

FOREWORD

In the very first chapter of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anastasia is interviewing Christian, and she notices the art collection in his office. Dreamily, Ana says the images are “raising the ordinary to extraordinary.” Those paintings were based on real works—a stunning series called *Looking at the Overlooked* by my hugely talented friend Jennifer Trouton. When I started thinking about what I would say in this foreword, I kept coming back to that line: raising the ordinary to extraordinary.

What started out for me as a fun writing project quickly became an obsession. When I wasn't at work, I devoted every waking hour to this tale of a woman coming to terms with her desires as she falls, hard and fast, for a man who thinks he's unlovable but is eventually redeemed and healed by love. For me, that is the essence of these books: they're about unconditional love—what it's like to receive it and what happens when a child doesn't. Every word of *Fifty Shades* sprang from these themes.

I became totally addicted to my own story. I would write everywhere—on the train, on the bus, but mostly at my desk in the corner of our back room, hiding my screen so my beloved teenage boys couldn't catch the odd bawdy word. During that time, I didn't watch TV, I didn't go to the cinema, I didn't go out—at all. My friends were quite cross with me; it was as if I'd dropped off the map. But I was writing. Writing. Writing... I loved it. It was so freeing—no expectations, no one breathing down my neck—except the early fans demanding the next online chapter. Those were heady, happy days.

Once the books had been published—initially by a small independent press in Australia—I thought I would get on with my life and continue my career behind the scenes in television, an industry I'd worked in for twenty-five years. But then *Fifty Shades of Grey* went viral. That

was when the ordinary became extraordinary. Shortly after that Random House (as it was then) stepped in, thanks to Anne Messitte, who became my publisher at what eventually became Penguin Random House.

The way news of the trilogy exploded, initially by word of mouth, was unprecedented. People loved *Fifty Shades*. Women who hadn't read a novel in decades devoured the books and felt compelled to talk about them. They formed book clubs. Friends, relatives, mothers, and daughters shared their copies. I had amazing photographs sent to me of countless women around poolsides, heads stuck in my books. Women on planes, women at work... The list went on and on.

The books were banned from some libraries—and what does that say about the policing of what women want to read? Now isn't the time or place to explore that, but let me tell you, it's not just love that sells books, hate does too. So, to everyone who wrote impassioned articles about *Fifty Shades* and its flaws, thank you.

The trilogy went on to become a global phenomenon. Women from all over the world shared their love for these books. And from all over the world the emails came: beautiful, poignant stories from many, many readers who told me how the books had affected them and how much *Fifty Shades* meant to them: the seventy-one-year-old man who told me that I'd reminded him what it was like to fall in love or the parents who successfully used the same techniques Dr. Flynn used with Christian for their own adopted child, who could not bear to be touched... People thanked me for getting them through their dark times—the death of a loved one, awful medical procedures, or leaving an abusive partner. I still have all these deeply personal and precious notes, and I hold them dear. I've shed many tears over them. They are an extraordinary and humbling testament to how my books have touched people.

Ten years on, so much has changed. We've been through a harrowing pandemic, we've watched loved ones suffer and often lost them, and we've seen the world become more fractious, less equal, and less tolerant. Over that same decade, I've seen a rise in people re-reading the *Fifty Shades* Trilogy and watching the movies, returning to a safe space of pure fantasy and enjoyment. For me too, that is what the books are—a fantasy, but an important and an enduring one, I hope.

Thank you to all who have accompanied me on this journey; it's

been a blast. You've raised the ordinary to extraordinary. I hope you enjoy this new gussied-up edition of the books, produced in celebration of a shared experience. They were written from my heart, and to those who received them into their hearts, I thank you. For everything.

E L James, October 2021

CHAPTER ONE

I scowl with frustration at my reflection 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 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 to meet the enigmatic CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. He's an exceptional entrepreneur and major benefactor of our university and 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 try and fail 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 give her a wry smile, 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 push 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. I’m 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, an attractive, well-groomed blond 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’ve

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, 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 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 blond 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 blond comes out a large door to the right. What is it with all the immaculate blonds? It's like Stepford here. Taking a deep breath, I stand up.

"Miss Steele?" the latest blond 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 Blond Number One in trouble?

Blond 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."

"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."

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

Perhaps Mr. Grey insists on all his employees being blond. I'm wondering idly if that's legal when the office door opens and a tall, elegantly dressed, attractive African American man with short dreadlocks 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,” Blond Number Two says.

I stand rather shakily, trying to suppress my nerves. Gathering up my belongings, 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 Joan of Arc. 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 and 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 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.”

“Do you mind if I record your answers?”

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

Crap. He’s teasing me? I hope. I blink 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 giving the commencement address 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—has been given the honor to address our class. 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 heart-beat 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. 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.

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 as if appraising 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. 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 this area?”

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

“That sounds very philanthropic. Is that 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, 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 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, 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." My heartbeat has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again. It's the first time he's said my name. 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 extra-curricular 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?" His voice is 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 Blond 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 and looks a little dumbfounded. He turns his head slowly to face her and raises his eyebrows. She flushes bright pink. *Oh good. It's not just me.*

"Very well, Mr. Grey," she mutters, then exits.

He frowns and turns his attention back to me. "Where were we, Miss Steele?"

Oh, we're back to Miss Steele now.

"Please, don't let me keep you from anything."

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

I swallow. "There's not much to know."

"What are your plans after you graduate?"

I shrug, thrown by his interest. *Move to Seattle with Kate, find a job.* I haven't really thought beyond my finals. "I haven't made any plans, Mr. Grey. I just need to get through my final exams." *Which I should be studying for right now, rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.*

"We run an excellent internship program here," he says quietly.

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Is he offering me a job? "Oh. I'll bear that in mind." I'm 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 blond.*

“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 have a long drive.”

“You’re driving back to Vancouver?” He sounds surprised, anxious even. He glances out 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 the odd current between us is still there. It must be my nerves.

“Mr. Grey.” I nod.

Moving with athletic grace to the door, he opens it wide. “Just ensuring you make it through the door.” He gives me a small smile. Obviously, he’s referring to my earlier less-than-elegant entry into his office.

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

“Did you have a coat?” Grey asks.

“A jacket.”

Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which Grey takes from her before she can hand it to me. He holds it up, and feeling ridiculously self-conscious, I shrug it on. Grey places his hands for a moment on my shoulders. I gasp at the contact. If he notices my reaction, he gives

nothing away. His long index finger presses the button summoning the elevator, and we stand waiting—awkwardly on my part, coolly self-possessed on his.

The doors open, and I hurry in, desperate to escape. *I really need to get out of here.* When I turn to look at him, he's gazing at me and leaning against the doorway beside the elevator with one hand on the wall. He really is very, very good-looking. It's unnerving.

"Anastasia," he says as a farewell.

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

While cruising toward Interstate 5, my mind continues to wander. I'm truly perplexed as to what makes someone so driven to succeed. Some of his answers were so cryptic—as if he had a hidden agenda. And Kate's questions—ugh! The adoption and asking him if he was gay! I

shudder. I can't believe I said that. *Ground, swallow me up now!* Every time I think of that question in the future, I will cringe with embarrassment. Damn Katherine Kavanagh!

I check the speedometer. I'm driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion. And I know it's the memory of those piercing 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 up the volume, 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's 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 skimming 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. 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’m eager to change the subject.

“Yes, and it was delicious as usual. I’m feeling much better.” She smiles in gratitude.

I check my watch. “I have to run. I can still make my shift at Clayton’s.”

“Ana, you’ll be exhausted.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll see you later.”

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

I’m glad I can make my shift, as it gives me something to focus on that isn’t Christian Grey. We’re busy—it’s the start of the summer season, and folks are redecorating their homes.

Mrs. Clayton looks relieved to see me. “Ana! I thought you weren’t going to make it today.”

“My appointment didn’t take as long as I thought. I can do a couple of hours.”

“I’m real pleased to see you.”

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

WHEN I ARRIVE HOME later, Katherine is wearing headphones and working on her laptop. Her nose is still pink, but she has her teeth into a story, so she's concentrating and typing furiously. I'm thoroughly drained, exhausted by the long drive, the grueling interview, and being swamped at Clayton's. I slump onto 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 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 gotten 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?" she calls after me.

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?” She snorts. “That’s a first.”

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 am 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—candle-making—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 know I have Mom's full attention. "I'm fine," I answer quickly.

"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 and he's still watching soccer on TV (and going bowling or fly-fishing or making furniture when he's not). Ray is a skilled carpenter and the reason I know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw. All seems well with him.

FRIDAY NIGHT, KATE AND I are debating what to do with our evening—we want some time off from our studies, our work, and 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.

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 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,

John, 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 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 eventually, 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." 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. What can I help you with, Mr. Grey?"

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

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

Cable ties?

“We stock various lengths. Shall I show you?” My voice wavers. *Get a grip, Steele.*

A slight frown mars Grey’s rather lovely brow. “Please. Lead the way.”

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 gestures with his long-fingered, beautifully manicured hand.

With my heart pounding—so hard that I think it’s trying to escape my body—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 environmental science 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 mutter, 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 say 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 points 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 as a charge runs 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.

“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?” His voice is velvet 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.

“*Anal!*”

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 Koozes 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 environmental science division of WSU. He’s funding some research,” I inform her.

“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, 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 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, capisce?” 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 while 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 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 hang up, visualizing the wicked gleam in his eyes. *How can he make seven little words hold so much tantalizing promise?*

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,” I snap. “It’s an occupational hazard with me. Don’t be ridiculous.” 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 dinner. Then I need to study.” I cannot hide my irritation with her as I open one of the cupboards.

I’M 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 Kate explains at reception that we’re here to photograph Christian Grey, CEO, we are instantly upgraded to a suite. Just a regular-size one, though, as apparently Mr. Grey is already occupying their largest one. An overeager 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 room service 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 midthirties, 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 wave 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 grin at José, who smiles back with affection. 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?” She directs him to a chair set up against the wall. “Be careful of the lighting cables. And then we’ll do a few standing, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure,” I answer, completely thrown. I glance anxiously at Kate, who shrugs. I ignore José scowling behind her.

“Good day to you all,” says Grey as he opens the door and stands 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 says 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.

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.

"Could you please 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..." I stop, then look directly at him. "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. 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 in disapproval. "But I don't trust him," she adds.

I raise my hand in the hope 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 off the suite’s living area. “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.

“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,” Kate says. “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 gentle, 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. Surprised and embarrassed, they jump apart, staring guiltily in every direction but ours.

Grey and I step into the elevator. I'm 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 hard to tell. The young couple says nothing, and we travel down to the first floor in an awkward 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 hear suppressed giggles from the couple erupt behind us.

Grey grins. "What is it about elevators?"

We cross the expansive lobby 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'm giddy and tingling 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 I bite my lip and stare down at my hands once more, 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 on the small, round birch-veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate bearing a lone tea bag 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 tea bag into the teapot and almost immediately fish it out again with my teaspoon. As I place the used tea bag 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.

“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.”

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 the table.

“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 blush scarlet, I’m sure, 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. You’re a mystery, Miss Steele.”

Mysterious? Me?

“There’s nothing mysterious about me.”

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

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. 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? It's not going the way I thought it was going to go. For a start, 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, and I realize, 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 says 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. "You're not giving much away, are you?" He rubs 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.

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

“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