. I pull my knees up against my chest and wrap my arms around them, protecting me and protecting my Little Blip. I rock to and fro, weeping softly.

What did I expect? I married this man too quickly. I knew it—I knew it would come to this. Why. Why. *Why?* How could he do this to me? He knows how I feel about that woman. How could he turn to her? How? The knife twists slowly and painfully deep in my heart, lacerating me. Will it always be this way?

Through my tears, his prostrate figure blurs and shimmers. *Oh, Christian*. I married him because I love him, and deep down I know that he loves me. I know he does. His achingly sweet birthday present comes to mind.

*For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife. I love you. C x*

No, no, no—I can't believe that it will always be this way, two steps forward and three steps back. But that's how it's always been with him. After each setback, we move forward, inch by inch. He will come around … he will. But will I? Will I recover from this … from this treachery? I think about how he's been this last, horrible, wonderful weekend. His quiet strength while my stepdad lay broken and comatose in the ICU … my surprise party, bringing my family and friends together … dipping me down low outside the Heathman and kissing me in full public view. *Oh, Christian, you strain all my trust, all my faith … and I love you*.

But it's not just me now. I place my hand on my belly. No, I will not let him do this to me and our Blip. Dr. Flynn said I should give him the benefit of the doubt—well, not this time. I dash the tears from my eyes and wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

Christian stirs and rolls over, pulling his legs up from the side of the bed, and curls up beneath the duvet. He stretches out a hand as if searching for something, then grumbles and frowns but settles back to sleep, his arm outstretched.

*Oh, Fifty. What am I going to do with you? And what the hell were you doing with the Bitch Troll?* I need to know.

I glance once more at the offending text and quickly hatch a plan. Taking a deep breath, I forward the text to my BlackBerry. Step one complete. I quickly check the other recent texts, but see only messages from Elliot, Andrea, Taylor, Ros, and me. None from Elena. Good, I think. I exit the text screen, relieved that he hasn't been texting her, and my heart lurches into my throat. *Oh my*. The wallpaper on his phone is photograph upon photograph of me, a patchwork of tiny Anastasias in various poses—our honeymoon, our recent weekend sailing and soaring, and a few of José's photos, too. When did he do this? It must have been recently.

I notice his e-mail icon, and an idea slithers enticingly into my mind … *I could read Christian's e-mails*. See if he's been talking to *her*. Should I? Sheathed in jade-green silk, my inner goddess nods emphatically, her mouth set in a scowl. Before I can stop myself, I invade his privacy.

There are hundreds and hundreds of e-mails. I spin down through them, and they look dull as ditchwater … mostly from Ros, Andrea, and me, and various executives in his company. None from Bitch Troll. While I'm at it, I'm relieved to see there are none from Leila either.

One e-mail catches my eye. It's from Barney Sullivan, Christian's IT guy, and the subject line is: Jack Hyde. I glance guiltily at Christian, but he's still snoring gently. I've never heard him snore. I open the e-mail.

---

**From:** Barney Sullivan

**Subject:** Jack Hyde

**Date:** September 13 2011 14:09

**To:** Christian Grey

CCTV around Seattle tracks the white van from South Irving Street. Before that I can find no trace, so Hyde must have been based in that area.

As Welch has told you the unsub car was rented with a false license by an unknown female, though nothing that ties it to the South Irving Street area.

Details of known GEH and SIP employees who live in the area are in the attached file, which I have forwarded to Welch, too.

There was nothing on Hyde's SIP computer about his former PAs.

As a reminder, here is a list of what was retrieved from Hyde's SIP computer.

**Greys' Home Addresses:**

Five properties in Seattle

Two properties in Detroit

**Detailed Resumés for:**

Carrick Grey

Elliot Grey

Christian Grey

Dr. Grace Trevelyan

Anastasia Steele

Mia Grey

**Newspaper and online articles relating to:**

Dr. Grace Trevelyan

Carrick Grey

Christian Grey

Elliot Grey

**Photographs:**

Carrick Grey

Dr. Grace Trevelyan

Christian Grey

Elliot Grey

Mia Grey

I'll continue my investigation, see what else I can find.

B Sullivan

Head of IT, GEH

This odd e-mail momentarily sidetracks me from my night of woe. I click on the attachment to check through the names on the list, but it's obviously huge, too big to open on the BlackBerry.

What am I doing? It's late. I've had a tiring day. There are no e-mails from the Bitch Troll or Leila Williams, and I take some cold comfort from that. I glance quickly at the alarm clock: it's just after two in the morning. Today has been a day of revelations. I am to be a mother, and my husband has been fraternizing with the enemy. Well, let him stew. I am not sleeping here with him. He can wake up alone tomorrow. After placing his BlackBerry on the bedside table, I retrieve my purse from beside the bed and, after one last look at my angelic, sleeping Judas, I leave the bedroom.

The spare playroom key is in its usual place in the cabinet in the utility room. I grab it and scoot upstairs. From the linen closet, I retrieve a pillow, duvet, and sheet, then unlock the playroom door and enter, switching the lights to dim. Odd that I find the smell and ambience of this room so comforting, considering I safe-worded the last time we were in here. I lock the door behind me, leaving the key in the lock. I know that tomorrow morning Christian will be frantic to find

me, and I don't think he'll look in here if the door's locked. Well, it will serve him right.

I curl up on the Chesterfield couch, wrap myself in the duvet, and drag my BlackBerry from my purse. Checking my texts, I find the one from the evil Bitch Troll that I forwarded from Christian's phone. I press "forward" and type:

*WOULD YOU LIKE MRS. LINCOLN TO JOIN US WHEN WE EVENTUALLY DISCUSS THIS TEXT SHE SENT TO YOU? IT WILL SAVE YOU RUNNING TO HER AFTERWARD. YOUR WIFE*

I press "send" and switch the volume to mute. I huddle under my duvet. For all my bravado, I'm overwhelmed by the enormity of Christian's deceit. This should be a happy time. Jeez, we're going to be parents. Briefly, I relive telling Christian that I'm pregnant and fantasize that he falls to his knees with joy in front of me, pulling me into his arms and telling me how much he loves me and our Little Blip.

Yet here I am, alone and cold in a BDSM fantasy playroom. Suddenly I feel old, older than my years. Taking on Christian was always going to be a challenge, but he really has surpassed himself this time. What was he thinking? Well, if he wants a fight, I'll give him a fight. No way am I going to let him get away with running off to see that monstrous woman whenever we have a problem. He's going to have to choose—her or me and our Little Blip. I sniffle softly, but because I'm so exhausted, I soon fall asleep.

---

I WAKE WITH A start, momentarily disoriented … *Oh yes—I'm in the playroom*. Because there are no windows, I have no idea what time it is. The door handle rattles.

"Ana!" Christian shouts from outside the door. I freeze, but he doesn't come in. I hear muffled voices, but they move away. I exhale and check the time on my BlackBerry. It's seven fifty, and I have four missed calls and two voice messages. The missed calls are mostly from Christian, but there's also one from Kate. *Oh no*. He must have called her. I don't have time to listen to them. I don't want to be late for work.

I wrap the duvet around me and pick up my purse before making my way to the door. Unlocking it slowly, I peek outside. No sign of anyone. *Oh shit* … Perhaps this is a bit melodramatic. I roll my eyes at myself, take a deep breath, and head downstairs.

Taylor, Sawyer, Ryan, Mrs. Jones, and Christian are all standing in the entrance to the great room, and Christian is issuing rapid-fire instructions. As one they all turn and gape at me. Christian is still wearing the clothes he slept in

last night. He looks disheveled, pale, and heart-stoppingly beautiful. His large gray eyes are wide, and I don't know if he's fearful or angry. It's difficult to tell.

"Sawyer, I'll be ready to leave in about twenty minutes," I mutter, wrapping the duvet tighter around me for protection.

He nods, and all eyes turn to Christian, who is still staring intensely at me.

"Would you like some breakfast, Mrs. Grey?" Mrs. Jones asks. I shake my head.

"I'm not hungry, thank you." She purses her lips but says nothing.

"Where were you?" Christian asks, his voice low and husky. Suddenly Sawyer, Taylor, Ryan, and Mrs. Jones scatter, scurrying into Taylor's office, into the foyer, and into the kitchen like terrified rats from a sinking ship.

I ignore Christian and march toward our bedroom.

"Ana," he calls after me, "answer me." I hear his footsteps behind me as I walk into the bedroom and continue into our bathroom. Quickly, I lock the door.

"Ana!" Christian pounds on the door. I turn on the shower. The door rattles. "Ana, open the damned door."

"Go away!"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Suit yourself."

"Ana, please."

I climb into the shower, effectively blocking him out. Oh, it's warm. The healing water cascades over me, cleansing the exhaustion of the night off my skin. *Oh my*. This feels so good. For a moment, for one short moment, I can pretend all is well. I wash my hair and by the time I've finished, I feel better, stronger, ready to face the freight train that is Christian Grey. I wrap my hair in a towel, briskly dry myself with another towel, and wrap it around me.

I unlock the door and open it to find Christian leaning against the wall opposite, his hands behind his back. His expression is wary, that of a hunted predator. I stride past him and into our walk-in closet.

"Are you ignoring me?" Christian asks in disbelief as he stands on the threshold of the closet.

"Perceptive, aren't you?" I murmur absentmindedly as I search for something to wear. Ah, yes—my plum dress. I slide it off the hanger, choose my high black stiletto boots, and head for the bedroom. I pause for Christian to step out of my way, which he does, eventually—his intrinsic good manners taking over. I sense his eyes boring into me as I walk over to my chest of drawers, and I peek at him in the mirror, standing motionless in the doorway, watching me. In an act worthy of an Oscar winner, I let my towel fall to the floor and pretend that I am oblivious to my naked body. I hear his restrained gasp and ignore it.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks. His voice is low.

“Why do you think?” My voice is velvet soft as I pull out a pretty pair of black lace La Perla panties.

“Ana—” He stops as I shimmy into them.

“Go ask your Mrs. Robinson. I’m sure she’ll have an explanation for you,” I mutter as I search for the matching bra.

“Ana, I’ve told you before, she’s not my—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Christian.” I wave my hand dismissively. “The time for talking was yesterday, but instead you decided to rant and get drunk with the woman who abused you for years. Give her a call. I am sure she’ll be more than willing to listen to you now.” I find the matching bra and slowly pull it on and fasten it. Christian walks farther into the bedroom and places his hands on his hips.

“Why were you snooping on me?” he says.

In spite of my resolve I flush. “That’s not the point, Christian,” I snap at him. “Fact is, the going gets tough and you run to her.”

His mouth settles into a grim line. “It wasn’t like that.”

“I’m not interested.” Picking a pair of black thigh-highs with lacey tops, I retreat to the bed. I sit, point my toe, and gently ease the gossamer material up to my thigh.

“Where were you?” he asks, his eyes following my hands up my legs, but I continue to ignore him as I slowly roll on the other stocking. Standing, I bend to towel-dry my hair. Through my parted thighs, I can see his bare feet, and I sense his intense gaze. When I’ve finished, I stand and step back to the chest of drawers, where I grab my hairdryer.

“Answer me.” Christian’s voice is low and husky.

I switch on the hairdryer so I can no longer hear him and watch him through my lashes in the mirror as I finger dry my hair. He glares at me, eyes narrow and cool, chilling even. I look away, focusing on the task at hand and trying to suppress the shiver that runs through me. I swallow hard and concentrate on drying my hair. He’s still mad. He goes out with that damned woman, and he’s mad at *me? How dare he!* When my hair looks wild and untamed, I stop. Yes … I like it. I switch off the hairdryer.

“Where were you?” he whispers, his tone arctic.

“What do you care?”

“Ana, stop this. Now.”

I shrug, and Christian moves quickly across the room toward me. I whirl around, stepping back as he reaches out.

“Don’t touch me,” I snap and he freezes.

“Where were you?” he demands. His hands fist at his side.

“I wasn’t out getting drunk with my ex,” I seethe. “Did you sleep with her?”

He gasps. “*What?* No!” He gapes at me and has the gall to look wounded and angry at the same time. My subconscious breathes a small, welcome sigh of relief.

“You think I’d cheat on you?” His tone is one of moral outrage.

“You did,” I snarl. “By taking our very private life and spilling your spineless guts to that woman.”

His mouth drops open. “Spineless. That’s what you think?” His eyes blaze.

“Christian, I saw the text. That’s what I know.”

“That text was not meant for you,” he growls.

“Well, fact is I saw it when your BlackBerry fell out of your jacket while I was undressing you because you were too drunk to undress yourself. Do you have any idea how much you’ve hurt me by going to see that woman?”

He pales momentarily, but I’m on a roll, my inner bitch unleashed.

“Do you remember last night when you came home? Remember what you said?”

He stares at me blankly, his face frozen.

“Well, you were right. I do choose this defenseless baby over you. That’s what any loving parent does. That’s what your mother should have done for you. And I am sorry that she didn’t—because we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now if she had. But you’re an adult now—you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent.

“You may not be happy about this baby. I’m not ecstatic, given the timing and your less-than-lukewarm reception to this new life, this flesh of your flesh. But you can either do this with me, or I’ll do it on my own. The decision is yours.

“While you wallow in your pit of self-pity and self-loathing, I’m going to work. And when I return I’ll be moving my belongings to the room upstairs.”

He blinks at me, shocked.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to finish getting dressed.” I am breathing hard.

Very slowly, Christian retreats one step, his demeanor hardening. “Is that what you want?” he whispers.

“I don’t know what I want anymore.” My tone mirrors his, and it takes a monumental effort to feign disinterest while I casually dip the tips of my fingers into my moisturizer and smooth it gently over my face. I peer at myself in the mirror. Blue eyes wide, face pale, but cheeks flushed. *You’re doing great. Don’t back down now. Don’t back down now*.

“You don’t want me?” he whispers.

*Oh—no … oh no you don't, Grey.*

"I'm still here aren't I?" I snap. Taking my mascara, I apply some first to my right eye.

"You've thought about leaving?" His words are barely audible.

"When one's husband prefers the company of his ex-mistress, it's usually not a good sign." I pitch the disdain at just the right level, evading his question. Lip gloss now. I pout my shiny lips at the image in the mirror. *Stay strong, Steele … um—Grey.* Holy fuck, I can't even remember my name. I pick up my boots, stride over to the bed once more, and quickly put them on, tugging them up over my knees. Yep. I look hot just in underwear and boots. I know. Standing, I gaze dispassionately at him. He blinks at me, and his eyes travel swiftly and greedily down my body.

"I know what you're doing here," he murmurs, and his voice has acquired a warm, seductive edge.

"Do you?" And my voice cracks. *No, Ana … hold on.*

He swallows and takes a step forward. I step back and hold my hands up.

"Don't even think about it, Grey," I whisper menacingly.

"You're my wife," he says softly, threateningly.

"I'm the pregnant woman you abandoned yesterday, and if you touch me I will scream the place down."

His eyebrows rise in disbelief. "You'd scream?"

"Bloody murder." I narrow my eyes.

"No one would hear you," he murmurs, his gaze intense, and briefly I'm reminded of our morning in Aspen. *No. No. No.*

"Are you trying to frighten me?" I mutter, breathless, deliberately trying to derail him.

It works. He stills and swallows. "That wasn't my intention." He frowns.

I can barely breathe. If he touches me, I will succumb. I know the power he wields over me and over my traitorous body. I know. I hang on to my anger.

"I had a drink with someone I used to be close to. We cleared the air. I am not going to see her again."

"You sought her out?"

"Not at first. I tried to see Flynn. But I found myself at the salon."

"And you expect me to believe you're not going to see her again?" I cannot contain my fury as I hiss at him. "What about the next time I step across some imaginary line? This is the same argument we have over and over again. Like we're on some Ixion's wheel. If I fuck up again, are you going to run back to her?"

"I am not going to see her again," he says with a chilling finality. "She finally

understands how I feel."

I blink at him. "What does that mean?"

He straightens and runs a hand through his hair, exasperated and angry and mute. I try a different tack.

"Why can you talk to her and not to me?"

"I was mad at you. Like I am now."

"You don't say!" I snap. "Well *I* am mad at you right now. Mad at you for being so cold and callous yesterday when I needed you. Mad at you for saying I got knocked up deliberately, when I didn't. Mad at you for betraying me." I manage to suppress a sob. His mouth drops open in shock, and he closes his eyes briefly as if I'd slapped him. I swallow. *Calm down, Anastasia*.

"I should have kept better track of my shots. But I didn't do it on purpose. This pregnancy is a shock to me, too." I mutter, trying for a modicum of civility. "It could be that the shot failed."

He glares at me, silent.

"You really fucked up yesterday," I whisper, my anger boiling over. "I've had a lot to deal with over the last few weeks."

"You really fucked up three or four weeks ago. Or whenever you forgot your shot."

"Well, God forbid I should be perfect like you!"

*Oh stop, stop, stop*. We stand glowering at each other.

"This is quite a performance, Mrs. Grey," he whispers.

"Well, I'm glad that even knocked up I'm entertaining."

He stares at me blankly. "I need a shower," he murmurs.

"And I've provided enough of a floor show."

"It's a mighty fine floor show," he whispers. He steps forward, and I step back again.

"Don't."

"I hate that you won't let me touch you."

"Ironic, huh?"

His eyes narrow once more. "We haven't resolved much, have we?"

"I'd say not. Except that I'm moving out of this bedroom."

His eyes flare and widen briefly. "She doesn't mean anything to me."

"Except when you need her."

"I don't need her. I need you."

"You didn't yesterday. That woman is a hard limit for me, Christian."

"She's out of my life."

"I wish I could believe you."

"For fuck's sake, Ana."

“Please let me get dressed.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair once more. “I’ll see you this evening,” he says, his voice bleak and devoid of feeling. And for a brief moment I want to take him in my arms and soothe him … but I resist because I’m just too mad. He turns and heads for the bathroom. I stand frozen until I hear the door close.

I stagger to the bed and flop down on it. I did not resort to tears, shouting, or murder, nor did I succumb to his sexpertise. I deserve a Congressional Medal of Honor, but I feel so low. Shit. We resolved nothing. We’re on the edge of a precipice. Is our marriage at stake here? Why can’t he see what a complete and utter ass he’s been by running to that woman? And what does he mean when he says he’ll never see her again? How on Earth am I supposed to believe that? I glance at the radio alarm—eight thirty. *Shit!* I don’t want to be late. I take a deep breath.

“Round Two was a stalemate, Little Blip,” I whisper, patting my belly. “Daddy may be a lost cause, but I hope not. Why, oh why, did you come so early, Little Blip? Things were just getting good.” My lip trembles, but I take a deep cleansing breath and bring my rolling emotions under control.

“Come on. Let’s go kick ass at work.”

I DON’T SAY GOOD-BYE to Christian. He’s still in the shower when Sawyer and I leave. As I gaze out the darkened windows of the SUV, my composure slips and my eyes water. My mood is reflected in the gray, dreary sky, and I feel a strange sense of foreboding. We didn’t actually discuss the baby. I have had less than twenty-four hours to assimilate the news of Little Blip. Christian has had even less time. “He doesn’t even know your name.” I caress my belly and wipe tears from my face.

“Mrs. Grey.” Sawyer interrupts my reverie. “We’re here.”

“Oh. Thanks, Sawyer.”

“I’m going to make a run to the deli, ma’am. Can I get you anything?”

“No. Thank you, no. I’m not hungry.”

HANNAH HAS MY LATTE waiting for me. I take one sniff of it and my stomach roils.

“Um … can I have tea, please?” I mutter, embarrassed. I knew there was a reason I never really liked coffee. Jeez, it smells foul.

“You okay, Ana?”

I nod and scurry into the safety of my office. My BlackBerry buzzes. It’s Kate.

“Why was Christian looking for you?” she asks with no preamble at all.

“Good morning, Kate. How are you?”

“Cut the crap, Steele. What gives?” The Katherine Kavanagh Inquisition begins.

“Christian and I had a fight, that’s all.”

“Did he hurt you?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, but not the way you’re thinking.” I cannot deal with Kate at the moment. I know I will cry, and right now I am so proud of myself for not breaking down this morning. “Kate, I have a meeting. I’ll call you back.”

“Good. You’re all right?”

“Yes.” *No*. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay, Ana, have it your own way. I’m here for you.”

“I know,” I whisper and fight the backlash of emotion at her kind words. *I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry*.

“Ray okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper the word.

“Oh, Ana,” she whispers.

“Don’t.”

“Okay. Talk later.”

“Yes.”

DURING THE COURSE OF the morning, I sporadically check my e-mails, hoping for word from Christian. But there’s nothing. As the day wears on, I realize that he’s not going to contact me at all and that he’s still mad. Well, I’m still mad, too. I throw myself into my work, pausing only at lunchtime for a cream cheese and salmon bagel. It’s extraordinary how much better I feel once I’ve eaten something.

At five o’clock Sawyer and I set off for the hospital to see Ray. Sawyer is extra vigilant, and even oversolicitous. It’s irritating. As we approach Ray’s room, he hovers over me.

“Shall I get you some tea while you visit with your father?” he asks.

“No thanks, Sawyer. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll wait outside.” He opens the door for me, and I’m grateful to get away from him for a moment. Ray is sitting up in bed reading a magazine. He’s shaved, wearing a pajama top—he looks like his old self.

“Hey, Annie.” He grins. And his face falls.

“Oh, Daddy …” I rush to his side, and in a very uncharacteristic move, he opens his arms wide and hugs me.

“Annie?” he whispers. “What is it?” He holds me tight and kisses my hair. As I’m in his arms, I realize how rare these moments between us have been. *Why is that?* Is that why I like to crawl into Christian’s lap? After a moment, I pull away from him and sit down in the chair beside the bed. Ray’s brow is furrowed with concern.

“Tell your old man.”

I shake my head. He doesn’t need my problems right now.

“It’s nothing, Dad. You look well.” I clasp his hand.

“Feeling more like myself, though this leg in a cast is bitchin’.”

“Bitchin’?” His word prompts my smile.

He smiles back. “Bitchin’ sounds better than itchin’.”

“Oh, Dad, I am so glad you’re okay.”

“Me, too, Annie. I’d like to bounce some grandchildren on this bitchin’ knee one day. Wouldn’t want to miss that for the world.”

I blink at him. *Shit*. Does he know? And I fight the tears that prick the corners of my eyes.

“You and Christian getting along?”

“We had a fight,” I whisper, trying to speak past the knot in my throat. “We’ll work it out.”

He nods. “He’s a fine man, your husband,” Ray says reassuringly.

“He has his moments. What did the doctors say?” I don’t want to talk about my husband right now; he’s a painful topic of conversation.

BACK AT ESCALA, CHRISTIAN is not home.

“Christian called and said that he’d be working late,” Mrs. Jones informs me apologetically.

“Oh. Thanks for letting me know.” Why couldn’t he tell me? Jeez, he really is taking his sulk to a whole new level. I am briefly reminded of the fight over our wedding vows and the major tantrum he had then. But I’m the aggrieved one here.

“What would you like to eat?” Mrs. Jones has a determined, steely glint in her eye.

“Pasta.”

She smiles. “Spaghetti, penne, fusilli?”

“Spaghetti, your Bolognese.”

“Coming up. And Ana … you should know Mr. Grey was frantic this morning when he thought you’d left. He was beside himself.” She smiles fondly.

*Oh* …

HE'S STILL NOT HOME by nine. I am sitting at my desk in the library, wondering where he is. I call him.

"Ana," he says, his voice cool.

"Hi."

He inhales softly. "Hi," he says, his voice lower.

"Are you coming home?"

"Later."

"Are you in the office?"

"Yes. Where did you expect me to be?"

*With her*. "I'll let you go."

We both hang on the line, the silence stretching and tightening between us.

"Good night, Ana," he says eventually.

"Good night, Christian."

He hangs up.

*Oh shit*. I gaze at my BlackBerry. I don't know what he expects me to do. I'm not going to let him walk all over me. Yes, he's mad, fair enough. I'm mad. But we are where we are. I haven't run off loose-lipped to my ex-pedo lover. I want him to acknowledge that that is not an acceptable way to behave.

I sit back in my chair, gazing at the billiards table in the library, and recall fun times playing snooker. I place my hand on my belly. Maybe it's just too early. Maybe this is not meant to be … And even as I think that, my subconscious is screaming *no!* If I terminate this pregnancy, I will never forgive myself—or Christian. "Oh, Blip, what have you done to us?" I can't face talking to Kate. I can't face talking to anyone. I text her, promising to call soon.

By eleven, I can no longer keep my eyelids open. Resigned, I head up to my old room. Curling up beneath the duvet, I finally let myself go, sobbing into my pillow, great heaving unladylike sobs of grief …

MY HEAD IS HEAVY when I wake. Crisp fall light shines through the great windows of my room. Glancing at my alarm I see it's seven thirty. My immediate thought is *Where's Christian?* I sit up and swing my legs out of bed. On the floor beside the bed is Christian's silver-gray tie, my favorite. It wasn't there when I went to bed last night. I pick it up and stare at it, caressing the silky material between my thumbs and forefingers, then hug it against my cheek. He was here, watching me sleep. And a glimmer of hope sparks deep inside me.

MRS. JONES IS BUSY in the kitchen when I arrive downstairs.

“Good morning,” she says brightly.

“Morning. Christian?” I ask.

Her face falls. “He’s already left.”

“So he did come home?” I need to check, even though I have his tie as evidence.

“He did,” she pauses. “Ana, please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but don’t give up on him. He’s a stubborn man.”

I nod and she stops. I’m sure my expression tells her I do not want to discuss my errant husband right now.

WHEN I ARRIVE AT work, I check my e-mails. My heart leaps into overdrive when I see there’s one from Christian.

---

**From:** Christian Grey

**Subject:** Portland

**Date:** September 15 2011 06:45

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Ana,

I am flying down to Portland today.

I have some business to conclude with WSU.

I thought you would want to know.

Christian Grey

CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

Oh. Tears prick my eyes. That’s it? My stomach flips. Shit! I am going to be sick. I race to the powder room and make it just in time, depositing my breakfast into the toilet. I sink to the floor of the cubicle and put my head in my hands. Could I be any more miserable? After a while, there’s a gentle knock on the door.

“Ana?” It’s Hannah.

*Fuck*. “Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ll be out in a moment.”

“Boyce Fox is here to see you.”

*Shit*. “Show him into the meeting room. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Do you want some tea?”

“Please.”

AFTER MY LUNCH—ANOTHER CREAM cheese and salmon bagel, which I manage to keep down—I sit staring listlessly at my computer, looking for inspiration and wondering how Christian and I are going to resolve this huge problem.

My BlackBerry buzzes, making me jump. I glance at the screen—it’s Mia. Jeez, that’s all I need, her gushing and enthusiasm. I hesitate, wondering if I could just ignore it, but courtesy wins out.

“Mia,” I answer brightly.

“Well, hello there, Ana—long time no speak.” The male voice is familiar. *Fuck!*

My scalp prickles and all the hair on my body stands to attention as adrenaline floods through my system and my world stops spinning.

It’s Jack Hyde.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jack.” My voice has disappeared, choked by fear. How is he out of jail? Why does he have Mia’s phone? The blood drains from my face, and I feel dizzy.

“You do remember me,” he says, his tone soft. I sense his bitter smile.

“Yes. Of course.” My answer is automatic as my mind races.

“You’re probably wondering why I called you.”

“Yes.”

*Hang up*.

“Don’t hang up. I’ve been having a chat with your little sister-in-law.”

*What? Mia! No!* “What have you done?” I whisper, trying to quell my fear.

“Listen here, you prick-teasing, gold-digging whore. You fucked up my life. Grey fucked up my life. You *owe* me. I have the little bitch with me now. And you, that cocksucker you married, and his whole fucking family are going to pay.”

Hyde’s contempt and bile shock me. *His family?* What the hell?

“What do you want?”

“I want his money. I really want his fucking money. If things had been different, it could have been me. So *you’re* going to get it for me. I want five million dollars, today.”

“Jack, I don’t have access to that kind of money.”

He snorts his derision. “You have two hours to get it. That’s it—two hours. Tell no one or this little bitch gets it. Not the cops. Not your prick of a husband. Not his security team. I will know if you do. Understand?” He pauses and I try to respond, but panic and fear seal my throat.

“You understand!” he shouts.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Or I will kill her.”

I gasp.

“Keep your phone with you. Tell no one or I’ll fuck her up before I kill her. You have two hours.”

“Jack, I need longer. Three hours. How do I know that you have her?”

The line goes dead. I gape in horror at the phone, my mouth parched with fear,

leaving the nasty metallic taste of terror. *Mia, he has Mia*. Or does he? My mind whirs at the obscene possibility, and my stomach roils again. I think I'm going to be sick, but I inhale deeply, trying to steady my panic, and the nausea passes. My mind rockets through the possibilities. *Tell Christian? Tell Taylor? Call the police? How will Jack know? Does he actually have Mia?* I need time, time to think—but I can accomplish that only by following his instructions. I grab my purse and head for the door.

"Hannah, I have to go out. I am not sure how long I'll be. Cancel my appointments this afternoon. Let Elizabeth know I have to deal with an emergency."

"Sure, Ana. Everything okay?" Hannah frowns, concern etched on her face as she watches me flee.

"Yes," I call back distractedly, hurrying toward Reception, where Sawyer is waiting.

"Sawyer." He leaps up from the armchair at the sound of my voice and frowns when he sees my face.

"I'm not feeling well. Please take me home."

"Sure, ma'am. Do you want to wait here while I get the car?"

"No, I'll come with you. I'm in a hurry to get home."

I GAZE OUT THE window in stark terror as I go over my plan. Get home. Change. Find checkbook. Escape from Ryan and Sawyer somehow. Go to bank. Hell, how much room does five million dollars take up? What will it weigh? Will I need a suitcase? Should I telephone the bank in advance? Mia. *Mia*. What if he doesn't have Mia? How can I check? If I call Grace it will raise her suspicions, and possibly endanger Mia. He said he would know. I glance out the back window of the SUV. Am I being followed? My heart races as I examine the cars following us. They look innocuous enough. *Oh*, *Sawyer*, *drive faster*. *Please*. My eyes flicker to meet his in the rearview mirror and his brow creases.

Sawyer presses a button on his Bluetooth headset to answer a call. "T … I wanted to let you know Mrs. Grey is with me." Sawyer's eyes meet mine once more before he looks back at the road and continues. "She's unwell. I'm taking her back to Escala … I see … sir." Sawyer's eyes flick from the road to mine in the rearview mirror again. "Yes," he agrees and hangs up.

"Taylor?" I whisper.

He nods.

"He's with Mr. Grey?"

"Yes, ma'am." Sawyer's look softens in sympathy.

“Are they still in Portland?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Good. I have to keep Christian safe. My hand strays down to my belly, and I rub it consciously. And you, Little Blip. Keep you both safe.

“Can we hurry please? I’m not feeling well.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sawyer presses the accelerator and our car glides through the traffic.

MRS. JONES IS NOWHERE to be seen when Sawyer and I arrive at the apartment. Since her car is missing from the garage, I assume she’s running errands with Ryan. Sawyer heads for Taylor’s office while I bolt to Christian’s study. Stumbling in panic around his desk, I wrench open the drawer to find the checkbooks. Leila’s gun slides forward into view. I feel an incongruous twinge of annoyance that Christian has not secured this weapon. He knows nothing about guns. *Jeez, he could get hurt.*

After a moment’s hesitation, I grab the pistol, check to ensure it’s loaded, and tuck it into the waistband of my black slacks. I may need it. I swallow hard. I’ve only ever practiced on targets. I’ve never fired a gun at anyone; I hope Ray will forgive me. I turn my attention to tracking down the right checkbook. There are five, and only one is in the names of C. Grey and Mrs. A. Grey. I have about fifty-four thousand dollars in my own account. I have no idea how much money is in this one. But Christian must be good for five million dollars, surely. Perhaps there’s money in the safe? Crap. I have no idea of the number. Didn’t he mention the combination was in his filing cabinet? I try the cabinet, but it’s locked. *Shit*. I’ll have to stick to plan A.

I take a deep breath and, in a more composed but determined manner, stride to our bedroom. The bed has been made, and for a moment, I feel a pang. Perhaps I should have slept here last night. What is the point of arguing with someone who, by his own admission, is Fifty Shades? He’s not even talking to me now. No—I do not have time to think about this.

Quickly, I change out of my slacks, pulling on jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and a pair of sneakers, and put the gun in the waistband of my jeans, at my back. From the closet I fish out a large soft duffel bag. Will five million dollars fit into this? Christian’s gym bag is lying there on the floor. I open it, expecting to find it full of dirty laundry, but no—his gym kit is clean and fresh. Mrs. Jones does indeed get everywhere. I dump the contents onto the floor and stuff his gym bag into my duffel. There, that should do it. I check that I have my driver’s license as identification for the bank and check the time. It’s been thirty-one minutes since

Jack called. Now I just have to get out of Escala without Sawyer seeing me.

I make my way slowly and quietly to the foyer, aware of the CCTV camera, which is trained on the elevator. I think Sawyer's still in Taylor's office. Cautiously, I open the foyer door, making as little noise as possible. Shutting it quietly behind me, I stand on the very threshold, up against the door, out of the view of the CCTV lens. I fish my cell phone out of my purse and call Sawyer.

"Mrs. Grey."

"Sawyer, I'm in the room upstairs, will you give me a hand with something?" I keep my voice low, knowing he's just down the hallway on the other side of this door.

"I'll be right with you, ma'am," he says, and I hear his confusion. I've never telephoned him for help before. My heart is in my throat, pounding in a jarring, frenetic rhythm. Will this work? I hang up and listen as his footsteps cross the hallway and go up the stairs. I take another deep, steadying breath and briefly contemplate the irony of escaping from my own home like a felon.

Once Sawyer's reached the upstairs landing, I race to the elevator and punch the call button. The doors slide open with the too-loud ping that announces the elevator is ready. I dash inside and frantically stab the button for the basement garage. After an agonizing pause, the doors slowly start to slide shut, and as they do I hear Sawyer's cries.

"Mrs. Grey!" Just as the elevator doors close, I see him skid into the foyer. "Ana!" he shouts in disbelief. But he's too late, and he disappears from view.

The elevator sinks smoothly down to the garage level. I have a couple of minutes' start on Sawyer, and I know he'll try to stop me. I glance longingly at my R8 as I rush to the Saab, open the door, toss the duffel bag onto the passenger seat, and slide into the driver's seat.

I start the car, and the tires squeal as I race to the entrance and wait eleven agonizing seconds for the barrier to lift. The instant it's clear I drive out, catching sight of Sawyer in my rearview mirror as he dashes out of the service elevator into the garage. His bewildered, injured expression haunts me as I turn off the ramp onto Fourth Avenue.

I let out my long-held breath. I know Sawyer will call Christian or Taylor, but I'll deal with that when I have to—I don't have time to dwell on it now. I squirm uncomfortably in my seat, knowing in my heart of hearts that Sawyer's probably lost his job. *Don't dwell*. I have to save Mia. I have to get to the bank and collect five million dollars. I glance in the rearview mirror, nervously anticipating the sight of the SUV bursting forth from the garage, but as I drive away, there's no sign of Sawyer.

THE BANK IS SLEEK, modern, and understated. There are hushed tones, echoing floors, and pale green etched glass everywhere. I stride to the information desk.

"May I help you, ma'am?" The young woman gives me a bright, insincere smile, and for a moment I regret changing into jeans.

"I'd like to withdraw a large sum of money."

Ms. Insincere Smile arches an even more insincere eyebrow.

"You have an account with us?" She fails to hide her sarcasm.

"Yes," I snap. "My husband and I have several accounts here. His name is Christian Grey."

Her eyes widen fractionally and insincerity gives way to shock. Her eyes sweep up and down me once more, this time with a combination of disbelief and awe.

"This way, ma'am," she whispers, and leads me to a small, sparsely furnished office walled with more green-etched glass.

"Please take a seat." She gestures to a black leather chair by a glass desk bearing a state-of-the-art computer and phone. "How much will you be withdrawing today, Mrs. Grey?" she asks pleasantly.

"Five million dollars." I look her straight in the eye as if I ask for this amount of cash every day.

She blanches. "I see. I'll fetch the manager. Oh, forgive me for asking, but do you have ID?"

"I do. But I'd like to speak to the manager."

"Of course, Mrs. Grey." She scurries out. I sink into the seat, and a wave of nausea washes over me as the gun presses uncomfortably into the small of my back. *Not now. I can't be sick now*. I take a deep cleansing breath, and the wave passes. Nervously, I check my watch. Twenty-five past two.

A middle-aged man enters the room. He has a receding hairline, but wears a sharp, expensive charcoal suit and matching tie. He holds out his hand.

"Mrs. Grey. I'm Troy Whelan." He smiles, we shake, and he sits down at the desk opposite me.

"My colleague tells me you'd like to withdraw a large amount of money."

"That's correct. Five million dollars."

He turns to his sleek computer and taps in a few numbers.

"We normally ask for some notice for large amounts of money." He pauses and flashes me a reassuring but supercilious smile. "Fortunately, however, we hold the cash reserve for the entire Pacific Northwest," he boasts. *Jeez, is he trying to impress me?*

"Mr. Whelan, I'm in a hurry. What do I need to do? I have my driver's license, and our joint account checkbook. Do I just write a check?"

“First things first, Mrs. Grey. May I see the ID?” He switches from jovial show-off to serious banker.

“Here.” I hand over my license.

“Mrs. Grey … this says Anastasia Steele.”

*Oh shit.*

“Oh … yes. Um.”

“I’ll call Mr. Grey.”

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary.” *Shit!* “I must have something with my married name.” I rifle through my purse. What do I have with my name on it? I pull out my wallet, open it, and find a photograph of Christian and me, on the bed in *Fair Lady*’s cabin. *I can’t show him that!* I dig out my black Amex.

“Here.”

“Mrs. Anastasia Grey,” Whelan reads. “Yes, that should do.” He frowns. “This is highly irregular, Mrs. Grey.”

“Do you want me to let my husband know that your bank has been less than cooperative?” I square my shoulders and give him my most forbidding stare.

He pauses, momentarily reassessing me, I think. “You’ll need to write a check, Mrs. Grey.”

“Sure. This account?” I show him my checkbook, trying to quell my pounding heart.

“That’ll be fine. I’ll also need you to complete some additional paperwork. If you’ll excuse me for a moment?”

I nod, and he rises and stalks out of the office. Again, I release my held breath. I had no idea this would be so difficult. Clumsily, I open my checkbook and pull a pen out of my purse. Do I just make it out to cash? I have no idea. With shaking fingers I write: *Five million dollars. $5,000,000.*

*Oh God, I hope I’m doing the right thing. Mia, think of Mia. I can’t tell anyone.*

Jack’s chilling, repugnant words haunt me. *“Tell no one or I’ll fuck her up before I kill her.”*

Mr. Whelan returns, pale-faced and sheepish.

“Mrs. Grey? Your husband wants to speak with you,” he murmurs and points to the phone on the glass table between us.

*What? No.*

“He’s on line one. Just press the button. I’ll be outside.” He has the grace to look embarrassed. Benedict Arnold has nothing on Whelan. I scowl at him, feeling the blood drain from my face again as he shuffles out of the office.

Shit! Shit! *Shit!* What am I going to say to Christian? He’ll know. He’ll intervene. He’s a danger to his sister. My hand trembles as I reach for the phone.

I hold it against my ear, trying to calm my erratic breathing, and press the button for line one.

"Hi," I murmur, trying in vain to steady my nerves.

"You're leaving me?" Christian's words are an agonized, breathless whisper.

*What?*

"No!" My voice mirrors his. *Oh no. Oh no. Oh no—how can he think that?* The money? He thinks I'm going because of *the money*? And in a moment of horrific clarity, I realize the only way I'm going to keep Christian at arm's length, out of harm's way, and to save his sister … is to lie.

"Yes," I whisper. And searing pain lances through me, tears springing to my eyes.

He gasps, almost a sob. "Ana, I—" He chokes.

*No!* My hand clutches my mouth as I stifle my warring emotions. "Christian, please. Don't." I fight back tears.

"You're going?" he says.

"Yes."

"But why the cash? Was it always the money?" His tortured voice is barely audible.

*No!* Tears roll down my face. "No," I whisper.

"Is five million enough?"

*Oh please, stop!*

"Yes."

"And the baby?" His voice is a breathless echo.

*What?* My hand moves from my mouth to my belly. "I'll take care of the baby," I murmur. *My Little Blip … our Little Blip.*

"This is what you want?"

*No!*

"Yes."

He inhales sharply. "Take it all," he hisses.

"Christian," I sob. "It's for you. For your family. Please. Don't."

"Take it all, Anastasia."

"Christian—" And I nearly cave. Nearly tell him—about Jack, about Mia, about the ransom. *Just trust me, please!* I silently beg him.

"I'll always love you." His voice is hoarse. He hangs up.

"Christian! No … I love you, too." And all the stupid shit that we put each other through over the last few days fades into insignificance. I promised I'd never leave him. I am not leaving you. I am saving your sister. I slump into the chair, weeping copiously into my hands.

I am interrupted by a timid knock on the door. Whelan enters, though I

haven’t acknowledged him. He looks everywhere but at me. He’s mortified.

*You called him, you bastard!* I glare at him.

“Your husband has agreed to liquidate five million dollars worth of his assets, Mrs. Grey. This is highly irregular but as our main client … he was insistent … very insistent.” He pauses and flushes. Then frowns at me and I don’t know if it’s because Christian is being highly irregular or that Whelan doesn’t know how to deal with a weeping woman in his office.

“Are you all right?” He asks.

“Do I look all right?” I snap.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Some water?”

I nod, sullenly. I have just left my husband. Well, Christian thinks I have. My subconscious purses her lips. *Because you told him so*.

“I’ll have my colleague bring you some while I prepare the money. If you could just sign here, ma’am … and make the check out to cash and sign that, too.”

He places a form on the table. I scrawl my signature along the dotted line of the check, then the form. *Anastasia Grey*. Teardrops fall on the desk, narrowly missing the paperwork.

“I’ll take those, ma’am. It will take us about half an hour to prepare the money.”

I quickly check my watch. Jack said two hours—that should take us to two hours. I nod to Whelan, and he tiptoes out of the office, leaving me to my misery.

A few moments, minutes, hours later—I don’t know—Miss Insincere Smile reenters with a carafe of water and a glass.

“Mrs. Grey,” she says softly as she places the glass on the desk and fills it.

“Thank you.” I take the glass and drink gratefully. She exits, leaving me with my jumbled, frightened thoughts. I will fix things with Christian somehow … if it’s not too late. At least he’s out of the picture. Right now I have to concentrate on Mia. Suppose Jack is lying? Suppose he doesn’t have her? Surely I should call the police.

*“Tell no one or I’ll fuck her up before I kill her.”* I can’t. I sit back in the chair, feeling the reassuring presence of Leila’s pistol at my waist, digging into my back. Who would have thought I’d ever feel grateful that Leila once pulled a gun on me? Oh, Ray, I’m so glad you taught me how to shoot.

*Ray!* I gasp. He’ll be expecting me to visit this evening. Perhaps I can simply dump the money with Jack. He can run while I take Mia home. *Oh, this sounds absurd!*

My BlackBerry jumps to life, “Your Love Is King” filling the room. *Oh no!*

What does Christian want? To twist the knife in my wounds?

*"Was it always the money?"*

Oh, Christian—how could you think that? Anger flares in my gut. Yes, anger. It helps. I send the call to voice mail. I'll deal with my husband later.

There's a knock on the door.

"Mrs. Grey." It's Whelan. "The money is ready."

"Thank you." I stand up and the room spins momentarily. I clutch the chair.

"Mrs. Grey, are you feeling okay?"

I nod and give him a back-off-now-mister stare. I take another deep, calming breath. *I have to do this. I have to do this. I must save Mia*. I pull the hem of my hooded sweatshirt down, concealing the butt of the pistol in the back of my jeans.

Mr. Whelan frowns but holds open the door, and I propel myself forward on my shaking limbs.

Sawyer is waiting at the entrance, scanning the public area. *Shit!* Our eyes meet, and he frowns at me, gauging my reaction. Oh, he's mad. I hold up my index finger in a with-you-in-a-minute gesture. He nods and answers a call on his cell phone. *Shit! I bet that's Christian*. I turn abruptly, almost colliding with Whelan right behind me, and bolt back into the little office.

"Mrs. Grey?" Whelan sounds confused as he follows me back in.

Sawyer could blow this whole plan. I gaze up at Whelan.

"There's someone out there I don't want to see. Someone following me."

Whelan's eyes widen.

"Do you want me to call the police?"

"No!" Holy fuck, no. What am I going to do? I glance at my watch. It's nearly three fifteen. Jack will call at any moment. *Think, Ana, think!* Whelan gazes at me in growing desperation and bewilderment. He must think I'm crazy. *You are crazy*, my subconscious snaps.

"I need to make a call. Could you give me some privacy, please?"

"Certainly," Whelan answers—grateful, I think, to leave the room. When he's closed the door, I call Mia's cell phone with trembling fingers.

"Well, if it isn't my paycheck," Jack answers scornfully.

I don't have time for his bullshit. "I have a problem."

"I know. Your security followed you to the bank."

*What?* How the hell does he know?

"You'll have to lose him. I have a car waiting at the back of the bank. Black SUV, a Dodge. You have three minutes to get there." *The Dodge!*

"It may take longer than three minutes." My heart leaps into my throat once more.

“You’re bright for a gold-digging whore, Grey. You figure it out. And dump your cell phone once you reach the vehicle. Got it, bitch?”

“Yes.”

“Say it!” he snaps.

“I’ve got it.”

He hangs up.

*Shit!* I open the door to find Whelan waiting patiently outside.

“Mr. Whelan, I’ll need some help taking the bags to my car. It’s parked outside, at the back of the bank. Do you have an exit at the rear?”

He frowns.

“We do, yes. For staff.”

“Can we leave that way? I can avoid the unwelcome attention at the door.”

“As you wish, Mrs. Grey. I’ll have two clerks help with the bags and two security guards to supervise. If you could follow me?”

“I have one more favor to ask you.”

“By all means, Mrs. Grey.”

TWO MINUTES LATER MY entourage and I are out on the street, heading over to the Dodge. Its windows are blacked out, and I can’t tell who’s at the wheel. But as we approach, the driver’s door swings open, and a woman clad in black with a black cap pulled low over her face climbs gracefully out of the car. *Elizabeth from the office! What the hell*. She moves to the rear of the SUV and opens the trunk. The two young bank clerks carrying the money sling the heavy bags into the back.

“Mrs. Grey.” She has the nerve to smile as if we are off on a friendly jaunt.

“Elizabeth.” My greeting is arctic. “Nice to see you outside work.”

Mr. Whelan clears this throat.

“Well, it’s been an interesting afternoon, Mrs. Grey,” he says. And I am forced to observe the social niceties of shaking his hand and thanking him while my mind reels. *Elizabeth?* Why is she mixed up with Jack? Whelan and his team disappear back into the bank, leaving me alone with the head of personnel at SIP, who’s involved in kidnapping, extortion, and very possibly other felonies. Why?

Elizabeth opens the rear passenger door and ushers me in.

“Your phone, Mrs. Grey?” she asks, watching me warily. I hand it to her, and she tosses it into a nearby trash can.

“That will throw the dogs off the scent,” she says smugly.

Who *is* this woman? Elizabeth slams my door shut and climbs into the driver’s seat. I glance anxiously behind me as she pulls out into traffic, going

east. Sawyer is nowhere to be seen.

"Elizabeth, you have the money. Call Jack. Tell him to let Mia go."

"I think he wants to thank you in person."

*Shit!* I glare at her stonily in the rearview mirror.

She pales and an anxious scowl mars her otherwise lovely face.

"Why are you doing this, Elizabeth? I thought you didn't like Jack."

She glances at me again briefly in the mirror, and I see a fleeting look of pain in her eyes.

"Ana, we'll get along just fine if you keep your mouth shut."

"But you can't do this. This is so wrong."

"Quiet," she says, but I sense her unease.

"Does he have some kind of hold on you?" I ask. Her eyes shoot to mine and she slams on the brakes, throwing me forward so hard that I hit my face against the headrest of the front seat.

"I said be quiet," she snarls. "And I suggest you put on your seat belt."

And in that moment I know that he does. Something so awful that she's prepared to do this for him. I wonder briefly what that could be. Theft from the company? Something from her private life? Something sexual? I shudder at the thought. Christian said that none of Jack's PAs would talk. Perhaps it's the same story with all of them. *That's why he wanted to fuck me, too*. Bile rises in my throat with revulsion at the thought.

Elizabeth heads away from downtown Seattle and up into the hills to the east. Before long we're driving through residential streets. I catch sight of one of the street signs: SOUTH IRVING STREET. She takes a sharp left onto a deserted street with a dilapidated children's playground on one side and a large concrete parking lot flanked by a row of squat, empty brick buildings on the other. Elizabeth pulls into the parking lot and stops outside the last of the brick units.

She turns to me. "Showtime," she murmurs.

My scalp prickles as fear and adrenaline course through my body.

"You don't have to do this," I whisper back. Her mouth flattens into a grim line, and she climbs out of the car.

*This is for Mia. This is for Mia.* I quickly pray, *Please let her be okay, please let her be okay*.

"Get out," Elizabeth snaps, yanking the rear passenger door open.

Shit. As I clamber out, my legs are shaking so hard I wonder if I can stand. The cool late afternoon breeze carries the scent of the coming fall and the chalky, dusty smell of derelict buildings.

"Well, lookee here." Jack emerges from a small, boarded-up doorway on the left of the building. His hair is short. He's removed his earrings and he's wearing

a suit. *A suit?* He ambles toward me, oozing arrogance and hate. My heart rate spikes.

"Where's Mia?" I stammer, my mouth so dry I can hardly form the words.

"First things first, bitch," Jack sneers, coming to a halt in front of me. I can practically taste his contempt. "The money?"

Elizabeth is checking the bags in the trunk. "There's a hell of a lot of cash here," she says in awe, zipping and unzipping each bag.

"And her cell?"

"In the trash."

"Good," Jack snarls, and from nowhere he lashes out, backhanding me hard across the face. The ferocious, unprovoked blow knocks me to the ground, and my head bounces with a sickening thud off the concrete. Pain explodes in my head, my eyes fill with tears, and my vision blurs as the shock of the impact resonates, unleashing agony that pulses through my skull.

I scream a silent cry of suffering and shocked terror. Oh no—*Little Blip*. Jack follows through with a swift, vicious kick to my ribs, and my breath is blasted from my lungs by the force of the blow. Scrunching my eyes tightly, I try to fight the nausea and pain, to fight for a precious breath. *Little Blip, Little Blip, oh my Little Blip—*

"That's for SIP, you fucking bitch!" Jack screams.

I pull my legs up, huddling into a ball and anticipating the next blow. *No. No. No*.

"Jack!" Elizabeth screeches. "Not here. Not in broad daylight for fuck's sake!"

He pauses.

"The bitch deserves it!" he gloats to Elizabeth. And it gives me one precious second to reach around and pull the gun from the waistband of my jeans. Shakily, I aim at him, squeeze the trigger, and fire. The bullet hits him just above the knee, and he collapses in front of me, crying out in agony, clutching his thigh as his fingers redden with his blood.

*"Fuck!"* Jack bellows. I turn to face Elizabeth, and she's gaping at me in horror and raising her hands above her head. She blurs … darkness closes in. *Shit* … She's at the end of a tunnel. Darkness consuming her. Consuming me. From far away, all hell breaks loose. Cars screeching … brakes … doors … shouting … running … footsteps. The gun drops from my hand.

"Ana!" Christian's voice … Christian's voice … Christian's agonized voice. Mia … *save Mia*.

"ANA!"

Darkness … peace.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

There is only pain. My head, my chest … burning pain. My side, my arm. Pain. Pain and hushed words in the gloom. *Where am I?* Though I try, I cannot open my eyes. The whispered words become clearer … a beacon in the darkness.

"Her ribs are bruised, Mr. Grey, and she has a hairline fracture to her skull, but her vital signs are stable and strong."

"Why is she still unconscious?"

"Mrs. Grey has had a major contusion to her head. But her brain activity is normal, and she has no cerebral swelling. She'll wake when she's ready. Just give her some time."

"And the baby?" The words are anguished, breathless.

"The baby's fine, Mr. Grey."

"Oh, thank God." The words are a litany … a prayer. "Oh, thank God."

*Oh my*. He's worried about the baby … the baby? … *Little Blip*. Of course. My Little Blip. I try in vain to move my hand to my belly. Nothing moves, nothing responds.

*"And the baby? … Oh, thank God."*

Little Blip is safe.

*"And the baby? … Oh, thank God."*

He cares about the baby.

*"And the baby? … Oh, thank God."*

He wants the baby. Oh, thank God. I relax, and unconsciousness claims me once more, stealing me away from the pain.

EVERYTHING IS HEAVY AND aching: limbs, head, eyelids, nothing will move. My eyes and mouth are resolutely shut, unwilling to open, leaving me blind and mute and aching. As I surface from the fog, consciousness hovers, a seductive siren just out of reach. Sounds become voices.

"I'm not leaving her."

*Christian!* He's here … I will myself to wake—his voice is strained, an agonized whisper.

“Christian, you should sleep.”

“No, Dad. I want to be here when she wakes up.”

“I’ll sit with her. It’s the least I can do after she saved my daughter.”

*Mia!*

“How’s Mia?”

“She’s groggy … scared and angry. It’ll be a few hours before the Rohypnol is completely out of her system.”

“Christ.”

“I know. I’m feeling seven kinds of foolish for relenting on her security. You warned me, but Mia is so stubborn. If it wasn’t for Ana here …”

“We all thought Hyde was out of the picture. And my crazy, stupid wife—Why didn’t she tell me?” Christian’s voice is full of anguish.

“Christian, calm down. Ana’s a remarkable young woman. She was incredibly brave.”

“Brave and headstrong and stubborn and stupid.” His voice cracks.

“Hey,” Carrick murmurs, “don’t be so hard on her, or yourself, son … I’d better get back to your mom. It’s after three in the morning, Christian. You really should try to sleep.”

The fog closes in.

THE FOG LIFTS BUT I have no sense of time.

“If you don’t take her across your knee, I sure as hell will. What the hell was she thinking?”

“Trust me, Ray, I just might do that.”

*Dad! He’s here. I fight the fog … fight …* But I spiral down once more into oblivion. *No …*

---

“DETECTIVE, AS YOU CAN see, my wife is in no state to answer any of your questions.” Christian is angry.

“She’s a headstrong young woman, Mr. Grey.”

“I wish she’d killed the fucker.”

“That would have meant more paperwork for me, Mr. Grey …”

“Miss Morgan is singing like the proverbial canary. Hyde’s a real twisted son of a bitch. He has a serious grudge against your father and you …”

The fog surrounds me once more, and I’m dragged down … down. *No!*

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN you weren’t talking?” It’s Grace. She sounds angry. I try to move my head, but I’m met with a resounding, listless silence from my body. “What did you do?”

“Mom—”

“Christian! What did you do?”

“I was so angry.” It’s almost a sob … No.

“Hey …”

The world dips and blurs and I’m gone.

I HEAR SOFT GARBLED voices.

“You told me you’d cut all ties.” Grace is talking. Her voice is quiet, admonishing.

“I know.” Christian sounds resigned. “But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know … with the child. For the first time I felt … What we did … it was wrong.”

“What *she* did, darling … Children will do that to you. Make you look at the world in a different light.”

“She finally got the message … and so did I … I hurt Ana,” he whispers.

“We always hurt the ones we love, darling. You’ll have to tell her you’re sorry. And mean it and give her time.”

“She said she was leaving me.”

*No. No. No!*

“Did you believe her?”

“At first, yes.”

“Darling, you always believe the worst of everyone, including yourself. You always have. Ana loves you very much, and it’s obvious you love her.”

“She was mad at me.”

“I’m sure she was. I’m pretty mad at you right now. I think you can only be truly mad at someone you really love.”

“I thought about it, and she’s shown me over and over how much she loves me … to the point of putting her own life in danger.”

“Yes, she has, darling.”

“Oh, Mom, why won’t she wake up?” His voice cracks. “I nearly lost her.”

*Christian!* There are muffled sobs. No …

*Oh* … the darkness closes in. *No*—

“IT’S TAKEN TWENTY-FOUR YEARS for you to let me hold you like this …”

“I know, Mom … I’m glad we talked.”

“Me too, darling. I’m always here. I can’t believe I’m going to be a grandmother.”

*Grandma!*

*Sweet oblivion beckons*.

HMM. HIS STUBBLE SOFTLY scrapes the back of my hand as he squeezes my fingers.

“Oh, baby, please come back to me. I’m sorry. Sorry for everything. Just wake up. I miss you. I love you …”

*I try. I try. I want to see him*. But my body disobeys me, and I fall asleep once more.

I HAVE A PRESSING need to pee. I open my eyes. I’m in the clean, sterile environment of a hospital room. It’s dark except for a sidelight, and all is quiet. My head and my chest ache, but more than that, my bladder is bursting. I need to pee. I test my limbs. My right arm smarts, and I notice the IV attached to it on the inside of my elbow. I shut my eyes quickly. Turning my head—I’m pleased that it responds to my will—I open my eyes again. Christian is asleep, sitting beside me and leaning on my bed with his head on his folded arms. I reach out, grateful once more that my body responds, and run my fingers through his soft hair.

He startles awake, raising his head so suddenly that my hand falls weakly back onto the bed.

“Hi,” I croak.

“Oh, Ana.” His voice is choked and relieved. He grasps my hand, squeezing it tightly and holding it up against his rough, stubbled cheek.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I whisper.

He gapes, then frowns at me for a moment. “Okay.”

I struggle to sit up.

“Ana, stay still. I’ll call a nurse.” He quickly stands, alarmed, and reaches for a buzzer on the bedside.

“Please,” I whisper. *Why do I ache everywhere?* “I need to get up.” *Jeez, I feel so weak*.

“Will you do as you’re told for once?” he snaps, exasperated.

“I really need to pee,” I rasp. My throat and mouth are so dry.

A nurse bustles into the room. She must be in her fifties, though her hair is jet black. She wears overlarge pearl earrings.

“Mrs. Grey, welcome back. I’ll let Dr. Bartley know you’re awake.” She

makes her way to my bedside. “My name is Nora. Do you know where you are?”

“Yes. Hospital. I need to pee.”

“You have a catheter.”

*What? Oh, this is gross*. I glance anxiously at Christian, then back to the nurse.

“Please. I want to get up.”

“Mrs. Grey.”

“Please.”

“Ana,” Christian warns. I struggle to sit up once more.

“Let me remove your catheter. Mr. Grey, I am sure Mrs. Grey would like some privacy.” She looks pointedly at Christian, dismissing him.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He glares back at her.

“Christian, please,” I whisper, reaching out and grasping his hand. Briefly he squeezes my hand, then gives me an exasperated look. “Please,” I beg.

“Fine!” he snaps and runs his hand through his hair. “You have two minutes,” he hisses at the nurse, and he leans down and kisses my forehead before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

CHRISTIAN BURSTS BACK INTO the room two minutes later as Nurse Nora is helping me out of bed. I’m dressed in a thin hospital gown. I don’t remember being stripped.

“Let me take her,” he says and strides toward us.

“Mr. Grey, I can manage,” Nurse Nora scolds him.

He gives her a hostile glare. “Damn it, she’s my wife. I’ll take her,” he says through gritted teeth as he moves the IV stand out of his way.

“Mr. Grey!” she protests.

He ignores her, leans down, and gently lifts me off the bed. I wrap my arms around his neck, my body complaining. *Jeez, I ache everywhere*. He carries me to the en suite bathroom while Nurse Nora follows us, pushing the IV stand.

“Mrs. Grey, you’re too light,” he mutters disapprovingly as he sets me gently on my feet. I sway. My legs feel like Jell-O. Christian flips the light switch, and I’m momentarily blinded by the fluorescent lamp that pings and flickers to life.

“Sit before you fall,” he snaps, still holding me.

Tentatively, I sit down on the toilet.

“Go.” I try to wave him out.

“No. Just pee, Ana.”

Could this be any more embarrassing? “I can’t, not with you here.”

“You might fall.”

“Mr. Grey!”

We both ignore the nurse.

“Please,” I beg.

He raises his hands in defeat. “I’ll stand outside, door open.” He takes a couple of paces back until he’s standing just outside the door with the angry nurse.

“Turn around, please,” I ask. Why do I feel so ridiculously shy with this man? He rolls his eyes but complies. And when his back is turned … I let go, and savor the relief.

I take stock of my injuries. My head hurts, my chest aches where Jack kicked me, and my side throbs where he pushed me to the ground. Plus I’m thirsty and hungry. *Jeez, really hungry*. I finish up, thankful that I don’t have to get up to wash my hands, as the sink is close. I just don’t have the strength to stand.

“I’m done,” I call, drying my hands on the towel.

Christian turns and comes back in and before I know it, I’m in his arms again. I have missed these arms. He pauses and buries his nose in my hair.

“Oh, I’ve missed you, Mrs. Grey,” he whispers, and with Nurse Nora fussing behind him, he lays me back on the bed and releases me—reluctantly, I think.

“If you’ve quite finished, Mr. Grey, I’d like to check over Mrs. Grey now.” Nurse Nora is mad.

He stands back. “She’s all yours,” he says in a more measured tone.

She huffs at him and then turns her attention back to me.

*Exasperating isn’t he?*

“How do you feel?” she asks me, her voice laced with sympathy and a trace of irritation, which I suspect is for Christian’s benefit.

“Sore and thirsty. Very thirsty,” I whisper.

“I’ll fetch you some water once I’ve checked your vitals and Dr. Bartley has examined you.”

She reaches for a blood pressure cuff and wraps it around my upper arm. I glance anxiously up at Christian. He looks dreadful—haunted, even—as if he hasn’t slept for days. His hair is a mess, he hasn’t shaved for a long time, and his shirt is badly wrinkled. I frown.

“How are you feeling?” Ignoring the nurse, he sits down on the bed out of arm’s reach.

“Confused. Achy. Hungry.”

“Hungry?” He blinks in surprise.

I nod.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Anything. Soup.”

“Mr. Grey, you’ll need the doctor’s approval before Mrs. Grey can eat.”

He gazes at her impassively for a moment, then takes his BlackBerry out of his pants pocket and presses a number.

“Ana wants chicken soup … Good … Thank you.” He hangs up.

I glance at Nora, whose eyes narrow at Christian.

“Taylor?” I ask quickly.

Christian nods.

“Your blood pressure is normal, Mrs. Grey. I’ll fetch the doctor.” She removes the cuff and, without so much as another word, stalks out of the room, radiating disapproval.

“I think you made Nurse Nora mad.”

“I have that effect on women.” He smirks.

I laugh, then stop suddenly as pain radiates through my chest. “Yes, you do.”

“Oh, Ana, I love to hear you laugh.”

Nora returns with a pitcher of water. We both fall silent, gazing at each other as she pours out a glass and hands it to me.

“Small sips now,” she warns.

“Yes, ma’am,” I mutter and take a welcome sip of cool water. *Oh my*. It tastes perfect. I take another, and Christian watches me intently.

“Mia?” I ask.

“She’s safe. Thanks to you.”

“They did have her?”

“Yes.”

All the madness was for a reason. Relief spirals through my body. *Thank God, thank God, thank God she’s okay*. I frown.

“How did they get her?”

“Elizabeth Morgan,” he says simply.

“No!”

He nods. “She picked her up at Mia’s gym.”

I frown, still not understanding.

“Ana, I’ll fill you in on the details later. Mia is fine, all things considered. She was drugged. She’s groggy now and shaken up, but by some miracle she wasn’t harmed.” Christian’s jaw clenches. “What you did”—he runs his hand through his hair—“was incredibly brave and incredibly stupid. You could have been killed.” His eyes blaze a bleak, chilling gray, and I know he’s restraining his anger.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” I whisper.

“You could have told me!” he says vehemently, fisting his hands in his lap.

“He said he’d kill her if I told anyone. I couldn’t take that risk.”

Christian closes his eyes, dread etched in his face.

"I have died a thousand deaths since Thursday."

*Thursday?*

"What day is it?"

"It's almost Saturday," he says, checking his watch. "You've been unconscious for more than twenty-four hours."

*Oh.*

"And Jack and Elizabeth?"

"In police custody. Although Hyde is here under guard. They had to remove the bullet you left in him," Christian says bitterly. "I don't know where in this hospital he is, fortunately, or I'd probably kill him myself." His face darkens.

*Oh shit. Jack is here?*

*"That's for SIP you fucking bitch!"* I pale. My empty stomach convulses, tears prick my eyes, and a deep shudder runs through me.

"Hey." Christian scoots forward, his voice filled with concern. Taking the glass from my hand, he tenderly folds me into his arms. "You're safe now," he murmurs against my hair, his voice hoarse.

"Christian, I'm so sorry." My tears start to fall.

"Hush." He strokes my hair, and I weep into his neck.

"What I said. I was never going to leave you."

"Hush, baby, I know."

"You do?" His admission halts my tears.

"I worked it out. Eventually. Honestly, Ana, what were you *thinking*?" His tone is strained.

"You took me by surprise," I mutter into his shirt collar. "When we spoke at the bank. Thinking I was leaving you. I thought you knew me better. I've said to you over and over I would never leave."

"But after the appalling way I've behaved—" His voice is barely audible, and his arms tighten around me. "I thought for a short time that I'd lost you."

"No, Christian. Never. I didn't want you to interfere and put Mia's life in danger."

He sighs, and I don't know if it's from anger, exasperation, or hurt.

"How did you work it out?" I ask quickly to distract him from his line of thought.

He tucks my hair behind my ear. "I'd just touched down in Seattle when the bank called. Last I'd heard, you were ill and going home."

"So you were in Portland when Sawyer called you from the car?"

"We were just about to take off. I was worried about you," he says softly.

"You were?"

He frowns. “Of course I was.” He skirts his thumb over my bottom lip. “I spend my life worrying about you. You know that.” *Oh, Christian!*

“Jack called me at the office,” I murmur. “He gave me two hours to get the money.” I shrug. “I had to leave, and it just seemed the best excuse.”

Christian’s mouth presses into a hard line. “And you gave Sawyer the slip. He’s mad at you, as well.”

“As well?”

“As well as me.”

I tentatively touch his face, running my fingers over his stubble. He closes his eyes, leaning into my fingers.

“Don’t be mad at me. Please,” I whisper.

“I am so mad at you. What you did was monumentally stupid. Bordering on insane.”

“I told you, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You don’t seem to have any regard for your personal safety. And it’s not just you now,” he adds angrily.

My lip trembles. He’s thinking about our Little Blip.

The door opens, startling us both, and a young African American woman in a white coat over gray scrubs strides in.

“Good evening, Mrs. Grey. I’m Dr. Bartley.”

She starts to examine me thoroughly, shining a light in my eyes, making me touch her fingers, then my nose while closing first one eye and then the other, and checking all my reflexes. But her voice is soft and her touch gentle; she has a warm bedside manner. Nurse Nora joins her, and Christian wanders to the corner of the room and makes some calls while the two of them tend to me. It’s hard to concentrate on Dr. Bartley, Nurse Nora, and Christian at the same time, but I hear him call his father, my mother, and Kate to say I’m awake. Finally, he leaves a message for Ray.

*Ray*. *Oh shit* … A vague memory of his voice comes back to me. He was here—yes, while I was still unconscious.

Dr. Bartley checks my ribs, her fingers probing gently but firmly.

I wince.

“These are bruised, not cracked or broken. You were very lucky, Mrs. Grey.”

I scowl. *Lucky?* Not the word I would have chosen. Christian glowers at her, too. He mouths something at me. I think it’s *foolhardy*, but I’m not sure.

“I’ll prescribe some painkillers. You’ll need them for this and for the headache you must have. But all’s looking as it should, Mrs. Grey. I suggest you get some sleep. Depending on how you feel in the morning, we may let you go home. My colleague Dr. Singh will be attending you then.”

“Thank you.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Taylor enters bearing a black cardboard box with *Fairmont Olympic* emblazoned in cream on the side.

*Holy cow!*

“Food?” Dr. Bartley says, surprised.

“Mrs. Grey is hungry,” Christian says. “This is chicken soup.”

Dr. Bartley smiles. “Soup will be fine, just the broth. Nothing heavy.” She looks pointedly at both of us, then exits the room with Nurse Nora.

Christian pulls the wheeled tray over to me, and Taylor places the box on it.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Grey.”

“Hello, Taylor. Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, ma’am.” I think he wants to say more, but he holds off.

Christian is unpacking the box, producing a thermos, soup bowl, side plate, linen napkin, soupspoon, a small basket of bread rolls, silver salt and pepper shakers … The Olympic has gone all-out.

“This is great, Taylor.” My stomach is rumbling. I am famished.

“Will that be all?” he asks.

“Yes, thanks,” Christian says, dismissing him.

Taylor nods.

“Taylor, thank you.”

“Anything else I can get you, Mrs. Grey?”

I glance at Christian. “Just some clean clothes for Christian.”

Taylor smiles. “Yes, ma’am.”

Christian glances down at his shirt, bemused.

“How long have you been wearing that shirt?” I ask.

“Since Thursday morning.” He gives me a crooked smile.

Taylor exits.

“Taylor’s real pissed at you, too,” Christian adds grumpily, unscrewing the lid of the thermos and pouring creamy chicken soup into the bowl.

*Taylor, too!* But I don’t dwell on that as my chicken soup distracts me. It smells delicious, and steam curls invitingly from its surface. I take a taste and it’s everything it promised to be.

“Good?” Christian asks, perching on the bed again.

I nod enthusiastically and don’t stop. My hunger is primal. I pause only to wipe my mouth with the linen napkin.

“Tell me what happened—after you realized what was going on.”

Christian runs his hand through his hair and shakes his head. “Oh, Ana, it’s good to see you eat.”

“I’m hungry. Tell me.”

He frowns. “Well, after the bank called and I thought my world had completely fallen apart—” He can’t hide the pain in his voice.

I stop eating. *Oh shit.*

“Don’t stop eating, or I’ll stop talking,” he whispers, his tone adamant as he glares at me. I continue with my soup. *Okay, okay … Damn, it tastes good*. Christian’s gaze softens and after a beat, he resumes.

“Anyway, shortly after you and I had finished our conversation, Taylor informed me that Hyde had been granted bail. How, I don’t know, I thought we’d managed to thwart any attempts at bail. But that gave me a moment to think about what you’d said … and I knew something was seriously wrong.”

“It was never about the money,” I snap suddenly, an unexpected surge of anger flaring in my belly. My voice rises. “How could you even think that? It’s never been about your fucking money!” My head starts to pound and I wince. Christian gapes at me for a split second, surprised by my vehemence. He narrows his eyes.

“Mind your language,” he growls. “Calm down and eat.”

I glare mutinously at him.

“Ana,” he warns.

“That hurt me more than anything, Christian,” I whisper. “Almost as much as you seeing that woman.”

He inhales sharply, as if I’ve slapped him, and all of a sudden, he looks exhausted. Closing his eyes briefly, he shakes his head, resigned.

“I know.” He sighs. “And I’m sorry. More than you know.” His eyes are luminous with contrition. “Please, eat. While your soup is still hot.” His voice is soft and compelling, and I do as he asks. He breathes a sigh of relief.

“Go on,” I whisper, between bites of the illicit fresh white bread roll.

“We didn’t know Mia was missing. I thought maybe he was blackmailing you or something. I called you back, but you didn’t answer.” He scowls. “I left you a message and then called Sawyer. Taylor started tracking your cell. I knew you were at the bank, so we headed straight there.”

“I don’t know how Sawyer found me. Was he tracking my cell, too?”

“The Saab is fitted with a tracking device. All our cars are. By the time we got near the bank, you were already on the move, and we followed. Why are you smiling?”

“On some level I knew you’d be stalking me.”

“And that is amusing because?” he asks.

“Jack had instructed me to get rid of my cell. So I borrowed Whelan’s cell, and that’s the one I threw away. I put mine into one of the duffel bags so you

could track your money."

Christian sighs. "Our money, Ana," he says quietly. "Eat."

I wipe my soup bowl with the last of my bread and pop it into my mouth. For the first time in a long while, I feel replete in spite of our conversation.

"Finished."

"Good girl."

There's a knock on the door and Nurse Nora enters once more, carrying a small paper cup. Christian clears away my plate and starts putting all the items back into the box.

"Pain relief." Nora smiles, showing me the white pill in the paper cup.

"Is this okay to take? You know—with the baby?"

"Yes, Mrs. Grey. It's Lortab—it's fine; it won't affect the baby."

I nod gratefully. My head is pounding. I swallow it down with a sip of water.

"You ought to rest, Mrs. Grey." Nurse Nora looks pointedly at Christian.

He nods.

*No!* "You're going?" I exclaim, panic setting in. *Don't go—we've just started talking!*

Christian snorts. "If you think for one moment I'm going to let you out of my sight, Mrs. Grey, you are very much mistaken."

Nora huffs but hovers over me and readjusts my pillows so that I have to lie down.

"Good night, Mrs. Grey," she says, and with one last censorious glance at Christian, she leaves.

He raises an eyebrow as she closes the door.

"I don't think Nurse Nora approves of me."

He stands by the bed, looking tired, and despite the fact that I want him to stay, I know I should try to persuade him to go home.

"You need rest, too, Christian. Go home. You look exhausted."

"I'm not leaving you. I'll doze in this armchair."

I scowl at him, then shift onto my side.

"Sleep with me."

He frowns. "No. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me. Please, Christian."

"You have an IV."

"Christian. Please."

He gazes at me, and I can tell he's tempted.

"Please." I lift up the blankets, inviting him into the bed.

“Fuck it.” He slips off his shoes and socks, and gingerly climbs in beside me. Gently, he wraps his arm around me, and I lay my head on his chest. He kisses my hair.

“I don’t think Nurse Nora will be very happy with this arrangement,” he whispers conspiratorially.

I giggle, then stop as pain lances through my chest. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Oh, but I love that sound,” he says a little sadly, his voice low. “I’m sorry, baby, so, so sorry.” He kisses my hair again and inhales deeply, and I don’t know what he’s apologizing for … making me laugh? Or the mess we’re in? I rest my hand over his heart, and he gently places his hand on mine. We are both silent for a moment.

“Why did you go see that woman?”

“Oh, Ana.” He groans. “You want to discuss that now? Can’t we drop this? I regret it, okay?”

“I need to know.”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” he mutters, irritated. “Oh, and Detective Clark wants to talk to you. Just routine. Now go to sleep.”

He kisses my hair. I sigh heavily. I need to know why. At least he says he regrets it. That’s something, my subconscious agrees. She’s in an agreeable mood today, it seems. Ugh, Detective Clark. I shudder at the thought of reliving Thursday’s events for him.

“Do we know why Jack was doing all this?”

“Hmm,” Christian murmurs. I’m soothed by the slow rise and fall of his chest, gently rocking my head, lulling me to sleep as his breathing slows. And while I drift I try to make sense of the fragments of conversations I heard while I was on the edge of consciousness, but they slither through my mind, remaining steadfastly elusive, taunting me from the edges of my memory. Oh, it’s frustrating and exhausting … and …

NURSE NORA’S MOUTH IS pursed and her arms folded in hostility. I hold my finger up to my lips.

“Please let him sleep,” I whisper, squinting in the early morning light.

“This is your bed. Not his,” she hisses sternly.

“I slept better because he was here,” I insist, rushing to my husband’s defense. Besides, it’s true. Christian stirs, and Nurse Nora and I freeze.

He mumbles in his sleep, “Don’t touch me. No more. Only Ana.”

I frown. I have rarely heard Christian talk in his sleep. Admittedly, that might

be because he sleeps less than I do. I've only ever heard his nightmares. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me, and I wince.

"Mrs. Grey—" Nurse Nora glowers.

"Please," I beg.

She shakes her head, turns on her heel, and leaves, and I snuggle up against Christian again.

WHEN I WAKE, CHRISTIAN is nowhere to be seen. The sun is blazing through the windows, and I can now really appreciate the room. *I have flowers!* I didn't notice them the night before. Several bouquets. I wonder idly who they're from.

A soft knock distracts me, and Carrick peeks around the door. He beams when he sees that I'm awake.

"May I come in?" he asks.

"Of course."

He strides into the room and over to me, his soft, gentle blue eyes assessing me shrewdly. He's wearing a dark suit—he must be working. He surprises me by leaning down and kissing my forehead.

"May I sit?"

I nod, and he perches on the edge of the bed and takes my hand.

"I don't know how to thank you for my daughter, you crazy, brave, darling girl. What you did probably saved her life. I will be forever in your debt." His voice wavers, filled with gratitude and compassion.

*Oh* … I don't know what to say. I squeeze his hand but remain mute.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. Sore." I say, for honesty's sake.

"Have they given you meds for the pain?"

"Lor … something."

"Good. Where's Christian?"

"I don't know. When I woke up, he was gone."

"He won't be far away, I'm sure. He wouldn't leave you while you were unconscious."

"I know."

"He's a little mad at you, as he should be." Carrick smirks. Ah, this is where Christian gets it from.

"Christian is always mad at me."

"Is he?" Carrick smiles, pleased—as if this is a good thing. His smile is infectious.

"How's Mia?"

His eyes cloud and his smile vanishes. “She’s better. Mad as hell. I think anger is a healthy reaction to what happened to her.”

“Is she here?”

“No, she’s back at home. I don’t think Grace will let her out of her sight.”

“I know how that feels.”

“You need watching, too,” he admonishes. “I don’t want you taking any more silly risks with your life or the life of my grandchild.”

I flush. *He knows!*

“Grace read your chart. She told me. Congratulations.”

“Um … thank you.”

He gazes down at me, and his eyes soften, though he frowns at my expression.

“Christian will come around,” he says gently. “This will be the best thing for him. Just … give him some time.”

I nod. *Oh … They’ve spoken*.

“I’d better go. I’m due in court.” He smiles and rises. “I’ll check in on you later. Grace speaks highly of Dr. Singh and Dr. Bartley. They know what they’re doing.”

He leans down and kisses me once more. “I mean it, Ana. I can never repay what you’ve done for us. Thank you.”

I look up at him, blinking back tears, suddenly overwhelmed, and he strokes my cheek affectionately. Then he turns on his heel and leaves.

*Oh my*. I’m reeling from his gratitude. Perhaps now I can let the prenup debacle go. My subconscious nods sagely in agreement with me yet again. I shake my head and gingerly get out of bed. I’m relieved to find that I am much steadier on my feet than I was yesterday. In spite of Christian sharing the bed, I have slept well and feel refreshed. My head still aches, but it’s a dull nagging pain, nothing like the pounding yesterday. I’m stiff and sore, but I just need a bath. I feel grimy. I head into the en suite.

**“ANA!” CHRISTIAN SHOUTS.**

“I’m in the bathroom,” I call as I finish brushing my teeth. That feels better. I ignore my reflection in the mirror. *Crap, I look a mess*. When I open the door, Christian is by the bed, holding a tray of food. He’s transformed. Dressed entirely in black, he’s shaved, showered, and looks well rested.

“Good morning, Mrs. Grey,” he says brightly. “I have your breakfast.” He looks so boyish and much happier.

Wow. I smile broadly as I climb back into bed. He pulls over the tray on wheels and lifts the cover to reveal my breakfast: oatmeal with dried fruits,

pancakes with maple syrup, bacon, orange juice, and Twinings English breakfast tea. My mouth waters; I'm so hungry. I down the orange juice in a few gulps and dig into the oatmeal. Christian sits down on the edge of the bed to watch. He smirks.

"What?" I ask with my mouth full.

"I like to watch you eat," he says. But I don't think that's what he's smirking about. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," I mutter between mouthfuls.

"I've never seen you eat like this."

I glance up at him, and my heart sinks. We have to address the very tiny elephant in the room. "It's because I'm pregnant, Christian."

He snorts, and his mouth twists into an ironic smile. "If I knew getting you knocked up was going to make you eat, I might have done it earlier."

"Christian Grey!" I gasp and set the oatmeal down.

"Don't stop eating," he warns.

"Christian, we need to talk about this."

He stills. "What's there to say? We're going to be parents." He shrugs, desperately trying to look nonchalant, but all I can see is his fear. Pushing the tray aside, I crawl down the bed to him and take his hands in mine.

"You're scared," I whisper. "I get it."

He gazes at me, impassive, his eyes wide and all his earlier boyishness stripped away.

"I am, too. That's normal," I whisper.

"What kind of father could I possibly be?" His voice is hoarse, barely audible.

"Oh, Christian." I stifle a sob. "One that tries his best. That's all any of us can do."

"Ana—I don't know if I can …"

"Of course you can. You're loving, you're fun, you're strong, you'll set boundaries. Our child will want for nothing."

He's frozen, staring at me, doubt etched on his beautiful face.

"Yes, it would have been ideal to have waited. To have longer, just the two of us. But we'll be three of us, and we'll all grow up together. We'll be a family. Our own family. And your child will love you unconditionally, like I do." Tears spring to my eyes.

"Oh, Ana," Christian whispers, his voice anguished and pained. "I thought I'd lost you. Then I thought I'd lost you again. Seeing you lying on the ground, pale and cold and unconscious—it was all my worst fears realized. And now here you are—brave and strong … giving me hope. Loving me after all that I've done."

"Yes, I do love you, Christian, desperately. I always will."

Gently taking my head between his hands, he wipes my tears away with his thumbs. He gazes into my eyes, gray to blue, and all I see is his fear and wonder and love.

“I love you, too,” he breathes. And he kisses me sweetly, tenderly, like a man who adores his wife. “I’ll try to be a good father,” he whispers against my lips.

“You’ll try, and you’ll succeed. And let’s face it; you don’t have much choice in the matter, because Blip and I are not going anywhere.”

“Blip?”

“Blip.”

He raises his eyebrows. “I had the name Junior in my head.”

“Junior it is, then.”

“But I like Blip.” He smiles his shy smile and kisses me once more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Much as I'd like to kiss you all day, your breakfast is getting cold," Christian murmurs against my lips. He gazes down at me, now amused, except his eyes are darker, sensual. Holy cow, he's switched again. My Mr. Mercurial.

"Eat," he orders, his voice soft. I swallow, a reaction to his smoldering look, and crawl back into bed, avoiding snagging my IV line. He pushes the tray in front of me. The oatmeal is cold, but the pancakes under the cover are fine—in fact, they're mouthwatering.

"You know," I mutter between mouthfuls, "Blip might be a girl."

Christian runs his hand through his hair. "Two women, eh?" Alarm flashes across his face, and his dark look vanishes.

*Oh crap*. "Do you have a preference?"

"Preference?"

"Boy or girl."

He frowns. "Healthy will do," he says quietly, clearly disconcerted by the question. "Eat," he snaps, and I know he's trying to avoid the subject.

"I'm eating, I'm eating … Jeez, keep your hair on, Grey." I watch him carefully. The corners of his eyes are crinkled with worry. He's said he'll try, but I know he's still freaked out by the baby. *Oh, Christian, so am I*. He sits down in the armchair beside me, picking up the *Seattle Times*.

"You made the papers again, Mrs. Grey." His tone is bitter.

"Again?"

"The hacks are just rehashing yesterday's story, but it seems factually accurate. You want to read it?"

I shake my head. "Read it to me. I'm eating."

He smirks and proceeds to read the article aloud. It's a report on Jack and Elizabeth, depicting them as a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde. It briefly covers Mia's kidnapping, my involvement in Mia's rescue, and the fact that both Jack and I are in the same hospital. How does the press get all this information? I must ask Kate.

When Christian finishes, I say, "Please read something else. I like listening to you."

He obliges and reads me a report about a booming bagel business and the fact that Boeing has had to cancel the launch of some plane. Christian frowns as he reads. But listening to his soothing voice as I eat, secure in the knowledge that I am fine, Mia is safe, and my Little Blip is safe, I feel a precious moment of peace despite all that has happened over the last few days.

I understand that Christian is scared about the baby, but I don't understand the depth of his fear. I resolve to talk to him some more about this. See if I can put his mind at ease. What puzzles me is that he hasn't lacked for positive role models as parents. Both Grace and Carrick are exemplary parents, or so they seem. Maybe it was the Bitch Troll's interference that damaged him so badly. I'd like to think so. But in truth I think it goes back to his birth mom, though I'm sure Mrs. Robinson didn't help. I halt my thoughts as I nearly recall a whispered conversation. *Damn!* It hovers on the edge of my memory from when I was unconscious. Christian talking with Grace. It melts away into the shadows of my mind. *Oh, it's so frustrating*.

I wonder if Christian will ever volunteer the reason he went to see her or if I'll have to push him. I'm about to ask when there's a knock on the door.

Detective Clark makes an apologetic entry into the room. He's right to be apologetic—my heart sinks when I see him.

"Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey. Am I interrupting?"

"Yes," snaps Christian.

Clark ignores him. "Glad to see you're awake, Mrs. Grey. I need to ask you a few questions about Thursday afternoon. Just routine. Is now a convenient time?"

"Sure," I mumble, but I do not want to relive Thursday's events.

"My wife should be resting." Christian bristles.

"I'll be brief, Mr. Grey. And it means I'll be out of your hair sooner rather than later."

Christian stands and offers Clark his chair, then sits down beside me on the bed, takes my hand, and squeezes it reassuringly.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, Clark is done. I've learned nothing new, but I have recounted the events of Thursday to him in a halting, quiet voice, watching Christian go pale and grimace at some parts.

"I wish you'd aimed higher," Christian mutters.

"Might have done womankind a service if Mrs. Grey had," Clark agrees.

*What?*

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey. That's all for now."

“You won’t let him out again, will you?”

“I don’t think he’ll make bail this time, ma’am.”

“Do we know who posted his bail?” Christian asks.

“No sir. It was confidential.”

Christian frowns, but I think he has his suspicions. Clark rises to leave just as Dr. Singh and two interns enter the room.

AFTER A THOROUGH EXAMINATION, Dr. Singh declares me fit to go home. Christian sags with relief.

“Mrs. Grey, you’ll have to watch for worsening headaches and blurry vision. If that occurs you must return to the hospital immediately.”

I nod, trying to contain my delight at going home.

As Dr. Singh leaves, Christian asks her for a quick word in the corridor. He keeps the door ajar as he asks her a question. She smiles.

“Yes, Mr. Grey, that’s fine.”

He grins and returns to the room a happier man.

“What was all that about?”

“Sex,” he says, flashing a wicked grin.

Oh. I blush. “And?”

“You’re good to go.” He smirks.

*Oh, Christian!*

“I have a headache.” I smirk right back.

“I know. You’ll be off limits for a while. I was just checking.”

*Off limits?* I frown at the momentary stab of disappointment I feel. I’m not sure I want to be off limits.

Nurse Nora joins us to remove my IV. She glares at Christian. I think she’s one of the few women I’ve met who is oblivious to his charms. I thank her when she leaves with my IV stand.

“Shall I take you home?” Christian asks.

“I’d like to see Ray first.”

“Sure.”

“Does he know about the baby?”

“I thought you’d want to be the one to tell him. I haven’t told your mom either.”

“Thank you.” I smile, grateful that he hasn’t stolen my thunder.

“My mom knows,” Christian adds. “She saw your chart. I told my dad but no one else. Mom said couples normally wait for twelve weeks or so … to be sure.” He shrugs.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to tell Ray.”

“I should warn you, he’s mad as hell. Said I should spank you.”

*What?* Christian laughs at my appalled expression. “I told him I’d be only too willing to oblige.”

“You didn’t!” I gasp, though an echo of a whispered conversation tantalizes my memory. Yes, Ray was here while I was unconscious …

He winks at me. “Here, Taylor brought you some clean clothes. I’ll help you dress.”

AS CHRISTIAN PREDICTED, RAY is furious. I don’t ever remember him being this mad. Christian has wisely decided to leave us alone. For such a taciturn man, Ray fills his hospital room with his invective, berating me for my irresponsible behavior. I am twelve years old again.

*Oh, Dad, please calm down. Your blood pressure is not up to this.*

“And I’ve had to deal with your mother,” he grumbles, waving both of his hands in exasperation.

“Dad, I’m sorry.”

“And poor Christian! I’ve never seen him like that. He’s aged. We’ve both aged years over the last couple of days.”

“Ray, I’m sorry.”

“Your mother is waiting for your call,” he says in a more measured tone.

I kiss his cheek, and finally he relents from his tirade.

“I’ll call her. I really am sorry. But thank you for teaching me to shoot.”

For a moment, he regards me with ill-concealed paternal pride. “I’m glad you can shoot straight,” he says, his voice gruff. “Now go on home and get some rest.”

“You look well, Dad.” I try to change the subject.

“You look pale.” His fear is suddenly evident. His look mirrors Christian’s from last night, and I grasp his hand.

“I’m okay. I promise I won’t do anything like that again.”

He squeezes my hand and pulls me into a hug. “If anything happened to you,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and low. Tears prick my eyes. I am not used to displays of emotion from my stepfather.

“Dad, I’m good. Nothing that a hot shower won’t cure.”

WE LEAVE THROUGH THE rear exit of the hospital to avoid the paparazzi gathered at the entrance. Taylor leads us to the waiting SUV.

Christian is quiet as Sawyer drives us home. I avoid Sawyer's gaze in the rearview mirror, embarrassed that the last time I saw him was at the bank when I gave him the slip. I call my mom, who sobs and sobs. It takes most of the journey home to calm her down, but I succeed by promising that we'll visit soon. Throughout my conversation with her, Christian holds my hand, brushing his thumb across my knuckles. He's nervous … something's happened.

"What's wrong?" I ask when I'm finally free from my mother.

"Welch wants to see me."

"Welch? Why?"

"He's found something out about that fucker Hyde." Christian's lip curls into a snarl, and a frisson of fear passes through me. "He didn't want to tell me on the phone."

"Oh."

"He's coming here this afternoon from Detroit."

"You think he's found a connection?"

Christian nods.

"What do you think it is?"

"I have no idea." Christian's brow furrows, perplexed.

Taylor pulls into the garage at Escala and stops by the elevator to let us out before he parks. In the garage, we can avoid the attention of the waiting photographers. Christian ushers me out of the car. Keeping his arm around my waist, he leads me to the waiting elevator.

"Glad to be home?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper. But as I stand in the familiar surroundings of the elevator, the enormity of what I've been through crashes over me, and I start to shake.

"Hey—" Christian wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. "You're home. You're safe," he says, kissing my hair.

"Oh, Christian." A dam I didn't even know was in place bursts, and I start to sob.

"Hush now," Christian whispers, cradling my head against his chest.

But it's too late. I weep, overwhelmed, into his T-shirt, recalling Jack's vicious attack—*"That's for SIP, you fucking bitch!"*—telling Christian I was leaving—*"You're leaving me?"*—and my fear, my gut-wrenching fear for Mia, for myself, and for Little Blip.

When the doors of the elevator slide open, Christian picks me up like a child and carries me into the foyer. I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him, keening quietly.

He carries me through to our bathroom and gently settles me on the chair. "Bath?" he asks.

I shake my head. No … no … not like Leila.

"Shower?" His voice is choked with concern.

Through my tears, I nod. I want to wash away the grime of the last few days, wash away the memory of Jack's attack. *"You gold-digging whore."* I sob into my hands as the sound of the water cascading from the shower echoes off the walls.

"Hey," Christian croons. Kneeling in front of me, he pulls my hands away from my tearstained cheeks and cups my face in his hands. I gaze at him, blinking away my tears.

"You're safe. You both are," he whispers.

*Blip and me*. My eyes brim with tears again.

"Stop, now. I can't bear it when you cry." His voice is hoarse. His thumbs wipe my cheeks, but my tears still flow.

"I'm sorry, Christian. Just sorry for everything. For making you worry, for risking everything—for the things I said."

"Hush, baby, please." He kisses my forehead. "I'm sorry. It takes two to tango, Ana." He gives me a crooked smile. "Well, that's what my mom always says. I said things and did things I'm not proud of." His gray eyes are bleak but penitent. "Let's get you undressed." His voice is soft. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, and he kisses my forehead once more.

Briskly he strips me, taking particular care as he pulls my T-shirt over my head. But my head is not too sore. Leading me to the shower, he peels off his own clothing in record time before stepping into the welcome hot water with me. He pulls me into his arms and holds me, holds me for the longest time, as the water gushes over us, soothing us both.

He lets me cry into his chest. Occasionally he kisses my hair, but he doesn't let go, he just rocks me gently beneath the warm water. To feel his skin against mine, his chest hair against my cheek … this man I love, this self-doubting, beautiful man, the man I could have lost through my own recklessness. I feel empty and aching at the thought but grateful that he's here, still here—despite everything that's happened.

He has some explaining to do, but right now I want to revel in the feel of his comforting, protective arms around me. And in that moment it occurs to me; any explanations on his part have to come from him. I can't force him—he's got to want to tell me. I won't be cast as the nagging wife, constantly trying to wheedle information out of her husband. It's just exhausting. I know he loves me. I know he loves me more than he's ever loved anyone, and for now, that's enough. The realization is liberating. I stop crying and step back.

"Better?" he asks.

I nod.

"Good. Let me look at you," he says, and for a moment I don't know what he means. But he takes my hand and examines the arm I fell on when Jack hit me. There are bruises on my shoulder and scrapes at my elbow and wrist. He kisses each of them. He grabs a washcloth and shower gel from the rack, and the sweet familiar scent of jasmine fills my nostrils.

"Turn around." Gently, he proceeds to wash my injured arm, then my neck, my shoulders, my back, and my other arm. He turns me sideways, and traces his long fingers down my side. I wince as they skate over the large bruise at my hip. Christian's eyes harden and his lips thin. His anger is palpable as he whistles through his teeth.

"It doesn't hurt," I murmur to reassure him.

Blazing gray eyes meet mine. "I want to kill him. I nearly did," he whispers cryptically. I frown, then shiver at his bleak expression. He squirts more shower gel on the washcloth and with tender, aching gentleness, he washes my side and my behind, then, kneeling, moves down my legs. He pauses to examine my knee. His lips brush over the bruise before he returns to washing my legs and my feet. Reaching down, I caress his head, running my fingers through his wet hair. He stands, and his fingers trace the outline of the bruise on my ribs where Jack kicked me.

"Oh, baby," he groans, his voice filled with anguish, his eyes dark with fury.

"I'm okay." I pull his head down to mine and kiss his lips. He's hesitant to reciprocate, but as my tongue meets his, his body stirs against me.

"No," he whispers against my lips, and he pulls back. "Let's get you clean."

His face is serious. *Damn* … He means it. I pout, and the atmosphere between us lightens in an instant. He grins and kisses me briefly.

"Clean," he emphasizes. "Not dirty."

"I like dirty."

"Me, too, Mrs. Grey. But not now, not here." He grabs the shampoo, and before I can persuade him otherwise, he's washing my hair.

I LOVE CLEAN, TOO**.** I feel refreshed and reinvigorated, and I don't know if it's from the shower, the crying, or my decision to stop hassling Christian about everything. He wraps me in a large towel and drapes one around his hips while I gingerly dry my hair. My head aches, but it's a dull persistent pain that is more than manageable. I have some painkillers from Dr. Singh, but she's asked me not to use them unless I have to.

As I dry my hair, I think about Elizabeth.

“I still don’t understand why Elizabeth was involved with Jack.”

“I do,” Christian mutters darkly.

This is news. I frown up at him, but I’m distracted. He’s drying his hair with a towel, his chest and shoulders still wet with beads of water that glint beneath the halogens. He pauses and smirks.

“Enjoying the view?”

“How do you know?” I ask, trying to ignore that I’ve been caught staring at my own husband.

“That you’re enjoying the view?” he teases.

“No,” I scold. “About Elizabeth.”

“Detective Clark hinted at it.”

I give him my tell-me-more expression, and another nagging memory from when I was unconscious surfaces. Clark was in my room. I wish I could remember what he said.

“Hyde had videos. Videos of all of them. On several USB flash drives.”

*What?* I frown, my skin tightening across my forehead.

“Videos of him fucking her and fucking all his PAs.”

Oh!

“Exactly. Blackmail material. He likes it rough.” Christian frowns, and I watch confusion followed by disgust cross his face. He pales as his disgust turns to self-loathing. Of course—Christian likes it rough, too.

“Don’t.” The word is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

His frown deepens. “Don’t what?” He stills and regards me with apprehension.

“You aren’t *anything* like him.”

Christian’s eyes harden, but he says nothing, confirming that’s exactly what he’s thinking.

“You’re not.” My voice is adamant.

“We’re cut from the same cloth.”

“No, you’re not,” I snap, though I understand why he might think so. *“His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid, in and out of trouble, too—mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie.”* I recall the information Christian revealed on the plane to Aspen.

“You both have troubled pasts, and you were both born in Detroit. That’s it, Christian.” I fist my hands on my hips.

“Ana, your faith in me is touching, especially in light of the last few days. We’ll know more when Welch is here.” He’s dismissing the subject.

“Christian—”

He stops me with a kiss. “Enough,” he breathes, and I remember the promise I made to myself not to hound him for information.

“And don’t pout,” he adds. “Come. Let me dry your hair.”

And I know the subject is closed.

AFTER DRESSING IN SWEATPANTS and a T-shirt, I sit between Christian’s legs as he dries my hair.

“So did Clark tell you anything else while I was unconscious?”

“Not that I recall.”

“I heard a few of your conversations.”

The hairbrush stills in my hair.

“Did you?” he asks, his tone nonchalant.

“Yes. My dad, your dad, Detective Clark … your mom.”

“And Kate?”

“Kate was there?”

“Briefly, yes. She’s mad at you, too.”

I turn in his lap. “Stop with the *everyone is mad at Ana* crap, okay?”

“Just telling you the truth,” Christian says, bemused by my outburst.

“Yes, it was reckless, but you know, your sister was in danger.”

His face falls. “Yes. She was.” Switching off the hairdryer, he puts it down on the bed beside him. He grasps my chin.

“Thank you,” he says, surprising me. “But no more recklessness. Because next time, I will spank the living shit out of you.”

I gasp.

“You wouldn’t!”

“I would.” He’s serious. Holy cow. Deadly serious. “I have your stepfather’s permission.” He smirks. He’s teasing me! Or is he? I launch myself at him, and he twists so that I fall onto the bed and into his arms. As I land, pain from my ribs shoots through me and I wince.

Christian pales. “Behave!” he admonishes, and for a moment he’s angry.

“Sorry,” I mumble, caressing his cheek.

He nuzzles my hand and kisses it gently. “Honestly, Ana, you really have no regard for your own safety.” He tugs up the hem of my T-shirt, then rests his fingers on my belly. I stop breathing. “It’s not just you anymore,” he whispers, trailing his fingertips along the waistband of my sweats, caressing my skin. Desire explodes unexpected, hot, and heavy in my blood. I gasp and Christian tenses, halting his fingers and gazing down at me. He moves his hand up and tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

“No,” he whispers.

*What?*

"Don't look at me like that. I've seen the bruises. And the answer's no." His voice is firm, and he kisses my forehead.

I squirm. "Christian," I whine.

"No. Get into bed." He sits up.

"Bed?"

"You need rest."

"I need you."

He closes his eyes and shakes his head as if it's a great effort of will. When he opens them again, his eyes are bright with his resolve. "Just do as you're told, Ana."

I'm tempted to take off all my clothes, but then I remember the bruises and know I won't win that way.

Reluctantly, I nod. "Okay." I deliberately give him an exaggerated pout.

He grins, amused. "I'll bring you some lunch."

"You're going to cook?" I nearly expire.

He has the grace to laugh. "I'm going to heat something up. Mrs. Jones has been busy."

"Christian, I'll do it. I'm fine. Jeez, I want sex—I can certainly cook." I sit up awkwardly, trying to hide the flinch caused by my smarting ribs.

"Bed!" Christian's eyes flash, and he points to the pillow.

"Join me," I murmur, wishing I were wearing something a little more alluring than sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"Ana, get into bed. Now."

I scowl, stand up, and let my pants drop unceremoniously to the floor, glaring at him the whole time. His mouth twitches with humor as he pulls the duvet back.

"You heard Dr. Singh. She said rest." His voice is gentler. I slip into bed and fold my arms in frustration. "Stay," he says, clearly enjoying himself.

My scowl deepens.

MRS. JONES'S CHICKEN STEW is, without doubt, one of my favorite dishes. Christian eats with me, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

"That was very well heated." I smirk and he grins. I'm replete and sleepy. Was this his plan?

"You look tired." He picks up my tray.

"I am."

"Good. Sleep." He kisses me. "I have some work I need to do. I'll do it in here

if that's okay with you."

I nod … fighting a losing battle with my eyelids. I had no idea chicken stew could be so exhausting.

IT'S DUSK WHEN I wake. Pale pink light floods the room. Christian is sitting in the armchair, watching me, gray eyes luminous in the ambient light. He's clutching some papers. His face is ashen.

*Holy cow!* "What's wrong?" I ask immediately, sitting up and ignoring my protesting ribs.

"Welch has just left."

*Oh shit*. "And?"

"I lived with the fucker," he whispers.

"Lived? With Jack?"

He nods, his eyes wide.

"You're related?"

"No. Good God, no."

I shuffle over and pull the duvet back, inviting him into bed beside me, and to my surprise he doesn't hesitate. He kicks off his shoes and slides in alongside me. Wrapping one arm around me, he curls up, resting his head in my lap. I'm stunned. *What's this?*

"I don't understand," I murmur, running my fingers through his hair and gazing down at him. Christian closes his eyes and furrows his brow as if he's straining to remember.

"After I was found with the crack whore, before I went to live with Carrick and Grace, I was in the care of Michigan State. I lived in a foster home. But I can't remember anything about that time."

My mind reels. A foster home? This is news to both of us.

"For how long?" I whisper.

"Two months or so. I have no recollection."

"Have you spoken to your mom and dad about it?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should. Maybe they could fill in the blanks."

He hugs me tightly. "Here." He hands me the papers, which turn out to be two photographs. I reach over and switch on the bedside light so I can examine them in detail. The first photo is of a shabby house with a yellow front door and a large gabled window in the roof. It has a porch and a small front yard. It's an unremarkable house.

The second photo is of a family—at first glance, an ordinary blue-collar

family—a man and his wife, I think, and their children. The adults are both dressed in dowdy, overwashed blue T-shirts. They must be in their forties. The woman has scraped-back blonde hair, and the man a severe buzz-cut, but they are both smiling warmly at the camera. The man has his hand draped over the shoulders of a sullen teenage girl. I gaze at each of the children: two boys—identical twins, about twelve—both with sandy blond hair, grinning broadly at the camera; there's another boy, who's smaller, with reddish blond hair, scowling; and hiding behind him, a copper-haired gray-eyed little boy. Wide-eyed and scared, dressed in mismatched clothes, and clutching a child's dirty blanket.

*Fuck*. "This is you," I whisper, my heart lurching into my throat. I know Christian was four when his mother died. But this child looks much younger. He must have been severely malnourished. I stifle a sob as tears spring to my eyes. *Oh, my sweet Fifty*.

Christian nods. "That's me."

"Welch brought these photos?"

"Yes. I don't remember any of this." His voice is flat and lifeless.

"Remember being with foster parents? Why should you? Christian, it was a long time ago. Is this what's worrying you?"

"I remember other things, from before and after. When I met my mom and dad. But this … It's like there's a huge chasm."

My heart twists and understanding dawns. My darling control freak likes everything in its place, and now he's learned he's missing part of the jigsaw.

"Is Jack in this picture?"

"Yes, he's the older kid." Christian's eyes are still screwed shut, and he's clinging to me as if I'm a life raft. I run my fingers through his hair while I gaze at the older boy, who is glaring, defiant and arrogant, at the camera. I can see it's Jack. But he's just a kid, a sad eight- or nine-year-old, hiding his fear behind his hostility. A thought occurs to me.

"When Jack called to tell me he had Mia, he said if things had been different, it could have been him."

Christian closes his eyes and shudders. "That fucker!"

"You think he did all this because the Greys adopted you instead of him?"

"Who knows?" Christian's tone is bitter. "I don't give a fuck about him."

"Perhaps he knew we were seeing each other when I went for that job interview. Perhaps he planned to seduce me all along." Bile rises in my throat.

"I don't think so," Christian mutters, his eyes now open. "The searches he did on my family didn't start until a week or so after you began your job at SIP. Barney knows the exact dates. And, Ana, he fucked all his assistants and taped

them.” Christian closes his eyes and tightens his grip on me once more.

Suppressing the tremor that runs through me, I try to recall my various conversations with Jack when I first started at SIP. I knew deep down he was bad news, yet I ignored all my instincts. Christian’s right—I have no regard for my own safety. I remember the fight we had about me going to New York with Jack. Jeez—I could have ended up on some sordid sex tape. The thought is nauseating. And in that moment I recall the photographs Christian kept of his submissives.

Oh shit. *“We’re cut from the same cloth.”* No, Christian, you’re not, you’re nothing like him. He’s still curled around me like a small boy.

“Christian, I think you should talk to your mom and dad.” I am reluctant to move him, so I shift and slide back into the bed until we are eye to eye.

A bewildered gray gaze meets mine, reminding me of the child in the photograph.

“Let me call them,” I whisper. He shakes his head. “Please,” I beg. Christian stares at me, pain and self-doubt reflected in his eyes as he considers my request. *Oh, Christian, please!*

“I’ll call them,” he whispers.

“Good. We can go to see them together, or you can go. Whichever you prefer.”

“No. They can come here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want you going anywhere.”

“Christian, I’m up for a car journey.”

“No.” His voice is firm, but he gives me an ironic smile. “Anyway, it’s Saturday night, they’re probably at some function.”

“Call them. This news has obviously upset you. They might be able to shed some light.” I glance at the radio alarm. It’s almost seven in the evening. He regards me impassively for a moment.

“Okay,” he says, as if I’ve issued him a challenge. Sitting up, he picks up the bedside phone.

I wrap my arm around him and rest my head on his chest as he makes the call.

“Dad?” I register his surprise that Carrick has answered the phone. “Ana’s good. We’re home. Welch has just left. He found out the connection … the foster home in Detroit … I don’t remember any of that.” Christian’s voice is almost inaudible as he mutters the last sentence. My heart constricts once more. I hug him, and he squeezes my shoulder.

“Yeah … You will? … Great.” He hangs up. “They’re on their way.” He sounds surprised, and I realize that he’s probably never asked them for help.

“Good. I should get dressed.”

Christian’s arm tightens around me. “Don’t go.”

“Okay.” I snuggle into his side again, stunned by the fact that he’s just told me a great deal about himself—entirely voluntarily.

AS WE STAND AT the threshold of the great room, Grace wraps me gently in her arms.

“Ana, Ana, darling Ana,” she whispers. “Saving two of my children. How can I ever thank you?”

I blush, touched and embarrassed in equal measure by her words. Carrick hugs me, too, kissing my forehead.

Then Mia grabs me, squashing my ribs. I wince and gasp, but she doesn’t notice. “Thank you for saving me from those assholes.”

Christian scowls at her. “Mia! Careful! She’s in pain.”

“Oh! Sorry.”

“I’m good,” I mutter, relieved when she releases me.

She looks fine. Impeccably dressed in tight black jeans and a pale pink frilly blouse. I’m glad I’m wearing my comfortable wrap dress and flats. At least I look reasonably presentable.

Racing over to Christian, Mia curls her arm around his waist.

Wordlessly, he hands Grace the photo. She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth to contain her emotion as she instantly recognizes Christian. Carrick wraps his arm around her shoulders as he, too, examines it.

“Oh, darling.” Grace caresses Christian’s cheek.

Taylor appears. “Mr. Grey? Miss Kavanagh, her brother, and your brother are coming up, sir.”

Christian frowns. “Thank you, Taylor,” he mutters, bemused.

“I called Elliot and told him we were coming over.” Mia grins. “It’s a welcome-home party.”

I sneak a sympathetic glance at my poor husband as both Grace and Carrick glare at Mia in exasperation.

“We’d better get some food together,” I declare. “Mia, will you give me a hand?”

“Oh, I’d love to.”

I usher her toward the kitchen area as Christian leads his parents into his study.

KATE IS APOPLECTIC WITH righteous indignation that’s aimed at me and Christian, but most

of all Jack and Elizabeth.

"What were you *thinking*, Ana?" she shouts as she confronts me in the kitchen, causing all eyes in the room to turn and stare.

"Kate, please. I've had the same lecture from everyone!" I snap back. She glares at me, and for one minute I think I'm going to be subjected to a Katherine Kavanagh how-not-to-succumb-to-kidnappers lecture, but instead she folds me in her arms.

"Jeez—sometimes you don't have the brains you were born with, Steele," she whispers. As she kisses my cheek, there are tears in her eyes. *Kate!* "I've been so worried about you."

"Don't cry. You'll set me off."

She stands back and wipes her eyes, embarrassed, then takes a deep breath and composes herself. "On a more positive note, we've set a date for our wedding. We thought next May? And of course I want you to be my matron of honor."

"Oh … Kate … Wow. Congratulations!" *Crap—Little Blip … Junior!*

"What is it?" she asks, misinterpreting my alarm.

"Um … I'm just so happy for you. Some good news for a change." I wrap my arms around her and pull her into a hug. Shit, shit, *shit*. When is Blip due? Mentally I calculate my due date. Dr. Greene said I was four or five weeks. So—sometime in May? *Shit.*

Elliot hands me a glass of champagne.

*Oh. Shit.*

Christian emerges from his study, looking ashen, and follows his parents into the great room. His eyes widen when he sees the glass in my hand.

"Kate," he greets her coolly.

"Christian." She is equally cool. I sigh.

"Your meds, Mrs. Grey." He eyes the glass in my hand.

I narrow my eyes. *Dammit. I want a drink*. Grace smiles as she joins me in the kitchen, collecting a glass from Elliot on the way.

"A sip will be fine," she whispers with a conspiratorial wink at me, and lifts her glass to clink mine. Christian scowls at both of us, until Elliot distracts him with news of the latest match between the Mariners and the Rangers.

Carrick joins us, putting his arms around us both, and Grace kisses his cheek before joining Mia on the sofa.

"How is he?" I whisper to Carrick as he and I stand in the kitchen watching the family lounge on the sofa. I note with surprise that Mia and Ethan are holding hands.

"Shaken," Carrick murmurs to me, his brow furrowing, his face serious. "He

remembers so much of his life with his birth mother; many things I wish he didn't. But this—" He stops. "I hope we've helped. I'm glad he called us. He said you told him to." Carrick's gaze softens. I shrug and take a hasty sip of champagne.

"You're very good for him. He doesn't listen to anyone else."

I frown. I don't think that's true. The unwelcome specter of the Bitch Troll looms large in my mind. I know Christian talks to Grace, too. I heard him. Again I feel a moment's frustration as I try to fathom their conversation in the hospital, but it still eludes me.

"Come and sit down, Ana. You look tired. I'm sure you weren't expecting all of us here this evening."

"It's great to see everyone." I smile. Because it's true, it *is* great. I'm an only child who has married into a large and gregarious family, and I love it. I snuggle up next to Christian.

"One sip," he hisses at me and takes my glass from my hand.

"Yes, Sir." I bat my lashes, disarming him completely. He puts his arm around my shoulders and returns to his baseball conversation with Elliot and Ethan.

"MY PARENTS THINK YOU walk on water," Christian mutters as he drags off his T-shirt.

I'm curled up in bed watching the floorshow. "Good thing you know differently." I snort.

"Oh, I don't know." He slips out of his jeans.

"Did they fill in the gaps for you?"

"Some. I lived with the Colliers for two months while Mom and Dad waited for the paperwork. They were already approved for adoption because of Elliot, but the wait's required by law to see if I had any living relatives who wanted to claim me."

"How do you feel about that?" I whisper.

He frowns. "About having no living relatives? Fuck that. If they were anything like the crack whore …" He shakes his head in disgust.

*Oh, Christian! You were a child, and you loved your mom.*

He slides on his pajamas, climbs into bed, and gently pulls me into his arms.

"It's coming back to me. I remember the food. Mrs. Collier could cook. And at least we know now why that fucker is so hung up on my family." He runs his free hand through his hair. "Fuck!" he says, suddenly turning to gape at me.

"What?"

"It makes sense now!" His eyes are full of recognition.

"What?"

“Baby Bird. Mrs. Collier used to call me Baby Bird.”

I frown. “That makes sense?”

“The note,” he says, gazing at me. “The ransom note that fucker left. It went something like ‘Do you know who I am? Because I know who you are, Baby Bird.’ ”

This makes no sense to me at all.

“It’s from a kid’s book. Christ. The Colliers had it. It was called … *Are You My Mother?* Shit.” His eyes widen. “I loved that book.”

Oh. I know that book. My heart lurches—*Fifty!*

“Mrs. Collier used to read it to me.”

I am at a loss as to what to say.

“Christ. He knew … that fucker knew.”

“Will you tell the police?”

“Yes. I will. Christ knows what Clark will do with that information.” Christian shakes his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. “Anyway, thank you for this evening.”

*Whoa. Gear change*. “For what?”

“Catering for my family at a moment’s notice.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Mia. And Mrs. Jones, she keeps the pantry well stocked.”

He shakes his head as if in exasperation. At me? Why?

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Grey?”

“Good. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” He frowns … not understanding my concern.

Oh … in that case. I trail my fingers down his stomach to his oh-so-happy trail.

He laughs and grabs my hand. “Oh no. Don’t get any ideas.”

I pout, and he sighs. “Ana, Ana, Ana, what am I going to do with you?” He kisses my hair.

“I have some ideas.” I squirm beside him and wince as pain radiates through my upper body from my bruised ribs.

“Baby, you’ve been through enough. Besides, I have a bedtime story for you.”

*Oh?*

“You wanted to know …” He trails off, closes his eyes, and swallows.

All the hair on my body stands on end. *Shit.*

He begins in a soft voice. “Picture this, an adolescent boy looking to earn some extra money so he can continue his secret drinking habit.” He shifts onto his side so that we’re lying facing each other, and he’s gazing into my eyes.

“So I was in the backyard at the Lincolns’, clearing some rubble and trash

from the extension Mr. Lincoln had just added to their place …”

*Holy fuck* … he’s talking.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I can barely breathe. Do I want to hear this? Christian closes his eyes and swallows. When he opens them again, they are bright but diffident, full of disquieting memories.

"It was a hot summer day. I was working hard." He snorts and shakes his head, suddenly amused. "It was backbreaking work shifting that rubble. I was on my own, and Ele—Mrs. Lincoln appeared out of nowhere and brought me some lemonade. We exchanged small talk, and I made some smart-ass remark … and she slapped me. She slapped me so hard." Unconsciously, his hand moves to his face and he caresses his cheek, his eyes clouding at the memory. *Holy shit!*

"But then she kissed me. And when she finished, she slapped me again." He blinks, seemingly still confounded even after all this time.

"I'd never been kissed before or hit like that."

Oh. She pounced. On a kid.

"Do you want to hear this?" Christians asks.

*Yes … No …*

"Only if you want to tell me." My voice is small as I lie facing him, my mind reeling.

"I'm trying to give you some context."

I nod in what I hope is an encouraging manner. But I suspect I may look like a statue, frozen and wide-eyed with shock.

He frowns, his eyes searching mine, trying to gauge my reaction. Then he turns onto his back and stares up at the ceiling.

"Well, naturally, I was confused and angry and horny as hell. I mean, a hot older woman comes on to you like that—" He shakes his head as if he still can't believe it.

*Hot?* I feel queasy.

"She went back into the house, leaving me in the backyard. She acted as if nothing had happened. I was at a total loss. So I went back to work, loading the rubble into the Dumpster. When I left that evening, she asked me to come back the next day. She didn't mention what had happened. So the next day I went back. I couldn't wait to see her again," he whispers, as if it's a dark

confession … because frankly it is.

"She didn't touch me when she kissed me," he murmurs and turns his head to gaze at me. "You have to understand … my life was hell on earth. I was a walking hard-on, fifteen years old, tall for my age, hormones raging. The girls at school—" He stops, but I've got the picture: a scared, lonely, but attractive adolescent. My heart twists.

"I was angry, so fucking angry at everyone, at myself, my folks. I had no friends. My therapist at the time was a total asshole. My folks, they kept me on a tight leash; they didn't understand." He stares back up at the ceiling and runs a hand through his hair. I itch to run my fingers through his hair, too, but I stay still.

"I just couldn't bear anyone to touch me. I couldn't. Couldn't bear anyone near me. I used to fight … fuck, did I fight. I got into some god-awful brawls. I was expelled from a couple of schools. But it was a way to let off steam. To tolerate some kind of physical contact." He stops again. "Well, you get the idea. And when she kissed me, she only grabbed my face. She didn't touch me." His voice is barely audible.

She must have known. Perhaps Grace had told her. *Oh, my poor Fifty*. I have to fold my hands beneath my pillow and rest my head on it in order to resist the urge to hold him.

"Well, the next day I went back to the house, not knowing what to expect. And I'll spare you the gory details, but there was more of the same. And that's how our relationship started."

Oh, fuck, this is painful to hear.

He shifts again onto his side so he's facing me.

"And you know something, Ana? My world came into focus. Sharp and clear. Everything. It was exactly what I needed. She was a breath of fresh air. Making the decisions, taking all that shit away from me, letting me breathe."

*Holy shit*.

"And even when it was over, my world stayed in focus because of her. And it stayed that way until I met you."

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? Tentatively, he smoothes a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"You turned my world on its head." He closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, they are raw. "My world was ordered, calm, and controlled, then you came into my life with your smart mouth, your innocence, your beauty, and your quiet temerity … and everything before you was just dull, empty, mediocre … it was nothing."

*Oh my*.

“I fell in love,” he whispers.

I stop breathing. He caresses my cheek.

“So did I,” I murmur with the little breath I have left.

His eyes soften. “I know,” he mouths.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

*Hallelujah!* I smile shyly at him. “Finally,” I whisper.

He nods. “And it’s put everything into perspective for me. When I was younger, Elena was the center of my world. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for her. And she did a lot for me. She stopped my drinking. Made me work hard at school … You know, she gave me a coping mechanism I hadn’t had before, allowed me to experience things that I never thought I could.”

“Touch,” I whisper.

He nods. “After a fashion.”

I frown, wondering what he means.

He hesitates at my reaction.

*Tell me!* I will him.

“If you grow up with a wholly negative self-image, thinking you’re some kind of reject, an unlovable savage, you think you deserve to be beaten.”

*Christian … you are none of those things*.

He pauses and runs his hand through his hair. “Ana, it’s much easier to wear your pain on the outside …” Again, it’s a confession.

Oh.

“She channeled my anger.” His mouth presses together in a bleak line. “Mostly inward—I realize that now. Dr. Flynn’s been on and on about this for some time. It was only recently that I saw our relationship for what it was. You know … on my birthday.”

I shudder as the unwelcome memory of Elena and Christian verbally eviscerating each other at Christian’s birthday party surfaces unwelcome in my mind.

“For her that side of our relationship was about sex and control and a lonely woman finding some kind of comfort with her boy toy.”

“But you like control,” I whisper.

“Yes. I do. I always will, Ana. It’s who I am. I surrendered it for a brief while. Let someone make all my decisions for me. I couldn’t do it myself—I wasn’t in a fit state. But through my submission to her, I found myself and found the strength to take charge of my life … take control and make my own decisions.”

“Become a Dom?”

“Yes.”

“Your decision?”

“Yes.”

“Dropping out of Harvard?”

“My decision, and it was the best decision I ever made. Until I met you.”

“Me?”

“Yes.” His lips quirk up in a soft smile. “The best decision I ever made was marrying you.”

*Oh my*. “Not starting your company?”

He shakes his head.

“Not learning to fly?”

He shakes his head. “You,” he mouths. He caresses my cheek with his knuckles. “She knew,” he whispers.

I frown. “She knew what?”

“That I was head over heels in love with you. She encouraged me to go down to Georgia to see you, and I’m glad she did. She thought you’d freak out and leave. Which you did.”

I pale. I’d rather not think about that.

“She thought I needed all the trappings of the lifestyle I enjoyed.”

“The Dom?” I whisper.

He nods. “It enabled me to keep everyone at arm’s length, gave me control, and kept me detached, or so I thought. I’m sure you’ve worked out why,” he adds softly.

“Your birth mom?”

“I didn’t want to be hurt again. And then you left me.” His words are barely audible. “And I was a mess.”

*Oh no*.

“I’ve avoided intimacy for so long—I don’t know how to do this.”

“You’re doing fine,” I murmur. I trace his lips with my index finger. He purses them into a kiss. *You’re talking to me*.

“Do you miss it?” I whisper.

“Miss it?”

“That lifestyle.”

“Yes, I do.”

*Oh!*

“But only insofar as I miss the control it brings. And frankly, your stupid stunt”—he stops—“that saved my sister,” he whispers, his words full of relief, awe, and disbelief. “That’s how I know.”

“Know?”

“Really know that you love me.”

I frown. “You do?”

“Yes. Because you risked so much … for me, for my family.”

My frown deepens. He reaches over and traces his finger over the middle of my brow above my nose.

“You have a *V* here when you frown,” he murmurs. “It’s very soft to kiss. I can behave so badly … and yet you’re still here.”

“Why are you surprised I’m still here? I told you I wasn’t going to leave you.”

“Because of the way I behaved when you told me you were pregnant.” He runs his finger down my cheek. “You were right. I am an adolescent.”

*Oh shit … I did say that.* My subconscious glares at me. *His doctor said that!*

“Christian, I said some awful things.” He puts his index finger over my lips.

“Hush. I deserved to hear them. Besides, this is my bedtime story.” He rolls onto his back again.

“When you told me you were pregnant—” He stops. “I’d thought it would be just you and me for a while. I’d considered children, but only in the abstract. I had this vague idea we’d have a child sometime in the future.”

*Just one? No … Not an only child. Not like me*. Perhaps now’s not the best time to bring that up.

“You are still so young, and I know you’re quietly ambitious.”

*Ambitious? Me?*

“Well, you pulled the rug out from under me. Christ, was that unexpected. Never in a million years, when I asked you what was wrong, did I expect you to be pregnant.” He sighs. “I was so mad. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. And it took me back, that feeling of nothing being in my control. I had to get out. I went to see Flynn, but he was at some school parents’ evening.” Christian pauses and arches an eyebrow.

“Ironic,” I whisper. Christian smirks in agreement.

“So I walked and walked and walked, and I just … found myself at the salon. Elena was leaving. She was surprised to see me. And, truth be told, I was surprised to find myself there. She could tell I was mad and asked me if I wanted a drink.”

Oh shit. We’ve cut to the chase. My heart doubles in speed. *Do I really want to know this?* My subconscious glares at me, a plucked eyebrow raised in warning.

“We went to a quiet bar I know and had a bottle of wine. She apologized for the way she behaved the last time she saw us. She’s hurt that my mom will have nothing to do with her anymore—it’s narrowed her social circle—but she understands. We talked about the business, which is doing fine, in spite of the recession … I mentioned that you wanted kids.”

I frown. “I thought you let her know I was pregnant.”

He regards me, his face guileless. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

He shrugs. “I never got the chance.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I couldn’t find you the next morning, Ana. And when I did, you were so mad at me …”

*Oh yes*. “I was.”

“Anyway, at some point in the evening—about halfway through the second bottle—she leaned over to touch me. And I froze,” he whispers, throwing his arm over his eyes.

My scalp tingles. *What’s this?*

“She saw that I recoiled from her. It shocked both of us.” His voice is low, too low.

Christian, look at me! I tug at his arm and he lowers it, turning to gaze into my eyes. Shit. His face is pale, his eyes wide.

“What?” I breathe.

He frowns and swallows.

*Oh* … what isn’t he telling me? Do I want to know?

“She made a pass at me.” He’s shocked, I can tell.

All the breath is sucked from my body. I feel winded, and I think my heart has stopped. *That fucking Bitch Troll!*

“It was a moment, suspended in time. She saw my expression, and she realized how far she’d crossed the line. I said … no. I haven’t thought of her like that for years, and besides”—he swallows—“I love you. I told her, I love my wife.”

I gaze at him. I don’t know what to say.

“She backed right off. Apologized again, made it seem like a joke. I mean, she said she’s happy with Isaac and with the business and she doesn’t bear either of us any ill will. She said she missed my friendship, but she could see that my life was with you now. And how awkward that was, given what happened the last time we were all in the same room. I couldn’t have agreed with her more. We said our good-byes—our final good-byes. I said I wouldn’t see her again, and she went on her way.”

I swallow, fear gripping my heart. “Did you kiss?”

“No!” he snorts. “I couldn’t bear to be that close to her.”

*Oh. Good*.

“I was miserable. I wanted to come home to you. But … I knew I’d behaved badly. I stayed and finished the bottle, then started on the bourbon. While I was

drinking, I remembered your saying to me some time ago, 'If that was my son …' And I got to thinking about Junior and about how Elena and I started. And it made me feel … uncomfortable. I'd never thought of it like that before."

A memory blossoms in my mind—a whispered conversation from when I was half-conscious—Christian's voice: "*But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know … with the child. For the first time I felt … What we did … it was wrong.*" He'd been speaking to Grace.

"That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"It's over?"

"Yes. It's been over since I laid eyes on you. I finally realized it that night and so did she."

"I'm sorry," I mutter.

He frowns. "What for?"

"Being so angry the next day."

He snorts. "Baby, I understand angry." He pauses, then sighs. "You see, Ana, I want you to myself. I don't want to share you. What we have, I've never had before. I want to be the center of your universe, for a while at least."

*Oh, Christian*. "You are. That's not going to change."

He gives me an indulgent, sad, resigned smile. "Ana," he whispers. "That's just not true."

Tears prick my eyes.

"How can it be?" he murmurs.

Oh no.

"Shit—don't cry, Ana. Please, don't cry." He caresses my face.

"I'm sorry." My lower lip trembles, and he brushes his thumb over it, soothing me.

"No, Ana, no. Don't be sorry. You'll have someone else to love as well. And you're right. That's how it should be."

"Blip will love you, too. You'll be the center of Blip's—Junior's world," I whisper. "Children love their parents unconditionally, Christian. That's how they come into the world. Programmed to love. All babies … even you. Think about that children's book you liked when you were small. You still wanted your mom. You loved her."

He furrows his brow and withdraws his hand, fisting it against his chin.

"No," he whispers.

"Yes. You did." My tears flow freely now. "Of course you did. It wasn't an

option. That's why you're so hurt."

He stares at me, his expression raw.

"That's why you're able to love me," I murmur. "Forgive her. She had her own world of pain to deal with. She was a shitty mother, and you loved her."

He gazes at me, saying nothing, eyes haunted—by memories I can't begin to fathom.

*Oh, please don't stop talking*.

Eventually he says, "I used to brush her hair. She was pretty."

"One look at you and no one would doubt that."

"She was a shitty mother." His voice is barely audible.

I nod and he closes his eyes. "I'm scared I'll be a shitty father."

I stroke his dear face. *Oh, my Fifty, Fifty, Fifty*. "Christian, do you think for one minute I'd let you be a shitty father?"

He opens his eyes and gazes at me for what feels like an eternity. He smiles as relief slowly illuminates his face. "No, I don't think you would." He caresses my face with the backs of his knuckles, gazing at me in wonder. "God, you're strong, Mrs. Grey. I love you so much." He kisses my forehead. "I didn't know I could."

"Oh, Christian," I whisper, trying to contain my emotion.

"Now, that's the end of your bedtime story."

"That's some bedside story …"

He smiles wistfully, but I think he's relieved. "How's your head?"

"My head?" *Actually, it's about to explode with all you've told me!*

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Good. I think you should sleep now."

*Sleep! How can I sleep after all that?*

"Sleep," he says sternly. "You need it."

I pout. "I have one question."

"Oh? What?" He eyes me warily.

"Why have you suddenly become all … forthcoming, for want of a better word?"

He frowns.

"You're telling me all this, when getting information out of you is normally a pretty harrowing and trying experience."

"It is?"

"You know it is."

"Why am I being forthcoming? I can't say. Seeing you practically dead on the cold concrete, maybe. The fact I'm going to be a father. I don't know. You said

you wanted to know, and I don't want Elena to come between us. She can't. She's the past, and I've said that to you so many times."

"If she hadn't made a pass at you … would you still be friends?"

"That's more than one question."

"Sorry. You don't have to tell me." I flush. "You've already volunteered more than I ever thought you would."

His gaze softens. "No, I don't think so, but she's felt like unfinished business since my birthday. She stepped over the line, and I'm done. Please, believe me. I'm not going to see her again. You said she's a hard limit for you. That's a term I understand," he says with quiet sincerity.

Okay. I'm going to let this go now. My subconscious sags into her armchair. *Finally!*

"Good night, Christian. Thank you for the enlightening bedtime story." I lean over to kiss him, and our lips touch briefly, but he pulls back when I try to deepen the kiss.

"Don't," he whispers. "I am desperate to make love to you."

"Then do."

"No, you need to rest, and it's late. Go to sleep." He switches off the bedside light, plunging us into darkness.

"I love you unconditionally, Christian," I murmur as I cuddle into his side.

"I know," he whispers, and I sense his shy smile.

---

I wake with a start. Light is flooding the room, and Christian is not in bed. I glance at the clock and see it's seven fifty-three. I take a deep breath and wince as my ribs smart, though not as badly as yesterday. I think I could go to work. *Work—yes*. I want to go to work.

It's Monday, and I spent all of yesterday lounging about in bed. Christian let me go out only briefly to see Ray. Honestly, he's still such a control freak. I smile fondly. *My control freak*. He's been attentive and loving and chatty … and hands-off since I arrived home. I scowl. I am going to have to do something about this. My head doesn't hurt, the pain around my ribs has eased—though, admittedly, laughing has to be undertaken with caution—but I'm frustrated. I think this is the longest I've gone without sex since … well, since the first time.

I think we've both recovered our equilibrium. Christian is much more relaxed; his long bedtime story seems to have laid some ghosts to rest, for him *and* for me. We'll see.

I shower quickly, and once I'm dry, I browse carefully through my clothes. I want something sexy. Something that might galvanize Christian into action. Who would have thought such an insatiable man could actually exercise so much self-control? I don't really want to dwell on how Christian learned such discipline over his body. We haven't spoken of the Bitch Troll once since his confession. I hope we never do. To me she's dead and buried.

I choose an almost indecently short black skirt and a white silk blouse with a frill. I slide on thigh-highs with lacy tops and my black Louboutin pumps. A little mascara and lip gloss for a natural look, and after a ferocious brushing, I leave my hair loose. Yes. This should do it.

Christian is eating at the breakfast bar. His forkful of omelet stops in midair when he sees me. He frowns.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey. Going somewhere?"

"Work." I smile sweetly.

"I don't think so." Christian snorts with amused derision. "Dr. Singh said a week off."

"Christian, I am not spending the day lounging in bed on my own. So I may as well go to work. Good morning, Gail."

"Mrs. Grey." Mrs. Jones tries to hide a smile. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Please."

"Granola?"

"I'd prefer scrambled eggs with whole wheat toast."

Mrs. Jones grins and Christian registers his surprise.

"Very good, Mrs. Grey," Mrs. Jones says.

"Ana, you are not going to work."

"But—"

"No. It's simple. Don't argue." Christian is adamant. I glare at him, and only then do I notice that he's in the same pajama bottoms and T-shirt he was wearing last night.

"Are you going to work?" I ask.

"No."

*Am I going crazy?* "It is Monday, right?"

He smiles. "Last time I looked."

I narrow my eyes. "Are you playing hooky?"

"I'm not leaving you here on your own to get into trouble. And Dr. Singh said it would be a week before you could go back to work. Remember?"

I slide onto a barstool beside him and hoist my skirt up a little. Mrs. Jones places a cup of tea in front of me.

“You look good,” Christian says. I cross my legs. “Very good. Especially here.” He traces a finger over the bare flesh that shows above my thigh-highs. My pulse quickens as his finger runs across my skin. “This skirt is very short,” he murmurs, vague disapproval in his voice as his eyes follow his finger.

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed.”

Christian gazes at me, his mouth twisted in an amused yet exasperated smirk.

“Really, Mrs. Grey?”

I blush.

“I’m not sure this look is suitable for the workplace,” he murmurs.

“Well, since I’m not going to work, that’s a moot point.”

“Moot?”

“Moot,” I mouth.

Christian smirks again and resumes eating his omelet. “I have a better idea.”

“You do?”

He glances at me through long lashes, gray eyes darkening. I inhale sharply. *Oh my. About time*.

“We can go see how Elliot’s getting on with the house.”

*What? Oh! Tease!* I vaguely remember we were supposed to do that before Ray was injured.

“I’d love to.”

“Good.” He grins.

“Don’t you have to work?”

“No. Ros is back from Taiwan. That all went well. Today, everything’s fine.”

“I thought *you* were going to Taiwan.”

He snorts again. “Ana, you were in the hospital.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah—oh. So today I’m spending some quality time with my wife.” He smacks his lips together as he takes a sip of coffee.

“Quality time?” I can’t disguise the hope in my voice.

Mrs. Jones places my scrambled eggs in front of me, again failing to hide her smile.

Christian smirks. “Quality time.” He nods.

I am too hungry to flirt anymore with my husband.

“It’s good to see you eat,” he murmurs. Rising, he leans over and kisses my hair. “I’m going to shower.”

“Um … can I come and scrub your back?” I mumble through a mouth full of toast and scrambled egg.

“No. Eat.”

Leaving the breakfast bar, he tugs his T-shirt over his head, treating me to the

sight of his finely sculptured shoulders and naked back as he saunters out of the great room. I stop mid-chew. He's doing this on purpose. *Why?*

CHRISTIAN IS RELAXED ON the drive north. We've just left Ray and Mr. Rodriguez watching soccer on the new flat-screen television that I suspect Christian has bought for Ray's hospital room.

Christian has been laid back ever since "the talk." It's as if a weight has been lifted; Mrs. Robinson's shadow no longer looms so large over us, maybe because I've decided to let it go—or because he has, I don't know. But I feel closer to him now than I ever have before. Perhaps because he's finally confided in me. I hope he continues to do so. And he's more accepting of the baby, too. He hasn't gone out and bought a crib yet, but I have high hopes.

I gaze at him, drinking him in as he drives. He looks casual, cool … sexy with his tousled hair, Ray-Bans, pinstripe jacket, white linen shirt, and jeans.

He glances at me and clasps my leg above the knee, his fingers stroking gently. "I'm glad you didn't change."

I did slip on a denim jacket and change to flats, but I'm still wearing the short skirt. His hand lingers above my knee. I put my hand on his.

"Are you going to continue to tease me?"

"Maybe." Christian smiles.

"Why?"

"Because I can." He grins, boyish as ever.

"Two can play that game," I whisper.

His fingers move tantalizingly up my thigh. "Bring it on, Mrs. Grey." His grin broadens.

I pick up his hand and put it back on his knee. "Well, you can keep your hands to yourself."

He smirks. "As you wish, Mrs. Grey."

Damn it. This game is going to backfire on me.

CHRISTIAN TURNS INTO THE driveway of our new house. He stops at the keypad and punches in a number, and the ornate white metal gates swing open. We roar up the tree-lined lane under leaves that are a blend of green, yellow, and burnished copper. The tall grass in the meadow is turning gold, but there are still a few yellow wildflowers dotted among the grass. It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining, and the salty tang of the Sound is mixed with the scent of the coming fall in the air. This is such a tranquil and beautiful place. And to think we're going to make our

home here.

The lane curves around, and our house comes into view. Several large trucks, sides emblazoned with GREY CONSTRUCTION, are parked out front. The house is decked in scaffolding, and several workmen in hard hats are busy on the roof.

Christian pulls up outside the portico and switches off the engine. I can sense his excitement.

"Let's go find Elliot."

"Is he here?"

"I hope so. I'm paying him enough."

I snort, and Christian grins as we get out of the car.

"Yo, bro!" Elliot shouts from somewhere. We both glance around.

"Up here!" He's up on the roof, waving down at us and beaming from ear to ear. "About time we saw you here. Stay where you are. I'll be right down."

I glance at Christian, who shrugs. A few minutes later, Elliot appears at the front door.

"Hey, bro." He shakes Christian's hand. "And how are you, little lady?" He picks me up and swings me around.

"Better, thanks," I giggle breathlessly, my ribs protesting. Christian frowns at him, but Elliot ignores him.

"Let's head over to the site office. You'll need one of these." He taps his hard hat.

THE HOUSE IS A shell. The floors are covered in a hard fibrous material that looks like burlap; some of the original walls have disappeared and new ones have taken their place. Elliot leads us through, explaining what's happening, while men—and a few women—work everywhere around us. I'm relieved to see the stone staircase with its intricate iron balustrade is still in place and draped completely in white dust sheets.

In the main living area, the back wall has been removed to make way for Gia's glass wall, and work is beginning on the terrace. In spite of the mess, the view is still stunning. The new work is sympathetic and in keeping with the old-world charm of the house … Gia's done well. Elliot patiently explains the processes and gives us a rough time frame for each. He's hoping we can be in by Christmas, although Christian thinks this is optimistic.

Holy cow—Christmas overlooking the Sound. I can't wait. A bubble of excitement blooms inside me. I have visions of us trimming an enormous tree while a copper-haired little boy looks on in wonder.

Elliot finishes our tour in the kitchen. "I'll leave you two to roam. Be careful.

This is a building site."

"Sure. Thanks, Elliot," Christian murmurs, taking my hand. "Happy?" he asks once Elliot has left us alone. I am gazing at this empty shell of a room and wondering where I will hang the pepper pictures that we bought in France.

"Very. I love it. You?"

"Ditto." He grins.

"Good. I was thinking of the pepper pictures in here."

Christian nods. "I want to put up José's portraits of you in this house. You need to decide where they should go."

I blush. "Somewhere I won't see them often."

"Don't be like that." He scolds me, brushing his thumb across my bottom lip. "They're my favorite pictures. I love the one in my office."

"I have no idea why," I murmur and kiss the pad of his thumb.

"Worse things to do than look at your beautiful smiling face all day. Hungry?" he asks.

"Hungry for what?" I whisper.

He smirks, his eyes darkening. Hope and desire unfurl in my veins.

"Food, Mrs. Grey." And he plants a swift kiss on my lips.

I give him my faux pout and sigh. "Yes. These days I'm always hungry."

"The three of us can have a picnic."

"Three of us? Is someone joining us?"

Christian cocks his head to one side. "In about seven or eight months."

*Oh … Blip*. I grin goofily at him.

"I thought you might like to eat alfresco."

"In the meadow?" I ask.

He nods.

"Sure." I grin.

"This will be a great place to raise a family," he murmurs, gazing down at me.

*Family! More than one?* Dare I mention this now?

He spreads his fingers over my belly. *Holy shit.* I hold my breath and place my hand over his.

"It's hard to believe," he whispers, and for the first time I hear wonder in his voice.

"I know. Oh—here, I have evidence. A picture."

"You do? Baby's first smile?"

I pull out the ultrasound of Blip from my wallet.

"See?"

Christian examines it closely, staring for several seconds. "Oh … Blip. Yeah, I see." He sounds distracted, awed.

“Your child,” I whisper.

“Our child.” He counters.

“First of many.”

“Many?” Christian’s eyes widen with alarm.

“At least two.”

“Two?” He tests the word. “Can we just take this one child at a time?”

I grin. “Sure.”

We head back outside into the warm fall afternoon.

“When are you going to tell your folks?” Christian asks.

“Soon,” I murmur. “I thought about telling Ray this morning, but Mr. Rodriguez was there.” I shrug.

Christian nods and opens the hood of the R8. Inside are a wicker picnic basket and the tartan blanket we bought in London.

“Come,” he says, taking the basket and blanket in one hand and holding the other out to me. Together we walk into the meadow.

“SURE, ROS, GO FOR it.” Christian hangs up. That’s the third call he’s taken during our picnic. He’s kicked off his shoes and socks and is watching me, arms on his raised knees. His jacket lies discarded on top of mine, as we’re warm in the sun. I lie beside him, stretched out on the picnic blanket, both of us surrounded by tall golden and green grass far from the noise at the house and hidden from the prying eyes of the construction workers. We are in our own bucolic haven. He feeds me another strawberry, and I chew and suck it gratefully, gazing at his darkening eyes.

“Tasty?” he whispers.

“Very.”

“Had enough?”

“Of strawberries, yes.”

His eyes glitter dangerously, and he grins. “Mrs. Jones packs a mighty fine picnic,” he says.

“That she does,” I whisper.

Shifting suddenly, he lies down so his head is resting on my belly. He closes his eyes and seems content. I tangle my fingers in his hair.

He sighs heavily, then scowls and checks the number on the screen of his buzzing BlackBerry. He rolls his eyes and takes the call.

“Welch,” he snaps. He tenses, listens for a second or two, then suddenly bolts upright.

“Twenty-four/seven … Thanks,” he says through gritted teeth and hangs up.

The change in his mood is instant. Gone is my teasing, flirtatious husband, replaced by a cold, calculating master of the universe. He narrows his eyes for a moment, then gives me a cool, chilling smile. A shiver runs down my back. He picks up his BlackBerry and presses a speed dial.

"Ros, how much stock do we own in Lincoln Timber?" He kneels up.

My scalp prickles. *Oh no, what's this?*

"So, consolidate the shares into GEH, then fire the board … except the CEO … I don't give a fuck … I hear you, just do it … thank you … keep me informed." He hangs up and gazes at me impassively for a moment.

Holy shit! Christian is mad.

"What's happened?"

"Linc," he murmurs.

"Linc? Elena's ex?"

"The same. He's the one who posted Hyde's bail."

I gape at Christian in shock. His mouth is pressed in a hard line.

"Well—he'll look like an idiot," I murmur, dismayed. "I mean, Hyde committed another crime while out on bail."

Christian's eyes narrow and he smirks. "Fair point well made, Mrs. Grey."

"What did you just do?" I kneel, facing him.

"I fucked him over."

*Oh!* "Um … that seems a little impulsive," I murmur.

"I'm an in-the-moment kind of guy."

"I'm aware of that."

His eyes narrow and his lips thin. "I've had this plan in my back pocket for a while," he says dryly.

I frown. "Oh?"

He pauses, seeming to weigh something in his mind, then takes a deep breath.

"Several years back, when I was twenty-one, Linc beat his wife to a pulp. He broke her jaw, her left arm, and four of her ribs because she was fucking me." His eyes harden. "And now I learn he posted bail for a man who tried to kill me, kidnapped my sister, and fractured my wife's skull. I've had enough. I think it's payback time."

I blanch. *Holy shit*. "Fair point well made, Mr. Grey," I whisper.

"Ana, this is what I do. I'm not usually motivated by revenge, but I cannot let him get away with this. What he did to Elena … well, she should have pressed charges, but she didn't. That was her prerogative.

"But he's seriously crossed the line with Hyde. Linc's made this personal by going after my family. I'm going to crush him, break up his company right under his nose, and sell the pieces to the highest bidder. I am going to bankrupt him."

*Oh* …

"Besides." Christian smirks. "We'll make good money out of the deal."

I stare into blazing gray eyes that soften suddenly.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he whispers.

"You didn't," I lie.

He arches a brow, amused.

"You just took me by surprise," I whisper, then swallow. Christian is really quite scary sometimes.

He brushes his lips against mine. "I will do anything to keep you safe. Keep my family safe. Keep this little one safe," he murmurs and splays his hand out over my belly in a gentle caress.

*Oh* … I stop breathing. Christian gazes down at me, his eyes darkening. His lips part as he inhales and, in a deliberate move, the tips of his fingers brush against my sex.

*Holy shit*. Desire detonates like an incendiary device igniting my bloodstream. I grasp his head, my fingers weaving into his hair, and tug hard so my lips find his. He gasps, surprised by my assault, giving my tongue free passage into his mouth. He groans and kisses me back, his lips and tongue hungry for mine, and for a moment we consume each other, lost in tongues and lips and breaths and sweet, sweet sensation as we rediscover each other.

Oh, I want this man. It's been too long. I want him here, now, in the open air, in our meadow.

"Ana," he breathes, entranced, and his hand skims over my backside to the hem of my skirt. I scramble to unbutton his shirt, all fingers and thumbs.

"Whoa, Ana—stop." He pulls back, his jaw clenched, and grabs my hands.

"No." My teeth clamp gently around his lower lip and I tug. "No," I murmur again, gazing at him. I release him. "I want you."

He inhales sharply. He's torn, his indecision writ large in his luminous gray eyes.

"Please, I need you." Every pore of my being is begging. *This is what we do*.

He groans in defeat as his mouth finds mine, molding my lips to his. One hand cradles my head while the other skims down my body to my waist, and he eases me onto my back and stretches out beside me, never breaking contact with my mouth.

He pulls back, hovering over me and gazing down. "You are so beautiful, Mrs. Grey."

I caress his lovely face. "So are you, Mr. Grey. Inside and out."

He frowns, and my fingers trace the furrow in his brow.

"Don't frown. You are to me, even when you're angry," I whisper.

He groans once more, and his mouth captures mine, pushing me into the soft grass beneath the blanket.

"I've missed you," he whispers, and his teeth graze my jaw. My heart soars.

"I've missed you, too. Oh, Christian." I fist one hand in his hair and clutch his shoulder with the other.

His lips move to my throat, leaving tender kisses in their wake, and his fingers follow, deftly undoing each button of my blouse. Tugging my blouse apart, he kisses the soft swell of my breasts. He murmurs appreciatively, low in his throat, and the sound echoes through my body to my deep dark places.

"Your body's changing," he whispers. His thumb teases my nipple until it's erect and straining against my bra. "I like," he adds. I watch his tongue taste and trace the line between my bra and my breast, tantalizing and teasing me. Taking my bra cup delicately between his teeth, he pulls it down, freeing my breast and nuzzling my nipple with his nose in the process. It puckers at his touch and from the chill of the gentle fall breeze. His lips close around me, and he sucks long and hard.

"Ah!" I groan, inhaling sharply, then wincing as pain radiates outward from my bruised ribs.

"Ana!" Christian exclaims and glares down at me, concern etched on his face. "This is what I'm talking about," he admonishes. "Your lack of self-preservation. I don't want to hurt you."

"No … don't stop," I whimper. He stares at me, warring with himself. "Please."

"Here." Abruptly he moves, and I'm sitting astride him, my short skirt now bunched up around my hips. His hands glide over the tops of my thigh-highs.

"There. That's better, and I can enjoy the view." He reaches up and hooks his long index finger into my other bra cup, freeing that breast, too. He grasps both of my breasts, and I throw my head back, pushing them into his welcome, expert hands. He teases me, tugging and rolling my nipples until I cry out, then sits up so we're nose to nose, his greedy gray eyes on mine. He kisses me, his fingers still teasing me. I scramble for his shirt, undoing the first two buttons, and it's like sensory overload—I want to be kissing him everywhere, undressing him, making love with him all at once.

"Hey—" He gently grasps my head and pulls back, eyes dark and full of sensual promise. "There's no rush. Take it slow. I want to savor you."

"Christian, it's been so long." I'm panting.

"Slow," he whispers, and it's a command. He kisses the right corner of my mouth. "Slow." He kisses the left corner. "Slow, baby." He tugs my bottom lip with his teeth. "Let's take this slow." He unfurls his fingers in my hair, keeping

me in place as his tongue invades my mouth, seeking, tasting, calming … inflaming. Oh, my man can kiss.

I caress his face, my fingers moving tentatively down to his chin and then to his throat, and I start again on the buttons of his shirt, taking my time, as he continues to kiss me. Slowly I pull his shirt apart, my fingers trailing over his clavicles, feeling their way across his warm, silky skin. I push him gently back until he's lying beneath me. Sitting up, I gaze down at him, aware that I'm squirming against his growing erection. *Hmm*. I trace my fingers across his lips to his jaw, then down his neck and over his Adam's apple to that little dip at the base of his throat. *My beautiful man*. I lean down, and my kisses follow the tips of my fingers. My teeth graze his jaw and kiss his throat. He closes his eyes.

"Ah." He groans and tilts his head back, giving me easier access to the base of his throat, his mouth slack and open in silent veneration. Christian lost and aroused is just so exhilarating … and so arousing to me.

My tongue trails down his sternum, twirling through his chest hair. *Hmm*. He tastes so good. He smells so good. Intoxicating. I kiss first one, then two of his small round scars, and he grasps my hips, so my fingers halt on his chest as I gaze down at him. His breathing is harsh.

"You want this? Here?" he breathes, his eyes hooded with a heady combination of love and lust.

"Yes," I murmur, and my lips and tongue graze across his chest to his nipple. I pull and roll it gently with my teeth.

"Oh, Ana," he whispers and, circling my waist, he lifts me, tugging at his button and fly so he springs free. He sits me down again, and I push against him, delighting in the feel of him hot and hard beneath me. He runs his hands up my thighs, pausing where my thigh-highs stop and my flesh begins, his hands running small, teasing circles at the tops of my thighs so that the tips of his thumbs touch me … touch me where I want to be touched. I gasp.

"I hope you're not attached to your underwear," he murmurs, his eyes wild and bright. His fingers trace the elastic along my belly and then slide inside, teasing me, before grabbing my panties tightly and pushing his thumbs through the delicate material. My panties disintegrate. His hands splay out on my thighs, and his thumbs brush against my sex once more. He flexes his hips so his erection rubs against me.

"I can feel how wet you are." His voice is tinged with carnal appreciation, and he suddenly sits up, his arm around my waist again, so we're nose to nose. He rubs his nose against mine.

"We're going to take this slow, Mrs. Grey. I want to feel all of you." He lifts me, and with exquisite, frustrating, slow ease, lowers me onto him. I feel each

blessed inch of him fill me.

"Ah—" I moan incoherently as I reach out to clasp his arms. I try to lift myself off him for some welcome friction, but he holds me in place.

"All of me," he whispers and tilts his pelvis, pushing himself into me all the way. I throw my head back and let out a strangled cry of pure pleasure.

"Let me hear you," he murmurs. "No—don't move, just feel."

I open my eyes, my mouth frozen in a silent *Ah!* And he's gazing at me, hooded, licentious gray eyes into dazed blue. He shifts, rolling his hips, but holds me in place.

I groan. His lips are at my throat, kissing me.

"This is my favorite place. Buried in you," he murmurs against my skin.

"Please, move," I plead.

"Slow, Mrs. Grey." He flexes his hips again and pleasure radiates through me. I cup his face and kiss him, consuming him.

"Love me. Please, Christian."

His teeth skim my jaw up to my ear. "Go," he whispers, and he lifts me up and down. My inner goddess is unleashed, and I push him down on the ground and start to move, savoring the feeling of him inside me … riding him … riding him hard. With his hands around my waist he matches my rhythm. I have missed this … the heady feeling of him beneath me, inside me … the sun on my back, the sweet smell of fall in the air, the gentle autumnal breeze. It's a heady fusion of senses: touch, taste, smell, and the sight of my beloved husband beneath me.

"Oh, Ana." He groans, eyes closed, head back, mouth open.

*Ah … I love this*. And inside, I'm building … building … climbing … higher. Christian's hands move to my thighs, and delicately his thumbs press at their apex, and I explode around him over and over and over and over, and I collapse, sprawled on his chest as he cries out in turn, letting go and calling out my name with love and joy.

HE CUDDLES ME AGAINST his chest, cradling my head. *Hmm*. Closing my eyes, I savor the feel of his arms around me. My hand is on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart as it slows and calms. I kiss and nuzzle him, and marvel briefly that not long ago he would not have let me do this.

"Better?" he whispers. I raise my head. He's grinning broadly.

"Much. You?" My answering grin reflects his.

"I've missed you, Mrs. Grey." He's serious for a moment.

"Me, too."

"No more heroics, eh?"

“No,” I promise.

“You should always talk to me,” he whispers.

“Back at you, Grey.”

He smirks. “Fair point well made. I’ll try.” He kisses my hair.

“I think we’re going to be happy here,” I whisper, closing my eyes again.

“Yep. You, me and … Blip. How do you feel, incidentally?”

“Fine. Relaxed. Happy.”

“Good.”

“You?”

“Yeah, all those things,” he murmurs.

I look up at him, trying to gauge his expression.

“What?” he asks.

“You know, you’re very bossy when we have sex.”

“Are you complaining?”

“No. I’m just wondering … you said you missed it.”

He stills, gazing at me. “Sometimes,” he whispers.

*Oh*. “Well, we’ll have to see what we can do about that,” I murmur and kiss him lightly on his lips, curling around him like a vine. Images of us together, in the playroom; the Tallis, the table, on the cross, shackled to the bed … I love his kinky fuckery—our kinky fuckery. Yes. I can do that stuff. I can do that for him, with him. *I can do that for me*. My skin tingles as I remember the riding crop.

“I like to play, too,” I murmur, and glancing up, I’m treated to his shy smile.

“You know, I’d really like to test your limits,” he whispers.

“My limits for what?”

“Pleasure.”

“Oh, I think I’d like that.”

“Well, maybe when we get home,” he whispers, leaving that promise hanging between us.

I nuzzle him once more. I love him so.

---

It’s been two days since our picnic. Two days since the promise of *well, maybe when we get home* was made. Christian is still treating me like I’m made of glass. He still won’t let me go to work, so I have been working from home. I put the stack of query letters I’ve been reading aside on my desk and sigh. Christian and I haven’t been back in the playroom since I safe-worded. And he’s said he misses it. Well, so do I … especially now that he wants to explore my limits. I

flush, thinking what that could possibly entail. I glance at the billiards table … Yes, I can't wait to explore those.

My thoughts are interrupted by soft, lyrical music that fills the apartment. Christian is playing the piano; not one of his usual laments but a sweet melody, a hopeful melody—one that I recognize, but have never heard him play.

I tiptoe to the archway of the great room and watch Christian at the piano. It's dusk. The sky is an opulent pink, and the light is reflected off his burnished copper hair. He looks his beautiful breathtaking self, concentrating as he plays, unaware of my presence. He's been so forthcoming over the last few days, so attentive—offering small insights into his day, his thoughts, his plans. It's as if he's breached a dam and started talking.

I know he'll come to check on me in a few minutes, and it gives me an idea. Excited, I steal away, hoping that he still hasn't noticed me, and race to our room, stripping off my clothes as I go, until I'm wearing nothing but pale blue lace panties. I find a pale blue camisole and slip into it quickly. It will hide my bruise. Diving into the closet, I pull out Christian's faded jeans—his playroom jeans, my favorite jeans—from the drawer. From my bedside table I pick up my BlackBerry, fold the jeans neatly, and kneel by the bedroom door. The door is ajar, and I can hear the strains of another piece, one I don't know. But it's another hopeful tune; it's lovely. Quickly I type an e-mail.

---

**From:** Anastasia Grey
**Subject:** My Husband's Pleasure
**Date:** September 21 2011 20:45
**To:** Christian Grey

Sir

I await your instructions.

Yours always

Mrs. G x

I press "send."

A few moments later the music stops abruptly. My heart lurches and starts pounding. I wait and wait and eventually my BlackBerry buzzes.

---

**From:** Christian Grey
**Subject:** My Husband's Pleasure <——love this title, baby
**Date:** September 21 2011 20:48

**To:** Anastasia Grey

Mrs. G

I'm intrigued. I'll come find you.

Be ready.

Christian Grey
Anticipative CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.

*Be ready!* My heart starts to pound and I begin to count. Thirty-seven seconds later the door opens. I'm looking down at his bare feet as they pause on the threshold. *Hmm*. He says nothing. For ages he says nothing. *Oh shit*. I resist the urge to look up at him and keep my eyes downcast.

Finally, he reaches down and picks up his jeans. He stays silent but heads into the walk-in closet while I remain stock-still. *Oh my … this is it*. My heart is thundering, and I relish the rush of adrenaline that spikes through my body. I squirm as my excitement builds. What will he do to me? A few moments later he's back, wearing the jeans.

"So you want to play?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

He says nothing, and I risk a quick glance … up his jeans, his denim clad thighs, the soft bulge at his fly, the open button at the waist, his happy trail, his navel, his chiseled abdomen, his chest hair, his gray eyes blazing, and his head cocked to one side. He's arching an eyebrow. *Oh shit*.

"Yes what?" he whispers.

*Oh*.

"Yes, Sir."

His eyes soften. "Good girl," he murmurs, and he caresses my head. "I think we'd better get you upstairs now," he adds. My insides liquefy, and my belly clenches in that delicious way.

He takes my hand and I follow him through the apartment and up the stairs. Outside the playroom door, he halts and bends and kisses me gently before grasping my hair hard.

"You know, you're topping from the bottom," he murmurs against my lips.

"What?" I don't understand what he's talking about.

"Don't worry. I'll live with it," he whispers, amused, and he runs his nose along my jaw and gently bites my ear. "Once inside, kneel, like I've shown you."

“Yes … Sir.”

He gazes down at me, eyes shining with love, wonder, and wicked thoughts.

Jeez … Life is never going to be boring with Christian, and I’m in this for the long haul. I love this man: my husband, my lover, father of my child, my sometimes Dominant … my Fifty Shades.

## EPILOGUE

*The Big House, May 2014*

I lie on our tartan picnic blanket and gaze up at the clear, blue, summer sky, my view framed by meadow flowers and tall green grasses. The heat of the afternoon summer sun warms my skin, my bones, and my belly, and I relax, my body turning to Jell-O. This is comfortable. Hell no … this is wonderful. I savor the moment, a moment of peace, a moment of pure and utter contentment. I should feel guilty for feeling this joy, this completeness, but I don't. Life right here, right now, is good, and I've learned to appreciate it and live in the moment like my husband. I smile and squirm as my mind drifts to the delicious memory of last night at our home in Escala …

---

The strands of the flogger skim across my swollen belly at an aching, languorous pace.

"Have you had enough yet, Ana?" Christian whispers in my ear.

"Oh, please." I beg, pulling on the restraints above my head as I stand blindfolded and tethered to the grid in the playroom.

The flogger's sweet sting bites into my behind.

"Please what?"

I gasp. "Please, Sir."

Christian places his hand over my ringing skin and rubs gently.

"There. There. There." His words are soft. His hand moves south and around, and his fingers slide inside me.

I groan.

"Mrs. Grey," he breathes, and his teeth pull on my earlobe. "You're so ready."

His fingers slide in and out of me, hitting that spot, that sweet, sweet spot again. The flogger clatters onto the floor and his hand moves over my belly and up to my breasts. I tense. They are sensitive.

"Hush," Christian says, cupping one, and he gently brushes his thumb over my nipple.

"Ah."

His fingers are gentle and enticing, and pleasure spirals out from my breast, down, down … deep down. I tilt my head back, pushing my nipple into his palm, and moan once more.

"I like to hear you," Christian whispers. His erection is at my hip, the buttons of his fly pressing into my flesh as his fingers continue their relentless assault: in, out, in, out—keeping a rhythm. "Shall I make you come like this?" he asks.

"No."

His fingers stop moving inside me.

"Really, Mrs. Grey? Is it up to you?" His fingers tighten around my nipple.

"No … No, Sir."

"That's better."

"Ah. Please," I beg.

"What do you want, Anastasia?"

"You. Always."

He inhales sharply.

"All of you," I add, breathless.

He eases his fingers out of me, pulls me around to face him, and removes the blindfold. I blink up into darkening gray eyes that burn into mine. His index fingers trace my bottom lip, and he pushes his index and middle fingers into my mouth, letting me taste the salty tang of my arousal.

"Suck," he whispers. I swirl my tongue around and between his fingers.

*Hmm … even I taste good on his fingers*.

His hands skim up my arms to the cuffs above my head, and he unclips them, freeing me. Turning me around so I'm facing the wall, he tugs on my braid, pulling me into his arms. He angles my head to one side and skims his lips up my throat to my ear while holding me flush against him.

"I want in your mouth." His voice is soft and seductive. My body, ripe and ready, clenches deep inside. The pleasure is sweet and sharp.

I moan. Turning to face him, I pull his head down to mine and kiss him hard, my tongue invading his mouth, tasting and savoring him. He groans, places his hands on my behind and tugs me against him, but only my pregnant belly touches him. I bite his jaw and trail kisses down his throat and run my fingers down to his jeans. He tilts his head back, exposing more of his throat to me, and I run my tongue down to his chest and through his chest hair.

"Ah."

I tug the waistband of his jeans, the buttons popping, and he grasps my shoulders as I sink to my knees in front of him.

As I gaze up at him through my lashes, he stares down at me. His eyes are dark, his lips parted, and he inhales deeply when I free him and ensnare him with

my mouth. I love doing this to Christian. Watching him come apart, hearing his breath hitch, and the soft moans he makes deep in his throat. I close my eyes and suck hard, pressing down on him, relishing his taste and his breathless gasp.

He grasps my head, stilling me, and I sheath my teeth with my lips and push him deeper into my mouth.

"Open your eyes and look at me," he orders, his voice low.

Blazing eyes meet mine and he flexes his hips, filling my mouth to the back of my throat then withdrawing quickly. He pushes into me again and I reach up to grab him. He stops and holds me in place.

"Don't touch or I'll cuff you again. I just want your mouth," he growls.

Oh my. *Like that is it?* I put my hands behind my back and gaze up at him innocently with my mouth full.

"Good girl," he says, smirking down at me, his voice hoarse. He eases back, and holding me gently but firmly, he pushes into me again. "You have such a fuckable mouth, Mrs. Grey." He closes his eyes and eases into my mouth as I squeeze him between my lips, running my tongue over and around him. I take him deeper and withdraw, again and again and again, the air hissing between his teeth.

"Ah! Stop," he says, and he pulls out of me, leaving me wanting more. He grasps my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. Grabbing my braid, he kisses me hard, his persistent tongue greedy and giving at once. Suddenly he releases me, and before I know it, he's lifted me into his arms and moved over to the four-poster. Gently, he lays me down so that my behind is just on the edge of the bed.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he orders. I do and pull him toward me. He leans down, hands either side of my head, and still standing, very slowly eases himself into me.

Oh, that feels so good. I close my eyes and revel in his slow possession.

"Okay?" he asks, his concern evident in his tone.

"Oh, God, Christian. Yes. Yes. Please." I tighten my legs around him and push against him. He groans. I clasp his arms, and he flexes his hips slowly at first, in, out.

"Christian, please. Harder—I won't break."

He groans and starts to move, really move, pounding into me again and again. Oh, it's heavenly.

"Yes," I gasp, tightening my hold on him as I start to build … He moans, grinding into me with renewed determination … and I'm close. *Oh, please. Don't stop*.

"Come on, Ana," he groans through gritted teeth, and I explode around him, my orgasm going on and on and on. I call out his name and Christian stills,

groaning loudly, as he climaxes inside me.

"Ana," he cries.

---

CHRISTIAN LIES BESIDE ME, his hand caressing my belly, his long fingers splayed out wide.

"How's my daughter?"

"She's dancing." I laugh.

"Dancing? Oh yes! Wow. I can feel her." He grins as Blip Two somersaults inside me.

"I think she likes sex already."

Christian frowns. "Really?" he says dryly. He moves so his lips are against my bump. "There'll be none of that until you're thirty, young lady."

I giggle. "Oh, Christian, you are such a hypocrite."

"No, I'm an anxious father." He gazes up at me, his brow furrowed, betraying his anxiety.

"You're a wonderful father, as I knew you would be." I caress his lovely face, and he gives me his shy smile.

"I like this," he murmurs, stroking then kissing my belly. "There's more of you."

I pout. "I don't like more of me."

"It's great when you come."

"Christian!"

"And I'm looking forward to the taste of breast milk again."

"Christian! You are such a kinky—"

He swoops on me suddenly, kissing me hard, throwing his leg over mine, and grabbing my hands so they are above my head. "You love the kinky fuckery," he whispers, and he runs his nose down mine.

I grin, caught in his infectious, wicked smile. "Yes, I love the kinky fuckery. And I love you. Very much."

---

I jerk awake, woken by a high-pitched squeal of delight from my son, and even though I can't see him or Christian, I grin like an idiot with my glee. Ted has woken from his nap, and he and Christian are romping nearby. I lie quietly, still marveling at Christian's capacity for play. His patience with Teddy is

extraordinary—much more so than with me. I snort. But then, that's how it should be. And my beautiful little boy, the apple of his mother's and father's eyes, knows no fear. Christian, on the other hand, is still too overprotective—of both of us. My sweet, mercurial, controlling Fifty.

"Let's find Mommy. She's here in the meadow somewhere."

Ted says something I don't hear, and Christian laughs freely, happily. It's a magical sound, filled with his paternal joy. I can't resist. I struggle up onto my elbows to spy on them from my hiding place in the long grass.

Christian is swinging Ted around and around, making him squeal once more in delight. He stops, launches him high into the air—I stop breathing—then he catches him. Ted shrieks with childish abandon and I breathe a sigh of relief. Oh, my little man, my darling little man, always on the go.

" 'Gain, Daddy!" he squeals. Christian obliges, and my heart leaps into my mouth once more as he tosses Teddy into the air and then catches him again, clutching him close. Christian kisses Ted's copper-colored hair and blows a kiss on his cheek, then tickles him mercilessly for a moment. Teddy howls with laughter, squirming and pushing against Christian's chest, wanting out of his arms. Grinning, Christian sets him on the ground.

"Let's find Mommy. She's hiding in the grass."

Ted beams, enjoying the game, and looks around the meadow. Grasping Christian's hand, he points to somewhere I'm not, and it makes me giggle. I lie back down quickly, delighting in this game.

"Ted, I heard Mommy. Did you hear her?"

"Mommy!"

I giggle-snort at Ted's imperious tone. Jeez—so like his dad, and he's only two.

"Teddy!" I call back, gazing up at the sky with a ridiculous grin on my face.

"Mommy!"

All too soon I hear their footsteps trampling through the meadow, and first Ted then Christian bursts through the long grass.

"Mommy!" Ted screeches as if he's found the lost treasure of the Sierra Madre, and he leaps on me.

"Hey, baby boy!" I cradle him against me and kiss his chubby cheek. He giggles and kisses me in return, then struggles out of my arms.

"Hello, Mommy." Christian smiles down at me.

"Hello, Daddy." I grin, and he picks Ted up and sits down beside me with our son in his lap.

"Gently with Mommy," he admonishes Ted. I smirk—the irony is not lost on me. From his pocket, Christian produces his BlackBerry and gives it to Ted. This

will probably win us five minutes of peace, maximum. Teddy studies it, his little brow furrowed. He looks so serious, blue eyes concentrating hard, just like his daddy does when he reads his e-mails. Christian nuzzles Ted's hair, and my heart swells to look at them both. Two peas in a pod: my son sitting quietly—for a few moments at least—in my husband's lap. My two favorite men in the whole world.

Of course, Ted is the most beautiful and talented child on the planet, but then I am his mother so I would think that. And Christian is … well, Christian is just himself. In white T-shirt and jeans, he looks as hot as usual. What did I do to win such a prize?

"You look well, Mrs. Grey."

"As do you, Mr. Grey."

"Isn't Mommy pretty?" Christian whispers in Ted's ear. Ted swats him away, more interested in Daddy's BlackBerry.

I giggle. "You can't get around him."

"I know." Christian grins and kisses Ted's hair. "I can't believe he'll be two tomorrow." His tone is wistful. Reaching across, he spreads his hand over my bump. "Let's have lots of children," he says.

"One more at least." I grin, and he caresses my belly.

"How is my daughter?"

"She's good. Asleep, I think."

"Hello, Mr. Grey. Hi, Ana."

We both turn to see Sophie, Taylor's ten-year-old daughter, appear out of the long grass.

"Soeee," Ted squeals with delighted recognition. He struggles out of Christian's lap, discarding the BlackBerry.

"I have some popsicles from Gail," Sophie says. "Can I give one to Ted?"

"Sure," I say. Oh dear, this is going to be messy.

"Pop!" Ted holds out his hands and Sophie passes one to him. It's dripping already.

"Here—let Mommy see." I sit up, take the popsicle from Ted, and quickly slip it into my mouth, licking off the excess juice. Hmm … cranberry, cool and delicious.

"Mine!" Ted protests, his voice ringing with indignation.

"Here you go." I hand him back a slightly less runny popsicle, and it goes straight into his mouth. He grins.

"Can Ted and I go for a walk?" Sophie asks.

"Sure."

"Don't go too far."

“No, Mr. Grey.” Sophie’s hazel eyes are wide and serious. I think she’s a little frightened of Christian. She holds her hand out, and Teddy takes it willingly. They trudge away together through the long grass.

Christian watches them.

“They’ll be fine, Christian. What harm could come to them here?” He frowns at me momentarily, and I crawl over into his lap.

“Besides, Ted is completely smitten with Sophie.”

Christian snorts and nuzzles my hair. “She’s a delightful child.”

“She is. So pretty, too. A blonde angel.”

Christian stills and places his hands on my belly. “Girls, eh?” There’s a hint of trepidation in his voice. I curl my hand behind his head.

“You don’t have to worry about your daughter for at least another three months. I have her covered here. Okay?”

He kisses me behind my ear and scrapes his teeth around the edge to the lobe.

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Grey.” Then he bites me. I yelp.

“I enjoyed last night,” he says. “We should do that more often.”

“Me, too.”

“And we could, if you stopped working …”

I roll my eyes and he tightens his arms around me and grins into my neck.

“Are you rolling your eyes at me, Mrs. Grey?” His threat is implicit but sensual, making me squirm, but as we’re in the middle of the meadow with the kids nearby, I ignore his invitation.

“Grey Publishing has an author on the *New York Times* bestsellers list—Boyce Fox’s sales are phenomenal, the e-book side of our business has exploded, and I finally have the team I want around me.”

“And you’re making money in these difficult times,” Christian adds, his voice reflecting his pride. “But … I like you barefoot and pregnant and in my kitchen.”

I lean back so I can see his face. He gazes down at me, eyes bright.

“I like that, too,” I murmur, and he kisses me, his hands still spread across my bump.

Seeing he’s in a good mood, I decide to broach a delicate subject. “Have you thought any more about my suggestion?”

He stills. “Ana, the answer is no.”

“But Ella is such a lovely name.”

“I am not naming my daughter after my mother. No. End of discussion.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Grasping my chin, he gazes earnestly down at me, radiating exasperation. “Ana, give it up. I don’t want my daughter tainted by my past.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.” Shit … I don’t want to anger him.

“That’s better. Stop trying to fix it,” he mutters. “You got me to admit I loved her, you dragged me to her grave. Enough.”

Oh no. I twist in his lap to straddle him and grasp his head in my hands.

“I’m sorry. Really. Don’t be angry with me, please.” I kiss him, then kiss the corner of his mouth. After a beat, he points to the other corner, and I smile and kiss it. He points to his nose. I kiss that. He grins and places his hands on my backside.

“Oh, Mrs. Grey—what am I going to do with you?”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” I murmur. He grins and, twisting suddenly, he pushes me down onto the blanket.

“How about I do it now?” he whispers with a salacious smile.

“Christian!” I gasp.

Suddenly there’s a high-pitched cry from Ted. Christian leaps to his feet with a panther’s easy grace and races toward the source of the sound. I follow at a more leisurely pace. Secretly, I’m not as concerned as Christian—it was not a cry that would make me take the stairs two at a time to find out what’s wrong.

Christian swings Teddy up into his arms. Our little boy is crying inconsolably and pointing to the ground, where the remains of his popsicle lie in a soggy mess, melting into the grass.

“He dropped it,” Sophie says, sadly. “He could have had mine, but I’ve finished it.”

“Oh, Sophie darling, don’t worry.” I stroke her hair.

“Mommy!” Ted wails, holding his hands out to me. Christian reluctantly lets him go as I reach for him.

“There, there.”

“Pop,” he sobs.

“I know, baby boy. We’ll go see Mrs. Taylor and get another one.” I kiss his head … oh, he smells so good. He smells of my baby boy.

“Pop,” he sniffs. I take his hand and kiss his sticky fingers.

“I can taste your popsicle here on your fingers.”

Ted stops crying and examines his hand.

“Put your fingers in your mouth.”

He does. “Pop!”

“Yes. Popsicle.”

He grins. My mercurial little boy, just like his dad. Well, at least he has an excuse—he’s only two.

“Shall we go see Mrs. Taylor?” He nods, smiling his beautiful baby smile. “Will you let Daddy carry you?” He shakes his head and wraps his arms around my neck, hugging me tightly, his face pressed against my throat.

“I think Daddy wants to taste popsicle, too,” I whisper in Ted’s little ear. Ted frowns at me, then looks at his hand and holds it out to Christian. Christian smiles and puts Ted’s fingers in his mouth.

“Hmm … tasty.”

Ted giggles and reaches up, wanting Christian to hold him. Christian grins at me and takes Ted in his arms, settling him on his hip.

“Sophie, where’s Gail?”

“She was in the big house.”

I glance at Christian. His smile has turned bittersweet, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

“You’re so good with him,” he murmurs.

“This little one?” I ruffle Ted’s hair. “It’s only because I have the measure of you Grey men.” I smirk at my husband.

He laughs. “Yes, you do, Mrs. Grey.”

Teddy squirms out of Christian’s hold. Now he wants to walk, my stubborn little man. I take one of his hands, and his dad takes the other, and together we swing Teddy between us all the way back to the house, Sophie skipping along in front of us.

I wave to Taylor who, on a rare day off, is outside the garage, dressed in jeans and a wife-beater, as he tinkers with an old motorbike.

---

I pause outside the door to Ted’s room and listen as Christian reads to Ted. “I am the Lorax! I speak for the trees …”

WHEN I PEEK IN, Teddy is fast asleep while Christian continues to read. He glances up when I open the door and closes the book. He puts his finger to his lips and switches on the baby monitor beside Ted’s crib. He adjusts Ted’s bedclothes, strokes his cheek, then straightens up and tiptoes over to me without making a sound. It’s hard not to giggle at him.

Out in the hallway, Christian pulls me into his embrace. “God, I love him, but it’s great when he’s asleep,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

He gazes down at me, eyes soft. “I can hardly believe he’s been with us for two years.”

“I know.” I kiss him, and for a moment, I’m transported back to Teddy’s

birth: the emergency caesarian, Christian's crippling anxiety, Dr. Greene's no-nonsense calm when my Little Blip was in distress. I shudder inwardly at the memory.

---

"Mrs. Grey, you've been in labor for fifteen hours now. Your contractions have slowed in spite of the Pitocin. We need to do a C-section—the baby is in distress." Dr. Greene is adamant.

"About fucking time!" Christian growls at her. Dr. Greene ignores him.

"Christian, quiet." I squeeze his hand. My voice is low and weak and everything is fuzzy—the walls, the machines, the green-gowned people … I just want to go to sleep. But I have something important to do first … Oh yes. "I wanted to push him out myself."

"Mrs. Grey, please. C-section."

"Please, Ana," Christian pleads.

"Can I sleep then?"

"Yes, baby, yes." It's almost a sob, and Christian kisses my forehead.

"I want to see the Lil' Blip."

"You will."

"Okay," I whisper.

"Finally," Dr. Greene mutters. "Nurse, page the anesthesiologist. Dr. Miller, prep for a C-section. Mrs. Grey, we are going to move you to the OR."

"Move?" Christian and I speak at once.

"Yes. Now."

And suddenly we're moving—quickly, the lights on the ceiling blurring into one long bright strip as I'm whisked across the corridor.

"Mr. Grey, you'll need to change into scrubs."

"What?"

"Now, Mr. Grey."

He squeezes my hand and releases me.

"Christian," I call, panic setting in.

We are through another set of doors, and in no time a nurse is setting up a screen across my chest. The door opens and closes, and there's so many people in the room. It's so loud … I want to go home.

"Christian?" I search the faces in the room for my husband.

"He'll be with you in a moment, Mrs. Grey."

A moment later, he's beside me, in blue scrubs, and I reach for his hand.

“I’m frightened,” I whisper.

“No, baby, no. I’m here. Don’t be frightened. Not my strong Ana.” He kisses my forehead, and I can tell by the tone of his voice that something’s wrong.

“What is it?”

“What?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine. Baby, you’re just exhausted.” His eyes burn with fear.

“Mrs. Grey, the anesthesiologist is here. He’s going to adjust your epidural, and then we can proceed.”

“She’s having another contraction.”

Everything tightens like a steel band around my belly. Shit! I crush Christian’s hand as I ride it out. This is what’s tiring—enduring this pain. I am so tired. I can feel the numbing liquid spread … spread down. I concentrate on Christian’s face. On the furrow between his brows. He’s tense. He’s worried. *Why is he worried?*

“Can you feel this, Mrs. Grey?” Dr. Greene’s disembodied voice is coming from behind the curtain.

“Feel what?”

“You can’t feel it.”

“No.”

“Good. Dr. Miller, let’s go.”

“You’re doing well, Ana.”

Christian is pale. There is sweat on his brow. He’s scared. *Don’t be scared, Christian. Don’t be scared.*

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Oh, Ana,” he sobs. “I love you, too, so much.”

I feel a strange pulling deep inside. Like nothing I’ve felt before. Christian looks over the screen and blanches, but stares, fascinated.

“What’s happening?”

“Suction! Good …”

Suddenly, there’s a piercing angry cry.

“You have a boy, Mrs. Grey. Check his Apgar.”

“Apgar is nine.”

“Can I see him?” I gasp.

Christian disappears from view for a second and reappears a moment later, holding my son, swathed in blue. His face is pink and covered in white mush and blood. My baby. My Blip … Theodore Raymond Grey.

When I glance at Christian, he has tears in his eyes.

“Here’s your son, Mrs. Grey,” he whispers, his voice strained and hoarse.

“Our son,” I breathe. “He’s beautiful.”

“He is,” Christian says and plants a kiss on our beautiful boy’s forehead beneath a shock of dark hair. Theodore Raymond Grey is oblivious. Eyes closed, his earlier crying forgotten, he’s asleep. He is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. So beautiful, I begin to weep.

“Thank you, Ana,” Christian whispers, and there are tears in his eyes, too.

---

“What is it?” Christian tilts my chin back.

“I was just remembering Ted’s birth.”

Christian blanches and cups my belly.

“I am not going through that again. Elective caesarian this time.”

“Christian, I—”

“No, Ana. You nearly fucking died last time. No.”

“I did not nearly die.”

“No.” He’s emphatic and not to be argued with, but as he gazes down at me, his eyes soften. “I like the name Phoebe,” he whispers, and runs his nose down mine.

“Phoebe Grey? Phoebe … Yes. I like that, too.” I grin up at him.

“Good. I want to set up Ted’s present.” He takes my hand, and we head downstairs. His excitement radiates off him; Christian has been waiting for this moment all day.

“DO YOU THINK HE’LL like it?” His apprehensive gaze meets mine.

“He’ll love it. For about two minutes. Christian, he’s only two.”

Christian has finished setting up the wooden train set he bought Teddy for his birthday. He’s had Barney at the office convert two of the little engines to run on solar power like the helicopter I gave Christian a few years ago. Christian seems anxious for the sun to rise. I suspect that’s because he wants to play with the train set himself. The layout covers most of the stone floor of our outdoor room.

Tomorrow we will have a family party for Ted. Ray and José will be coming and all the Greys, including Ted’s new cousin Ava, Kate and Elliot’s two-month-old daughter. I look forward to catching up with Kate and seeing how motherhood is agreeing with her.

I gaze up at the view as the sun sinks behind the Olympic Peninsula. It’s

everything Christian promised it would be, and I get the same joyful thrill seeing it now as I did the first time. It's simply stunning: twilight over the Sound. Christian pulls me into his arms.

"It's quite a view."

"It is," Christian answers, and when I turn to look at him, he's gazing at me. He plants a soft kiss on my lips. "It's a beautiful view," he murmurs. "My favorite."

"It's home."

He grins and kisses me again. "I love you, Mrs. Grey."

"I love you, too, Christian. Always."

## FIFTY'S FIRST CHRISTMAS

My sweater is scratchy and smells of new. Everything is new. I have a new mommy. She is a doctor. She has a tetscope that I can stick in my ears and hear my heart. She is kind and smiles. She smiles all the time. Her teeth are small and white.

"Do you want to help me decorate the tree, Christian?"

There is a big tree in the room with the big couches. A big tree. I have seen these before. But in stores. Not inside where the couches are. My new house has lots of couches. Not one couch. Not one brown sticky couch. "Here, look."

My new mommy shows me a box, and it's full of balls. Lots of pretty shiny balls.

"These are ornaments for the tree."

Orn-a-ments. Orn-a-ments. My head says the word. Orn-a-ments.

"And these—" she stops and pulls out a string with little flowers on them. "These are the lights. Lights first, and then we can trim the tree." She reaches down and puts her fingers in my hair. I go very still. But I like her fingers in my hair. I like to be near New Mommy. She smells good. Clean. And she only touches my hair.

*"Mom!"*

He's calling. Lelliot. He's big and loud. Very loud. He talks. All the time. I don't talk at all. I have no words. I have words in my head.

"Elliot, darling, we're in the sitting room." He runs in.

He has been to school. He has a picture. A picture he has drawn for my new mommy. She is Lelliot's mommy, too. She kneels down and hugs him and looks at the picture. It is a house with a mommy and a daddy and a Lelliot and a Christian. Christian is very small in Lelliot's picture. Lelliot is big. He has a big smile and Christian has a sad face.

Daddy is here, too. He walks toward Mommy. I hold my blankie tight. He kisses New Mommy and New Mommy isn't frightened. She smiles. She kisses him back. I squeeze my blankie.

"Hello, Christian." Daddy has a deep soft voice. I like his voice. He is never loud. He does not shout. He does not shout like … He reads books to me when I

go to bed. He reads about a cat and a hat and green eggs and ham. I have never seen green eggs. Daddy bends down so he is small.

"What did you do today?"

I show him the tree.

"You bought a tree? A Christmas tree?"

I say yes with my head.

"It's a beautiful tree. You and Mommy chose very well. It's an important job choosing the right tree."

He pats my hair, too, and I go very still and hold my blankie tightly. Daddy doesn't hurt me.

"Daddy, look at my picture." Lelliot is mad when Daddy talks to me. Lelliot is mad at me. I smack Lelliot when he is mad at me. New Mommy is mad at me if I do. Lelliot does not smack me. Lelliot is scared of me.

THE LIGHTS ON THE tree are pretty.

"Here, let me show you. The hook goes through the little eye, and then you can hang it on the tree." Mommy puts the red orn-a … orn-a-ment on the tree.

"You try with this little bell."

The little bell rings. I shake it. The sound is a happy sound. I shake it again. Mommy smiles. A big smile. A special smile for me.

"You like the bell, Christian?"

I say yes with my head and shake the bell once more, and it tinkles happily.

"You have a lovely smile, darling boy." Mommy blinks and wipes her hand on her eyes. She strokes my hair. "I love to see your smile." Her hand moves to my shoulder. No. I step back and squeeze my blankie. Mommy looks sad and then happy. She strokes my hair.

"Shall we put the bell on the tree?"

My head says yes.

"CHRISTIAN, YOU MUST TELL me when you're hungry. You can do that. You can take Mommy's hand and lead Mommy to the kitchen and point." She points her long finger at me. Her nail is shiny and pink. It is pretty. But I don't know if my new mommy is mad or not. I have finished all my dinner. Macaroni and cheese. It tastes good.

"I don't want you to be hungry, darling. Okay? Now would you like some ice cream?"

My head says *yes!* Mommy smiles at me. I like her smiles. They are better

than macaroni and cheese.

THE TREE IS PRETTY. I stand and look at it and hug my blankie. The lights twinkle and are all different colors, and the orn-a-ments are all different colors. I like the blue ones. And on the top of the tree is a big star. Daddy held Lelliot up, and Lelliot put the star on the tree. Lelliot likes putting the star on the tree. I want to put the star on the tree … but I don't want Daddy to hold me up high. I don't want him to hold me. The star is sparkly and bright.

Beside the tree is the piano. My new mommy lets me touch the black and the white on the piano. Black and white. I like the white sounds. The black sound is wrong. But I like the black sound, too. I go white to black. White to black. Black to white. White, white, white, white. Black, black, black, black. I like the sound. I like the sound a lot.

"Do you want me to play for you, Christian?"

My new mommy sits down. She touches the white and the black, and the songs come. She presses the pedals underneath. Sometimes it's loud and sometimes it's quiet. The song is happy. Lelliot likes Mommy to sing, too. Mommy sings about an ugly duckling. Mommy makes a funny quacking noise. Lelliot makes the funny quacking noise, and he makes his arms like wings and flaps them up and down like a bird. Lelliot is funny.

Mommy laughs. Lelliot laughs. I laugh.

"You like this song, Christian?" And Mommy has her sad-happy face.

I HAVE A STOCK-ING. It is red and it has a picture of a man with a red hat and a big white beard. He is Santa. Santa brings presents. I have seen pictures of Santa. But Santa never brought me presents before. I was bad. Santa doesn't bring presents to boys who are bad. Now I am good. My new mommy says I am good, very good. New Mommy doesn't know. I must never tell New Mommy … but I am bad. I don't want New Mommy to know that.

DADDY HANGS THE STOCK-ING over the fireplace. Lelliot has a stock-ing, too. Lelliot can read the word on his stock-ing. It says Lelliot. There is a word on my stock-ing. Christian. New Mommy spells it out. C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N.

DADDY SITS ON MY bed. He reads to me. I hold my blankie. I have a big room. Sometimes the room is dark and I have bad dreams. Bad dreams about before. My new

mommy comes to bed with me when I have the bad dreams. She lies down and she sings soft songs and I go to sleep. She smells of soft and new and lovely. My new mommy is not cold. Not like … not like … And my bad dreams go when she is there asleep with me.

SANTA HAS BEEN HERE. Santa does not know I have been bad. I am glad Santa does not know. I have a train and a helicopter and a plane and a helicopter and a car and a helicopter. My helicopter can fly. My helicopter is blue. It flies around the Christmas tree. It flies over the piano and lands in the middle of the white. It flies over Mommy and flies over Daddy and flies over Lelliot as he plays with the Legos. The helicopter flies through the house, through the dining room, through the kitchen. He flies past the door to Daddy's study and upstairs in my bedroom, in Lelliot's bedroom, Mommy and Daddy's bedroom. He flies through the house, because it's my house. My house where I live.

## MEET FIFTY SHADES

*Monday, May 9, 2011*

Tomorrow," I mutter, dismissing Claude Bastille as he stands on the threshold of my office.

"Golf, this week, Grey." Bastille grins with easy arrogance, knowing that his victory on the golf course is assured.

I scowl after him as he turns and leaves. His parting words rub salt into my wounds because despite my heroic attempts in the gym this morning, my personal trainer has kicked my ass. Bastille is the only one who can beat me, and now he wants another pound of flesh on the golf course. I detest golf, but so much business is done on the fairways I have to endure his lessons there, too … and though I hate to admit it, Bastille does go some way to improving my game.

As I stare out at the Seattle skyline, the familiar ennui seeps into my consciousness. My mood is as flat and gray as the weather. My days are blending together with no distinction, and I need some kind of diversion. I've worked all weekend and now, in the continued confines of my office, I'm restless. I shouldn't feel this way, not after several bouts with Bastille. But I do.

I frown. The sobering truth is that the only thing to capture my interest recently has been my decision to send two freighters of cargo to Sudan. This reminds me—Ros is supposed to come back to me with numbers and logistics. *What the hell is keeping her?* Intent on finding out what she's playing at, I glance at my schedule and reach for the phone.

*Oh, Christ!* I have to endure an interview with the persistent Miss Kavanagh for the WSU student magazine. *Why the fuck did I agree to this?* I loathe interviews—inane questions from inane, ill-informed, vacuous idiots. The phone buzzes.

"Yes," I snap at Andrea as if she's to blame. At least I can keep this interview short.

"Miss Anastasia Steele is here to see you, Mr. Grey."

"Steele? I was expecting Katherine Kavanagh."

"It's Miss Anastasia Steele who's here, sir."

I scowl. I hate the unexpected. "Show her in," I mutter, aware that I sound like

a sulky teen but not giving a fuck.

*Well, well … Miss Kavanagh is unavailable*. I know her father, the owner of Kavanagh Media. We've done business together, and he seems like a shrewd operator and a rational human being. This interview is a favor to him—one that I mean to cash in later when it suits me. And I have to admit I was vaguely curious about his daughter, interested to see if the apple had fallen far from the tree.

A commotion at the door brings me to my feet as a whirl of long chestnut hair, pale limbs, and brown boots dives headfirst into my office. I roll my eyes and repress my natural annoyance at such clumsiness as I hurry over to the girl who has landed on her hands and knees on the floor. Clasping her slim shoulders, I help her to her feet.

Clear, bright-blue, embarrassed eyes meet mine and halt me in my tracks. They are the most extraordinary color—guileless, powder-blue—and for one awful moment, I think she can see right through me. I feel … exposed. The thought is unnerving. She has a small, sweet face that is blushing now, an innocent pale rose. I wonder briefly if all her skin is like that—flawless—and what it would look like pink and warmed from the bite of a cane. *Fuck*. I stop my wayward thoughts, alarmed at their direction. *What the fuck are you thinking, Grey? This girl is much too young*. She gapes at me, and I almost roll my eyes again. *Yeah, yeah, baby, it's just a face, and the beauty is only skin deep*. I want to dispel that unguarded, admiring look from those big blue eyes.

*Showtime, Grey. Let's have some fun*. "Miss Kavanagh? I'm Christian Grey. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?"

There's that blush again. In command once more, I study her. She's quite attractive, in a gauche way—slight, pale, with a mane of mahogany hair barely contained by a hair tie. A brunette. Yeah, she's attractive. I extend my hand, and she stutters the beginning of a mortified apology and places her small hand in mine. Her skin is cool and soft, but her handshake surprisingly firm.

"Miss Kavanagh is indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, Mr. Grey." Her voice is quiet with a hesitant musicality, and she blinks erratically, long lashes fluttering over those big blue eyes.

Unable to keep the amusement from my voice as I recall her less-than-elegant entrance into my office, I ask who she is.

"Anastasia Steele. I'm studying English literature with Kate, um … Katherine … um … Miss Kavanagh at Washington State."

A nervous, bashful, bookish type, eh? She looks it; hideously dressed, hiding her slight frame beneath a shapeless sweater and an A-line brown skirt. *Christ, does she have no dress sense at all?* She looks nervously around my office—

everywhere but at me, I note with amused irony.

How can this young woman be a journalist? She doesn't have an assertive bone in her body. She's all charmingly flustered, meek, mild … submissive. I shake my head, bemused at where my inappropriate thoughts are going. Muttering some platitude, I ask her to sit, then notice her discerning gaze appraising my office paintings. Before I can stop myself, I find I'm explaining them. "A local artist. Trouton."

"They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary," she says dreamily, lost in the exquisite, fine artistry of my paintings. Her profile is delicate—an upturned nose, soft, full lips—and in her words she has mirrored my sentiments exactly. "*The ordinary raised to extraordinary.*" It's a keen observation. Miss Steele is bright.

I mutter my agreement and watch that flush creep slowly over her skin once more. As I sit down opposite her, I try to bridle my thoughts.

She fishes a crumpled sheet of paper and a digital recorder out of her overly large bag. Digital recorder? *Didn't those go out with VHS tapes?* Christ—she's all thumbs, dropping the damned thing twice on my Bauhaus coffee table. She's obviously never done this before, but for some reason I can't fathom, I find it amusing. Normally this kind of fumbling maladroitness irritates the fuck out of me, but now I hide my smile beneath my index finger and resist the urge to set it up for her myself.

As she grows more and more flustered, it occurs to me that I could refine her motor skills with the aid of a riding crop. Adeptly used it can bring even the most skittish to heel. The errant thought makes me shift in my chair. She peeks up at me and bites down on her full bottom lip. *Fuck me!* How did I not notice that mouth before?

"Sorry, I'm not used to this."

*I can tell, baby*—my thought is ironic—*but right now I don't give a fuck, because I can't take my eyes off your mouth*.

"Take all the time you need, Miss Steele." I need yet another moment to marshal my wayward thoughts. *Grey … stop this, now*.

"Do you mind if I record your answers?" she asks, her face candid and expectant.

I want to laugh. *Oh, thank Christ*.

"After you've taken so much trouble to set up the recorder, you ask me now?" She blinks, her eyes large and lost for a moment, and I feel an unfamiliar twinge of guilt. *Stop being such a shit, Grey*.

"No, I don't mind," I mutter, not wanting to be responsible for that look.

"Did Kate—I mean Miss Kavanagh—explain what the interview was for?"

“Yes, to appear in the graduation issue of the student newspaper, as I shall be conferring the degrees at this year’s graduation ceremony.” Why the fuck I’ve agreed to do *that*, I don’t know. Sam in PR tells me it’s an honor, and the Environmental Science Department in Vancouver needs the publicity in order to attract additional funding to match the grant I’ve given them.

Miss Steele blinks, all big blue eyes once more, as if my words are a surprise and fuck—she looks disapproving! Hasn’t she done any background work for this interview? She should know this. The thought cools my blood. It’s … displeasing, not what I expect from her or anyone I give my time to.

“Good. I have some questions, Mr. Grey.” She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, distracting me from my annoyance.

“I thought you might,” I mutter dryly. *Let’s make her squirm*. Obligingly she squirms, then pulls herself together, sitting up straight and squaring her small shoulders. Leaning forward she presses the “start” button on the recorder, and frowns as she glances down at her crumpled notes.

“You’re very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe your success?”

Oh Christ! Surely she can do better than this? What a fucking dull question. Not one iota of originality. It’s disappointing. I trot out my usual response about having exceptional people in the United States working for me. People I trust, insofar as I trust anyone, and pay well—blah, blah, blah … But Miss Steele, the simple fact is, I’m a fucking genius at what I do. For me it’s like falling off a log. Buying ailing, mismanaged companies and fixing them or, if they’re really broken, stripping their assets and selling them off to the highest bidder. It’s simply a question of knowing the difference between the two, and invariably it comes down to the people in charge. To succeed in business you need good people, and I can judge a person, better than most.

“Maybe you’re just lucky,” she says quietly.

*Lucky?* A frisson of annoyance runs through me. *Lucky?* No fucking luck involved here, Miss Steele. She looks unassuming and quiet, but this question? No one has ever asked me if I was *lucky*. Hard work, bringing people with me, keeping a close watch on them, second-guessing them if I need to; and if they aren’t up to the task, ruthlessly ditching them. *That’s what I do, and I do it well. It’s nothing to do with luck! Well, fuck that.* Flaunting my erudition, I quote the words of my favorite American industrialist to her.

“You sound like a control freak,” she says, and she’s perfectly serious.

*What the fuck?*

Maybe those guileless eyes *can* see though me. Control is my middle name.

I glare at her. “Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Steele.” *And I’d like to*

*exercise it over you, right here, right now*.

Her eyes widen. That attractive blush steals across her face once more, and she bites that lip again. I ramble on, trying to distract myself from her mouth.

"Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself, in your secret reveries, that you were born to control things."

"Do you feel that you have immense power?" she asks in a soft, soothing voice, but she arches her delicate brow, revealing the censure in her eyes. My annoyance grows. Is she deliberately trying to goad me? Is it her questions, her attitude, or the fact that I find her attractive that's pissing me off?

"I employ more than forty thousand people, Miss Steele. That gives me a certain sense of responsibility—power, if you will. If I were to decide I was no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell up, twenty thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so."

Her mouth pops open at my response. That's more like it. *Suck it up, Miss Steele*. I feel my equilibrium returning.

"Don't you have a board to answer to?"

"I own my company. I don't answer to a board," I respond sharply. She should know this. I raise a questioning brow.

"And do you have any interests outside of your work?" she continues hastily, correctly gauging my reaction. She knows I'm pissed, and for some inexplicable reason this pleases me enormously.

"I have varied interests, Miss Steele. Very varied." I smile. Images of her in assorted positions in my playroom flash through my mind: shackled on the cross, spread-eagled on the four-poster, splayed over the whipping bench. *Fucking hell! Where is this coming from?* And behold—there's that blush again. It's like a defense mechanism. *Calm down, Grey.*

"But if you work so hard, what do you do to chill out?"

"Chill out?" I grin; those words out of her smart mouth sound odd. Besides when do I get time to chill out? Has she no idea of the number of companies I control? But she looks at me with those ingenuous blue eyes, and to my surprise I find myself considering her question. What *do* I do to chill out? Sailing, flying, fucking … testing the limits of little brown-haired girls like her, and bringing them to heel … The thought makes me shift in my seat, but I answer her smoothly, omitting my two favorite hobbies.

"You invest in manufacturing. Why, specifically?"

Her question drags me rudely back to the present.

"I like to build things. I like to know how things work, what makes things tick, how to construct and deconstruct. And I have a love of ships. What can I

say?" They distribute food around the planet—taking goods from the haves to the have-nots and back again. What's not to like?

"That sounds like your heart talking, rather than logic and facts."

*Heart? Me? Oh no, baby*. My heart was savaged beyond recognition a long time ago. "Possibly, though there are people who'd say I don't have a heart."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because they know me well." I give her a wry smile. In fact, no one knows me that well, except maybe Elena. I wonder what she would make of little Miss Steele here. The girl is a mass of contradictions: shy, uneasy, obviously bright, and arousing as hell. *Yes, okay, I admit it. She's an alluring little piece.*

She recites the next question by rote.

"Would your friends say you're easy to get to know?"

"I'm a very private person, Miss Steele. I go a long way to protect my privacy. I don't often give interviews." Doing what I do, living the life I've chosen, I need my privacy.

"Why did you agree to do this one?"

"Because I'm a benefactor of the university, and for all intents and purposes, I couldn't get Miss Kavanagh off my back. She badgered and badgered my PR people, and I admire that kind of tenacity." *But I'm glad it's you who turned up and not her*.

"You also invest in farming technologies. Why are you interested in this area?"

"We can't eat money, Miss Steele, and there are too many people on this planet who don't have enough to eat." I stare at her, poker-faced.

"That sounds very philanthropic. Is that something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world's poor?" She regards me with a quizzical expression as if I'm some kind of conundrum for her to solve, but there is no way I want those big blue eyes seeing into my dark soul. This is not an area open to discussion. Ever.

"It's shrewd business." I shrug, feigning boredom, and I imagine fucking her smart mouth to distract myself from all thoughts of hunger. Yes, that mouth needs training. Now *that* thought is appealing, and I let myself imagine her on her knees before me.

"Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?" she recites by rote again.

"I don't have a philosophy as such. Maybe a guiding principle, Carnegie's 'A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.' I'm very singular, driven. I like control … of myself and those around me."

"So you want to possess things?" Her eyes widen.

*Yes, baby. You, for one.*

"I want to deserve to possess them, but yes, bottom line, I do."

"You sound like the ultimate consumer." Her voice is tinged with disapproval, pissing me off again. She sounds like a rich kid who's had all she ever wanted, but as I take a closer look at her clothes—she's dressed in Walmart, or Old Navy possibly—I know that isn't it. She hasn't grown up in an affluent household.

*I could really take care of you.*

*Shit, where the fuck did that come from?* Although, now that I consider it, I do need a new sub. It's been, what—two months since Susannah? And here I am, salivating over this brown-haired girl. I try a smile and agree with her. Nothing wrong with consumption—after all, it drives what's left of the American economy.

"You were adopted. How far do you think that's shaped the way you are?"

What the fuck does this have to do with the price of oil? I scowl at her. What a ridiculous question. If I'd stayed with the crack whore, I'd probably be dead. I blow her off with a nonanswer, trying to keep my voice level, but she pushes me, demanding to know how old I was when I was adopted. *Shut her down, Grey!*

"That's a matter of public record, Miss Steele." My voice is arctic. She should know this shit. Now she looks contrite. Good.

"You've had to sacrifice a family life for your work."

"That's not a question," I snap.

She blushes again and bites down on that damned lip. But she has the grace to apologize.

"Have you had to sacrifice a family life for your work?"

*What do I want with a fucking family?*

"I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that."

"Are you gay, Mr. Grey?"

What the fuck! I cannot *believe* she's said that out loud! The unspoken question that my own family dares not ask, much to my amusement. *How dare she!* I have to fight down the urge to drag her out of her seat, bend her across my knee, and spank the living shit out of her, then fuck her over my desk with her hands tied tightly behind her back. That would answer her question. How frustrating is this female? I take a deep, calming breath. To my vindictive delight, she appears to be acutely embarrassed by her own question.

"No, Anastasia, I'm not." I raise my eyebrows, but keep my expression impassive. Anastasia. It is a lovely name. I like the way my tongue rolls around it.

"I apologize. It's um … written here." Nervously, she tucks her hair behind

her ear.

She doesn't know her own questions? Perhaps they're not hers. I ask her, and she pales. Fuck, she really is very attractive, in an understated sort of way. I would even go so far as to say she is beautiful.

"Er … no. Kate—Miss Kavanagh—she compiled the questions."

"Are you colleagues on the student paper?"

"No, she's my roommate."

No wonder she is all over the place. I scratch my chin, debating whether to give her a really, really hard time.

"Did you volunteer to do this interview?" I ask, and I'm rewarded with her submissive look: eyes large, nervous about my reaction. I like the effect I have on her.

"I was drafted. She's not well," she says softly.

"That explains a great deal."

There's a knock at the door, and Andrea appears. "Mr. Grey, forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes."

"We're not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting."

Andrea hesitates, gaping at me. I stare at her. *Out! Now! I'm busy with little Miss Steele here*. Andrea blushes scarlet, but recovers quickly.

"Very well, Mr. Grey," she says and, turning on her heel, she leaves us.

I turn my attention back to the intriguing, frustrating creature on my couch. "Where were we, Miss Steele?"

"Please don't let me keep you from anything."

*Oh no, baby. It's my turn now*. I want to know if there are any secrets to uncover behind those beautiful eyes.

"I want to know about you. I think that's only fair." As I lean back and press my fingers to my lips, her eyes flick to my mouth and she swallows. *Oh yes—the usual effect*. And it is gratifying to know she isn't completely oblivious to my charms.

"There's not much to know," she says, her blush returning. I'm intimidating her. *Good*.

"What are your plans after you graduate?"

She shrugs. "I haven't made any plans, Mr. Grey. I just need to get through my final exams."

"We run an excellent internship program here." *Fuck*. What possessed me to say that? I'm breaking a golden rule—never, ever fuck the staff. *But Grey, you're not fucking this girl*. She looks surprised, and her teeth sink into that lip again. *Why is that so arousing?*

"Oh. I'll bear that in mind," she mumbles. Then as an afterthought she says,

“Though I’m not sure I’d fit in here.”

*Why the hell not? What’s wrong with my company?*

“Why do you say that?” I ask.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Not to me.” I’m confounded by her response.

She’s flustered again as she reaches for the digital recorder. *Shit, she’s going*. Mentally I run through my schedule for the afternoon—there is nothing that won’t keep.

“Would you like me to show you around?”

“I’m sure you’re far too busy, Mr. Grey, and I do have a long drive.”

“You’re driving back to WSU in Vancouver?” I glance out the window. It’s one hell of a drive, and it’s raining. Shit. She shouldn’t be driving in this weather, but I can’t forbid her. The thought irritates me. “Well, you’d better drive carefully.” My voice is sterner than I intend.

She fumbles with the recorder. She wants out of my office, and for some reason I can’t explain, I don’t want her to go.

“Did you get everything you need?” I add in a transparent effort to prolong her stay.

“Yes, sir,” she says quietly.

Her response floors me—the way those words sound, coming out of that smart mouth—and briefly I imagine that mouth at my beck and call.

“Thank you for the interview, Mr. Grey.”

“The pleasure’s been all mine,” I respond—truthfully, because I haven’t been this fascinated by anyone in a long while. The thought is unsettling.

She stands and I extend my hand, eager to touch her.

“Until we meet again, Miss Steele.” My voice is low as she places her small hand in mine. *Yes, I want to flog and fuck this girl in my playroom*. Have her bound and wanting … needing me, trusting me. I swallow. *It ain’t going to happen, Grey*.

“Mr. Grey.” She nods and withdraws her hand quickly … too quickly.

Shit, I can’t let her go like this. It’s obvious she is desperate to leave. Irritation and inspiration hit me simultaneously as I see her out.

“Just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Steele.”

She blushes on cue, her delicious shade of pink.

“That’s very considerate, Mr. Grey,” she snaps.

Miss Steele has teeth! I grin behind her as she exits, and I follow in her wake. Both Andrea and Olivia look up in shock. *Yeah, yeah. I’m just seeing the girl out*.

“Did you have a coat?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I scowl at simpering Olivia, who immediately leaps up to retrieve a navy coat. Taking it, I glare at her to sit down. Christ, Olivia is annoying—mooning over me all the time.

Hmm. The coat *is* from Walmart. Miss Anastasia Steele should be better dressed. I hold it up for her, and as I pull it over her slim shoulders, I touch the skin at the base of her neck. She stills at the contact and pales. *Yes!* She *is* affected by me. The knowledge is immensely pleasing. Strolling over to the elevator, I press the call button while she stands fidgeting beside me.

*Oh, I could so stop your fidgeting, baby*.

The doors open and she scurries in and then turns to face me.

“Anastasia,” I murmur, saying good-bye.

“Christian,” she whispers. And the elevator doors close, leaving my name hanging in the air, sounding odd, unfamiliar, but sexy as hell.

*Well, fuck me. What was that?*

I need to know more about this girl. “Andrea,” I snap as I stalk back into my office. “Get me Welch on the line, now.”

As I sit at my desk and wait for the call, I look at the paintings on the wall of my office, and Miss Steele’s words drift back to me. *“Raising the ordinary to extraordinary.”* She could so easily have been describing herself.

My phone buzzes.

“I have Mr. Welch on the line for you.”

“Put him through.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Welch, I need a background check.”

*Saturday, May 14, 2011*

**Anastasia Rose Steele**

| | |
|---|---|
| **DOB:** | Sept 10, 1989, Montesano, WA |
| **Address:** | 1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7, Haven Heights, Vancouver, WA 98888 |
| **Mobile No:** | 360 959 4352 |
| **Social Security No:** | 987-65-4320 |
| **Banking Details:** | Wells Fargo Bank, Vancouver, WA 98888<br>Acct No: 309361: $683.16 balance |
| **Occupation:** | Undergraduate Student<br>WSU Vancouver College of Liberal Arts<br>- English Major |
| **GPA:** | 4.0 |
| **Prior Education:** | Montesano JR-SR High School |
| **SAT Score:** | 2150 |
| **Employment:** | Clayton's Hardware Store,<br>NW Vancouver Drive, Portland, OR<br>(part-time) |
| **Father:** | Franklin A. Lambert<br>DOB: Sept 1, 1969, Deceased Sept 11, 1989 |
| **Mother:** | Carla May Wilks Adams<br>DOB: July 18, 1970<br>**m** Frank Lambert<br>- March 1, 1989, widowed Sept 11, 1989<br>**m** Raymond Steele<br>- June 6, 1990, divorced July 12, 2006<br>**m** Stephen M. Morton<br>- August 16, 2006, divorced January 31, 2007<br>**m** Robbin (Bob) Adams<br>- April 6, 2009 |
| **Political Affiliations:** | None Found |

**Religious Affiliations:** None Found
**Sexual Orientation:** Not known
**Relationships:** None indicated at present

I pore over the executive summary for the hundredth time since I received it two days ago, looking for some insight into the enigmatic Miss Anastasia Rose Steele. I cannot get the damned woman out of my mind, and it's seriously beginning to piss me off. This past week, during particularly dull meetings, I've found myself replaying the interview in my head. Her fumbling fingers on the recorder, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the lip biting. *Yes*. The fucking lip biting gets me every time.

And now, here I am, parked outside Clayton's, the modest hardware store on the outskirts of Portland where she works.

*You're a fool, Grey. Why are you here?*

I knew it would lead to this. All week … I knew I'd have to see her again. I'd known it since she uttered my name in the elevator and disappeared into the depths of my building. I'd tried to resist. I'd waited five days, five fucking days to see if I'd forget about her. *And I don't do waiting. I hate waiting … for anything*. I've never actively pursued a woman before. The women I've had understood what I expected of them. My fear now is that Miss Steele is just too young and that she won't be interested in what I have to offer … will she? Will she even make a good submissive? I shake my head. There's only one way to find out … so here I am, a fucking ass, sitting in a suburban parking lot in a dreary part of Portland.

Her background check has produced nothing remarkable—except the last fact, which has been at the forefront of my mind. It's the reason I'm here. *Why no boyfriend, Miss Steele?* Sexual orientation unknown—perhaps she's gay. I snort, thinking that unlikely. I recall the question she asked during the interview, her acute embarrassment, the way her skin flushed a pale rose … *Shit.* I've been suffering from these ludicrous thoughts since I met her.

*That's why you're here.*

I'm itching to see her again—those blue eyes have haunted me, even in my dreams. I haven't mentioned her to Flynn, and I'm glad because I'm now behaving like a stalker. *Perhaps I should let him know*. I roll my eyes—I don't want him hounding me about his latest solution-based shit. I just need a distraction … and right now the only distraction I want is working as a salesclerk in a hardware store.

*You've come all this way. Let's see if little Miss Steele is as appealing as you remember. Showtime, Grey*. I climb out of the car and stroll across the lot to the front door. A bell chimes a flat electronic note as I walk in.

The store is much bigger than it looks from the outside, and although it is almost lunchtime the place is quiet, for a Saturday. There are aisles and aisles of the usual crap you'd expect. I'd forgotten the possibilities that a hardware store could present to someone like me. I mainly shop online for my needs, but while I'm here, maybe I'll stock up on a few items … Velcro, split rings—*Yeah*. I'll find the delectable Miss Steele and have some fun.

It takes me all of three seconds to spot her. She's hunched over the counter, staring intently at a computer screen and picking at her lunch—a bagel. Unthinking, she wipes a crumb from the corner of her lips and into her mouth and sucks on her finger. My cock twitches in response. *Fuck! What am I, fourteen?* My reaction is fucking irritating. Maybe this adolescent response will stop if I fetter, fuck, and flog her … and not necessarily in that order. Yeah. That's what I need.

She is thoroughly absorbed in her task, and it gives me an opportunity to study her. Salacious thoughts aside, she is attractive, seriously attractive. I've remembered her well.

She glances up and freezes, pinning me with intelligent, discerning eyes—the bluest of blue that seem to see right through me. It's as unnerving as the first time I met her. She just stares, shocked I think, and I don't know if this is a good response or a bad response.

"Miss Steele. What a pleasant surprise."

"Mr. Grey," she whispers, breathy and flustered. Ah … a good response.

"I was in the area. I need to stock up on a few things. It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Steele." *A real pleasure*. She's dressed in tight T-shirt and jeans, not the shapeless shit she was wearing earlier this week. She's all long legs, small waist, and perfect tits. She continues to gape, and I have to resist the urge to reach out and tip her chin up to close her mouth. *I've flown from Seattle just to see you, and the way you look right now, it was worth the journey*.

"Ana. My name's Ana. What can I help you with, Mr. Grey?" She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders like she did during the interview, and gives me a fake smile that I'm sure she reserves for customers.

*Game on, Miss Steele*.

"There are a few items I need. To start with, I'd like some cable ties."

Her lips part as she inhales sharply.

*You'd be amazed what I can do with a few cable ties, Miss Steele*.

"We stock various lengths. Shall I show you?"

“Please. Lead the way, Miss Steele.”

She steps out from behind the counter and gestures toward one of the aisles. She’s wearing Chucks. Idly I wonder what she’d look like in skyscraper heels. Louboutins … nothing but Louboutins.

“They’re in with the electrical goods, aisle eight.” Her voice wavers and she blushes … again.

*She* is *affected by me*. Hope blooms in my chest. *Not gay then*. I smirk.

“After you,” I murmur, holding my hand out for her to lead the way. Letting her walk ahead gives me the space and time to admire her fantastic ass. She really is the whole package: sweet, polite, and beautiful with all the physical attributes I value in a submissive. But the million-dollar question is, Could she be a submissive? She probably knows nothing of the lifestyle—my lifestyle—but I very much want to introduce her to it. *You are getting way ahead of yourself on this deal, Grey*.

“Are you in Portland on business?” she asks, interrupting my thoughts. Her voice is high, trying to feign disinterest. It makes me want to laugh, which is refreshing. Women rarely make me laugh.

“I was visiting the WSU farming division based in Vancouver,” I lie. *Actually, I’m here to see you, Miss Steele*.

She flushes, and I feel like a shit.

“I’m currently funding some research there in crop rotation and soil science.” That, at least, is true.

“All part of your feed-the-world plan?” Her lips shift to a half-smile.

“Something like that,” I mutter. *Is she laughing at me?* Oh I’d love to put a stop to that if she is. But how to start? Maybe with dinner, rather than the usual interview … now that would be novel; taking a prospect out to dinner.

We arrive at the cable ties, which are arranged in an assortment of lengths and colors. Absentmindedly my fingers trace over the packets. *I could just ask her out for dinner*. Like on a date? Would she come? When I glance at her she’s examining her knotted fingers. She can’t look at me … *this is promising*. I select the longer ties. They are more flexible after all—they can accommodate two ankles and two wrists at once.

“These will do,” I murmur, and she blushes again.

“Is there anything else?” she says quickly—either she’s being super attentive or she wants to get me out of the store, I don’t know which.

“I’d like some masking tape.”

“Are you redecorating?”

I suppress my snort. “No, not redecorating.” I haven’t held a paintbrush in a long time. The thought makes me smile; I have people to do all that shit.

“This way,” she murmurs, looking chagrined. “Masking tape is in the decorating aisle.”

*Come on, Grey. You don’t have long. Engage her in some conversation.* “Have you worked here long?” Of course, I already know the answer. Unlike some people, I do my research. She blushes once more—Christ, this girl is shy. *I don’t have a hope in hell*. She turns quickly and walks down the aisle toward the section labeled DECORATING. I follow her eagerly. *What am I, a fucking puppy?*

“Four years,” she mumbles as we reach the masking tape. She bends down and grasps two rolls, each a different width.

“I’ll take that one,” I say. The wider tape is much more effective as a gag. As she passes it to me, the tips of our fingers touch, briefly. It resonates in my groin. *Fuck!*

She pales. “Anything else?” Her voice is soft and husky.

Christ, I’m having the same effect on her that she has on me. *Maybe* …

“Some rope, I think.”

“This way.” She quickly scoots up the aisle, giving me another chance to appreciate her fine ass.

“What sort were you after? We have synthetic and natural filament rope … twine … cable cord …”

*Shit—stop*. I groan inwardly, trying to chase away the image of her suspended from the ceiling in my playroom.

“I’ll take five yards of the natural filament rope, please.” It’s coarser and chafes more if you struggle against it … my rope of choice.

A tremor runs through her fingers, but she efficiently measures out five yards. Pulling a utility knife from her right pocket, she cuts the rope in one swift gesture, coils it neatly, and ties it off with a slipknot. *Impressive*.

“Were you a Girl Scout?”

“Organized group activities aren’t really my thing, Mr. Grey.”

“What is your thing, Anastasia?” I catch her gaze, and her irises dilate as I stare. *Yes!*

“Books,” she whispers.

“What kind of books?”

“Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mainly.”

*British literature? Brontë and Austen, I bet. All those romantic hearts and flowers types*. Fuck. That’s not good.

“Anything else you need?”

“I don’t know. What else would you recommend?” I want to see her reaction.

“For a do-it-yourselfer?” she asks, surprised.

I want to hoot with laughter. *Oh baby, DIY is not my thing*. I nod, stifling my

mirth. Her eyes flick down my body and I tense. She is checking me out! *Fuck me*.

"Coveralls," she blurts out.

It's the most unexpected thing I've heard out of her sweet, smart mouth since the "are you gay" question.

"You wouldn't want to ruin your clothing." She gestures to my jeans, embarrassed once more.

I can't resist. "I could always take them off."

"Um." She flushes beet red and gazes down at the floor.

"I'll take some coveralls. Heaven forbid I should ruin any clothing," I murmur, to put her out of her misery. Without a word, she turns and walks briskly up the aisle, and once again I follow in her enticing wake.

"Do you need anything else?" she says breathlessly, handing me a pair of blue coveralls. She's mortified, eyes still cast down, face flushed. Christ, she does things to me.

"How's the article coming along?" I ask in the hope she might relax a little.

She looks up and gives me a brief relieved smile. *Finally*. "I'm not writing it, Katherine is. Miss Kavanagh. My roommate, she's the writer. She's very happy with it. She's the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that she couldn't do the interview in person."

It's the longest sentence she's addressed to me since we first met, and she's talking about someone else, not herself. *Interesting*.

Before I can comment, she adds, "Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photographs of you."

The tenacious Miss Kavanagh wants photographs. Publicity stills, eh? I can do that. It will allow me to spend some more time with the delectable Miss Steele.

"What sort of photographs does she want?"

She gazes at me for a moment, then shakes her head.

"Well, I'm around. Tomorrow, perhaps …" I can stay in Portland. Work from a hotel. A room at the Heathman, perhaps. I'll need Taylor to come down, bring my laptop and some clothes. Or Elliot—unless he's screwing around, which is his usual MO over the weekend.

"You'd be willing to attend a photo shoot?" She cannot contain her surprise.

I give her a brief nod. *You'd be amazed what I'd do to spend more time with you, Miss Steele … in fact, so am I.*

"Kate will be delighted—if we can find a photographer." She smiles and her face lights up like a summer dawn. Christ, she's breathtaking.

"Let me know about tomorrow." I pull my card out of my wallet. "It has my cell number on it. You'll need to call before ten in the morning." And if she

doesn't, I'll head on back to Seattle and forget about this stupid venture. The thought depresses me.

"Okay." She continues to grin.

"Ana!" We both turn as a young man, casually but expensively dressed, appears at the far end of the aisle. He's all fucking smiles for Miss Anastasia Steele. *Who the hell is this prick?*

"Er … excuse me for a moment, Mr. Grey." She walks toward him, and the fucker engulfs her in a gorilla-like hug. My blood runs cold. It's a primal response. *Get your motherfucking paws off her*. I fist my hands and am only slightly mollified when I see her make no move to hug him back.

They fall into a whispered conversation. *Shit, maybe Welch's facts were wrong*. Maybe this guy is her boyfriend. He looks the right age, and he can't take his greedy little eyes off her. He holds her for a moment at arm's length, examining her, then stands with his arm leisurely resting on her shoulder. It's a seemingly casual gesture, but I know he's staking a claim and telling me to back off. She seems embarrassed, shifting from foot to foot.

*Shit. I should go.* Then she says something else to him and moves out of his reach, touching his arm, not his hand. It's clear they aren't close. *Good*.

"Er … Paul, this is Christian Grey. Mr. Grey, this is Paul Clayton. His brother owns the place." She gives me an odd look that I don't understand and continues, "I've known Paul ever since I've worked here, though we don't see each other that often. He's back from Princeton, where he's studying business administration."

The boss's brother, not a boyfriend. The extent of the relief I feel is unexpected, and it makes me frown. *This woman has really gotten under my skin*.

"Mr. Clayton." My tone is deliberately clipped.

"Mr. Grey." He shakes my hand limply. *Wet fucker*. "Wait up—not *the* Christian Grey of Grey Enterprises Holdings?" In a heartbeat I watch him morph from territorial to obsequious.

*Yeah, that's me, you prick.*

"Wow—is there anything I can get you?"

"Anastasia has it covered, Mr. Clayton. She's been very attentive." *Now fuck off.*

"Cool," he gushes, all wide-eyed and deferential. "Catch you later, Ana."

"Sure, Paul," she says, and he ambles off, thank Christ. I watch him disappear toward the back of the store.

"Anything else, Mr. Grey?"

"Just these items," I mutter. Shit, I'm out of time, and I still don't know if I'm

going to see her again. I have to know whether there's a hope in hell she might consider what I have in mind. How can I ask her? Am I ready to take on a new submissive, one who knows nothing? Shit. She's going to need substantial training. I groan inwardly at all the interesting possibilities this presents … Fuck me, getting there is going to be half the fun. Will she even be interested? Or do I have this all wrong?

She heads back to the cashier's desk and rings up my purchases, all the while keeping her gaze cast down. *Look at me, damn it!* I want to see her beautiful blue eyes again and gauge what she's thinking.

Finally she raises her head. "That will be forty-three dollars, please."

*Is that all?*

"Would you like a bag?" she asks, slipping into salesclerk mode as I pass her my Amex.

"Please, Anastasia." Her name—a beautiful name for a beautiful girl—rolls off my tongue.

She packs the items briskly and efficiently into the carrier. This is it. I have to go.

"You'll call me if you want me to do the photo shoot?"

She nods as she hands back my charge card.

"Good. Until tomorrow, perhaps." *I can't just leave. I have to let her know I'm interested*. "Oh, and Anastasia? I'm glad Miss Kavanagh couldn't do the interview." Delighting in her stunned expression, I sling the bag over my shoulder and saunter out of the store.

Yes, against my better judgment, I want her. Now I have to wait … fucking wait … again.

*That's all … for now.*
*Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading.*
*E L James*

## E L James

E L James is a former TV executive, wife, and mother of two based in West London. Since early childhood, she dreamed of writing stories that readers would fall in love with, but she put those dreams on hold to focus on her family and her career. She finally plucked up the courage to put pen to paper with her first novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. She is also the author of *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*.

# Fifty Shades Trilogy

## E L James

Fifty Shades
of Grey

Fifty Shades
Darker

Fifty Shades
Freed