

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, gazing 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 steepled 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 wid-

ens. *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 sum-

mer 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 mak-

ing 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 scabble 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 hand-

held, 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 send-off? 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, McAlvaine 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 splattered 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 day-dream.

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 informa-

tion 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.