Dark side of love

by Philaenissamos

Summary

When Christian and Anastasia meet sparks fly. But when Anastasia discovers who Christian is and what she thinks he has done to her father she wants nothing to do with him anymore. Christian, however, won't take no for answer. This is a very dark story about obsession, rejection, and the continuous cycle of abuse. This story is MA rated and not for the fainthearted.
Chapter 1

Disclaimer This is a work of fiction, none of the events are true. Any similarities with real live people and events is purely coincidental. No profit was made from this work. Fifty Shades of Grey if property of E.L James.

WARNING: This story contains very disturbing situations, dubious/non-consent, strong language, and graphic violence. I recommend that you do not read this story if you are sensitive to these issues.

This is a very dark (love) story that deals with some very dark subjects matters. Research shows that over 80% of all people that have been abused as children develop at least one psychological disorder. Victims of child abuse have a larger chance to become perpetrators themselves. This story is trying to deal with the continuous cycle of abuse and how it eventually can be broken. Not everything or everyone is good or bad most things and people fall into a large gray spectrum. I know this story will probably upset a lot of people and I am always open to suggestions and constructive criticism.

I would like to thank Mosaic23 and Svart Jasmin for beta reading this story and encouraging me to post this story. You two rock. I would also like to give a shout out to the wonderful ladies of the Fsog facebook page you guys are amazing.

EDIT. (5-8-2016)I have been getting a lot of PM's asking me if this will be a cheating story. The answer is an emphatic NO. I do not read nor write C&A cheat stories. I am not a fan of that genre stories. This story is dark and fucked up enough as it is no need for extra drama.

Dark side of Love

Prologue

You reap what you sow

I remember reading somewhere that there are only a few defining moments in your life.

Taylor once told me that killing another person will change you irrevocably, especially when you see the life drain from your victim's eyes.

I squeeze her throat tighter applying ample pressure around her long neck. She gurgles and desperately tries to pry my hands away. Yet her eyes, her cold blue eyes remain lifeless like there is no life to drain from them. In this moment, I realise that they have always been this way. I only never saw it before because the look in them mirrored my own.

Her body is slowly turning limp in my arms but she still desperately tries to push my hands away. There is a pleading look on her face yet her facial muscles do not seem to move much. It is a weird almost alien sight to see but it doesn't surprise me. She always dreaded growing older; she was obsessive in maintaining a youthful appearance even if she had to resort to surgery to obtain it. It all doesn't matter now. Death never discriminates, and right now it is coming for her and it will be the final intimate moment that we will ever share.

I am supposed to feel some sadness about that fact; she was, after all, my most trusted and only friend. But I don't feel any emotion even remotely close to grief or sadness. In fact slowly choking
the life out of her is strangely cathartic. Like I am being set free from a life sentence.

It is ironic really she always told me that she made me, and I guess in many ways she did. She took the small monster that was living inside me and shaped and nurtured it to the monster it is today. A cold, callous, and remorseless entity. Right now, she is reaping the fruits of her labor.

Her breathing has turned into small choking gasps, her pupils dilate and the veins in her eyes are popping one by one. It won"t be long now before death takes her and I can finally be free of her forever.

Chapter one

Ennui

14 Months Ago

Christian

I stare out of the car window and watch the city lights fly by a luminescent blur. I am in a city surrounded by eight and a half million people that never sleep. Yet somehow, for some reason, I feel all alone. I sigh and run my hand through my hair and prepare for yet another honor award lauded on me. I am accepting the Carnegie Medal of Honor for my fight against global hunger. If they only knew the real me, they never would be so keen to award me anything. But they don"t know the real me. Nobody does, except Elena. And I would like to keep it that way.

When the car door opens I will plaster a big smile on my face and shake countless hands exuding charm, wit, and confidence- what is expected of me. At 30, I have everything I have ever desired since I was a scared, abused four-year-old little boy weeping at his mother"s rotting corpse. More money than Croesus, more power than the president, and more respect than the Pope, but at the same time I have nothing. My mind drifts back six months ago and I cringe at the memory.

"Leila, please put the gun down so we can help you," I pled desperately.

"Alone," she whispers, haunting me with her expression. She"s staring at me fiercely from her kneeling position on the kitchen floor of my apartment. "I am all alone. A life without love is no life at all. But you will never understand that."

I see Taylor pointing his gun at her and I gesture him to stand down but he pointedly refuses. It angers me. Guns are not going to solve anything. Sawyer has silently escorted a shaking Gail out of harm"s way and is calling Flynn.

"Leila, please, you have so much to live for! You will find love again, just- please Leila, let me help you," I begged again.

Leila lets out a humourless cackle that makes my blood run cold.

"You know nothing about love, you never have! I love you Christian, but you dropped me like a rock the moment I told you. I thought it was the end of me until Craig came into my life. You have no clue what it is like to wake up to next to another person knowing that your lives are so intertwined that your world begins and ends with them. And now he is gone," she spat out venomously and her words hurt more than I am willing to admit, because deep down I know she is right. I died when the crack whore died. I am nothing but an empty shell.

"In the end, we die all alone, but at least I will be with Craig forever, while you will forever be a
living, dead man. Please for your sake learn to love Christian," she said giving me a sad smile.

"Mrs. Williams put the gun down or I will shoot you," Taylor said authoritatively while pointing his gun at her.

Leila stares at me grief, pain, and sadness were etched on her face.

"You can”t kill someone who is already dead. And just like me, he is already dead,"she says, her voice laced with pain. "Craig is waiting for me now. Goodbye Christian."

Leila had put the gun in her mouth and I heard myself scream. "NO!"

A deafening bang echoed through my apartment. I felt something warm and wet dripping on my shirt and face. The smell of brimstone and iron penetrated my nose and I couldn't breathe no matter how hard I tried, there was never enough air to fill my lungs.

It has been six months since Leila killed herself in my apartment and it is hard for me to be there. The memories of that horrific night are still haunting me and it has become impossible for me to sleep without aid. Every time I close my eyes I see her laying lifelessly on the floor, with her brains splattered all over my kitchen. On really bad days, those images merge with the images of the crack whore in a cacophony of mental pain. Two bodies, two ghosts dance behind my eyes, scaring me, making sleep impossible. I am a useless, empty shell of a man who was too incompetent to save his own birthmother and an ex-submissive. I am a monster that destroys women- it is a simple fact.

When the press got wind of what happened, a media frenzy ensued. Thankfully my lawyers and publicists managed to contain the story, no sordid details of my relationship with Leila came to light. The story was that a mentally unstable ex-girlfriend committed suicide in my apartment after I refused to take her back.

I tried to move on with my life after what happened with Leila. Elena told me to get right back on the saddle as soon as possible. She even had numerous subs lined up for me. I tried them all but I did not get the same fulfilment from the experiences. Even before Leila killed herself, I wasn't getting what I needed from doing scenes anymore. Leila was right. I am a living dead man.

The car stops in front of the New York Public Library where the ceremony is held. The large broken white neoclassical building stands proudly on 5th Avenue. The large Corinthian pillars give the building a strong and unwavering look. It is truly a work of art. The car door opens.

"Showtime," I murmur under my breath and plaster the familiar smile on my face.

The camera flashes are blinding and reporters begin to shout an endless number of questions.

"Mr. Grey, have you recovered from the suicide of your ex-girlfriend?" I inwardly cringe at the question and ignore the vulture from some sleazy national rag who is standing near my car.

I walked up the red carpet where the invited reporters and photographers were milling about.

"Mr. Grey! Pose for a picture please." I plaster another smile on my face and countless flashes go off.

"Mr. Grey congratulations on winning a Carnegie medal. What are your thoughts on the Ethiopian drought and famine? Do you agree with USAID's assessment that the Ethiopian government did too little since 1984 to prevent another famine?" a stocky New York Times reporter with short dark hair and black rim horned glasses asked. I find it an interesting question. The only thing that is still holding my interest is my fight against hunger and poverty.
Taylor, Ryan, and Sawyer, my trusted security guys, try to escort me through the crowd but I stop them. My publicist, Carol Jackson, told me it would be good for my public image if I took the time to answer some questions and this question is worth answering.

I turn my attention him and gave him a tight smile.

"El Niño is a predictable natural phenomenon the Ethiopian government should have invested more in drought resistant crops and irrigation systems. In that respect the director of USAID is right. But that does not matter for the people that are affected by hunger and drought at this moment. It is our responsibility as human beings to help those in need. Arguing about who is guilty of what is not going to help those in need. In the long run, however, these investments need to be done, and GEH is committed to providing technological and agriculture help to the regions affected by the drought in West Africa," I replied with my usual air of confidence.

The reporter wants to ask me some more questions, but I have no time to answer more. I thank him for his interest and continue my way inside the public library flanked by Sawyer and Taylor.

"Mr. Grey!" an immaculately dressed woman on very high heels comes running to me and I am almost afraid she will trip. She gave me a come hither smile and her green eyes lighted up seductively. I have to suppress the urge to roll my eyes this woman has no clue she is flirting with the devil.

"I am Linda McKay of the Carnegie Corporation. I hope Mr. Thomson already explained what to expect of this evening," she said in one breath while shaking my hand profusely.

I pulled back my hand and nodded at her.

"He did," I confirmed.

"Good," she purred leading me to the science, industry and business library where the ceremony is taking place.

My parents, Elliot, and Mia are already present and they won’t stop showering me with praise. It makes me feel uncomfortable because I am not the man they think I am. I spend the next 30 minutes before dinner and the beginning of the ceremony shaking hands with the other nominees and New York”s elite, playing my role as shrewd businessman and virtuous philanthropist.

When it is time for the first courses to be served, I am escorted to the table I share with my family and other important figures. Most of them hope to gain a favour from me. I use my usual wit and charm and the conversation at the table ebbs and flows. If there is one thing I have learned from the past decade is that it is important to hold on to valuable contacts. favours are the number one currency exchanged between the elite and I am the master in this game of give an take.

The MC - some presenter from a popular news show - starts the ceremony. After some introductory words and light banter, he calls on the stage the first medallist. Dr. Jeffery Brandt is a famous biologist and environmentalist with an unwavering dedication to protecting fragile ecosystems and the native animals and people that life in them. GEH is currently funding some of his research. His speech is short funny and to the point. After he is done the MC thanks him before introducing me.

"Our next medallist is the youngest person to have ever received the Carnegie medal of Philanthropy. Just like Andrew Carnegie, Mr. Grey believes the rich are mere trustees of their wealth and have the moral obligation to promote the welfare and happiness of others. His Grey Foundation is dedicated to eradicating hunger, and poverty by promoting education and protecting
the environment for future generations. It is my honour to present this medal to Mr. Christian Grey."

There is a loud applause in the room and I am called to the stage to receive my medal and give my acceptance speech.

I stand behind the glass stand take a deep breath. *Here we go again.*

"I have given a lot of speeches in my life but I can honestly say that I have never given one in a library. I am pretty sure that Mrs. Andrews the Liberian at Harvard Baker library would have kicked me out immediately if I tried this in her sanctuary." The audience laughed and I smiled before continuing my speech. "The fight against eradicating hunger and poverty is a personal one for me. I own everything I have to my adoptive parent's Grace and Carrick Grey who I would like to take a moment to thank for their love and support. Just like Andrew Carnegie, I come from very humble beginnings and know what it is like to go to bed hungry every night. And just like Andrew Carnegie I was given the opportunity to make something of myself.

At this moment more than 3 billion people in Africa, Latin-America and some parts of Asia have to make ends meet with less than 2 dollars 30 cents a day. And more than 1.3 billion people, including 850 million children, live in abject poverty. Agricultural dysfunction is rife within these parts of the world and the result is ecological and social destruction. The people affected by this often fall victim to preventable diseases like Malaria and Pneumonia. These diseases kill without discrimination ripping whole families apart. Trapping people in an endless cycle of hunger, poverty, and disease.

By eradicating hunger we can destroy that cycle and end poverty. I am accepting this award tonight in honour of all the people that fell victim to hunger and poverty. I am not only humbled but also profoundly grateful that the selfless work of many Grey foundation employees and beneficiaries has been recognized. This award belongs to them more than it belongs to me. The great Andrew Carnegie once said *Wealth is not to feed our egos but to feed the hungry and to help people help themselves.* I leave you now with these parting words of wisdom. Thank you all."

I ended my speech and got a thunderous applause from the audience. For these people, I am a boy wonder, a paragon of humanity, a part I have been playing for so long now it has become a part of me. If they only knew the monster that is residing inside me they would think twice about honouring me.

After the ceremony is done I make up some excuse about work so I can go back to my apartment. I will fly back to Seattle in two days but first I have some business to take care of at GEH New York. My mother reminds me of Sunday dinner and I kiss her farewell. They are staying at the Four Seasons, and will fly back tomorrow with one of my private jets.

When I get back to my apartment I pour myself a glass of Scotch and sit down on the large couch standing in the living room.

"Mr. Grey there is a young lady coming upstairs for you. Mrs. Lincoln has sent her, sir."

I contemplate sending her away but it has been two months since I last got laid. Maybe this little sub can snap me out of my ennui.

"Let her in," I grumbled and Taylor nodded in acquiescence.

Moments later a petite brunette stands in front of me with her head bowed in a perfect submissive position.
"Look at me." I command and her head snaps up.

She is beautiful, they all are. She has soft soulful brown eyes, luscious lips, and a well-formed nose, but she does nothing keep the cold dark void swirling inside me at bay. It does not matter though, as long as she can fill my psychical needs and free me from my ennui she will do.

"Tell me your name." I commanded her again.

"Gwen Becker, Sir." She says with a soft voice.

"Tell me why you are here Miss Becker."

"Mistress Elena sent me to you, Sir, to congratulate you for winning the Carnegie medal. I am here to please you, Sir."

"Get on your knees." I told her and she immediately obliged. I walked around her absorbing every inch of her well-formed body. Normally my libido would have spiked, but now it remains dormant. It frustrates me to no end. It has been months since the last time I fucked but my cock does not seem to care.

I know I need to amp up the scene. I don't have a playroom here so I need to improvise. But first, this girl needs to sign an NDA. Elena probably already had her vetted and made her sign one, but I don't care, you can never be too safe. And since that debacle with Leila, I do not really trust Elena's judgment anymore. There is no need for a contract. I have no use for a long-term sub now.

"Wait here." I tell her before walking to my office to fetch an NDA specifically for this purpose.

"Sign this." I growl and throw the NDA and a pen in front of her. She complies without question it still baffles me that people can sign contracts without reading them first.

"Strip and put your hands behind your head when you are done." I say tiredly.

Once she is done, I instruct her to go to the couch and lay flat on her stomach. I bind her hands to her feet with some filament rope I found in my office. She is tussled up like a Christmas Turkey. Yet my cock remains dormant. She squirms uncomfortably and tells me that her hands are bound too tight. I am furious that she spoke without permission and that she had the nerve to complain about my bindings. I don't know where this anger is coming from but I cannot contain it. It feels like I am losing control over every part of my life.

"You know how many women would love to be in your position?" I rage.

"Many, Sir." She squeaks out.

"Countless, and none of them would complain about the bindings. Either you scream red now and get the fuck out of here or take what I am going to do to you. What is it going to be?" I bark.

"Stay, Sir." She says timidly.

"Good." I say. I release my belt from my pants, aim it at her butt and slam it down with all my might. She yelps loudly.

"Quiet!" I bark.

I aim the belt again and hit her again on her ass. Small welts begin to form but she stays quiet this time. I hit her again and again and again hoping to evoke my libido again but nothing happens. Her
ass is no longer pink but red and angry welts have formed on her back and butt.

"God damn it!" I yelled and released my cock from my trousers squeezing and jerking it but I cannot get it up. Images from the crack whore and Leila blend in my mind. I slam the belt down harder with each blow on the back of the sub while furiously stroking my cock, trying to erase the haunting images from my mind. My traitorous dick remains limp, proving once and for all that I am a useless, pathetic and incompetent little man that can't even get his dick up. Anger and sadness fill me I stumble backwards and I drop the belt I was holding.

I release Miss Becker from her bindings and provide the necessary aftercare before sending her away. For the first time in my adult life, I am at a complete loss and have no idea what to do with myself.

Rage, an uncontrollable rage washes over me, and a red haze settles over my eyes. I need to break something, I need to destroy something. I start throwing and smashing everything in my path until there is nothing left anymore. The apartment is empty just like me. I fall to the ground and let the pain and despair pull me into a dark empty void. Leila was right. I am already dead.

I stare pensively through the large window of Flynn's office. A couple of wrens have nested in the large maple tree that is standing near the window. It has been over a month since I last saw Flynn.

I don't have to look behind me to know that he is staring at me over the rim of his glasses with a pencil in his mouth. I also know what he will say if I remain silent for a moment longer. These sessions with him have become predictable, just like the ennui that has enveloped me.

"Christian, I am more than happy to take your money even if you are just staring out of my window. But I don't think that is what you came here for." He says just like I predicted. I sigh and turn around to face him.

"No, that was not what I came here for."

"I suppose I should congratulate you on winning the Carnegie medal of Philanthropy."

I shrug.

"Just another notch on my belt. Not that it matters. Nothing really matters anymore."

Flynn looks at me slightly alarmed. "Why do you say that Christian?"

"After the ceremony, I went back to my New York apartment because I just needed to be alone. But Elena had ordered a sub for me as a present and it has been a while since I had intercourse. The girl was beautiful Flynn, and I was really hoping that she could break to malaise and give me some relief." I sit down on the large green leather couch and put my head in my hands.

"What happened Christian?"

"I ordered her to strip I tied her up and beat the crap out of her with my belt, but I couldn't get aroused from it. What is wrong with me?" I whisper the last part embarrassedly.

Flynn, like always, never judges me. He stares at me intently and clears his throat.

"Did you find the woman attractive?"

"Yes, of course." I reply impatiently.
"Then why do you think you did not get aroused by her?"

"I don't know. I pay you a small fortune to find out." I snap angrily at him.

"Christian, I cannot read your mind. I can only interpret the things you tell me, to form an opinion. Only you know the real answer to that question." Flynn responds calmly.

"Let me ask you two more questions." Flynn continues.

"Did binding her excite you?"

The question itself does not shock me but the answer to that question does, and I feel momentarily stunned.

"Not like it used to excite me." I finally murmur.

"Did beating her excite you?" Flynn asks again.

Just like the first question, the answer to this one is equally shocking. I gulp and stare at Flynn.

"I did not feel much when I was hitting her. It is something I just always do, a habit that is kind of hard to break. But it did not really excite or arouse me. Not like it used to."

"Christian, do you want to hear my hypothesis?"

"Yes, that is what I am paying you for." I reply gruffly.

"We both know that spanking little brown haired girls are your way of punishing your birthmother. Even though you refuse to admit it, you had a strong emotional bond with your birth mother. In spite of what you say or think, you loved her and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Children are brought into this world programmed to love their parents. Punishing random brown haired girls to punish your mother is your way of dealing with the pain she has inflicted on you. However, as expected, this coping mechanism is breaking down rapidly. Most likely triggered by Leila's dramatic suicide. You have had zero emotional connection to the girls you had arrangements with. They were merely interchangeable surrogates of your mother. There is nothing wrong with BDSM. In fact, it is a very healthy outlet for some people. But a healthy BDSM relation requires deep trust and an emotional connection between two consensual partners. You never had that. You are suffering from a form of depression and the root cause of that is your birth mother. In order for you to really deal with all your issues you need to confront your past, and your feelings for your birth mother. By dealing with the guilt you feel over her death, you subsequently learn to deal with your feelings of guilt over Leila's death. It is time for you to lay her ghost to rest Christian, only then you can move forward to where you want to be."

"This speech about the crack whore is getting old. She died 26 years ago on a dirty apartment floor leaving me to fend for myself. I don't love her, I never have so stop saying that." I barked.

Flynn holds his hands up in mock defeat. "You wanted to hear my hypothesis Christian. I merely gave my interpretation of what you just told me. Our time is almost up. But I want to ask you one more question. A question you can mull over at home. If your birth mother has nothing to do with your current issues then why do you keep calling her a crack whore?"

I stare at him for a moment trying to come up with an answer but nothing comes to mind. He smiles at me. "Save your answer for next time, Christian, see you next week."
Anastasia

I am laying down on my bed with my eyes closed. I am exhausted from the seven-hour flight back from Savannah. Mom needed me badly and I couldn't let her fend for herself. When I was a little girl, I always thought that mom was invincible but in reality, she is only human just like me. Seeing mom so sad and broken really hurt. Even if she did try to put on a brave face for me, I knew better. Who is going to take care of her now? It is odd to realize how life can change in an instant. One moment Bob was with us and the next he was gone.

There is a gentle knock on my bedroom door.

"Can I come in?" Kate asks while popping her head in the small opening.

"Sure," I say sleepily.

"How is your mom?" She asks with genuine concern.

"She is putting on a brave face but I know her heart is broken. She misses Bob terribly. We tried to sort out his stuff to give to charity but she broke down completely."

"Well, it has only been four months. She obviously needs more time to grieve." Kate says with an air of finality.

"I told her that, but she wants to sell the house and move forward. She says there is no point in dwelling on the past. She wants to live closer to me and is thinking about moving to Oregon or Washington. It kind of depends on where I find a job after college."

"You won't be graduating until next year. She has plenty of time to sell the house. Rushing things is not going to help her, it didn't help my mom after my grandmother died." Kate says sadly.

I shrug and stare out the window for a minute. I know Kate means well and maybe she is right. But I want my mom near me so I can keep an eye out on her. Mom is very sweet but naïve, and a bit scatterbrained. I don't think I could bear it if something were to happen to her. A bitter, dark memory from when I was 16 flares through me, but I quickly repress it. I do not want to go there ever again. Ray told her that she could stay with him in Montesano, but she does not want to intrude. It is a shame, really. I know he still holds a candle for her. He has gotten lonely ever since he lost his job at the shipyard he worked for. He had been working there for over 20 years. Until some big company bought and dismantled it with no regard for the hundreds of people that worked there.

"She needs me Kate and I can't leave her to fend for herself."

"I know you can't Ana. Look, it is almost dinner time and I am going to order a pizza. You want some too?" Kate asks.
I give her a small smile. Kate really is a good friend.

"Sure. Thanks," I reply, halfheartedly. I am not really hungry at the moment but I know Kate will insist that I eat something.

I decide to take a shower before dinner; there is no point in sleeping now.

Dinner with Kate is pleasant as always. She tells me all the news I missed while I was in Georgia. Apparently, Ethan broke up with his girlfriend much to Kate's delight. But then again, Kate never liked any of Ethan's girlfriends. She is secretly hoping I take him on, but I told her that is never going to happen. Ethan is handsome, funny and a generally nice guy, but I only like him as a friend.

"Ana, you are never going to lose your virginity if you keep friend-zoning every guy that is interested in you," Kate says exasperatedly.

"I am not doing that!" I say back defensively.

"Oh, please, Ana. Shall I give you the list? Andrew, Martin, Ethan, Collin, and Jose just at the top of my head," she says with triumph.

I rolled my eyes at her but I know she has a point. They are all nice guys, I just wasn't attracted to them.

"Speaking of Jose. Did he call you while you were in Georgia? He is in desperate need for a model and you are his muse," Kate teases.

"He did and I told him that I am not model material, so he has to look for someone else," I said decisively. Jose is our best friend and an engineering major with a passion for photography. He is very talented and was thinking of switching majors especially since he's getting a lot of paid assignments. His recent stint was a photography assignment for the Portland tourism bureau. Hence, he needs a male and female model to play the part of happy tourists.

"Bullshit Ana, you are gorgeous. Granted, you are too tiny to do any runaway work, but you can totally do campaigns and ads," Kate says with the confidence that I lack.

"You sound just like my mother," I groan in reply.

My telephone buzzes and I see an unknown number appear on the screen. Who is calling me at this hour?

"Hello?"

"Is this Miss Anastasia Steele?" A tired woman's voice asks.

"This is she."

"I am Dr. Louise Grantham from Mason General Hospital. I am sorry to inform you that your father became unwell this evening and has been brought here for treatment," she says, and I can hear the sympathy in her voice.

I hear her words but I have trouble understanding them. It is like my brain has shut down and refuses to come on again.

"What do you mean?" I finally manage to stammer.

"Your father is very sick. He has a fever and is hallucinating. We are currently running some test to
determine what is wrong with him."

My hands begin to shake and I feel sick. Please let daddy be all right, let daddy be all right. I keep chanting in my head. I can't lose him, not after Bob.

"Is he going to be alright?" I ask furtively

"We do not know yet, Miss Steele. Our main priority is to get his temperature down. If it is possible for you to come down, I strongly urge you to do so."

I drop the phone from my hands and tears began to well in my eyes. This cannot be happening. Ray never gets sick. This is all a bad dream and when I open my eyes everything will be back to normal. I feel Kate's warm hands grasp my shoulders and embrace me fiercely. I can no longer keep the tears at bay and crumbled down and cry.

I stare at Ray's empty hospital bed. The sheets are thin and crumpled and an empty glass of orange juice stands on the nightstand. Ray has been staying in Mason General for almost two weeks and today the test results are finally coming in. I feel nervous and my stomach is in knots, but Ray remains his usual stoic self. He still maintains that he had just a simple virus but I was not convinced and neither was Dr. Grantham.

"I'll be damn glad if the doctor sends me home today. These toilets stink," Ray grumbles while he walks back to his bed.

I give him a tight smile and squeeze his hand reassuringly.

"I hope so too, Daddy," I reply, not able to hide the anxiety from my voice.

"It is a whole lot of fuss over nothing. I am glad that you did not tell your mother. She has enough to deal with as it is, there is no reason to stress her out over a cold. Luckily I do not have to share my room with anyone at the moment so I can keep the cable TV all to myself," Ray says while hopping back into his hospital bed.

I had noticed how easily he tired out lately and it had scared me. Ray always had an abundance of energy. This was not like him at all.

There's a knock on the door and Dr. Grantham makes her presence known. The look on her face is solemn and instinctively I know that she's not going to bring us any good news.

"Mr. and Miss Steele, I am afraid that I do not bring good news. We have diagnosed you with stage one Diffuse large B-cell lymphoma Mr. Steele," Dr. Grantham says, and for the second time in four months, my world stops and tilts on its axes.

"What does that mean?" I stammer.

"Diffuse large B-cell lymphoma is a type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a form of cancer. It develops when the body makes abnormal B-lymphocytes; these are lymphoma cells. This type of cancer is relatively common and can be treated well when caught in the early stages. We are lucky that we caught it so soon in your father's case."

I'm confused. Ray was never sick. He never smokes or takes drugs and he is always psychically active.

"I mean how, when? My dad is always keeping healthy."
"Environmental factors often play a role in developing this form of cancer. I read in your father's medical file that he worked at a shipyard. Did you work with toxic chemicals Mr. Steele?"

My dad's face looked ashen and he swallowed.

"We worked with various chemicals. We made our own benzene based dyes for paint. Our bosses wanted to offer their clientele the luxury of creating their own color for their ships.," Ray answers hoarsely.

"That can be a cause. Benzene is known for causing various types of cancers," Dr. Grantham replies sympathetically.

My mind is a jumbled mess and I have trouble thinking straight. What about my dad's colleagues that were also exposed to that crap? And why is it still used if it is dangerous? So many questions swirl through my head and I feel lost, desolate and angry. I know I cannot give in to those feelings yet, I need to remain strong for my daddy. I also need to find out everything I can about this disease so my father can get the best treatment possible.

"Doc, what are my chances of survival?" My father asks and I dread to hear the answer.

"Luckily, we caught your lymphoma in the early stages. With the right treatment, your chances of survival are optimistic Mr. Steele," Dr. Grantham answers and I feel the knot in my stomach lessen somewhat. This is a little ray of hope in a dark and bleak situation.

The next hour the doctor explains what kind of treatments is possible. He will get extensive chemotherapy combined with Rituximab, an antibody medication to fend off infections. She also explains that Ray needs to be treated at a veteran hospital in Seattle or his health insurance won't cover the treatments. There is so much more I wanted to ask her but my brain is too jumbled to come up with questions. After that discussion, I am mentally and emotionally exhausted. But Ray remained his taciturn self. He barely said anything or showed any kind of emotion. He only begged me not tell my mom anything, as he does not want her to worry. Not after what happened to Bob.

Tears well in my eyes and I know I am going to break down soon. I curse myself for it. I should stay strong for Ray, he means the world to me. Seeing him so tired and sick like this is my worst nightmare. I cannot lose either of my parents. I still need them too much.

He squeezes my hand reassuringly.

"Don't worry about your old man Annie. I am going to be alright. I'm like a cat, I always land on my feet."

His strength and grace never fail to amaze me. I should have been the one to catch him now that he is falling not the other way around. I furiously wipe the tears from my eyes and try to give him a smile. Still, I'm pretty sure it came off more as a grimace.

Dr. Grantham referred Ray to a VA doctor in Seattle and arranged for his transportation promptly. I feel completely lost and alone. There is so much that needs to be taken care of and I have no idea where to start.

Christian

I always considered the nickname "Windy City" an exaggeration of the Chicago weather. The hawk winds from Lake Michigan provide a cool breeze on an otherwise scorching summer night. I had felt restless being cooped up in my hotel room. This acquisition was not going according to plan and it was beginning to take its toll on me. I needed to get out of here somewhere where I
could take my mind off things. So I let Taylor drive me to Danté, an exclusive BDSM club catering only the rich and powerful. I had been a member for a couple of years now but rarely visited it, even when I was in Chicago.

I was hoping to do a scene with some random sub, to prove once and for all that Flynn was wrong about everything. But after an hour of searching, I still had not found a woman that appealed to me. I walk towards the bar, order a gin and tonic, then move towards the private rooms in the back. Some private rooms were designed with a small window opening in the doors to appease the clientele with more voyeuristic tendencies.

I peeked through one of the windows and almost immediately recognized the couple in the room. I never knew that the Bensons, my business associates, were into the lifestyle. They always seemed to be a prim and proper couple. The initial shock and surprise that had shot through quickly wore off and I become mesmerized by the scene displayed in front of me.

She lays bound over the whipping bench, her long brown hair bound in a ponytail. He stands behind her and strokes the cat over her flawless light caramel skinned back. He bends over and breathes in her scent, peppering her back with countless kisses. He turns her head towards his and captures her lips in a long passionate kiss. The entire scene is both intimate and erotic, and it shot a shiver down my spine. He pulls back from her and pushes the vibrator inside her before raining down the cat on her ass and pussy, creating soft red marks in its wake. She moans in pleasure and his breath is harsh and labored. I feel like a voyeur watching two people totally entwined with each other. Never before in my life have I witnessed such intimacy. I prided myself on being an excellent Dom having had plenty of submissives, and maybe that was the problem with it all. Never in my life had I experienced the level of intimacy displayed in front of me. Not even with Elena.

I take a sip of my gin and tonic and let the bittersweet liquid cool my heated senses, unable to pry my eyes away from the scene. He has her bound to the Saint-Andrews cross now and is fucking her at a feverish phase, burying his head in her neck, like he couldn't get close enough to her.

Realization hit me like a lightning bolt, I knew then that I wanted what the Bensons had. A real connection and relationship with somebody else, but I also knew that was something that was not meant for me, and the thought infuriated me. Why did I have to be so fucked up that I couldn't find a real meaningful connection with a woman? Maybe all this stuff about making meaningful connections and love is all just pretentious bullshit. Elena always says that love is for fools and she would know. A familiar wave of dread and darkness sweeps over me. It had become my one and only faithful companion these last years.

I drown my glass and take a final look at the couple. I slam two one hundred dollar bills on the bar before I walk out of Danté's, slowly burning in my own personal inferno.
Flying sparks

Anastasia

I look at the large, neatly piled bills on my father's kitchen table and dread fills my stomach. How on earth am I going to be able to pay for this? There is the mortgage on his house and workshop, plus countless hospital bills. Anger boils up inside me. What is the use of health insurance when they refuse to cover almost half of his medical expenses?

If he had not been fired, we would not be in this predicament now. He had a much better health plan when he was still working at the shipyard. However, I immediately realize that playing the blame game was not going to help me pay these bills. I check the balance of his small savings account, and there is just enough in there to pay two of the three medium sized bills.

"I packed some extra clothes for him and put them in the large black suitcase. Is that alright?" Kate asks, stumbling into the kitchen. She is my rock in this turmoil and I could not have asked for a better friend.

"Thank you, Kate," I said and give her a warm smile.

She picks up one of the bills and scans it with a puzzled look on her face. "Doesn't your father's health insurance cover most of these bills?"

"No, it doesn't, it is totally useless. I don't think I can pay for this all unless I quit college and get a job," I reply with long drawn out sigh.

"You cannot quit college now, Ana. Not when you only have one year left. We will figure something out. I can tell my dad you don't have to pay rent anymore. What about your mom, can't she help you and Ray out?"

This is why I admire Kate so much. She always tries to look for solutions instead of dwelling on a problem.

"Ray made me promise not to tell my mom. He is afraid she would not be able to handle it if she knew he was sick. Not after Bob died so suddenly."

Despite their divorce 5 years ago they still love each other like longtime friend do.

"Well, that's a ridiculous idea. Sooner or later she will find out, and won't be happy that you omitted this little fact." Kate says pointedly and I know she's right.

"I just don't want to upset her further, not when she is still grieving over Bob," I reply with a soft voice.

"Give the woman some credit. She is much stronger than you think." Kate may have met my mom a couple of times, but I know from experience that mom is anything but strong.

"I just need a quick way to earn some cash fast," I mutter under my breath.

"So why don't you take Jose up on his offer? Do the damn photo shoot! It will get you at least $2,500," Kate says emphatically and I know she is right.

I hate being the center of attention, let alone having my picture splashed all over some Portland
tourist guide, but it would earn me some much-needed cash at least. I decide to put my personal discomfort to rest and call Jose this afternoon to tell him I'm willing to do the photo shoot next week.

An efficient makeup artist puts the final touches of makeup on my face while I stare at the beautiful cherry tree in Portland's Japanese Gardens. One of the last key tourist attractions in Portland, where we will be shooting pictures at for the tourist guide. We had already taken pictures at Washington Park, Pittock Mansion, Oregon Zoo, Oregon Museum of Science and Industry and the Pioneer Courthouse Square. I am exhausted and glad that posing and smiling for the camera will soon be over. Jose kept telling me I looked terrific and that I was doing great, but I wasn't feeling it.

I had come to the definitive conclusion that modeling was not for me. Kate accompanied me to Portland as moral support and I was thankful for that. It made the entire experience somewhat bearable. Eric Bancroft, my fellow "model", also had a positive effect on my first modeling experience. He was fun and witty and made me feel very comfortable.

"Ana are you ready for the next couple of shots?" Jose asks. I give him a wry smile.

"Sure," I say, with as much enthusiasm I can muster.

"I was thinking that we take a couple of pictures with you and Eric standing on the bridge looking over the garden," Jose muses out loud.

"Tell us where you need us exactly and we will be there," Eric replies with his usual chipper voice.

"I want you guys in the middle of the bridge," Jose responds confidently.

We take on the desired pose and Jose snaps away. After the bridge, we take more pictures under a maple tree, waterfall, bonsai trees and Koi pond. The fish are friendly, tame, and eat out of our hands. It is a fun experience. When we finish, we sit down at the café and order some drinks.

"How about we go out tonight to celebrate the last and very successful day of shooting?" Jose proposes enthusiastically.

"Oh, that is a great idea!" Kate chimes in immediately.

I do not particularly like going into crowded clubs or bars and I could not really spare the cash for a night of partying. I needed every penny for Dad's bills and college tuition. Before Ray became sick, I only had to take out a small student loan. Ray and Mom both put in $500 a month in my checking account. Together, with my job at Clayton's, I had enough money to cover all my expenses. But everything has changed now. I had not dared to tell Kate and Jose yet, but dropping out to find a job became a very likely scenario and $2,500 from one photo shoot was not going to change that.

"What about you Ana are you in?" Eric asks. I hesitate a little before answering.

"I don't know, I guess I am not really in the mood to party," I reply, earnestly.

Eric squeezes my hand reassuringly, but Kate is not impressed with my answer.

"Oh, come on, Ana, live a little. You need fun, a night out to clear your mind off things and distress. You deserve it," Kate says emphatically.

"I know this great club on Ankeny Street. It is called the Seventh Circle and it has a little bit of a
gothic feel to it," Eric says.

Kate gives me her cutest pouty face and I cave. It was very hard to tell her no when she did the pout face.

"Ok…" I say without much conviction.

"Great! Now all we need are great outfits tonight and we are all good to go," Kate chimes enthusiastically and I know that it is the perfect excuse for her to play dress up with me again.

I drink the final bit of my tea and decide to gracefully accept whatever Kate was planning to throw at me.

**Christian**

I rub my tired eyes before staring at the spreadsheets again. Tomorrow afternoon I am having a meeting with the Dean and agriculture department of Washington State University about the progress they made with drought resistant crops. These last few months I have done nothing but travel to avoid going back to Escala and the ghosts that haunt me there.

Elliot told me to throw it on the market and buy something new so I can get a fresh start. A realtor friend of his named Olga Kelly told him that some great property on the Sound would be put on the market soon. He has always known that I loved that area and wanted to buy a house there someday. But I have no use for a great sprawling mansion for just me.

"Yo, bro, I heard about this great club just opened up on Ankeny Street. I bet it is packed with hot chicks. You want to go?" Elliot asks and I internally berate myself for asking him to accompany me on this trip to Portland.

I must be getting soft. One sob story about needing a hideout from some stalker ex-girlfriend and spending quality time with his little brother was all it took to convince me to take him with me on this trip. A decision I had come to regret.

"I thought you wanted to give your dick a rest this weekend," I reply gruffly, not feeling the slightest inclination of going to a packed club where people might invade my personal space, or worse, touch me. Not to mention that Elliot's definition of hot chicks was not my definition of hot.

A couple of disastrous double dates he put me through after the whole incident with Leila vividly assault my mind. Elena told me to forget about all that dating nonsense it wasn't for people like us and I know she is right.

"I am not going to fuck! Just checking out the merchandise Portland nightlife is selling," he replies cheerfully.

"That sounds like you're looking for prostitutes, but then again those are the usual women you date," I say coolly.

"Fuck you, Christian! At least I date. Jeez, you can be such an uptight, sexually frustrated prick some times. You need to get fucking laid, so maybe you should take a drive down to the red light district and get your cock sucked by the first hooker you come across," he snaps back. Elliot had never been one for diplomacy.

"Sorry bro, I have better taste in women than you," I reply back pointedly, making Elliot snort.

"You have an impossible taste in women. The girl you want doesn't exist, bro, so you might take
what Portland has to offer. Besides you seriously need a break. You have done nothing but work ever since we got back from mountain biking." Elliot says flippantly.

I sigh and roll my eyes at him.

"Fine, but if it's shit, I'm out of there before you can say pussy,"

"Deal. I am going to freshen up. Meet you downstairs?" Elliot asks.

"That water[1] is wasted on you, Elliot. You will always smell like a pig."

"Fuck you, Grey." Elliot replies while flipping me the bird, and for the first time in a long while, I smile a little.

I inform Taylor that Elliot and I will be out tonight at some club on Ankeny and he could take the rest of the night off. I take a quick shower and dress in casual jeans and a white linen shirt before meeting Elliot downstairs. The valet brings my R8 and we drive through the calm Portland evening traffic.

"You should buy me one of these," Elliot says while turning the radio louder.

"Go work for it. Lazy prick."

"Screw you Christian, who built all of your latest most innovative company factories well within budget? You should give me extra brownie points for that."

"Building something within budget is a requirement when you work for me, not something that happens once every blue moon."

"Whatever Christian," he grunts.

We arrive at Ankeny Street and park the car in the nearest parking spot.

"No valet parking at this dump," I say sardonically. He shrugs, calls me a douche, and walks towards the club without a backward glance.

Seventh Circle - a sign with dark gothic letters flashes above the door. How ironic, I think as I enter the establishment. A large bouncer nods at me when I pressed a hundred dollar bill in his hand. I make my way over to the bar where Elliot was already flirting with a vacuous blond. I look around the club taking in the interior. It's dark and the only lighting comes from the large flashy disco lights above the dance floor.

The floors and the bar are made of dark wood and the walls are crimson. It reminds me a bit of the playroom. I order a Bud and watch the partying crowd living it up on the dance floor.

They all look so young and carefree, like nothing in the world could hurt them. For the first time in my life, I wonder what it would have been like to grow up like that, young, carefree, and happy. I never partied or went to clubs at that age. Elena told me those places were full of shallow girls looking to score some wealthy unsuspected guy. I never questioned the validity of that statement, but now seeing these people like this, I wondered if it was true. Alas, what's done is done. There is no point in dwelling on the past. Elena did her best to shape me into a semblance of a man, but even she could not do much with such fucked up source material. I will be forever grateful that she cared enough to try at least.

A brunette sitting next to me is desperately trying to get my attention. I can't make out her facial
features because of the dim lighting, but her entire demeanor was exactly like Elena said it would be. I ignore her and drown my beer. I have had enough of this place and want to return to the Heathman to get some work done. Searching for Elliot, I let him know that I'm leaving and he could take a cab back to the hotel, or call for Taylor to pick him up.

I spot him getting his rocks off with a new strawberry blonde on the dance floor. I sigh and make my way over to them. Luckily, the dance floor isn't really crowded, so there are no bodies pressing against mine. I suppose I should be thankful for small favors. I make my way further up the dance floor and am instantly halted in my tracks when two striking powder blue eyes lock with mine.

The color was the most extraordinary blue I have ever seen. Blue as a clear summer sky, with the endless depths of the Pacific Ocean- they are striking. She boldly holds my gaze while moving her body hypnotically to the beat of the music. She dances like she's the only one in the club; her movements both fearless and graceful. She's like an angel fallen from heaven dancing in hell. The stationary yellow light above her head turns her lush chestnut hair into a halo on her head. Occasionally, the large flashy disco lights illuminate the contours of her face, ones that seemed sculptured to golden ratio perfection. Like the famous artist, Leonardo Da Vinci himself had sculptured her from the earth's finest marble. The rest of her face, however, remains obscured from me. She giggles at the blonde and Elliot; it's the most alluring sound I have ever heard. I stand there completely mesmerized and fascinated by the exotic creature in front of me and lose all sense of time and reason. I have never, ever felt something like this. I feel like a moth inexplicitly drawn to a bright hot flame. I feel lost, scared, and out of control.

I move closer to her so we are standing only inches apart from each other. I move to the rhythm with her and she smiles at me - the most breathtaking smile anyone has ever gifted me. Every cell in my body flares up and it feels like I was awakened from a deep dark slumber. Desire, a feeling that had become alien to me, stirs in my chest with a vengeance. Sparking my libido in whole new ways. It's both a scary and exhilarating.

I bow my head towards her ear and inhale her sweet scent- a unique combination of fresh apples, jasmine, and cinnamon. The smell of her is powerful and intoxicating, enveloping all my senses.

"You are dancing like nobody is watching like you own this place," I say softly in her ear. Her body heat is radiating against mine and it sends a shiver down my spine.

She throws her head back in bubbling laughter and her eyes shine with mirth.

"Well, you got to dance like nobody is watching, Love like you'll never be hurt, Sing like there's nobody listening, And live like its heaven on earth," she says brightly.

"William Purkey. It is a great motto to live by, but I suppose only a few people really do. So am I right to presume you're a teacher?"

"No, English lit major with a minor in education. What about you? You don't seem the teaching type."

"Ana," she says, holding out her hand for me. I accept it and feel a jolt of electricity shoot through my spine. She feels it too because she immediately withdraws her hand from mine. I never had this instant connection with anyone before.

"So, Christian. You want to dance with me like no one is watching?" She asks sweetly.

I smile at her and put my hands on her hips. It feels so natural and right.

"I guess I can adhere to Purkey's motto for one night." I reply.

We move in sync with the rhythm of the music a slow erotic beat. I push my hips against her and slowly grind against her. My erection is painfully strained in my pants. She smiles cockishly at me. Edging me on further. She slides her hand around my neck. The gesture is unexpected but the darkness I normally feel when people touch me stays dormant. A fact that is both shocking and arousing as hell. I groan loudly when I feel her crotch pressed against mine. We are so close now all hands, hips and arms. She looks at me boldly with bright cerulean eyes completely bewitching me. The dance floor, the other people, and the music fade away it is just her and me. I bow towards her and my lips softly graze hers.

Her mouth is sculptured to fit mine perfectly. Its feels warm, moist and soft. She responds with fervor to my tentative kiss. Her tongue presses against my mouth begging for entrance and I cannot, don't, want to refuse her. I feel her tongue slide inside my mouth exploring it tentatively. I push my tongue into her mouth greedily. I suck her tongue and explore every part of her luscious mouth. She tastes like crisp wine, raspberries, and Ana. She tugs my hair and I moan in her mouth. God, have I ever been so aroused before? She is a witch, a siren ensnaring me in her powerful magic. I am totally under her spell and I cannot, and don't, want to break it.

Our lips move against each other hungrily, both taking and giving, and she presses her body closer to mine. I don't ever want it to end. What the hell is happening to me? Snap out of it Grey! This isn't you. When have I ever really kissed a girl? The answer to that question is depressing and I quickly let it go. The kiss deepens further and it feels like my entire body has been set on fire burning every single part of me.

Suddenly she breaks our kiss and looks at me alarmed. Frightening me. Did she suddenly realize what kind of monster I am?

"Sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you, I don't know what came over me." She stammers. I am flabbergasted. I wanted every heaven sent second of that kiss! How could she ever have doubted that?

"No, need to apologize. I really liked that kiss, and I would love to do it again." I say consolingly. She gives me a shy smile and breaks our gaze staring at her feet for a second. I realize she feels uncomfortable and maybe even shy. This will not do and I decide to snap her out of her funk. A drink at a quiet table is just what the doctor ordered,

I was about to offer her a drink when I hear someone loudly cursing and yelling. A body slams into me harshly, nearly making me lose my balance. I see the blonde my brother was dancing with lying on the floor dazed. Ana is bent down over her. The sound of breaking glass reverberates through the club and I hear Elliot curse loudly. Then I see him fighting with two other guys near the end of the dance floor. I run towards him and push one of the guys off him. The guy's face is red and puffy and his eyes almost bulge out in fury. He takes a swing at me, but I am much faster. I block him and clock him right in the face. He falls backward on the ground and struggles to get back up.

"Stay the fuck down or I will break every single bone in your body," I angrily hiss at him.
Two or three bouncers come running towards us, pulling Elliot and the other guy apart. I look around for Ana and her friend to see if they were all right, but I cannot see them anywhere.

"Fuck!" I curse out loud. I hear Elliot yell to one bouncer and turn my attention to them.

"Let go of my brother," I say to one of the bouncers.

"Dude shut the fuck up. We don't take orders from you," a bouncer who is holding down Elliot says.

My blood starts boiling- nobody ever speaks to me that way.

"Do you have any fucking clue who I am?" I seethe.

"Dude, I don't know and I don't care. Shut the fuck up and let me do my job," he growls at me.

"If you do not release my brother now, I will personally make sure you lose this job and never get another one again," I state calmly.

"And who the hell do you think you are?" the bouncer asks while glaring at me.

"Christian Grey," I calmly reply. His face turns pale and he starts stammering a host of excuses. In times like this, it pleases me tremendously that I had the reputation of a hard ass.

"I am sorry Mr. Grey, I did not know," he stammers before letting go of Elliot.

"What's going on Elliot?" I ask as calmly as possible.

"Two guys started fighting and Kate and I got in the crossfire."

"Kate? Oh right, the blonde you were dancing with."

Elliot nodded. "I tried to separate them but they turned on me."

"You look like shit. I mean more than you normally do," I say trying to make light of the situation. His lip is split and he has a black eye.

"Fuck you Christian. Where are the girls? Kate and her friend Ana?"

"I do not know. I lost track of them in the confusion." I reply irritated, really cursing myself out for losing side of my mystery girl with no way to contact her again. I run my hand through my hair in exasperation. My heart sinks and the familiar feeling of depression washes over me again. I knew I had to see her again. I want to know every little thing about her. I just could not let her go, not now.

I call Welch and tell him to search for a girl named Ana, majoring in English Lit with a minor in education. I give him a description of her and her blonde friend, Kate who failed to mention her last name to Elliot, and order him to check all universities in Oregon and Washington. I tell him to coordinate with Barney to check all security cameras in and around Ankeny Street and a club named Seventh Circle. I hang up and order a double scotch for Elliot and myself, hoping to numb the gnawing ache in my chest.

Anastasia

The slow hypnotic beat of the music fills my ears and my body sways to the rhythm. The alcohol I had consumed gives me a pleasant buzz and it makes me feel light and free. For a brief moment in time, I do not have to worry about my father's illness, mortgage, or unpaid hospital bills. I can just
be me, Ana, a young, carefree student.

I look up and lock eyes with two of the most amazing gray eyes I have ever seen. They are intense and burning like molten liquid silver pools, even in the darkness of the club. I feel my heart catch in my throat and find myself unable to move away from his stare. His stare is both hypnotic and magnetic - a dangerous combination. I could not really see any further details of his face, but the disco lights occasionally illuminated him. His hair is reddish-brown and his profile looks like Michelangelo himself sculptured it. He is almost too perfect, like a fallen angel tempting unsuspected mortals to sin.

Kate and her new boy toy are dancing like there is no tomorrow. It is pretty much a given fact that she would spend the night with him.

"He is so hot!" Kate mouths at me, making me giggle.

The fallen angel comes closer and starts dancing with me, matching my rhythm. His body heat envelopes me, and a delightful shiver runs through my body. I have never felt anything like this before. Sure, I have been attracted to some guys in the past, but this attraction that I feel for him is completely alien to me. It makes me feel a little scared.

I feel his warm breath near my ear when he bows over to talk to me. His smell is heady and pure, masculine - a strange intoxicating blend of musk, citrus, and cedar.

"William Purkey. It is a great motto to live by, but I suppose only a few people really do. So, am I right to presume you're a teacher?"

"No, English lit major with a minor in education. What about you? You don't seem the teaching type."

He lets out a loud laugh that brings a smile to my face. "You are very perceptive. You are also right. I'm not a teacher, but I read Purkey's *Becoming an Invitational Leader*. I found it inspiring."

"Ana." I say my name by means of introducing myself while holding my hand out for him to shake. He willingly takes it, and as soon as our palms touch, I feel a jolt of electricity pass through my spine, making me withdraw my hand from his quickly. Judging by the look on his face, I can assume he felt it as well.

"Christian." His husky voice replies.

"So, Christian. Do you want to dance with me like no one is watching?" I can't help but ask sweetly, not wanting him to leave my side yet.

His beautiful smile graces his face once again before he puts his hands on my hips. I'm surprised at how natural and right this feels, but I decide not to question it right now.

"I guess. I can adhere to Purkey's moto for one night." He responds, and I can't help but give in to the music.

We start to dance to pulsating erotic beat of the music. I feel his large hands on my hips and his pelvis grinds against mine. I feel tingles shooting down my spine and something hot and wet rushes out of me. This man is sin personified and I cannot get enough of him. I push myself against his crotch and slowly push my hips up and down grinding against him. I feel something hot and hard against my stomach and I realize he is aroused. A heady powerful feeling flushes through me I smile at him and slide my hands around his neck pulling him closer to me. I don't know if it's because of my attraction to him or the alcohol that I have consumed, but I want nothing more then
to kiss those beautiful sinful lips. It is like he has read my mind. His mouth brushes against mine, his lips feel both soft and hard. His scent is everywhere, enveloping me in his intoxicating concoction. I push my tongue against his lips and he opens his mouth immediately, allowing me to slide my tongue in his mouth, exploring and tasting every inch of him. My blood feels like it is burning inside my body and I feel completely dazed. Our kiss deepens further, our mouths molded perfectly together. It is like nothing it is just him and I on the dance floor. I press myself closer to him needing more friction. What is wrong with you Ana? Dry humping some random stranger in the middle of a dance floor! A small voice venomously whispers in the back of my mind. It is like ice water on my recently discovered libido. What must he think of me? Maybe he thinks I am so cheap slut grinding myself against every guy in a club. I feel mortified and quickly break this kiss.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you, I don't know what came over me." I stammer like an idiot and look away in total mortification.

"No, need to apologize. I really liked that kiss, and I would love to do it again." He says soothingly. I smile at him and stare at my feet like an idiot for a second.

Suddenly I hear someone yelling and cursing so loudly, it over stemmed the music playing in the club. Terror fills me when I see Kate falling on the ground, hitting her head on the dance floor. The guy she was dancing with runs towards her assailants and punches one in the face. I run towards Kate and ask her if she was alright.

She murmurs something incoherent. She was totally out of it. Fear grips me. Please. Kate, be ok.

Eric and Jose come running towards us.

"What the hell happened?" Jose yells.

"Two guys fighting pushed her on the ground. I don't think she is feeling well," I reply.

"Kate, look at me ok?" Eric says and Kate turns her glassy eyes on him.

"She hit her head. She might have a concussion," I tell the both of them.

"Come on, let's take her to the ER," Eric says and lifts her off the ground.

We walk outside and get in the car. I close my eyes for a moment- two bright gray eyes are hauntingly staring back at me. I feel a dull ache spreading in my chest when I realize that I probably won't ever see him again.
Christian

There were two numbers scribbled down on a piece of paper that was lying on the conference table in front of me. One was significantly smaller than the other.

For me, those two numbers were just the bottom line of an acquired company that was not meeting my expectations, but for the man standing in front of me holding an impassioned presentation, that same company represented his life's work.

I once read that the first kill for soldiers on a battlefield is always the hardest. We are taught that killing is wrong from an early age; we are also thought to be forgiving and compassionate towards others. Taking someone's life goes against everything society - and maybe even humanity - stands for. Yet, that soldier on the battlefield does not have a choice. It's kill or be killed. There is no room for compassion or forgiveness. After the first kill, it gets easier to take a life and another after that. You become hardened and immune to the suffering of others when they threaten your very existence. It is the same in the world of mergers and acquisitions. Failing companies- if they can't be fixed- are always torn apart and sold in pieces. There is no room for sentimentality or compassion. All that matters is the bottom line and the cold hard cash that stands there.

When I was younger, I often had trouble with liquidating a company that could theoretically be fixed with time and a lot of costs. I used to retain employees of these companies, hoping that I wouldn't have to fire them if the company had to be liquidated. I was often willing to take less profit if it meant they could keep their jobs. However, just like the soldier on the battlefield, time has made me hardened and immune. This industry has no place for weakness.

I no longer pay any attention to the man in front of me. I had already made up my mind and nothing he could say or do would change that.

Instead, I find my mind drifting towards her again and stare out of the window watching the leaves of the trees turn yellow, red, and brown in the mid-September sun. Ever since I first laid eyes on her, back in June, she has been a constant on my mind occupying every waking thought and sleepy dream. It is a welcome change from the horrific nightmares that have haunted me for so long. I can still smell her unique soothing scent and feel the warmth of her lovely soft skin. It is enough to make my cock twitch and spit out cum like there is no tomorrow. I've lost count on how many times I pleasured myself at the mere memory of her.

I have never felt anything like this before, this complete and all-consuming obsession with another human being. Every time I close my eyes, I can still feel her hot, sweet mouth on mine. That kiss had been otherworldly, leaving me completely dazed and disoriented every time I think about it. It feels like I have seen a part that was missing from me yet I cannot seem to locate it to bind it to me again. It is slowly driving me to the edge of insanity. It is unsettling and I know nothing good will come of it. Yet I cannot stop myself. I am like a magnet longing for its polar opposite.

Welch has felt the brunt of my anger for the last two weeks. It's his incompetence that's keeping her from me. He still has not been able to find out who she is and where she came from. I even contemplated firing him and hiring someone else to find her.

The presentation ends and Mr. Polman looks at me hopefully and I turn my attention back to him.

"Mr. Polman, you have had more than a year to turn this company around and earn back my
investments. Your company simply has not met any of the expectations I set out for it. I don't see how this new plan of yours is going to change that. The bottom line remains that your company is worth more in parts and that is how I will sell it."

In just four sentences, I destroy the man's life work, but like the hardened soldier I had become, I felt nothing for his plight. You don't get to where I am today without being ruthless. I nod at Ros, who immediately follows me out of the conference room, leaving Mr. Polman to his own devices.

"Thank fuck that is over what a waste of time. Liquidate and move on," Ros says.

"Agreed, I don't know why we even bothered," I reply.

She smirks at me. "Because you are a saint Christian."

I snort loudly. "We both know that is a lie."

Ros laughs loudly. "True. That reminds me, I am taking Gwen with us this afternoon when we are visiting the laboratories. She really wants to see where all my hard work went."

For the last 18 months Ros and Barney, my head of research and development, have been working on setting up GEH's own research and development laboratories in collaboration with WSU and Oregon State University. It will officially open in two weeks, but Professor Berg will give us a grand tour today.

The lab complex is one of the biggest in the country and is host to researchers in various scientific disciplines including agricultural research, biochemical and biomedical research, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and Robotics. Ros and Barney believe this investment will give GEH the edge in the very competitive industry of mergers and acquisitions, and I agree. The research will result in new technologies that GEH can and will patent.

"Isn't that a little risky considering she's almost near her due date?" I reply, genuinely concerned.

Ros snickers. "Dr. Green said first babies are always late. She will be fine."

I raise my eyebrow at her and sigh.

"If you say so," I mutter in response making her chuckle.

We walk out of GEH and enter a small bistro close by. Gwen is already waiting for us at a table near the window. She looks happy, radiant, and very pregnant. She greets the both of us enthusiastically and we sit down at the table. The waiter comes over and we all order the daily special. The conversation between the three of us ebbs and flows easily. Nevertheless, I find my mind drift off to Ana, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I inwardly curse Welch for not being able to locate her yet. It is a primal, all-consuming feeling I have never felt before in all my thirty years.

Ros snaps me out of my musings by calling for the check. She insists on paying for our meals and I thank her. As we walk out of the bistro, Taylor is already waiting for us, ready to drive us to Boeing airfield were Charlie Tango, my helicopter, would be waiting to fly us to Portland. I curtly greet him and we all enter the armored Audi Q8. In the Audi behind us is Falcone, Ros's CPO, and Ryan. They follow us while Taylor drives us with Sawyer riding shotgun next to him. Personal security is an unfortunate but necessary measure I had to implement when I became a high profile multi-billionaire. Not only for me personally but for my loved ones as well- something my little sister Mia despises. Our drive to the airfield is expedient and I help Gwen out of the car. She grins at me excitedly.
"I have never flown in a helicopter before! This going to be so much fun!" She gushes.

"It is," I grin back.

"I cannot believe you are going to be our pilot. This is seriously awesome," she squeals excitedly.

Ros rolls her eyes at her mockingly. "Yes, yes, go join the Christian Grey fan club like the rest of his air-headed, infatuated groupies. You will fit right in."

She teases and takes Gwen's hand before leading her to the helicopter. Gwen huffs loudly. "You are just jealous."

I chuckle at their lighthearted banter and follow them to the helicopter. Ros and Gwen are some of the few people that make me feel comfortable. They both know the true story behind Leila's suicide, yet they never judged me or pried into my personal life.

I start the preflight procedure as soon as we are all strapped into the safety harnesses, and ask for flight control's permission to take off. Our flight to Portland is short and fun. Gwen's excitement about flying in Charlie Tango was infectious and I find myself calling out landmarks, like some cheesy tourist guide. After an hour, I land Charlie Tango smoothly at Portland International, where two other armored black Audis are waiting for us. Taylor and Sawyer lead us to the first one, while Falcone and Ryan enter the second one. Taylor starts the car and drives to the Grey Research Laboratories located south of Portland. After a 30-minute drive, we finally arrive at the heavily secured laboratory complex.

"Mr. Grey, Ms. Bailey, welcome!" Professor Vincent Berg, the general director of Grey Research Laboratories, says enthusiastically. He is a tall, thin man in his mid-forties with short, trimmed, dark blonde hair and astute brown eyes.

"Vincent, nice to see you again," Ros says, while she gives him a hand and introduces him to Gwen.

"Professor," I say curtly and shake his hand.

We enter the main building and Professor Berg starts the tour and shows us the agricultural labs. Professor Hoffman, head of agricultural labs, tells us about the latest developments in soil science and drought resistant crops. She excitedly shows us a new breed of potatoes that is specifically designed to thrive in arid environments. I am amazed. This new breed of potatoes would be excellent for the countries in East Africa affected by drought.

After our tour of the agricultural labs was complete, Professor Berg shows us the biochemical and biomedical labs where researchers focus primarily on the development of various new medicines and substances. We say our goodbyes to the researchers and move to the tech lab. Professor Berg explains that a part of the tech lab is based underground because of quantum mechanical neutrino based research.

Gwen, who is a physicist, is very eager to see the quantum labs and almost drags Ros to the elevator to check them out first. Professor Berg and I dutifully follow them into the elevator. Professor Berg tells us that this part of the tech lab is built twelve-hundred feet underground and I cannot help but feel a little impressed. The elevator door opens. After a swift ride to the lab, we get out and are greeted by a frazzled looking guy. Dr. Carter, the lead scientist on neutrino research at the lab, explains to us that he is currently researching quantum entanglement. Gwen and he quickly lock into a heated debate on the subject, much to Ros' chagrin. I, on the other hand, find it a very intriguing conversation. Thirty minutes later, Professor Berg insists that we move back upstairs so
he can show us the other labs. We say our goodbyes to Dr. Carter and enter the elevator again. Professor Berg presses the button and the doors closed smoothly. The elevator hums and starts to move up. Suddenly, the lights flash and the humming sound stops. The elevator stops moving, trapping us. The main lights turn off and the eerie blue emergency lights turn on. "What the hell?" Ros asks anxiously. Professor Berg presses the button again, but the elevator remains unmoving. "I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on," Professor Berg stammers. "It appears we have stopped," I reply sarcastically. Professor Berg presses the emergency button and a disembodied voice of a woman echoes through the small space. She explains that there was a power outage and the emergency generators had not kicked in to compensate for the loss of power. She promises us that they were working on fixing the problem as soon as possible. "Well, at least we are trapped in a lab with the smartest people in the country. I am sure they will solve this problem in no time at all," Gwen says hopefully. "Well, they better I don't have time for this shit," Ros snaps, earning her an eye roll from Gwen. "Since we are going to be stuck for a while, I guess we should just make the best of a bad situation," I say.

Even though I feel irritated, I know that there is no point in getting angry. After a half-hour, we all sit down on the elevator floor and the mood plummets. Professor Berg apologizes repeatedly for the inconvenience and I make a mental note to scold Elliot for this monumental fuck up. He is the main contractor for this building like he always is with all new GEH buildings. An ear-piercing scream fills the confined space of the elevator startling me. I look up and see Gwen grabbing her stomach. A small, wet pool forms underneath her. "I think my water broke," she blurts out sending Ros into a panic attack. "This cannot be happening you, weren't due for another two weeks!" Ros says panicking. "Well, this baby is coming now!" Gwen replies panting while clutching her stomach. I waste no time and try calling my mother for advice, but there is no reception underground. I order Professor Berg to push the emergency button again so 911 could be called. I then instruct Gwen to slow down her breathing. I tell Ros to time Gwen's contractions so we can determine if the baby is close. I remove my jacket and turn it into a pillow, making Gwen as comfortable as possible. Ros is still in a complete state of panic, rambling and raving unhelpfully in the elevator. I tell her to shut up sit next to Gwen. She complies after a few well-chosen curse words. Unfortunately for us, Gwen's contractions are rapidly succeeding themselves. This baby is going to be born now. I am slightly shocked when I see the baby's head crowning, but I quickly recover, sternly reminding myself that this was all natural. Gwen screams at me when I tell her to push. I gently place my hands near the baby's head and guide it out. A wail fills the elevator and I look at the small, squirming creature in complete wonder. It is a sensation I have never experienced before. I look up and smile at Ros and Gwen who were crying. "It's a boy," I say hoarsely. "We know!" They say in unison. Professor Berg removes his lab coat and hands it to me. I wrap the baby in it and hand him to Gwen and Ros. "Here is your son, Mrs. and Mrs. Bailey," I say. My chest feels tight with a host of unnamed emotions.

"Thank you, Christian, for not losing your cool and delivering our baby," Gwen says earnestly. "You two are very welcome. Please take good care of him," I reply softly. Suddenly, the idea of how frail, small, innocent, and completely depended on newborns are sinks in, and for the first time in my life, I wonder if my crack whore of a birth mother had experienced the same emotions when I was born. It makes me feel uneasy. "We promise, Christian. We will," Ros replies her voice tight with emotion, knowing where my feelings stem from. "So what are you two naming the little fellow?" I ask. "Christian Andrew Bailey. We would like to ask you to be his godfather," Gwen says. I feel my throat constrict and a sea of emotions is whirling inside me. How can I be a godfather? Doesn't she know how fucked up I am? "I think you make a wonderful godfather. After all, you brought him into this world. Besides, it isn't hard. All you have to do is spoil him," she says and winks at me. I gave them a wry smile. "I am honored, thank you." The disembodied female voice echoes through the elevator again and tells us the problem with the elevator is solved and we will be moving to the surface again. The paramedics are already waiting for Gwen once we arrive.
The humming noise starts again and the elevator starts moving upwards. I look over at Ros, Gwen, and baby Christian closely cuddled together in the corner of the elevator- genuine love and affection evident between them. I feel a twitch of jealousy in my gut. More than anything in the world, I want what they have with Ana, the girl that made me feel again.

I inwardly curse Welch, once more, for not being able to find her. The paramedics immediately pour in after the elevator doors open again. I congratulate Ros and Gwen and tell them I will visit them tonight. Taylor and Sawyer drive me to the Heathman where my usual suite is booked. I take a good, long shower and order some room service. I had hoped to answer and sort through my emails, but I feel too drained to work. I sit down on the couch and absentmindedly browse through some Portland tourist guide. I turn another page and my eyes are immediately drawn to the most beautiful woman I had ever seen posing in the picture of the Japanese Gardens. I feel my stomach fluttering like someone released a million butterflies inside of me. I knew it was her, Ana, the girl I had met at the club. I never got a good look at her face because it had been too dark, but I could recognize those beautiful blue orbs anywhere. After all, I have dreamed of them every night since I first laid eyes on her. Now seeing her for the first time completely, she is everything I expected her to be and more. She truly is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I have seen and been with a lot of beautiful women. I feel my heart pound in my chest as excitement courses through me. After all these weeks searching, I would finally learn who she is and where she lives. I grab my phone and dial Welch. "Mr. Grey," he answers on the third ring. "Welch, my girl is posing in the Portland Tourism Guide. Find out her full name and run a background check immediately." "Yes, sir," he replies stoically. I hang up and close my eyes. Soon I would see her again. That thought brings a smile to my face while tranquility settles over me.
Discoveries and Consequences

Anastasia

It has been eight long weeks since my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and our financial situation has taken a turn for the worse. I was unable to increase my student loan because I missed some stupid deadline that the lady of student affairs had failed to mention to me. The simple fact was that I couldn't afford to stay in college and pay for Ray's bills. I know both my mom and Ray will be devastated if I dropped out, especially since I am starting my senior year, but Ray's health is more important to me. I refuse to tell him or mom how dire the situation is; they have enough crap to deal with at the moment. No, I just need to be strong and handle it by myself. Still, I could not help but feel angry at Ray's bosses at the shipyard. They were the ones that made him sick.

I had borrowed Kate's laptop to do some research into the company a couple of days ago and found out that some of Ray's colleagues had gotten ill as well. I had emailed one of them. He had emailed me back today and I was shocked when I read his reply. He wrote that the shipyard had been notoriously lax with safety regulations regarding dangerous chemicals. Apparently, they had valued profit more than human lives. He was especially angry with Christian Grey who he called an egotistical, megalomaniacal money grabbing prick. He wrote that Grey had been a silent partner for years and closed shop the moment people started to complain about health problems. I had heard of Christian Grey before, everybody is the US had. He was portrayed as some philanthropist wonder boy in the media according to Kate. I, on the other hand, had never paid any attention to the man until today.

I entered his name in Google, and my heart caught in my throat when a picture of him appeared on screen. It was him! The gorgeous man I danced with in the club in Portland a couple of weeks ago! Those intense silver eyes, and that scorching hot kiss, have haunted my dreams for weeks now leaving me all hot and bothered in the morning. He was even more handsome than I ever thought was possible. His hair was a thick tousled copper mess, and his jaw was strong and masculine. A tingling sensation crept over my spine into my nether regions. I felt sick and repulsed with myself. How could I have been attracted to such a vile person? I swore right then and there to expulse him from my thoughts and dreams no matter how hard that would be. Hell, he probably wouldn't remember me anyway.

I close Kate's laptop and prepare myself for another long shift at Clayton's, grateful for every dollar I would earn. I had asked Mr. and Mrs. Clayton if I could get more hours once I left college, and they were very understanding and accommodating of my situation. Today was very busy in the hardware store and time flew by. I help Mr. Clayton with closing the shop and wish them goodnight. I walk over to my car, and suddenly feel a prickling sensation in my neck, as if I was being watched. It was a feeling I've been having for a couple of days now. I look around but could not see anyone. I scold myself for being paranoid and blame stress and lack of sleep for my predicament.

I start the car and drive back to the apartment I share with Kate.

"Hi Ana. How was work?" she asks cheerfully when I got home.

"Oh, you know. The usual. Nothing special really. How was your day?"

"Ugh I spent hours on editing an article some freshman sent in. It was dreadful! He can't write for shit," she complains.
"Sounds like fun. Listen Kate, I just want to take a quick shower before starting on dinner. Is that ok with you?"

"Sure no problem. Or we can just order pizza. My treat," Kate offers kindly.

"Pizza would be great. I'm kind of tired."

"I thought you would be. You are working too hard. How are you going to handle Clayton's when your classes start again?" Kate asks with concern.

Dread fills my stomach. I haven't told Kate yet that I am dropping out. I know she would go ballistic when, if, I told her, and she will call mom or Ray in a flash. I cannot have that, not right now.

"I will manage it," I mutter. She looks at me skeptically but luckily decides to drop the subject.

"Oh, Ana before I forget. Professor Murphy called this morning. She would like to speak to you ASAP."

I look at her surprised. Professor Murphy is the head of the English Literature department at WSU, and a very inspiring woman. She has written three novels and is an expert on Thomas Hardy. Her classes were a true delight.

"Did she tell you what she wanted?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"Nope. Just that she wanted to speak to you and that it was urgent. She gave me her number so you can call her back. It's on the coffee table," Kate says while staring at her laptop screen.

"Thanks," I reply, grabbing the note from the table before making my way into the bathroom. I'll call Professor Murphy tomorrow.

After my shower, Kate and I enjoy our pizza with some cheap wine. She asks about Ray and my mom and I ask her about her brother Ethan, who was gallivanting through Europe, before we switch through more trivial topics. After dinner, we watch some romantic comedy before calling it a night.

I make my way into my bedroom, brush my teeth, and fall asleep the moment my head hits my pillow. And just like every night, intense gray eyes haunt me again.

The insidious sound of my alarm clock wakes me from a restless slumber. I feel warm, clammed, and a little disoriented. I knew that I had dreamed of something but I could not grasp what the dream was about. It dissipated like a fog in a warm summer morning. The display on my alarm clock showed 7:30. My shift at Clayton's starts at noon, so I had the entire morning for myself, though I had nothing to do. I did not need to prepare for any upcoming classes since I was dropping out. That thought made me very sad and simultaneously reminded me that I needed to call professor Murphy. I was still at a loss on what she wanted from me.

I get out of bed, freshen up, and make some breakfast for myself. Kate is already off to campus to discuss some stuff about the student paper.

After breakfast, I grab my phone and call professor Murphy, her cheerful voice ringing through the speaker at the fourth ring. I feel a little nervous calling her.

"Good morning professor, this is Anastasia Steele speaking," I say, a little anxious.

"Anastasia! Thank you for calling me back quickly. I have received some troubling news from the
student administration office. Is it true you are dropping out?" she asks right to the point, taking me aback.

"Mm yes," I finally manage to stammer out.

"May I be so brusque and ask why?"

I feel hot and uncomfortable. I did not want to discuss my financial issues with my parents let alone with a college professor whom I admired greatly.

"I, I …. I" I stammer, hating myself for not being able to tell her.

"I know that whatever the reason is it must be hard for you to tell me. But I cannot help you if you do not tell me what's going on," Professor Murphy kindly says.

"My dad is in the hospital. He has cancer and I need to work to pay for his medical bills.," I finally blurt out.

Professor Murphy was silent on the other end of the line for a moment and I hear some rustling of paper. I feel like a fool for spilling my guts to her. Of course she couldn't help me, no one could.

"Anastasia I would like to talk to you in person today. I think WSU will be able to help you out. When are you available? I would like to discuss this further with you as soon as possible," She says, taking me by complete surprise.

"I am free this morning," I reply.

"Good. Meet me at my office at 10:00 am," she says briskly.

I thank and greet her before I hang up the phone. Hope blooms in my chest. Maybe, just maybe, I do not need to drop out after all.

Professor Murphy's office reminds me of a Victorian English library. Large brown bookcases reached the ceiling and were stuffed with books and various trinkets. A large classical globe stood next to her large wooden desk. I sit down on one of the dark green leather armchairs that where situated in front of the desk.

"Anastasia welcome!" Professor Murphy says excitedly.

Professor Murphy is a woman in her early forties, with dark black hair that was stylishly cut in a bob. She wore a pair of trendy glasses on the point of her nose, and her kind blue eyes sparkled mischievously behind them.

"Good morning professor," I say a little nervously.

She sits down behind her desk and pulls out some papers from her drawer.

"Anastasia. Let me start by saying that I am very sorry to hear about your father. I hope he makes a quick recovery," she says earnestly.

"Thank you."

I understand that his health has put you into a difficult financial situation and I would like to help. You are one of my best students and I would hate to see you miss out on your education because life has thrown you a curveball.
If this had happened last year I would not have been able to help you. Thankfully, this year, Mr. Grey of Grey Enterprises Holdings has set up a special internship program with WSU to help out brilliant students that have been confronted with financial hardships. You see, Mr. Grey is a firm believer in fostering talent." She says and gives me a tight smile before continuing.

"This year Mr. Gray has offered six internship spots, and you have been selected for one of them. Mr. Grey will pay your college tuition and all other college related expenses. You will also be paid a small salary of about 20 dollars an hour. In return, you will work four days a week at one of the departments of his headquarters in Seattle. Your classes at WSU will be scheduled on your day off. That way, you earn money to help your father and still be able to get your diploma. It is a very elegant solution." Professor Murphy says as if she just offered me the best thing since sliced bread.

My stomach drops and anger sweeps through me. Fostering talents my ass. More like exploiting people and dump them the moment they become an inconvenience. It's his fault that Ray got sick and I was in this mess in the first place! I would rather be damned than be used and abused by his company the same way my dad was. There is no way I was going to work for that asshole or his stupid company. He can take his internship and shove it so far up his ass that he would choke on it. However, the little rational voice in me is quick to point out that this might be the best solution to my shitty situation. Especially since Ray has been admitted into a veteran hospital located in Seattle. Yet, I cannot bring myself to accept this cup of ill-disguised poison. Still, I will never make professor Murphy privy for my reasons to refuse this, and I quickly need to come up with a plausible reason to turn this internship down.

"This is a really kind offer professor, and I don't want to sound ungrateful, because I am really grateful for it. However, I cannot accept this. I don't think I can afford to work just four days a week." I say hesitantly.

She looks at me intently for a few long seconds before she speaks up again.

"Anastasia, I don't want to sound blunt, but very little jobs will offer you a higher salary or a fulltime position. Not in this economy anyway. Do you really want to waste your talent on some menial badly paid job and forfeit your college education? What about your parents? Would they really want you to drop out?" she asks with an arched eyebrow.

I instantly feel guilty, and I can't deny she is making a couple of very valid points.

"My parents don't know I am dropping out. I haven't told them yet since they have enough trouble of their own right now."

She stares at me disbelievingly for a moment and then blinks.

"Ana, I cannot force you to tell your parents and I cannot force you to take this internship. I will only give you a word of advice as a parent myself. I could never let my children sacrifice their hopes and dreams for me, and by the way you talk about your parents, I very much doubt that their view differs from mine. Please think about this carefully Anastasia. Take these forms and read them through before you make your decision. I need an answer by next Friday," she says imploringly.

I nod and tell her I will think about it and call her before Friday with my decision. We say our goodbyes and I drive back to the apartment. I hate this, all of this. My dad's illness, my dire financial situation, Bob dying on my mother and most of all I hate Grey and his evil company for putting me between Scylla and Charybdis.

As soon as I get home, I find Kate sitting in the living room reading something on her laptop.
"Hi Ana, did you call professor Murphy yet?" Kate asks curiously.

I'm not really in the mood to discuss what professor Murphy and I talked about, but I know Kate will turn tenacious if I did not offer any information up voluntarily. I dread telling Kate that I am dropping out.

"Yes, I just came back from a meeting with her."

"So? What did she want?"

This is the question that I dreaded the most. I swallow and contemplate what I was going to tell Kate before I opt for a half-truth.

"To talk about my future at WSU," I reply, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

It did not work, though, because Kate's attention was immediately peaked.

"What do you mean about your future?" she asks.

I sigh and sat down on the couch. I did not know why I even bother with being evasive. Kate would never let me get away with this explanation.

"Kate I need to drop out. I need a fulltime job to pay for all of dad's expenses," I say bluntly, dropping the news like a bomb.

"What?! NO! Ana you cannot drop out! Do you parents know you are planning to drop out? I am sure your mom and dad will never allow you to do that," Kate all but screams at me.

"No Kate they don't and you won't tell them. Dad is sick and he needs all his energy to get better. He doesn't need to worry about my shit. And mom just lost Bob, she is still mourning his death. On top of that Bob's son is stirring up trouble about the inheritance. I cannot bother her with my issues since I can solve them easily by dropping out and getting a job," I reply, resolutely. Mom called yesterday distraught, telling me that Bob's son Andy wants to throw her out of the house she bought with Bob, claiming that she has no right to live there anymore now that Bob is gone. That small piece of news cemented my decision to drop out.

"And you think that they will jump of joy when you drop out? Your mom took a job just so she could help pay for your tuition. Your dad worked 12 hours a day to help out too. Dropping out means that all your parents' sacrifices have been for nothing," Kate says furiously.

"It is just for this year Kate. Once dad is on the mend I will finish my senior year," I say feeling a little guilty.

"Ana you and I both know that once you have a job it will be very hard to start college again. What did professor Murphy say about you dropping out?" Kate inquires brusquely.

"She wanted to help me. She offered me an internship position in some new project the university has with Grey Enterprises Holdings. GEH will pay my tuition and a salary in return I have to work for at one of the departments at GEH for four days and my off day would be reserved for classes. You understand that I can never work for the company that got my dad sick in the first place."

Kate looks at me like had grown two heads.

"Are you insane? You are offered a great opportunity and you turn it down because you hate the company that wants to help you out? First off, you don't even know for sure if the shipyard your
father worked for made him sick. Secondly, you only have to work for them for a year. After your internship is over you can take your diploma and quit. My dad did business with Grey and he is apparently a notorious recluse so you probably will never even have to deal with him in person."

"First off, I haven't turned it down yet, and secondly, there is plenty of evidence that his shipyard was lax with safety regulations exposing not only my dad but countless others to dangerous substances. I am not going to work for a man like that," I bite back.

Kate rolls her eyes at me and purses her lips.

"You have read some random forum on the Internet and an email from a guy telling you that safety at the shipyard sucked. That is hardly enough evidence. On top of that, this all happened before Grey got involved with the company.

You are throwing away your future on some random claims about GEH's shady business dealings. Think about it Anastasia. The man is under constant scrutiny from everything and everybody and some people would love to see him fall. If his company's ethics were indeed dodgy it would have been common knowledge by now."

Rationally I knew Kate made some valid points but I also knew that a man like Grey had enough money to make complaints disappear.

"It does not matter Kate. I already got offered fulltime position at Claytons I don't need Grey's charity," I snap back, making Kate laugh mockingly at me.

"So you throw away your future and your dreams to become an editor for a 9 dollar an hour job at a hardware store and hope to pay your dad's bills with that? Seriously Ana, you are out of your mind and I won't let you do that, because that would make me a shitty friend," Kate says bluntly.

I know she was right and I did not put it past her to call one of my parents to tattle on me.

"Look Kate, I am hungry and I need to work in two hours. I told professor Murphy I would think about it and I will. Just give me a break, ok?" I plead with her, hoping she would simply drop it, making her throw her hands up in mock defeat.

"Fine," she murmurs under her breath before she continues to type furiously on her laptop again.

I make a sandwich even though I'm not really hungry anymore. My head is swirling with the pros and cons of this internship and I rationally know that the pros far outweighed the cons. I take up my phone and quickly dial professor Murphy before I could change my mind again.
On The Edge of Obsession

Anastasia

I drag the last of the moving box out of Wanda, and I'm happy that my move to Seattle has gone smoothly. Kate and Jose proved to be their weight worth in gold by helping me find a place and move. I was lucky to be able to rent this apartment in a great neighborhood in Seattle for only 500 dollars a month. It belonged to a successful photographer friend of Jose who was on a yearlong assignment to travel all over the world, taking pictures for National Geographic.

He owed Jose a huge favor and was willing to rent me his apartment cheap, provided I took care of his cat who, ironically, was called Mouse. The apartment is fully furnished, so thankfully I do not need to buy anything. I simply could not spare the money. I only brought my own bed and the contents of my room from my shared apartment with Kate. Dread washes over me; I'm going to miss Kate so very much. I walk back inside the apartment building and press the elevator button. The door opens immediately and I enter swiftly.

"Hold the door sugar!" I hear a man's voice yelling at me. I quickly push my hand between the elevator doors and they open again.

"Thank you sugar, phew, that was close." He says with a smile as he enters the elevator. His voice has a warm and familiar southern drawl to it. He's small maybe 5.7 with soulful brown eyes and dark olive skin. His dark yet black hair is ordained with streaks of bright purple and he's dressed flamboyantly in a pair of bright red pants, a blue floral shirt, and a blue bow tie with matching floral patterned shoes. His entire personality is energetic, friendly and charismatic. The kind of person you immediately love at first glance.

"What floor do you need to go, sugar?" He asks.

"Uhm, fourth."

He gives me a beaming smile.

"So do I! I'm Jimmy Deveraux by the way." He says and offers me his hand to shake.

"Anastasia Steele. Very nice to meet you." I accept his extended hand and smile at him.

"It seems you're new here. What apartment are you moving into pretty girl?" He asks.

"Number fifteen."

"Oh, Rich's place. You're the Ana he was talking about renting his apartment to. We are practically neighbors! I live in number eighteen. Do you need help with the box?" He asks in a friendly manner and quickly takes the box out of my hands before I could reply.

"My momma always told me; "Always help a lady out"." He says and I can't help but smile at him.

"You are a true southern gentleman." I reply, making him scoff loudly.

"That is not what my ex-boyfriend told me." He says pointedly.

"Well, I guess that's probably why he is an ex-boyfriend." I chuckle, receiving a hearty laugh from him.
"I like you already. I think you and I are going to get along great Annie Steele."

The elevator doors open and we walk towards my new apartment and before walking in I introduce Jimmy to Kate and Jose who are both taken by him almost immediately. He helps us unpack all my boxes and lends Jose a hand as he assembled my bed in the former guest bedroom, while Kate and I arrange my clothes in my very own walk-in closet.

Kate opens a box that I did not recognize and starts to hang clothes I have never seen before in my closet. Many of them still had the price tag attached to them further convincing me that they weren't mine. They were way out of my price range.

"Kate I don't think those clothes are mine." I say sounding a little puzzled even to my own ears.

"They are." She simply states.

"But I never bought them!"

"They are a gift Ana, you know my mom is a fashion designer right? Sometimes she gets stuff from other designers, and she gives away most of it. This time, we decided to give it to you. If you are going to work for GEH you need to look smart and professional. This is our way of helping you out."

I grab one of the blouses with a 400-dollar price tag.

"It is just too much. I can't accept this." I mutter under my breath.

"You can, and you will." Kate replies bluntly.

"But Kate..." I start to protest but she stops me immediately.

"Look, Ana, GEH is a cutthroat business. My father works with them and he knows that GEH has set a very high bar for the employees. The competition is a killer and every flaw you have will be scrutinized and judged. You need to look presentable, so you need these clothes. End of discussion."

I let out a sigh. Kate's right and it scares the hell out of me. I knew I wouldn't fit in. I never wanted this internship in the first place but it is the only way for me to graduate this year. I despise Grey and his ruthless business methods. He is the one to blame for Ray's illness and I hate him for it. A tear slips from my eye but I quickly wipe it away with the back of my sleeve.

"Thank you, Kate, you are a great friend." I say earnestly.

"Hey, Ana please don't cry. I promise everything will be all right. This whole thing will be over in know time and you will have your diploma. Hell, you probably never even have to see that asshole," Kate says and pulls me in a warm embrace.

"Hey, you guys. I am ordering some pizza for dinner tonight and have asked Jimmy if he wants to stay. You don't mind Ana, do you?" Jose asks while peeking his head through the bedroom door.

"No, I don't mind. I would like a pepperoni, please. Kate and I will share?" I ask while I look quizzically at Kate.

"Sure I love pepperoni." She replies.

We make our way back to the living room where Jimmy and Jose were cheerfully chatting and sit
down on the couch next to them. The doorbell rings and I got up to open it.

"Wow, pizza is fast here." Jose chuckles.

"Well, that's a first normally I always have to wait at least 30 minutes before they finally arrived. It must be because pretty girl here has moved in here; she is already working her Voodoo." Jimmy says cheerfully making Kate and Jose laugh.

"You, sir, are such a charmer." I smile at him and he winks.

I press the buzzer and a dull monotone male voice answers.

"Delivery for a Miss. Steele."

I press the button to let him in expecting the pizza guy. However, when I open the door a tall pimpled guy with a bright red nose carrying a large and a small brown box is standing in front of me.

"I need to see some ID, and you need to sign here." He says, pointing at the tablet in his hand.

"I think you have the wrong address I did not order anything." I tell him.

He lets out an annoyed sigh and looks at the tablet.

"Are you Anastasia Steele?" He asks again.

"Yes." I reply.

"Then this if for you. Please show me some ID and sign on the dotted line." He says sounding irritated.

I look at him feeling a little perplexed. The only people that know about my move to Seattle and new address were Kate, Jose, and my parents. I mutter some excuse and take out my license before signing on the dotted line of his tablet.

He pushes the boxes in my hand and disappears before I can even thank him. I walk back into the living room and put the boxes on the table.

"Wow, Steele I didn't know you ordered so much stuff." Kate says while looking questioningly at the boxes.

"I didn't. I have no idea who sent me this." I reply.

"There is an envelope attached to the big box." Jose points out.

I quickly snatch it off the box and rip it open.

Grey Enterprises Holdings.

455 5th Ave Z

Seattle, WA 98109

Anastasia. R. Steele.

89 Union St Apartment 15
Dear miss. Steele,

Congratulations on obtaining your internship. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome you into the GEH family.

We strive to get the best out of our people and therefore offer the best resources available to achieve that goal. We at GEH believe that one of the keys to success is solid communication and expect that our employees are contactable at all times.

Enclosed in both of these boxes you will find an IPhone and a MacBook that should ensure that is the case.

We wish you luck on your internship and are looking forward to meeting you on Monday.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Crawford.

Head of Human resources Grey Enterprises Holdings.

"Wow, GEH moves fast and doesn't do cheap stuff. A MacBook and an IPhone? No wonder GEH is the number one place to work for according to Forbes and the CEO Christian Grey is one gorgeous piece of ass. Pity he turned out to be straight." Jimmy says without hiding his disappointment.

"Oh yeah. I remember reading about an ex-girlfriend killing herself in his apartment. The tabloids were filled with that story for weeks."

"Oh, yes that was the talk of the town for months. Poor girl's husband died in a car crash. After that, she wanted Grey back but he wasn't interested and allegedly threw her out of his apartment. A few days later, she came back and killed herself in front of him. It was all quite tragic."

I am surprised to hear this now. I have read plenty about Grey on the internet but did not come across this story. He probably had it all erased so nobody would remember how he ruined yet another innocent life.

The bell rings again and I jump up to open it. Grateful that I don't have to listen to Jimmy and Kate's conversation about Grey anymore. I grab my wallet and pull out a 20.

"I've got this Ana." Jose says and opens the door before I have the chance. Moments later the pizza guy stands in front of us and Jose presses a 20 in his palm.

"Keep the change." He says and closes the door.

"Pizza is here." He yells and pulls out some plates. Thankfully, the conversation about Grey has seized.

Dinner turned out to be fun. Jimmy was animatedly talking about his family and his life before he moved to Seattle. He's originally from New Orleans born into a big creole family of six. He has three older sisters that he adores, and he recently followed his lifelong dream of becoming a chef and opening up his own restaurant. He was a corporate lawyer before he quit his job over a year
ago. His father had always insisted that he got a good education and became a lawyer and he didn't want to let his father down, saying that it was a big enough shock for his father when he told him he was gay, and he did not want to disappoint him further. He sighs and looks at us with sadness in his eyes.

"I learned the hard way that you cannot live your life abiding by the wishes of other people no matter how much you love them or don't want to disappoint them. In the end, it will only make you deeply unhappy. Always stay true to yourself and make your own path in life by following your own dreams. I wish someone had told me that when I was your age. It would have saved me a lot of hurt and heartaches." He says smiling ruefully.

"Here is to our true selves." Jose says while holding up his glass of wine.

We clink our glasses and the conversation moves to lighter topics. The time was nearing eleven when Jimmy excuses himself and goes back to his apartment. Kate and Jose are leaving back to Vancouver tomorrow morning and I dread it. I unpack the boxes and pull out the Mac and the IPhone. I'm surprised to find that everything is installed and ready for use. I surf the internet a little then go to bed, and for the first time in a long while, I am not looking forward to the days to come.

Monday morning came all too soon and here I am, preparing for my first day as an intern at Grey Enterprises Holdings. Kate assembled my outfit for today, a gray pencil skirt, white blouse and black pumps. I petted and fed Mouse before grabbing the papers I need for today and shove them in my messenger bag. I make my way to Wanda, my blue VW Beetle. She luckily starts without hesitation today and I drive off to GEH without a hitch. I park my car in the underground parking garage and take the elevator to reception.

"Good morning. I am Anastasia Steele and I am here for the internship." I say while pulling out my acceptance letter from my bag.

The perfectly coifed blonde at the reception desk regards me coolly before handing me a form and a pen.

"Sign this please." She says tersely.

I do as I am told and hand the form back to her. She hands me a badge and a map of the building.

"This is your security badge, have it on you at all times. You need to go to conference room 201. Take the elevator to the 12th floor and then take a right." She says all business like.

I thank her and make my way over to the elevators. A tall, skinny guy with blond hair and black rimmed glasses is standing there as well. He smiles at me when I enter the elevator with him.

"Which floor?" He asks with a friendly smile.

"12th." I reply, not able to hide the nerves from my voice.

"Is this your first time at GEH?" He asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Is it that obvious?" I ask, making him let out a soft chuckle in response.

"Don't worry; it is my first time too. Nathan Combs, I am one of the lucky 6 to get accepted into GEH and WSU new internship program. I take it you are one of the remaining 5 interns." He says while holding out his hand for me to shake.

"Yes, I am one of the other five. I am Ana Steele nice to meet you." I shake his hand, and for the
first time, I notice that he's cute in a nerdy sort of way. He has soft sparkling brown eyes and
dimples in his cheeks that are visible when he laughs.

The ping of the elevator and the sight of the doors sliding open suddenly interrupt my musings.

"Ladies first." He says sweetly making room for me to get out of the elevator.

We walk towards the conference room and are greeted by six other interns. A bubbly brunette with
bright green eyes named Emily Parker immediately introduces herself to me. The other interns are
a broad-shouldered former quarterback named Carlos Herrera, and a stocky law student named
Matt Durham. The last one to introduce herself is a tall beautiful blond beautiful but bitchy
psychology major named Kylie Jordan[HM3].

She has an air of superiority around her and manages to antagonize me in record time.

"Did you know that Mr. Grey personally asked me to take this internship? He was so impressed
with my grades and work. I think he is totally into me. He is just so rich, gorgeous and dreamy. I
think him and I would make a great couple." She blabbers inanely and I discreetly roll my eyes,
making Emily and Nathan laugh.

"You mean you and his money make a great couple?" Nathan jabs at her.

She scoffs at him and arrogantly flips her blond mane away from us, turning her attention to Carlos
who is chatting with Matt, when the door of the conference room opens and a sharply dressed
woman strides in.

"Good morning everyone. I am Helen Crawford, head of human resources here at GEH. I would
like to welcome and congratulate you all on earning this new and prestigious internship. I would
first like to give a quick introduction about what we expect from you and what you can expect
from us. After that, you all need to fill in these employment agreements followed by a tour of the
building. At 11:30 sharp, we need to be back in this conference room to where Mr. Grey himself
will be giving a welcome speech. After Mr. Grey's speech, Ms. Bailey, and Jack Anderson the
dean of WSU will be explaining this internship in more detail and you will be introduced to the
department heads. Any questions so far?"

I feel sick. I had hoped to fulfill this internship without ever seeing Grey. Now I'm going to be
confronted with him face to face. I do not want to deal with that horrible man. I silently pray that
his speech will be short and he wouldn't remember me.

Kylie Jordan raises her hand.

"Will we be working personally with Mr. Grey during this internship?" She asks.

A fleeting look of disapproval washes over Helen Crawford face.

"No, you will be working with your designated department head." She answers to the point.

Kylie looks like she swallowed a lemon.

"Shame." She murders under her breath.

"Ok, any more questions?" Helen asks.

"I have a question about GEH healthcare plan. Is that just for regular employees or do we get it as
well?" Carlos asks.
"When you sign your employment contract you will become a GEH employee so yes we will cover your health care." Helen answers swiftly.

Carlos thanks her and when nobody has any more questions Helen starts handing out the forms. I sigh. This is going to be a long day.

Christian

I stare at the cup of coffee in front of me unable to take an another sip. My stomach is fluttering and flopping as if someone had set loose a million butterflies inside of me. It's a strange and novel feeling. Today is finally the day that I will see her again. These last few weeks without knowing who she was or where she was had been purgatory. Every waking thought was filled with her and every night I dreamed of her. Her intoxicating scent still lingers in my nostrils after I wake up. Yet, in some masochistic way, I'm grateful for those dreams. They provided a merciful respite from my horror filled night terrors that have plagued me for as long as I can remember. I scoff; the irony of it all was clear as day to me.

I wonder if she thought about me the same way I thought about her. I know she felt the connection between us that night. It was something so primal and powerful it had been impossible to forget. I let out a long drawn sigh. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part.

Helen Crawford informed me that all the laptops and IPhones had been sent out on Friday morning and would be delivered the same day. I asked Barney to put a secret keylogger on both Anastasia's IPhone and MacBook. Naturally, he complied with my request without question. I was curious to find out more about the enigmatic Miss Steele. Welch had followed her around for the last couple of weeks and compiled a manila file with basic information about her a month ago. For the millionth time this week I open it hoping to find something new. I knew it was a futile exercise; I knew everything that was in there by heart, yet I couldn't stop myself.

ANASTASIA ROSE STEELE

DOB:
Sept. 10, 1995, Montesano, WA

Address:
1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7,
Haven Heights, Vancouver, WA 98888

Address:
89 Union St Apartment 15
Seattle WA 97102

Mobile No:
360-959-4352

Social Security No:
987-65-4320
Bank:
Wells Fargo Bank, Vancouver, WA:
Acct. No.: 309361:
$283.16 balance

Occupation:
Undergraduate Student
WSU Vancouver College of Arts and Sciences
English Major (requested her enrolment terminated on sept 5, 2014 citing financial reasons.)

GPA:
4.0

Prior Education:
Montesano Jr. Sr. High School

SAT Score:
2150

Employment:
Clayton's Hardware Store, NW
Vancouver 46/1315
Drive, Portland, OR (part-time)

Father:
Franklin A. Lambert, DOB: Sept. 1, 1973,
Deceased Sept. 11, 1995

Mother:
Carla May Wilks Adams,
DOB: July 18, 1976
m. Frank Lambert March 1, 1994,
widowed Sept. 11, 1995
m. Raymond Steele June 6, 1996,
divorced May 12, 2011
m. Stephen M. Morton October 16, 2011,
divorced Jan. 31, 2012
m. Bob Adams April 6, 2013
widowed June 18, 2015

**Political Affiliations:**
None Found

**Religious Affiliations:**
Not Known

**Sexual Orientation:**
Not Known

**Relationships:**
None Indicated at Present

When Welch delivered this summary about Miss Steele three weeks ago, I was shocked to read about her dire financial situation. Miss Steele was unable to pay her college tuition. According to Welch, her request to increase her student loan had been filed too late. I still have no idea why she needed her student loan increased, and I had ordered Welch to find out. Miss Steele is smart, making the Dean's list every year and maintaining a GPA of 4.0 throughout her entire college career. I knew then that I just couldn't let her drop out and I wanted to help her.

But I just couldn't barge into her life and offer my help, knowing she probably would never accept that and even worse ask all kinds of uncomfortable question that I did not want to answer. No, I needed to come up with a smarter plan and I did. In a week's time, I set up a new internship program in collaboration with WSVU. It was an idea that had been floating around in my head for a while, but now was the perfect time to implement it. The only demand I made was that Anastasia was given a spot, which wasn't unreasonable since she fit the criteria we selected for the program perfectly. I made sure of that.

Now, she was finally here waiting in one of the many conference rooms here at GEH. I take a deep breath hoping to quell the butterflies in my stomach and make my way to the conference room where the interns, Ros, my department heads, and the dean of WSU are already waiting. I school my usual impassive demeanor; a look I have perfected since my heady days with Elena. Cool, Controlled and Calculated. I repeat the mantra over and over again and walk through the opened doors of the conference room.

I feel her presence before I even lay eyes on her. It's like a pulsating electromagnet pulling me to her. Good lord in heaven, my dreams have not done her justice. Here in the full light of day, she's even more beautiful than I remember. She's absolutely breathtaking and for a moment it feels like my heart has stopped beating. Her long chestnut hair forms a stark contrast to her smooth pale skin. In the light of day, it appears as if it was glowing like a halo on top of her head. Her big blue eyes
are striking in her lovely elfin face, giving her almost a mystical appearance.

Her eyes lock with mine, and it feels like time stopped and everyone else in the room disappeared. For the first time since I last saw her, I felt alive again, like I have been woken from a long restless slumber. I could so easily drown in those large blue pools and I feel a sharp stab of disappointment when she turned her gaze away from me, breaking the spell. At the same time, a surge of happiness fills me; she recognized me! I stride inside with my usual confidence.

"Good morning all. I would like to welcome Jack Anderson from Washington State and our new interns to Grey Enterprises Holdings." I say curtly.

"Good morning." Everybody murmur back in unison.

I walk towards the head of the table, but I don't sit down. Instead, I remain standing behind the chair and look at all the new faces, lingering on Anastasia's.

"Here at Grey Enterprises Holdings, we believe that every talented student should be given the chance to get their diploma, excel at their chosen discipline and pursue their dreams. That is why I am proud to present our new internship program with collaboration with Washington State University. You six are the very first selected to participate in this program because you are all talented, dedicated and are the best in your chosen fields.

Here at GEH we want only the best, people that excel in everything we ask them to and don't back down from a challenge. We want not only the best people but we also want to get the best out of people because we believe in their abilities. That is why we feel that it is important to invest in each and everyone one of our interns and employees, because, at the end of the day, it is you that make this company the great company it is today. I am confident you will all perform exceptionally and prove to be a great addition to our company. Welcome to Grey Enterprises Holdings." I say and train my eyes on the stunning Miss Steele again, who quickly looks away. I wonder if she was shy or embarrassed and I resolve to find out after this meeting is over.

After I gave my short speech, the dean of WSU, Jack Anderson took over explaining the academic portion of the internship program. He spoke in a dull monotone voice, yet everybody was paying attention, scribbling down notes furiously. I look towards Anastasia, her eyebrows she is frowning and she is biting her plump bottom lip in utmost concentration. Why hadn't I noticed how juicy that lip was before? Holy fuck! That is one of the most arousing sights I have ever seen! I feel my cock twitch in approval, and I shuffled in my chair hoping that nobody would see my discomfort. What the hell is this girl doing to me?

After the Dean was done, it was Ros's turn. Her charismatic and energetic personality drew everybody in immediately. Since she has become a mother, she seems even more confident and grounded than before. It's really odd how such a small thing could create such a huge impact on a person's life. I turn my attention to her and listen intently to what she has to say.

"Thank you, Jack, for your explanation of the academic side of things." She begins and he smiles and nods at her.

"As Mr. Grey already mentioned, we here at GEH believe that it is important to invest in people so they can cultivate their talents and grow to their full potential. This intern program has been designed to do just that. Each of you will be rotated throughout the different GEH departments so you learn and experience new things and discover new talents and interests. You will be divided into teams of two people and will directly work with the head of the department you are assigned to. The members of the teams will rotate with every department switch. Are there any questions so far?" Ros asked while looking around the group.
A blond haired good-looking hipster guy with trendy glasses immediately raises his hand in the air like he was still in third grade.

"Yes… Mr. Combs." Ros says after peering at the sheet in front of her.

"Miss Bailey ma'am, I understood from the brochure we were given that not every department is participating in this internship program. Can you please explain to us which departments we will be placed with?" He asks, and I can't help but be slightly impressed with his attention to detail.[HM6]

"An excellent question Mr. Combs. You all will rotate in the following departments. Public relations, Marketing, Research and Development, Mergers and Acquisitions, Finance, Legal, and finally IT. At the end of this meeting, you will be divided into groups and assigned to your department."

"Thank you." He says and turns towards Anastasia before smiling sweetly at her. To my utter annoyance, she shyly smiles back at him.

An unfamiliar feeling tightens my stomach. I do not like that. I do not like that at all. The strength of these feelings is both overwhelming and surprising. I never felt like this before. I glare at him and resolve to make sure he would not be grouped with Anastasia Steele.

"Any more questions?" Ros asks. When no more questions came, she continues her explanation of the rest of the program and then introduces the different department heads to the interns. She sits down next to me and I bend towards her ear.

"Ros, I want you to group the blond hipster with the jock." I say referring to the dark haired guy that was sitting next to Combs.

Ros raises a meticulously plucked eyebrow at me.

"Why?" She asks.

 Fucking. I internally curse needing to come up with a good reason. I quickly scan the brief bios of the different interns that is placed in front of me. Carlos Herrera was the name of the jock.

"Carlos is a sportsman, an engineering major, the kind of guy that always wants to win and is used to make snap judgment decisions without thinking them through. Combs is a science major with a passion for fishing, is probably a thinker with a calm personality. I think they make a well-balanced team." I mutter to Ros.

The simple fact was that I do not want either of those pretty boys grouped with the stunning Miss. Steele.

Ros nods at me, seemingly satisfied with my reasoning.

"Good point Christian." She says and scribbles something down on the sheet in front of her.

After my department heads finish their introductions, Ros took over again.

"Thank you, Sam, for that great introduction of our PR department. I will now place you all into your respected group and assign you to the department you will start your internship with. Carlos Herrera and Nathan Combs, you will be working at IT. Emily Parker and Matt Durham will be working with at legal. Finally, Anastasia Steele and Kylie Jordan, you ladies will be working with Marketing. You will stay at this department for six weeks until you are rotated to a different one. After lunch, you will present yourself to your department head for further instructions. Any
questions?" Ros asks again.

When nobody responds, Ros gives them a tight smile.

"Good. I want to thank you all for your attention and wish you good luck on your internship. Lunch has been provided for you today at the GEH restaurant. Enjoy."

Everyone gets up and mutter in approval. I swiftly follow suit hoping to catch a few moments alone with the lovely Miss. Steele. She is the last one to leave the conference room and I quickly catch up with her.

"Miss. Steele, a moment please." I say smoothly earning a puzzled look from Ros.

Anastasia halts mid-step and looks at me with a mixture of shock and surprise.

"Mr. Grey, sir?" Her voice is lyrical like a sweet siren's call. The way she enunciates "sir" travels right through my cock and I shift uncomfortably on my feet. Yes, my libido is alive and kicking. For months, I had dreamed of this moment, but now that it is finally here, I am at a loss for words. Was this a good idea? I have a few golden rules of business and number one has always been never fuck the staff. However, wasn't the point of all of this to see Anastasia again? To get to know her better and pursue a relationship with her? But what kind or relationship am I looking for? Do I want her as my sub? Or as a regular girlfriend? I never had a vanilla relationship before. Am I even capable of having a vanilla relationship in the first place?

She is pure and innocent; a bright star in a dark night and I am drawn to her light like a moth to a flame, even though she is way too good for me. Yet, I want her more than anything I have ever wanted in my entire life, and I am a selfish man. I always get what I want and I wasn't about to let Anastasia Steele slip through my fingers.

"What a lovely surprise seeing you again here at the headquarters of my company of all places. I trust you have been well?"

"Yes, thank you for asking sir." She replies flatly, the tone of her voice surprising me.

"Have you settled well sir? I know it is a huge change from Vancouver."

"Yes sir, I have." She replies a little anxiously like she wants to get away from me ASAP. It irritated me. Had I misjudged her interest in me back in Portland? I severely doubted that I've always prided myself with how good I am at reading people; that is what made me so successful in the business world. Maybe she's shy or intimidated by knowing who I really am. Or maybe she sees the fucked up monster you really are Grey; a venomous little voice echoes through my head.

I smile at her hoping to ease the tension between us somewhat. I decide to be forward cutting right to the chase ending the small chat.

"I was wondering if you are free for coffee sometime?" I ask hopefully.

She visibly pales, and an alarming look appeared on her face completely startling me. This is not good.

"No sir, I don't think that's a good idea." She stammers a bit.

The sting of rejection felt like someone stabbed a knife in my heart and twisted it around. It was familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. What has changed over these months? I know she had
been into me. I suck in a breath, hoping to calm the emotions whirling inside me. I open my mouth to ask for the reason of her rejection, but Ros interrupts me before the words leave my lips.

"Christian, Woods has majorly screwed up with implementing the new fiber optics network for Kavanagh media. Andrea has set up an emergency conference meeting now." Ros says, the irritation evident in her voice.

"Fuck! I knew I should have fired that asshole months ago." I curse aloud. Kavanagh Media is a major client and a fuck up was the last thing I could use now.

I turn around to tell Ana that I wanted to continue this conversation some other time but she's already gone. What the fuck? Why was she acting this way? All these months of dreaming of her day and night, of fantasizing about what would happen when I would see her again. It all turned out to be an illusion. I resolve to find out after I deal with the mess Lucas Woods has created. I quickly send out a text to Welch to find out more about Miss. Steele before I walk back to the conference room.
Burned and Branded

Anastasia

Life always has a way of getting in the way of things. I learned that lesson when I was fifteen and my mom divorced Ray. I had hoped that Mr. Grey wouldn't have remembered our meeting in Portland, and I had hoped that my attraction to him had solely been alcohol induced. Unfortunately for me, I was wrong on both counts. I hated myself for being so attracted to Grey; if it was just psychical attraction it would have been easier to deal with but it wasn't. For some reason, I felt emotionally drawn to him. There was just something about him that drew me in and I knew it was dangerous and completely idiotic no matter how intoxicating his kiss had been. Hell! I only met the guy twice! It would have been so much easier for me to manage all these conflicting emotions if I felt nothing for him than just psychical attraction. Then again, beauty is only skin-deep. After all, Satan had been beautiful too before God cast him out of heaven. Evil always needed a pretty package to tempt people and Grey was no different. A beautiful package with rotten contents. Once I reminded myself of that fact, it was simple to compartmentalize everything I felt for him. It made it easy to turn him down when he invited me for a drink.

I was still a little shocked that he did that, especially since GEH had a very strong no fraternization policy. Nevertheless, I guess Grey did whatever the hell he wanted, rules were merely tools to control his subjects. Thankfully, he took it well and I had not seen him again since the introduction meeting on Monday, and since today was Friday, I did not need to go to the office, and there was zero chance of running into him.

Instead, I just had my first classes. All in all, this internship wasn't so bad and I realized I was actually enjoying it. Kylie and I were given a project to find new ways to get donations for a charity called Coping Together that was run by Grey's mother. Although Kylie and I did not really get along, we did manage to scribble down some ideas. I walk to my car and throw my bag on the passenger seat, start the car, and drive off in the mild Friday afternoon traffic. I need to get some groceries if I want to eat this weekend and decide to shop at the farmers market on Pike Marketplace. There is a long queue at the ATM machine and I patiently wait while checking my cell phone. There is a text from an unknown number and I quickly check it.

Dear Anastasia, you left rather abruptly last Monday and we did not get to finish our conversation. Ever since I first saw you in Portland, you have been a constant on my mind. I would really like to have a drink with you sometime soon to clear the air so to speak. Let me know when you are available. Yours, Christian.

I am completely speechless how the hell did he get my number? I quickly remind myself that my number is probably on file somewhere since I am working for his company. Why can't this guy just take no for an answer? I quickly text him back.

Dear Mr. Grey, like I said, I don't think it is a good idea for us to have a drink. You are my boss and I would like to keep our relationship professional. Therefore, I must decline your offer. Sincerely, Anastasia.

I stow my phone away and enter my code into the ATM machine. My stomach plummets! I only have a 100 dollars left and the month has just begun. How am I going to pay for food and gas? A queue is forming behind me so I quickly take out 20 dollars and put it in my purse. I only buy the bare necessities to last me the week and head home. I am just about to open my apartment door when I hear Jimmy call my name.
"Sugar! Someone has sent you these! You must have one hell of an admirer cause these are stunning." He says while handing me a huge bouquet of beautiful white roses.

"So? Who are they from?" He asks while enthusiastically bouncing up and down in front of me.

"I don't know," I mutter, a little perplexed.

"There is a card at the back. What does it say?" He asks while pushing the card down so he could read it too.

_Dear Anastasia,_

_Congratulations on your first week of work. I hope everything went well. I would like to have some drinks with you this weekend. Call me on this number when you are free. 206-555-2314

_Christian._

This man is persistent and does not seem to take no for an answer. I don't think he has ever heard the word no from anybody in his entire life. _Spoiled little rich boy_, I think sourly. I feel a little ill. I cannot afford to piss him off no matter how much I want to. I cannot lose this internship.

"Who is Christian?" Jimmy asks.

_Crap._ I cannot tell him he is my boss.

"Some guy a met in a club a couple months ago."

"So what's the problem sugar? You do not seem too happy. Wasn't he hot?" he asks, causing me to scoff at his question.

"He was stunning. But he isn't the kind of man I thought he was." I reply, receiving a sympathetic smile from Jimmy.

"Most men scoring girls in clubs rarely are. Best let him down gently sugar if you want my advice." Jimmy says and gently pats my back, making me smile at him.

"I will. Thanks, Jimmy."

"No problem sugar. Are we still on for tonight?" He asks while moving backwards to his apartment.

"Yes, you bring the movie right?"

"Sleepless in Seattle sugar. Tom Hanks is fine!"

I giggle and wave at him.

"Laters, Jimmy."

He blows me a kiss and disappears back into his apartment.

I enter my apartment and throw the flowers on the kitchen counter, not sure what to do with them. I put away the groceries and then decide on a quick shower before I head off to the hospital to visit my daddy like I have done every evening since moving to Seattle.

I am just about to put on my shoes when there is knock on my door. I sigh. It is probably Jimmy
being early for our film night. I thought I told him I was going to visit my dad first. Maybe he forgot? I open the door and I'm met with a pair of familiar blue eyes.

"Mom?" I ask, unable to hide the surprise in my voice.

"Hi, baby girl." My mom says.

I jump into her arms and she envelopes me into a warm loving hug, the kind that only moms can give. I breathe in her soothing scent and I start sobbing, freeing all the grief, pain, and sorrow that I bottled up these last few months.

She gently rocks me in her arms and hushes softly. It is so comforting, and it feels just like I am five years old again. She gently clasps my upper arms and pulls me away so she can look into my tear-stained face.

"Oh, baby what were you and Ray thinking! Hiding something so important from me." She scolds.

"I'm sorry." I manage to stutter out weakly. Mom wipes my nose gently with a handkerchief and ushers me inside the apartment.

"I was completely shocked when Jose Sr. called me two days ago and mentioned that Ray had cancer. He was under the assumption that I already knew. Why didn't you tell me?" she asks sternly.

"We just did not want you to worry mom. You have so much on your plate already." I say contritely and mom sighs and shakes her head.

"Oh, Anastasia just because my life is a mess right now does not mean I can't be there for Ray and you. Don't you know that I will always be there for you? No matter how tough life gets?" She says sounding hurt.

She would never say it out loud, but the underlying message is clear. It makes me feel even worse.

"Come here baby girl." She says and envelopes me into a hug again.

"Did you have dinner yet?" she asks.

"No. I was planning to visit Ray first."

"Well, I am coming with you. I was planning to see him tomorrow anyway. We can get some take out if you want after." Mom says.

"Sure mom just let me grab my purse."

When I get back I see that mom has put the flowers on the counter top in a vase.

"Anastasia, do you have something to tell me?" She asks while cocking and eyebrow at me. *Crap!*

"No mom I was going to throw those flowers out. They came from an ass." I say defensively

"What happened?" Mom asks concerned.

"Nothing, he is just a heartless egotistical bastard and I don't want anything to do with him. Can we please just drop it?" I ask irritated.

Mom scrutinizes my face and then sighs.
"That bad huh? Fine. But if all women were to throw away perfectly good flowers because men are jerks, we would never have any flowers." She says and puts the vase on the coffee table before walking to the door.

We walk out of my apartment towards my car and mom is chatting up a mile a minute, asking me all about my internship at GEH, and telling me what an amazing opportunity I have been handed.

"I always knew you were special and would go far sweetheart. You're beautiful and you have a good head on your shoulders. Your father would have been so proud." She says hoarsely. She always gets emotional when she talks about my biological father who died a day after I was born.

I park Wanda and we make our way inside the hospital. The smell of anti-septic hangs heavy in the air and the atmosphere is filled with a strange mixture of grief, pain, joy and relief. It does not matter how often I come here; I can never get used to it.

Ray is not in his room when we enter and I immediately feel uneasy. I walk towards the reception desk on his floor and ask where he is. The elderly woman at the desk informs me that one of the nurses took him to the hospital cafeteria after he complained about the quality of the food. It makes me chuckle. Mom and I decide to go the cafeteria to meet him there.

I immediately spot him at a window seat eating a burger and fries and I cannot help but smile a little. That is just so Ray. Mom, however, doesn't look too pleased.

Ray looks up and is utterly shocked when he sees mom standing next to me.

"Carla?! What are you doing here?" He asks, not hiding his surprise.

"I am here to visit you which I could have done weeks ago if you had been so kind to tell me that you were sick!" Her voice goes up in a crescendo at the end. "How could you keep this from me, and worse, let our daughter keep this from me! I am so mad at you Raymond Steele. When were you planning to tell me? On your death bed?" She continues to rant at him making me feel sorry for him.

"You have enough issues of your own Carla. There was no need to burden you further. According to my doctors, my chances of survival are high."

"Well, I deserved to know. You cannot saddle Ana alone with this. It isn't fair." She says sternly, only to receive a stubborn look from Ray.

"See? This is exactly the reason why I did not want to tell you. I knew you would fly off the handle. You could never handle setbacks." He snaps back at her, making me feel uncomfortable. I always hated when they fight.

"That is a low blow, Ray. I care. I always have and I always will." Mom replies sadly.

Ray looks contrite and sighs.

"I am sorry I shouldn't have said that. Thank you for coming. I really do appreciate it."

The look on mom's face softens and she sits down at the table. She takes his hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

"I cannot lose you, Ray. You are my best friend."

"You won't. I will conquer this disease. Don't you two worry your pretty little heads about that." He
says with certainty and mom smiles at him. Thankfully, the rest of our visit with Ray went on a much lighter note. Mom and I decide to eat at the hospital cafeteria with Ray, and for a brief moment, it felt like we were a family again. After dinner, mom and I go back to my apartment where mom is staying with me for the upcoming week. She planned to stay at a hotel but I managed to talk her out of that idea. I like that she stays with me as long as she doesn't cook.

"Ana sweetheart I am going to take a shower is that alright?" She asks.

"Sure mom. I am going to make us some tea ok?"

"Sounds good honey." She says smiling.

I put on the kettle and grab two tea mugs out of the cupboard. I wonder if I still have some cookies left. There is another knock on the door and I hear Jimmy's high-pitched voice echoing through the hallway. Oh, right. Movie night. I almost forgot about that.

"Good evening Mr. Deveraux," I say smiling when I open the door.

"Brought some wine, cream and bacon Jalapenos, cheese with French bread and mozzarella sticks so we can have a proper movie night." He says while pressing a box filled with goodies into my hand.

"Wow, Jimmy. This is just too much. I have just eaten." I reply.

"No offense sugar, but you could use a sandwich or two. You're way too skinny. Besides, you can't have a proper movie night without some finger food. Gives us something else to drool about other than Tom Hanks." He says waving his hand dismissively. He walks towards the TV and pops the movie into the DVD player just as mom walks back into the room.

"Oh, I did not realize you had a guest and such a pretty lady." Jimmy gushes making mom blush.

"Jimmy this is my mom Carla. Mom this is Jimmy, my good friend, and neighbor." I introduce them.

"Lovely to meet you." Mom says charmingly

"Pleasure is all mine." Jimmy says and kisses her hand.

"Oh, such manners! You all see those in a good southern boy." Mom gushes.

"Born and bred ma'am." He says and winks at her.

Mom and Jimmy hit it off immediately mom was born in South Carolina and just like Jimmy, she possesses that sweet southern charm.

"Oh, these sticks are to die for." Mom says when she stuffs her mouth with another mozzarella stick.

"Made them myself." Jimmy says proudly.

"Jimmy is a chef working at Canlis; one of the top restaurants in Seattle." I tell her, proud of my new found friend.

"Oh, I heard you need a reservation a year in advance to dine there." Mom says awed.

"Sad but true. If you want, you can come with me on Monday morning and I will feed you some of
our finest cuisines."

"Really? That would be amazing!" Mom says happily.

"Maybe we can share some good recipes from Carolina. I always love to learn new things." Jimmy says, and I can't help the heartfelt laugh that leaves my lips.

"Mom isn't the best cook Jimmy." I say, and he looks just like someone stole his last cookie.

"It is true. It is always hit or miss with my culinary skills." Mom confesses.

"Then I have no other choice than to teach you." He says resolutely.

Soon mom and Jimmy have the whole week planned for when I am working and I feel kind of left out. At the same time, I'm happy that they like each other, and I don't have to worry about mom when I am working. The only thing I am not happy about is that mom wants to take me shopping tomorrow as another birthday present but it is impossible to change her mind.

It is nearly 12 o'clock when Jimmy leaves and mom and I go to bed, and I cannot help but dream of intense gray eyes again.

The following morning, mom treats me to breakfast at a small café near my apartment block, and we spend almost the entire day shopping. Mom really takes it all out dragging me through every little boutique she can find. I am exhausted, and I still have not found anything to my liking yet. Lunch proves a welcome distraction and I silently hope that we can go home afterwards. My hopes are immediately dashed when mom drags me into the umpteenth boutique after lunch. It is small, quirky and smells of polished wood and expensive textiles. Mom browses through the racks and murmurs something about not leaving until she finds me something.

"How about this Ana?" Mom asks and hands me a beautiful mint green form fitting dress with a large brown belt.

"It is very Bohemian chic." I murmur.

"What is wrong with Boho-chic? It brings some color into your work wardrobe. Everything you have now is either black, white, and gray." Mom says frowning.

"It is what most people wear at work mom."

"Well those people are a dime a dozen and you baby girl are unique. Go on try it on."

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her and take the dress to try it on. I immediately love it. It hugs what little curves I have and accentuates my figure. My mom totally agrees. She hands me brown leather strap heels and a gorgeous Givenchy bag to match. She buys a long white linen dress for herself. We thank the lady in the store and finally head back home.

My weekend was amazing but was way too short. Jimmy came over and made us a lovely Sunday roast dinner that we ate with Ray in the hospital. Ray was very happy to finally have a proper meal and made me thank Jimmy over and over again. Now, it is Monday morning and I have to go back to work again, much to my dismay. I did not respond to Christian's numerous texts or his flowers and I dread the possibility of running into him at the office today. The man is persistent and apparently does not know the meaning of no. I scoff. That's probably because nobody ever told him no. He is just another spoiled little rich boy that thinks the world revolves around him.

I park Wanda and quickly make my way to my desk at marketing department. Kylie is already
waiting for me with a scowl on her face.

"Good morning Kylie." I greet her politely.

"Where have you been? You were supposed to be here over a half hour ago." She immediately snaps at me taking me by complete surprise.

"What are you talking about? I am on time it is just 9 o'clock."

"I sent you an email yesterday evening telling you to get in early today. I heard that Mr. Grey's mother is coming today and we are supposed to give her a presentation of our ideas." She seethes.

"I didn't get any email from you." I say defensively.

"I send it at midnight." She bites back.

"I was asleep at midnight Kylie and in no position to check my email. Besides, I haven't heard anything about Mrs. Grey coming today." I say unable to hide the surprise in my voice.

"That's because you have no connections at GEH. I know all the important people. My friend Olivia is an intern for Mr. Grey's PA and she told me that his mother was coming over. It is on his schedule for today." She replies snidely.

Ugh, Kylie can be such a bossy bitch at times. I am beginning to dislike her more and more.

"Look, we can stand here all day arguing or get started on this presentation." I reply flippantly and she rolls her eyes at me before grabbing her stuff and heads to one of the free closed communal workspaces.

I sigh, take my messenger bag from my desk, and follow her.

"What time is Mrs. Grey supposed to come in?" I ask her.

"Olivia said 10:30 so we best get started I won't be made to look like a fool in front of Mr. Grey's mother." She replies tersely.

_Good luck with that,_ I think uncharitably. I decide not to aggravate Kylie further. I open my MacBook and quietly begin to work on our presentation, streamlining the ideas we had from the notes we made. At 9:30 our department head Brad Lyndon, a thin jovial man in his fifties peeks his head through the door.

"Good morning ladies. I have some exciting news. Mr. Grey and his mother will be down here at 10:30 to see what you girls have come up with. I suggest that you two make a nice presentation for them to showcase your ideas."

"Good morning Mr. Lyndon we already on it. I figured we needed to present our ideas to someone soon." Kylie tells him cheerfully while looking at me smugly.

"Oh, good. Excellent work girls. I am really excited to see what you two came up with." He gives us a tight smile and walks away again.

"Kylie, I don't think we should put in the idea of making Coping Together a more exclusive charity. It will cost donations." I say hesitantly.

"Seriously Anastasia. You don't get it, do you? By catering to a more exclusive crowd, Coping Together will get much higher donations. I know how rich people operate I grew up around them."
She says snobbishly.

"Well, I am not comfortable with the idea. I think that we will get more donations if Coping Together would be more inclusive. Every dollar counts." I reply back sharply.

"You know what? How about we each present our own ideas? I go first and you can go after I am done." She snaps.

"Works for me." I counter back curtly.

We continue to work, only exchanging the bare necessities. I hate being grouped up with Kylie and I dread the weeks to come that I will be stuck with her. We are just in time with finishing the presentation when Mr. Lyndon informs us that Mr. Grey and his mother are on their way down. We grab our stuff and follow Mr. Lyndon to the empty conference room where we quickly set up our equipment.

I can feel his eyes burning into my back before I lay eyes on him and an involuntary shiver runs down my spine. I turn around and see him with an elegantly dressed beautiful, honey blond woman standing next to him. Our eyes lock and I quickly break his heated gaze.

"Good morning." He says coolly and sits down at the head of the conference table.

His mother smiles at us and greets us politely before sitting down next to him. Mr. Lyndon and two other people from the marketing department enter as well and close the door.

"Miss. Steele and Miss. Jordan I am very eager to hear your ideas." Mrs. Grey says warmly.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey. I would like to start by showing you my ideas." Kylie says haughtily and I have to suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her.

I silently envy her when she is explaining her ideas with zeal and confidence in a flawless presentation. In some ways, she reminds me of Kate. Grace Grey surprisingly does not seem to be enthusiastic about the ideas Kylie brings forward.

"Forgive Miss. Jordan but isn't it better to broaden our demographic instead of focusing on just one specific group?" Mrs. Grey asks after Kylie's presentation.

"I believe it isn't Mrs. Grey. Research shows that the upper class gives much larger sums of money to charity than the rest of society. I, therefore, think it's better to just focus our efforts on them." Kylie replies confidently but Mrs. Grey is not convinced.

"Perhaps we should hear Miss Steele's proposals, mother. After that, we can make a decision." Mr. Grey says ending their discussion. His constant scrutinizing stare has made me feel warm and uncomfortable and I suddenly wish I was anywhere but here.

I anxiously start my part of the presentation. To my surprise, it goes pretty smoothly and 10 minutes later I have arrived at my conclusion.

"I think it is better to cater to a broader demographic. While it is true that rich people give more to charity, the middle class gives more frequently evening out the score. Charity isn't just about money it is also getting people involved with your cause. If we cater to a broader demographic we will likely get more people volunteering for various Coping Together projects." I end my presentation with slight hesitation.

I look towards Mrs. Grey and she smiles broadly at me.
"I really love all your ideas, Miss Steele. This is exactly what I was hoping for when I came in this morning. I would really like to discuss your ideas in more details soon. If it is all right with your bosses of course." She says with a sideways glance to Mr. Grey who has a funny look on his face.

"Of, course mother. We will schedule a follow-up meeting as soon as possible. Miss. Steele, I would like a full report detailing your ideas and the costs on my desk by noon and not a minute later. Thank you both." He says and brusquely gets up from his chair holding his hand out for his mother.

I stammer a yes sir and want to get out of the room as soon as possible. Kylie gives me the stink eye and walks past me without a second glance. Probably pissed that here ideas were shot down. I look at my watch crap it is already 10:30, which gives me only 90 minutes to finish my report. I quickly walk to my desk and begin to work.

"Nice work Miss. Steele." Mr. Lyndon compliments me with a smile when he walks past my desk.

"Thank you, sir." I murmur back feeling a little out of it.

"Enjoy your little victory while it last Anastasia. Soon everybody will see what a fraud you are." Kylie hisses angrily while walking past my desk taking me by complete surprise.

"This isn't a competition Kylie. We were supposed to do this together it was your idea to separate the presentation because you thought my idea sucked." I snap back. The nerve of this girl.

She huffs and throws her hair to the side of her face, then stomps back to her own desk. Great! My working relationship with Kylie just jumped the shark and I will be stuck with her for weeks to come. I sigh and continue to type up my report. I don't have time for this petty kind of distraction.

At 11:50 prompt, I am in the elevator to the twentieth floor to give my report to Mr. Grey's assistant. I do not wish to be alone with him at any cost. He makes me feel uncomfortable and his constant texts and flowers this weekend kind of crept me out.

I walk over to his perfectly coifed blond assistant and give her a polite smile. Andrea Parker, her nametag reads.

"Could you give this to Mr. Grey, please? It is a report on the new Coping Together marketing strategy." I say trying but failing to sound confident.

His assistant looks me up at me and then smiles.

"Good afternoon Miss. Steele. Mr. Grey is expecting you, you can go right in." She says in a friendly manner. *Crap.*

"Uhm..." I stammer like an idiot.

"It is through that door over there." Andrea says while pointing at a large brown oak door to the side of the room.

"Thanks." I mutter. I take a deep breath walk to the door and open it. The office is huge. A large classical Mahogany Victorian desk stands in the centre forming a bright contrast with the otherwise modern decor. On the walls hang a couple of abstract paintings of common items. The pictures draw me in and I cannot help but stare at them.

"They are Trouton." I hear his deep masculine voice coming from behind me, and I feel that familiar pull between us again. That scorching, burning heat that I both love and hate.
"They raise the ordinary to the extraordinary." I murmur more to myself than to him, not daring to look him in the eyes. When I do look up his face is a mixture of surprise and wonder.

"I couldn't agree more Miss. Steele please. Have a seat." He says while pointing at a large dinner like a table near the windows.

I comply and sit down at the table, and although the view over Seattle is magnificent, I cannot enjoy it. The tension pulsing between us is palatable.

"You know, it is considered polite that you thank people when they send you a gift." He says. His voice is cold and unyielding. I swallow audibly, and I feel like a deer stalked by a mountain lion.

"I am sorry Mr. Grey, but I have been very busy this weekend. My mother came over." I say defensively.

"It would not have hurt you if you took two minutes to fire off a thank you message. You were very quick to turn down my invitation for lunch. A situation I will now rectify. I ordered you a Caesar salad and some French bread. If you don't like it I can order you something else." He says with so much authority in his voice.

"What the hell? The nerve of this man!"

"Mr. Grey, I turned down your invitation for lunch because it isn't appropriate. If you do not wish to discuss the report now I am happy to discuss it some other time." I reply while getting up from the table.

"SIT DOWN. Having lunch wasn't a request Miss. Steele, it's an order. We shall discuss your report and our situation over lunch. Now… Sit. Down." He barks.

I am so completely bewildered that I follow his instruction like a meek little lamb. He is finally showing his true colours. The dominant, cold and careless master of the universe, bending everyone and everything to his will. The devil in disguise indeed. Suddenly I feel anger rise inside me. For a moment, I contemplate on telling him that I would never go out with him even if he were the last man on earth because he is a careless, selfish, parasitic bastard, but I decide against it. I cannot afford being fired, or worse, blacklisted.

"Good girl." He says in a patronizing manner and I want to slap him.

"Now, I hope we can have these discussions in a civil manner. Would you like a glass of water?" He asks in a consolatory manner while holding up the water carafe.

I stare at him dumbstruck and he pours my glass without waiting for my answer.

"My mother really loved your ideas and she was quiet taken with you. I want you to work with her for the upcoming weeks to help implement your ideas. She will contact you later today." He states in his matter-of-fact no-none-sense manner.

"All right." Is all I can muster. This man is like a freight train waltzing all over me and there is nothing I can do to stop him. It makes feel like an impotent child again and I hate it.

"Now that we have discussed the report. We can discuss us." He says confidently.

"There is no us." I snap taking him by complete surprise and for a moment, he looks hurt.

"Why are you so resistant? Don't you feel it the pull between us? Please tell me, have I done
anything to offend you?” He asks.

There are a number of things I want to tell him. He indirectly destroyed my life and Ray's life. It does not matter that he was only a silent partner he should have known what was going on. I do not care about the physical attraction between us. This isn't some romance novel where the beast suddenly turns into a prince. Before I can answer him, there is a knock on the door and Andrea comes in bringing a box with lunch. Mr. Grey thanks her before dismissing her. He places the box with Caesar salad in front of me.

"Eat." He says while gesturing at it.

"I am not really hungry, but thank you." I lie stubbornly. There is a dangerous glint in his eyes when he stares at me and I feel my stomach drop.

"Tell me, Miss Steele, do you get a kick out of reeling me up? It is lunchtime and you probably haven't eaten since breakfast. I want my staff to be productive. You cannot be productive on an empty stomach so please, eat." He says dismissively while tucking into his own salad.

My treacherous stomach grumbles and his mouth twists in a half smile. I reluctantly begin to eat which seems to please him.

"My question. You haven't answered it. Have I done something to offend you?” He asks again.

Yes! I want to yell at him but I refrain.

"No, Mr. Grey. You have not offended me. My life has taken an unexpected turn and I do not have time to be in a relationship with anyone at the moment."

"How so?"

I really do not want to tell him about Ray. He is the one that fucked up Ray's life after all and once I start talking I know I will blow up at him. I take a deep steadying breath before I reply.

"It is very personal sir, and I do not want to talk about it."

"You know Anastasia, someone once told me that is better to share pain than to bottle it up inside. I won't lie to you Anastasia, I want you. I have wanted you from the moment I first locked eyes with you and I know you feel the attraction too. You're a siren's call that I cannot resist. All I ask is that you give me, us a chance.” He says earnestly. I hate to admit it but deep down I know he is right. I am attracted to him. However, none of that matters. I know what kind of a man he is: dangerous on all levels.

"I am sorry, but I can't."

"Why the hell not?! Don't you feel it? This pulse between us. You burned and branded me like I burned and branded you."

I swallow audibly.

"Well answer me!” He snaps

"I do. But it doesn't matter! Sexual attraction is not the basis for a healthy relationship. On top of that, it is gross moral turpitude to pursue a relationship with a subordinate. You and I will never work. If you will excuse me, sir, I need to go back to work.” I reply and get up from the table.
He stands too, anger marring his face.

"How can you know if we will never work if you don't give us a chance?" He hisses.

"I am sorry." I whisper unable to look at the hurt on his face.

"You are not being honest with me or yourself Anastasia. Make no mistake I always get what I want and this isn't over." He says softly but there is menace in his voice.

"Is that a threat?" My voice is shaking and my heart constricts at his treating words. This is bad very bad.

"No, Anastasia it is a promise." He replies brusquely.

I am shocked by the venom in his voice and want nothing more than run from him and his office. I quickly make my way out of his office right into the elevator. I take a deep steadying breath willing the flurry of emotions to come down. Christian Grey has proven to be a handful, and I don't know how to deal with him. Suddenly I wish that I had never gone to 7th Circle on that faithful evening when I met him. All I want is for this aching burn to stop.
Explosion

Christian

Impotent rage is coursing through my veins, threatening to boil over like hot lava from a volcano, and I only have myself to blame.

You stupid fuck! You dumb fucker! How could you have screwed this meeting up so bad? Now you really scared her away. I run my hands furiously through my hair. I want to smash something, break something the way I have just been broken into a thousand pieces. She does not want me and who could really blame her? I am a worthless husk of a man. I thought she was different from all the others; pure and innocent and caring. But she isn't. She is throwing me away like I am nothing. Well, I am not a 4-year-old little boy anymore, I won't stand for it, not anymore. This time, I will claim and keep what is mine no matter what it will cost.

She wasn't being honest with me, there is more behind her rejection and I intend to find out. I take out the information on her that Welch has provided. I can dream her background check by now. I am looking for something, anything that can give me some insight on her daily life. She said that her life had taken a turn recently, but refused to specify. Well, if you won't tell me yourself Miss Steele, I will find it out on my own. I scan through the pages of information. Itinerary: pages total 20 stands in bold letters on top of the paper, yet I only count 8 pages. How could I have missed this? And more importantly, where are the rest of the fucking pages. I feel the anger well up again in full force. I slam my hand down on the phone on my desk.

"Andrea, Welch, NOW." I seethe through the phone sounding like a complete Neanderthal, but I don't give a flying fuck.

"Yes, Mr Grey." Andrea says without flinching. She and Ros are the only ones around here that can handle my outburst without batting an eye. I slam on the phone again and the intercom goes dead. Moments later Andrea calls up again.

"Mr Grey, Mr Welch is on line one." She says, ever the professional.

"Thank you." I mutter in a more conciliatory manner. I don't want to lose Andrea; she is a brilliant PA.

"Welch, I am missing twelve pages in the itinerary section of the file on Miss. Steele. Where. THE. FUCK. Are they?" I hiss.

"They should be within the file I provided for you." He says stoically.

"Well, it is not fucking in here. I'm missing possible vital information. I need to know where Miss. Steele travelled to during her time in Vancouver and Seattle. Can you manage to give me that information or do I need to hire a private eye." I snap.

"Sir, that information was provided to you on August 15th. My assistant Kaiser handed it over to your second PA Miss. Blandino. But I am happy to type it out and send it to you again." Welch replies calmly.

Welch is very old school. He still types all his reports out on an antique typewriter. He is afraid to leave a digital trail. Paper, he says, can be destroyed, but digital evidence always leaves a footprint. And because some of the stuff he does isn't exactly legal, he is extra careful with what he does.
Except for handing over a crucial file to my idiot intern Olivia Blandino. My hands tremble with rage.

"Send me the file again Welch. Today!" I growl and hang up the phone, then press the speaker button again.

"Andrea, get Olivia in here right now." I bark.

"Yes, Mr Grey." She answers quickly.

Moments later Olivia comes shuffling into my office, fear etched on her face, but I don't care. I am boiling with rage about her fuck up.

"Miss. Blandino. On august 15th, Mr Welch's assistant Mr Kaiser brought a confidential file in that needed my attention immediately. Can you tell me why some pages from that particular file are missing?" My voice is soft but the anger is clear.

Olivia is nervously wringing her hands and refuses to meet my gaze.

"I accidently spilt some coffee over some of the pages. I tried to dry them and type them over but they were too far-gone. I called Mr Welch's assistant and asked if he could send a new file but he told me it would cost time to assemble everything again."

I have half a mind to fire her on the spot. The only thing stopping me is the promise I made to her father Senator Blandino. He has been proven a very valuable asset in guarding and protecting GEH's interests, and I don't want to piss him of. His daughter, however, is a stupid girl that cannot distinguish a pig from a cow.

"Why the hell wasn't I informed of this fuck up! I could have expedited the process." I hiss.

"I, I .. I don't know sir." She murmurs out softly.

"Get the fuck out of my office and send Andrea in." I bellow, fed up with her ineptitude.

Andrea enters my office swiftly with her iPad in hand.

"Get Olivia out of my office. I don't ever want to see her again." I snap.

"But she is the senator's daughter." Andrea counters.

"I don't care if she the Queen of goddamn England! I want her out. Place her somewhere where she can do no harm."

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to walk you through your afternoon's schedule?" She asks, unaffected by my outburst.

"Cancel and reschedule everything and get Claude Bastille in here. I will be out for the rest of the day." I growl as I grab my jacket and walk out of my office without a backwards glance.

I need to blow off some steam and I am not waiting until Claude, my personal trainer, gets his ass here. Taylor is immediately by my side.

"I will be in the gym for a while." I tell him.

"Yes, sir." He replies, stoic as ever.
We enter the elevator and press basement level where my gym is located. I quickly dress in a t-shirt and sweats and start doing some warming ups before my bouts with Claude, who arrives 30 minutes later.

"You ready to get your ass kicked?" Claude taunts.

"Bring it on." I reply confidently. We don our kick boxing gear and make our way to the boxing ring. Claude wastes no time and he deals out the first punch hitting me in the jaw.

"Faster Grey you are too slow." He says while throwing out an upper cut that I barely manage to block. Claude is a former Olympic gold medallist and the only one who can beat me.

"Block higher Grey. None of your business bullshit in my ring. Focus!" He snarls while he hits the side of my ribs. The physical pain is a welcome distraction to my mental agony.

I block his next to blows but I'm too slow for his roundhouse kick and sweep, knocking me hard on my ass.

"What is it, Grey? I have never seen you so unfocused. Some chick cramping your style?" he taunts.

I feel the anger well up inside me again. I quickly jump up front kick and then sweep his right leg, making him lose his balance and tumble on his ass.

He smirks cockily at me.

"Looks like I found the root of your problem."

"Fuck off Claude." I mutter, only enticing him further to egg me on.

The next 15 minutes we continue our sparring, and I am exhausted at the end of the final round. It feels like I have run a marathon.

"Tomorrow again." I say slightly out of breath.

"Count on it." He replies and shakes my hand before heading off to the showers. I wipe my face with a towel and greedily gulp down my bottle of water before heading off to my private shower. Once I am dressed, I quickly check the messages on my blackberry. I have missed calls from Elliot and Elena and some urgent emails from Ros. The rounds with Bastille have only slightly taken the edge of my bad mood and I am not sure if I want to deal with either Elliot or Elena right now, but I know they will just haunt me if I ignore them for too long.

I sigh loudly and decide to call Elliot first while walking towards my car with both Taylor and Sawyer in tow.

"Yo, Bro!" He answers cheerfully on the second ring.

"What do you want Elliot." I reply sullenly.

"Jeez, bro what crawled up your ass and died." He rebukes good-naturedly as always.

"Elliot, get to the point or I'll hang up. I am busy." I snap impatiently.

"Seriously bro chill. I want to show you something. I am texting you the address now."

"Elliot I have no intention of spending my night with one of your hook-ups and her "hot" friend.
"Jesus, Christian. Can you just trust me for once in your freaking life? There are no girls out here unless you count Joan but she is a dyke. Just come to the damn address. It is not like I am asking a whole lot from you."

I sigh. He does have a point. Elliot is uncomplicated and happy. He always wanted a closer relationship with me but I always held back afraid of showing him the monster I truly am.

"Fine." I reply petulantly.

"Good, laters Christian." He says and hangs up the phone. I instruct Taylor to drive to the designated address and resign on calling Elena while I am on my way.

"Christian. What gives?" She purrs through the speaker.

"What's up Elena?" I say straight to the point.

"I haven't seen you in weeks and you sound so tense. Do I need to arrange a girl for you?" She asks without preamble.

"Seriously Elena if I needed a girl I would have called you myself. And I can't say that the last ones you sent me where satisfactorily. Is that why you called?" I say a little irritated.

"Calm down. I am merely offering. I don't know what is wrong with you lately but you are losing control. I worry about you. Let's meet for dinner tomorrow night so we can chat up."

Elena is right I am losing control and Miss. Steele is to blame for that. Maybe Elena can shine some fresh light on the whole situation.

"Sure, fine. Upcoming Friday 8 o'clock at the mile high." I say and hang up without waiting for her reply.

I stare out of the window and watch the landscape pass by. We are clearly heading to an address near the Puget Sound. We drive through an affluent residential neighbourhood with large houses, loads of green, and well-equipped and kept playgrounds. At the end of the street, Taylor makes a sharp right and drives up a long private road until stopping at a large iron wrought gate at the end of it. Taylor presses the intercom and I hear Elliot disembodied voice usher us in. The driveway is long with large cedar trees flanking either side of the road making it feel grand and powerful. A beautiful meadow with wild flowers is right behind the line of the trees. An unfamiliar feeling churns in my gut. It is like being homesick and coming home all rolled into one, and in that moment I know I should be right here.

I gasp in surprise when I see the large sandstone Georgian manor in front of me. It looks like something straight from one of Jane Austen's novels. Even in scaffolding, it looks utterly magnificent. Elliot yanks the car door open and gives me a broad grin.

"What do you think?" He asks.

"It is amazing. Whose house is this?"

"Technically it is a Grey construction property. Remember the realtor friend of mine Olga Kelly? I asked her if she could keep an eye out for property on the sound because I knew you always wanted something like this. A couple of months ago this came on the market and she tipped me. It was in terrible shape to I managed to buy it rather cheaply and we have been remodelling it ever
since. Come let me show you around."

We walk inside of the house and Elliot starts the tour. The hallway is large with a double mahogany spiralling staircase, and the floors are checkered black and white tiles. Behind the stairs, there is a magnificent large window overlooking the sound. The whole place feels light, airy and serene; so unlike Escala.

"Wow, Elliot I am impressed." I say slightly awe struck.

"Come let me show you the rest of the house." He says while walking towards the living room area. Elliot tells me about all the latest innovative techniques that are used to make the house eco-friendly and energy efficient. The house uses a heat pump to warm and cool it. The roof tiles incorporated the latest solar panel technology and the glass windows produce energy through sunlight. The house is almost completely self-sufficient in terms of energy production. Elliot explains and I am totally amazed. The floor plan downstairs consists out of a living room, kitchen, dining area, library, sunroom, poolroom, office space, and security rooms. Above the garage, there are staff apartments. Upstairs, there are six bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms. On the third floor, Elliot is planning a game area more for himself than for me. The basement consists out of a large wine cellar and fitness hall. Elliot is really good in what he does and I am thoroughly impressed.

"So what do you think?" He asks rather anxiously.

"The house is stunning. You have done an amazing job here Elliot." I say earnestly.

"So... Amazing enough to take it off my hands?" He quips.

"It is large El, very large, and I am just alone." I mutter.

"Seriously bro, you always wanted to live in a place like this near the sound. Now is a chance to fulfil that dream. You are not happy in Escala; you avoid that place like a plague. It is time to move on, leave the past behind and start anew. Settle down, find a good woman, have some kids. You deserve to be happy Christian. God knows you deserve it."

Elliot's little speech is making me feel uncomfortable. Do I really deserve to be happy? I really love the house and I want to move on with Anastasia. I wonder what she would think of this house. For a brief moment of time in my mind's eye, I see her standing near the window smiling at me her hand resting on her pregnant belly. I am shocked at the direction my thoughts are taking; it is just a silly fantasy. But Anastasia doesn't want you she will never be yours. A small venomous voice says snidely in my head. But lord knows I want her more than my next breath and I am a selfish man.

"Remember the club we visited back in Portland." I say with a soft voice taking Elliot by surprise.

"Hell yeah, I met the hottest girl ever and never got her number. It is not something I will easily forget." He replies. His voice laced with disappointment.

"Remember her friend? The brunette?" I ask.

"Yeah, the girl was stunning and you two seemed to really get a long." He replies smirking.

"Her name is Anastasia Steele and I really like her El, I never felt this strongly about any girl before. So I tracked her down. Found out she had some financial difficulties so I arranged an internship at GEH for her. I was so excited to see her again. And Lord when I did she was everything I remembered her to be and so much more. But when I tried to make my move she shunned me. I tried sending her flowers, asked her out on numerous occasions, texted her
throughout the weekend. But she acted like I was some kind of pariah." I say dejected. I feel vulnerable and exposed baring my soul like this for Elliot. I half expect that he would joke about it but when I look up his facial expression is kind and honest.

"Wow, man I am sorry that sucks. Have you asked her why?" Elliot asks sympathetically.

"Yes, she told me that she had some personal problems and didn't have time for a relationship. She also told me that she doesn't want to date me cause I am her boss. But I know she is hiding something, something she is not telling me. She was just so distant and cold Elliot."

"Give her some time Christian. You are wanting too much from her too soon and it is probably creeping her out. If she has some personal shit going on she probably isn't in the right mind-set. Just tell her that you want to be her friend and want to help her. Let her open up to you that way first, earn her trust. It will probably make her feel more comfortable."

Elliot's advice makes perfect sense. I have been pushing and pursuing her hard. Maybe I should light up and be her friend first, she is probably a little overwhelmed at the moment.

"Thanks, El. I think I will do that."

"You're welcome little bro. Happy to help. So if you have tracked her down. Do you happen to have the phone number of her hot friend?" He inquires cheekily and it makes me smile.

"I'll have Welch send it to you."

"YES! Thanks, bro you are the best." He says as we walk out of the house and Elliot eyes me up.

"So you want to buy the house from me? I can offer you a great price. Think of it as an investment for your bright future with Miss. Steele."

Somehow, that statement made me feel lighter.

"Fine, sold. Send me the paper work first thing tomorrow."

"WHOO, Yes! I knew you would bite."

I roll my eyes at him and get back in the Audi SUV.

"Laters, Elliot." I say and slam the door shut. Taylor starts the car and we drive back to my solitary fortress in the sky, where Gail is waiting with dinner; chicken casserole. After dinner, I decide to do some work and head into my office. It is over nine when Taylor knocks on my door.

"What is it, Taylor?" I ask without looking up from the spreadsheets I am studying.

"Mr Welch is on his way up sir."

"Oh, good he has what I asked for already. Send him in immediately." I say curtly.

"Yes, sir." He replies and leaves again.

Welch enters my office smelling like a Tabaco factory. I hate the smell if cigarettes it always triggers awful memories The man seriously needs to stop smoking. He always reminds me of the cigarette smoking man from the X-files. He exudes the same coolheaded elusiveness.

"Good evening Mr Grey." He greets politely and hands me a brown envelope. "The information you requested." He says coolly.
I eagerly accept it and begin to read. I immediately notice very frequent visits to a Portland veteran hospital when she was still living in Vancouver and even daily visits to a veteran hospital now, here in Seattle.

"Who is she visiting in the hospital?" I demand.

"Her stepfather Raymond Steele. Ex- army served during the first Gulf War." Welch replies immediately.

This explains a lot. Her cold distant behaviour he avoidance of me. She is just worried about her dad. Understandably so. It is a relief. Elliot is right I should offer her my friendship and help.

"What does he have?" I ask curiously.

"Cancer, lymphoma." Welch says stoically.

"Thank you, Welch. This information sheds a whole new light on things."

"No problem sir." He replies.

I dismiss Welch and quickly change in jeans and a crème cable knighted sweater. I walk to the wine cellar and select a pink Bollinger to celebrate my new friendship with Ana. I will give her the time she needs to recover from her dad before I move on to more.

"Taylor." I yell.

"Yes, sir?"

"I will be out tonight. I am taking the R8. You can take the rest of the night off."

"Thank you, sir." He replies and heads back to his apartment.

The drive to Anastasia's apartment was a short one, and I have never been more nervous. My stomach is in knots and I feel a little nauseous. I don't know how long I have been sitting here in the parking lot staring at her windows trying to build up the courage to ring her bell and talk to her. My palms are sweaty and I wipe them off my pants before taking a deep breath. "Man, the fuck up Grey." I mutter to myself before finally getting out of the car. I don't even have to call myself in an old lady holds the door open for me. I want to scold her for it buzzing in strangers in an apartment building is dangerous. I refrain and give her a tight smile. Anastasia lives in apartment 15, located on the fourth floor. My heart pounds in my chest when I knock on her door.

The door opens and surprise etches her beautiful face. She looks stunning; she is wearing some tight black yoga pants and a simple shirt. Her hair sits in a messy bun on top of her head.

"Good evening Anastasia. May I come in?" I ask while she continues gaping at me. I gently close her mouth and give her a smile. Utterly bemused, she steps aside making room for me to come in.

"Mr Grey, what are you doing here?" She squeaks.

"First I would like to apologise for the way I acted this afternoon. It was inappropriate of me and I am sorry. I know about your father and I am really sorry he has to go through that experience. I just want you to know that if you ever need anything or just a friend to talk to I am here for you." There, I said what I wanted to say. I feel lighter but very vulnerable. I just want her to like me the same way I like her.
Anastasia laughs a cold bark of a laugh. Her reaction is confounding me.

"You are sorry about my dad's situation? Please spare me the empty platitudes, Mr. Grey. You never gave a damn about my father or his co-workers when you closed down Olympia boating, the shipping yard he worked for. You never lifted a finger when the union published a report about the unsafe working conditions at the shipyard. You, sir, did nothing to help my father then, but now when you want in my pants you are suddenly concerned about my father's wellbeing and want to help him.

Well, it is all too little too late. We don't need or want your help, and I sure as hell don't want you as a friend." Pain, a gut-wrenching all-consuming pain rips through me. It feels like she cut out my heart and stamped on it. This rejection hurts so bad, even worse than when… No, don't go there not now. See you dumb fucker. She doesn't want you because you are a worthless little shit. She is seeing right through you. There are tears streaming down her face and she frantically tries to wipe them. Her pain is hurting me on some deep level I don't understand.

There are tears streaming down her face and she frantically tries to wipe them. Her pain is hurting me on some deep level I don't understand.

Anger, blind hot rage sweeps through me. How dare she treat me like this? After all, what have I done to her? She is just like the crack whore, an ungrateful using and abusing little bitch. All my adult life I have tried not to feel extreme emotions but she, she pushes all of my buttons. Her insinuation that I made her father sick is both insane and offensive. I employ thousands of people and I pay and treat them well.

"How dare you accuse me of putting my staff deliberately in danger just so I could make a few extra bucks? What kind of man to you take me for? You know absolutely nothing about what goes on at my company! I should fire you on the spot for the slander you just spewed out of your mouth. I employ over a thousand people and I pay and treat them well. You have been one of the beneficiaries from my business ethics. Yet you accuse me of this bullshit? Well, fuck you!" I scoff loudly. "You know I always prided myself on being a good judge of character but boy was I wrong about you. You are nothing more than a clueless judgemental little bitch." I bark at her, my anger overflowing. I want to hurt her, really hurt her. Bend her over the couch and belt the shit out of her. I clench my fists at my side squeezing the bottle of Bollinger so hard I am half-afraid I will break it. I count down from 10 to zero. 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1-10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1 It doesn't work.

Even though she looks shell shocked and tearful, there is a stubbornly determined look on her face.

"Well, I am sorry the truth hurts, doesn't it? I am not going to be insulted in my own home. I want you to leave and I do not wish to see you ever again outside of our professional relationship." She says defiantly. Most people would have cowered in a corner at my outburst but she doesn't. I love and hate it at the same time.

I glare at her coldly wanting to spank her for what she just did. I need to get out of here before things get out of hand. I turn around, open the door then slam it shut without giving her a backwards glance. I am shaking with anger. I feel hurt, rejected and humiliated. The impotent rage cursing through me makes me feel like that abandoned 4-year-old boy again. I smash the bottle of Bollinger against her apartment building. With a satisfying bang, the glass breaks into pieces spraying its contents everywhere. I start my R8 and slam my foot down on the paddle. The streets are empty and I press down the throttle fully, soon hitting 80 miles an hour but I don't care. Nothing matters anymore. I want to see Flynn but I remember that he is visiting relatives in England at the moment. So, I cruise aimlessly through the deserted streets of Seattle for hours. It does something to soothe my rage a little. I finally make my way home and pour myself a glass of
whisky while sinking down into my desk chair. Her words and indigent rage keep playing over and over in my head.

I remember the Olympia boating company. It was a medium sized shipyard with a unique order and delivery system. It was one of the reasons why GEH took 30% share in the company as a silent partner. Marcus Pratt, my acquisitions manager, dealt with them most of the time. I remember when Marcus came to tell me about 18 months ago that there were large concerns about the way the company was run. I never inquired about any of the specifics; I trusted Marcus judgement. He advised me to either pull GEH's interest or take over the company completely and liquidate it. I decided on acquiring and liquidating since the company was worth more in parts than as a whole. GEH made a very nice profit from it.

Had I known about the health and safety issues I would have launched an inquiry into the company. I should have asked Marcus for more details. I admit it was negligent on my part but was I really to blame for Miss. Steele's father's situation or the other workers? The thought chills me to the bone. I may be a heartless asshole but I would never put people's lives in danger to make an extra buck.

I need more information about this particular acquisition. I pick up the phone and call Marcus who answers on the fourth ring.

"Good evening Mr Grey." He says politely.

"Marcus I need the entire file on the Olympia boating company acquisition. Have it delivered to me first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir. Of course." His voice is laced with surprise.

"Good. Good evening." I hang up the phone and pour myself another glass of whisky. The alcohol does nothing to silence the excruciating ache I am feeling in my chest.

It is late when I finally go to bed but sleep does not come at all tonight. Tired but restless, I climb out of bed to find some solace on my piano. The sad notes of Bach's Marcello eerily echo through my cavernous living room. It soothes my bleak mood. The first light of dawn filters through my windows, illuminating the keys of my piano and I finally stop playing. I get up, stretch myself, and decide to go for a run. The streets are deserted for the most part this early morning. I only spot the occasional person walking their dog. I don't know why but I find myself at Anastasia's apartment block. It was never my intention to go there but I am drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I stand in a secluded spot, which gives me a great view of her apartment. The lights are still out and I wonder if she could sleep peacefully after our little spat. I hold my vigil until dawn fully breaks and the lights of her apartment flicker on, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, which I never get. Dejected, I run back to Escala and take a quick shower. The delicious smells of bacon, toast, and eggs fill my nostrils when I enter my living room but I am not hungry. Mrs Jones smiles at me when I sit down at the breakfast bar.

"Good morning Mr Grey." She says. She pours me a cup of coffee and sets down a plate containing my breakfast.

"Good morning Gail." I mutter. I dutifully eat up my breakfast before Taylor drives me to Grey House.

"Good morning Mr Grey. Do you want coffee?" Andrea asks efficient as ever.

"Yes, please."
"Milk?" She asks with a little smile on her face.

"Please. Then I would like to go over my schedule for today."

"Certainly sir. Also, Mr Pratt told me to give you this." Andrea says while handing me a brown cardboard archival box.

"Oh, yes. Thank you, Andrea."

When I am in the confines of my office, I open the box and start digging through the contents. Andrea comes in with my schedule and starts rattling of my schedule. It is filled with back-to-back meetings and a social lunch with the mayor.

I hardly have time to examine the contents of the box regarding the acquisition of the Olympia boating company and what I find has not set any alarm bells yet. I check in with Lyndon from marketing to hear how Anastasia is doing. She has been a constant on my mind and it is annoying the crap out of me. I am exhausted when I finally get home but once again sleep eludes me and I spend another fitful night behind my piano. When dawn breaks, I put on my running gear again and run towards Anastasia's apartment building keeping my silent vigil at the same secluded spot. You are pathetic Grey waiting like some lovesick puppy on a woman that hates your guts. The snide little voice runs clearly in my head and it occurs to me that I could be standing another day, a week a month or even a year just to catch a glimpse of her. This cannot go on anymore. She is mine. Even if she doesn't want me and I don't deserve her.

I run back, shower have breakfast and have Taylor drive me off to GEH. It is another day full of meetings and analyses and I find it hard to keep my attention to it all. At one, I get a call from my mother telling me she cannot make her meeting with Anastasia and asks me to fill in for her. I jump at the chance to see her again. Her hurtful words still echo in my mind taunting me every day.

When I get down to marketing Lyndon and some board members of Coping-Together are already waiting. I am surprised to see that Miss. Steele is not there yet.

"Lyndon I do not have much time were is Miss. Steele." I snap at him.

"You will be right in Mr Grey there was some trouble with the copying machines. It is fixed now." Lyndon replies politely.

"Good." I mumble petulantly, sit down at the head of the table, and sourly greet the rest of the people. I rationally know I should not take my anger out on my staff and I recede in controlling my emotions better. Normally I would have chilled my frustrations on a sub, but that does not seem to work anymore. I feel like I am on a constant precipice above a gaping abyss.

The talking seizes and all eyes train to the door where Anastasia has just entered. Collective mumbles and sighs of appreciation fill the room, pissing me off beyond the rational. She looks breathtaking. Her rich brown hair spills in waves over her slender shoulders and the little make up she is wearing accentuates her lush lips and stunning eyes. She is wearing a green dress hugging her in all the right places with a large brown belt and matching strap leather heels making her legs seem even longer. It is way too sexy for work for my taste. Images of her naked and strapped to the St. Andrews cross assault my mind.

My cock hardens and twitches in my pants making me feel flushed and uncomfortable. I want to fuck her badly. Claim her, own every inch of her body, mind and soul. The thought of not having her is slowly killing me.
The familiar anger rises inside of me again. I hate the effect she has on me and how the other men are drooling over her. She is mine. The fact is, I want to hurt her the same way she has hurt me. It is petty and vindictive, but right now I really don't care.

"Miss. Steele, have you been made aware of GEH clothing policy?" I ask her coolly.

She looks like a deer caught in headlights scared and unable to move. The sadist in me is pleased.

"Yes, sir." She stutters.

"Then can you explain to me why you are dressed like a two-penny whore waiting for the next cock to ensnare." I sneer at her, earning a collective gasp from all the other people in the room.

"Mr Grey sir..." Lyndon begins but I glare at him silencing him immediately. Tears are welling in Miss. Steele's eyes and I feel conflicted. The sadist in me wants to demean and humiliate her further and I am unable to resist the urge. Now she knows what it feels like.

"I... I..." she begins and I raise my eyebrow at her.

"Are you too stupid to form a coherent sentence Miss. Steele? I asked you a fucking question. Answer me!" I bellow. I know I am going too far, but I cannot stop myself.

She quickly wipes a tear from her face and the sadist in me roars with vindictive delight.

"I didn't think this was inappropriate work attire, sir." She manages to weakly goading on the sadist in me on.

"You didn't think it was inappropriate work attire? You thought wrong! I will give you an official warning. Once you're done with your little presentation you will go home and dress properly. Do you understand." I sneer.

There is a defiant look in her tearful eyes that cuts me to the bone.

"Yes, sir." She replies her voice shaky but clear.

"I haven't got all damn day. Start your presentation, that is what I am paying you for." I snap.

She wipes her eyes again and flicks the beamer on with shaky fingers, starting her presentation. Her voice is hoarse, she stutters from time to time, and the vindictive sadist inside me is dying to rip her a new one again. Surprisingly, she recovers pretty quickly and I am impressed with her efforts to promote Coping Together. The sadist in me quiets down, and the high from mentally flogging her dissipates, and I feel like an utter asshole for the way I treated her. How could I have lost control so badly? You really fucked this up, Grey. Fix this mess!

"Your efforts to promote Coping Together seem successful. At least I did not waste this intern position on you, Miss Steele." God Grey way to go sounding like an utter douchebag. This will not do.

She doesn't look at me but I can see the pain etched on her beautiful face.

"I shall rely your efforts to my mother. She will be pleased." I say in a more consolatory manner. Willing her to look at me. She doesn't, and remains mute.

"Well thank you for that lovely presentation, Miss. Steele. Mr Grey I would like to discuss some points with you if you have time. Miss Steele, could you write me a report when you get back from
changing your clothes?" Lyndon asks pointedly.

"Yes, sir of course." She replies and quickly scurries out of the room, relieved to be away from me, and I never loathed myself more. The rest of the people in the room disappear as well leaving me alone with Lyndon who looks at me furiously.

"Mr Grey with all due respect, I do not appreciate the way you treated Miss. Steele. It was uncalled for. If you have issues with her attire, you could have told her that in private. This was frankly unprofessional." His voice in firm and unwavering. I admire his guts; I never expected him to call me out on my bullshit.

"Dully noted." I coolly reply and brusquely leave the conference room.

On my way back to my office, I hear people whisper; news of my outburst has travelled fast. They quickly scurry away when I approach them afraid to be the next victim of my foul mood. The rest of the week goes by in a blur and I have never been more miserable. A steady pattern has developed I try and fail to sleep, then play the piano until the break of dawn, go running to Anastasia's apartment and wait at my hiding spot until she gets up. I have checked up on her discreetly at work ever since my outburst, she has become silent and withdrawn, making me feel like an even bigger asshole. I need to make this up to her somehow but I am afraid of what she will do or say. I don't want to be hurt again. My phone rings it is Elena.

"Elena." I greet her curtly when picking up the phone.

"Christian darling. Are we still on for tonight?" She purrs.

Right, dinner at the mile club. I almost forgot.

"Yes, of course." I mumble petulantly.

"Christian what is wrong? You sound so down."

Elena is such a mother hen; nothing gets past her. She knows me so well and is my one and only friend.

"I will tell you tonight, not over the phone." I reply petulantly.

"I am worried about you." She answers.

"Tonight Elena." I repeat and hang up the phone.

I spend the rest of the day in a couple of conference calls and some due diligence work on a couple of possible acquisitions. At 18:30, I go home, quickly shower and dress before driving my R8 to the mile high club after giving Taylor the night off. Elena is sitting at a table near the windows, which gives a spectacular view over the city. Like usual, she is dressed in black and her platinum blond hair sits perfectly on her head. She looks great.

"Christian." She says affectionately and offers her cheek to me. I kiss her and sit down across from her.

"I ordered for us already. The pan seared scallops with chorizo and cauliflower puree for starters and the Angus rib-eye with mushroom purée and beef tea for main."

"Sounds good." I murmur.
The waiter comes over and pours us a Montenovo to go with the scallops. Elena puts her hand on mine and looks at me imploringly.

"I am very worried about you Christian. You are so tense and in a foul mood. What is going on? Please tell me."

Elena's concern is moving. She has always been a great friend. I pour my heart out to her and tell her everything that has happened over the last few months. If there is someone that would understand me, it is her. Her face remains impassive but she is listing intently her eyes burning into my skull like embers. Once I am done a sense of relief washes over me glad, to have it all off my chest.

Elena squeezes my hand in a sympathetic manner.

"Oh, Christian you are so obtuse sometimes. You are in love with this girl and she is in love with you without realising it either." Elena says brightly.

In love me? No... I cannot be, this is just some weird infatuation.

"No, no I cannot be in love." I throw back at her.

She waves her hand dismissively.

"Yes, you are. And that is wonderful news." She says but there is a strange glint in her eyes.

"How do I get rid of these feelings? It is driving me crazy, making me lose control. She doesn't want me, Elena, she made that crystal clear to me." I reply pointedly.

"How old is this girl?" she asks and raises an eyebrow at me.

"20."

Elena's face is a picture of shock.

"So young?"

"Seriously Elena, you bring that up?" I snap at her and she gives me a small smile.

"I was just a little shocked that is all. You usually like them older." She says in a consolatory manner. "You know what the problem is with these young girls? That they have absolutely no idea what they want. They are like soft clay that you can shape and form exactly how you desire. Take her by the hand and show her Christian." Elena says her voice has a sharp edge to it.

"Well, that is just the problem, Elena. She doesn't want me to show her anything. I cannot exactly force her." I reply irritated by Elena's simplification of things.

Elena looks at me sternly her facial features are taut.

"You are Christian Grey, dominant and in control. You don't ask, you take whatever the hell you want. You are not some little girl's puppet that she can play with and discard. Take her, dominate her and control and mould her to fit your desires, in the end, she will thank you for it. Her 'no' now means nothing. You should know that by now Christian, I took control of your life and look where you are now. One of the most, powerful, richest, successful people in the world. Do the same for that girl. Trust me she will be forever grateful for it. "

Elena is right I have been letting her take control. She is young, vulnerable and unable to take care
of herself, let alone make any meaningful decisions. She needs my guidance, whether she likes it or not. I need to step up and take control of this situation completely.

"You are right Elena, like always. Thank you for being such a good friend to me." I say feeling much better about the entire thing already. From now one we will do it my way.

"Oh, Christian you don’t have to thank me for being a good friend, it is my duty and my pleasure. If you need any help with the girl just let me know and I will be there for you." She says and smiles sweetly at me.

"Thanks but I think I will manage."

It is ten o'clock in the evening when I finally get home. The talk with Elena really was an eye opener. She is right there is no room for guilt and doubt.

I am the master of my universe and everyone in it either breaks or bends to my will; a fact Miss. Steele will soon find out.
Unseen influence

Anastasia

The cup of tea feels hot in my hands but I clinch it harder desperately trying to numb the pain and humiliation I felt last Thursday. I miss my mom and I miss Kate and Jose. I feel so alone and desolate. Mom wanted to stay another week but her lawyer called her yesterday telling her she needed to come back to Savannah asap. Bob's son was stirring up more trouble about the inheritance accusing mom of all kinds of hideous things. Mom was so distraught that I did not want to saddle my crap on her. But she knew something was wrong she always does. I stare outside the window the sky is dark and cloudy the wind is loud and smashes the thick raindrops against the glass but somehow the ticking sound is soothing, like a children's lullaby.

I dread going to work again tomorrow the office gossip is brutal and I know I will be subjected to the stares and whispers of my colleagues especially Kylie who was practically gloating about what happened. Mr. Lyndon apologized to me and told Kylie to shut it but that didn't stop her from digging at me when he wasn't around. **Just four more weeks and I will be paired with someone else if I still work at that hellhole.** I think sourly. I started to look around for other jobs. I have been thinking about moving back to Montesano if I find a job there so I don't have to pay both rent and Ray's mortgage anymore. I am two months behind on his mortgage payments and the money I save from renting this place could be used to pay those months off. The only downside is that I have to drop out and won't be able to visit Ray every day. Besides the chances of finding something in Montesano are small there aren't a lot of jobs there. I did put in some applications for decent paying jobs here in Seattle. I hope to hear back from them soon. I cannot wait to hand in my resignation at GEH.

A knock on my door and Jimmy' cheerful sing-song voice pull me out of my reverie.

'Good evening Annie wanna hang out?.' He says with a big smile on his face. Like always his is flamboyantly dressed in some multi-colored skinny jeans and a bright blue shirt.

His warm friendliness brings tears to my eyes all the emotions I have been hiding since come crashing down at once.

'He, Annie sugar what's wrong?' He asks with a gentle voice and stirs me back inside of my apartment. He puts the goodies he brought down on the table sits next to me and puts his arms around my shoulder pulling me against his chest. It feels so warm and comforting that I cannot hold back anymore. Hot warm tears stream down my face which each sob my body contorts painfully in his arms. Jimmy pulls me closer and gently strokes my back rocking me like a little baby. 'Sssh it's ok sugar cup it is going to be ok...' He gently whispers.

I keeping sobbing until I have no tears left to give I feel empty but lighter somehow. I look up and stare straight into his warm soulful brown eyes.

'Feel better?' He inquires gently and I nod.

'My momma always says; 'Cry as hard as you want to but make sure that when you stop crying, you never cry for the same reason again.’ So tell me, Annie Steele, what is wrong?’ He says imploringly and my walls crumble. I tell him everything how Christian and I met why I took the internship how he pursued me and me turning him down and how he blew up at me on Thursday. Jimmy is listing intently while he continues to stroke my back. It is calming and comforting.
'He sounds like the typical playground bully who pulls on the pigtails of a girl he likes hoping to get her attention. It is childish and frankly kind of dangerous. I know that Grey is all kinds of rich, powerful and intimidating but you really need to file a formal complaint with HR sugar. Because this is nothing short of harassment.' Jimmy says empathically.

'I don't know Jimmy I am scared what if they fire me? I can't lose this job not until I have something else that pays equally well.'

'Oh, Annie they can't fire you for filing a complaint. Trust me I have been a corporate lawyer so I know. You need to stand up for yourself. If you don't do anything will stop him from doing it again to you or to somebody else. Even as the big boss he has to abide by his company's harassment policy. I have a lawyer friend you want me to contact him?' He asks pointedly.

'I already dread working there tomorrow again Jimmy. People are already gossiping and pointing at me and Kylie my co-worker has been a straight up bitch. I just don't want to be singled out more than I already am. So no please, no lawyer' I sigh.

'Listen to me sugar cup. Filling a harassment complaint is confidential meaning that nobody but the ones involved will know. Grey is all kinds of rich and powerful you can't go up against him without outside help. Trust me. Stop making excuses and start protecting yourself..' Jimmy says sternly.

I know he is right I cannot let him do this to me again I need to stop it before it escalates. But I don't have money to pay for an attorney and I cannot expect people to give me stuff for free. No, I need to do this on my own.

'I know you are right. I will make an appointment with HR first thing tomorrow morning. But no lawyer Jimmy I simply cannot afford it.'

Jimmy sighs in exasperation.

'My friend could help you out for only a small fee. You want me to accompany you instead?' He asks while padding my leg.

I smile at him.

'I think I can manage I don't want it to escalate. Or be singled out as that girl stirring trouble. But thank you for asking.'

Jimmy starts to say something but I stop him.

'Trust me Jimmy I will be fine. Helen Crawford seems like a fair and decent person. Just thank you for being a great friend and being here for me.'

He gives me a beaming smile.

'Wouldn't want to be anywhere else right now sugar cup.'

Helen Crawford GEH head of HR office is modern and stark. Her desk is made of solid glass. On it are a laptop a phone and a pen. Various cubistic works of art hang on her walls. There are no personal pictures or trinkets anywhere. The entire atmosphere of the office is cold, detached and impersonal. It does nothing to ease the anxiety I am feeling about this conversation. I anxiously pluck at the fabric of my gray pencil shirt. A nervous habit I cannot seem to break.

Mrs. Crawford enters her office with a hautain confidence. She is carrying some paperwork in her
right hand at does not acknowledge me at first. The knot in my stomach grows tighter.

'Miss. Steele.' She says finally acknowledging my presence in the room. She firmly shakes my hand. She sits down at her desk and gives me a cool smile that doesn't reach her eyes. My heart plummets this doesn't bode well.

She scans the paperwork she has brought in.

'I understand that you have a complaint about Mr. Grey's behaviour towards you last week. Is that correct?' She asks coolly.

'It is.' I reply hoarsely.

'Could you please elaborate how Mr. Grey has offended you?' She asks while staring at me impassively.

Offended? Is she deliberately understating things? Why isn't she taking me seriously? I scrape my throat and I cannot help but fidget again. I feel like an errant schoolgirl called to the principles office. The only thing is I never was that girl.

'He called me stupid and a two-penny whore in front of a bunch of executives during a meeting because he didn't agree with my attire.' I say bluntly willing her to understand that this was harassment and not some random petty insult. I quickly sum up what happened.

'I see.' She says her voice sharp and cold. She scribbles something down on the piece of paper in front of her.

'Look, Anastasia, may I call you Anastasia?' she asks in a friendlier manner.

'Ana please.' Only mum calls me Anastasia when she is mad at me.

'Ok, Ana.' She says and smiles at me. 'I know you are young and a little naïve... But we have clear clothing guidelines at GEH. Every person working for GEH should adhere to these guidelines. Dressing in a provocative manner is not professional and will send the wrong message to.... People.... especially the male population working here at GEH. Let me give you some friendly advice. If you want to make it in the business world you need to develop a thicker skin. Mr. Grey can be very crude at times but he is an amazing CEO, leader, and person. He was just looking out for you in his own blunt way.

There is no need to get bent out of shape over this and file a complaint. I am sure Mr. Grey did not mean it in a demeaning way.' She says. There is a certain menace in her voice that sets me on edge.

I cannot believe what I am hearing and I feel the blood rise to my cheeks. I am made boiling mad. How dare she?

'Mrs. Crawford, I can assure you I was not dressed provocatively. He humiliated me in front of a group of people. I don't know how else I should interpret this.' I hiss and feel the tears prick in my eyes. It was a mistake to come here I should have known that she wouldn't take me seriously.

'Maybe you did not find in provocative Miss Steele but you were in clear violation of the guidelines. You are of course free to fill in a formal complaint but I can assure you that an official inquiry will be detrimental to your future career. Not just here at GEH but also any other company you may work for.' She snaps her blue eyes cold and piercing.

Is she for real? Suddenly I wish that I would have taken Jimmy up on his offer. I feel so stupid.
'Is that a threat?' I ask incredulously not sure if I am hearing her right.

She scoffs and waves her hands dismissively.

'Of course not. It is a fact. You need witnesses to corroborate your story getting their statements cost time. During that time you would be placed on administrative leave until the investigation is finished. I can tell you now that not many people will interpret what transpired between you and Mr. Grey the same as you which is harmful to your case.' She says snidely and I understand the unspoken message she is sending. No one wants to be on Grey's shit list which makes me free game. Well, I am not going to wait like some meek little lamb till he pounces me again. Jimmy was right I need to stand up and protect myself.

'Then I can longer work her at GEH. I would like to turn in my resignation.' I say angrily. Mrs. Crawford eyes widen a fraction for a moment before her face turns impassive again.

'Of course, you are welcome to hand in your resignation. But I would like to remind you you are contractually obliged to reimburse the money GEH has invested in you thus far. Currently, that is around fifteen thousand dollars. We also won't be able to give you a reference. Which you will need. I urge you to think about this before making any rash decisions. I understand that you are hurt and upset but you are throwing away your future and pushing yourself into debt. I won't accept your resignation yet, not until you had time to think properly about this.' She says dismissively.

Fuck I had forgotten about early resignation clause of the contract. I don't have fifteen thousand dollars and I won't get a loan without another job to pay that bastard back. Once again I find myself stuck between a rock and a hard place. I inwardly curse Grey for making my life hell. But I won't ever give him the satisfaction of destroying me. I feel the tears prickle in my eyes but I won't Grey again I have cried enough over this and it's not going to help me. I need to stay strong.

'Thank you, Mrs. Crawford. I let you know what I will do as soon as possible.' I get up from my chair and walk towards the door. But Mrs. Crawford stops me.

'Miss. Steele, please do the right thing. I would hate to see your future destroyed.' She says imploring me. I want to tell her to go fuck herself but I refrain.

The rest of the week goes by in a blur. The gossip is slowly starting to die down and Kylie's snark remarks have become less frequent. Grey has not bothered me again they say he is in Washington DC buttering up politician's and I thank god for small favours. Fridays are the only days I look forward too. The classes I get are challenging and fun and I don't have to think about work for one day. Finding a new job, however, has proven to be a challenge I got rejected for almost all jobs I applied to. I only have not heard back from Puget sound publishing. I haven't told Jimmy the truth about my conversation with Mrs. Crawford afraid to disappoint him. He has been a really good friend to me but he cannot help me. Not with this. The only upside this week is that Ray is doing better. The new medicines they put him on are much more effective. The downside is that they are more expensive and his insurance doesn't cover all the cost. Thankfully mom helped to pay for the new meds. I know she does not have a lot of money but she says she will manage.

I rifle through my cupboards looking for something to eat for today. My finances are extremely tight so I have careful with food. I sometimes think that Jimmy is probably the only reason I haven't starved yet. I sigh I am out of almost everything I have no choice but to spend my last few dollars grocery shopping. I grab my bag and head on the door. The streets are crowded with people floundering around on their free Saturday afternoon.

I cross the street and an uneasy feeling creeps over me the hairs on my back stand up and I feel
exposed like someone watching me. I increase my steps and look around but I cannot see anyone. 
*Get a grip Steele you are just getting paranoid from all the stress at work.*

I breathe a sigh of relieve when I enter Ernie's supermarket. I grab a basket and quickly do my 
shopping stopping for eggs, noodles, pasta, potatoes, bread and some vegetables. I have no money 
to buy meat, fruit or any other extras. I quickly make my way to check out and pay my groceries. 
The uneasy feeling of being watched returns again and I almost run back towards my apartment 
closing and quickly locking my door. I resign on spending the rest of the day relaxing at home 
crawled up on the couch with Mouse the cat a nice cup of tea and a good book until it's time to 
visit Ray.

'Aannie.' He says smiling brightly at me.

'Hi, daddy how are you doing?' I ask and kiss his cheek.

'Honestly for the first time in a while I feel really good. These new medicines are miracle workers.' 
He says beaming at me.

'I can see that you look real good daddy.' I say and squeeze his hand.

'Here. Jimmy send you something again from Canlis.' I say and hand him a Tupperware with 
canapés.

'That boy is spoiling me. Tell him thank you.' He says and puts the box down on his nightstand.

'So how have you been Annie. You look a little stressed.' He says his voice full of concern. I feel 
the tears prick again but I won't give in.

'I am fine daddy just a little busy but fine.' I lie.

Ray stares me with discerning eyes. I always have been a terrible liar and he knows exactly when I 
am not exactly truthful.

He scrapes his throat.

'Aannie. Your mother and I have been talking. I know money is tight and you and your mother are 
doing your best to cover everything. It is not fair I don't want to be a burden to you both. So I have 
been thinking about selling the house and my workshop in Montesano. It will save a lot of money 
and help cover for my other medical expenses.' He says while looking me in the eye.

Sell the house? His home? Our home? The place I grew up in where I felt loved, safe and secure? 
The house that holds so many good and happy memories. The last place where we were a family? 
No never! I won't let Grey take this from me, from us too.

'You can't sell the house, daddy? Where will you live? Where will you work when you get better?' 
I try to hide the desperation in my voice but fail miserably.

'We will cross that bridge when we come to it.' He says shrugging.

'Really Dad. it's not necessary to sell the house I can manage. This internship is paying really well. 
Please don't worry about it.' I say trying to change his mind.

'Aannie..' he starts but I stop him.

'Dad I promise I will tell you when I cannot handle it anymore. Ok please just don't worry about it.'
I say in a final bit.

He looks torn for a moment.

'Fine I won't sell the house but I will sell the workshop. It will give you some breathing room.' He counter offers.

'Daddy. I can manage.' I start but he squeezes my leg stopping me.

'It's alright Annie not sure if I want to run my own company again when I get out of this damn hospital anyway.' He says in a conciliatory manner taking me by complete surprise.

'I thought you liked being your own boss?'

'I do, but having your own company is a lot of work. Not sure I want to do it again. Now, can you please read me the sports reports I am dying to know how the Mariners did and I cannot read the small print anymore. I think I need glasses.' He says and gives me a little smile.

It's after 8 when I finally leave Ray and head home. It's dark, cold and rainy outside. The wind howls and pulls against poor Wanda who valiantly purrs through the bleak weather. My wiper moves quickly up and down my windscreen trying to control the heavy gush of rain smashing against it. I park my car at the parking lot in front of my apartment building and quickly run inside. Berating myself for forgetting an umbrella for the umpteenth time. I am completely soaked and shivering like crazy when I reach my floor.

I walk towards my apartment and almost trip over something.

I hear an accusatory meow I look down and are met by two intense green eyes staring angrily at me. Strange

'Mouse what are you doing out here in the middle of the hallway!' I exclaim. I pick her up and walk towards my apartment door. How did the cat get out? I could have sworn that she was peacefully sleeping on the couch when I left. Did she sneak after me? Or maybe Jimmy let her escape? He has a key to my apartment. He was flying to New Orleans today to visit his family maybe he came in to say goodbye and let Mouse escape?

I open my door and walk in everything looks just the same when I left.

'Did you sneak after me you silly cat?' I say and put her down. I move to the kitchen and throw some cat chunks in her cup which greedily starts to eat.

I quickly make something eat before taking a shower. I decide to watch some TV before going to bed. Tomorrow is yet another manic Monday and already dread what the day will bring.

*Every breath you take*
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you

*Every single day*
*Every word you say*
*Every game you play*
*Every night you stay*
*I'll be watching you*
Oh, can't you see
You belong to me
How my poor heart aches with every step you take.

My alarm clock goes off and Sting's melodic voice croons me awake it's six AM. Why did it go off so early? I slam it shut and roll around in my bed hoping to catch another hour of sleep. I am still bone tired. My eyes fly open and I look at my alarm clock in panic. Shit! It's 8 AM I am going to be late. I jump out of bed quickly shower and dress. I decide to forgo breakfast to save time and grab my lunch from the fridge. I barely make it in time for yet another painful day at work.

'Morning Ana.' Mr. Lyndon says when he sees me flying to my desk.

'Morning sir.' I reply and sit down at my desk. I need to finish the Coping Together add campaign today and start to work. I am so engrossed in my work that I barely hear the persistent buzz of my cell phone. But Kylie is quick to remind me in her usual snarky way.

I roll my eyes at her and pick it up.

'Ana Steele speaking.' I say and move away from her so she can't listen in.

'Miss. Steele this is Clarice Hold from Puget sound publishing speaking. Am I calling you at a convenient time?' she asks friendly.

My heart skips a beat and my mouth turns a little dry.

'Uhm yes sure.' I stutter.

'We would like to invite you for a job interview. Are you free this afternoon?' she asks. I could ask Mr. Lyndon if I could go home an hour early today. I could make something up. If I would get this job I could get a loan and pay these fuckers off before I tell Grey to shove his internship up his ass.

'Yeah, I am later this afternoon.' I reply happily.

'Good! I will schedule you in at three. Is that alright?' she asks.

'Sure. See you at three.' I say.

'Goodbye Miss. Steele.' She says and hangs up the phone. I almost skip to Mr. Lyndon's office and ask him if it's alright if I leave 2 and a half hours earlier today. Luckily he doesn't inquire why and lets me off the hook.

Time ticks by slowly but 14:30 is here at last. I quickly grab my things say goodbye to Mr. Lyndon and head to the underground garage to grab my car from its usual spot. I get in and turn the ignition. Wanda purrs to life and I begin my 15-minute drive to Puget sound publishing.

The building is sleek and modern with an amazing view of the sound. The receptionist at the desk greets me and I am let to a small white waiting room in the back of the building.

'Anastasia Steele?' a tall blonde woman asks.

'Yes.' I say slightly hoarsely.

'Hello, I am Clarice Hold we spoke on the telephone. Welcome to Puget sound publishing.' She says in a professional but friendly manner firmly shaking my hand.

'Thank you.' I say and follow her to an office with amazing view over the water. A gentleman is a
perfectly cut suit and dark brown hair is sitting on one of the chairs near the desk.

'This is Mark Peters. Head of HR. He will help interview you.' She says introducing him to me. She sits down and the interview starts. She asks why I haven't finished my degree and I tell her my circumstances. They both react sympathetically. The rest of the interview goes smoothly and I am asked to do an English aptitude test. It is pretty easy and I am done with it in an hour. The computer rattles the results out immediately and I aced it.

'Well, Miss. Steele this is one of the highest scores we have ever seen. I want to offer you the job right now but I need to discuss it with Mark and our CEO first. I will try to call you back tonight.' She says beaming at me.

I feel elated soon I will have a new job that even pays a little better than my job at GEH. I cannot wait to call Helen Crawford and turn in my resignation for good. I say goodbye to Miss. Hold and almost skip out of the building. My drive home goes smooth and I turn up the volume of the radio and sing loudly when Christina Aguilera's *Stronger* comes on. It is 5:30 when I get home and don't expect a call from them today. I put my phone in the charger feed Mouse and prepare dinner. When I am halfway through my phone rings and I almost leap towards it.

'Anastasia Steele speaking.' I say anxiously.

'Hi, Anastasia this is Clarice Hold speaking. I am calling about the job we had. I have some bad news. Higher management wanted someone with more experience for the position. I am sorry.'

My stomach plummets and I feel a little sick. All my hopes are dashed again in an instant.

'Oh.' I manage to say weakly.

'I know it is a disappointing and I personally wanted a different outcome but unfortunately I cannot change. Please apply to us again when you have more experience.' She says kindly.

'Thank you I will.' I mutter softly.

'Have a good evening Miss Steele. Goodbye.' She says hangs up the phone. I put my phone down feeling empty. I turn down the stove I am not hungry anymore my stomach is in knots. Maybe I will eat something after my visit to Ray. Right now I need to grieve this setback. *Come on Ana next time it will better just hang in there.* I put on a brave face again when I am visiting Ray I smile, joke and laugh with him but inside I feel hurt and a little like a loser. I hope I feel a little better tomorrow. Mom's wise words echo through my head. *Night is darkest just before dawn Anastasia. Never despair.* I miss her and decide to call her first thing tomorrow I need to hear her soothing voice telling me that everything will be alright.

It has been three days since I got the rejection call from Puget sound although it still smarts I am slowly getting over it. I am still actively looking for another job but haven't had any success yet. I have spoken to a realtor to sell Ray's workshop and I am driving up to Montesano Friday after classes to meet with him. If the workshop is sold off soon it will save me at least 400 dollars a month. The money I can use to pay the mortgage on the house. I am over two months behind now, the bank is understanding but still wants its money. I sigh and finish up for today. The only upside is that I only have to work two more weeks with Kylie who is still a giant bitch. I hope working with someone else will make GEH a little more fun. I wish Mr. Lyndon a great weekend and head out. Mr. Lyndon is the only one making this GEH experience bearable and I will miss him when I am assigned to another department in two weeks. He is a sweet elderly man that always makes me smile. He recently became a grandfather and proudly showed me the pictures of his granddaughter.
I step into the garage and walk towards my car at its usual spot. I gasp in shock glass splinters cover the spot where Wanda is supposed to be but she is gone. Someone stole my car out of all the very expensive cars here in this parking garage. I start to panic. No. No. No. This can't be happening! I need my car. I frantically phase up and down the parking spot. I fish my phone out of my bag and call the police to report my car stolen.

It is useless! They want me to come to the station to fill in a report. I have no money for the bus so it's going to be a long walk. I want to scream and cry why can't I catch a break!? These last few months my life has been completely derailed and I don't know how much more bullshit I can handle before I break down. I wipe my tears and start walking towards the exit.

'Miss? Is there something wrong?' I hear a clear males voice.

I turn around and see a smartly dressed man is a black suit looking at me. His hair is cut in a buzz cut and his posture is military. I have seen him before when I went up to deliver the Coping Together report to Grey.

'Yes, someone stole my car.' I blurt out.

'Where did you park it?' He asks. I walk back to the spot where Wanda was and he follows me. He looks to the floor and then up the walls of the parking garage.

'Bad luck. Your car was standing in a security camera blind spot. It is probably the reason why they took yours. What kind of car was it?'

'A light blue Volkswagen Beetle from 1988.' I reply.

'I see.' He says before taking out his phone. 'Car stolen GEH personnel garage need someone here right now.' He says and hangs up his phone.

'Come let's get upstairs Miss? The police will be here shortly.' He says.

'Steele, Ana Steele.' I reply.

'Thank you. Mr..?' I ask

I am impressed how the hell did he manage the police to come here?

'Sawyer ma'am Luke Sawyer. Deputy head of GEH security. My direct boss is Mr. Taylor. He will be pissed off when hears that someone stole something on his watch.' He says and cracks a smile.

We take the elevator to the 20th floor. We walk towards the security room where another gentleman with a blond buzz cut is sitting. He is a couple of years older than Mr. Sawyer but has the same rigid military demeanour.

'Miss Steele car was stolen in the parking garage, Jason. The police will be here shortly.' Sawyer says coolly.

Mr. Taylor looks pissed.

'Have you secured security footage, Sawyer?' He asks sternly.

'I am going to now. But miss Steele was parked in a blind spot.' He says scoffing.

'Get me the other footage. I want to know who went in and out the garage today.' He snaps.
'Yes, boss.' Luke replies and leaves the room leaving me alone with Mr. Taylor.

'I am very sorry to hear that miss Steele. I promise you that we do our best to catch whoever did this. Do you have theft insurance? he asks.

'No, only liability. Wanda is old I never thought anyone would take her.' I say and feel the tears well in my eyes again.

'I see.' He replies and leaves the room.

Moments later Luke comes back with to Seattle PD officers in tow and we fill in the police report.

'I am sorry to bring the bearer of bad miss Steele. But I don't have much hope of finding your car. The 1988 beetle is a classic and parts are very high in demand.' One of the officers informs me and I just want to hide in a corner and cry. But that is not going to help me.

Mr. Taylor enters the room again and puts a set of keys and some paperwork in front of me.

'GEH has a very broad insurance policy and we take full responsibility for the disappearance of your car miss Steele. I have spoken to Mrs. Crawford and Mr. Grey and they agreed to compensate you for your loss. There is a red Audi A4 parked in parking bay 105 it is yours.' He says casually.

I cannot believe what I am hearing.

'I can borrow a company car for now?' I say looking for clarification, of course, they wouldn't give me a car. Especially not an expensive Audi.

'No, miss Steele. You are being compensated for the loss of your beetle. The car is yours if you sign on this dotted line. You are in luck GEH always has a fleet of Audi's for company purposes. We recently renewed all the cars in the fleet so yours barely made any millage. I think that's adequate compensation don't you think so miss Steele?'

I feel faint. This is all just too weird. Why would they give me a brand new car? I have a funny feeling about this. But I can't exactly turn their generous over down.

'Wanda, she was old. she was only worth a few thousand dollars maybe. It is too much.' I mutter.

'Actually Volkswagen beetle's from 1988 are quite expensive so it's about even I think.' Sawyer chips in.

'Just sign miss Steele. Unless you prefer another car.' Taylor says stoically. I take the pen out of my bag and sign on the dotted lines of the paperwork.

'Good, that is settled. Sawyer will take you to your new car.' He says dismissing me. The two policemen stay with him in the security room and I follow Sawyer out. I step into the foyer and see him coming out of his office casually conversing in French with a group of men and women. Our eyes meet and it is like the earth stops spinning. He stares is intimidating both scorching hot and ice cold. There is something sinister behind his eyes and it scares the hell out of me I need to leave now! I quickly avert my gaze and swiftly follow Sawyer to the elevator. I still feel his eyes burning into my skull when I get into the elevator. A wave of conflicting emotions crashes over me. I want to yell at him slap him and curse at him at the same time I am kind of grateful he gave me a new car. I don't know what I would have done without transportation.

Sawyer tells me that the car has a full gas tank and has full coverage insurance via GEH. We stop in front of a beautiful brilliant red Audi A4 sedan. Sawyer explains all the futures of the car and
how to start it. I thank him for everything he has done for me and finally head home glad this hellish week is over.
Tipping point

Christian

My fingers gently trace the lines of her body, pushing down lightly on the screen of my laptop. Watching her has become my absolute favorite pastime. I press the arrow buttons on my laptop and the cameras immediately changes angle, giving a generous view of her long, long legs. I sigh, and my rock hard cock presses uncomfortably against the seams of my pants. She slowly shimmies out of her panties and I let out a small moan. It seems like she is giving a private striptease just for me. I just stare at her goddess like naked form and wonder if she tastes as good as she looks and smells. I open the button of my pajama pants and pull out my cock. I grip my dick tightly with one of her panties I took from her apartment and slowly move my hand up and down my shaft, a small pleasurable shudder runs through my body. She gets into the shower and turns on the showerhead. Warm drops of water soak her flawless skin and I want to lick every drop of her. I increase the pressure on my cock and move stroking it harder and faster. A delicious tingle hums through my body and a grunt escapes my throat. I want to be inside of her; I need to feel her tight little cunt clamped around my cock. But I have to be patient and stick to the plan. I will have her beneath me soon enough, but until then, my right hand, this video footage, and my imagination will have to do. I watch her lather herself and imagine my hands on her firm body soaping every inch of her. Squeezing and sucking her perfect tits until she comes in my hand. I fantasize of turning her around facing the shower wall while I slam my thick, long cock inside of her from behind.

My entire body tightens, and a warm humming feeling radiates in my stomach, spreading throughout the rest of my body. My hard cock pushes against my palm and I continue to stroke it. I let out a harsh grunt and start stroking it harder and faster. I imagine slamming inside her tight, hot wet cunt, gripping her pubic hair while slamming her ass hard against my pelvis, iliciting sweet moans of pleasure from her that ring in my ear. I pump with increasing vigour and my climax begins to build. Drops of pre-cum coat the head of my dick and I smear it over my shaft while I imagine that its Anastasia wetness coating my cock. I buck and shudder over and over again, and my cock pulsates in my hand. I grunt and growl. Ana! I moan and feel hot ropes of cum leap out of me coating my fingers, pubic hair, and stomach. I sigh and wipe myself clean with her panties. I sink back in my pillow and continue to watch as she dries and dresses for bed.

"Goodnight my sweet angel. I cannot wait to officially claim you as mine." I whisper and put the laptop on the other pillow of my bed. I switch off the light and try to fall asleep. Knowing that she is safe and sound in her bed is a laudanum for my otherwise troubled nights.

I turn around and stare at the ceiling and contemplate the last few weeks. Business wise, it had been very successful. Two weeks ago, I flew to Washington DC to check up on my investments there. To put it bluntly, I checked up on the various senators and congressmen that are in my pocket and the lobbyists I am paying handsomely to get the shit I need to be done. I scoff loudly. Democracy my ass! For the right price, everything is for sale. It is just a matter of knowing the right people and financing the right campaigns. These politicians only care about their own pockets and re-elections, it is what makes them vulnerable to people like me. It is rather unpleasant if you really think about it. This country was modeled after the Roman Republic in so many ways and as irony has it, suffers from the same illnesses. It was after all corruption that destroyed the Roman Republic over two thousand years ago. I had three very fruitful meetings with the secretary of Commerce, the secretary of State and the secretary of Defense. I managed to obtain two multibillion-dollar government contracts, which will create countless of new jobs. Overall, the week was very successful. The only thing I hated was not being able to see Anastasia. I dreamed of her every night and not being able to see her when I wanted. it slowly drove me crazy. I vowed that
I would never go through that again.

When I arrived back in Seattle late Saturday morning, I immediately went to her apartment and stood vigil at my usual spot, waiting to catch a glimpse of her. I knew it was pathetic and I knew I needed a smarter more reliable way of seeing her when I wanted, at least until she was officially mine. I called Welch and asked him to put her apartment under surveillance. I went with Welch's crew just to see her room, to see how and where she slept. I remember walking into her room and the first thing I noticed was her sweet lingering intoxicating scent. Her room was neat and tidy. She had a double white bed with a spiraled frame and imagined tying her to it. In her closet hung a combination of cheap and designer clothes. She must have gotten those designer outfits from Kavanagh because I know she hardly has any money. I reset the timer of her alarm clock; I wanted to catch a glimpse of her when I held my vigil the next morning. I humored myself and called in a favor at the radio station she was listing to. I asked them to play *Every Breath You Take* by Sting at 6:00 the next morning. She would know the significance of that song soon enough.

Elena was right. If I wanted to get what I want, I needed to take control of Anastasia's life. I needed to fundamentally change the way I was handling things with Anastasia and treat our relationship the same way I treated my businesses dealings. If Miss Steele is not open for a peaceful merger, I had to switch gears and initiate a hostile takeover. So far, my game plan had proven to be successful more or less. There had only been one minor hiccup. Helen Crawford had called me while I was in DC. She told me that Miss Steele complained about my behavior and wanted to leave GEH. The key logger I had installed on her laptop proved to be very useful. I saw all the applications she filled in, and I used my considerable influence to make sure nobody hired her. Only Puget Sound showed some resilience to my persuasions. However, a well-placed threat got them in line in no time.

I admit, I shouldn't have done what I did, but what done is done. Once she is mine completely, I will apologize, but I was not going to let her go ever.

I had already made it up to her in a way by replacing that deathtrap of a car of hers. I was shocked that she drove that thing. I tore Welch a new one for not informing me sooner. When he said she drove a beetle I assumed it was a relatively new one. But that thing she drove is not safe, let alone roadworthy. I don't think I would be able to handle it if anything were to happen to her. I need to protect her and keep her safe. I wanted to buy her a Saab but Elena suggested that I should stick to a red Audi A4, as she found it a more appropriate choice. She said that young girls like sporty flashy cars and the Saab is a car for elderly women. She has been a great friend helping and supporting me in making Miss Steele mine. Meeting Ana has made me feel again, she has brought me back to life. She is the air that I breathe, the blood in my veins, and the pulse of the black hole that is my heart. Without her, I revert to a living dead man and I cannot let that happen again, EVER. I am not a religious man but I believe with every fiber of my being that Faith or God has gifted her to me as my salvation, my soulmate and what God has brought together nothing can separate.

These upcoming weeks I will implement every element of my game plan and make Miss Steele mine. I already set all the wheels in motion it. I turn around to watch the screen of my laptop again. My sweet angel is sleeping peacefully. Knowing that she soon will be mine gives me a calmness, a sense of peace and belonging that I have not felt in years. I close my eyes and drift off into a calm slumber.

"Morning Andrea." I say rather cheerfully when I step into my office. Since Elena pointed me in the right direction and I have taken control over Anastasia's life, I have a new sense of direction and purpose. It has a calming effect on me.

"Morning Mr. Grey." Andrea replies, slightly surprised, and I do not blame her. These last few
weeks my mood had been foul most of the times.

"Coffee sir?" She asks.

"Yes, black, one sugar, and ask your assistant to bring me a croissant." I reply and head into my office. Moments later she comes in carrying my coffee her IPad and three binders. She puts the coffee down and hands the binders to me.

"Welch sent these, sir. He said you requested them." She says casually.

"Thank you, Andrea." I reply knowing exactly what these binders contain.

"Do you wish to go over today's schedule now sir?"

"Yes please do." I reply already knowing that today is going to be very busy.

"You have a meeting with Sam Massey at ten to discuss GEH's new press policy. At eleven o'clock, you have a conference call with Mr. Bao Chang from Chang shipping. You have a lunch meeting with Ros at twelve thirty, then at two o'clock you have a meeting with Katherina Cosa the art dealer from Portland, and your final meeting for today is at four o'clock with Mr. Matthew Cooper in Ballard." Andrea finishes rattling of my meetings for today. It is all dull for the most part. The only thing that I look forward to is my meeting with Mr. Cooper.

Matthew Cooper is somewhat of a legend within the BDSM community; he creates customized playrooms and dungeons for those who can afford his price. Today, he will be designing and creating one especially for myself and Miss Steele at our new house on the sound. I have destroyed my playroom at Escala. I won't be taking anything from there. I want everything to be new and different for Anastasia and me.

"Thank you, Andrea." I say and dismiss her to focus my attention on the three binders Welch sent me. They contain the financial records of one Raymond Steele, one Carla Addams néé Wilks, and one Anastasia Steele. The reason why I am such a successful businessman is because I know everything there is to know about an acquisition. I know the strengths and weaknesses of the company and I know exactly how to exploit both to my advantage. I need to know all of Anastasia's strengths and weaknesses before I commence my hostile takeover, so to speak.

I open the first binder and pour over Ray Steele's financial records and it's immediately clear to me that he is in a dire financial situation. To be blunt, he is a few short months removed from bankruptcy. He has two mortgages, one on a workshop and another on his house. Both are underwater meaning that the mortgage on the property is higher than its current market value. If he would sell the workshop, he would still be around 85 thousand dollars in debt with the bank. It is even worse with his house. He is also almost three months behind on both mortgage payments. If the bank were to foreclose both properties, Ray Steele would still be around 200 thousand dollars in debt with the bank. On top of his real-estate troubles, he has around 10 thousand dollars of unpaid medical bills. Yep, this guy is fucked. I sigh, close the binder, and turn my attention to Carla Addams' financial situation. The first thing I notice is that she is in much better position than her ex-husband is. She earns a decent living as manager at an art and craft store, and her deceased husband left her with the mortgage-free house and around 500 thousand dollars in savings and stocks. The trouble for her is that all these assets are frozen. The late Mr. Addams' son disputes his father's latest will, which only gives him half of his father's estate and Addams junior is playing dirty. According to these records, he filed a lawsuit against his step-mother for neglecting his father's heart condition, claiming that she is responsible for his death. These kinds of cases can drag for ages and can ruin people completely. It occurs to me that with two simple phone calls I could either escalate or make their troubles go away completely. I close the binder and grab
Anastasia's. Poverty is the first word that comes to mind when I open it. A familiar yet unfamiliar pain slashes through me and I swallow. She earns a decent living here at GEH and her mother has been depositing money in her account faithfully each month, but it is still not enough to cover her own living expenses, her dad's medical bills, and his mortgage payments. She is desperately trying but failing to keep her head above water. She barely has money for gas and food. The image of a starving beautiful young woman and a little boy in a dirty Detroit apartment assaults my mind. NO! Don't go there Grey! A stabbing pain pierces through me and I feel a little nauseous.

My intercom buzzes. I press the button and Andrea's voice comes through informing me that Sam has arrived. I tell her to send him in and file the binders in my filing cabinet.

"Mr. Grey." Sam says while walking into my office. I shake his hand and tell him to sit down at one of the chairs near my desk.

"I have some great news, sir. The Vatican has asked if you are willing to be main guest speaker of a major conference about social, economic and environmental issues they are organizing next month. Pope Francis himself is very impressed with your humanitarian work and really wants to meet with you, sir. This is a huge honour." Sam says excitedly and I frown at him.

"Sam. You know how I feel about receiving publicity for my humanitarian work. Accepting the Carnegie medal was one thing but this is a whole different ballgame." I hate being laureled for something so basic of feeding the hungry and poor.

"Sir, this is an excellent chance to promote your efforts in getting aid into Sudan and the refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan. The publicity we would get from this could give us a momentum in pressuring our government and the EU to do more about the refugee crisis." Sam says earnestly.

He does make a valid point. At the moment, more than 65.3 million people are displaced uprooted from their homes and families to flee hunger, poverty, and war. The reaction to this global crisis from various governments around the world is nothing less than inept. Most governments are too spineless to put in real efforts to solve this crisis, afraid of the reaction of the populists within their borders enticing fear in parts of the electorate.

"What exactly do they expect from me?"

"They want to hear your vision on humanitarian work and the refugee crisis. Pope Francis especially wants to know how the Vatican could help our efforts." Sam answers quickly.

This could be very beneficial indeed. I could stay at Villa Montferrat, one of my overseas real-estate investments. I have only ever been there once when I was on a forced family vacation in Tivoli, a village near Rome. We stayed at the Villa and my mother fell head over heels in love with the place. I bought it so she could use it whenever she wanted it.

"Tell the Vatican that I except there invite and have Andrea lock it in my Agenda."

"Certainly sir." He says and beams at me.

The rest of the meeting we discuss the changes we made in GEH publicity and press policy until Andrea announces my next meeting. I open my laptop and sign into WebEx where Andrea already has posted the link to the conference window. Mr. Boa Chang owns one of Asia's largest shipping companies, and he is looking to expand his business to the west. He wants a joint venture with GEH to achieve that goal. My conference meeting with him lasts almost ninety minutes and was very constructive. We have a business plan ready and he will be flying to Seattle next week to discuss the finer points before we draw up a contract. Ros enters my office with large strides and
smiles at me.

"Ready for lunch? I thought we could go out of the office I reserved a private room at Le Picot." She says nonchalantly.

"Sure fine, just let me grab my jacket."

Le Picot is only a block away from GEH so it's easiest to walk. Taylor and Ryan follow us closely and dutifully wait at the entrance of our private dining room.

The waitress comes over to take our order. She is all over me like a rash annoying the crap out of me but amusing Ros. Ros takes her phone out of her bag and shows me photos of little Chris. I cannot believe how big has gotten.

"Gwen wanted to know when you are free for dinner and a bonding day with the little guy. After all, you are his godfather." Ros says eyeing me closely.

"I will need to check my agenda, but tell her maybe next weekend. He has gotten so big, what the hell are you guys feeding him?" I jest.

"Tell me about it. He is getting his first mashed fruits and vegetables and he eats everything. He is like an elephant, shits like one too." Ros says proudly.

"A guy after my own heart." I reply chuckling.

The waitress comes back with our order and I frown. I ordered the ribeye salad with truffle mayonnaise but there isn't any on the plate.

"I ordered a rib eye salad with truffle mayonnaise. Where the hell is it?" I ask irritated.

"Oh, I thought you said hold the mayo." The waitress replies sheepishly and I snap. I cannot stand incompetence.

"If you would have spent less time ogling me and more time writing down the correct order like a proper waitress would, I could eat now. Get me my fucking mayonnaise or I will personally make sure you are out of a job." I hiss and she cowers away from me. Good.

"Yes, sir... I am so sorry." She mutters and almost runs out of the room.

"Jesus Christian, you can be such a dick sometimes. Give the poor girl a break! I do not know what is going on with you lately but you are wound up tighter than a nun's rectum. Has it become a habit of yours? Scaring the shit out of young girls? I heard with happened with the intern, the gorgeous brunette? You really need to chill Christian. She could have sued your ass for harassment." Ros says heatedly.

I glare at her. I have no intention of discussing my blowout with Miss Steele with Ros.

"If some women would actually do what they are paid for I don't have to blow up at them." I sneer at her and she rolls her eyes at me.

"Sometimes you can be a real sexist asshole, you know that right?" she throws in my face and it angers me. I am not a sexist and she knows this. I open my mouth to let her have it but she holds her hand up in a placating manner.

"Look let's just drop it and concentrate on business." She says while giving me a pointed stare.
"Fine." I reply sullenly.

"Good. Now tell me, how did it go with Chang?"

The next hour Ros and I discuss our latest acquisitions, investments, and liquidations. Overall, GEH is in great shape our profits are up and we have left our competitors far behind us. We walk back to GEH. I have a two o'clock meeting with Mrs. Cosa, the art dealer from Portland and representative of one Jose Rodriguez, a friend of Miss Steele and photographer for the Portland tourist guide. I asked her if Mr. Rodriguez had any more photos of Miss Steele that weren't published and it looks like she came through.

"Mrs. Cosa. How are you?" I say and give her my most charming smile, which has its usual effect.

"Fine thank you for asking Mr. Grey." She replies blushing.

"Please sit down. Have you been offered a drink?" I ask.

"Yes, your assistant was very helpful. Thank you." She replies and sits down.

"I understand that you were successful in obtaining what I asked?" I ask while cocking an eyebrow at her.

"Yes, certainly Mr. Grey. Miss Steele is Mr. Rodriguez's muse and it took quite some convincing on my part to have him part with these." She says and points at a large brown parcel leaning against the chair.

"He wanted to use them for the exposition and show them to her. But I convinced him to stick to landscapes to preserve the flow of the exposition." She says continuing briskly.

"Well, I am eager to see what I have purchased." I say and give her a tight smile.

"Certainly Mr. Grey." She says and hands me the parcel. I open it and gasp slightly. The pictures are more than I could have ever hoped for. On one of them, Anastasia is laughing broadly at the camera. On another, she stares contemplatively over the water. On the third picture, she is snuggled in a chair engrossed in a book with a light frown on her face. The last picture shows her pouting; it is both sexy and adorable at once, making my cock twitch in appreciation.

"They are exquisite. Mr. Rodriguez truly is talented. I trust my offer was adequate?" I ask.

"More than enough. He was quite shocked and flattered that someone was willing to pay so much for his work."

"Trust me it is worth every penny. Please tell him that." I say.

"Will do Mr. Grey. It was a pleasure doing business with you." She says as she gets up and shakes my hand.

"Likewise Mrs. Cosa." I reply and see her to the door.

I stare at the pictures of Anastasia, completely mesmerized by them, and I know just where I am going to hang them.

The rest of my afternoon, I spend on some due diligence work and the quarterly numbers of one of my telecommunications companies. I am so engrossed in my work that I hardly notice how much time has gone by. My intercom buzzes and Andrea's voice rings through.
"Mr. Grey it's 15:25 you need to leave now for your four o'clock at Laurelhurst."

Ah right, Mr. Cooper the most exciting meeting of today.

"Thank you, Andrea. Tell Taylor and Ryan to meet me downstairs."

"Yes, sir." She replies and I hang up.

I grab my jacket and head down to the parking garage. Ryan opens the door of the Audi Q7 and I hop in. Taylor drives quickly through the Seattle traffic and I stare out of the window, watching people go about their business on a busy Monday afternoon. Taylor drives up the I-5 and speeds up the car. I close my eyes taking a minute nap before my meeting with Mr. Cooper. When I open my eyes again, Taylor is just driving up the private road leading to my new estate.

The house looks even more magnificent without the scaffolding. Elliot and his team are as good as done, and it is up to me to have the place decorated. Elliot suggested his good friend and occasional fuck buddy Gia Matteo for the job. Taylor stops in front of the door and Ryan opens the car door for me. Matthew is already waiting in front of the house.

"Mr. Cooper. Glad you could make it at such short notice." I say and shake his hand.

"You made it worth my while Mr. Grey." He replies stoically.

"That I did. Let's get inside." I reply and he nods in acquiescence.

"Do you have an area in mind to build the room?"

"Yes, upstairs near my bedroom. I want to move from the playroom to the bedroom and bathroom quickly and I want the room to be discreet and secret. So access to it has to be restricted by some form of security." I rattle up my wish list.

"No problem." He says and studies the floorplan of the top floor.

"We could take a piece of the extra guest bathroom and the second bedroom to construct a playroom linked to your bedroom. That way we can build the access in your walk-in closet." He purposes.

"That is an excellent idea. Make it work, there is no budget, spend what you need to spend." I reply a little excited.

He looks a little surprised and gives me a cool smile.

"Of, course Mr. Grey. Now furniture. What do you wish to have in your new playroom?" He asks.

"A suspension rail, St. Andrews cross made out of cedar wood, a four poster bed, antique early 18th-century mahogany wood. A whipping bench, ash wood, with a leather top. A Berkeley horse also dark wood, some racks a dresser antique late 17th century French and, a tantric chair." I reply quickly and he writes it all down.

Cooper and his team will work on the room the moment Elliot hands over the keys. I make sure that every member of his team signs an NDA and have a contract drawn up. I will let my usual place costume-make toys and implements.

I say goodbye to Mr. Cooper and let Taylor drive me to Escala where Gail is ready to serve dinner. Linguine with lobster and herbed cream sauce. I shove my food down my throat quickly, barely
tasting any of it. I cannot wait to indulge in my new favorite pastime, watching Miss Steele.

I stare at the louche fucker in the mirror and quickly wash my hands eager to get down to
marketing. Today marks Anastasia's final day at the marketing department, and after our evaluation
of her final presentation, I want her placed in the finance department, which is on my floor. That
way I can see her every day and implement the second part of my plan. If she is desperate enough,
she will take the help I am willing to offer, at a price of course. With swift strides, I enter the
conference room and I immediately spot her. She is in a deep conversation with Lyndon. He smiles
at her and squeezes her upper arm in a reassuring manner. This tiny gesture on his part makes me
see red. I do not want anyone touching her. She is mine and nobody touches what's mine.

"Can we begin this presentation? I haven't got all day." I snap and Anastasia visibly pales and
flinches a little. The sadist in me roars, but the other part of me, the human part feels hurt.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Grey." Lyndon answers politely and nods at Anastasia.

Anastasia presses a button on her laptop and the projector springs to life. She takes a sip of her
water and I notice that her hands are shaking a little.

"As you all know, I looked into how we could market Coping Together to a larger demographic to
gain more donations. Our efforts have concentrated on two main points. 1. We broadened the
visibility of CT and its efforts to help drug-addicted parents and their children. 2. We went out and
recruited more volunteers at schools, WSU and in the streets. As you can see on this infographic,
our efforts have been successful. We gained 23% more donations over this last month and we also
got an increase in volunteers of 18%." She says her voice is soft and she is shaking like a leaf. She
doesn't dare to look in my direction, and it pisses me off. I want to look into those beautiful blue
orbs.

"Impressive numbers Miss Steele. The question is, are these increases temporary or long term?" I
ask crossing my legs and cocking an eyebrow at her.

She wrings her hands and skittishly looks at me. Big blue eyes wide. I am truly intimidating her
and it is as gratifying as it is infuriating. I want to dominate her, own her and love her as far as I am
capable of that. I want her to do the same to me, more than I have ever wanted anything in my
total life.

"It is, of course, difficult to predict the long-term effects, Sir. That is why I am suggesting that we
set up a campaign team to continue our efforts." She says a little shaken.

"And is that within the allocated budget?" I ask coolly.

Suddenly a mobile phone rings and Anastasia almost leaps to the table to pick it up. I am
flabbergasted; does she want to be fired? There is nothing that I find ruder and hate more than
people's mobile phones going off in the middle of a meeting.

"If you want to keep your damn job you better turn off that phone." I hiss angrily. However, she
bluntly ignores me, picks it up, and hurries out of the conference room. What the hell! I want to
take her over my lap and spank the shit out of her for this absolute display of disrespect.

"Sorry Mr. Grey. Miss Steele asked me in advance if she could keep her phone with her. She was
expecting a telephone call from the hospital. Her father has cancer and the doctors are removing
the tumor today." Lyndon quickly says, and I feel like an asshole. Why didn't Welch tell me about
this?
Suddenly we hear yells coming from the hallway and I rush out to see what the commotion is about. Absolute terror seizes me when I see Anastasia lying on the ground, pale and unresponsive. Images of a young boy desperately trying to wake his mother assault my mind. My heart constricts and my stomach drops I feel sick, out of control, and helpless. In a few short strides, I am next to her, pushing the person who is hovering over her away. I won't let anyone take her, I will never go through that again.

I slide my hand down her neck to feel her pulse and I breathe a sigh of relieve. Her pulse is strong and steady.

"What the fuck happened?!" I yell at the people surrounding us.

"She suddenly fainted, sir." A woman with coifed blond hair answers.

"Get Dr. Carlson to my office NOW, and get me a fucking blanket!" I snap.

I lift Anastasia up and take her to my office she feels so tiny and light but having her in my arms feels so right. I lay her down on my couch in my office and study her beautiful face. She looks restless, scared even.

Lyndon runs after me holding a white blanket in his hands. I snatch it from him and gently put it over Anastasia then dismiss Lyndon. I don't want anyone near her.

There is a knock on my door and Dr. Carlson stands in the doorway. Carlson has been GEH's in-house company doctor for years now and great at his job.

"Get in her and check on her." I order him brusquely.

"Mr. Grey sir. I would like to have some privacy with the young lady." He says in a stern manner.

"I am not going anywhere. Do your fucking job and check on her NOW!" I rage.

"She has the right to privacy sir. I will give you my conclusions after my check up if they are relevant to her job at GEH." He replies coolly. I want to scream at him and beat the shit out of him but I know that isn't going to help Ana.

I leave them alone with a backwards glance and pace down the foyer of my office. Andrea and her new assistant throw nervous looks my way but I do not give a fuck.

20 minutes later Carlson calls me back into my own damn office. Anastasia is nowhere to be seen, and fear grips me again.

"Where is she?" I snap.

"She is in your bathroom, sir. Relieving herself." He replies coolly.

"What is wrong with her?" I demand.

He sighs and looks at me quizzically for a moment clearly debating what he is going to tell me. It doesn't matter, I will find out anyway, I will let Welch hack into her medical records as soon as he is gone.

"She was dehydrated and frankly a little malnourished. This coupled with the stress of her father's operation and work made her faint."

"What you mean malnourished?" I ask appalled.
"It isn't really serious at the moment, but I have reasons to believe that Miss Steele's diet is unbalanced. To put it bluntly, she isn't getting enough nutrition in her food."

"I will make sure that she does from now on." I reply sharply and dismiss him.

I am enraged. I knew it! I knew she couldn't fend for herself. However, of course, she is too stubborn and proud to accept my help. She threw it right back in my face just like the crack whore. This kind of women think they can do it all by themselves but they are weak and naive. They need guidance and protection against the world and against themselves. I am going to save her regardless of what she wants. She is just like a child and incapable of making proper decisions. I need to intervene before it is too late and I will do anything that is needed to ensure her health and safety. I protect what is mine, even if it means I have to play dirty. After all, all is fair in love and war. I wasn't ready to play my cards just yet, but she has given me no other options.

My phone rings and Welch ID appears on the screen.

"Welch." I snap.

"Mr. Grey sir. Mr. Raymond Steele was due to have his tumor removed today. But the procedure wasn't an entire success. Parts of the tumor couldn't be removed at the hospital he is in now. They don't have the means and expertise. He needs to be moved to LA or Boston to have the procedure done but I can tell you now that his health insurance it not going to cover it all."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I all but growl.

"My source only came through 5 minutes ago." He replies stoically.

"Thank you." I grumble sullenly and hang up.

Well, this is something I could use to convince Miss Steele to enter a... relationship with me.

I sit down on my couch and wait for Anastasia to finish her bathroom break; we have much to discuss. She startles when she sees me sitting on the couch.

"How are you feeling?" I ask coolly.

"I am fine. Thank you for asking. I should be going back now." She replies and clutches her bag closer to her chest.

"You are not going anywhere." I say sharply, stopping her in her tracks she looks at me incredulously eyes full of indignation.

"Tell me, is it a habit of yours to not eat? The good doctor just told me that you are underfed." I ask calmly and she glares at me.

"I eat just fine, and frankly, that is none of your business sir. It is a private matter." She bites back.

"But it is my business. I can't have employees drop to the ground at the first sign of stress because they do not take care of themselves." I reply pointedly.

"I can take perfect care of myself. I don't need your help or anyone else's for that matter. So, if you will excuse me. I have to get back to work. That is unless you have fired me, in that case, I need to get back home." She says and storms off to the door. I have had enough of her insolence. I swiftly jump on my feet and grab her arm, turn her around, and pin her against the wall, rendering her immobile.
"Let go of me or I'll scream." She hisses like an angry cat, and she looks truly magnificent. The adrenaline spikes in my veins. This is arousing, really arousing.

"Go ahead baby. Scream all you like. This office is soundproof." I say and give her a menacing smile. She tries to kick me in the cross but I am quicker and much stronger. I swiftly turn her around so she is pinned against the wall with her back towards me.

"Now be a good girl and listen to what I have to say." I whisper near her ear, breathing in her intoxicating scent. I feel heady drunk with the power I have over her. It takes all my self-control not to hike up her dress and slam my throbbing cock balls deep inside of her from behind. My breathing is ragged and labored, while I desperately try to control myself. Her close proximity does nothing to ease my raging desire.

"Let go of me you psycho." She demands angrily and I chuckle.

"If you calm down I will let you go. Now please, I just want to talk to you without you throwing a fit at me." I release the pressure on her arms a little to emphasize my point.

She huffs trying to break free completely.

"Do you promise me not to run? I will let you go if you do. Please, Anastasia I only want to talk to you."

"I promise." She manages petulantly.

"Good! Good girl." I reply and let go of her. She spins around and glares at me furiously. She lifts her hand to slap me on the face, but I grab it and hold it tightly.

"I thought you were going to play nice?" I ask her tauntingly.

"You think you can do whatever you want just because you are rich?! Well, screw you. You humiliated me in a room full of people and then suddenly act like you are some knight in shining armor trying to rescue me. Well, I do not need rescuing I need to work and earn my living in peace so I can take care of my responsibilities." She hisses, blue eyes narrowed in anger.

"I am sorry about humiliating you in front of everybody. I was wrong and should have confronted you in private. How is your father?" I ask knowing that this change of subject will coax a reaction from her.

"He is fine thanks for asking." She replies back coolly.

"Really now? Because I heard something else. I understood his operation did not go as planned." I throw back in her face.

"How the hell do you know that?! Are you stalking me?" she demands almost shouting at me now. Her anger resonates with me on a deeper level that I cannot understand.

I look at her contemplatively for a moment debating on telling her the truth but ultimately decide against it.

"I called the hospital and convinced them to tell me what happened. I needed to know exactly why you fainted. I know that your father needs special medical treatment only available in Boston and LA. I also to know that you have no means of paying for it. I offered you my friendship and help numerous times but you threw it back in my face. Therefore, I got the message you hate me and don't want to beholden to me.
But let's cut the crap, shall we? I want you, Anastasia. I have wanted you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. I am done playing games so I have a proposal for you. I will make all your problems go away. Your father's mortgages will be fully paid and he will get the best medical treatment there is. Your mother's legal matters will be a thing of the past with just one phone call from me. All you have to do is sign this." I say and walk over to my desk and pull out the submissive contract specially made for Miss Steele and give it to her.

Her eyes widen when she scans the contract and realization hits her.

"You want me to be your sex slave for six months?" She asks incredulously and I am offended. I want her to be so much more.

"No, I want you to give us a try, and since you aren't interested in dinner and a movie first, I thought I would do it this way. I can help your father Anastasia, please think about this." I reply pointedly.

"You know Mr. Grey, I always thought you were a heartless bastard. But I was wrong. You are one depraved son of a bitch. Why are you even doing this? You can have every woman you want. Why me? Is it because I said no and you cannot handle the fact?" She asks her voice tight with emotion.

"I am doing this because you and I belong together, I know you are just as attracted to me as I am to you. You need to stop deluding yourself because of some mistaken idea." I reply sharply.

She opens her mouth, closes again, and then throws her hands up in exasperation.

"It is you who is delusional Mr. Grey. There is no us and there will never be an us. I want you to leave my family and me alone. You are insane, and I want nothing to do with you. I swear if you don't stop I will go to the police." She is trying to sound confident but failing miserably. She grabs the contract and shreds it in half throwing it on my Bauhaus coffee table in disgust.

Pain lashes through me I thought she would finally agree to be mine but I see it clearly now. She won't ever see reason until she hits rock bottom and has nowhere else to turn to. She is drowning and I won't let her go under. She needs my help whether she likes it or not. I need to be cruel to be kind there is no other option. Right now, I need to stay in control and prevent this from escalating further. I don't want her to run or quit her job. I stare at her impassively.

"Fine. I understand if you don't want to sign. I am sorry about all of this. I sometimes go too far and get carried away and I know it's wrong. I will leave you alone, as you wish. From now on, our relationship will be strictly professional. I am sorry to have bothered you. Please report to Miss Bailey for your next assignment." I say dismissing her.

The tension seeps from her shoulders and she breathes a sigh of relief. It hurts so bad seeing her reacting to me like that. Why can't she see we belong together?

"Yes, sir." She replies softly and almost runs out of my office.

I pick up my phone buzz Andrea.

"Get me Mr. Wheeler on the phone now." I snap. Max Wheeler is my banker and regional manager of Seattle's First Bank of which I own large amounts of stock.

"Yes, sir." She replies immediately.

"Mr. Grey what can I do for you today." Wheeler asks politely.
"A Mr. Raymond Steele has two mortgages at your bank on a house and a workshop in Montesano. He is almost three months behind on his payments and I have it on good authority that he won't be able to pay for both of them for a considerable length of time. Call them and foreclose both properties to cut your losses now."

The good thing about Wheeler is that he never questions me, which is ideal in this case.

"Thank you for telling me sir. I will give the order immediately."

"Good. Goodbye." I reply and hang up.

Now let's see how long it takes for Anastasia to take me up on my offer. If you don't want to bend, you are going to break little girl, and I will be there to pick up the pieces and put her back together my way so she can finally see what I have been telling her all along. That we are made for each other.
Break down

Anastasia

The only way from down is up. It is a mantra that I keep repeating in my head hoping to gain some strength from it. However, the truth is that I have never felt so weak, vulnerable and out of control of my own life. Not even when I was 16 and miserable living with my mom and husband number 3. I don't know how much more I can take before I break. These last few weeks have been nothing short of horrific. Ray's surgery to remove his tumour had only been a partial success. The doctors told me he needed to have a special treatment that is only available in Boston or LA. I don't want him to go there because I cannot visit him every day, at least not until I find a job so I could move there to be with him. Not that it matters now, though. The bastards from his health insurance company refuse to foot the bill. Those leeches only want to pay half of the treatment. It is so unfair! Ray worked hard all of his life, he always tried to help other people and this is what he gets? Hot angry tears stream from my face and I quickly wipe them before getting out of the car. I don't want Ray to see me like this, it will make him feel guilty or worried. I need to stay strong for him, for us I just need to hang in there a little longer. After all, he has done for me, I can do this for him.

I press the button on the key and the Audi locks instantly. I sigh. The car drives like a dream and is pretty, but she isn't Wanda, my old trusty beetle dad bought for me. I loved that car because even though Ray never had a lot of money but he made damn sure mom and I had everything we needed. I don't need such an expensive car, I think I should sell it and use the money for Ray's treatments. I will look up how much it is worth exactly before bringing it to a car dealer, and if I still haven't got enough money to pay for Ray's treatment, I will apply for a personal loan at the bank to cover the rest.

"Hi, daddy." I say when I see my dad sitting on his bed reading a sports magazine.

"Annie!" He replies with a board smile on his face genuinely happy to see me and it warms me up inside, and just like that, all troubles are momentarily forgotten.

"How are you feeling today?" I ask while putting some clean clothes in his closet.

"Ok, a bit sore but I have had worse. Can't complain." He replies while eying me up and down with a frown on his face. "Have you lost weight, Annie? You look so thin. Are you doing ok?" His voice is edged with concern.

"Don't worry about me daddy I am fine. Just real busy at work." I lie, making him huff and I know he doesn't really believe me.

"I got a new car dad." I quickly say to distract him from further interrogating me.

"Really? What happened to Wanda?" He asks surprised.

"Someone stole her while I was at work. Upper management took responsibility for the theft and gave me one of the new company cars." I quickly explain.

"That is very considered of them. Grey Enterprises Holdings always was a good employer." Ray replies while nonchalantly shrugging his shoulder.

It makes me mad.

"How can you say that daddy? They made you sick! They are the reason that you have cancer and
are in this hospital bed." I exclaim and I feel the tears prick in my eyes again. It is Grey who should pay for Ray's treatments, he leched off him and made him sick. He should carry the consequences, not us. I think adamantly.

Ray looks at me surprised for a moment.

"Annie, sweetheart we don't know that. The doctor told me that there are a number of environmental factors that could have contributed to the lymphoma development. I served in Iraq sweetheart remember? We used various chemicals there that could have contributed to it according to my doctor. Besides, I worked for Olympia shipping way before GEH ever took a part in the company. I know, Olympia shipping wasn't the best company to work for. They were lax with the safety regulations, they always were and it didn't change after Grey took over part of the company. It even got worse then because my bosses wanted to impress Grey. Maybe I should have looked harder for another job but I didn't." He sighs. "I maybe I have been a fool, Annie." No, daddy no! I want to tell him.

He gives me a sad smile before continuing.

"I was so mad at them, at the army, at myself when the doctors told me I had cancer. I blamed them all for the shitty situation I was in. I kept wondering What if I hadn't joined the army, or what if I never went to work for Olympia? Then I thought about you and your mother. If I hadn't joined the army I would have never met your biological father thus never met your mother or you, and if I hadn't taken the job at Olympia shipping back then I couldn't have provided for the two of you. You and your mother made me a stronger person, a happier person, and overall a better person. You filled my otherwise empty life with love and joy and if I asked, I would do everything the same again when given the chance. I would say yes without a shadow of a doubt in a heartbeat. I guess what I am trying to say, Annie, is that there is no point is playing the blame game, it is exhausting and frustrating, and in the end, you gain nothing but a giant headache from it. Sometimes things just happen in life without rhyme or reason, and you know what? Who we are as people is determined by how we conduct ourselves in the face of adversity. It can either make us or break us. Ultimately, we decide who we are and where we go. Never forget that." He says, the look on his face tired but solemn and sincere, making my heart constrict. Teardrops slide down my cheek and I quickly try to wipe them, but dad does it for me. He wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me to his chest. It feels like I am a little girl again comfortable and familiar. Like home.

"I just don't want to lose you, daddy. I love you and I need you too much. Seeing you like this pale and ill in some subpar hospital is so hard. I just want you to get the best treatment there is so you can get better."

"Don't cry for your old man Annie. I cannot promise you that everything is going to be all right and I will get all better. However, I can promise you that I will fight as hard as I can to beat this thing. Now, cheer up sweetheart, and let's get some sticky toffee pudding downstairs in the cafeteria. It is the only thing they know how to make right." He says and I crack a smile at him. "There is my girl." He says and kisses my forehead.

Visiting hour is over way too soon and I do not really want to go home yet and be lonely there. Jimmy is still in New Orleans and I cannot Skype Kate or Jose because they are on a college excursion to some backwater mountain retreat with no internet, and it is too late to call mom. I decide to drive around for a bit, getting to know the streets of Seattle before finally heading home where I take a shower and watch a movie on my laptop in bed before I go to sleep. Tomorrow starts my first week in the finance department with a new partner, and Grey promised to leave me alone. Nevertheless, I do not want to work for GEH anymore. Grey scared the hell out of me when he
pinned me to his office wall. The man is unstable and I do not trust him. I don't want to stick around to see if he is keeping his word or not. I am not going to be that girl that should have known better. I decide to fill in some new applications first thing when I get home from work tomorrow. I turn off the light and fall asleep the moment my head hits my pillow.

Emily Parker is sweet, funny, and smart. We will be partnered up this upcoming six weeks at the finance department, and for the first time since I started this internship, I am enjoying myself again. It is lunchtime and we are sitting on a bench in the park near Grey house. The weather is unseasonably mild for a mid-November afternoon and I enjoy watching the ducks that are swimming in the pond.

"Didn't you bring lunch?" Emily asks.

"No. I forgot my lunch bag in the fridge." I lie. I do not dare to tell her that I only have ramen left in my cupboards. I hate asking my mom for more money knowing how she will freak out and worry if I told her I am broke, but I don't have much of a choice.

"Here, share with me. I have more than enough. My Naanii[HM1] always worries I eat too little, so she stuffs my lunchbox." She says smiling fondly.

"Naanii?" I ask.

"Yes, Naanii means grandmother in Hindi, my mother's mother. My grandma is originally from India, she and my grandfather moved to the US in the seventies. I have been living with them since I was 13." She says sounding forlorn.

"Oh. I don't want to sound too forward, but can I ask why?" I reply genuinely interested.

"My parents died when I was 13." She replies the sadness clear in her voice. "My dad was originally from England, he and my mom met in Africa. They were both aid workers. They always joked about how they met. My mom smashed right into him in the hospital on the first day she started working there." She smiles a little before continuing. "Dad always said that love hit him square in the gut." It always made me smile. "When I was 13 they went back to The Congo to do aid work for three months. They didn't want to uproot our lives and to take me and my little brother with them. So, we stayed with my grandparents. I will never forget the day we got the news that their inland plane had crashed. Everything changed after that." She quickly wipes a tear from her eyes and smiles at me.

"I am so sorry for your loss. I cannot imagine how it is to lose one parent let alone two at the same time." My heart constricts, and I can feel her pain, it is so close to my own.

"It was hard, really hard. I know the pain will never go away, it has just gotten less pronounced over the last few years. But enough about me. Tell me about your family." She asks quickly directing the attention away from herself.

I give her a small smile and tell her about my mom and about Ray. It feels good to talk to someone my own age, who knows what hardship is like. We continue talking until we are back at the office and I am called into Mr. Miller's office. Mr. Miller is the head of the finance department and I feel a little anxious. What does he want?

I knock on his door and his heavy baritone voice tells me to enter. I open the door and I'm met with the kind blue eyes of Mrs. Grey.

"Anastasia." She says warmly and gently squeezes my forearms.
"Hello, Mrs. Grey." I say surprised not knowing why she is here and what she wants from me.

"Forgive my intrusion at work, but I have not had the opportunity to thank you for all your hard work on the Coping Together project. My son has spoken very highly of you, and I totally understand why. Your efforts to promote Coping Together have been very successful." She says and gives me a beaming smile. I am totally perplexed by her kind words, and her admission about Mr. Grey, and I find it very hard to believe.

I smile back shyly feeling very uncomfortable under all that praise.

"You are welcome Mrs. Grey I was just doing my job." I reply softly.

"Oh please call me Grace darling. My mother in law is called Mrs. Grey. It makes me feel so old. I have always been a firm believer that hard work should be rewarded. I don't want to intrude or anything but Christian told me you fainted because you had worked so hard. Well, I feel responsible, so tomorrow I am taking you with me for a nice day of relaxing. We will have lunch, a spa day, and a visit to a beauty salon, my treat." She says beaming at me and for the second time, she completely confounds me.

"Please, Mrs. Grey… I mean Grace, it is not necessary. I was just doing what I was paid to do. I really appreciate your offer but I can't take a day of."

"Nonsense dear. I already discussed it with Mr. Miller and he thought it was a great idea." She says while smiling at him and he nods in acquiescence. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at ten so you can sleep in for a bit. Getting enough sleep is important." She says with a motherly tone.

I am completely stunned and at a loss for words. Grace seems genuinely friendly and although I do appreciate her offer very much, it feels a little inappropriate and uncomfortable.

"Well, Anastasia. I must be going now. There is a measles outbreak and I need to get back to the hospital. See you tomorrow." She says smiling.

"Uhm, yeah. Until tomorrow." I manage to mutter out weakly.

Mr. Miller gives me a wry smile.

"I am impressed with you Anastasia. Grace Grey doesn't louder praise easily. I think you will be a great asset to my finance team." He says.

"Thank you, sir." I reply and he nods dismissing me.

I feel a little dazed when I walk out of his office back to my workspace. I find it hard to concentrate on putting the debtors in the account payable module of the accounting program. It is dull and tedious work and I cannot wait until 5 PM so I can finally go home.

"Anastasia, can you bring these papers to Mr. Grey's office? They need to be signed immediately." Mr. Miller asks. Crap! I was hoping to avoid him as much as possible.

"Uhm, sure." I reply tentatively and he hands me a stack of papers.

"Thank you." He says and saunters off to his office again.

I sigh, getting out of my chair to start my march to Mr. Grey's office. Like always, his reception desk is managed by two perfectly coifed blondes who look like they have stepped off the pages of some glamorous magazine. One I remember is named Andrea. I walk over to her and give her a
weak smile.

"Mr. Miller sent these for Mr. Grey, they need to be signed immediately." I tell her with all the confidence I can muster, and try to hand over the papers to her.

"Mr. Grey is expecting you, go right in." she says smiling politely at me.

"Oh, ok." I mutter softly and walk to the large dark wooden door separating his office from the large open lobby. I push against the heavy door and it opens surprisingly smoothly.

I see him sitting at his desk engrossed in some papers. He does not seem to have noticed my entrance into his office. I resign myself to quickly greet him and put the paperwork on his desk before making a beeline out of his office.

"Miss Steele." He says curtly without looking up from his papers. Well, so much for that plan, I think sourly.

"Sir, I have the paperwork you requested." I say softly and he looks up at me. He scrutinizes me intently and there is something dark and insidious behind his gaze. It's scaring the hell out of me. Leave, this man is dangerous! A voice screams in the back of my mind and I want to run.

"Hand it to me." He orders. His voice is cold and brusque. I comply immediately, not wanting to spend another minute in his office. His hand brushes mine, his skin is both hot and cold on mine, unnerving me. I hear him sharply breathe and he sits up straighter.

He takes a pen and casually starts reading the documents. I quickly and quietly move back towards the door.

"Miss Steele. Did I dismiss you?" He asks with a menacingly soft voice. I swallow and shake my head.

"No sir." I reply trying to sound confident.

"Then where were you going?" He asks while eying me coolly.

"I... I... Nowhere sir." I finally lie. He raises one eyebrow, eyeing me sceptically.

He purses his lip and turns his attention back to the papers I brought him. I stand uncomfortably at his desk and feel like some clueless idiot. My attention turns to his walls. Several abstract works of art of ordinary items hang on the walls and I am completely fascinated by the paintings. I idly move towards the wall to inspect them up close. The first painting depicts a kettle that is almost blending into the colourful background, creating a strange paradox of visible invisibility.

"Trouton." I hear his deep baritone voice say, startling me out of my reverie.

I feel the heat of his body radiating against my back. He is standing so close that his body is almost pressing me against the wall. I can feel his breath tickle the back of my neck. There is a humming electric pulse surrounding us, making the little hairs on my forearms and neck stand to attention. I feel warm, flushed, and uncomfortable.

I turn around and suppress a gasp when I look into his eyes. They are dark and feral, like a lion ready to kill his prey. Fear and some other feeling I do not fully grasp unfruffled in my belly and my pulse races. It is as if he senses it because he takes a step backwards immediately. I release a breath I did not know I was holding.
He gives me an apologetic smile that does not reach his eyes. I clear my throat and weakly smile back at him. I want to run away from this office but the rational part of my brain maintains my sense of decorum.

"They are lovely. They raise the ordinary to the extraordinary." I mutter softly and he looks at me surprised. A vague emotion almost looks like pride passes on his face.

"I could not agree more. Tell me, Miss Steele, do you like abstract art?" He asks, eyeing me closely.

"I like all kinds of arts. I really enjoy the classic Romano-Greek statues but I also love stuff from the renaissance or the Dutch masters. I guess I can find beauty in all things even works that others might find ugly." I reply earnestly.

He stares at me intently, like he is trying to see if I am truthful. It is unsettling.

"It takes a pure and guileless person to see the beauty in ugliness, someone once told me. I am neither." He says and gives me a sad smile.

"Here. Bring these back to Mr. Miller." He says brusquely again, and I am grateful that I am being dismissed.

"Yes, sir." I quickly say and almost run out of his office. The entire experience has left me anxious and jumpy. There is something about him that pushes all of my buttons. He is dangerous, like a predator waiting to strike, and it is scaring the hell out of me. I vow to double my efforts to find another job. The sooner I am out of here the safer I will be, I am sure of it.

When the clock hits 5 PM, I almost jump out of my chair to go home. I ask Mr. Miller if there is anything else he needs, and he shakes his head at me.

"Good evening Miss Steele." He says distractedly.

"Good evening sir." I reply and head towards my car with Emily who has parked her car a few spots away from me. We say our goodbyes and I drive to my apartment building. Dinner today is simple ramen noodles. It is something I have been eating for days now. I sigh dreading to call my mother knowing that she will be worried and scold me for not calling and telling her sooner.

"Hello, baby girl." Her sweet voice rings through the speaker after the third ring. Suddenly I feel homesick.

"I mom. How are you?"

"I am good sweetheart. I was planning to call you. I have some nice news. My boss has asked me if I am willing to give quilt classes in the evening, I am really excited about that." She says happily.

"Wow, that is great mom. When do you start?" I say feeling genuinely happy for her. Mom's biggest dream always was teaching various arts and crafts classes.

"Next week and I can hardly wait. How are you, sweetheart?" She asks with a hint of concern in her voice.

"I am ok. Busy at work but ok." I reply softly.

"Anastasia what is wrong?" Mom immediately asks. I sigh. I should have known that she would see right through me.
"I am fine mom, just a little tired." I always hate asking for money.

"Anastasia I am your mother, I always know when you are hiding stuff from me. Now tell me what is wrong?" She asks again sternly.

"I just... I am low on cash." I finally mutter hesitantly.

"Oh, sweetheart why didn't you tell me sooner? I have told you time and time again to come to me when things were getting tight." She scolds me.

"I know and I am sorry. I just hate asking you for money. It makes me feel like a child again." I say a little sullenly.

"Anastasia, you are my child, I am supposed to take care of you. I wouldn't be a very good mother if I didn't. I know things are hard right now and I know you aren't telling me half of it. I am not stupid." She sighs before continuing. "I just want you to know you can come to me for whatever reason. You understand?"

"Yes, mom." I reply duly chastised.

"Good. Now how much do you need?"

"250 I think." I reply tentatively.

My conversation with mom is long. We talk about Ray, her feud with Bob's son, and on a lighter note, she shares the latest gossip from Savannah with me. It is almost 19:30 when we finally say goodbye and I head to Ray. He is watching a football game when I get there. We chat a little but spend most of the time in companionable silence. I leave a little earlier so I can do some grocery shopping. That way I can have breakfast tomorrow. Mom has been overly generous of course, depositing 500 dollars in my checking account. I sigh, take out 30 dollars, and shop at Ernie's, my usual shopping market. When I get home, I shower then watch some TV. There is nothing interesting on. I idly wonder if it's too late to watch a movie but ultimately decide against it and head to bed, wondering what my spa day with Mrs. Grey will bring tomorrow.

Early morning sunlight streams through my bedroom windows waking me up. I check my alarm clock. It is almost 7:30 but I still feel tired. I sigh and turn around hoping to catch a little more sleep before I have to get up. The persistent buzzing from my alarm clock wakes me again an hour later and I tiredly clamber out of my bed. I take a quick shower and decide to treat myself with pancakes with maple syrup and bacon. It has been quite a while since I had such a feast for breakfast and I greedily eat everything. I brush my teeth, feed mouse, and decide to do some laundry before Mrs. Grey, I mean Grace, gets here. At 10 sharp my doorbell rings. Mrs. Grey is punctual that is for sure.

"Good morning Anastasia. You ready to go?" she asks cheerfully.

"Uhm, yeah sure just let me grab my bag." I quickly reply.

Together we walk towards the car, all the while Grace is talking animatedly about her work and her charity. She is a genuine, warm, and friendly person, and I am finding myself liking her more and more. She is nothing like her pushy, arrogant, bloated heart son. In fact, they don't look alike. I guess Mr. Grey takes after his father. Then I remember that Mr. Grey was adopted. My respect for Grace surges. The woman is a real saint if she put up with him. Grace parks her sleek expensive white Jaguar in the parking garage and we walk to the store area. I gape with open mouth at all the expensive and luxurious stores we come across. We are at the Bravern center, one of the most
expensive shopping malls in Seattle. I have never been here before. Everything here is way out of my budget but I heard Kate raving about it.

We enter a posh beauty salon named Escalva. Everything is stark, modern and white. Grace looks around like she is looking for someone. Suddenly her eyes light up and she smiles broadly at a stunning, perfectly coifed blonde woman about her age.

"Elena, darling." She says affectionately and kisses her on both cheeks.

"So good to see you, Grace." The woman named Elena replies affably.

Grace turns her attention to me.

"Anastasia I would like you to meet my good friend Elena." She says smiling brightly.

"How do you do." I say while politely shaking her hand.

She stares at me appraisingly and her pupils dilate like she just realized something. Her lips curl up in something that resembles a smile. There is something disingenuous and dark about here entire demeanour, and it is giving me the creeps.

"A pleasure to meet you, Anastasia." She says in a polite but friendly manner. She turns her attentions back to Grace.

"The full package?" she asks.

"Oh, yes lord knows I need it. There has been an outbreak of measles and I have put in so many hours I hardly had time for myself." She says sounding a little exasperated.

"I don't know why people just don't vaccinate their children." Elena replies pointedly.

"You don't have to tell me. It is that anti-vaxxers lobby spreading lies and nonsense to scare people off." Grace says heatedly. Elena nods her head in agreement and ushers us in a beautifully decorated private room.

"Clarice. Bring Mrs. Grey and her friend some mimosas." She orders brusquely. I idly wonder if drinking alcohol so early in the morning is a good idea.

"Yes, ma'am." The young girl replies and jumps off her chair.

"You will have a manicure first, then the wax, followed by an algae bath and steam room. After that, I think a hot stone massage is in order, and a nice lunch." Elena rattles up briskly.

"Sounds divine." Grace replies brightly.

"I think you should both have a haircut as well. We have some gorgeous new hair colours and cuts this season." Elena says confidently.

"Sounds like a good idea. Don't you agree Anastasia?" Grace asks me.

"I could use a haircut." I reply earnestly. "And please call me Ana. Only my mom calls me Anastasia when she is mad at me."

Grace chuckles.

"Sure thing darling." She says good-naturedly.
Moments later the girl, Clarice, comes back and sets down a bright yellow drink in front of me. Grace eagerly takes a sip of hers.

"Sometimes a girl really needs to spoil herself. Cheers." She whispers conspiratorially at me.

"Cheers." I reply and take a sip of the surprisingly refreshing cocktail.

"So Anastasia. What do you do?" Elena asks while taking my right hand into hers and starts my manicure.

"I am an intern at Grey Enterprises Holdings." I quickly reply.

"Oh, she works for Christian?" Elena asks Grace.

"Yes, and she is amazing. Did you know she single handily increased the number of donations for Coping Together?" Grace says proudly making me flush.

"Did you know? Impressive." Elena says coolly.

"Well I don't mean to dish on Christian, but he really cracked the whip on the poor girl. So I thought she deserved a break." Grace babbles on good-naturedly.

Elena Coffs and clears her throat.

"Well Christian works hard, it is only natural he expects it from his staff." Elena says sounding a little affronted. Odd.

Grace chuckles.

"You always were his biggest champion." Grace says smiling.

After my manicure is done Elena escorts my to a stark white private room with a large massage-like table in the middle. She hands me a big fluffy white robe and tells me to undress. Maybe I am a prude but I don't feel comfortable undressing or being naked in front of strangers. Nevertheless, I hesitantly comply when she leaves the room. Moments later a staunch woman in her late forties, maybe early fifties, enters the room and greets me politely. She orders me to disrobe and lay down on the table.

I comply with all the enthusiasm I can muster. I really do not like this and I wonder if I can ask her to skip the waxing. On the other hand, I am mildly curious about the entire experience. Ray always says; If you don't try anything new you never know if you will like it.

The wax feels cold on my skin. I feel a sharp, stingy, slightly painful feeling on my leg when the woman pulls the paper off. After a few minutes, the feeling becomes a dull tolerable sting that is hardly bothering me. I gasp when she smears some on my genital area. I really don't know about this. I want to protest but I am too late. With a short rip of paper and a harsh sting, I am bold down there. Kate would be so proud; she always tried to convince me to get a Brazilian. I resolve calling her after this beauty day is over. Suddenly, the door of the room opens and Elena comes striding in. She looks at me like I am some piece of meat. It is unnerving, and I desperately want to cover myself up. What the hell is she doing in here? Has she no respect for my privacy?

"I came to check to see if everything is in order here?" She asks with a clearly feigned concern.

"I am fine." I mutter.
"Good. I'll take it from here Madeline." She says, dismissing the other woman. I don't want to be alone with her, she has an insidious malevolence about her that is pushing all my buttons.

"Have you been working long for Mr. Grey?" Elena asks while applying some wax on my forearms. I quickly grab a towel that is laying on the table to cover myself up a little and she smirks at me. It is unsettling.

"Almost two months now." I reply softly.

"So what do you make of him?" Elena probes further. Why the hell does she want to know?

I shrug.

"He is my boss. I don't see him that often." I reluctantly reply.

"I see." She says a little acidly while finishing up the last of my waxing.

"You are all done. Follow me for your algae bath." She orders brusquely. Why can't she just leave and let me be?

By 13:30, I am prodded, poked, steamed and almost frozen in an algae bath. My hair is cut a little shorter in layers and for the first time in forever, I feel like a million dollars. I am hungry and in spite of my disquieting confrontation with Elena, I feel relaxed.

"You really need to try the grilled chicken salad sandwich. It is to die for." Grace gushes. We are sitting at a beautiful homely restaurant near the Bravern center and I thoroughly enjoy her company. Grace Grey is the epitome of warm, motherly and compassionate.

"It does look good. I think I'll go with that." I reply smiling.

Our conversation flows easily. She wants to know about my family. I tell her the basics about Ray and mom and she tells me that all her three children are adopted. Apparently, Mr. Grey has an older brother who is in construction and a younger sister who is studying in Paris to become a chef. Her husband Carrick is a lawyer, I have heard of him before. He has successfully handled a couple of very high profile cases that were all over the news.

After our lunch is over, she drives me back home.

"I really enjoyed today Ana. Please keep in touch." Grace says kindly and squeezes my arm.

"I will. Thank you for everything Mrs... I mean Grace."

"You are very welcome. You deserved it."

I smile at her, saying goodbye again. I get out of the car and walk back to my apartment to enjoy a nice cup of tea and a good book to finish off my day of pampering.

It has been more than a week since I had my spa day with Mrs. Grey, and the initial feelings of relaxations have evaporated like snow on a hot summer's day. Working in finance is very demanding. Mr. Miller is really strict on deadlines and I really don't want to find out what happens to me if I miss one. However, I have learned a lot about GEH's financial business, assets, and negatives. So the entire experience is definitely interesting. I walk into my apartment building and get the mail out of my letterbox. Every week, Ray's neighbour forwards his mail to me so I don't have to make the two-hour journey to Montesano each week. Most of the mail are bills but I spot a letter from the bank in there too.
What do they want? I enter my apartment and open the letter.

Date November 20th, 2015

Mr. R Steele
Wilder Hill Lane, 38
Montesano, Washington, 98563

Re: Mortgages

Wilder Hill Lane, 38
Montesano, Washington, 98563

Church Street 215
Montesano, Washington, 98563

Dear Mr. Steele:

You have fallen behind on your mortgage payments. After repeated requests to bring your loans current, we are now forced to foreclose both properties. Seattle First Bank will demand the entire balance outstanding under the terms of your mortgage agreement.

The total amount due for the property on Wilder Hill Lane is $250,000.00-.

The total amount due for the property on Church Street is $185,000.00-.

Seattle First Bank will start legal action to foreclose on the mortgage, which will result in the sale of the property. We may also have the right to seek a judgment against you for any deficiency after the home is sold.

To avoid foreclosure you must also include with the above payment, any payments or late charges that are due during this 14-day period. Acceptance of less than the total amount due includes but is not limited to, the principal and interest and all other outstanding charges and costs. The money can be deposited in the following account number: 923798. Please use the following reference number while depositing the due amount. 125.851.9365

You have the right to assert in the foreclosure proceeding the non-existence of the default or any other defence to our legal action and sale of the property.

Sincerely,

Nicolas Klein

Seattle first bank director of Mortgages and personal loans.

Seattle first bank is a subsidiary of Grey Enterprises Holdings Incorporated.

I am shaking and bile rises in my throat. No! How can they do that to him! I told them, I explained everything, they were willing to help, and now all of a sudden they want to foreclose? This does not make any sense at all. There must be some mistake. I try calling the manager who handles Ray's case but he isn't answering. I frantically pace up and down my apartment floor trying to think of a solution. I look at the date again. It was sent last week, that means I have only 7 days to come up with 435,000,000 dollars.

Tears spring in my eyes and indigent rage swells in my chest. Those money grubbing careless
bastards! I should have known GEH holds a large interest in that bank and money is all that fucking Grey cares about. I hate him, really hate him. He made Ray sick, solicited me improperly, and now he is taking our home?! NO just NO! I have had enough of his bullshit.

Tomorrow I will take back what is rightfully ours. He owes Ray money, not the other way around. There are payments each week to GEH creditors, Seattle First Bank is one of I have to do is change the account number and use the reference number to pay for both mortgages. That way, I won't raise suspicion. Once I know for sure that everything has been paid and my plan has worked I will quit. I sit down on my couch to absorb everything. I feel a lot calmer now knowing what to do.

I look at the picture of me and Ray that is hanging on the wall. I remember that day as if it was yesterday. I was 16 and recently moved back to live with him. Those were troubled times with mom and husband number 3. He took me camping near Lake Sylvia, and he never asked or probed about anything. He was just being there for me letting me know with his actions that he would always have my back. Tomorrow I will do the same for him.
Inertia is the resistance of every psychical object to change in a state of motion. It is a scientific principle within the physics field that, ironically enough, has strong parallels with human behavior. How we respond and behave to applied outside force or pressure seems to differ on the individual, and it seems that Miss Steele is very resistant to outside force.

I must admit that I half expected her to be on her hands and knees in front of me now, begging me to renew my offer, but alas, Miss Steele seems to have other ideas. The Audi moves again slowly, navigating through the Wednesday afternoon traffic. I stare out the darkened windows, a mother with a young son moves fast over the sidewalk. She is holding the young boy protectively against her chest shielding him from the harsh December wind and rain. It makes me wonder if the crack whore ever did something similar for me. The thought is painful, and I quickly suppress it. I hate thinking about her, it makes me feel weak, vulnerable, and incompetent. I take a deep breath, ridding myself of all thoughts crack whore, and continue staring out the car window, until Taylor stops at a small lunchroom at the heart of Seattle's historic district.

Ryan opens my door I briskly get out of the car and enter the establishment.

"Grey." I tell the maître D' curtly.

"Good afternoon Mr. Grey. Please follow me." He replies politely and takes me to my seat. I am surprised to find that Elena isn't here yet. She is always early. I decide to order directly to speed this lunch up. I am flying to Rome in two hours and don't have time for idle chit chat.

"Garlic bread, seafood chowder for two and two glasses of Fielding estate Riesling chilled," I tell the waiter brusquely. He nods and immediately scurries off to where he came from.

The Vatican invited me to be their main guest speaker at a conference about social, economic, and environmental issues and I accepted. The conference won't start until four days from now, but my mother basically ordered me to have a mini vacation before the conference starts. She thinks that I work way too hard. I hate having a holiday all by myself, it gives me time to think and reflect on my life, and I loathe doing that, knowing what a fuck up I really am.

"Christian, darling sorry I am late. There were some issues with suppliers at the Braven center." Elena's says graciously. I get up from the table and greet her with two kisses on the cheek.

"Solved now?" I ask straight to the point.

"Yes, thankfully. The supplier was an idiot." She says dismissively.

"Good. I have ordered the garlic bread and the seafood chowder." I say pointedly.

She looks a little affronted but then smiles at me.

"Sounds delicious. So, how are things with you and the little intern? I must say I was surprised when I met her, you know. She is stunning, don't get me wrong. But she seems a little shy and mousy in comparison with the girls I usually picked for you."

I am annoyed with Elena's blunt statement. It is frankly none of her business.
"Well, maybe that is because you picked those girls for me, Elena. They never had much sustenance to them." I reply flippantly.

"Ouch, that hurts. You know how I always want what's best for you Christian." She says in a placating tone.

"I know." I grumble back.

"Your mother seems to be quite taken with her." Elena says a little sourly.

I smile at her.

"Yes, what's not to like? It took zero persuasion on my part for her to take Anastasia out for a beauty day. I merely told her about what happened and she jumped at the suggestion. I think Anastasia will make a great daughter in law." I say earnestly.

Elena coughs loudly spilling her wine all over the table.

"Are you alright?" I ask mildly concerned.

"Yes, just a shock to hear you talk that like. I have never seen you so in love before, Christian. It is such a delight to see. But I am so worried for you. This girl does not seem into you like you are into her, from what you told me. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"I know, what do you suggest I do to turn that around? I did what you told me to do and took control of her life but she hasn't even nibbled on my bait."

"Oh, Christian that is because you have been way too kind and patient with her. You need to be brutal, cruel and demanding. I know you think you already are but you are still way too kind. You need to break her down, destroy her completely, strip her of her own will and identity, and then reshape her so you can build her up again to fit your needs and desires. I know her kind, she thinks she knows everything and can handle everything but she can't. She is a lost little sheep, desperately looking for a Sheppard. And if you do not take care of her she will end up a street hooker with a needle stuck in her arm. Remember how I did the same for you? How I saved you from that kind of life? And look at you now Christian. I know it all sounds counterintuitive, but trust me; it is the only way you can save her. In the end, it will make her a better person, and more importantly she will learn to love you." Elena says and squeezes my hand reassuringly.

"Do you really think she will love me?" I ask hoarsely, her loving me is an unspoken deep dark secret of mine.

Elena takes a sip of her wine and gives me a wry smile.

"I know she will. Just trust me."

I release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Thank you, Elena, I don't know where I would be without your friendship." I tell her earnestly.

"You are most welcome Christian. If you want I can help you train her." Elena says eyeing me closely.

I don't want her to help me. What I want to do with Ana is private, intimate and just between us. I don't want anyone else near her. She's mine and only mine.
"No that is alright. I can manage myself." I snap.

"Just offering. You know where to find me if you need help."

The rest of lunch we talk about Elena's plans to expand Escalva. She needs another 150k investment from GEH to open two more salons. I tell her to send me her business plan ASAP and we will discuss it when I get back from Rome.

Our lunch ends and I make my way back to the car, and Taylor drives off to SeaTac where my plane will leave in an hour. My phone rings and I check the caller ID. It's Grace.

"Mother." I briskly say when picking up the phone.

"Hello, sweetheart. I am just calling you to wish a lovely holiday and a safe flight. Just try not to work dear." My mother cheerful voice resounds through the speaker.

"Thank you, mom. I have a conference, so I need to work." I reply tersely.

"Christian, I am worried about you. I know you need to do a little work but please try to enjoy the Italian landscape and weather a little while you are there." Mom says in that tone of voice that makes me feel like a six-year-old again.

"I will try mom." I reply back quickly hoping she will let up.

"Good. I love you, sweetheart."

"Bye mom say hello to dad and Mia for me." I know I will miss Mia, my little sister, a lot. I will take her out when I get back.

"I will." She says a little tearfully. I cannot deal with her crying knowing where it comes from, so I hang up the phone. I resume staring out the car window watching the city flash by. Taylor pulls the Audi up the tarmac, and Ryan opens my door again. He, Taylor, and Prescott will accompany me to Italy where they will get help from three more guards. Unfortunately, we had to increase security. There are various threats against my person and the Vatican. Taylor doesn't want to take any chances, so he ramped up security after talking to the commander of the Swiss guard, the pontifical police force.

Prescott, Stephan my captain, and Melanie the flight attended greet me when I enter the plane.

"We are ready for take-off sir." Stephan informs me.

"Thank you, Stephan." I reply and buckle in.

30 minutes later we are airborne, and I can move around the plane again. Taylor briefs me on the latest security issues in my office. Apparently, some Muslim and right-wing extremist have threatened the Vatican and the conference, and guards are taking it very seriously. After the security briefing, I decide to do some work. One of my latest acquisitions, a fiber optics company, is struggling even though we overhauled and rebranded it. I think Lucas Woods, the CEO, is the problem, but Ros wants to give him a little more time to steer the company in the right direction. We are flying above New York when Melanie the flight attendant serves dinner. Steak, baked potatoes, and green beans with a glass of Merlot. It is still 8 hours flying before we reach Rome, and I am restless. I decide to do some exercise and take a shower before checking in with Miss Steele.

I lay down on my bed and turn on my laptop but the video feed does not seem to work at 36.000
feet. I sigh and close my laptop, again feeling empty and disappointed. Feeling bored and alone, I take out Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and begin to read.

"Mrs. Lincoln I don't think I want to do this anymore." I have been dreading this day for the entire week, and I finally managed to get enough courage to tell her I want out.

Our affair started a couple of months back, and at first, I really liked all the sex I was getting. I felt calmer and more at ease with myself than I ever had before. But Mrs. Lincoln became increasingly more demanding. When she caught me talking with one of the girls from school, she flipped and caned my hide until I couldn't sit for a week. I felt so angry and out of control again but at the same time, it felt safe and familiar. It is all so confusing and I want a break from it all to figure myself out.

"Christian, darling, I know things have gotten a little rough, and it's hard to cede control, but deep down in your heart, you know you want and need this. It is what you deserve. Don't deny it, you are not worthy to have any control or say over your life, you blew that privilege. Remember?" Elena says soothingly.

I know she is right. I made everyone's life a living hell. I am a fuck-up and nobody wants to help me, at least Elena is willing to.

She purses her lips and then smiles at me.

"You don't want your mother to know how sick you are, do you? It will destroy her. Come Christian let me show you just how good I am for you and how much I can help you." Elena says huskily, rubs my cock, and drops down on the floor in front of me. She opens my zipper and pulls my hard throbbing cock out. Her tongue slowly slides over the head of my dick, and she fondles my balls, making me moan out loud. It feels so good but so bad it is confusing.

"Please, Elena stop." I murmur but she doubles her efforts, pulling my dick deeper into her mouth. She releases my cock and looks at me coldly.

"You want this Christian, stop protesting. It will help you. Just relax and let go." She hisses and continues sucking my dick harder this time. Her hot, wet mouth wrapping deliciously around my cock. I am lost, confused, and can't think straight anymore. I let her continue, dragging me back to that deep dark place in my mind where only pain and pleasure matter.

"Sir? Wake up please sir." I startle awake from Taylor's loud voice ringing in my ear.

What the fuck was that dream about? And where the hell am I? I feel dazed and disoriented. Oh, right probably somewhere over the Atlantic, on my way to the conference. I must have fallen asleep.

"Yes Taylor, what is it?" I croak out annoyed.

"Mr. Miller is on the phone for you sir. He says it's urgent."

I lift my eyebrow at him and walk over the phone in my study.

"Miller. What do you want?" I bark into the horn.

"I am sorry to disturb you, sir. But I am afraid I have some bad news. One of our interns, Miss Steele, has embezzled 435,000 dollars from our creditor's account. After our investigation, we found enough evidence to hand the case over to law enforcement. With your permission, I would like to hand the case over to the police." Miller says in a matter of fact tone.
I feel hurt. A part of me had hoped she would come to me for help, but the other more realistic part knew that Miss Steele would fall for plan B. Silly naïve little girl.

"You will under NO circumstances involve the police. Miss Steele was under my strict orders to investigate how good our fraud detection system was. You should be pleased Miller, it is functioning much better than I expected." I reply coolly.

"Oh, sir I didn't know." He begins.

"Of course you didn't know. It was supposed to be a secret test. Now that Miss Steele has done what I have asked of her, I want you to send her to Rome today. I have another project regarding this conference for her… Check with Barry which planes is free. And Miller, send me all of the evidence you have. I want to know exactly how the system detected it." I orderauthoritatively.

"But sir, I thought all the interns were assigned to our departments for six weeks." He starts again.

"Mr. Miller, I am your boss and I want one of my employees to assist me. I am ordering you to send Miss Steele to help me out. Do I make myself clear?" I hiss through the speaker.

"Yes, sir, perfectly." He replies hastily.

"Good. And Miller? Don't mention any of this to Miss Steele." I snap and hang up before calling Sawyer; he picks up on the second ring.

"Luke. She took the bait on plan B. Escort her on the flight to Rome and take Reynolds with you. Have Harrison take over as head of security. Don't let her out of your sight Luke." I say straight to the point.

"Yes sir, only I don't think she has a passport." He replies immediately.

"Call Crawford and have her contact the State department to arrange for one immediately." 

"Yes, sir." He says and I hang up.

Well, well, well. It looks like I am finally getting what I want. I sink in my office chair and pour myself and Taylor a scotch. I feel excited and exhilarated, but also saddened. I wanted her to come to me for help no steal from me. But It doesn't matter now, I have what I wanted. Miss Steele will soon be mine, there is no escape now. I offer the drink to Taylor and he gives me a slow nod.

"Miss Steele has fallen for plan B. She has taken money from GEH." I quietly inform him.

"I see. Well, she always had a choice, sir." He simply replies and takes a sip of his Scotch.

"Are you ok with it?" I ask just to make sure Taylor is still on my team.

"Yes, sir." He states without hesitation.

"Good." I reply and down the contents of my glass. I dismiss Taylor because I have work to do. Anastasia needs a new wardrobe for our stay Italy and for Escala. I also need some new toys and implements to punish her for stealing from me. I open my laptop and start my search. Miss Steele will be in for a big surprise.

**Anastasia**

I feel hot, sweaty and nervous. Why the hell didn't I quit immediately after I transferred the money? I berate myself while I wait for Mr. Miller to call me into his office. Does he know what I
"Hi, Ana." Emily greets me cheerfully.

"Hi, Em." I say with a shaky voice. I will miss Emily once I am gone from the hellhole. She is the one that has made these past two weeks bearable.

"Are you alright?" She asks concerned.

"Just a little nervous. I have been called into Mr. Miller's office."

She smiles at me and squeezes my shoulder.

"It is probably just an evaluation of your first week. I had mine yesterday." She says reassuringly.

"Miss Steele you can come in now." Mr. Miller grunts.

My feet feel heavy like someone bound to lead to them, and I slowly shuffle into his office. I almost faint when I see Mr. Sawyer standing next to his desk. They know! They are on to me. How could I have been so stupid? I knew stealing from GEH was a bad idea, but Grey owed Ray that money. I quickly sit down before my legs buckle out, and wait for the hammer to drop. I feel small and vulnerable, like a bug waiting to be squashed.

"Miss Steele, Thank you for coming. I will get right to the point. Mr. Grey has requested that you join him in Rome and assist him with the Conference he is attending in there. He needs someone to read through and proofreads his speeches, and as an English major you are most suitable for the job." He says brusquely.

I am speechless. I half expected the police to come in and arrest me, yet I am being sent to Rome to assist the bastard. I want to tell him no and then quit before they find out about my theft, but I know that is not really an option. It will make me look even guiltier if I stay a little longer and they find out. I can always try to chalk it up as an honest mistake. But I don't want to spend a week with Grey. Not if I can help it. The man is dangerous and I don't trust him. God forbid he ever finds out I took money from him.

"Rome sir?" I ask him hoarsely.

"Yes, Rome, as in Italy." He snaps irritated.

"But I don't have a passport and I still have some work that needs to be finished this week." I protest.

"A passport will be provided, Miss Steele. I already contacted Mrs. Crawford and she already started the procedure. I will escort you to HR after we are done here so we can take a picture and send it to the state department. Your passport will be ready in two hours max so you have time to pack your bags. I will escort you to your apartment so you can get your stuff after you have taken your picture. We need to be airborne in three hours so we need to move." Mr. Sawyer says bluntly.

How can they pull this off so quickly? I feel dazed and pressured. I can't just leave to Rome, leave my dad and Mouse behind. I need to take care of them. Before I can protest, again Mr. Miller speaks up.

"Have a nice trip Miss Steele." Mr. Miller says coldly in dismissal and I wonder what his problem is.
"Thank you, sir." I say and quickly get out of his office.

Mr. Sawyer walks with me to HR where my picture is taken in less than 5 minutes time.

"My dad is in the hospital I can't just leave him." I tell Sawyer. I could ask Jimmy to feed Mouse since he got back from New Orleans today.

"Is your father's condition stable?" Mr. Sawyer asks.

"Yes." I mutter petulantly, knowing all my protests will fall on deaf ears.

"Well, I am sure he will be fine for a week. If an emergency should arise, we can fly back instantly. If you want, I can arrange for a laptop for him so you two can Skype." Mr. Sawyer offers.

"Thank you, I would really appreciate that." I reply gratefully. At least I can see him then. It is a small comfort. Nevertheless, I cannot shake this ominous feeling I have about this trip. Why is Grey so insistent that I join him there? He could ask any other person working for him. Suddenly, I feel the urge to run, but I quickly suppress it. Grey might be a creepy bastard but he is still my boss for now.

Sawyer drives me to my apartment, and I begin to pack a suitcase. I have never been out of the country before, and I always wanted to visit Rome. But not like this, not with Grey. I sigh, and put some last socks and panties in my suitcase and close it up before walking to Jimmy's apartment.

"Hello Sugar, I missed you so much." He says hugging me.

"Hi Jimmy, I missed you too. How was New Orleans?" I ask.

"Hot, steamy, and delicious. The only downside was my aunty Elly-Mae who was her usual Cray, Cray." He says winking at me.

I laugh at his descriptive linguistics.

"You found yourself a man?" I tease.

"A gentleman never tells Sugar. So where are you off to little Annie?" He says while pointing at my suitcase.

"Business trip." I mutter without much enthusiasm.

"To where?" He asks excitedly.

"Rome." I reply.

"Oh, I heard it's beautiful I never been, pity I cannot come with you. He pouts.

"You can go in my place." I offer wryly and he smiles at me.

"Don't tempt me sugar."

"Listen, Jimmy, could you feed and keep an eye on Mouse while I am gone?"

"Sure thing sugar." He replies smiling.

"Thank you, dear." I say and give him a quick hug.
"Bon Voyage Annie." he says smiling broadly.

"Thanks." I reply again and wave at him.

I take the elevator and walk back to the SUV where Sawyer is waiting for me.

"We will be off to SeaTac now Miss Steele." He informs me.

"What about my passport?" I ask surprised.

"Reynolds, my colleague, has it with him. He will be flying with us." He replies stoically.

"Oh." I manage weakly. I sigh and call my father, informing him that I will be out of the country on a business trip to Rome. Ray seems to be very excited for me, and I feel bad for not sharing his enthusiasm. I tell him I love him and that I will call him as soon as my plane has landed. After Ray, I call my mother and tell her about the trip. She's almost gushing on the other end of the line telling me what a wonderful opportunity I have been given. Just like my conversation with Ray, I do not want to rain on her parade and act like I am excited, for her benefit. I tell her that I love her and I need to go once the car stops on the tarmac in front of a large plane with the gray GEH logo on its tail wing.

Sawyer opens my door, and I get out of the car. I walk up the stairs leading to the plane. I am greeted by a tall guy wearing the same black suit as Luke who I assume is Reynolds, a blond woman in her forties, and our pilot a woman named Beighley.

I gape at the interior of the plane. Everything is luxurious and polished. The seats are white leather and stand far apart giving plenty of leg space. The blond flight attendant even explains that there is a shower and a bedroom on board and that I am free to use if I want to. I thank her.

The plane starts taxiing and picks up speed. I am pressed harder against my chair and suddenly the ground disappears and we are airborne beginning our 13-hour journey to Rome.

It is 11 O'clock in the evening when we finally land on Leonardo Da Vinci international airport just outside the city. And even though the flight was luxurious and comfortable, I feel bone tired and jet lagged. Sawyer, however, instructs me not to get out of my seat yet. Moments later, two customs officers enter the plane and inquire about our passports. Apparently working for GEH avoids the long line mere mortals have to go through to enter the country. Once they are satisfied, we are allowed to leave the plane.

Sawyer and Reynolds escort me to a large black town car, and we begin our journey to our hotel. I can see the curve of the famous river Tiber while we are driving over the A 91, and after 10 minutes I can see the bright lights of the eternal city twinkling in the distance. I feel a little excited I wonder if we will pass the Colosseum. I always wanted to see it up close. Maybe I will even have time to visit it.

16 minutes later, we are at the heart of the city and I see the Colosseum flash by. It looks even more amazing this close by than anything I have ever seen on a picture. I take out my phone and quickly snap some pictures to send to my mom, Jose, and Kate. I hardly notice that the lights of the city are starting to disappear in the distance. The car turns on to another freeway and picks up speed again. Apprehension sets it my stomach. Where the hell are we going? I thought we were staying in Rome?

"Sawyer, where are we going?" I ask, hardly masking the creeping anxiety that I am feeling.

"To our sleeping accommodations Miss Steele." He replies coolly seemingly unfazed by the tone
of my voice.

"I thought we were staying in Rome." I say a little accusatory.

"Mr. Grey feels Rome is too busy. He prefers a more quiet town." Sawyer says and shrugs his shoulders.

The little voice that warned me about this strip is blaring in my head again, and for the first time since Ray's diagnosis, I feel scared again. We drive for another 40 minutes until the car finally stops in front of a large iron wrought gate that immediately swings open. The car slowly drives over a long driveway that leads to a magnificent 16th-century villa. The lawns on the grounds are meticulously kept, and a large fountain spews water gracefully out of a lion's head. Four Corinthian pillars stand perfectly symmetrical like eternal sentinels at the front of the house. The large oak doors swing open and an elderly gentleman dressed in a butler's suit comes out.

"Good evening Miss Steele. My name is Giani and I am the butler of Villa Montferrat." He says with a thick Italian accent. Oh, maybe this is one of those very private and expensive hotels that only the rich can afford. I sigh in relief.

"Thank you." I stammer politely.

"Carlo will bring your luggage to your room." He says and points at a younger man who moves to the back of the car.

"I understand you are tired from flying. Therefore, I won't hold you for much longer. Breakfast is at eight every morning, lunch is at one, and dinner is at six sharp." He says and smiles at me.

"Ok, I will remember that." I mutter.

We walk into the house and I am surprised to see no reception desk anywhere in the building. The floors are white marble and the walls are ordained with countless works of art. It is absolutely stunning. We walk up a large spiral staircase and Giani stops in front of one of the rooms.

"This is your room. The bathroom is through that door on your right. You can always call me if you need anything." He says casually while I am trying to absorb the magnitude of the room. There is a large dark wood canopy bed with red drapes in the center. A roaring fireplace sits directly in front of it. There is a dresser, two nightstands, and a huge mahogany closet. The entire room feels like something a fairy tale princess would sleep in.

"Thank you, Giani." I reply wanting to freshen up and jump in that very inviting looking bed.

He wishes me a good night and leaves me to my own devices. I open the bathroom door and again I'm amazed. A large oval marble bath on golden legs stands in the middle of the room, and two dark marble sinks with the largest mirror I have ever seen stand to the side. I quickly take my toothbrush out of my bag, brush my teeth, and wash my face. I take my clothes off and put on my PJs, ready to jump into that bed. Absentmindedly I open the bathroom door and let out a scream.

"Good evening Miss Steele." A deep all too familiar baritone voice startles me. Two intense gray eyes burn into my skull, casually observing me from the canopy bed like it is the most normal thing in the world.

"Mr. Grey. What are you doing here?" I stammer.

His mouth curls into a slow predatory smile. He gracefully moves of the bed and casually prowls towards me. Fear settles in my gut and I crawl back against the wall away from him.
"I think you know Miss Steele." He replies acidly. His voice is ice cold and menacing.

The fear spreads from my gut enveloping every inch of me. It feels like I am drowning in a large empty sea. Keep them talking keep them talking the self-defence mantra that Ray thought me kicks in but deep down I know it will do nothing to help me out of this situation.
Anastasia

I feel my heart pounding in my ears and I stand frozen, paralyzed against the bedroom wall. My mouth feels dry like cotton, my airway is constricted, and I desperately try to suck in some precious air. Please don't faint, please don't faint. I keep telling myself. He slams his hands down against the wall trapping me between them. His eyes are burning with such intensity that it feels like I am being set on fire. A shiver runs through me and I look away from him, desperately trying to avoid his scorching gaze. There is a sinister darkness emanating from within him setting me on edge.

I feel his fingers gently stroke my cheeks before grabbing my chin tilting my head up so I am forced to look at him like I am some errant small child about to be scolded. His actions are so patronizing that my fear is replaced with blood boiling anger. How dare he touch me like this and come into my room with no regard for my privacy? This is nothing short of sexual harassment and I won't stand for it.

"Let go of me. You are hurting me." I hiss furiously.

"Duly noted." He calmly states.

Rage, all I feel is rage. Something snaps inside of me and all I want is to hurt him like he hurt Ray and is hurting me now. His eyes widen a fraction when I bring my knee up to his groin. He tries to block me but is only partially successful. My knee manages to hit a part of his groin area and he howls in undiluted pain and fury, the sound is ear-piercing and feral. He has let go of me and for a moment I stand still, frozen on my spot watching him grabbing his balls. Run you, idiot, you need to run! A voice rings clear in my head snapping me out of my daze. A surge of adrenaline spikes through me and I run past him straight to the door. I pull on the handle but it won't budge. Panic seizes me and I pull again desperately trying to open it.

"You stupid little bitch. I was going to try and do this civilly by talking to you about our situation but you had to fuck that up didn't you?" He snarls. I feel his arms grabbing me from behind he lifts me up and carries me towards the bed. He throws me on it and is on me before I can do anything else. I try to kick him but he is too quick and blocks me. He pins my legs to the mattress with his heavy body.

His right-hand grabs both of my wrists painfully and drags them above my head. I feel something leathery snap around them, binding my hands together. I try to wring them free but the bindings won't budge.

"You brought this on yourself. You just had to see how far you could push me didn't you? " He barks.

"You sick psycho. Let go of me or I will scream this whole hotel down." My voice is high-pitched unrecognizable even to my own ears.

He laughs a cold, hard bark of a laugh. When he looks at me, my heart nearly stops. His eyes are cold and menacing and his handsome face is contorted in pure fury. He doesn't even look human anymore, but more like a diabolical creature from my worst nightmares.

"Go ahead baby. Scream all you want it is a huge turn on and nobody is going to save you from me. They all know you are mine." He emphasizes the last part chilling me to the bone.
He grabs something from under the bed, a long metal rod with three eyebolts and leather straps attached to it. He grabs my pajama pants and pulls them down in one swift move. His sharp intake of breath fills the room when he shamelessly stares at my now exposed nether region.

"So beautiful." He murmurs before strapping both my ankles inside the leather bindings. Realization hits like a ton of bricks. The sick son of a bitch knows I took the money from him; he has planned this all along! My intuition was right. I should have never come here.

He gets up from the bed to admire his handy work. My legs are forced apart by the bar and I can't close them. I feel exposed, freighted, helpless, and angry. This man is truly depraved.

He casually unbuttons his shirt and pulls down his jeans and boxers, exposing himself to me. I turn my head to avoid looking at his naked form. I hear him chuckle before crawling over me on the bed again. He presses his bare chest against me, his skin feels sweaty and hot on mine. He runs his nose from my ear down my neck, placing soft kisses everywhere. "So sweet, so beautiful." He murmurs. His musky citrusy scent assaults my senses and scalding hot angry tears escape from my eyes. I desperately wipe my cheeks on the pillow. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

His hands creep under my pajama shirt, fondling and touching me everywhere. They feel scorching on my exposed skin. The soft sound of ripping textile echoes through the room exposing my stomach and chest to him too. I feel his hot breath on my nipple before his mouth latches on nibbling and sucking on it. An odd tingling sensation radiates through me. I feel dazed and confused and I want him to stop. I don't want this, here, with him. I always wanted my first time to be with someone special, not with some deranged psychopath.

"Please stop. You can't do this, please. I don't want this." I hate to resort to begging, but I don't know what else to do to make this stop.

"Oh, baby you do want this." His warm hand travels down touching and stroking me between my thighs. The sensation is new, titillating and bewildering. Why am I feeling this? What is he doing to me? He looks up at me and his eyes shine in triumph. "Look how wet you are!" He exclaims proudly.

"But you really don't deserve it yet. First, you need to be punished for your transgressions." He suddenly declares, grabs the bar between my legs and flips me over in one swift move so I am laying on my stomach. Dread fills me, and impotent tears stream down my face. He climbs on the bed again and I hear him open a drawer near the bedside. The cracking sound of leather fills the still air around us.

"I think you deserve 8 hits with the flogger for that little stunt you just pulled." He says casually. "And since this is all new to you. I will forgo the counting for just this time." His voice is cruel and unforgiving.

"NO! Please stop. I will do anything you want. I will go out with you if you want. Anything, just don't hurt me. Please." Full-blown panic grips me, and images of mom and husband number three flash before my eyes. I don't want to be like her. I feel sick and cannot breathe.

He laughs a cold, cruel, malevolent laugh.

"Go out with me? Oh, baby, we are way past that station. And yes, you will do anything I want. And right now I want to punish you." He snarls mercilessly.

I hear a swooshing noise near my right ear.
A second later, I feel a hard, sharp stingy pain when the leather straps of the flogger snap against the skin of my behind. The pain is brutal and an involuntary cry escapes my lips.

"One." His voice sounds harsh and authoritative. Another merciless hit rains down on my behind and I cry out again. "Two." He snarls before hitting me again harder this time and I scream, really scream. "That is right baby throw it all out." I hear him mutter behind me. I clench my teeth "Fuck you, you psycho!" I hiss at him and he chuckles. "Oh, yes baby, fuck me you will." He replies casually before raining down the flogger again, on my throbbing behind. "Four." He snarls out. The pain is getting worse and worse and I find myself drift off into that secret safe, serene space in my mind, where nothing can harm our touch me. I haven't been there since I was sixteen.

The blows seem to stop and I feel myself drift out of that space again. "NO!" I cry out. He starts hitting me again, pausing longer between each hit. The pain becomes raw and more intense. His ragged breathing and the crackling sound of the flogger hitting my abused skin fill the stale air around us. Suddenly I feel something hot and wet dripping on my ass it burns on my skin. "Eight." He finally grunts out. The pungent smell of chlorine mixed with masculine sweat and ammonia assaults my nostrils. His hand lightly caress my ass rubbing in something wet and sticky. His touch is excruciating on my sensitive skin like someone has set my ass on fire. [HM1] The pain is overpowering and I begin to sob really sob. "Claimed, mine." I hear him softly murmur.

He grabs the bar between my legs again flipping me on my back again. The soft 1000 thread cotton sheets feel like sandpaper on my abused ass. He is standing before me, stark naked. His shoulders and chest are broad and muscular, and his abdomen is chilled into a perfect six pack.

How can someone so beautiful be so dark and ugly? I gasp when my eyes involuntarily lock on his penis. It is huge, thick, long, and hard with milk like moisture coating the head. [HM2] He smirks at me, grabs it and obscenely strokes it moving his hand slowly up and down his shaft while staring down at me. And I realize that he just ejaculated on my ass. I feel nauseous and faint. I try to swallow down the lump that has formed in my throat, while I desperately try to free my hands. Please, anything but that. I need to get out of here. I need to escape. I close my eyes and pray to God to make him stop and let me go.

I feel the bed dip again and his body heat is radiating beside me. I flinch when his fingers slowly caress the skin on my legs and belly.

"Don't you fucking touch me! You sick bastard." I scream out giving in to the overwhelming anger.

He looks upset for a moment but his impassive mask slips back in.

"You have a potty mouth on you, Miss Steele. I was hoping we could keep it at one punishment tonight so I suggest you calm down and don't push me to give you another one." His voice sounds casual but there is a dark undercurrent in it.

"I will tell everyone what you just did to me. I will go to the police and they will arrest you. You won't get away with this." I seethe at him.

He laughs a cold cruel laugh.

"Do you really think anybody is going to believe you? The word of some thieving little intern over the word of the great and powerful Christian Grey, a paragon of humanity. Are you really that naive? You know what my PR and legal teams are capable of. They will destroy you so fast your head will spin. You will be just another desperate little gold-digger searching for her 15 minutes of fame. Hell, the police won't even bother to file a report."
As much as I wanted to deny his claims, I knew what he said was the truth. I had seen with my own eyes how fast and ruthless he dismantled companies and people. He is extremely powerful, has friends in very high places, and seemingly limitless influence around the world. He was right, he would destroy me in the blink of an eye and I wouldn't stand a chance against him. It fuelled my anger even more.

"Is this how you get your kicks? By beating, raping, and abusing women when they tell you to shove it? You are one sick and pathetic motherfucker and don't even think for one second that I will give into your sick games."

He looks pained for a moment closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he open them again he smirks coolly at me.

"Au contraire mon, Cheri. I know that you will give into what you call… my sick games. You owe me 435,000 dollars and you will be paying them back in a manner I choose. If you refuse, I will personally make sure you will be spending at least 10 years in prison for embezzlement and fraud."

I stare at him in defiance.

"You owed my father that money you filthy leech. I merely took back what you owed him. I rather spend 10 years in prison then one minute with you."

"Enough with that nonsense! I am tired of you insulting my business ethics! I did not make your father sick. I don't know why you keep throwing that little fantasy of yours in my face. If you are so desperate to throw your life away behind bars and let your father die, be my guest. I shall inform Taylor and have you extradited back to Washington. And once you are stuck in jail I will make it my life's mission to fuck you and fuck you over every single day." He sneers, his head is bright red and his eyes glow in anger. He looks dark and sinister, exactly like the demon he is.

My anger-fuelled confidence begins to wane and I slowly realize that he means every word he said. If I would go to prison, I wouldn't be able to take care of Ray and he wouldn't get the treatments he needs. The thought of Ray dying because of me is unbearable. Dread settles in and I am beginning to understand that I will never be able to win this from him. He is simply too powerful. I just want this to be over with. My ass hurts and is sticking to the sheets, my arms feel heavy and painful from the constraints, and my legs and feet hurt from being pressed wide by the bar.

"Why are you doing this to me? Is it because I bruised your colossal ego? And you need to take out your petty revenge? What do you want from me?" My voice sounds strained and tired, just like how I feel.

His eyes turn to slits and he stares at me like I some clueless idiot.

"You know why I am doing this. We belong together whether you like it or not. I want your complete and total submission Anastasia that is the only way I can make you understand that we are meant to be together."

He rummages through one of the bedside drawers and takes out a piece of paper and a pair of handcuffs. He releases my hands from the leather bindings and snaps the handcuffs on both my wrists before handing me the paper.

"Read this." He orders arrogantly.

*The contractual relationship between Anastasia Rose Steele, born September 10, 1995, Montesano WA., and Christian Trevelyan Grey, born June 18, 1985, Detroit MI.*
Nature of the relationship

Miss Steele will submit to a total power exchange (TPE) with Mr. Grey. Meaning in essence that Mr. Grey will assume control over every aspect of Miss Steele's life. Mr. Grey's decisions are absolute and Miss Steele will willingly and without hesitation obey him in all things. Mr. Grey in return will provide in all of Miss Steele's needs, safeguarding her health, and safety at all times. The relationship will be strictly monogamous.

Obedience

Miss Steele will obey Mr. Grey in all things, immediately without hesitation or reservation, and in an expeditious manner. Miss Steele will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by Mr. Grey.

Availability

Miss Steele will be available to attend to Mr. Grey's needs 24/7. Miss Steele will move into Mr. Grey's living accommodations for the duration of this contract. Mr. Grey will provide a room for Miss Steele where she will be able to withdraw herself when Mr. Grey is not in need of her services.

Sleep

Miss Steele will ensure she achieves a minimum of seven hours of sleep every night unless otherwise instructed by Mr. Grey. Mr. Grey will decide when and where Miss Steele is allowed to sleep.

Food

Mr. Grey will provide a prescribed list of foods from which Miss Steele will eat three times a day. Miss Steele will not snack between meals with the exception of fruit. Mr. Grey will always decide what and when Miss Steele will eat.

Clothes and Jewellery

Miss Steele will wear clothing only approved by Mr. Grey. Mr. Grey will provide a clothing budget for Miss Steele, which Miss Steele shall utilize. Mr. Grey shall always accompany Miss Steele to purchase clothing and jewelry when needed.

Exercise

Mr. Grey shall provide Miss Steele with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and Miss Steele. The personal trainer will report to Mr. Grey on Miss Steele's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty

Miss Steele will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. Miss Steele will visit a beauty salon of Mr. Grey's choosing at times to be decided by Mr. Grey, and undergo whatever treatments Mr. Grey sees fit.

Personal Safety:

Miss Steele will not drink alcohol unless Mr. Grey decides otherwise. Miss Steele will not smoke, or use recreational drugs of any kind. Miss Steele will not put herself in unnecessary danger and
will always follow the instructions of Mr. Grey or his security team should the need arise.

**Behaviour**

Miss Steele will conduct herself in a modest manner at all times. She will not embarrass Mr. Grey in any way, shape, or form, and will address him as Master unless instructed otherwise. Miss Steele will not be allowed to have any contact with any other men without Mr. Grey's explicit permission with the exception of family. Miss Steele will not go out or make appointments with others without Mr. Grey's explicit permission.

She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection on Mr. Grey. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings, and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of Mr. Grey.

Miss Steele and Mr. Grey will both not enter any other sexual relationships with others for the duration of this contract.

**Consequences when failing to comply with Mr. Grey's instructions**

Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by Mr. Grey.

Is he insane? Does he really think I will agree to be his personal sex slave? This is worse than prison. I need to make him understand that I won't ever agree to this. I need something, anything to make him back off. Maybe the bank will be able to deposit the money back?

"No. I cannot agree to this. Please, Mr. Grey, let me call the bank, they may be able to deposit your money back. Please, I am sorry, ok? I am sorry I stole from you, but please don't do this to me." My voice sounds hoarse and desperate I barely recognize it.

"I don't give a rat's ass about the money Anastasia, I never have. It is you that I want, and I will have you any way I can get you. I didn't do anything to you. You brought this onto yourself, and now you have to bear the consequences of your actions. You either agree to this arrangement or I will have you arrested and thrown in jail, and you won't be safe from me there trust me. If I cannot have you nobody can, and make no mistake, I never make idle threats; don't test me."

His words send a chill down my spine. He truly is a psychopath, and there is no doubt in my mind that he will make good on his threats. There is a deep disturbing violent darkness within him, and he is probably powerful enough to do whatever to me even if I am in jail. I need to buy time so I can escape from him. Maybe if I fly back to the US and have the bank deposit the money back, I can act like it was an honest mistake, he can't touch me then, right? I swallow and look up at him his eyes are burning into mine it is unnerving.

"Can I think about this, please? Just for a day, it is a very big decision." I mutter.

"No. I want an answer now. I don't understand what there is to think about. Me or jail, either way, I will get what I want. Tell me Anastasia, who is going to take care of your father and mother when you are rotting away in prison? If you agree to this contract, I will personally make sure your father will get the best treatments in the world, and your mother's legal matters will be a thing of the past in a heartbeat. I promise I will take care of you, and your needs will always come first. Just give yourself to me and I will take care of you. We both know you cannot take care of yourself." He says that last part sternly like talking to an errant child.

What am I am going to do? I don't believe a word he says about my parents it is just a way of
baiting me and I am not going to take it. I want to break down and cry again but I know that won't help me. "Be a fighter not a victim Ana." My mom's words ring clear in my head. Think Ana think!

Ok... His sick psycho contract it is not legally binding, if I sign it now he will be happy and he will think he won. That pervert already got his rocks off when he flogged me, so he will probably leave me alone until tomorrow. As soon he is out of here, I will make my escape and hide from him until I can get his money back.

"Alright, I will sign the contract," I whisper softly. He beams at me and gives me a full-toothed all American boy smile.

"I knew you would come around and see it my way. I promise you baby it will be amazing between us, just trust me." He hands me a fountain pen and another piece of paper.

"What is this?" I ask while staring at it.

"It is a non-disclosure agreement. You already signed one at GEH, but this will cover our personal relationship. Sign it with the contract." He commands brusquely.

I want to scream at him and tell him to shove both papers, but I refrain. Of course, he wouldn't want the world to know what kind of sicko he really is. I think sourly. I put my signature on both documents and hand them back to him.

He gives me a slow predatory smile chilling my blood.

"Good girl." He praises. "Now that the paperwork is out of the way we can start our new relationship. I have been dying to be inside of you ever since I first laid eyes on you." He murmurs softly and slowly strokes the inside of my thigh. Undiluted fear grips me again this is not how it was supposed to go down.

"Please Mr. Grey I am tired from the flight and I want to sleep can we do it tomorrow?"

He pulls his hand away and slaps my thigh hard I yelp from the painful sting.

"You will address me as Master, and you have no say in what we do when. I want to fuck you now and fuck you now I will. You signed the contract, remember?" He sneers and panic seizes me.

"You want this Anastasia; just as much as I do, you just do not realize it yet. But don't worry I will make you understand everything." He opens the handcuffs and releases my wrists from them. He gently strokes my wrists with his thumbs before snapping them back in the leather cuffs again placing them high above my head. My arms feel strained and painful. He moves on top of me and I feel his firm lips on my breasts, his hot breath feels like molten lava on my skin. I want him to stop and leave me alone.

"Please Master, stop please." Maybe if I plead with him he will stop and understand that I do not want this and that what he is doing to me is wrong. I know it is an idle hope but I don't know what else to do.

"Be quiet or I will gag you. Just enjoy what I do to you it will make you feel so much better I promise." His voice is silky, almost placating.

Oh, God, he is not going to stop, he is not going to stop! I feel his large hands roam my abdomen exploring every inch of me, his right-hand travels further south. His thumb gently presses on my clitoris and a shudder rushes through my body sending shockwaves through my system. No, I don't want this! Why is my body betraying me like this? His thumb moves slowly but relentlessly in a circular motion over my clit, I feel hot and my entire body is buzzing with this new sensation. I feel
sick and confused about it all. Suddenly one of his fingers is at my entrance pushing inside me and I yelp at the sudden intrusion.

"Jesus, you're tight but so fucking wet." He murmurs proudly.

Determination sets in to stop him. I don't want to lose my virginity to him especially not like this.

"Please stop Master. I have never done any of this before and it hurts." I cry out. He immediately stops and looks up at me. His face is taut with anger.

"I have enough of your whining and lies. You are quite the accomplished little slut popping the pill since you were fifteen. Well, I am going to make you forget about all the incompetent fuckers that tried to fuck you. Soon you will know what it is like being with a real man." He spits out his words with such vitriol that I cringe away from him. How the hell does he know I am on the pill? Why doesn't he believe me?

"I am a virgin! I am only on the pill for menstrual cramps." I blurt out desperately wanting him to stop. He looks at me disbelieving for a moment before slipping a finger back inside of me again. Moving it round and round stroking me everywhere. I quiver at his touch and I feel something warm, wet and sticky dripping out of me.

His eyes widen as he is realizing something. A beaming bright smile forms on his face. He looks like someone who just been told he won the lottery.

"You really are a virgin. I knew you were mine the moment I laid eyes on you. This was meant to be. You were saving yourself for me, you only did not know it yet." He says with such feral pride and conviction it is unnerving. He pulls his finger out of me and puts it in his mouth sucking on it hard. His pupils dilate and his facial features morph into something animalistic.

"You taste even better than I thought was possible. Since this is your first time I need to make this extra special." He says brightly and releases my feet from the spreader bar. "It will hurt too much if I take you with your feet bound like that." He says kindly like he is doing me some huge favor.

I pull my leg back and try to kick him but he is faster grabbing both my feet and pinning them down on the mattress.

"I should spank you for that little action. I swear, if you do it again, I will put both your feet back in the bar and I will not give a damn how much I hurt you when I slam my cock inside of you. This entire experience can be either pleasurable or painful for you, choose wisely." He growls angrily and I know he means every word of it. He runs his stubble chin on the bare flesh of my pussy. It tickles. "I like this." He murmurs and pushes my legs apart. He quickly moves his head between my legs and pushes his nose between my folds before breathing in deeply.

"You smell divine Anastasia." He murmurs. I feel his wet tongue swirling around my clit and I nearly convulse from the alien sensation, hating myself more than I ever did before. He chuckles. "You like that don't you? You are a carnal creature Miss Steele, so fucking responsive." He says softly between the licks of his tongue. His skilled mouth and tongue alternate between licks and nibbles around my clitoris. I try to fight these strange and powerful sensations but I can't, the feeling is too overwhelming. He closes his lips around my clit and sucks hard. The pleasure is so intense, I let out a small scream. "That is right baby enjoy what I do to you," he says while continuing his ministrations.

What is happening to me? I don't understand any of this. I shouldn't be feeling like this. I am as sick as he is. I feel my heart pounding in my chest as if it is trying to escape from all of this. The
throbbing between my legs is never ending, and waves of heat burn my entire body. I try to move away from his torturing mouth but he grabs my ass, kneading the sensitive flesh and pushing my vagina against his mouth, forcing me back on the bed again. He sinks a finger back inside me and slowly moves it in and out of me in sync with the ministrations of his tongue.

The feelings become unbearable and I squirm against his relentless tongue. The musky heady smell of our combined arousal fills the air around us, and I let out an involuntary moan. The throbbing between my legs is overwhelming and I feel him dragging me closer to the edge of a cliff. I cannot fight him any longer. I let go with a loud scream, my legs stiffen, and my entire body tightens. The throbbing feeling between my legs has been replaced by a relentless pulsing feeling. It feels like I am flying.

After a few moments, the high winds down and I feel lost, devastated and confused. I just want to curl up in a tiny ball and cry until I have no more tears left.

I feel the heat of his body hovering over me, and he places gentle kisses on my breast and neck before slipping his wet tongue inside my mouth. I can taste my own salty, muskiness on him and I want to cry in shame. His kisses become feverish. There is an urgent unrelenting possessiveness in his kiss that liquefies my insides, and I feel that heady sensation build up again when his hands start their torture of my pussy again. I feel his thick long erection hard against my hips and I brace myself for what is to come.

I want to scream and cry and tell him to stop but I know it will only piss him off and hurt me more.

He leans on his forearm and slowly guides his penis to my entrance. I tense up and panic sets in when I feel it pulsating against my entrance. "Please don't do this," I beg against my better judgment but he doesn't seem to hear me. His eyes are glazed over and there is a serene expression on his face.

"Wrap your legs around me and relax. It will hurt more if you are tensed up." He says in a dark warning voice.

I do what he says afraid of the pain that is about to come.

"Good girl." He mutters softly.

He slowly but deliberately begins to push inside me. My body tenses at the intrusion and it hurts badly. "Relax." He grunts out and start messaging my clit again. A strange combination of pleasure and pain dulls my senses. He inches his enormous cock in deeper inside of me and I whimper.

"Sssh. I know, just relax and it will feel better soon. I promise." He softly whispers in my ear and I want to hurt him, really hurt him. Drops of sweat mare his brow and his face is strained like he is in pain. Suddenly his weight shifts and he slams into me completely, growing in absolute pleasure. An aching burn spreads through my body it feels like I am ripped into two. I cry out in pain and he captures my mouth with his to silence my cries.

I am sobbing uncontrollably and my entire body in shaking. He pauses for a moment and stares at me. His eyes are completely dark and burning in mine. His breathing is ragged and his nostrils flare like a bull about to lose control. I feel his member throbbing inside of me stretching me fully and I whimper.

"Oh, Ana. You feel so good, baby." He breathes out, my name a veneration on his lips.
I feel sick and nauseous like I am going to pass out from the unbearable pain. I start to hyperventilate, desperately trying to get some precious air in my lungs.

"Sssh baby breath in, out, in, out. I promise the pain will pass. Just try to relax." He coos and I hate him really hate him for doing this to me.

Slowly the pain ebbs away and I feel my body begin to relax.

"That's it, baby, you are doing great." He places soft kisses on my forehead and lips. His lips feel firm and warm. Suddenly, he moves out of me, and for a short moment, I feel relieved. Then without warning, he slams into me again, roughly, and I cry out again, but the pain is much more manageable than the first time he did this to me.

He presses one of his longer fingers to my clit again and slowly thrusts his hips against mine, making my abused ass rubs painfully against the sheets. Slowly, the pain between my legs is replaced by that now familiar tingling sensation. His hips move rhythmically against mine while his long agile finger keeps stroking my clit. I feel the tension build in my gut again, radiating through the rest of my body. I feel so ashamed and embarrassed by these feelings, I want to run away and hide to my safe place deep inside my head, but these powerful sensations don't let me escape.

His thrusts get harder and deeper and his breathing is labored. He picks up speed and really starts to move harder and faster inside of me. Our bodies are slick against another and his moans and panting fill the room.

I am writhing with the intensity of these new feelings. The pain has almost completely disappeared. I feel myself rise higher and higher until suddenly I am free falling back to earth again. The feeling is so intense that I see stars for a moment. Hot angry tears of shame stream down my face. I didn't want this! His thrusts get more erratic, some are deep and hard, while others are shallow and softer. His grunts and moans are deafening to my ears. I feel his cock is jerking and throbbing inside of me "Ana!" He cries out, and I feel something warm and wet spilling inside of me like pie, and I realize that he found his release. He is panting heavily and places kisses all over my face. He doesn't pull out but collapses on top of me. His weight is heavy smothering me.

"Jesus Ana that was incredible." He grunts out breathlessly. After a few more moments, he rolls off me and pulls me close against his chest. He nuzzles my hair and I feel his grin against my ear.

"I told you it would be good, didn't I?" He says triumphantly but all I can do is cry. Heart-wrenching sobs make my body tremble on the bed. There is a sticky wetness between my legs and the room reeks of the musky scent of sex and heartbreak.

It feels like a part of me has died and I can never get it back. I feel so desolate and broken. I feel him release my arms from the leather bindings and he gently massages them while whispering words of comfort in my ear. I don't even register what he is saying, I simply don't care anymore. I don't know how long we have been laying on the bed like this. My thoughts are jumbled and hazy, and my tears have dried. I feel nothing but a sweet dark oblivion and it is a welcome change from the gut wrenching pain I felt before.

I feel him wrapping his strong arms around me. He lifts me from the bed and carries me to the large tub in the bathroom. He slowly and gently puts me down in the tub. The warm fragrant water is soothing on my abused body. He slides in behind me and squirts some body wash on a sponge. Tenderly he starts washing my back and arms before moving south to my belly. He squirts some more soap on the sponge. "Open your legs." His voice is warm and kind and it is so different from it was before but it does nothing to sooth the ache I feel inside. He pushes the sponge between my
legs and slowly starts cleaning me down there. His hands move in a circular motion while he murmurs sweet words in my ear but I do not register what he is saying. I feel detached like a spectator looking in on an intimate scene between two lovers.

Warm water from the showerhead rains down on my head, soaking my hair, and I feel his strong nimble fingers messaging in shampoo on my head. He gently washes it out and places a kiss on my head.

"You have such beautiful hair. I still not believe how perfect you are. You are a gift from God Anastasia, sent here just for me, and I will treasure you forever." He says with such chilling conviction it is frightening.

He lifts me out of the bathtub and puts me down on a towel. He gently starts drying my body before he blows dries, combs, and braids my hair.

I feel numb. As if I am an outsider watching a Greek tragedy unfold. He dresses me in a pair of silk pajamas I don't recognize before carrying me to bed. With detached interest, I notice the oval bloodstain on top of the covers. It is undisputed proof that what transpired was real and not some fucked up figment of my imagination. He follows my gaze and there is a sincere almost vulnerable expression on his face.

"You have given me an invaluable gift, one that I will treasure forever." He says solemnly his behavior is a complete dichotomy to me.

He puts me down and slips the covers over me. He slides next to me and pulls me against him again. I don't have the energy to protest, I am lost in a fast ocean of sorrow.

"Sleep my sweet girl." He says and turns off the light, plunging the room into the same darkness that has filled my soul.
**Unbroken**

**Christian**

Villa Montferrat was built mid-16th century by the Italian nobleman Enrique Lombardi, who had been notorious for kidnapping his unwilling bride from her ancestral home. The irony is not lost on me. During the Second World War, the villa was turned into a hospital to treat wounded allied soldiers who were injured during the battle of Montecassino. Throughout the ages, the walls of this villa have witnessed far greater consternations than what transpired between Miss Steele and myself last night. I had never been so aroused before, hell I never came from just flogging a woman's ass. Seeing the pink welts on her lush flesh both enticed and soothed the sadist inside me. The entire experience was an enlightenment on many different levels. Little Miss Steele is a natural masochist. I noticed how she drifted of too subspace when I flogged her and was pleasantly surprised. I had to pause my blows to prevent her from getting there. I wanted to make her feel every ounce of pain she put me through, that is the only way she will learn to behave. And when she finally signed the contract, I was beyond ecstatic. Having her is something I have been dreaming about for months, and now it is finally a reality. Taking her for the very first time, knowing that she was a virgin, was the most intense and gratifying sexual experience I have ever had. I would even go so far to say it was a spiritual experience. It wasn't just the sex, it was her allowing me to take care of her afterwards that has awoken something deep inside of me. A spark that has ignited my entire being. She made me come alive after being stuck in a dead like slumber for an eternity. Not having her was never going to be an option.

It felt counterintuitive breaking her, and I did not want to do it at first. I had planned to woo her again. However, when she kicked me and treated me disrespectfully, I knew Elena was right. She needs to be broken and built back up again. I know she will deny it out in spite and anger, but she enjoyed what I did to her. She came not once but twice! I know it must have been a shock to her system. It was a shock to mine when Elena did that to me when I was 15. I was mad and confused for a little while when she took my virginity and hated myself for enjoying it. Nevertheless, in the end, I realized that it was all for the best. She helped me become the successful man I am today. Anastasia will realize soon enough how good and cathartic this will be for her, me taking care of her every need.

I increase my speed running over the well-kept grounds of the estate with Taylor and Sawyer in tow. It is 6:15 in the morning and the bright sunrays illuminate the sky with brilliant hues of gold and orange. I feel invigorated and centered; for the first time in forever, I slept really well with Anastasia lying next to me. She is like a dreamcatcher keeping every bad dream away. The early morning wind is chilly on my clam skin. Small dewdrops litter the grass and the air smells of flowers and rain. I enjoy this time of day most when everyone is still asleep and the world around me is quiet and peaceful.

At 7 sharp, we are back at the Villa and I am desperate for a shower and some breakfast. Giani my butler and caretaker greets me at the door.

"Buongiorno Signor Grey. Breakfast at eight?" He asks with a thick Italian accent. "Yes thank you Giani. Is Catherina awake yet?" Catherina is his daughter and one of the maids. She will be Anastasia's companion while we are here.

"Si Signor."

"Send her to my and Miss Steele's room in forty minutes."
"Ovviamente Signor Grey." He replies and gives me a polite smile before he scurries of towards the kitchen. I climb up the stairs two steps at the time and enter my bedroom. For a moment, I stand mesmerized watching Anastasia sleep. The early morning sunlight seeps through the white curtains illuminating her hair and beautiful porcelain face. She looks like an angel, even though her facial expression looks slightly pained. Yes, she really is an angel, an angel I dragged into my hell. A pang of guilt sweeps through me but I suppress it. Guilt is a useless emotion, it does nothing to change a situation and only makes you feel like shit.

I move closer to her and stroke my hand over her soft cheeks. She flinches a little and it cuts right through me. I don't want her to shy away from my touch, but I suppose it was to be expected. Nevertheless, we have to work on that. I run my hand through my hair and stare at her a moment longer before making my way to the bathroom.

The warm water is refreshing on my damp skin and it alleviates the strain in my muscles from my early morning run. I wash myself quickly and imagine Anastasia's dainty hands on my cock when I run the washcloth over myself. God, I fantasized about her for so long that having her finally with me here is a dream come true. I can finally act out all my fantasies. The thought is arousing and I feel myself harden with each passing second. I need her again. I quickly turn off the shower and dry myself. I do not bother with dressing myself, that would be a little bit redundant.

Her eyes are still closed when I enter the bedroom again, but I know she is awake. I slide into bed with her and breathe in the sweet scent of her hair. It is so enticing. I slide my hand under her blouse and softly squeeze her nipple. It hardens and erects immediately in response. Lord, she is responsive to my touch, it is more than I could ever have hoped for. I move my other hand in her pyjama pants and softly stroke between her thighs. She shudders against me and coats my hand with her sweet juices.

She tries to push my hand away and I know for sure now that she is awake. Her action makes me chuckle. She clearly does not comprehend the nature of our relationship and it will be a joy to teach her. I grab her hand and pin it against the bed.

"Good morning sweet girl," I whisper in her ear and her eyes fly open. They look dull and lifeless on the surface but I can see the defiant fire burning brightly in their ocean blue depths. Something akin to pride swells within me and I do not understand why.

I place my hand between her wet folds again and continue my exploration of her beautiful pussy. She tries to move away from me and out of the bed, but I push her back against me.

"You seem to have forgotten our arrangement already? Do you need a reminder?" I ask sardonically.

"I need to go to the bathroom... Master." She replies back sarcasm clear in her voice. This attitude will not do.

"I won't allow you to. Not yet anyway. I decide what you do when. You signed the contract remember?" My voice sounds brusque and I am hoping my point comes across. I hate to start the day with another punishment, especially when she is probably still sore from yesterday.

"For how long?" she asks out of the blue, changing the direction of the conversation, and I do not want to answer her.

"How long what?" I reply coolly.
"Our contract how long am I… how long does it last?" she looks away from and swallows.

*Forever.* I want to tell her but I know she would never accept that answer, and that would make both of our lives harder. How long will it take me to break and bend her so we can move on to a different kind of contract? Will she be more pliable when I give her an end term? It really does not matter what end term I give her, I will never let her go regardless.

"Six months. You will be serving me for six months after that your debt is paid and you are free to leave." It surprises me how easy that lie leaves my lips. My answer seems to shock her.

"Six months is a very long time." She murmurs softly.

"435.000 is a lot of money. It will take this much time to pay me back." I reply flippantly.

"Last night… you didn't use anything. When you..." Her voice sounds eerie, almost robotic, and she cannot seem to even say what we did. It is stirring something inside of me, which I quickly suppress. I need to stay strong and unwavering. Her question does not come as a surprise, I was ecstatic when I read she was on the pill in her medical records. It meant we could go skin on skin. I know why she is asking this and I inwardly scoff. Before last night, I hadn't had sex for over a year. My libido was already low for a while but it plunged into oblivion after Leila blew her brains out in my kitchen, but I won't tell her that.

"No, Anastasia. I didn't use a condom, there was no need. You are on the pill and I am clean. I get tested every three months. You are welcome to look into the results if you want." I offer in reassurance. "Look, Anastasia, I know it is hard to believe for you now, but I would never do anything to harm you. It doesn't seem like that now but in time you will understand that we are meant to be."

She scoffs and looks at me like I am insane. Here entire demeanor is disrespectful and rude. The defiant fire in her eyes burns brightly and she holds my gaze boldly. It is both refreshing and arousing and I am completely surprised by my own feelings. *This will not do Grey, punish her for it.*

"If you think I will ever love you after what you have done to me, you are delusional Master." She spits out. Her words cut me like a knife and I realize now more than ever that she is the only person in the world that has the power to destroy me. What I feel for her is frightening and I do not understand it. Do I want her to love me? The answer is a startling and unnerving me. It is not a question of wanting her love but needing her love. What for? I don't know. Peace of mind? Acceptance? Absolution? Redemption? A chance at life? Or maybe all of the above. More than ever I realize that I need to break her before she breaks me.

"I don't want your love, only your body." The lie is painful but I need to protect myself. "Now take off your pajamas, spread your legs, and turn on your stomach. I am going to take you from behind now." I command harshly.

The inner war she is fighting inside her head is clearly etched on her beautiful face and I hold my breath. For a moment, I think she is going to refuse me but then suddenly she does what she is told. She turns around on her stomach and spread her legs wide surprising me. Breath escapes my lips when I stare at the erotic sight displayed before me. I feel like a starving man at an all you can eat banquet.

"Lean on your forearms." My voice sounds husky and desperate. I need to taste her again. I kneel behind her and spread her ass cheeks. Her tight hole looks lush and pink. I want to claim her ass but I won't do it today. Her ass needs training first. I bend down and push my tongue between her
folds. Her scent spicy and musky, an intoxicating combination. Tantalizingly slow, I begin licking her between her folds moving my tongue from her clit to her entrance. She shudders and I am rewarded with her sweet salty nectar. Sweet Jesus, she is responsive. I continue my sweet torture and I am rewarded with a tiny little moan spurring me on further. I double my efforts and gently push my finger inside of her now soaked pussy. She bucks and mewls and I have to hold her steady.

"You like that don't you baby." I grin at her but she doesn't respond. I suck on her clit and move my finger in out of her with a slow and steady rhythm. I feel her walls tighten and she quivers, and I know her orgasm is eminent.

I remove my finger and position my cock at her entrance. I wrap my arm around her waist and slam inside of her. She screams loudly and her walls squeeze my cock like a vice sucking me in further.

"Please don't I am sore." She cries out.

"Good. I like you sore, that way you will be reminded all day long where I and only I have been." I hiss near her ears. I grab the hair by the nape of her neck and slam her down on my throbbing cock again. I can't get close enough to her or deep enough in her. Her soft silky walls feel like pure bliss. I set a steady slow rhythm pumping my cock in and out of her sweet cunt over and over again. Her legs stiffen and her pussy walls contort around my cock. She lets out an ear-piercing scream.

Oh yes! My girl just came all over my cock and I roar in pleasure. It takes all my self-control not to cum immediately too, like some out of control 15 year old. Lord has it ever felt this good? This is what heaven must feel like, warm, wet, and tight as hell. I move my cock out of her a little before slamming it back in making her scream again. It is enticing. I pause again for a moment just to enjoy this pure bliss before moving in and out of her at a steady rhythm. The sound of our skin slapping together fills the room and it is the most erotic thing I have ever heard. I grunt loudly when I pick up the pace, moving faster in and out of her. The heady smell of her arousal and the sight of my cock moving in and out of her tight cunt spurring me on.

"You like that don't you Anastasia? My big thick cock inside of your sweet tight little cunt." I grunt out in her ear, again she stays quiet and it is irritating. She is too proud to admit that she loves what I do to her. My breathing is laboured and I know I am close. I swirl my hips in a circle to increase the pressure on my cock and I feel the familiar tingling sensation taking root in my spine spreading like wildfire throughout the rest of my body. My right hand moves to her breast and I squeeze her nipple. She rewards me with another soft moan.

"You are mine, Anastasia. Only mine." I grunt out harshly while continuing my punishing rhythm.

My left hand moves towards her clit and I gently stroke her there. She shudders and her walls begin ripple against my cock. I take her clit between my thumb and index finger and softly pinch her. Her entire body stiffens. I place a dozens of kisses on her back and neck, and she comes undone, pulling me with her in our euphoric bliss. I slam into her one more time, spilling everything I have inside of her and crash down on her back, her warm soft skin pressed against mine. For a brief moment I really think I died and gone to heaven, but it doesn't take long for the illusion to shatter. Heaven is no place for men like me. God has cast me out long time ago and will never let me enter again. The closet I can to come to it is by dragging this angel down to my own personal hell, hoping that she will give me some form of absolution.

"You are smothering me." Her soft sweet voice says, pulling me out of my brief reverie. I roll off her back without breaking my precious connection with her and pull her against my chest.

"Better like this?" I ask and kiss her neck.
"I still need to pee Master." She murmurs out sounding slightly despondent and I sigh. I wonder when she will finally realize how good we are together.

I pull out my now softening cock and let her go to the bathroom. I turn on my back and look at the clock. Catherina will be here to dress Ana in 10 minutes. Slightly annoyed that I cannot stay naked in bed with Anastasia, I put on my clothes. I open one of the closet drawers and pull out a black sexy lace pair of undergarments, and lay them down on the bed. I move back to the closet and pull out a pale pink knee-length dress with a large black belt and black open Louboutin shoes, and lay it all out on the bed.

She comes back in the room and looks at the clothing on the bed.

"Catherina the maid will help you dress. Put on the bra and panties now. I don't want anyone seeing what is mine."

"I do not need anyone to dress me. I can dress myself and I have my own clothes." She snaps sounding offended by the suggestion. Lord, she really has a lot to learn. I raise my eyebrow at her in warning but she does not back off.

"You will dress the way I tell you by who I tell you. I think you and I should go over the contract again. It seems like you do not understand the nature of our arrangement. Now. Put on those panties and wait until Catherina gets here or I will spank you so hard you won't be able to sit for the rest of the day."

She scoffs loudly and rolls her eyes upward. The gesture is entirely unexpected and incredibly disrespectful and it boils my blood. I jump up from the bed and grab her arm pulling her against the bed.

"I have had enough of you disrespecting me. I think you need a little remainder who is the boss." I sit back down on the bed and pull her over my lap, pinning her on me with my forearm.

"NO! Let go of me. Fuck you and your contract!" she seethes and I see red. I hate people who go back on their word. I lift up the hem of her robe exposing her beautiful ass to me and I slam down my hand on her exposed skin. She yelps in pain and I do it again.

"I will spank you six more times and you will count. Failure to do so will earn you another six smacks. After breakfast, you will study the contract in detail and explain to me what I expect from you. Do you understand?" I hiss.

Tears are staining her now blotched cheeks and I feel conflicted. The sadist in me roars while the other human part desperately wants to take all the pain and sorrow away from her. But the sadist is stronger and I shut my feelings down.

"Answer me!" I roar making her cringe.

"Yes." She squeals out and I smack her hard again.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Master." She spits out angrily.

"Good. Now count." I say and smack her again.

"One." She yelps and I smack her again on the other cheek turning her lush flesh a delicious pink. My cock swells in my pants and my breathing is ragged. Pity I have no time to fuck her again.
"Two." She says hoarsely and another two smacks follow in quick succession

"Three, four." She sounds breathless and pained. I smack her two more times ending the punishment. "Five, six." She says softly her voice sounding broken and defeated. Good, I hope she learned her lesson now.

I lift her up and put her back on the bed on her stomach. I walk to the bathroom, take out a bottle of arnica cream, an Advil and a glass of water, and walk back towards her. I gently rub the cream on her pink skin. It feels hot to the touch. She is lying still on the bed not making a single sound, but I am not worried. Once the endorphins kick in and the shock waves, she will be fine. It was the same with me when Elena first spanked me.

"Sit up straight." I command her and she complies without hesitation.

"Good girl. I knew you had it in you." I praise her but she doesn't respond. Instead, she stares blankly at the wall. I sigh and wonder when she will come down from subspace.

"Drink this." I mutter and hand her the glass and the Advil. She puts the pill in her mouth and drinks the water. Her movements are slow and robotic. She spills some water and it drips down her chin. I take a cloth and clean her up, gently wiping the water and her tears away. Finally, she is showing some emotions again and I know she has left subspace. I take up the panties and slide them on her before clipping on her bra. I love taking care of her, it resonates with me on some deep level that I do not understand.

There is a knock on the door disturbing our intimate moment.

"Enter." I bark.

"Buongiorno Signor Grey." Catherina enters our bedroom cheerfully. She is a petit brunette with curly hair and a pretty round face.

"Buongiorno Catherina. You can find Miss Steele's clothes on the bed. I want her to wear her hair down and only use a little makeup. She is a natural beauty. Send her downstairs a little before eight. We will have breakfast at eight sharp." I sternly instruct her.

"Si Signor Grey." She replies kindly.

"Good. I will leave you to it then." I say and leave the room.

I have some phone calls to make and walk towards my office that is located downstairs adjoining the library. I press against the large oak door and enter my temporary seat of power. The walls and ceiling of my office are completely mahogany wood paneled, and various work of classical art adorn the walls. In the corner stands a large antique globe, and two ceiling-high bookcases stand on both sides of my large polished wood 17th-century desk. I sit down in my black leather chair and pick up my phone.

The first call is to Wheeler, my banker. The fucker picks up on the fourth ring.

"Good evening Mr. Grey." He says a little breathless through the phone. Right, it is round 22:00 in Seattle now.

"Wheeler. Have you done what I asked?" I ask brusquely.

"Yes, sir. The money used to pay both of Mr. Steele's mortgages has been deposit back into GEH creditor account. Both mortgages have been paid using one of your personal accounts like you
"Good. Thank you, Wheeler." I say and hang up and dial the next number on my list. Dr. Sanjay Chopra is one of the top cancer specialists in the country. He works at Boston Mercy and will be treating Raymond Steele.

"Dr. Chopra." I greet him when he answers the phone.

"Good afternoon Mr. Grey. I was planning to call you today but you beat me to it. Mr. Steele has arrived this morning and is doing fine. I have scheduled his operation to remove the remainder of his tumor this upcoming Monday. I was informed that his ex-wife will be in town then for moral support."

"That is correct. One of my private jets will drop her off tomorrow. How are Mr. Steele's prospects?" I ask feeling genuinely concerned.

"We are optimistic that with chemo and the removal of his tumor Mr. Steele would make a full recovery." Dr. Chopra replies thoughtfully.

"Good. Keep me apprised of his situation. Please use all means available to save the man's life. If you need anything call me directly."

"Thank you, Mr. Grey. We shall do everything to help Mr. Steele get better."

"Have a good day Dr. Chopra." I say and hang up.

I check my email there are two very important ones from Barney and Welch.

From: Barney Kasich

Subject: Cleanup

Date: December 5, 2015, 8:16

To: Christian Grey

Mr. Grey,

As requested, any and all evidence regarding Miss Steele's unauthorized transactions have been erased from the system and can never be brought back. Once I have it confirmed that you read this email. I will permanently delete it from the server.

In addition, I have looked into email traffic of Olympia boating per your request and have found some irregularities. I would like to have your permission to investigate this further.

Kind regards,

Barney

Irregularities in the email traffic of Olympia boating? What the hell does that mean? It was not what I expected. I quickly fire off an email to Barney telling him to go all out before reading Welch's email.

From: Fred Welch
Subject: Andy Addams

Date: December 5, 2015, 9:03

To: Christian Grey

Mr. Grey,

My man in Savannah has been in contact with Andy Addams and has successfully convinced him to accept his father's wishes and leave his stepmother alone. Mr. Addams has dropped all legal procedures against Mrs. Addams effective immediately and has sworn not to bother her again.

Regards,

Welch.

So, it is done. I kept my end of the bargain, now let's hope Miss Steele keeps hers. I was never going to have her sent to jail. The thought of her in an ugly orange jumpsuit being manhandled by guards and other prisoners chills me to the bone. She is mine and no one touches what's mine. I merely needed the leverage to get her to sign the contract. I am not really sure what I would have done if she still had refused. I most likely would have locked her up in our new playroom in our house at the sound or something.

I look at the clock it is nearly 8 and time for breakfast. I leave my office and sit down in the dining room. Anastasia isn't here yet and it annoys me. Eight is eight. I loathe tardiness. I am about to get up to drag her from the bedroom when she finally comes in dressed the clothes I have chosen for her.

"You are late." I snap irritated.

"I am sorry." She mutters and stares down on the ground.

I pull out the chair next to my own.

"Sit." I command and she walks to the seat. Good, the punishment was effective.

"Catherina. We are ready for breakfast." I say dismissively and she scurries of too fetch breakfast, leaving me once again alone with Anastasia.

"You look beautiful. That color really suits you." I tell her earnestly.

She doesn't respond but continues to stare at the plate in front of her. Her reaction is once again annoying and disrespectful. I grab her cheeks and tilt her head towards me, staring into her beautiful eyes. The defiant fire seems to have died down somewhat and I feel conflicted.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that it is polite to thank someone when they pay you a compliment?"

"I am sorry Master. Thank you." She says despondently. Giani comes in with our breakfast, an omelet with bacon, toast, and fruit for me and pancakes with bacon and fruit for Ana. I know she loves pancakes it is something I have learned from the cameras in her house.

"Eat and swallow these." I tell her and put down two vitamin pills in front of her.

She eyes them speculatively and makes no move to take them. I sigh and put mine in my mouth swallowing them away with a glass of orange juice.
"They are vitamins pills to keep you healthy." I explain with a sigh.

She eyes them skeptically and takes a bite of her pancakes instead.

"Take your pills Anastasia. Now!" The warning is clear in my voice. Why does she have to fight me every step of the way? Is it so unclear what I expect from her?

For a moment it looks like she is going to ignore my order again and I am already thinking of some appropriate punishment. But she surprises me once more and takes the pills.

"Open your mouth and let me see." I order and she dutifully complies.

"Good girl." I praise her. We continue our breakfast in silence for a while.

"The contract. It will last six months?" she suddenly asks. I put down my napkin and stare at her.

"I know this is new to you Anastasia but you will address me as Master at all times. Is that understood?"

"Yes…" I arch my eyebrow at her. "Master." She quickly amends.

"Yes, Anastasia I thought I made that clear to you." I take a sip of my coffee and continue to eat.

"And I am expected to live with you during that time?" She asks.

"Yes." I reply gruffly. Didn't she pay any attention at all?

"I am sorry Master but I can't. I promised to take care of my friend's cat and house. I won't be able to do that when I am with you." She says as if she has found the Holy Grail.

"Do not worry. I have already arranged for the cat and your friend's house. I told you that I would be taking care of all your needs. Which reminds me, your father has been flown to Boston last evening. Dr Sanjay Chopra, the best cancer specialist in the country, will be treating him. His operation is scheduled tomorrow and your mother will be there for him when he wakes up so he won't be alone. She will be arriving in Boston in a few hours. If you are a good girl for the rest of the day, I will allow you to call him. See it as part of the incentive package."

She gapes at me open-mouthed.

"With all due respect Master, how dare you? You have no right to interfere..." she begins her voice laced with anger and indignation.

"Enough! Part of our arrangement is that I will be taking care of all your needs. This includes the needs of your family. Because frankly, you have proven to be unable to take care of yourself. You are in no position to provide your father with the medical care he needs so I took that burden off you. Incidentally, I also took care of your mother's legal troubles just as I promised. It is time for you to show some gratitude. You are acting like a whiny spoiled little brat and I have had enough of it. Do it again and you will feel the consequences. Do I make myself clear?" She looks dejected and it is slightly painful to watch. I really do not understand her. Why isn't she happy that I am helping her?

"Perfectly." She replies softly.

"Good. Now for today's schedule. Catherina will give you a tour of the grounds." Her eyes light up and I see the wheels turn in her head. She is planning something and I need to nip it in the bud.
"Don't bother to try and escape, security is everywhere. Bottom line, you will only make it harder for yourself. Lunch is at 12:30, be on time. At 19:30 we will be having a private dinner in Rome with Cardinal Bianchi, President of the Pontifical Commission of Vatican City, the Italian Minister of Economic Development Pedro Romano, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Giuseppe Mancini, and the EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Magnus Bergstrom and their partners. You will be conducting yourself in a modest manner and wear the evening dress I have selected for you. The rules are simple. Please me, and you will be rewarded. Displease me, and you will be punished. Is that clear?" I ask.

"Crystal." She says with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. I let it slide for now.

"Good. Eat your final pancake and you can go with Catherina. I will see you at lunch. I have some work to do." In one swift move, I get up from the table and walk to my office, mentally preparing for the day to come.

At 18:15, I am happy with the amount of work I did. Vacation my ass. The Vatican called and wanted to go through the schedule of the conference with me today. I also approved a new joint venture with a mobile software company, and ordered a present for Mia's birthday. I haven't seen Anastasia since lunch and I crave her presence. She must be getting dressed right now. I get up from my chair and walk upstairs to our bedroom but she isn't there yet. I am annoyed but decide to dress into my own dinner attire since the dress code is formal, white tie. I comb my wayward hair to the best of my ability before taking out a long silver coloured Versace dress with matching silver open heels for Ana. I rummage again through the bedside drawer and take out a ruby red Cartier box containing a beautiful pair of teardrop shaped diamond earrings. They will look splendid on Anastasia. I sit down and patiently wait for her to get upstairs and change.

The large wooden door opens and Anastasia comes into the room followed by Catherina.

"Good evening Signor Grey." Catherina greets me politely.

"Good evening ladies. Catherina, you can go. I will take over from here." I dismiss her.

"Si Signor." She says and hastily makes her exit.

"How was your tour of the grounds?" I ask genuinely interested in her answer.

"It was fine. It is pretty big and empty for a hotel." She replies softly though it feels like she is mocking me.

"That's because it isn't a hotel. This house is my private property I bought it last year. I hate staying in hotels while traveling." I explain and she shrugs her shoulders disinterested.

"Come here." I command her and she slowly shuffles towards me. I hand her the velvet Cartier box and she looks at me quizzically.

"Go on, open it." I encourage her. She takes the lid off and stares speechlessly at the earrings. I hope she likes them.

"I want you to wear them tonight with the dress. Do you like them? They are simple, elegant and beautiful, like you. A perfect present for the perfect girl." My voice soft and I mean every word of it.

"Yes, they are beautiful." Her voice is robotic and distant again. Her reaction is disappointing and I feel a little hurt.
"Well, I will leave you to dress then. I will send Catherina up again to do your hair and makeup. We will leave in 35 minutes."

"Yes, Master." She replies with the same tone of voice. It is frustrating she still does not seem to understand what it is I want from her.

I stare in complete wonder at the goddess that is walking down the stairs. The silver dress fits her like a glove, accentuating every curve of her divine body. The diamonds teardrops glitter in her eyes and her lips are painted a subtle red. She is like a siren and I cannot resist her call.

"You look stunning Anastasia. You make me proud." I mutter, take her hand and guide her towards the black Maybach that is already waiting for us. I strap her in her seatbelt before sitting down next to her.

The drive to Rome is only 20 minutes, but it feels longer. Maybe because Anastasia is distant and barely responding to me. We need to correct this and we need to do it now. I will make it clear to her once and for all that I own her body, mind, and soul.

"Take off your panties." I say in a voice that brokers no argument. She looks at me in absolute shock and horror but does not dare to protest. Slowly she does what she is told and hands me her panties. I put them in front of my nose and breathe in her intoxicating scent shocking her further.

"I think we are going to have some fun tonight." I say smirking at her.

"If you say so Master." She replies softly.

Taylor stops at a large palace-like building in the center of the city and opens our door. We are accompanied by Prescott and Sawyer today, who dutifully follow us inside the building, where Cardinal Bianchi our host this evening greets us cheerfully. He is a gray older man in his sixties with twinkling olive colored eyes and speaks English fluently.

"Welcome, Mr. Grey, such an honor to meet you." He says smiling broadly at me before turning his attention to Anastasia bestowing a beaming smile upon her. "And who is this lovely lady?" He asks while kissing her hand. The gesture makes me mad with jealousy, celibate or not, I don't want anyone touching her.

I pull her close to me and wrap my arm protectively around her waist.

"Cardinal I would like you to meet Anastasia Steele."

"How do you do sir?" Anastasia replies politely and I am glad she hasn't forgotten her manners.

"Well do come in the both of you. Our other guests are already seated." He leads us down a beautiful corridor to a large dining area at the back of the palace. On the way, he gives us a brief history of the place.

The chatting in the room seizes when Anastasia and I enter and all the fuckers stare at her in carnal appreciation. Jealous rage fills me again. It is a new disturbing feeling, one that I have no idea how to deal with. I pull her close to me again clearly staking my claim. A gesture that does not seem to go unnoticed.

Introductions are fast and to the point, the way I like it. Pedro Romano, the Minister of Economic Development and his wife, a blond wide haired woman, are sitting across from us. They are friendly enough, but the person I am really interested in talking to is Magnus Bergstrom, the EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management. I scoff internally, the EU did very
little to manage the refugee crisis. All they did was wipe their own plates clean and let others deal with it.

To my surprise, Bergstrom agrees with me about the EU handling the crisis. He blames the lack of leadership and the unwillingness of eastern European countries to house refugees as main culprits. "Too many chefs in the kitchen." He says sourly. The conversation at the table is lively and Anastasia does me proud. She is modest, polite, intelligent, charming and well informed. She has a natural charisma about her that just draws people in. She is truly the most fascinating person I have ever met. Nevertheless, I am annoyed. Her manners, smiles and kind gestures are solely for the benefit of the other guests. She hardly glances at my direction and it is making my blood boil. She needs a reminder to whom she belongs.

I place my hand at her knee and slowly move her dress up exposing the sweet flesh of her thigh to my hand. I slowly move upwards towards her core, but she jerks away from me, keeping her legs tightly closed. It is infuriating! She should accept my touch whenever and wherever. I squeeze her thigh hard, making sure it hurts and she winces, opening her legs a little for me.

Good. I continue my leisurely exploration of her sweet flesh while I talk to Giuseppe Mancini, a slender amusing man with a wife that looks like a manticore. I feel Anastasia shiver when my fingers reach their goal and I am pleased. She has a hard time concentrating on her conversation with the dear old Cardinal and I'm immensely happy.

I slide one finger inside of her while pressing my thumb to her clit, and slowly swirl it around and round. She closes her eyes and I hear her sharp intake of breath. Her arousal is coating my fingers. Suddenly she closes her legs again and mumbles some apology about needing to use the restroom.

Everyone man stands up, and I like the good gentleman I am, I insist that I escort her. 

"Don't you ever walk away or close your legs for me again." I hiss when we are in the hallway again.

"It was inappropriate Master." She counters I stand still grab her upper arm and push her against the wall slamming my mouth on hers pouring frustration in the kiss.

"I decide what is appropriate or not Anastasia. I am getting tired of repeating myself. You are mine, you understand?" I snarl still breathless from the kiss.

"I am sorry Master, I thought I had to behave modestly and was not to embarrass you. I am sure I would have done just that had you continued your ministrations." She counters pointedly. Her smart mouth is both enticing and infuriating.

"Well, I guess I should give you a lesson in control then. To prevent a similar situation to arise. You have displeased me Anastasia, and once we are back home, you will bear the brunt of your actions." My voice is menacingly soft and her eyes widen a fraction but the defiance is still there clear as day. Right then, I realize it never left nor diminished. And for the first time, I wonder if I can truly break her or if it's me that will end up broken. The thought is unsettling and I vow that to double my efforts to never let that happen again.
Plight

Anastasia

Sometimes you only learn the true meaning behind words if you have lived through them. It is a cold fact of life that I only recently came to understand. It is surprising to realize how much we crave a sense of normality and routine, no matter how fucked up that new normality is. What is normal anyway? I suppose it is completely dependent on your point of view, and right now my point of view has been lifted and tilted on its axes. It has been four days since I first set foot in this luxury prison but it feels like an eternity ago. It is the routine I reckon; it makes time go faster.

And you know what is really fucked up about this entire situation? I can deal with the spanking. The bruises heal and the pain is fleeting. But it is his elaborate aftercare and genuine concern for my wellbeing after the act that is messing with my mind. It is the same with the sex. I could have dealt with it all if he was just getting his rocks off and left me alone. I would have found refuge in the far corner of my mind that is my safe haven. But he never lets me. My body has become nothing but a mere slave to his. Every time he makes me come and wields my body to his will my mind slowly breaks a little. I console myself that this will all be over in six short months and I will be once again master of my own fate instead of a slave to his. I cannot help but wonder what will be left of me by then. Intuitively I know the answer to that question and it is frightening but crystal clear. I cannot remain here with him. Not if I want to hold on to my sanity, dignity, and identity. But where will I go? And will he let me?

I stare out the window. Dawn is rising in the east, chasing away the darkness of the night. But the warm healing rays of the sun can't chase away the darkness he left inside of me four days ago. I have hardly been able to sleep ever since. Every morning I wake up at five hoping that it was all a bad dream. But then I feel him wrapped around me like vines around a tree and I know that it is all real. I sigh and pick up the book that is laying hapless on the arm of my large plush chair. Normally books give me a sense comfort. They provide a refuge if you will to another reality. But here in this vast and stunning private library, that sense of comfort is nowhere to be found even though I am surrounded by one of the biggest collections of books I have ever seen.

A soft knock on the library door pulls me out of my solitary reverie.

'Miss Ana, it is time for you to dress. Breakfast will be served soon.' Catherina's soft spoken voice sounds clearly through the room. She has been my shadow since I got here, following me everywhere. She is friendly enough but I know she is just her to check up on me.

I sigh and put the book back in the bookstand and dutifully follow her upstairs.

'I can dress myself, Catherina. Mr. Grey has already put out my clothes.' I try to say politely but I fail. This whole business with dressing is utterly ridiculous I am not some helpless maiden stuck in the 17th century.

'Mr. Grey said that I should help you.' She interjects.

'I have been dressing myself since I was four. I'll think I'll manage.' I snap irritated. She looks shocked for a moment and is about to protest again. 'I will call you when I am ready for my hair and makeup.' I quickly say to soften the blow. She closes her mouth again and nods at me.

'Ok, Miss Ana. I will be waiting for you outside.' She acquiesces.
I quickly enter the bedroom. The bed has already been made and that asshole is nowhere to be found. I am glad for it. Like every day since I got here my clothes, panties and shoes are already laid out for me. Apparently, it matters a lot to him what I wear.

I quickly dress myself. Studying the black and white shift dress before pulling it over my head. I must admit the dress is beautiful. I put on the matching white heels and call Catherina back in.

I sit down in front of the makeup table and she gets to work.

She smiles at me.

'Done. You look lovely, Miss Ana. You must go downstairs now since Mr. Grey hates it when you are late for breakfast.’ She says slightly apologetically.

'No, we shouldn't. Lord forbids he has to wait for more than a minute.' I mutter sarcastically.

I enter the dining room and he is already waiting at the table. He eyes me critically and dismisses Catherina.

'This dress really suits you. Mrs. Acton, my personal shopper has done me proud. You look lovely, Anastasia.' He says and pulls out a chair for me.

'Thank you.' I remembering his reprimand when I failed to thank him two days ago. I am in no mood to repeat that painful episode.

The butler serves our breakfast and quickly scurries off. We eat in silence for a while. Slowly the anxiety creeps back and I find it hard to eat. I need to know if he is keeping me prisoner or not. Thus far I haven't been able to go where I want without someone following me. I guess I need to know if there is a way out of this all.

'Master can I ask you something.' I begin tentatively. He lifts his brow and nods.

'What is that you want to know, Anastasia?'

Ok, well there is no way around this best be to the point.

'Am I a prisoner here?' My voice is soft and I am shaking a little fearing his reaction.

He looks at me like I have grown two heads. He puts down his cutlery and wipes his mouth with a napkin.

'What do you mean a prisoner? Are you asking me if you can go wherever you want? Well then the answer is no, not without security.' He replies pointedly.

'So I am a prisoner.' I mutter softly.

'No Anastasia you're not.' He snaps. 'You choose to be here. You signed the contract. I don't know why it is so hard for you to understand this. If you feel like you are unable to fulfill this contract let me know and I will have Taylor extradite you back home. Where you will face several criminal charges. One way or another you will be paying me back. It is really not hard to understand. And I am frankly tired of this discussion so for one last time. Do you agree that stealing and committing fraud is wrong and criminal?' he snaps irritated.

I feel sick. I know where he is going with this I am so angry with myself for putting myself in this position.
'Well?' He barks impatiently.

'Yes.' I finally murmur.

'Yes, what?' He sneers.

'Yes, master.' I quickly amend.

'And do you agree. That a person who commits a crime should be punished?'

'Yes.' My voice is hoarse and my mouth is dry.

'It was you that signed the contract and chose for the alternative punishment I afford you. Stop acting like an innocent blameless victim because you are far from one. And this is the last thing I will ever say about this subject.' He says with finality.

I feel the anger rise again. Choice my ass!

'You didn't give me a choice! You threatened me. You told me that even when I choose jail you would still come after me! You raped and assaulted me before I even signed your damn contract!' I am shaking with righteous indignation. He is spinning and manipulating everything so he can act like I choose all this.

'First off your tone. DON'T. YOU. DARE. EVER. SPEAKING to me like THAT again. Do you understand?' He bellows his face is taut, red and angry and a vein is throbbing on his forehead. He is scary, really scary and I cower a little.

'Yes, master.' I reply quickly not wanting to set him of further fearing what he might do when really pushed. This man is unstable.

'I didn't threaten you. I merely pointed out the consequences of each choice you were presented with. I punished you before the contract that is true. I will never deny that but you brought that on yourself. If you hadn't kicked me we could have discussed it all in a civil manner. And since you signed the contract anyway this entire point is moot. Consider it giving permission retroactively.' He says dismissively and I know I will get no further with him.

I decide to drop the subject as it is pointless discussing it further with him. He will only turn it around so that I am solely to blame. I realize more than ever that I need to get myself out of this situation. I just have no idea how.

We continue to eat, the silence in the room has become oppressive. He scrapes his throat and looks at me.

'Tomorrow is the conference in Rome. I expect you the assist me in all things. And today at eleven we will be flying to the isle of Lampedusa where the refugee reception center is located. Cardinal Bianchi will accompany us. I expect you to honor the terms of our agreement without question. Give me your word. If you show me you can be trusted I will let go of security a little. Consider it an olive branch.' He states calmly.

This might be my chance. I could run and hide until I find a way to pay him back. Right? This has to work.

'I gave you my word.' I hastily reply.

He stares at me his eyes narrowed and discerning.
'Don't disappoint me, Anastasia.' He says sternly and gets up from the table in a gracious move.

'I won't master.' I mumble in reply to placate him.

'Good. Finish your breakfast and you can go with Catherina again. Just make sure you are ready to leave at 11 sharp. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Master.' I dutifully reply hating myself for being his docile little puppy.

I finish my breakfast and get up from my chair. Catherina is already waiting for me at the door leading up to the hallway.

'What would you like to do miss Ana?'

I shrug. I was thinking of going back to the library and spend my time with a book. She showed me most of the house and the grounds yesterday. It really is an impressive estate. It has its own olive and vineyards that stretch for miles but somehow their natural beauty seems lost on me right now.

'I think I will visit the library again.' I make my way towards the library but stop mid stride. The delicious smells of fresh baked bread and roasted meat fill my nostrils. And it occurs to me that Catherina never showed me the kitchen.

'Catherina, can you show me where the kitchen is? You never showed it to during our tour of the house.'

She smiles at me a little sheepishly.

'The kitchen is Norma's domain. She doesn't like anyone in there.'

'I love cooking and I would really like to see the kitchen and meet Norma. Maybe she has some tips for me.'

She looks a little indecisive for a moment and I pounce on her again.

'Mr. Grey told me I could see the entire house. The kitchen is part of the house. I promise I won't touch anything. I'd just like to see it.'

She sighs.

'Ok, I guess it is alright.'

The kitchen is conveniently located near the dining room only a level lower. I nearly faint when I see the kitchen. It is a huge country styled kitchen with an u shaped counter, two large stoves and an isle in the middle. A stocky, middle-aged woman is chopping and slicing at the counter.

Catherina speaks to her in rapid Italian and I cannot understand what they are saying. Norma moves her attention from Catherina to me and eyes me up and down assessing me.

'Buongiorno signorina.' She says not unkindly and continues slicing the vegetables.

'Buongiorno.' I reply back curious at what she is making. Norma does not speak a word of English so Catherina has to talk to us. Turns out that Norma is making Osso Bucco and fresh pasta for tonight's dinner and I am completely intrigued. I always wanted to learn how to make fresh pasta but my attempts at it thus far have failed.

I ask Norma if she could teach me how to make homemade pasta but Catherina is hesitant to
translate. She wrings her hands in a nervous manner and avoids looking at me.

'Mr. Grey does not want you to do any work. He is worried your clothes might get dirty.' She says softly.

I feel the heat rise in my face. No, I won't let him take one of the only forms of entertainment I have in this place. He has taken too much from me already.

'Mr. Grey isn't here and I can wear a shirt to prevent my clothes from getting dirty. I want to learn how to make pasta. Ask her please, Catherina.'

Catherina nods and begrudgingly asks Norma. The elder woman immediately nods and points to the spot next to her.

'I think she likes you.' Catherina says, sounding a little relieved.

Norma works fast and effective but somehow she is a great teacher. In no time I have learned how to make pasta dough and how to roll it out without tearing it. For a brief moment, I don't have to think about the shitty situation I am in.

'Miss Ana we need to leave. It is almost eleven.'

I sigh and put down the kitchen cutlery. I don't want to go. Slowly I follow Catherina out of the kitchen back to the hallway.

'Where have you been?' 'Master' barks.

'I, I was in the kitchen.' I stammer, not understanding what set him off this time.

He eyes me critically and holds out his hand for me to take it.

'I want you to have this.' He hands me a blue jewelry box. Great another expensive trinket. I feel cheap and dirty every time he gives me something.

'Open it.' He commands brusquely.

I open the box and stare at the beautiful delicate platinum watch that is laying inside.

'I want you to wear this every day so you can be on time. I hate it when people are late.'

'Thank you, Master. It is a very thoughtful present.' I try my best to keep the sarcasm out of my voice but I don't think I succeeded. Thankfully he doesn't seem to have heard it or maybe he does not care right now.

'Here. Let me put it on.' He takes out the watch and puts it on my left wrists.

'There you go. Only the finest platinum and diamonds are good enough to grace your lovely skin, Anastasia.' He says solemnly and kisses my hand.

'Now we need to go or we will be late.'

The same black car as yesterday is waiting to bring us to the airport again. The flight to Lampedusa, an isle in the Mediterranean near the boot of the Italian mainland, takes almost three hours. 'Master' explains to me that Cardinal Bianchi is already there and will pick us up from the airport. The large GEH jet is only carrying myself, Master and some of his ever-present security guys. It is pretty wasteful especially for a guy who is claiming to fight pollution and climate
I stare out the window and watch the clouds glide by. I remember when I was a child I always wondered if you could sit on them and float away with the wind. The plane shakes a little and I feel queasy. I clutch the arms of my seat and close my eyes hoping that it will be over soon.

'Turbulence. Just relax it will be over soon.' 'Master' says soothingly. He is right. Moments later everything returns to normal and the plane glides effortlessly through the sky.

'Anastasia, when we are in the company of the good cardinal you will address me as Christian. Is that understood?'

What? Why? I want to ask but I know not to. I feel uncomfortable calling him by his given name. It makes it all so intimate and personal and I desperately need to keep my distance from him. I need to devise a way to separate or compartmentalize the things that he does to me or I will go mad.

'Yes, Master.'

He nods at me and continues reading whatever it is he is reading while I continue to stare out the window. The seatbelt lights go on notifying us that we will land soon. He gets up from his chairs and buckles me in tightly. The smell of his cologne and body wash invading my nostrils and I hate myself for enjoying the way he smells.

With a loud thud, the plane lands on the Lampedusa airstrip. Three large SUV's are waiting for us on the tarmac. Cardinal Bianchi is standing next to one of them and greets us smiling.

'Mr. Grey, Miss Steele how lovely to see you both again.'

'Cardinal.' 'Master' says and shakes his hand.

'We will first visit the Saint Mary Magdalene asylum. It is a refuge for women who have fallen to human trafficking and exploitation. After that, we continue our journey to the refuge center. The church is actively involved in both. We have a moral duty to help those in need.' The cardinal looks solemn and pained as he speaks.

'Master' helps me into the car and soon we drive off to our destination. The streets are narrow and everywhere I look I see both commercial and residential buildings built in a typical colorful Mediterranean fashion. It is not what I expected. I always thought that not many were living on this isle.

The cars continue to the light traffic and I am surprised to see several provocatively dressed women sitting on plastic chairs in the burning sun at the side of the road.

'They are prostitutes.' The cardinal answers my unspoken question.

'Most of them are lured here mainly from Nigeria. They are promised good jobs and housing. But once they make the dangerous crossing from the Mediterranean sea they are forced to work in prostitution to pay back the human traffickers. Some of the women have to pay back more than $50,000 us dollars to the traffickers.'

'How horrible.' I whisper.

'Volunteers of Saint Mary try to help these women as best as they can.' He explains further. The car stops in front of an impressive sandstone building.
'Welcome to Saint Mary.' The cardinal says and gives us a wry smile.

Gray marble tiles and stark white walls dominate the decor of Saint Mary's. A crucifix hangs on the wall above the door leading into the main room. A woman in a long blue skirt and white blouse greets us warmly when we enter.

She introduces herself as sister Mary Frances head of the saint Mary of Magdalene asylum. She explains to us that the asylum is a safe haven for women that want to get out of the prostitution.

'Many people look down on these women. Judging them and humiliating them. But our god lord said; Who is without sin cast the first stone. Our heavenly father expects no less from us than to help these poor souls without prejudice or reservation. After all, one of his most devout disciples was Mary Magdalene who was once a prostitute herself. Everyone can be redeemed in the eyes of our good lord. Sometimes all people need is a little nudge to steer them to the right path.' Sister Mary Frances says with a nod.

'Master' looks skeptical, tense and uncomfortable.

'That is all very nice, sister Mary. But once these women are, as you just put it, redeemed. What happens to them? Redemption does not put food on the table at the end of the day. What does your organization really do to help these women long term?' 'Master' says sardonically

Sister Mary Frances smiles serenely at him.

'You are right Mr. Grey. Redemption alone is not enough. We educate these women, teach them a profession and help them set up business in their country of origin using micro credits. You see, Mr. Grey, the good book also says; The lord helps those who help themselves. It is a two-way street.' She answers gracefully and the bastard is stumped for a moment.

'Has there been any research done to establish how successful these women are with their businesses once they are back in their own country?' 'Master' says clearly not willing to concede yet.

'Yes, there has been.' The cardinal jumps in. 'About 95% of the women that leave saint Mary are successful in creating a new life for themselves with a reasonable income. Our biggest problem is that we do not have enough beds or funds to accommodate the large streams of women that need our help.'

'I see.' He mutters 'I think my company can help with that.' They start their discussion and I zone out drawn in by a little boy sitting stock still in the large flowery garden of the asylum. The boy looks so sad and lonely. I recognize the pain etched on his face. It is the same pain I see when I look in the mirror.

I move towards him and sit down in front of him but he barely registers my presence. He is lost in his own world.

He has a small blue car in his hand that he is driving up and down his leg.

'Hi, I am Ana. What is your name?' I say pointing at myself. He looks at me briefly for a moment his beautiful dark brown eyes look hollow and empty. The look in them is familiar for some reason but I cannot place it. The car slips out of his hand and falls on the ground with a loud metallic thud. I bent down to grab it to give it back to him not realizing he is doing the same thing. Our arms touch and he flinch away from me, huddling into a corner. He is hyperventilating in the verge of a panic attack I have no idea what to do.
Sister Mary Frances comes running towards us with 'Master' and the cardinal in tow.

'I just wanted to give him back his car.' I mumble apologetically. Sister Mary Frances gives me a sympathetic smile before she hurriedly moves to the little boy. 'Master' takes the car from me and walks over to where Mary Frances and the little boy are. Mary Frances is trying to calm him but it doesn't seem to work.

'Master' sits down on his knees softly talks to the boy. I cannot hear what he is saying but it seems to be working. He hands him the car and lifts him up into his arms holding him tenderly. A wave of conflicting emotions hits me. How can he be so cruel to me but so kind to the little boy? It is like he is two completely different people; a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde all rolled into one.

'I am sorry, Miss Steele. I should have told you about our little Thomas. He does not like to be touched. He has had a terrible past. His mother was killed by her pimp while he was in the other room. He must have heard everything. He will be adopted soon by a lovely young couple. I can only hope the damage that is done to him can be healed.' She says with a sigh.

'Master's' face is a mixture of pain and anger. He is cradling Thomas and softly sings to him. Absently I notice that he has a lovely singing voice. The whole thing feels surreal and confusing. This is how he draws people in, Ana, so he can manipulate them later. A small voice hisses in the back of my mind.

'Have they ever caught the bastard that killed his mother?' 'Masters' voice is strained and cold.

'Yes. He is currently serving life in prison.' Sister Mary Frances answers.

'Good. No child should ever be without his mother.' The tone of his voice is distant and strained. Like he is giving some deep confessional. For a moment he seems vulnerable and I hate it. It is much easier to hate him when he is acting like the bastard he really is.

It is almost two hours later when we finally leave saint Mary's and make our way to the refugee center. Thousands of immigrants mostly from Africa are packed together behind high fences. It is a depressing sorrowful sight that will be burned in my mind forever. The Cardinal and 'Master' also talk with the local people whose daily lives have completely turned upside down since the crisis started. Our visit here is shorter and I feel a sense of relief when we make our way back to the airport and say goodbye to the cardinal.

'Master' is quiet and contemplative when we fly back and I am glad for it. I don't have the energy to process all that has happened today. I want to go home, to mom and Ray and forget about everything that has happened over the last four days.

After dinner the delicious pasta and Osso Bucco Norma prepared, I expect another 'session' with him again. It has become routine after dinner. I breathe a sigh of relief when he tells me that he needs to work. I spend my time playing some cards with Catherina and watching TV. Before I go to bed grateful that he is still in is his office.

Soft melancholic notes of a piano echo through the large empty house stirring me from my sleep. The sound is eerie; almost inhuman. I get out of bed and walk downstairs to the sunroom where the piano is. There is a solitary light on illuminating just the piano and its player. It is such a lonely sight. The music stops and he turns around his eyes are intense and blazing under the light.

'I don't appreciate you sneaking up on me, Miss Steele.' He snaps.

'I am sorry, Master.'
'Why are you up? Did I wake you?'

'Yes, Master I was just curious where the music came from.'

He sighs and pulls the lid down on the piano.

'I am sorry I woke you. Now go back to bed we need to get up early tomorrow. Come let me take you.'

He takes my hand and leads me back upstairs and tucks me in.

'Sleep.' He orders and leaves again minutes later I can hear the faint notes of the piano echoing through the house again, and I slowly drown in the sadness of the song. The darkness he planted in me is expanding. Tomorrow when we are at the Vatican I will make a run for it. I need to save myself before his darkness takes me to the abyss and never lets me leave again. I have some euros in my wallet courtesy of mom. I hope it is enough to buy me a ticket and get out of the country. I only need my passport. It is in his safe in his office. I saw it when he took me from behind over his desk. I quickly suppress the memory before I break down again.

I get out of the bed again and sneak inside his office. Silently praying that I won't get caught. A lamp is still burning on his desk. I remove the painting that is covering the safe. Shit, what now? I need a code to get in. I try some random combinations but the safe won't open. Maybe he has written it down somewhere? I rummage through the drawers trying to make as little sound as possible.

I hear footsteps in the hallway and my stomach plummets. I have no idea what he will do to me when he finds me here but I know for sure it won't be good. I quickly put back the painting and crawl under his desk.

The door opens and I hear footsteps enter the room. My heart is pounding in my chest, my lips are dry and I feel the blood rushing in my ears. The footsteps are closer and I close my eyes praying that they go away.

I don't know how much time passes I am too scared to move or even breathe. Finally, the sound of footsteps fill the room again and the door of the office closes. I am still too scared to move. What if they come back? My legs begin to hurt from being crawled up on the cold hard marble floor and my feet are freezing. I crawl out under the desk and knock my head. The pain is instant and skull splitting. Tears spring to my eyes and I let out a yelp. A long stick that was leaning against the desk falls on the ground. I stand frozen praying that nobody is coming back in here again.

Time passes and I hear nothing. I breathe a sigh of relief. I grab the square stick and examine it closely, idly wondering what it's for. There are numbers carved in the side of it and it dawns on me it's the code to the safe.

I can hardly suppress the sense of elation and relief I feel. What idiot carves his safe code out for all to see? I quickly open the safe and it is stacked with hundred euro bills and all of our passports. I take mine out but refuse to take any of his money. That is what landed me in this trouble the first time.

I quickly close it up and hang the painting back. Moving as quietly as I can back to the still empty bedroom. Hope blooms in my chest. Soon I will be free of him. But what about your parents? What if he goes after them? You still owe him money, Ana. The small voice is nagging in the back of my mind. For now, I ignore her. I will cross that bridge when I come to it.
The conference hall is buzzing with excitement. Clergy, policy makers, politicians, and humanitarians are all anxiously waiting for the conference to start. 'Master' will give the opening speech after his meeting with the pope is over.

Members of his security staff are constantly watching me so it is hard to disappear in the crowd and make a run for it. I couldn't even go to the restroom alone. Prescott the only female in his team escorted me like I was a small child.

I am seated at the front of the stage with some other important people. A lady who appears to be in her early 40s strikes up a conversation with me. She is a human rights lawyer working for amnesty international.

'Oh, so you are Mr. Grey's assistant! Can I just say how much I admire your boss? He is not only handsome but such a good caring man. He donated more to foreign aid than some countries?'

I want to yell and scream at her. Tell her what a sociopath he really is but I refrain. I smile at her and tell her I didn't know. Idly hoping that my short answer is enough to shut her up.

She rambles on about what a saint he is asking me if I can introduce him to her. I politely tell her that I see what I can do.

The buzzing in the hall dials down and I see Taylor in the corner of my eye. He is Mr. Greys shadow so I know that he is here.

A plump man with a shiny bald head climbs on stage.

'Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Vatican's first ever conference on social, economic and environmental issues. It is our duty as decent human beings to take care of those that are less fortunate. Our honored guest speaker is an extremely successful entrepreneur, Carnegie medallist, humanitarian and environmentalist deeply committed to rid the world of hunger and poverty. Please give a warm round of applause for Mr. Christian Grey.' Baldy finishes his speech and the entire conference hall bursts out in cheers and applause. But I remain silent.

With easy grace, Christian climbs on the stage. He is copper hair is highlighted on the harsh glare of the lights. He looks stern and dignified in his charcoal suit. He takes out a piece of paper from his inner pocket and puts it on the speaker stand.

'Thank you, Father, for that very kind introduction.' He begins nodding at the bald guy. 'Yesterday I was on the isle of Lampedusa and visited a sanctuary for women that had been victims of human trafficking. I sat there with a little boy named Thomas who had lost his mother to her exploiters. He was scared and deeply traumatized and I knew exactly how he felt. I too lost my biological mother at a young age. When we look at the statistics of people that are being trafficked, forced into prostitution or forced to leave their homes in search for a better life, we see nothing but cold hard numbers. Just like Thomas' mother, my biological mother too was just another statistic. It is easy to have an opinion and make policy about various social issues simply based on calculus. Numbers are after all factual and rational and create a safe distance between you and the issue you make policy for. But after every number, there is a story of a real human being like you and me, who has suffered horrors and hardship most of us cannot imagine.

Nobody really wants to leave their home, life or friends behind to go on a dangerous journey to another country that does not really want to have them. Hunger, poverty, violence, and war create complete and total societal destruction, forcing people to abandon everything and everyone they know just to get a shot at a better life. Right now as I stand here before you more than 40 forgotten conflicts are destroying the lives of countless people around the globe while the world stays silent.
and the crisis's remain.

We need to take out the root of this problem and the endless wars and strives destabilizing these regions.

In the past decades, we have given large sums of money to developing countries with very little result. Corrupt governments pocketed the money while the little men and women in the street starve to death. A wise nun told me yesterday; 'The good lord helps those who help themselves. Give the local people small loans, education, resources and tools to set up there on businesses to stimulate the economy instead of giving money to their governments. Hunt down and punish those who have committed war crimes and incite violence. In the end, it is the common folk who create the fabric of stabile societies and our commitment should be with them.'

I hope this conference will be fruitful and bring about real change in the lives of millions of people. I humbly thank the Vatican for giving me the opportunity to speak about these subjects that are so close to my heart. Since we are in the Vatican that has been built on the ruins of the eternal city, I will leave you now with a quote from the famous Roman historian Marcus Tullius Cicero. *Non nobis solum nati sumus.* Thank you all.' He ends his speech and the crowd erupts into a deafening applause. But I hardly hear it. My mind is jumbled and hazy. His real mother died when he was as old as Thomas? His mother was a statistic? What does he mean by that? Is his mother dying the reason why he is fucked up? Or why he was so sad and distant yesterday? So many questions and no answers at all. But does it really matter how or why he is like he is? All I know is that I cannot stay with him. Not if I want to keep my own identity or sanity for that matter. The applause dies down and the crowds disperse to the various workshops, debates, and lectures that have been organized. I can't see any of the security guys and I know this is my chance to run. I quickly get up and mingle with the crowd and frantically search for the nearest exit. The crowds grows, thinner in the hallway and it becomes harder to blend in. I see security guys talking on their earpieces while their eyes search the crowd. Fear crawls in my gut and I walk faster. I don't want to think about Grey will do when he catches me again. I bolt for the door leading to the exit and I see men coming after me.

I am in full panic mode and sprint over Saint Peter square to the Via Della Conciliazione where I hope to hail a cab. My heart is pounding in my chest and fear and exhilaration curse through my veins.

I hear them call my name in the distance but I ignore them. Thankfully a cab stops in front of me and I quickly get in.

'The airport please.' I quickly say. I am out of breath and suddenly I feel bone tired. I close my eyes for a moment and the taxi begins the ride. When I open them again I can just make out the face of a furious looking Sawyer who is standing dejectedly on the sidewalk.

I made it! I am finally free! Is all I can think about right now until slowly realization sets in. What have I done?! I am a fugitive now I am sure they have already notified the authorities about my crimes. What about my parents? What will he do with them? A pit forms in my stomach and I feel sick. Maybe this wasn't a smart choice at all. Maybe I can go back and apologize to him. Tell him that it was a lapse in judgment and let him dish out any punishment he wants. I quickly dismiss the idea. NO Ana you ran to save yourself don't look back but think about a solution. Ok, I need to get his money back $435,000 dollars. How am I going to get that amount of money? I could rob a bank. Ugh, what a stupid idea Ana pay a crime with a crime… That is not going to work. Ok, I can sell the Audi it is a start right.. or the workshop and the rest well maybe I could sell my body to men… No, Ana, that is no different from what Grey asked from you. You left because you wanted to keep your dignity and identity remember?
I am pulled out of my inner struggle by the voice of the cab driver informing me that I have arrived at the airport. I quickly pay and thank him before climbing out of the car. I have no luggage because all my belongings are still at the Villa. I enter the airport hall but before I could get another step in I am blocked by the colossal body of Taylor.

'Miss Steele, come with me, please. Quietly we don't want to make a scene. That would be embarrassing for the both of us.' He says with a deceptively soft voice. And for the umpteenth time in a short while my world shatters into a million pieces again.

How the hell did he know where I was and how did he get here so fast? I feel weak in the knees and faint. This is it. No matter how this will pan out my life will be changed forever. They will either extradite me back to the US and I will be spending a minimum of 10 years in prison or he will send me back to Grey again. I am really stuck. This is my fate no matter how much I struggle I will never be able to change it. I feel tired and empty completely void of all emotions and dutifully follow Taylor outside.

'Don't think about running it will only make things harder for you.' He says when he stops in front of a large black SUV.

'Get in.' He commands.

I climb into the car and the door shuts with a bang.

'You gave me quite the workout.' Sawyer says jokingly startling me.

'Don't look so surprised I couldn't let T get you alone I was supposed to watch you. I must say you run impressively fast on those heels.'

Taylor gets in the car and drives away.

'Where are you taking me?' I ask fearfully.

'Back to the Villa. Mr. Grey has no time to watch you run amok when he is trying to save the world.' Taylor answers gruffly. Apart of me is relieved that I am not thrown in jail.. yet.

'Why are you doing this? Have you any idea what your boss is doing to me?'

Sawyer shrugs disinterested.

'Whatever is going on between you and the big boss is non off my business. As far as I am concerned Grey is a saint and that is all I am going to say about it.' He says dismissively.

'Pretty much the same for me. You signed his kinky contract willingly. You knew it was either that or jail. To me, you are a thief that treated one of the greatest men I know like a pile of shit. You never even gave him a chance instead you believed some random crap that people posted on the internet.' He is quiet for a moment before he continues speaking. 'Eight years ago my wife left me and our little girl suddenly without notice. She just vanished. My daughter, Sophie, was devastated she cried for days and kept asking me when mommy would be getting home. She was only three years old and I had no idea what to tell her. Turned out Linda was a gambling addict she used every penny we had to fuel her addiction and once there was no more money left she left for greener pastures. Leaving me and Sophie to fend for ourselves.

Creditors kept calling asking for their money. I had to sell our house, our, furniture and even an antique gold pocket watch my grandfather gave me just before he passed away. To top this shit pile up I lost my job and Sophie and I ended up living in my car. It was in the dead of winter with sub-
zero temperatures. I had no money for gas and barely any money for food. Every day I looked for jobs but no one was hiring because of the bad economy. If I was lucky I could work as a day laborer at the market. One day in January Sophie got ill it started with a nasty cough and before I knew it she had a raging fever. I went to the shop with what little money I had to buy some medicine and food. I took Sophie with me I couldn't leave her alone in the car. When I got to the cash register I didn't have enough money to pay for my stuff. I was desperate I needed to take care of Sophie. Out of nowhere this guy who was standing behind me pays for everything.

I turned around and thanked promising that I would pay him back but he didn't want to hear any of that. He gave me his card and told me that if I ever needed anything I should give him a call. That guy was Mr. Grey I was about to walk out of the store when my little girl staggered and collapsed and stopped breathing. For the first time in my life, I completely lost it. Mr. Grey came running towards us and stayed calm and collected the whole time. He ordered someone to call an ambulance and administered CPR. He saved Sophie's life. It turned out that she had severe pneumonia. I had no health insurance and no money to cover her medical bills. Then I remembered his card and his offer to help me. I gave him a call and 5 minutes later I had a job, house and premium health insurance. In a blink of an eye, he turned my life around and saved not only my daughter be me as well. He didn't know me and he didn't have to help me but he did without expecting anything in return. Everyone working for him personally has a similar story. He is a good man miss Steele damaged but in essence one of the best men I have ever had the privilege to know.’ Taylor says earnestly and I am for once I don't know what to say or think.

'Listen miss Steele I know that he can be a real bastard at times. But in the end, he means well. If you want my advice? Do what he asks of you and stop fighting him. You are only working yourself up for nothing. All he wants is for you to honor his contract like he has done. If you do so you will see how much more agreeable he becomes.’ Taylor says with an air of finality and I know the conversation is over.

Maybe he is right what is the point of fighting it all I always end up losing anyway. I remember something my grandmother once told me. She said that no one was born bad. Sometimes good people do bad stuff but that does not make them bad. She said Annie love the sinner but hate his sin. I know I could never do that. Not after everything he did to me. I don't think I could ever forgive him. But maybe he is not completely evil? Maybe I can hold on to myself if I focus on the positive instead of the negative.

Ray got his surgery and mom is out of legal hot water because of him. I guess I can hold on to that for six months. I can do this for them. I just pray it is enough to not break me apart beyond repair...

Non nobis solum nati sumus. Translates into. Not for ourselves alone are we born
Reflection

Christian

When I was a little boy, I spent hours in my grandfather's apple orchard. Just sitting quietly by myself under the shade of the many apple trees. It was the only place where I truly felt at ease. My grandfather would often come and sit next to me. Every time he sat next to me he would ask me a philosophical question about life, the universe, and the world around us. Once, he told me a story about a little boy that had found a baby eagle that had fallen from his nest. The boy couldn't let the baby eagle die, so he took him home and cared for the animal, raising it with a lot of love and patience. The eagle grew and grew and before the boy knew, the eagle had gotten so big that it didn't fit in its birdcage anymore. The boy's mother told him that the bird was all grown up and ready to fly out, to explore the world on his own. But the boy couldn't let the de bird go, he loved it too much and was afraid that the bird wouldn't make it on his own. So, he kept the bird locked up in its cage and only let it fly out occasionally. Even though the bird loved the boy he grew depressed, and his once beautiful feathers grew dull, and his eyes held a deep sadness within them. The boy felt really bad, he wanted the bird to be happy with him. He heard somewhere that if he cut the wings of the bird she wouldn't be able to fly anymore, that way she could stay with him and roam free around his house.

He asked his mother for advice and she told him "If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they're yours; if they don't they were never yours, to begin with." The boy was torn, he was afraid that if he let the bird go, he would never come back and he loved him too much to let that happen. At the same time, he hated to see his bird so sad. My grandfather asked me what I would do if I were the boy. I never really knew the answer to that question; nobody ever really loved me no matter how much I loved them. I was always alone, nobody wanted to be with me because I was such a horrible little boy. Not even my own mother wanted me. As I look back now on that question I think finally know the answer. If I show Anastasia enough love and affection and not clip her wings but expand her cage so it looks like she if free, she will learn to love me and always come back to me.

It is funny how a childhood dilemma can be so illuminating to my present plight. I was so mad when I heard she ran from me. She promised me at the breakfast table that she would honor our agreement. She lied straight to my face. And I hate to admit it, but it hurts really bad. I hoped we could have moved our relationship forward. All I want is to show her how good we can be together. Just like the first time we met, I know she liked me back then, we had a connection, she felt it too I am sure of it. Maybe the crack-whore and Elena are right, and I am truly unlovable. The thought is so painful I instantly suppress it.

After she ran my first instinct was to punish her harshly. I considered shoving a peeled ginger root up her ass before beating the crap out of her with a belt, like Elena, once did to me when she found out that I kissed a girl in 10th grade. She even told me to when she called to congratulate me on my rousing speech. However, when I finally got back home from the conference, I found her sleeping, rolled up really small in the fetal position in the middle of the bed. She looked pained, cramped up and vulnerable. It stirred something deep inside of me. I just couldn't do it I just couldn't hurt her, not like that. Why am I so useless? Elena told me to break her completely and build her up again. But I don't know if I can. Realization dawns on me, the scorching truth is that I would hate to see her broken! I feel lost and afraid, drowning in an alarming wave of emotions that I had never felt before. I flee the room running down the stairs to the sanctuary that is my office. I take out a bottle of scotch, throw in some ice, and drink like I have never drunk before. Time passes but it feels like I am standing still.
I whirl around the ice in my scotch glass, the amber liquid long gone. I am not quite sure how to approach Anastasia. I still need to punish her for running, Elena's says it's my duty as a good dominant, or she will never respect me. But I don't want to hurt her badly. Just enough to let the message sink it. Miss Steele has some masochistic tendencies, I noticed it the first time I flogged her. There lies my answer, it's all about getting her off on both pleasure and pain, and I have just the tool for that. I open my desk drawer and pull out a black box containing three small solid silver balls held together by a string. I inwardly smirk. I think Miss Steele would really appreciate these Ben Wah balls. She will beg me to spank her to relieve the tension within minutes.

I think it will be pleasurable for the both of us. After that, we can reevaluate our relationship and come up with a new status quo that works for the either of us. I get up from my chair and walk back upstairs to our bedroom. She is still sleeping. I sit down on a chair near the bed and just watch her sleep. I cannot believe how beautiful she is, the way her hair hangs loosely around her face, the way her chest moves when she breathes, the little frown on her forehead. I love everything about her. It is a frightening realization, how could I have fallen for someone that hates me so?

She stirs and mumbles something in her sleep but does not wake up. Slowly the first lights of dawn are creeping through the bedroom window, illuminating her hair like a halo on her head. She looks like an angel. I could just sit here and watch her forever, never growing tired of the sight before me. Deep down, I always knew she would run when given the chance. That is why I placed a tracker inside of her watch and on her clothes. I must admit that I underestimated her. I never thought she would be so bold and break into the safe to take out her passport. Well, at least she learned her lesson and did not take any of the money that was in there. Nevertheless, it all does not matter now. I always knew where she was or where she was going. When Taylor informed me that she was running towards the airport I told them to take the helicopter and wait for her until she arrived there. Security protocol demands that we have multiple means of transportation in case of an emergency. It proved to be very useful. I couldn't let her escape to wherever the hell she was planning to go. We made a deal and she needs to honor at least the spirit of the contract. I am open to discussing some finer points of the contract after she got her well-deserved punishment.

It is warm in here so I take off my tie that was loosely hanging from my neck and hang it over the arm of my chair, then I undo the top buttons of my shirt. She stirs again and finally her eyes flutter open.

"Good morning." I greet her. My voice is soft but she startles anyway. Quickly sitting up while pulling the blanket over her chest. I look at her intently and she visibly squirms.

"Have you slept well? Because I didn't, you know? I thought we had an agreement. I distinctly remember you promising me that you would honor the contract yesterday. However, you broke your word as soon as you humanly could. Care to explain?"

She fidgets with her hands and does not dare to look at me.

"I just can't do this with you… Every time you touch me and make my body a slave to yours you are tearing me apart, breaking me into a million pieces. If I stay here with you I will lose myself and I cannot let that happen." She answers, her eyes are wide and imploring.

I am unnerved for a moment, I remember how she smiled, joked and talked to me when we first met, and I don't want to lose that girl because that's the girl that I want.

"Don't be scared of what your body feels; embrace it. Your body knows it belongs to me like mine knows that it belongs to you. Don't overthink things, Anastasia, just accept what we have, and I promise everything will start to feel better. I do not wish to break you, Anastasia, well at least not anymore. Just give me a chance to show you how good we are together. Please, come here, and I
will show you what I mean."

She looks scared and hesitant. I sigh and get up from the chair, moving towards the bed. I hold out my hand for her but she does not accept it. It is painful but I quickly suppress it. Instead, she comes out of the bed on her own. The silk white nightgown she is wearing hugs her body in all the right places. I lick my lips at the sight of her and my cock twitches in my pants. God, she is gorgeous.

I sit down on the bed and pull her over my lap in one swift move, and pin her down by pressing my right arm into her back. She yelps loudly.

"What are you doing?" she cries out in shock.

"You ran after you promised me you wouldn't. You know I need to punish you for that... Pain and pleasure are two sides of the same coin Anastasia and will show you that today. Maybe once you realize what that means you will finally understand that we are meant to be and we can work on our mutual trust issues."

"No please, Christian my ass still hurts from last time." She begs. I sigh and softly stroke her hair.  

"You should have thought of that before you ran. I promise you that I won't hurt you at this moment, Ana. I just want to show you something. Relax." I pull up her silk pajamas and push down her panties exposing her beautiful ass to me.

I gently stroke her ass cheeks before moving my hand between her folds. She bucks wildly on my lap, turning me on even more. "Sssh. Relax baby I promise it won't be bad." I coo to her and take the silver balls from my pockets.

"Open your mouth." I tell her but she refuses.  

"Anastasia I won't ask again. Please open your mouth and suck on these balls."

Tears stream down her face and its gut wrenching. Yet I cannot give up, this lesson is too important for the both of us.

"Why do you always insist on making a drama out of everything? Just open your mouth and suck on those balls. Nothing bad will happen."

"How can I trust you after all you have done to me?!" she cries out in indignation.

"By giving me a chance to prove myself. You didn't honor your part of the arrangement. You knew what the consequences would be. Don't try and spin this around by making me the bad guy. Open your mouth." My voice is sterner than intended but I am slowly beginning to lose my patience. She finally does what she is told, and sucks on the balls. Lord the sight is arousing.

"That is it. Suck on them baby." I murmur. My hand moves between her folds again and I start stroking her inner labia and clit. She shudders at my touch and rewards my efforts with some of her sweet juices. I groan and my cock is strained in my pants.

"Oh yes, baby that is it." I mutter and push my index finger inside of her, swirling it around. She moans softly. I just love how responsive she is.

"Give me the balls baby." She dutifully complies and spits the balls out in my hand. I pull out my finger and slip the balls inside her wet pussy leaving the small rope out. I help her back up and smile at her.
'Go wash up and brush your teeth.' I command. She is a little unsteady on her feet, so I hold her a little longer before letting her walk away. Her sweet scent is soothing and intoxicating.

I sit back on the bed and wait until she comes back out again letting the balls do their magic inside of her. I know she will feel aroused, flushed, and possibly confused by the balls, and that is just the way I want her to feel. Pleasure and pain that is what it's all about.

The door of the bathroom opens again and she scuffles out not daring to look in my direction.

"How are you feeling?" I ask smoothly.

She shrugs her shoulders trying to feign indifference, but I know better. She is blushing and squirming slightly at the weight of the balls pressing inside her cunt. I am sure she will be wet as hell when I spank her. God lord it is arousing.

"Fine. I guess." She mumbles.

"Good to hear that. Could you please get me a glass of water? I am kind of thirsty." I ask casually. The more she moves the more the balls will work their magic inside of her.

She is quiet for a moment and I am pretty sure that she is about to argue with me again but she surprises me.

"Ok..." she replies subdued and makes her way back inside the bathroom. I open my blouse and strip down my pants so I am sitting down on the bed in just my boxers.

She comes back in and swallows when she sees me.

"Thank you for the water, Anastasia." I grab the glass from her and take a sip.

"You're welcome." She mumbles politely.

"Now take off the lovely nightgown, Anastasia. You don't need it for what we are going to do next." She opens her mouth and then closes it again.

"Yes, Master." Her tone has a sarcastic edge to it that I do not like but I leave it for now.

I lick my lips when I see her standing naked in front of me. She really is a goddess, the epitome of female perfection.

"You are Aphrodite incarnated Anastasia." I murmur appreciatively. I hold out my hand for her again hoping that this time she will take it. But she doesn't I sigh and grab her wrist pulling her towards me.

"You ran from me. I told you earlier that you must never run from me. No matter where you go, Anastasia, I will always find you. Remember that. Now as for your punishment. I will spank you twelve times, and after that, I will fuck your brains out. And what's more? You will love every minute of it and beg me for more."

She looks like a deer caught in headlights and I want to do anything to dispel that fear from her face.

"Just listen to your body Anastasia. It craves me like I crave you. I promise you will love this, trust me." My voice is soft but firm.
She swallows.

"Spank me with what?" she hoarsely whispers. I let go of her for a minute and hold up my hands.

"Just my hands. Pleasure and pain Anastasia, you will soon learn their merits, like I did when I was much younger. Now please lay over my lap so I don't have to pull you again."

She dutifully complies and lies down over my lap. I gently caress the porcelain cheeks of her beautiful ass. I cannot wait to turn them a lovely shade of pink.

"Count, Ana." I mutter. I caress her ass again and fondle between her folds. Her pussy lips are moist and glistening. I pull my hand away and slap down hard on her ass.

"One." She yelps out.

I caress her ass cheeks, and stroke between her legs again before bring my hand down hard on her pussy lips. "Two." She mews out and I slap her again this time on her ass cheek again. "Three." She moans out I increase the pace and smack her hard six times consequently, distributing the smacks between each cheek equally. I feel my blood surging through my body, heating every inch of me. I have never been so aroused before, it is like I am flying at high speed in a cloudless sky. "Nine." She cries after the last smack, her ass has turned into a beautiful shade of pink. I move my hand between her now dripping pussy lips, smack her three more times, then quickly pull the balls from her pussy. "Twelve." She cries out again, her voice high pitched and squealing. I lift her up, lie her down on her stomach, and quickly divest myself of my too tight boxers. My hard rock cocks slams again my stomach, I grab it and stroke it two or three times. I cannot wait to be inside of her.

"I am going to fuck you now Ana." I murmur and lay down on top of her, my chest pressed to her back. I guide my cock to her slippery wet entrance and slowly move it up and down between her wet folds, teasing her engorged clit. She moans loudly again and I know she is close. The combined smell of our arousal is heady and all consuming. She trembles when I slam my cock inside of her, screaming out some incoherent words. God! She feels good, warm, wet, and so fucking tight. Her pussy walls are sucking and squeezing me in deeper, and I lose all coherent form of thought. I have died and gone to heaven.

I have never felt so connected with another human being before. All I can see, smell, feel, and think about is her. She has become my complete and total existence, and I am completely lost inside of her. All I feel is this primal need to make her mine like she has made me hers.

I pull back and slam my cock deep between her thighs. Ana cries out again, and I begin thrusting quickly inside of her, claiming every inch of her sweet body. My chest pushes again her back; we are both warm and sweaty, filling the room with the sound of our skin slapping together.

I pick up the pace, slamming harder, faster, and deeper inside of her. She is so wet and pliant beneath my weight, taking every inch I give her like the good girl she is. Loud, gruff sounds of our combined pleasure fill the room. I thrust between her legs savagely, exercising the demons that have plagued me. Knowing that only she can bring me absolution. A now familiar tingle creeps down my spine, forming a delicious knot in my stomach. Euphoria is all I feel when I ram my cock inside of her again and again. I feel her walls tightening around me squeezing every inch of me. She cries out her orgasm in a long load moan and it is my undoing.

With a final hard thrust of my hips, I still inside of her. Her greedy little pussy squeezes and drains my cock of every drop of cum I possess. Leaving me breathless, spent, but elated. I fall forward and make her turn her head so she is facing me. I desperately seek entrance to her lush sweet mouth. Prying my tongue past her lips. I moan in pleasure when my tongue strokes hers kissing her
deeply, passionately, with everything that I have.

A small sweet noise escapes her throat and I grab one of her breasts, squeezing and stroking her now taut nipples. I am breathless and feel bereft when the kiss ends. These feelings I have for her are frightening, and now and I have no idea how to deal with them.

"You are mine, Anastasia. Only mine. Don't you ever forget it. You understand?" I implore.

She says nothing but stares at me like she is trying to decipher a difficult puzzle. It is unnerving.

"Answer me." I snap desperately wanting to hear her voice again.

"Yes, Master, I understand." She murmurs. An epiphany hits me like a ton of bricks, and it occurs to me that I much prefer her to call me by my first name instead of master.

"Could you please get off me? You are smothering me, Master." She softly whispers.

I grin in her neck and give her a quick peck on the cheek.

"I am sorry." I pull my softening cock from her and roll of her lying down next to her on my side face her beautiful face. I push some of her hair behind her ear and kiss her nose again.

"How did you like that?" I ask feeling anxious about her answer.

She shrugs.

"It was ok." She mutters.

"Don't lie to me Ana you came hard twice. Why is it so hard to admit that you love what I do to you?"

"Because Master, you are literally breaking me in two. As if my body and mind are two separate pieces forced apart. You have taken away everything that I hold dear and you just won't give it back." Teardrops fall from her ocean depths, and a stabbing pain flashes through me. I realize now more than ever that I hate to see her in pain.

"Do you really hate me Anastasia? Please don't lie. I promise I won't harm you no matter the answer."

She looks at me and squints her eyes like she is trying to discern me.

"Yes." She whispers and I free fall right back to the bottom of the pit of hell I was trying to crawl out of. I rather knew her answer, she had said it to me before. But hearing it now again like this is slowly killing me. Why do I want her to love me so bad? Deep down I know the terrifying answer to that question, but I can never admit it. It will make me weak and vulnerable. Elena's mantra plays through my head. 'Love is for fools Christian, don't you ever forget it.'

I swallow and feel faint and sick. When she first told me she hated me, I always assumed she said it in anger. But having her say it clearly to me like this is sobering.

"That is to be expected." I finally manage to croak out. Although I loathe her answer, it is somehow liberating at the same time. Having her admitting that she hates me gives us a path to go forward on. Her being honest with me is the first step in gaining her trust.

She looks shocked for a moment. Did she expect me to lash out at her?
"Look Anastasia. I think we need a fresh start. Wipe the slate clean if you will. I am willing to renegotiate the terms of our contract under the condition that the spirit of the contract remains. I guess I am saying we can be a little more flexible with the rules."

"What do you mean with that?" she counters.

"It means that I still expect you to be with me and obey me at all times and provide me sexual gratification. However, I am willing to forgo on the harsher aspects of the contract. Meaning, I am willing to give you some leeway. Giving you a choice in some of the things we will be doing together." I open the drawer of the bedside table and pull out the contract.

"When you first signed this I demanded that you call me Master. I would like to amend that so I can earn your trust, and we can move forward. From now on please call me Christian."

"I would be more comfortable in calling you, Master." She replies. I feel gutted because I know exactly why. She wants to keep a distance between us.

"Look Anastasia the duration of the contract won't change. I think it's important for the both of us to make the best out of this situation. I want you to feel more comfortable with this all. I want to get to know you as a person and I want you to get to know me. So I am asking you to communicate with me. Which parts of the contract you would like to see changed?"

I hand her the contract and she scans its contents.

"In the contract, under availability, it states that I get my own room to withdraw myself. When you are done with me, I would like to be left alone... I would like to sleep alone. I need time for myself." Her voice is soft and hesitant.

It is like she has punched me in the gut. For the short time that we have been together, I have noticed that I sleep much better with her sleeping next to me. She is a dream catcher, chasing all my nightmares away. But I cannot be selfish now, not if I want this relationship to move forward.

"Ok, as you wish." I acquiesce, trying to stay as impassive as possible.

"Anything else?" I ask.

"Obeying you in all things? I cannot do that. If you make me, you are taking away my free will, my identity, and you told me that you did not want to break me." She all but cries.

"Yes, Anastasia. I do not want to break you. But you not obeying me is not an option. I need control Anastasia I need to know where you are and what you are doing at all times. I need to take care of you, that is non-negotiable. Obeying me does not destroy your identity it fortifies it. You will soon realize how liberating it is not having to think about what you need to eat or wear or say, or do because I have everything covered. It will give you time to reflect on things that really matter. Trust me." I implore her.

"How would you know? It is easy for you to tell me what I can or cannot do. You have no idea how suffocating that is." She counters rapidly.

I am appalled I do not wish to suffocate her. She just needs to understand that this is for her benefit as well. I remember when I was 15 and reluctant to let Elena take control of me but look how well that turned out for me.

I sigh deeply.
"I know Anastasia more than you think. When I was 15, I was angry and out of control. I was getting drunk on a regular basis. Stealing booze from my dad's cabinet. I was constantly getting into fights, so much so that I was kicked off 3 different schools. My parents were at their wit's end and had no idea what to with me anymore. A friend of my mother suggested that some hard manual labor would put me back into shape. She and her husband just remodeled their home and garden, and someone had to clean up the debris left in her yard.

I didn't object. I could use the cash she was offering me because it was a nice way of paying for my booze instead of stealing it. I got to work and she seduced me, introducing me to BDSM in the process. She turned my life around. She took away all the stress and anger I was feeling so I could focus on myself. It was liberating. She taught me control and discipline and helped me turn into the successful man I am today. I want to do the same for you. You are in over your head and you need help. This is my way of giving it to you." I stare at her intently willing her to understand.

She looks utterly shocked, appalled and disgusted.

"BDSM?" She stutters.

Of course, she doesn't know what BDSM is, she's just so innocent in so many things. I should have explained it all to her sooner.

"Bondage, Dominance, Submission and (sado)Machoism. It's a lifestyle that involves erotic role-play between adults." I start to explain but she stops me.

"I know what it is. Kate and I researched it for our psychology class when we were freshmen." She says quickly. It seems like Miss Steele is full of surprises.

"How old was she?"

I shrug not knowing where she is going with this.

"She was in her late thirties maybe early forties. Why does that matter?"

"What does it matter?" she squeaks out. "A grown woman introduced a teenage boy to a kinky sex and you ask me what does it matter? I have spoken to a dominant in the BDSM lifestyle and he made it perfectly clear to me that this practice can only take place between two or more consenting adults, and when it does, there are safe words in place. Last time I checked, 15-year-olds were not able to give consent because they are minors. What she did to you and you are doing to me has nothing to do with BDSM! She did not help you! She fucked you up and turned you into a monster." Her voice is laced with indignation and her entire body is shaking.

For a moment, I am at a loss for words. I feel hurt and dismissed after I have opened up to her. How dare she judge me and Elena and what we had? She suddenly thinks she is an expert on BDSM because of some research she did in college?! The arrogance of her! She knows nothing about me and my lifestyle.

"Don't you dare judge me and the BDSM relationships I had. You think you are an expert on the subject because you did a college paper? I wanted that relationship. No, I needed it. Elena saved my life and you have no right to criticize her." I bark at her and she visibly shrinks away from me.

I run my hands through my hair in frustration. This was not how I planned this conversation to go down.

"Did you have contractual 'BDSM' arrangements with all of your... girlfriends, relationships or however you wish to call this?" She asks.
"I never had a girlfriend Anastasia. All the women who I had relationships with were trained submissives. They knew what to expect from our arrangement. I am incapable of any other kind of relationship. What I have with you is different somehow. I am willing to compromise more because this is all new to you."

She mumbles something under her breath that sounds a lot like fucked up. But I decide to ignore it.

"Are there any other issues you have with the contract?" I ask stirring us back to the topic at hand.

"Food and exercise. I don't like those ones. I would like to pick what I eat and exercising four times a week is too much." She replies firmly.

"It is very important for me to know that you are never hungry. I must insist that you eat three meals a day. How about this. You decide what you want for breakfast and lunch and we both eat what Mrs. Jones my housekeeper has prepared us for dinner? As for exercise, I need you to stay healthy. Once we are back in the US, I will introduce you to our playroom. The sessions we will have there will be very intense. However, I am willing to compromise somewhat. How about you train with my personal trainer 3 times a week instead of four?" I offer.

She looks shaky and pale.

"Playroom? You have your own playroom." She manages to force out.

"Yes, Anastasia of course. I have been a dominant for nine years now. I have built a new playroom in a new house I have purchased. We will be using it together. Please don't be alarmed I won't do anything really heavy without your explicit consent." I desperately try to reassure her.

"I thought you could do whatever you wanted to me. You're forcing me to obey you." She replies flippantly, calling me out, and I am lost for words for a second time this morning.

"That is different Anastasia. Yes, I want you to obey me in all things. But I want most is your pleasure. I can only get that if you communicate with me. I want and need this to work for the both of us. Please try to understand."

"So basically you want me to obey you until you tell me otherwise? That is all very confusing and not making much sense." She replies pointedly.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair in exasperation. Why is she so difficult? She is acting like a little miss know it all. It wasn't so hard when I did this with Elena, right?

"Look, Anastasia, this is getting us nowhere. You will fully understand what I mean once we are back home. Now, you still haven't replied to my offer. What do you think of my proposal to compromise on food and exercise?"

She shrugs and plays with her fingers.

"It's fine." She mutters non-committal, and I know that this conversation has run its course for now.

"Come; let me wash you so we can have breakfast." I get off from the bed and take her hand, pulling her upwards. Together we make our way to the bathroom for a nice long bath. Time, I need more time to show her how good we are together. I sigh again and turn on the tap. Maybe I should offer her another token of goodwill so she will come around to me. I let the warm water fill the tub and ponder my next move.

The seatbelt lights of the plane light up just after Stephan, my pilot, informed me that we will be
landing soon. Anastasia is fast asleep in the bedroom of my airplane. She was exhausted after I made her a new member of the mile high club. I can still smell her intoxicating scent on my skin, and I don't ever want to wash it off. I feel my cock harden again in my pants but quickly suppress it. There will be plenty of time for more of that later.

I must admit that I am truly surprised by her behavior now. I was actually torn on taking Anastasia with me to the second conference day, afraid that she might try to escape again, but it turned out my punishment and our heart to heart conversation stuck with her. She behaved perfectly and acted like a perfect assistant.

I quickly get up from my chair to wake her up before we land. I enter the bedroom and softly stroke her hair. Every time I see her like this, asleep and vulnerable, it stirs something inside me. She really is like an angel.

"Wake up Anastasia. We are going to land." I softly whisper in her ear. She murmurs something incoherent but does not wake up. I kneel down beside her and stare at her beautiful face. She looks haunted and restless, and I want nothing more than to dispel that look from her lovely facial features.

I stroke her cheeks and softly shake her shoulders.

"Come on, you got to get up Ana, we are going to land soon." I say more forceful now. Her eyes flutter open and she yawns sleepily before looking at the alarm clock on the bedside table. She looks surprised for a moment.

"I thought it was fourteen hours back to Seattle. We have only been flying for eight hours." She says confused.

"You are very perceptive Miss Steele. We are not in Seattle yet. I need to make a stop at the East Coast first. Please get up so I can buckle you in. We are landing soon."

She dutifully comes out of bed and pulls on the black lace bra and panties, and the navy midi dress I have laid out for her. She looks simply exquisite. I redo my tie and pick up my jacket from the bedroom chair.

"Come Anastasia." I command and open the bedroom door to let her out.

I buckle her in before securing my own seatbelt. Moments later Stephan initiates the landing procedures and we begin our decent back onto solid ground.

With a screeching noise, the wheels of the plane hit the runway and the plane rolls smoothly over the airstrip, coming to a halt on the tarmac. I unbuckle myself before unbuckling Ana. I take her hand and escort her off the plane to one of the three black SUVs that are waiting for us.

"Where are we?" She asks when we are seated in the car.

I give her a wry smile.

"Boston. I figured you want to check on your father. We will be driving to Boston Mercy now where we will speak to your father's physician, Doctor Chopra. After that, I have arranged for you to see your father."

She is speechless for a moment just staring at me.
"Why would you do this?" she asks perplexed taking me aback. Isn't she happy to see her dad?

"I told you, Anastasia. It is my duty to take care of you and to anticipate your needs. Try to enjoy this instead of overthinking everything."

"Thank you." She whispers softly.

I nod at her. "You are most welcome."

We continue you to drive in silence until we are nearly at the hospital.

"Am I allowed to see my father alone?" she suddenly asks and I am torn again. I don't want her to be alone with her dad. What if you says something about the arrangement we have?

"I don't think that's a good idea, Anastasia." I reply sternly.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't trust you. I do not wish to have to explain our relationship status to either of your parents." I reply brusquely.

"If you are so ashamed of what you have done. Then maybe you shouldn't have done it." She murmurs and it's like a punch in the gut.

"Anastasia that's enough! I am not ashamed of anything I did. I just wish not to complicate matters more than they are." I snap and she cringes.

"Come." I command when the car door opens in front of the hospital entrance. We make our way to the 15th floor where Dr. Chopra is waiting for us. He is an elderly man with gray hair and rim-horned glasses.

"Mr. Grey. How very lovely to finally meet you." He says and shakes my hand enthusiastically.

"And you must be Miss Steele, Mr. Steele's daughter. I must say that your father is doing great. He is strong like an ox." He says and beaming at her.

"Nice to meet you doctor Chopra." Anastasia replies politely.

"Your father's operation went very well. We have removed the remainder of the tumor on Monday, and are currently giving him chemotherapy to kill off any residual cancer cells. His prognoses are very good. Your mother has been with him since Sunday and has provided some badly needed mental support. He is resting now but he isn't asleep. Unfortunately, he can't have visitors for too long now since he needs to rest. Come. Let me show you to his room." Dr. Chopra says while leading us to a large hospital room at the end of the hallway.

He knocks on the door and opens before getting a response.

I grab Anastasia by her shoulder and turn her around so she is facing me.

"You have 30 minutes to talk to him in private and you won't mention any of things we did together. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly." She says and quickly turns around to follow Chopra into the room.

I sigh and sit down on one of the chairs in the hallway. I take out my blackberry and read the emails I have missed today. Time crawls and I feel anxious and restless. What if she tells her father everything and he takes her way from me? I cannot let them happen! I get up from the chair and
paced up and down the hallway. I look at my watch. 5 more minutes and she needs to come out. I try to sit down again and take out one of the magazines from the magazine stand. I idly flip through the pages barely registering what's on them. I look at the clock again. She should have been out 5 minutes ago. I knew it! I knew that I couldn't trust her. This what you get for being nice Grey! I should have listed to Elena and broke her instead of trying to work with her. I get up from the chair and quickly stride to the door of her father's hospital room.

I open it swiftly and halt my tracks when I see her sitting next to her father reading him the sports results from the paper. Relief washes over me and I feel a little foolish.

Anastasia gasps when she sees me. Well, the damage is done now, might as well make the best of it. This might be the perfect opportunity to solidify my relationship with her. If her parents know we are an 'item', it will raise less or no questions when she is living with me.

"Are you lost Sir?" he father asks concerned.

"Uhm, no sir I was coming to get your daughter. It is late and we need to get going soon. Please let me introduce myself. I am Christian Grey your daughter's boyfriend." I say holding out my hand to him, which he politely accepts.

"I know. I have seen your face on TV. Nice to meet you." He replies gruffly.

Anastasia looks like she is going to get sick and her father stares at her utterly confused.

"You did not tell me you had a boyfriend Ana? How long has this been going on?" He asks sternly.

Anastasia's face has turned red and she is desperately trying to come up with an answer. I take pity on her and decide to answer the question for her.

"Very recently sir. We have been official since this week." I say placating.

He eyes me speculatively.

"I see. Anastasia, could you get me some orange juice from downstairs? I am thirsty." He says casually. However, I know full well the meaning behind his words. He wants to talk to me alone and it's making me nervous.

Anastasia looks torn for a moment but finally does what he says.

"I will be right back daddy." She says and kisses him on his forehead.

"My Annie she is a real good girl you know? And I am well I am not and idiot. I know you got something to do with getting me these medical treatments and I would like to thank you for them. But make no mistake, if you hurt my little girl, I am coming after you no matter who you are."

His threat is both amusing and sobering. The man clearly isn't an idiot.

"I promise you, sir. I will take very good care of your daughter." In ways, you cannot possibly imagine.

"Anastasia told me you are a keen fisherman to Mr. Steele. Where do you like to go fishing?" I need to get into this guy's good graces. If I am, Anastasia wouldn't be very inclined to say anything detrimental to our relationship to him.

He immediately perks up.
"You fish son?" He asks and I give him a beaming smile and launch into my fishing tales. Soon, I will have him eating out my hands and I will have one less threat to my relationship with Ana to worry about. Yes, this is going to be much better than I could have hoped for.
Three years ago, I was a freshman in college. I was so young, free and innocent back then. I was excited about all the classes I was going to take. I remember entering my very first psychology class. I felt electrified and eagerly absorbed every ounce of information offered. I recall one assignment we got during the first week of classes. It was called *Who are you?* At first, I thought it was a stupid question. Of course, I knew who I was! However, when I read the assignment in more detail I found the question confronting because for the first time in my life I not only had to think about who I was but why I thought I was like that. For the first time, I really had to think about who I was. I came to the conclusion that although I was shy, clumsy, plain, and awkward, I was actually a nice and good person. I was pretty happy being me. Now, that time and those feelings feel like a lifetime ago.

I hate myself for being a weak coward, unable to come to terms with the new reality of my existence, let alone tell anyone about it. I can still hear my mom's sweet voice ringing in my ear asking me what was wrong. It was only yesterday since I last saw her, but it feels much longer, everything does. My mind drifts off back to yesterday evening.

"Anastasia please tell me are you really happy with Christian? I mean, don't take this the wrong way, I know he is all kinds of handsome and rich but... You seem so, I don't know, quiet." My mother's scrutinizing gaze is harsh under the halogen lights of the restaurant restroom where he took us out for dinner.

I feel exposed and scared at the same time. Mom always knew when something was up with me. But I balk I cannot tell her what he is doing with me. It will kill her and Ray. I look up and smile at her.

"No, everything is fine. Christian is great. I am just very tired and jetlagged from the flight." I lie.

She sighs and redoes her lipstick.

"He seems kind and is very charming. And I will forever be grateful for what he has done for you father. But... I don't know... there is just something about him..." She looks at me and gives me a wry smile. "You must think I am a silly old woman rambling like that. Look baby girl if you are happy then I am happy. Just know that your father and I will always be there for you."

Her words cut right through my soul and I wanted nothing more than to cry and breakdown. Of course, mom could see right through me, she always does. I wanted to tell her everything he had done to me. But I just couldn't. I saw how merciless and cruel he was. If I were to tell them everything and they would confront him, he would destroy them too in a heartbeat. I could not let that happen. I could live with what he was doing to me but I could never live with him destroying my family because of me.

No, I needed to carry this burden alone. I grabbed her hand and squeezed it lightly.

"I know. Thank you, mom, for being here for me. But please don't worry about me ok? I am fine."

I close my eyes and rest my head against the car window pushing the memory from my mind. Normally I would look out the window, curious and excited about the road ahead, and the changing landscapes. Now, I am not caring an ounce about my new destination. It does not matter anyway. I
"We're here." His baritone voice that has become so familiar in such a short time rings through the car pulling me from my reverie.

I open my eyes and stare out the window. We have stopped in front of a magnificent Edwardian or Victorian mansion, secluded between dense woods and a large open meadow field. It is something straight from the English classics. The meadow is making me feel homesick for some reason, and I know I would have really loved it in different circumstances. Right now it feels and looks like another prison.

The car door opens and I climb out of the Audi. The smell and sound of brackish water fill my senses.

"Come." He commands again while grabbing my hand. He leads me to the front of the door where a blond woman in her late thirties or early forties is waiting for us. She is wearing a black and white standard maid's attire and she is smiling broadly at the bastard.

"Good afternoon Mr. Grey." She says happily.

"Gail." He says warmly and squeezes her arm in greeting. "Anastasia, I would like for you to meet Gail, Mrs. Jones, my housekeeper. Anything you need you can ask her."

"Nice to meet you." I mutter and shake her hand.

"Pleased to meet you too, Miss Steele." She replies kindly.

"Well let's get inside so I can show you around. This place is new to me too. I bought and had it remodeled a few months back." He says nonchalantly and ushers me inside the house.

My eyes nearly bulge out of my sockets when I study the large hallway with two beautiful spiraling mahogany staircases. The floor is made from black and white checkered tiles, and a huge window in the back wall gives a stunning panoramic view over the water. I wonder where we are exactly. The entire atmosphere of the house is somehow sturdy and serene. It is a strange paradigm because I feel anything but sturdy and serene here, with him.

"The Sound. The view over the water, it's the Puget Sound." He answers my unspoken question.

"Oh," I reply softly.

"Come; let me show you the rest of the house." He pulls my arm and I dutifully follow him through the door on the right side of the hallway.

We enter another beautifully decorated room. A large white U-shaped couch stands in front of a big baroque fireplace. A black grand piano stands in front of the panoramic window, and various work of arts hang on the walls.

"This is the living room. Do you like it?" He asks taking me by surprise. Why would he care if I like it or not?

"It looks nice." I mutter and he smiles at me.

"I am happy that you like it. I would hate for you to dislike this place since you will be living here for six months." He explains.
"I shrug not knowing what to say.

"Come; let's go to the next room." He says and drags me to another room.

I am stunned when we enter the library. This is something else. The room is round and large, and full of books from the ground to the ceiling, with a big round glass dome set on top of the ceiling. My hands idly skim over the books; they are all first editions. I thought the library at his place in Italy was big, but this is something else.

"I figured you like books, being an English lit student, so I thought this would be the room for you. If you want you can work here." He says and points at the mahogany desk in the center.

"It's beautiful." I reply perplexed.

"I thought you might like it."

I stroll around the library a little more, wanting to read every book that is in here. I hardly notice that he is still behind me. I feel his arms slip over my waist pulling me against him.

"I am glad that I can make you happy like this." He whispers huskily in my ear and kisses me on the cheek. "Come, there is much more to see."

After 30 minutes, he has shown me the entire ground floor. I am overwhelmed. I never realized just how big this place was. Next to the living room and the library, there is a sunroom, a swimming pool, a dining room, and a large kitchen.

"Come let me show you the top floor. The most important room of the house is there." He says his face impassive but his voice sounds almost ominous.

I follow him up the spiraling staircase to the second floor. He grabs my hand and almost drags me to the end of the hallway, stopping in front of a light wooden door. He opens it and escorts me into a large open space bedroom. There is a big bed standing in the middle and there is a bath on legs and a shower area on the right. A large blazing fire roars in the fireplace. The color scheme of the room is mostly crème and gray giving it a serene atmosphere.

"This is my bedroom. You will be spending time in here with me. But this is not the room that I want to show you." He walks into the walk-in closet and orders me to follow. He presses his hand on the wood paneling in the back, and a number pad appears. He quickly enters a code and a hidden door on the left of the closet opens. Fear and dread settle in my stomach. What the hell is he hiding in there?

He seems to notice my apprehension because his facial features soften somewhat. "Please keep an open mind. You know what I want from you, and you are familiar with BDSM. This room is just an extension of that."

He places his hand on my lower back and pushes me inside the room. A chill runs down my spine when I enter the room. It is round womb like with blood red walls, and the floor is a deep dark wood. A four-poster bed with red satin sheets dominates the room. In front of it, there is a leather chesterfield couch and in daunts on me that those two pieces of furniture are the only normal things in the room. The rest is filled with odd pieces of furniture like the gym like horse standing on the right side of the room. I involuntarily shiver at the sight of the various implements hanging on the walls. Whips, chains, floggers, belts, and canes. I recognize them from my brief research into BDSM. I swallow nervously, the thought of him using these objects on me is downright frightening.
The sound of a door closing startles me and I jump. I turn around and see him strolling at me casually, eyeing me like a predator watching his prey.

I wring my hands nervously, not wanting to look at him. I gasp when I see four huge pictures of myself hanging on the wall near the door. A myriad of questions fills my head. Where? Who? How? When?

"Your friend Mr. Rodriquez is quite talented. He made these pictures of you a few months back with the intent to show them to you at his very first expose. You are his muse, not surprisingly. My art dealer convinced him to sell them to her for me. I don't want other people ogling you. You are the finest piece of art that has ever been created, and you are for my eyes only."

He answers my unspoken questions and his answers scare the hell out of me. Suddenly this all makes perfect sense the job at GEH, the Italian trip it has all been a setup from the get-go. He has been stalking me all along! He has been planning this whole damn thing for a very long time.

"How long have you been stalking me? Tell me the truth. This whole thing was a setup from the get-go, wasn't it?" My voice is shaky from the anger I feel.

He looks surprised, even guilty, for a moment before his face morphs into a taut angry mask.

"I haven't been stalking you. I merely wanted to get to know the girl I met in Seventh Circle and used my resources to find her. All I wanted was to help you and I did just that. But you, you have been nothing but negative ever since we met again. Every little thing I do, you spin into some diabolical feat. Frankly, it is getting tiring. You will not speak to me the way you just did, especially not in this room. If you ever do it again I will cane the shit out of you, do you understand?" He hisses, his eyes are slits he is towering above me, and I feel the heat radiating from his body.

Gut wrenching fear is clawing at me, screaming at me to run far and hard. But rationally, I know it's pointless; he will find me and make my life even worse than it is. I do not doubt his promise on that.

"Answer me!" he snaps.

"Yes, Master." I mutter out sarcastically, fury still whirling inside me.

"Good. Now about this room. This is my playroom. We will be spending a lot of time in here. When I order you to go in here, you will do so in your bra, panties, and high heels. You will kneel at the door and wait for me to get in. You will follow each order I give you in here immediately without hesitation. You will never ever talk back to me in here. Is that clear?" He asks arching an eyebrow at me.

That asshole has one fucked up idea of BDSM. I remember the Dom I spoke to for my project telling me about the importance of safe words. This is it! this is how I stop him! Safe words are the foundation of BDSM. Hope wells in my chest.

"Perfectly. Just one question, what about my safe words? Should I use the standard Red and yellow?" I ask innocently.

He looks taken aback for a moment confusion marks his face. He is quiet for the longest time contemplating something before scraping his throat.

"No safe words. You do not get them yet. You need to earn them." He whispers out hoarsely.
I cannot believe what I am hearing. This is not BDSM, this is abuse! I am at a loss for words. This bad, really, really bad.

"If you really do not like something tell me after the scene and we can discuss it." He amends quickly.

"Safe words are essential for BDSM. I am nothing more than your slave. You use the guise of BDSM to abuse me. Just please stop the euphemisms and tell it like it really is." I spit out not able to control my rage.

"Enough! You know nothing of the lifestyle, stop acting like you are some expert. You should be grateful that I am making you earn your safe words. When I started doing this my dominatrix wouldn't dream of giving me any." He bristles out clearly rattled.

"I guess that she is even sicker than you are then." I mutter out softly before I can stop myself.

"I have had enough of your insolence!" He bellows furiously. My palms are sweaty and my whole body is shaking. This man is dangerous and unstable. I instinctively move a few steps away from him.

He furiously pulls at his hair and glares at me.

"I should cane the shit out of you for this. I really should. You deserve it. You keep insulting my mentor and me. You need to know your place. Maybe I should... No, not that..." His voice is harsh and commanding, but he doesn't look at me. Instead, he is pacing up and down the room. He seems withdrawn like he is talking more to himself than to me.

Suddenly he turns around and walks over to me, and in seconds I am stunned, nailed to the ground. He grabs my hands and pulls me roughly through the door out of the playroom back into the closet.

The doors of the playroom close with a whooshing sound but he pushes me out of the closet before I can look at it again.

"Next time I will cane you. I swear to god I will. You know you deserve it." He says threatening while pointing his long finger at me.

He roughly grabs my arm again and pulls me out of his room back into the hallway. He stops in front of the room closest to his and opens the door.

"This room is yours." He says and pushes me in unceremoniously. "You will stay here so you can reflect on your disrespectful behavior towards me." He says and slams the door shut in my face. I hear the clicking of a lock and a sense of dread settles in my stomach. He is locking me in here! Oh, God, nobody knows where I am, he could keep me locked in here forever.

I try to open the door but it won't budge. Of course, it wouldn't you idiot! I reprimand myself sternly.

"Don't bother. You won't get out unless I want you to, and right now I want you to think long and deep about your behavior.

". He taunts through the door and I hear his footsteps move away from it. Asshole! I want to scream and curse at him but I just don't have any energy left. It is no use no matter what I do.

I sigh and look around. The room is large and beautifully decorated, soft pastels and fluffy pillows seem to be the theme here. A gray sleigh bed stands proudly in the middle of the room. I suppose it
could have been worse. He could have caned me. I guess being locked in a luxurious room is the lesser of two evils.

I move around the room and find a spacious walk-in closet full of designer clothes. At the end of the closet, there is another door leading towards a bathroom with a big marble bathtub in the middle and two large showerheads on the right. This place is just as big as my entire apartment. I walk back to the bedroom and lay down on the bed. The color of the sky has burst out into a hue of blue, reds, and purples. I will never get over how beautiful the sunset looks. I feel drained and exhausted. I just want to close my eyes and forget about everything for just a little while.

A blood-cuddling scream fills my ears. I jolt up awake in a panic. Where am I? Right... his prison on the Sound... The room is plunged into a deep darkness and I quickly switch on the light on the nightstand, pushing the darkness away.

"Aaarghh." The ear piercing scream fills my ears again, and I realize it's him. I hear footsteps on the hallway and hushed voices speaking rapidly to each other. I hear a door open and moments later, I hear his panicky voice yell at the people I assume are in his room. Rapid footsteps echo through the hall again, I assume going back downstairs. What is going on? Why was he screaming like that? The small vindictive part of me cannot help but take delight in his pain. He deserves it for what he did to me. The other part of me cannot help but feel for him. He must have been really hurt in the past. However, right now, the vindictive part of me is overwhelming my senses and I hate myself for it. I don't want to become a bitter, hateful person. That is not who I am, but I'm afraid he will turn me into one, just like someone did to him.

The soft notes of the piano resound to the otherwise quiet house. The music is melancholic and disjointed. It is depressing. I turn around and try to tune out the sound, hoping that sleep finds me again. I don't know how long I am lying awake or how long he is playing, but it must be an eternity. The first light of dawn tentatively fills the room, the music still has not stopped. I realize my exercise in getting some sleep is pointless. I get out of bed and shower silently hoping he will let me out of the room today. I take a warm long shower in the overly large bathroom. The warm water is relaxing on my skin. I am mildly surprised when I see my usual body wash standing on the shower rack. I uncap the bottle; the familiar scent is comforting. I wash and stand a little longer under the large shower head before turning off the tap. I quickly dry myself and wrap myself in a towel. I move towards the closet in search for something to wear.

I am surprised when I see lingerie and an outfit displayed on the center table of the closet. When did he get in here? I really should not have been surprised he did this, though, the man is a control freak. For a brief moment, I contemplate on wearing something else just to spite him but after yesterday, I really fear his wrath. The man is unstable. I sigh and take the outfit before moving back to the bedroom. I quickly dress and walk to the door. Maybe he let it open so I can get out. I pull on the door handle but it won't budge. The bastard locked me in again. What if he really locks me in here for six months? Trepidation fills me. This is bad, really bad. I move towards the window to see if I can open them. They are locked just the like door. Fear and anxiety fill me. I won't be able to survive being locked in her for six months.

I feel so sad, hot tears stream down my cheeks again. It seems that all I can do lately is cry and I hate myself for it. I just don't know if I have the mental capacity of the energy anymore to stay strong. I feel if I break down now I will never be able to glue myself back together. But he has to let me out right? I still need to eat and work so he needs to let me out eventually.

There is a soft knock on the door and I hear the door unlock. I feel relieved and grateful happy that I don't have to spend the entire day in here. I don't like being locked up in a room. A bitter memory of mom and husband number three flashes through my mind briefly.
The door opens and the blonde woman, I believe her name is Mrs. Jones, comes in the room.

"Good morning Miss Steele I brought you some breakfast." She says politely.

All my hopes of being released from this room plummet at that one simple sentence. She puts the tray she is carrying down on the table near the fireplace, and quickly scurries back to the door leaving me alone again.

"Mrs. Jones please wait." I call after her. She stops and turns around looking nervously at me.

"Uhm, I would like to eat downstairs. I don't like being cooped up in this room all day." I try.

"I am sorry Miss Steele. Mr. Grey instructed me to bring your breakfast to your room. He feels it's best that you stay in here a little longer." She says apologetically.

"Has he said how long?" I know my voice sounds dejected but I cannot help myself.

"No, he hasn't. I am really sorry Miss Steele but I need to leave now." She quickly opens the door and locks it again before I can ask her another question. I feel so desolate like I am the only person left in the world. I miss my dad, my mom, Kate, Jose, and Jimmy. In two short weeks, my entire life has been turned upside down and inside out. It feels like he has sucked me into his dark world taking everything good and pure I had from me.

I feel so lost not knowing what to do next. "Don't break down Ana, don't break down." I just need to focus on the positive. He didn't beat me yesterday. That is something right?

The smell of bacon, toast, and eggs fill my nostrils it makes me nauseous. I crawl back in bed and watch the sunrise. Time moves slowly and I am bored out of my mind. I switch on the TV and channel surf a little. There is nothing on that interests me. There are some books in the bookcase. I take out Rebekah and begin to read. At noon, Mrs. Jones brings lunch but I am still not hungry. She encourages me to eat something and I am inwardly thankful for some human contact.

I try to eat something but I am simply not hungry. Night falls again and soon its dinnertime. I hope I can get out of the room now, at least have dinner downstairs. But that hope is soon dashed as Mrs. Jones brings once again my food to my room. I tell her I am not hungry and let her bring it back downstairs. I close my book and try to go back to sleep.

I jolt awake to the blood-curdling screams coming from the room beside my own. A chill runs down my spine and I cannot help but wonder what demons are haunting him. The voices are back on the hall again and I hear him yell loudly. Moments later the soft melancholic sounds of the piano echo through the house stealing my sleep from me again.

Time is a funny thing when you do not need it you have it in abundance, but when you need it desperately you are running out of it quickly. Time in this room seems to crawl by and is losing all relevance. I am not sure how many days have passed since he first locked me in here. Mrs. Jones still brings breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day, but now she isn't allowed to speak to me. Every day and every night it's the same. I am stuck in this hell and the only solace I have is that he is stuck in his own hell. The funny thing it's though, that right now I am so lonely I would do anything for a little human contact even if it's with him.

I found pencils and paper. I think it was two days ago but I am not sure. Time has blurred into a single monotone block without any distinctions between the days.

I always loved drawing and painting. I remember Miss Claire, my art teacher, telling me that I was quite talented when I was in 10th grade. It has been ages since I have drawn anything, not since
husband number three. I have been drawing the meadow and trees I can see from my bedroom window.

I must have drawn the oak tree a hundred times and every time I'd draw it, new minute details emerge when I concentrate on the bark and branches. It's a welcome distraction to the monochrome that I am stuck in, it helps me preserve what's left of my sanity. I cannot escape the irony of it all it's funny how he helped me rediscover a piece of myself I thought I lost years ago. I guess when enveloped in such dense darkness you cling to even the smallest little lights.

I put down the pencils and move to the bathroom to wash my hands that are smudged with coal from the gray pencil I have been using. I wipe my hands and move back to the bedroom, not knowing what to do next. I don't want to read again or watch TV. I just want to talk someone. This loneliness is slowly suffocating me.

"Good morning." His deep baritone voice startles me. His is sitting on my bed going through my drawings with interest. I am momentarily shocked by the way he looks. He has a thick red beard and dark circles around his eyes. He looks haunted, like the hounds of hell have been chasing him. Something akin to pity stirs in my chest. It is an unwelcomed feeling.

"You are really very talented." He muses aloud.

"Thank you." I murmur back, remembering his rigid demand for decorum. I don't want to antagonize him and make him leave so I am forced to deal with loneliness and boredom again.

"Why did you stop?" He asks eyeing me sharply.

"My hands were dirty I needed to wash them." I reply perplexed.

"No, I mean why did you stop drawing until now?"

How does he know? This man's stalking truly knows no bounds. It is both baffling and scary. I am not going to tell him why I stopped drawing five years ago, the memories of that time are simply too painful.

I shrug nonchalantly.

"Lost interest I guess." I lie. The truth is that I couldn't see the beauty in things anymore after mom divorced Ray and was used as a punching bag by husband number three. It took me a while to get over that. It is strange that now in my deepest darkest moments I see the beauty in the smallest things again.

I even wonder sometimes what would have happened if things had been different, but I know it is a pointless exercise. Things are what they are and nothing we do can change the past.

He puts down the drawings and eyes me critically. I feel unnerved and exposed.

"It is a pity. I think every art academy would have welcomed you into their midst." He pauses for a moment and then continues. "Tomorrow is Monday and we both need to get back to work. You will drive with me and Taylor to work and finish your internship in the finance department. After that, you will be working for me directly. Every weekday we have breakfast at 7:30 and leave at 8:00 sharp. Is that clear?" he demands.

Monday? That means that I have been locked in here for five whole days! Somehow it feels much longer. I want to scream at him, demand to know why he did this to me but I do not dare. What if he decides to lock me in here longer? For the first time, I am actually happy to go back to work at
GEH again.

"Yes, Master."

"That reminds me. Drop the master. I want you to call me Christian when we are home and Mr. Grey at the office. Like I told you before, we need to make our relationship more… personable." He gets up from the bed and moves to the door. Fear grips me. What if he locks me in all day again?

'Mas... I mean Christian. I was wondering if I could get some books from the library. I promise I won't get in your way. You won't even see me. I just don't want to be cooped up again all day. Please, Christian?" I hate to beg, but the thought of being locked in here another day is unbearable.

He nods at me.

"I will leave the door open. You are not allowed to venture outside, not without security." He says sternly and turns around on his heel, leaving me alone again.

Relief floods through me and I quickly put on my shoes and almost run out of the room. The large house is empty except for a maid I haven't seen before who is cleaning the hallway. She looks up surprised when she sees me and greets me politely. I want to talk to her some more but she excuses herself and quickly scurries off in the direction of the kitchen.

I make my way to the library and almost bump into the large pool table in the middle of the room. Was this in here the first time I was here? It makes me feel homesick somehow. Jose and I used to play pool for hours on the weekend. He taught me how to play well. It was something I had always been very proud of, but now it seems all like it was a different world. My fingers glide over the polished wood of the pool table, it's smooth and cold to the touch. I linger on it a moment longer before moving to the ceiling high bookcases. I do not intend to read anything; I just want to look at all these magnificent pieces of literature wondering how the authors of these stories went through life.

Soon, I am lost in all these different stories and time went on the fast track again. There is a small knock on the door of the library. I didn't think I closed the door.

"Miss Steele, dinner is ready and Mr. Grey has requested you join him." Mrs. Jones announces without preamble.

"Oh, ok... coming." I hadn't realized it was after six already. I follow her to the large dining room where he is already seated.

"I would like to remind you that dinner is always at six Anastasia. You are 5 minutes late." He scolds me.

"I am sorry." I stammer.

"Sit down, here next to me." He commands brusquely.

I hate that I follow his orders like a lost little puppy but I do not want to start an argument with him. I always end up getting the short end of the stick.

"My mother is organizing a charity ball next week. You will come with me as my date." He orders like is the most normal thing in the world. I want to tell him no but I know that will inevitably will turn into a fight. The loss of my autonomy is pretty much the worse thing about this entire experience.
"Yes, Christian." I reply dutifully.

"Good, and I want you to spend the night with me tonight." He orders brusquely and I desperately try to swallow down a painful lump that has formed in my throat. I was hoping that he wouldn't, not for a little while. It makes me angry, really angry that I don't have a say in any of this. I cannot hold the lid on it any longer.

"Why did you lock me up for five days?" I ask him.

He holds his fork up mid-air his eyes are wide almost frightened.

"Because I needed time to think about everything you said to me. I was afraid I would hurt you beyond what you could take… I was angry, really angry with you." He replies, shocking me and I don't know how to form a coherent response.

The rest of dinner goes by quietly and he excuses himself soon after desert, reminding me that he wants me in his bed by ten. I want to tell him fuck you! So badly but I refrain.

Ten o'clock came much too soon. I dressed in my pajamas and crawled under his covers. Maybe if I acted like I was asleep he wouldn't try anything. I keep hoping against my better judgment. The bedroom opens and he strides in. He doesn't say anything but takes off his trousers and shirt and crawls into the bed with me.

"Good night Anastasia." He says pulls me against him and turns off the bedroom light plunging us into darkness.

I half expect him to initiate sex but nothing happens. I hear his soft even breathing in my ear and I know he has fallen asleep almost instantly holding me into a vice like grip. I close my eyes hoping that sleep will find me soon as well.

I wake up feeling overheated and sweaty. I have no idea how long I have been sleeping but I feel thirsty. I can't get up because his legs and are entwined with mine. I pry myself away from his grasp and go in search of a glass of water. The tiles of the bathroom floor are cold on my feet. It is a welcome change from the stiffening heat I just felt. I take a cup from the cabinet and fill it with water. The cool water is refreshing and I simply stand there enjoying it.

"AAAAARRRGGH." blood-curdling scream fills the silent evening air. "Oh, god not again." I quickly move to the bedroom and see him violently thrashing on the bed. His facial expression looks so pained and tortured its heart wrenching. I stand there at a loss not knowing what to do. It is like I am nailed to the spot I am standing on.

The door opens and Mrs. Jones and Mr. Taylor hurry in.

"Mr. Grey sir. Please wake up. It is ok everything is ok nobody is going to hurt." Mrs. Jones gently whispers to him like calming a wounded animal and I guess in a way she is. She softly nudges him and he wakes up with a jolt breathlessly.

His eyes are wild unfocused and his chest is heaving; he looks like a madman.

"She was gone, she was gone, she was gone. She ran from me she always runs from me." He whispers pained.

"It's ok Mr. Grey everything is ok. Here." She says sweetly and offers him some water. He takes it and drinks it quickly.
He looks around the room and sees me standing near the closet entrance. He looks shaken and haunted.

"Where did you go! I told you to stay with me tonight." He hisses.

"I, I just wanted a glass of water. I was thirsty." I murmur apologetically.

"You should have woken me and asked me to get you some. From now on make sure you have a bottle of water on your nightstand when you sleep here." He growls out angrily.

I am angry, confused, and intrigued at the same time. Why is he making such a big deal out this? It was just a glass of water. This man is a mystery. What happened to him that he is having these nightmares? I remember a colleague of my dad's once when he was in the army. He had nightmares multiple times a week from his tours in the gulf wars. PTSD is what my dad called it. Maybe Christian has the same thing?

"Taylor, Mrs. Jones you can both go back to bed. Anastasia come, back to bed. It's late." He growls out.

I move back into the bed and he quickly wraps his arms around me, pulling me close to him. I feel his nose in my neck and his hand pressing down on my stomach.

"Don't leave me." I think I hear him softly murmur but I am not sure. My mind is a jumbled mess and my emotions are all over the place. I have no idea what to do with this entire situation. I close my eyes and try to sleep so I do not have to think about everything for a few short hours.

The car glides into the Seattle morning traffic. We are both quiet, lost in our own worlds. We have not talked about what happened last night, and I don't particularly have the energy to do so. Taylor drives the car into the underground parking garage at Grey House and we get out of the car.

"I want you to have lunch with me at 12:30. Sawyer will escort you to finance. If you need anything call me on this number and I will have it arranged." He says while putting down his phone number on my iPhone.

"Yes, Mr. Grey."

"Good, have a nice day Anastasia." He says, not unkindly, and quickly moves to his private elevator near his parking spot.

"Are you ready to go Miss. Steele?" Sawyer asks and I nod at him. We take the elevator up to the 18th floor where the finance department is located.

"I think I can find my own desk, Mr. Sawyer." I murmur embarrassed to be followed around by a man the size of a house.

He gives me an apologetic smile. "Just making sure you reach your desk without injury. The boss would have a fit if I wasn't doing my job and you sustained a paper cut." He jokes but I do not find it funny.

I feel everyone on the floor looking at me and I can hear them whispering behind my back. Do they know I stole from Grey? Is that why there are gossiping? I feel nervous and uncomfortable. Suddenly, I want to give anything to be back in the now familiar safety of my room at the house on the Sound. Maybe coming to work wasn't such a good idea after all.

"I have a bone to grind with you, Annie Steele. Why didn't you tell me? I thought we were
friends!" Emily says hurt and exasperated confounding me.

"Tell you what? I am sorry Emily but I have no idea what you are talking about." I say bemused.

"Oh, come on Ana don't insult my intelligence. Tell me everything about you and Grey it's all over the news everyone is talking about it." She spits out excitedly.

"Seriously Em, what about me and Grey? He is my boss. I have honestly no idea what's going on."

I am exasperated. Grey would never tell anyone about the sick relationship we are in, would he?

Bile rises in my throat. What if he did tell people? The thought is horrifying.

Emily rolls her eyes at me and takes out here phone.

"Look." She says and shoves it under my face.

Christian Grey the world's most eligible bachelor has finally been snatched up.

Rhonda Rhodes reporting

Last week, we here at TMZ got some very reliable intel. Several eye witnesses saw the world hottest businessman being very intimate with a gorgeous brunette. Of course, we set out to investigate and found these exclusive images of the two love birds staying at the four seasons in Boston MA. We have identified the woman as Anastasia Steele, a 20-year-old college student from Vancouver who is currently an intern at GEH.

It looks like this is going to be a hot and heavy office romance...

I stop reading the article and stare open-mouthed at the camera images that are played in a loop. This must come from the security cameras at the hotel in Boston. I see myself standing next to him while he has his arm wrapped around my waist, ushering me inside the hotel lobby where he lets go of my waist and takes my hand, pulling me towards the elevator where he pulled me close to him. I am stunned completely speechless.

"He is not my boyfriend. He took me to see my father who is being treated for cancer in Boston. He made a stop in Boston just so I could see him. He was very compassionate and understanding." I say lamely.

Emily looks apologetically.

"I am sorry Ana I didn't know I thought..."

"It's ok I haven't told many people." I don't want to make her feel bad especially since she isn't far from the truth.

"Is he going to be ok?" she inquires genuinely concerned.

"The doctor is optimistic about his chances of recovery." It's one bright light in this otherwise perpetual darkness. Suddenly, I am overwhelmed with emotions, this is all too much. Tears threaten to spill again and I hate it. I cried so much these past months.

"Are you alright?" Emily asked concerned.

"Yeah, just need a quick restroom break." I lie and quickly scurry off so she won't see me crying. Nobody can help me out of this gigantic shit pile. I feel my phone buzz nonstop in my purse and take it out. I have a dozen missed calls from Kate, Jose, and Jimmy. They probably all called to
inquire about my relationship status. I don't want to talk to them right now. I just need a moment for myself and gather my senses. I quickly enter a restroom stall and let the tears fall freely.

I hear two women's voices from outside the stall talking animatedly to each other.

"You know what one of the other interns I think her name is Kylie told me?" One of the women asks.

"No, spill the beans Jenna don't keep me in suspense! I want to know how that little nobody snatched up one of the hottest and richest guys on the planet. I mean she is way out of his league. Some poor simple-minded coed that couldn't even afford college tuition. Ugh!"

"OMG Kelly that is exactly what I thought! So this Kylie girl told me that Grey really hated on her last month. He told her she dressed like a skank."

"Yeah, I heard that it went all over the building. She is a tasteless hussy if you ask me."

"Well, this Kylie girl thinks that the Steele girl has serious money issues and earns some extra cash by whoring herself out. I think Grey just wanted a quick fuck and paid her for it." The girl named Jenna says.

The tears won't stop falling. My entire body hurts; hearing people talk about me like that is so painful. I feel so alone and isolated I want to run, run for away from everybody and everything. I feel sick my stomach clenches and before I know it I am emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet seat. The taste in my mouth is disgusting. They continue the gossip but I tune them out. I need to protect myself against these vile bitches. I should have said something to them tell them how wrong they are, and Kylie, that pathetic bitch; I just want to smack her. I am not going to be pushed around anymore I am done crying. I get out of the stall and quickly wash my mouth and dry my eyes and reapply my makeup.

I straighten the gray pencil skirt that I am wearing and move back to my desk.

"Miss Steele, Mr. Grey wants to see you now." Mr. Miller my boss says brusquely.

Of course, he would have seen the video too.

"Yes, sir." He rolls his eyes and moves back into his office slamming the door with a bang startling me. Well so much for mending my working relationship with Mr. Miller. I sigh and take the elevator to the 20th floor.

"You can go right in Miss Steele. Mr. Grey is expecting you." His assistant, I think her name is Andrea, says.

"Thank you." I reply and open the heavy wooden door to his office. He is on the phone yelling at someone and doesn't look up when I get in. There is another dark haired man sitting in front of his desk he smiles kindly at me when he sees me. I have seen him before at the introduction meeting we had when I started my internship at GEH.

"Miss Steele. I am Sam Massey. Head of PR at GEH."

"Hello." I reply and shake his outstretched hand.

Mr. Grey turns his attention to us he looks furious. "Let's get to work Massey, that's what I am paying you for." He snaps angrily at Mr. Massey. He turns his attention to me "Anastasia please sit down. Are you alright?" He asks his tone of voice much milder now.
"A little shaken." I murmur.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I am fine. Thank you, sir." I lie.

"Good. Massey start talking." He snaps again.

"Yes, certainly sir." Mr. Massey replies and scrapes his throat. "I am sure you have been made aware of the fact that you and Mr. Grey were videotaped during your trip to Boston and it has made headlines."

"Yes, a friend showed me." I whisper hoarsely.

"It must have been quite a shock for you been splattered all over the internet and front pages." He says sympathetically.

"What did you tell your friend about our relationship?" Mr. Grey asks coolly.

"I told her you brought me to Boston after our business trip to see my dad. I didn't tell her about our… arrangement." He narrows his eyes at me and I know he is mad.

"Well, since you will be my official date to my mother's function. I think it's best if I put out a press release confirming our... relationship. Sam here agrees." He says pointedly stressing the word relationship.

My stomach plummets the thought is horrifying. Him telling the world and my parents is making everything real and definitive somehow. Something I never wanted to be. I guess a part of me still has not accepted the situation that I am in.

If this becomes public knowledge, the last bit of control I have over my life would disappear. Work here at GEH would become even more unbearable. All those vile bitches would make my life even more miserable and he would lock me up in that house for sure.

"No." I manage to get out. "No, I don't want people to know." I need to stand up for myself now or he will railroad me again. I stare at him defiantly.

"Sam. You are dismissed." He says callously and stares at me, fire blazing his quicksilver eyes. I should be scared of him but for some reason, I am beyond that now. I am done being a punching bag like my mother was to husband number three. It is time to stand up for me.
Meet Me in the Middle

Christian

I am furious, awed, frustrated, and totally bewildered. How dare she tell me no, or question my judgement? She is a force of nature, and I am a hopeless planet crumbling under her might. She is making me question everything I thought and believed in, and it's making me feel rudderless. I was so scared of caning her when she confronted me in the playroom that I needed to keep away from her. I don't understand this! Why did that feel so wrong? I have caned many women but I never felt like this. I have not told Elena yet; I know what she would say. She told me once I was too soft on Anastasia, and that I shouldn't give her any safe words. If she knew what I was doing now she would call me weak and feeble minded for sure. I don't want her to think I was a bad student of disappoint her. But worse of all, if Elena knew, she would most certainly try to interfere and I don't want her to go near Anastasia. Anastasia is mine and mine alone.

Elena never gave me any safe words; she told me that I should accept discipline without question, so I learned control. But somehow, it feels wrong doing the same thing to Ana. I should not have listened to those feelings, because now she keeps challenging me. I hate to admit it, but her denying us hurts like hell. I never felt this way before, and I don't think I can handle it.

I dismiss Sam instantly. I need to talk to her alone and reassert my dominance. I am calling the shots in this arrangement. It is about time she remembers this.

I narrow my eyes at her and stride over to where she is seated. I tower of her and she visibly squirms. Good!

"No?" My voice is deceptively soft.

She looks at me, defiance fierce in her eyes.

"I do not want to go public. If we did, I would not be able to work here anymore and get my degree." She says firmly confounding me.

"What do you mean?" I hiss.

She wrings her hands and looks away from me. I tip her chin forcing her to look at me. Her eyes are wide, both defiant and scared. "Look at me when I am speaking to you."

She swallows nervously.

"People are talking. When I got in this morning, I heard them gossiping behind my back. They say awful stuff. If we go public it will only get worse." She half whispers.

Gossip? I had not even thought of how that might affect her. I guess I am kind of used being a source for gossip. People seem to be obsessed with my love life. The thought that people are talking crap about her makes me boiling mad.

"What are they saying exactly? Tell me." I demand.

She is hesitant, almost unwilling. My patience is slowly slipping. I need to know now.

"Tell me!" I demand, my tone much more insistent now.
"They called me a whore. Saying that I sleep around with rich men for money. I guess they aren't that wrong..." Her voice is a near whisper, filled with sadness, and it tugs at those strange feelings that are whirling inside me. I hate that she thinks she is a whore. She is anything but. Doesn't she understand that I wanted her any way I could get her? Setting up this money trap was nothing more than a means to an end. Fury rages inside me. I want to hurt the people who are spreading this bullshit.

"You are not a whore. You only slept with me and no one else. The way I spend my money is my business and nobody else. I don't want you to ever think that!" I snap and she snorts.

"You paid me and I had sex with you. Our entire arrangement is coined around monetary gains for me. That makes me a whore." She says and I explode.

"Enough! You are mine and no one else's. I won't have you talking about yourself like that. Money was merely a means to an end. I want you regardless of that. I would take you any way I can get you. I want the names of those worthless pieces of shit and I want them now." I don't even realize that I am yelling and scaring her. It makes me feel like shit for some reason.

I sigh and gently stroke her cheek.

"I am sorry I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. Now, do you know the names of the people who are spreading these vicious rumors?" I ask again kinder this time.

She shrugs and hesitates again. I raise my eyebrow at her expecting.

"I was in the restroom. I just heard two women talking about me. I didn't see them I only heard her their names. Jenna and Kelly I think, they said that they got their information from Kylie Jordan." She confesses.

"Kylie Jordan, the other intern?" I clarify just to be sure.

"Yes, they mentioned her specifically. What are you going to do?" she asks fearfully.

"You will see." I answer darkly.

I pick up my phone and press quick dial.

"Roger, Its Grey send your intern Kylie Jordan up now."

"Yes, sir." He replies without question. Anastasia looks fearful.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"Ask her who she has been talking to and then fire her ass."

Anastasia looks appalled for some reason that I don't understand. Shouldn't she be happy that I am getting rid of her tormentors? Besides this will set an example; no one else will dare to talk ill of her again.

"But she needs this job. She can't afford college without it. Please don't fire her." She begs.

"She deserves it. She knows the company policy. I am not letting her hurt you like this. Why do you care anyway? She has been a pain in your ass for months." I snap.

She is quite for a moment.
"I don't like her, I think she is a bitch. But, I don't wish her ill will. If you fire her, it will ruin her life and I don't want that on my conscience. It's cruel. Can't you just reprimand her?" she asks.

Her reaction is baffling to me I expected her to be happy about it. But she actually feels sorry for the bitch. This beautiful, gorgeous woman either really is an angel or is really naïve.

"You are too kind to her, too forgiving. She doesn't deserve it." I growl.

She looks at me both confused and angry.

"Forgiving someone isn't about whether someone deserves it. Nobody deserves to be forgiven. You are in no position to talk about forgiveness." She throws in my face and her words cut right through me, it makes me feel uncomfortable. For a moment, I am at a loss for words.

I swallow and train my gaze away from her.

"Fine she will be disciplined, if that what you want." I acquiesce.

"Thank you, Mr. Grey." She replies visibly relieved.

"I will, however, send an email to everyone at GEH making it perfectly clear to them that this kind of behavior will not be tolerated, and if they insist on doing it any way they will be without a job. If I make it clear that we are in a relationship, the mystique about our relationship is off and people will quickly lose interest."

"Please don't." she begins and I feel my ire rise again.

"Anastasia don't push me. I understand that you resent the gossip but we just solved that. If we are seen in public people will ask questions, and it's best we beat them to the punch."

"It's not that! This entire relationship is a farce, and in six months we will both go our merry way, but people will still remember me as the intern that slept her way to the top. I want to keep what is between us." She says firmly.

I am spitting mad and hurt. This isn't a farce for me! This is everything I ever wanted; she is everything I ever wanted.

"We told your parents, I want to tell mine. I just don't understand why you can't at least try to get along with me. Nobody is going to judge for the relationship you have with me. People break up all the time." I need to placate her. I am not going to tell her that I will never let her go.

She looks at me like I have grown two heads and I scowl at her. A myriad of emotions wash over her face. She looks at me again all doe out and my heart skips a beat.

"Please, Christian it's really important to me. You can tell your parents but I don't want a public statement. Can't we compromise? I know I am stuck in this situation and I need time to adjust. In the contract I signed, it says that you will always put my needs first - I need the opportunity to build a life for myself after this is over. In return, I promise I will be more receptive to what you want for me, you know, keep my end of the deal."

Put her needs first, it is what the contract said. Elena always says that the needs of the dominant are automatically the needs of the submissive. If I did not want something, she always told me that her will was my will. Why isn't my will Anastasia's will, Elena's was mine? This is all so confusing and not adding up. I pull my hair in frustration. What did she say? She wants to compromise and be more receptive to my advances to her. This is bullshit; she should do what I say without question.
She signed the contract dammit! Why am I even entertaining these thoughts? She should be receptive to me regardless. But she isn't Grey, she hates you guts. The little voice in my head makes an unwelcomed appearance. He is right, I don't want her to hate me I want her to... the thought is overwhelming, and my mouth and lips feel dry all of a sudden. You are unlovable Grey nobody will ever love you. The voice taunts in my head again. I shake my head silencing him, the thought is too painful and I quickly suppress it, focussing back on the problem at hand.

Maybe if we do this compromise, as she so eloquently asked for, she will come to me on her own volition. Maybe she will learn to accept me and want me like I want her. It is worth to try, punishing her and trying to break her haven't worked. Maybe if I try this compromise I can get what I want from her.

"If I order Sam not to make a statement about our relationship, what will your end of the bargain look like exactly?" I probe curious about this new deal she is proposing.

She looks thoughtful for a moment.

"I won't argue with you anymore when you ask something from me." She replies.

I scoff loudly. She shouldn't argue with me, period. It is part of the contract. This should not even be up for discussion.

"The whole essence of the contract is that you do as you told. If you argue with me, I punish you. You don't seem to fully grasp that. The only reason why I let you off the hook so often is because this is all new to you. No Anastasia, I want more. I want you to reciprocate my actions, at least act like you care. If you can do that, I won't go public with our relationship." I cock an eyebrow at her.

She looks horrified and it cuts right through me. Am I that much of a monster to her? She nervously wrings her hands and looks down on her lap avoiding eye contact. Suddenly she looks up and stares brazenly into my eyes.

"Alright, I will try and reciprocate your actions." Her voice is shaky but clear and I am completely bewildered. She said yes!? I still can't believe what I just heard.

"You'll do it?" I ask again bemused.

"Yes..." she whispers. I still don't believe her. A part of me is convinced she is pulling my leg just so I won't go public with us. I need to test her.

"Kiss me." I command and her eyes widen.

"What?" She hoarse whispers.

"Show me you can reciprocate. I have kissed you many times, now you kiss me back."

She looks hesitant unwilling even. I knew it she was just all talk.

"Well?" I taunt.

She slowly gets up from her chair and stands in front of me. She leans close and I drink in her delicious scent when she leans closer to me. I can almost feel and taste her sweet lips on mine; the thought alone is so very arousing. Her lips touch mine and her mouth slowly opens, her sweet tongue softly presses against my lips and I eagerly let her slip in. She tastes of fruity tea and mint; it is so very sweet. Her hand slips around my neck when she deepens the kiss. A tingle runs through my spine resonating in my crotch. Fuck I am hard.
I kiss her back with equal vigor. I want her, no; I need her here right now. My hand slips under her skirt caressing her thighs, moving upwards, brushing again her pussy. She shudders and tries to move away from me but I press her against me.

The phone on my desk buzzes disturbing our intimate moment. Fuck! I break away from her, annoyed, and my hard cock throbbing in my pants.

"Don't leave." I tell her and she sits back down on the chair she just vacated. She looks a little bemused, lost even.

I press the buzzer and Andrea's disembodied voice rings to the speaker.

"Miss Jordan is here to see you, sir. And I would like to remind you of your 10 o'clock with Mr. Welch and Mr. Kasich." Right, Fred and Barney, my own Flinstones. I wonder what they have found while researching Olympia shipping.

"Thank you, Andrea, send Miss. Jordan in."

Anastasia gets up to leave but I stop her immediately.

"Where are you going?"

"You're meeting with Miss Jordan." She murmurs as an explanation.

"I want you to stay her with me when I confront her. Please sit back down."

She opens her mouth and closes it again before sitting back down.

Moments later, Kylie Jordan confidently walks into my office. Her blond hair is placed high on her head and she flutters her lashes at me when she sees me. I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her. Dumb twat.

"Miss Jordan, take a seat." I say coolly.

"Yes, sir." She replies eagerly while she moves to the chair at my desk. Her face falls when she sees Ana sitting there. I stand up straight and look down on her. She squirms a bit, and I know she is intimidated. Good. This bitch will receive a lesson she will never forget.

"Miss Jordan let me cut right to the chase. It has come to my attention that you have been spreading vicious lies and rumors about Miss Steele. Don't even think about denying it. I want to know who you told them to and I want to know it now." My voice sounds harsh and cold even to my own ears.

She stammers and squirms in her seat. "Uhm, I don't, I didn't..." she starts stammering.

"Miss Jordan let me cut right to the chase. It has come to my attention that you have been spreading vicious lies and rumors about Miss Steele. Don't even think about denying it. I want to know who you told them to and I want to know it now." My voice sounds harsh and cold even to my own ears.

She stammers and squirms in her seat. "Uhm, I don't, I didn't..." she starts stammering.

"Miss Jordan, let me make this clear for you. Either you tell me now, or you will be out of a job in less than two seconds. Now. Tell. Me. I don't have time for your bullshit."

Her face has turned beet red and tears are streaming down her face. Does she really think turning on the waterworks will save her from my wrath? What a naïve foolish girl she is. If it wasn't for Anastasia's insistence she would be out on the street by now.

"I was just talking to Jenna Cranston and Kelly Bushman. I didn't mean it unkindly, please you have to believe me. I was just surprised you see..." She begins to ramble. I hold up my hand to stop her.
I really want to fire her; I have every reason to. Why should little miss Steele here dictate how I run my company?

"Miss Jordan, I am really not interested. You were mean, vicious, and callous about Miss Steele and myself. You showed zero respect for our privacy and made Miss Steele's working life a lot harder. This is all grounds to terminate you, Ms. Cranston, and Ms. Bushman immediately." She swallows and starts to beg but I tune her out.

Anastasia looks at me wide eyed I think she is both shocked and angry with me. The look she gives Miss Jordan is full of compassion. Something I don't understand stirs within me. This beautiful girl really is a saint.

"Mr. Grey. Please, this is not necessary." She begins and I cave. I promised her I just cannot break it.

I stare at the pitiful creature on the seat in front of me and sigh.

"Miss Jordan. I made a promise to Miss Steele here. She does not agree with me that I should fire you or the other two. The only reason why you are not out of a job yet is because of Miss. Steele's seemingly infinite kindness. I will let your supervisor know that you are on probation and that you have received an official warning. If you are caught, again spreading these falsehoods, you will be fired immediately. Is that understood?" I hiss.

She looks both surprised and relieved and quickly shakes her head.

"Yes, yes sir." She blurts out.

"Now, you will apologize to Miss Steele immediately, and you will apologize to the rest of the company for telling such vicious gossip. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, yes sir, thank you sir." She hastily replies.

"Good. You can start with Miss Steele. After that, you will send an email to everyone you told this shit and retract your words."

"Yes, sir I will." She says and turns her attention to Ana. She nearly trips over her words apologizing to Anastasia, who silently listens to her speech. Like the amazing human being she is Anastasia graciously accepts the twat's apology. For some reason I can't fathom, it makes me feel good, hopeful even. I shake my head and dismiss them both when Andrea tells me that Barney and Welch are waiting.

I quickly call Miller to tell him to reprimand Miss Cranston and Miss Bushman for their part in the gossip before ordering Andrea to let Welch and Barney in.

"Barney, Welch." I greet them curtly when they enter my office.

"Good morning Mr. Grey." They both greet in unison.

"What do you have for me?" I ask cutting straight to the point. I really hate idle chitchat.

"Sir, I have looked into the email server of Olympia shipping per your request, and you are not going to like what I have found. I handed over my findings to Welch who dug further; hence, I requested to have him[HM1] presence with this meeting.

"Cut to the chase, Barney. What did you find?" I ask impatiently.
He hands me a brown manila file. "Take a look for yourself, sir." He replies.

I open the file to see what he means. What the hell?

"These are all invoices for chrome based paint! I specifically ordered them to stop using this kind of paints because of the possible health risks. All these invoices are from after I took over! Why the hell has this never been reported? Did Marcus Pratt know about this? Was he involved?"

"The directors at Olympia used a private server in addition to the official company server. I managed to get in and retain the information that was on them. Mr. Pratt was not involved in their scheme. From what we have gathered thus far, Mr. Lathimer and Mr. Kershaw of Olympia shipping had a couple of people from the department of labor on their payroll. They systematically swept concerns regarding health and safety regulations under the rug to keep down costs and increase profits. The chrome paint is a prime example of that policy. These emails detail their actions, and how they were going to keep it from GEH. They also tried to oppress the union and threatened and fired workers who complained." Barney explained.

"But that's not all Mr. Grey." Welch continues "Because of their unfettered greed, they put the lives of a 120 people that worked at the shipping company at risk. I did some research into the employees and found that, out of the 50 people that worked with the chrome paint on a daily basis, 10 developed serious health issues, and 5 had minor issues with their health. Because you liquidated the company, they all lost their health insurance and have trouble paying their medical bills or getting another job. Mr. Kershaw and Mr. Lathimer plundered the fund that was set up to help them get other employment. Many of the former Olympia employees only received a quarter of the money that was put aside for them as redundancies. They skilfully managed to hide this from Marcus, and thus you. If it wasn't for Barney finding their hidden server we would never have known."

I am furious, blood boiling mad. Nobody fucks me over, and if these two fucktards thought they could, they have another thing coming. They deliberately put people's lives in danger just so they could make an extra buck and they did it right under my nose. Anastasia was right! I am responsible for what happened to her father and I feel like shit.

"I want the names of the employees of the department of labor that were on their payroll and I want it now." I hiss.

"It's in the file, sir." Barney immediately responds. Of course, they would have found that out for me already. There is a reason why I hired them.

"Good." I say before hitting the button of the intercom. "Andrea, get me legal in here right now and cancel all my morning meetings." I sneer and slam the button again.

"I am going to ruin these fuckers; all of them. Good work Welch and Barney."

The rest of the morning, I spend strategizing our next moves against the former owners of Olympia shipping and their cohorts at the department of labor. I want them arrested for fraud, blackmail, and corruption. My legal team advised me to hand over this information to the Justice Department and the FBI since the money they stole crossed state boarders. Unfortunately, I had to cancel my lunch meeting with Anastasia to sort this mess out.

It's late when I am finally ready to go home. I ordered Sawyer to take Anastasia home already since its past 20:00. I want nothing more than to have a hot meal a shower and to crawl into bed with her. She has the right to know what happened at the shipping company right under my nose. I will make it clear to her that those responsible will be punished for what they did.
My phone buzzes and I look at the caller ID. It's Elena. For some reason, I don't really want to talk to her right now. I reluctantly answer her.

"Christian, what gives?" She immediately says.

"Good evening to you too, Elena." I reply tersely.

"I haven't talked to since you got back from your business trip. Let's have dinner." She offers.

"I am very busy at the moment Elena. I will not able to this week."

"Oh, well it has been a while since I saw you and I am really curious on how your little project is going. Do you need any help training her?"

The thought of Elena seeing Ana vulnerable and in all her glory is horrifying. For some reason I don't fully grasp, I just don't want her near Anastasia. Ana is mine and only mine.

"I am fine Elena. We are doing well." I reply noncommittally.

"Well, I am really interested in how she is responding to you. You should collar her, take her to the club sometimes, and do a scene with her. I want to see how my star pupil turned out." She flatters.

She knows I don't do public scenes or share subs! Why does she keep going on about this? It is pissing me off.

"You know I don't share subs or do public scenes, Elena. Just trust me we are doing fine."

"I am worried about you, Christian. I am worried she will play and manipulate you just to get her way. I told you be firm and break her... Well, I suppose I can see for myself at your parents' charity event next week if you followed my advice. I met her once so I can hold that as a benchmark."

I really don't want to disappoint Elena, but I don't want to break Ana. I just need to see how our current amended relationship will be working out. If it fails, I don't want Elena to see it.

"Elena, I can handle this. And about my parent's charity, I would appreciate it if you didn't come there. I don't want you to talk to Anastasia. I need you to leave her alone until I have fully broken her. We can have dinner sometime next week to talk things through." I offer to soften the blow.

She is silent for a moment.

"Well, that is a highly unusual request from you Christian. What will your mother say when I don't show up?"

"Tell her you are busy. Make something up." I snap annoyed.

"Well, because this is so important to you I will. I care about you Christian, I just want what is best for you." She sighs. "We can catch up with a nice dinner at Canlis sometime next week."

"Fine. I'll see you next week. Bye Elena." I hang up the phone, glad to have her of my case.

Taylor and two other security guards are already waiting for me when I get out of the office. Having security around 24/7 since I became a billionaire is a necessary evil. It is like being surrounded by the secret service every minute of the day.

We take the private elevator down the garage. Reynolds opens the door for me, while Taylor gets behind the wheel of the car. Ryan rids shotgun with Taylor, while Reynolds follows us in another
black Audi Q7. The drive home takes only 30 minutes, but I am eager to talk to Anastasia.

The car stops in front of the house, and Taylor opens my door before I get out.

"Good evening Mr. Grey." Gail greets me when I enter the house.

"Evening Gail. Where is Miss Steele?"

"In the library, Mr. Grey. When do you want to have your dinner served?" She asks kindly.

"In 10 minutes if possible."

"Certainly sir." She says smiling at me.

I walk to the library and see Anastasia sitting sideways on a chair in front of the fireplace. She is engrossed in a book and does not even notice me.

"Good evening Anastasia."

She startles and almost drops her book.

"I am sorry I did not mean to frighten you. Did you have dinner yet?" I ask.

"Yes, I hope you don't mind." She replies softly.

I move closer to her and stroke her cheek.

'No, not at all. I would hate it off you would go hungry. Although, I would appreciate it if you would join me in the dining room in 10 minutes. There is something I need to tell you. It is important."

She looks surprised for a moment.

"Uhm, sure." She murmurs and gets up from her chair.

"I am sorry that I had to cancel our lunch meeting today. I have been crazy busy. How was your day? Did people still bother you?"

"It was fine. Mr. Miller made those two women apologize and I have not heard anyone talking behind my back after the email you sent."

"Good." I say while nodding at her. I place my hand on the small of her back and guide her out of the library to the dining room.

"Sit. Do you want anything?" I pull out a chair for her and she sits down. I sit down next to her.

"No, I am fine." She replies. I call Gail in the kitchen and tell her to serve dinner.

A couple of minutes later she comes in with a delicious smelling sirloin steak, roasted potatoes, and green vegetables. I dig in immediately, appeasing my growling stomach.

"I have some news. You told me a while back that GEH was responsible for your father's illness. At that time, I refused to believe you. However, some things you said made me question that certainty. I did some research into our takeover and subsequent liquidation of Olympia shipping. What I have found out angered me greatly." I take out the manila folder and handed it over to her.
"What is this?" she asks.

"The things we found out. I can assure you those responsible will be brought to justice." I feel the anger rise again.

"They deliberately used chrome paint because it was cheaper even though they knew it was a health risk?" she asks completely aghast.

"Yes. After I ordered them not to." I point out.

"This is horrible. How many people got sick?" she asks horrified.

"10, including your dad. The people who worked with the stuff daily got very ill, and 5 have various lighter health issues. I want you to know that we have opened a fund to pay for their medical expenses. I am not the monster you think I am. Like I told you, the health and safety of my staff are important to me."

She is quiet for a moment, contemplative even.

"What will happen to the people who did this?" she asks

"They will be prosecuted. We have turned this information over to the authorities. They should be making arrests soon."

"I hope they get what they deserve. Thank you for taking another look at this on my behalf."

"You are welcome, Anastasia. Like I said, I was hoping we could start over. Get to know each other better before moving on to the playroom. I need you to trust me for that. Therefore, I am proposing something additional. Every day we will do truth or dare. You will ask me and I will ask you. What do you think?"

"I, I... Does that mean you won't initiate sex with me if I don't want to? Or is this just about the playroom?" she asks

What? Does she really hate the sex so much? What a load of bullshit! She loves it just as much as I do. She always came when we were intimate multiple times. It is this ridiculous socially constructed guilt that messes with her head, telling her she shouldn't like what I do to her. I had it too when I first started my affair with Elena. I need to make her understand that she should just let it go. I need to make it clear to her that it isn't a sin to love the sex she has with me.

But how do I do this without scaring her off? I look at her, her eyes are wide and pleading, and for the first time, I am at a loss for words and have no idea what to do…
Charity begins at home

Anastasia

I stare at him pleadingly, hoping he will understand that I don't really want to have sex with him. Yes, I signed the contract and he kept his end of the bargain. I am even willing to admit that I misjudged him about my father and I feel guilty for it. However, that does not change how I feel when he initiates intimacy with me. Why doesn't he understand that what he did to me was wrong? That he hurt me and made me feel demeaned and degraded? That I would not have slept with him if he hadn't coerced me to? He is so different from anyone I met before. His way of thinking is so completely different that I don't really know how to make him understand how I feel. He is just so damaged in his own way.

Maybe if things were different and I hadn't misjudged him, we could have been a couple, but we are past that station now.

"You enjoyed what I did to you, Anastasia. Why can't you just accept that? Why are you so ashamed for loving sex just as much as I do? Let go of this ridiculous moral burden. Trust me, you will feel better for it. I am speaking from experience."

Why can't he understand that my body's psychical response is just a natural reaction? That I did not want what he did to me? A little part of me is intrigued, though. What does he mean by speaking from experience? He has nightmares, he is damaged, but what happened to him? Did someone abuse him too?

"Mr. Grey, Christian, what you did to me was wrong. I did not enjoy it like you think I did. My body merely gave a natural reaction. But I did not like what you did to me. Please try to understand that I felt demeaned and degraded like I am a piece of meat for you to use whenever you feel like it." My voice is soft, almost a whisper. I am afraid of his reaction. His face looks grim, angry even. I need to try and explain this to him. Suddenly inspiration hits me. "Truth or dare?" I ask taking him by surprise.

"What?" He asks slightly bemused.

"Truth or dare? You wanted us to get to know each other better. I want to know you better, so truth or dare?"

He scratches his chin for a moment and cocks his head to the right and looks at me quizzically.

"Ok, alright, I'll play. Truth." He finally answers.

"You said you were speaking from experience, about what you did to me. What did you mean by that?" I ask genuinely interested in his answer.

He sighs, runs his hands through his hair, and mutters something inaudible under his breath. He looks at me, doubt marring his face. For a moment, I think he will call the whole thing off.

"I was an out of control teen getting into fights at school, getting expelled, drinking. You get the idea." He pauses for a brief moment. "My parents were at their wits end and did not know what to do. So a friend of my mother's suggested that I needed to do some hard manual labor, that it would straighten me out. Therefore, I started to work for her, cleaning up stuff in her backyard. One day she brought me something to drink and I made some smart-ass remark at her. She slapped me hard on my face and then kissed me and cupped my crotch… I felt confused, angry and aroused at the
same time.

I asked why she did that and she told me that I needed to learn control. She told me that she could make me stop drinking and fighting, become successful, making my parents proud of me. All I needed to do was let her take complete control of my life, do everything that she said. She introduced me to BDSM. At first, I hated it and I did not want to do it, it felt wrong but somehow it also felt really good. Elena told me that I shouldn't let societal norms dictate how I felt and just enjoy what she did to me.

That I shouldn't feel ashamed for enjoying the sex and being submissive, that it was all just natural. She was right. Elena turned my life around for the better. I stopped fighting and drinking, got good grades, got accepted into Harvard, and when I dropped out she helped me start GEH. So you see, I know and understand exactly how you feel and I am asking you to let go. Stop feeling ashamed of what we do. It is only natural." He looks at me imploringly his gray eyes wide almost pleading.

I am completely stunned. This is not what I expected at all. He was abused and he does not even realize it. He truly thinks that this is normal! This is so messed up, I just don't know what to do or say! Elena? Where did I hear that name before…? The image of the tall blond woman that gave me the creeps when Grace took me to the beauty salon springs to mind. It was her, she is his abuser! Instinctively I knew something was off with her.

"Does your mother know?" Is all I manage the squeak out.

He looks at me like I have grown two heads.

"Of course not! It's not like I could tell her that I was sleeping with a woman more than twice my age that happens to be her friend." He snaps clearly irritated.

More than twice his age? The woman is nothing more than a disgusting pedophile. Why doesn't he understand this? How can I make him understand?

"Mr. Grey..." I start and he looks at me pointedly. "Christian." I quickly amend feeling a little stupid for using his last name in such an intimate conversation. "There is something that I don't understand. If it wasn't wrong, what she and you did like she told you and like you felt like in the beginning, why couldn't you just tell your parents?"

"Anastasia, don't be ridiculous! My father is a lawyer and my mother is a pediatrician paragon[s] of societal morality. On top of that, they are devout members of Episcopal Church with very orthodox values and dogmas, unable to see past their own morality. They would never have understood what was going on between Elena and me, and how she helped me become the son they always wanted me to be. If anything, they should be grateful to her. Elena saved my life. She made me the man I am today. Rich, powerful, and in control of every aspect of my life." He says with complete and utter conviction it's unnerving.

Does he really believe this? Can't he see how wrong and fucked up what she did to him was? For a moment, I am completely stunned, at a loss for a coherent response. What he says does not make sense at all.

"You said it yourself, your parents are good, moral people. Given their respected professions they need to be... open-minded and look past their own orthodox belief system. If it truly wasn't wrong, what you and that woman did, they would have understood. She abused you, Christian like you are abusing me. She abused you when you were a vulnerable troubled young teen. There is no defence for that." I try to reason with him.
He rubs his hand through his hair furiously and pinches the bridge of his nose. He stands up straight glowering at me. A chill runs down my spine and fear takes a hold of me again. He looks menacing.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you. You are just like all the others, narrow-minded and judgemental. We made a deal, I merely forced you to keep your end of the bargain. You know nothing about me and how fucked up I was. Don't presume to know me just because I shared a tidbit with you. This discussion is over!" He bellows and I cringe. I want to be anywhere else but in the tense confines of dining room.

I grab my bag from the ground and try to move inconspicuously to the door.

"I haven't dismissed you. He hisses narrowing his eyes at me. His handsome face is contorted with unrestrained anger, giving him almost a reptilian look. I inwardly shudder.

"I am sorry." I mutter weakly hoping this won't further escalates.

"Regardless of all what's said and done, we made a deal Anastasia. You signed my contract and I will hold you to it. It is as simple as that. And if you feel the need to question and argue about everything I tell you then maybe... I should reconsider our little game of truth or dare. Now you are dismissed." He says bluntly while dismissively waving his hand at the door of the dining room.

I am hoping that I can spend the rest of the evening alone. I don't think I can handle another one of his outbursts today. At least I can take solace in the fact that the gossip at the office has died down thanks to his involvement. My phone however, has not stopped ringing all day long. I resolve to call Jose, Kate, my mom and Jimmy tonight.

"Ana!" Kate squeals happily through the phone.

"Hi, Kate."

"OMG, I have so much to tell you! And you, you should spill the beans right now! Tell me about you and Grey I want to hear every sordid detail." She rambles through the phone.

I dreaded this conversation for so long. Kate will go all Bernstein on me if I don't give a little titbit. And I just don't think I can withstand the Kavanagh inquisition.

"There is not much to tell. Mr. Grey is my boss and I accompanied him on a business trip to Italy. We talked a little and I told him about Ray. He was nice enough to make a stop in Boston so I could visit him and mom there. But we don't have any kind of romantic relationship." There I gave her just enough of the truth to stop digging, at least that is what I hope. I don't want her to know about the sick relationship I have with Mr. Grey.

"Well, I find that hard to believe looking at those pictures Ana. You two look amazing and sweet together. And you know what! I am dating his brother. Pity that you are not dating Christian. If you did we could finally be sisters." She blurts out happily. I am stunned, completely and totally flabbergasted. Is she dating his brother? How? When?

"What, how? When?" I manage to squeak out.

"Remember the hot blond guy I danced with at that club in Portland? Well, his name is Elliot Grey, the brother of billionaire hotshot Christian Grey. We met up again by accident in a small coffee shop in Portland. Can you believe it? Oh, Ana, he is amazing." She says dreamingly.

We quickly fall into an easy conversation and I realize how much I missed having girl talk with
Kate. It is a nice distraction from my own problems. She tells me all about Elliot, sounding like a little school girl having her very first crush. It makes me smile. I don't think I have ever seen Kate so in love before.

"Oh, and he has asked me to be his date to this charity ball his parents are organizing so I can meet them. He is just so chivalric." She says all dreamy and my heart drops in my stomach. Shit, shit, shit! It is the same ball Christian is taking me. Oh God no! Kate will know. I feel sick and sweaty that I hardly pay any attention anymore to what she is saying. This is bad, really bad. I need to find a way to get out of this date with Grey. If Kate sees us together again, she will be relentless.

There is a knock on the door interrupting my swirling thoughts.

"Kate hold on a second." I say when Mrs. Jones comes into the room.

"Miss Steele I don't mean to disturb you but Mr Grey has requested your presence down stairs for tea and biscuits." She says softly.

Crap! I was so wrapped up in my conversation with Kate that I did not notice that it's almost eight already. I don't want to stoke Grey's ire further by testing his patience again.

"Kate something came up and I have to go I will talk to you later ok?"

"Uhm, sure." She says hesitantly "Laters, Ana." She says and hangs up the phone. I throw my own cell phone on the bed and make my way downstairs to the drawing room where he is already seated. The roaring fire creates a comfortable warmth.

"About time." He says sullenly.

"I am sorry. Kate called and the phone call took longer than I expected." I reply tentatively, not wanting to set him off.

"When I tell you to come, you come immediately I am getting tired of repeating myself and your lame excuses." He glowers at me and I feel my heart slam against my ribcage in dread.

"I am truly sorry Mr… Christian I swear it won't happen again." I say lamely. I am getting so tired of arguing with this man. Maybe I should just leave? He paid for Ray's treatments, I could just try and sneak out again, right? My unsuccessful escape attempt in Italy and its aftermath come unbidden into my mind again. No, he would find me and surely have me locked up in prison for stealing his money.

I look up at him he looks so sad and dejected. Is he still upset from what I said to him? The unwelcome feeling of sympathy flows through me. Maybe I should just woman up and take responsibility for my actions? Serve out his contract no matter how hard it is? I loathe myself for even contemplating the thought, but I don't really see another option. Yes, I was wrong, but what he did to me just doesn't compare. But I also know that this combativeness is not getting me anywhere. It is tiring and only makes me more upset. Maybe I really should try to understand him even if I don't agree with him. I could at least try and listen without judgment right? I remember grandma Steele quoting the bible verse Who is without sin cast the first stone. I can try to live by that quote, after all, he has been honest and forthcoming with me when I asked him for the truth. Even when I did not like what came out of his mouth.

"Make sure that it doesn't." he snaps back irritated and I am instantly tense again, fearing the meaning of his words, and my generous thoughts about trying to understand him instantly evaporate.
Miss Jones brings us tea and coffee and a try full of fresh pastries. It smells delicious but I am not very hungry. I know he will blow another gasket if I don't take anything so I reluctantly take a bite out of a crème horn. It tastes amazing.

We drink our beverages in silence, but I can feel his burning gaze fixed on me throughout our dinner. I am already on edge due to his veiled threat, his penetrating stares makes me feel even more flushed and uncomfortable.

I breathe a sigh of relief when he drowns his coffee and gets up from his chair without uttering a word. Once he has left the drawing room I quickly follow suit and almost run to my bedroom. I try to call Jose back but he does not answer and neither does Jimmy. I feel a little sad that I do not get to talk to them. I miss them more than I thought was possible. I decide to take a shower to clear my mind a little.

The water is warm and relaxing, soothing my jumbled thoughts. I close my eyes and enjoy the luxurious feeling. Then I feel him before I see him; his strong masculine scent invading my senses startling me out of my own little world.

The look in his eyes is intense and feral like a predator eyeing its prey. I instinctively move backward slamming my back against the shower wall. A shiver runs down my spine and my mouth feels dry like cotton. Deep down, I always knew that he only would give me a brief reprieve from his sexual advances. I am not that naïve. He made it crystal clear to me this morning. He expects me to uphold my end of the 'deal/contract' or face the dire consequences. I had no intention of facing his wrath. I swallow nervously when his eyes shamelessly roam over my body hungrily and I flush beet red. It's a huge difference from the sad, sullen dejected man who stormed out of the dining room replaced by a confident, dominant man who standing right in front of me. He is just so mercurial.

"You are so beautiful." There is an odd hint of awe in his voice. He slowly undoes the buttons of his shirt without ever taking his eyes off me. He slides his shirt gracefully of his broad shoulders. He opens the button of his trousers and artfully pulls them down with his boxer briefs. I swallow at the sight of his enormous erection, and I idly wonder how that thing ever had fit inside of me.

He climbs in the shower with me and holds his hand out for the shampoo.

"May I?" He husky whispers. His pupils are so far dilated that his eyes appear to be completely black. His gaze is lustful and primitive, like a tiger ready to strike down its prey. I shudder at the sight of him not daring to deny his simple request. I nod and hand him the shampoo, and he gives me a slow, almost predatory smile.

"Sure." I croak out hardly recognizing my own voice. He pushes me further under the shower, completely wetting my hair. He gently massages my scalp with his large hands and I cannot help but relax at his ministrations.

"You have such beautiful hair Ana, you are just so perfect. Why do you have to be so perfect?" He murmurs more to himself than to me. His warm breath caresses ear making me shiver.

"I just can't get enough of you. I think about you every minute of every day. I know I should have left you alone when you asked me to but I just simply can't. You have bewitched me, Ana. I have never felt anything like this before." His voice is soft and earnest. His admission is both shocking and terrifying. He can't have feelings for me! He is in lust with me, I can handle that, but the thought of him feeling more for me is just frightening; it makes things emotional and messy. I need to make him understand that it's nothing more than lust that he feels. I am ready to be amicable for the duration of his contract and stop the constant tiring bickering but love, love has no place in this
sick relationship that we have.

"I guess that's what lust feels like." I counter softly and he holds his ministrations for a moment turning my head so I can look him in the eye.

"Maybe." He replies a little hesitant "These feelings, they are all new to me. I, don't…" He doesn't finish his sentence but starts his ministrations again now lathering my hair with shampoo and carefully rinsing it out. He sighs contently "I like washing your hair and bathing you. I never thought I would enjoy a simple action so much." He confesses and lathers me up again with soap. His hands roam all over my body caressing every inch of my back and shoulders before boldly sliding over my breasts gently squeezing my nipples and pushing his hard erection into my backside. I gasp at the sting of his squeeze.

"May I continue? I want to wash all of you." I murmur near my ear. I am somewhat surprised that he is asking for my permission now. Maybe he really is making an effort to earn my trust?

"Yes." I croak out, ignoring the wetness between my legs. I hate how my body responds to his touch; it makes me feel confused and uneasy.

His hands continue to move downwards between my thighs brushing over the mouth of my vagina.

"You're wet." He hisses in awe.

"I am standing under water." I reply tartly, embarrassed by my body's reaction to him.

"Anastasia, stop being ashamed of your body. It is perfectly natural to feel aroused. Let go of your ridiculous puritan world view." He scolds me while continuing his exploration of my body.

"I am not ashamed of my body. I just… this is all so confusing." I confess.

"Just stop thinking like that ok? Embrace what we have, what you feel. I won't do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. Just tell me to stop and I will. I want to earn your trust, that is all that matters to me. Once you trust me more we can explore the other aspects of the contract further." He replies heatedly.

Ok, so he is serious in giving me some choice, or at least he is claiming he will stop if I ask him.

"I don't like your hands there. It makes me feel uncomfortable." I murmur and he instantly moves his hand away from my crotch. Skimming down to my thighs and legs softly massaging my flesh.

So he means it. I feel relieved, it means that I can stop him when things get out of hands

"Your wish is my command." He kneels down in front of me and starts lathering my feet and legs. "You have such lovely feet. Lean against the wall I want to scrub your feet." I do as he says and he starts massaging my feet. The feeling is divine, he is really good at this. I lean my head back against the shower wall and close my eyes.

"Done." He mutters and puts my feet down on the ground. I open my eyes and come face to face with his hard muscular chest. I notice nine small white round scars running across his chest in almost perfect synchrony. Maybe they are from chicken pox? Seems strange though that they are so perfect put together.

I take up the shower gel bottle absentmindedly. Maybe he expects me to reciprocate? Return the favor? I squeeze some gel on my hands and move them towards his chest.
"NO!" He yells in anguish and grabs my wrist in an iron hold. "Don't touch me." He hisses angrily. "I thought…"

"You thought wrong! I don't like to be touched. Don't try to touch me again I am warning you. It's for your own safety." He says in a more conciliatory manner.

I am stunned. "Why not?" I stammer.

He sighs and runs his hands through his hair. Before locking eyes with me.

"Like I told you, I had a rough childhood until I was adopted by the Grey's. I still carry both the mental and psychical scars on my body and mind. I do not want to talk about it." His voice is laced with sadness.

Suddenly, it all makes sense. The way he bound my hands the first time we had sex, or him always taking me from behind. Carefully avoiding me touching him. It partially explains why he is fucked up. A strange mixture of overwhelming sadness and anger course through me.

"You can't be touched at all?" I ask wanting to know more.

"There are no-go areas. My chest and my back are always off limits. My shoulders biceps and arms can be touched when I know they are about to be touched."

"I see. Has it always been this way? I mean your mother must have touched you... To shower or change?" I want to know more I want to try to understand him.

He shrugs.

"Grace always respected my boundaries. She never touched my no-go areas. I was a very independent four-year-old."

"What about your birthmother? She must have touched you?"

His eyes frost over and turn to steel.

"I have had enough of this subject. Drop it Anastasia." He snaps.

"I am sorry I did not mean too…"

He holds his hands up.

"I said drop it. Here, you can wash my hair." He says in a more placating tone.

"Ok... You need to bend down you're a little tall."

He chuckles and bends his head towards me. I pour some shampoo in my hands and start massaging his scalp. His hair is dark red, thick and soft.

He softly hums in appreciation.

"There, you're done. You can wash it out now."

He opens his eyes, and there is a vulnerability about him that shocks me. He is usually so brutal
"Thank you." He mutters and washes out the shampoo. We stand together under the stream of hot water for a little longer.

"Come; let's get you out from under the water. You are turning into a prune." He presses his hand against my lower back and guides me out of the shower.

"I will dry and dress you." He says with a clipped voice that does not broker any argument and I let him. Silently wondering why this seems so important to him. It is not the first time he demanded to dry and dress me.

After he is done, he flips the covers on the bed and orders me to get in. He moves to his side of the bed and slides in behind me pulling me close to him.

"Christian..." I start, not knowing what to ask him exactly.

There is still so much I want to ask him, but he soon makes it clear that any conversation is over for today.

"Go to sleep Anastasia." He says and turns off the light plunging us into darkness.

The week goes by in a blur and my anxiety has increased 10 folds since Monday. Every day has been pretty much the same: work, freshen up, dinner and a shower together followed by sleeping in his bed. I've hardly been in my own room lately. The only distinction during the rest of the week was that Christian refused to answer any more questions about his life. In addition, when I tried to tell him that my best friend was seeing his brother and accompany him to the gala, he cut me off rudely. Telling me that it has no consequence to our gala date.

He does not care what Kate will say or blurt out to other people. I, on the other hand, do. I am sure she won't believe me now when I tell her is just my boss. I dread the Kavanagh inquisition more than anything else.

I sigh and skim my hands over the soft fabric of the beautiful silver Gucci dress picked out for me tonight. He expects me to be ready and waiting downstairs for him in a little less than an hour. I contemplated on feigning an illness but I am pretty sure he would call in a doctor to check up on me in no time. To avoid the embarrassment of being caught in a lie, I decided against it.

There is a knock on the door.

"Come in." I call to whoever is knocking.

A blond girl with perfectly coifed hair enters my room. She is wearing white beautician grabs with Escalva embroidered in gold letters on her chest. Escalva? That the pedo's salon! I feel sick to my stomach when the realization hits me. This means he is still speaking to that horrible woman. He really does not understand that she has abused him! The knowledge is somehow sobering but depressing.

"Good evening Miss Steele I am Greta Nilson and I will be doing your hair and makeup for tonight." She says briskly.

"Hello." I say trying to sound polite. It is not her fault that she is working for a pedo bitch.

She sits me down in front of the mirror and starts working on my hair.
"Are you excited for tonight?" She asks casually.

"Uhm, yeah sure." I reply noncommittally.

"Forgive me for being so forward but you must be very special if Mr. Grey is taking to the ball." She says almost dreamingly. I want to scoff at her but I refrain. She gives me a small smile. "But I can see why he would be, you are very beautiful."

"Thank you." I mutter shyly feeling slightly awkward.

"I mean, Mr. Grey has never taken a woman out in public before, not even the ones Mrs. Lincoln send to him." She says, more to herself than to me. She immediately gasps realizing her mistake. "I am sorry, I should not have told you that. Please don't tell anyone I told you that I would lose my job." She says a little panicky.

My mind is reeling. She is not only his abuser but also his pimp! This is all just so fucked up. She owns him and he does not even realize it. I need to know more.

"What kind of women did Mrs. Lincoln send to him?" I try to ask as nice as possible.

"Please, Miss Steele, forget I said anything. It was unprofessional of me." She begs.

I need to reassure her quick.

"Greta, please I won't tell anyone. This is all just news to me. I swear this will remain between us." I plead her.

She is hesitant for a moment.

"It was a running joke at the salon. Every three, six, or nine months, another brunette would visit Mrs. Lincoln in her office. Weeks later, they would come again accompanied by Mr. Grey. It was just odd."

"Does she still send him women?" I need to know more.

She looks at me shocked.

"No, I think she stopped sending him women a little over a year ago, after one of the girls she sent killed herself in his apartment. As far as I know he only had one at the time."

My mind is numb, unable to process all the information Greta is telling me. I remember Jimmy telling me that one of his ex-girlfriends killed herself in his kitchen. But hearing this now does not make sense at all. What kind of depraved relationship did he have with these girls that it led one to kill herself? What little sympathy I was beginning to feel for him slowly dissolves. He really is heartless and ruthless.

"Do you know why she killed herself?" I ask not sure if I want to know the answer.

"I am not sure. Rumour was that she fell in love with him but he did not love her back." She answers thoughtfully.

"I see." I reply not knowing what else to say. All this information is just so shocking.

"Mr. Grey and Mrs. Lincoln are they close friends?" I need to know. This woman is dangerous maybe even more dangerous than he is.
She shrugs.

"He is a silent partner of the salons. I don't know how close their friendship is. Please don't tell anyone about this Miss Steele."

So he is her business partner too. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse. I need time to process all this. It is all just too much to comprehend. To fuck up.

"I swear that this will be between us. Thank you for telling and trusting me Greta." I reassure her.

Greta finishes my makeup and I hardly recognize myself in the mirror. My eyes are smoky and my lips are a deep warm red. I never considered myself beautiful but now I have to admit that I look good.

"All done." She says smiling at me.

"Thank you, Greta. I really like it." I smile back at her and she beams. I look at the clock it is time to go. I know how punctual Christian is; I don't want to set him off by being late yet again.

I thank Greta again and she leaves my room waving goodbye. I grab the matching clutch from my bed and don't even hear the door open again.

I turn around and let out a yelp. Christian is standing at the entrance gawking at me. He looks extremely handsome in his black tuxedo and white dress shirt. His ginger hair is combed to the side and his gray eyes are smoldering. There is so much I want to tell him, confront him with everything I just heard but my mind is so jumbled that I can only stare at him dumbfounded unable to utter a sensible word.

"You look stunning Anastasia." He murmurs appreciatively and prowls into the room gracefully like a tiger drinking me in.

"Thank you. You look handsome too." He smiles at me and pulls a large square red box from the inside of his jacket pocket.

I open the box and stare mesmerized at the beautiful diamond cluster necklace set in platinum. The diamonds sparkle in the bedroom lights.

"I don't know what to say, I can't accept this." I say perplexed.

"You will say thank you Christian and you will accept it. Don't ruin this evening with your petulant attitude." He snaps irritated.

He takes the necklace from me and orders me to turn around. He quickly snaps it around my neck and I realize it's just like a dog collar. That wasn't about him giving me something for me it was about him placing a mark of ownership on me. The thought is sobering and painful. All his talk about trust was just a rouse he simply sees me as one of his acquisitions that needs to be managed and controlled. Maybe I am an idiot for trying to understand him or bestow him any sympathy. He is nothing but a heartless sociopath. It is just that being compliant makes things just so much easier. I feel like a coward for doing so but I am just so tired of fighting him..

"Here." He hands me another box and I open it.

In it is a stunning silver filigree mask. I look him questioningly.

"It's a masked ball. You need to put it on when we are at the mansion. It's a win-win situation
really. This way nobody will recognize you." He says matter of factly.

It is a relief, although I doubt Kate would not recognize me.

"Do you have a mask?"

"Yes of course. Everybody at the ball does." He answers and takes out a black Zorro-like mask.

"Let's go. My mother does not appreciate tardiness and neither do I." He says and takes my hand and leads my downstairs towards the car. He opens the door for me and I slide into the back seat. He follows suit and straps me in before I can do it myself. Why does he always have to do this? This insistent need to care for me? It makes this all so much more confusing. The car starts to drive and I stare out the window again, anxiety increasing with every mile we travel. I feel like a gas tank that has been topped to full and is about to overflow, not knowing how to deal with everything I have heard and feel.
Masquerade

Christian

Ever since Elena took me under her wing, I have been sure of myself and the direction my life needed to take. I never questioned her, us, or myself. Until Anastasia came into my life. I stare at her perfect profile that is sporadically illuminated by the streetlights we pass by. It kind of reminds me of the first time I saw her dancing so fearlessly in that club in Portland. I am still not quite sure what it was that attracted me so much the first time I saw her. Was it the way her body moved enticingly to the beat of the music? Was it her sheer stunning beauty that captivated me? Her charm, intellect and quick-witted banter? Her ocean blue eyes? I wanted nothing more than to drown in their depths. Or maybe it was a combination of it all. All I know is that she called to me on some deep, primal, fundamental level, and I wanted her more than I ever wanted anything. This feeling has only been intensified and I know that I don't want to and cannot let her go.

Elena told me to break her and rebuild her, but I just could not do it. I want to see her smile, laugh at my jokes, I want to banter with her or talk about life and the universe with her. I recently realized that if I break her I will never have that. No, I need another way to bind her to me. She needs to fall in love with me the same way I am enchanted by her. But how do I get her to love me? I inwardly scoff. Elena always says that love is for fools. Do I love Ana? Am I a fool? Or is this nothing more than an infatuation. The thought alone is scaring the hell out of me. No, I cannot love anyone. Elena said that I was one of those rare people incapable of loving and she has always been right about everything. I just need her like the crack whore needed her crack. I am a junky addicted to her very essence needing her every minute of every day. She has become the center of my universe. I inwardly scoff: Master of the universe my ass! She is my drug that I cannot live without. I guess I am no different than the crack whore was.

My phone buzzes and Elena's name appears on the screen. I ignore it; I am no mood for her overbearing attitude right now.

Lately, she has been relentless, hounding me with questions and unsolicited advice. I don't want Elena to intervene with the relationship I am trying to build with Anastasia, and I have asked her not to attend this charity event. She was not amused, to say the least. She wants me to bring Anastasia to her playroom so she can help me train her. I told her a million times that I don't share or have any exhibitionist tendencies. She knows this very well and her pushiness is starting to annoy me. But Elena is my only friend so I let it slide. She has done so much for me; without her, I would have been dead or in jail. Anastasia calling her a pedophile really angered me. I might have been reluctant in the beginning but in the end, it all worked out for the best. Has it Grey? A small irritating voice that has been whining in my head ever since Anastasia started her nonsense about Elena rings in my head, but I quickly suppress it. I don't need this bullshit, especially not now.

The car rolls through the gates of my parents' Bellevue estate. Like expected, my mother has outdone herself. Chinese lanterns illuminate the driveway; two large swans carved out of ice graciously flank the path that is leading to the back of the manor house. Taylor stops in front of the house and a valet opens our car door. I give Anastasia a little smile. "Put on your mask. It's show time." I slide my own mask on my face, feeling strangely liberated. I guess it is because I have been masquerading for so long that putting on a mask has the opposite effect. I take her hand and guide her out of the car. She looks breathtakingly beautiful; the silver mask makes her sapphire eyes pop out drawing everyone in. I almost cannot believe that she is really here, with me.
A beautiful inwrought flower filled pergola adorns the red carpet path leading to the back of my parents’ mansion.

"Mr. Grey a picture please." The photographer of the Seattle times asks. Anastasia’s eyes widen under her mask in dismay. It is irritating. Is being associated with me such a horrible thing?

"Relax nobody will recognize you." I snap.

"They will, they have seen me with you before! Even if I am wearing a mask they will put two and two together they aren't stupid." She hisses.

"Trust me they are. I will make sure they won’t mention your name anywhere. Besides, the photos from the hotel are blurry. Now act like a proper date and let the man take a picture." She opens her mouth to protest again but I silence her with a harsh glare. I pull her close to me and nod at the photographer who is patiently waiting for my reply. He quickly snaps a picture.

"Thank you, Mr. Grey. Miss?" He asks Anastasia.

"The name of my date is not relevant," I say dismissively and stir Anastasia to the back of the house where several large party tents are set up. Fire jugglers and breathers give a spectacular show for the arriving guests and the backyard has been transformed into a winter wonderland. Terrace heaters are placed everywhere giving off a pleasant warmth. Fake snow and dozens of snowmen, reindeer, sleds and Santa's litter the premises. A large Christmas tree filled with hundreds of little lights stands in the middle of it all. I glance at Anastasia her face is a mixture of surprise and awe and I feel oddly proud that she is somewhat impressed by all this.

"Christian dear, you are here and you really brought Anastasia with you." My mother greets me, smiling from ear to ear with my father in tow.

"Mother." I bend forward and kiss her cheek.

"I am so glad you two are here. It makes me so happy knowing that Christian finally found someone. Anastasia dear how have you been?" she says turning her attention to Anastasia who is standing next to me looking pale and in shock. I gently pinch her arm reminding her of her obligation to me.

"Mrs. Grey how lovely to see you again." She finally says politely.

"Oh, dear I told you to call me Grace. Carrick dear come and meet the girl who stole Christian's, heart."

Grace is the epitome of love and kindness but she lives in a romantic fantasy world. She would never understand the black void that sits at the place where my heart used to be. Anastasia did not steal my heart she got sucked into the black void instead.

My father ever the gentleman kisses her hand and gives her a beaming smile. I detest him kissing her I know it is not rational but I hate other men touching her. She is mine alone.

"Lovely to meet you, Anastasia. I have heard a lot about you."

"Uhm, thank you, Mr. Grey." Surprise evident in Anastasia's voice.

"Call me Carrick." He winks at her and turns his attention to me giving me a firm handshake.

"How are you son? If you have a minute later I want to discuss some business."
"Carry! No business talk today." Mom scolds him in her usual manner.

"Sorry dear." He says contritely but his tone of voice is light. He turns his attention to me and mouths office after dinner. I give him a stiff nod in confirmation.

I truly admire my father. He is a real Renaissance man, a true polymath. I don't think that there isn't a thing he has not have any knowledge about. He is also a real outdoorsman. He used to take me an Elliot for hour-long hikes and fishing trips when we were younger. He expected that all three of us got an Ivy League education. When I dropped out of Harvard, he was furious. There was a time when I just started GEH that we hardly spoke to each other. But mom and Mia forced us to dug it out and in the end, it was clear that he always had my back. I always consult him when I have a complex deal on my hands and his advice has been sound.

"You are forgiven just this once dear." My mother jests. "Christian and Ana, you two will be sitting at our table. Did you know that your brother's new girlfriend is the daughter of Eamon and Dana Kavanagh? I was so surprised that he finally found a girlfriend with a working brain."

Anastasia pales next to me and I roll my eyes at her skittish behavior. I should spank her for this ridiculousness.

"Yes, mother, he mentioned that to me. I was just as surprised as you are."

"Well, it is a delightful change in his usual MO. He seems head over heels with her. Anyway, he is sitting at the Kavanaghs table so Lance and Jeanine could sit at ours. Lance is dying to talk to you. Carol will escort you to our table."

I don't know much about the Kavanagh girl other than that she is Anastasia's best friend. I don't want Anastasia to talk to her about us. I shudder at the thought of her telling that woman about our unusual relationship. That is exactly the reason why I made her two male friends disappear out of the country. It was easy to arrange a life-altering event for both of them. The photographer got some great assignments in the wilderness of Africa and I arranged a top position for the chef at Gustav Flaubert's restaurant in Paris. I let Barney block their numbers on her phone just to be sure they won't mess with her head. Getting her to fall for me is hard enough as it is without their possible interference. If Kavanagh becomes a threat to my relationship with Anastasia, she needs to go as well regardless of her relationship with my brother. Anastasia is mine alone and I am not planning to share her even for a moment with anyone else.

"Thank you, mother. But I think we can manage without an escort. Been coming to these events for years now." I wink at her and take Anastasia arm leading her to the table overlooking Meydenbauer bay.

"Christian!" My grandmother greets me enthusiastically.

"You finally found yourself a woman. So proud of you son." My grandfather teases.

"Grandpa, grandma. I would like you to meet my date, Anastasia Steele. Anastasia these are my grandparents Theodore and Elisabeth Trevelyan." I introduce Anastasia to my grandparents.

"So lovely to meet you, Anastasia. It makes me so happy to see someone finally managed to steal my grandson's, heart." My grandmother gushes.

"Nice to meet you too Mr. and Mrs. Trevelyan." She replies a little shyly.

"Anastasia please call us Theo and Lizz. We might be old but we still feel like we are in our twenties." My grandfather jests.
They are all sweet and charm for Anastasia. My grandfather was a real shark in his lawyer days. I
guess Anastasia brings out the best in people and I could not feel more proud of her. This only
reaffirms what I always knew, Anastasia was made for me.

Anastasia smiles politely at them both.

"Call me Ana. Only my mother calls me Anastasia when she is mad at me." Anastasia replies
sweetly and I have to resist the urge to scold her. Ana is such a plain name for such a marvelous
jewel like her. Anastasia is much more fitting for the princess she is.

"You are such a sweet thing." My grandmother turns and faces me. "I like her better than your
brother's new girlfriend. She seems nice but distant."

"Well, grandmother, we both know that Elliot has no taste in anything." I joke and she slaps my
wrist in reprimand while my grandfather bursts out in laughing.

"Christian!" she mocks scolds and then smiles at me. I pull out a chair for Anastasia like I always
do and she graciously slides on. I sit down next to her and glance at her briefly. She is biting that
lovely juicy lip of her and fidgets with her hands. Tell, tell signs that she is nervous about
something. It irks me; everyone has been nothing but lovely to her.

"What's the matter? You are nervous! Why?" I whisper in her ear.

She turns around and blinks at me briefly.

"Kate is here with your brother. What if she sees me and starts hounding me for answers? I feel out
of my depth and I have no idea how to respond if she does."

I glare at her feeling deeply frustrated.

"If you want to keep this girl in your life you better make sure she won't interfere in our agreement.
Tell her that we are dating or make something else up. I don't care either way but stop acting like it
is the end of the world when people see you with me. It bothers me that you keep doing this." I
snap immediately somewhat regretting my outburst.

This is not the way to make her fall in love
with you dip shit.

I berate myself.

She stares at me, blue eyes fiery and fierce. Fuck, it is an arousing sight to see.

"Kate has been my friend forever you are only temporary." She bites back and it cuts right through
my soul.

"For these upcoming six months your ass is mine. If you cannot deal with her I will deal with her
for you." I seethe. And she cringes. Good.

"You have no right to disturb my life any more than you have. I won't let you destroy my friendship
with Kate." She hisses, her eyes are like frozen blue orbs.

"I have no intention of coming between you and the Kavanagh girl unless you leave me no choice.
I have every right to ensure you keep your end of our deal."

"Don't worry I will keep my end of your precious deal. You don't have to keep reminding me of it."

"Good. I am glad we are on the same page. Look, Anastasia, I don't care what you tell Kate. Just
stop her from interfering with our... Relationship and I won't say a word more about it. Can we just
enjoy this night without fighting about everything?"
"I did not realize we were fighting. I thought I was communicating with you." She says slightly perturbed.

"Well, you are obviously upset, Anastasia." I snap. Increasingly annoyed with her recalcitrant attitude.

She sighs opens her mouth before closing it again.

"I will talk to Kate ok?" She finally says.

I nod at her.

"Good." I pick up the menu card in front of me, glad this conversation is over. I skim over the menu and Anastasia does the same.

Menu Masquerade

For the 25th Copping Together charity ball

1st course

Raw oysters

On the half shell with cucumber mignonette

Domaine de la Pépière 'Gras Moutons' Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine 2014

2nd course

Smoked salmon

Cold Smoked/Potato pancake/Caviar/Crème fresh

Vila Maria Taylor Pass Chardonnay

3rd course

Pepper garlic pasta

Crab/Shrimp/Saffron marinara sauce

Rose White Night 2007

4th course

Smoked prime rib

Potato Gratin/Broccoli/Creamy horseradish

Zinfandel Laughlin Vinyard 2002

5th course

Creamy Sunchoke Purée,

Thyme Roasted Bing Cherries/ Foie Gras
Mother has gone all out with the menu. I wonder if Anastasia likes all the dishes my mother picked out for tonight. I look at her; she has a cute little V-shaped frown on her forehead that I just want to kiss. The thought is unnerving I have never been the one for tender kissing. I quickly suppress the thought; it is nothing more than infatuation Grey. I chide myself.

"Is there anything that you don't like?" I ask her. She looks up at me, the cute frown still etched on her elfin face.

"I just never had oysters before." She murmurs a bit embarrassed making me smile. She is just such a novice with many things.

"They taste lovely. Just tip the scale back and let the oyster slide down your throat."

She makes a face making me chuckle.

"I don't chew it? At all?" She says scrunching her cute little nose.

"Nope, just swallow. I promise you they taste very nice."

"Right, OK." She replies skeptically.

I smile at her and gently squeeze her thigh in reassurance and I am rewarded with a little smile that is making my heart flutter. It is an alien, funny feeling.

"Trust me ok?" It is a plea that goes beyond the food that is being served.

"I'll try." She replies earnestly and I am totally stunned. Has she understood the true meaning of behind my plea? Is she really willing to try? My mind is a jumbled mess trying to make sense of this all. I hardly hear the shrill voice that is calling out my name.

"Yoohoo Christian. How have you been?" I hear my mother's friend Jeannie calling me. She is by all accounts a lovely woman it is just a pity that her voice is so horrible. I turn around and see her and her husband Lance scurrying to our table.

"Jeannie, how lovely to see you again." I give her my patented smile and a kiss on the cheek before shaking Lance's hand.

"Oh, it is true! You have a date." She beams and I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her.
"Lance, Jeannie I would like you to meet my date, Anastasia. Anastasia these two lovely people are Lance and Jeannie Somerset, close friends of my parents."

Anastasia gives them a sweet smile instantly charming them. Just like my grandparents, Jeannie and Lance are over her like a rash. A strange feeling akin to pride stirs in my chest. Once again, I thank divine providence for sending her to me. She was meant to be mine it is as certain as the sun coming up every day.

The tables around are slowly filling with people and my mother finally makes her way over to us. The screeching sound of a turned on microphone fills my eardrums. My father his appearance on stage his Fidelio mask shining in the evening lights.

"Good evening everyone and welcome to our annual Coping Together fundraising." His voice echoes through the evening air and the murmurs from the guests instantly stop.

"This year is a milestone for both myself and my family because it is the 25th fundraiser we have organized. As you all know, our family is extremely dedicated to helping families suffering from addiction. This cause is a very personal one for us. 26 years ago, we adopted our amazing son Christian, who had lost his mother to this malignant disease. We are determent to help every husband, wife, mother, father, son and daughter fighting this affliction and stop the cycle of poverty, neglect, and abuse that stems from it. We implore you to be generous this evening so we can help as many people as possible. Thank you all for your attention and enjoy this beautiful evening.” My father finishes and I don't know whether the clap for him or stomp him in the face. I hate it when my parents, or anyone for that matter, bring up my past with the crack whore. The audience erupts in a deafening applause and my father introduces the master of ceremonies for tonight, some local celebrity.

I feel Anastasia's eyes burning into me. Her face is a mixture of pity and pain and I hate it. There is no use in crying over spilled milk. I don't need her damn pity.

"What is it?" I snap at her.

She blinks her eyes and her cheeks flush beet red in embarrassment.

"Nothing. I just.. I. Never knew about your mother, I am sorry." She stammers.

"I don't need or want your pity. She was a crack whore and she died freeing me from her ice-cold grasp. I am glad she is dead in the end I turned out a billionaire because of it."

Her eyes widen in shock she looks equally pained and appalled.

"Christian... How... She was your mother... She must have loved you." She finally stammers.

I cannot help but laugh at the ridiculous statement. The only thing that whore ever loved was crack and random cocks attached to scumbags. How can she be so terribly naive? She should know that the apple does not fall far from the tree, right? She is just so challenging, arguing about everything. It is frustrating but makes me feel alive at the same time. Like she has woken me from a deep, dark slumber.

"All she loved was her crack. She was a worthless human being and that is final. I am done discussing her." I hiss. I feel my mother's eyes on me. She is obviously interested in what we are talking about.

I don't want her to ask any questions. I move closer to Anastasia and turn her face to mine before placing a long hard kiss on her mouth. That should shut mom up in advance. Anastasia’s eyes are
wide and bewildered when I release her sweet juicy lips.

Anastasia opens and closes her mouth a couple of times looking like a fish out of the water. It is pretty cute and funny.

"You promised me not to make a scene, you know going public." She snaps at me.

"There are no paparazzi here and only a small number of guests know who you are. Hell, you are wearing a mask for crying out loud. Nobody will say anything. Don't make a drama out of nothing Anastasia."

"I am not causing drama! You are." She says indignantly making me smile.

I stroke her lips with my thumb and kiss her again slowly this time. My mother, Jeannie and grandmother are practically salivating.

"You are so challenging Anastasia. It is exhilarating. You make me feel so alive." I murmur staring at her flabbergasted face.

"Thanks, I guess. You are rather frustrating yourself." She says and gives me a small smile. It is making me feel like I am soaring.

The first course is served by very efficient waiters. My father makes his way over to our table and sits down next to my mother. He immediately starts a conversation with my girl. It is annoying. I don't like it when others take her attention away from me. I am forced to converse with Lance who is asking me a ton of questions about my company's new solar cell invention. It is tiring and dull since the most inventive aspects of the solar cells are a secret. I miss Mia. she is still in France working for that asshole cook I sent Anastasia's friend too.

I vaguely hear the MC asking us to put a bill with the highest denomination in the table envelope. I take out my wallet and pull out two, 500 hundred dollar bills and hand one to Anastasia who holds a paltry 50 dollar bill in her hand to shove in the envelope.

"Take this."

"I have money!" She replies slightly offended.

"Trust me. You want to put in a higher denomination."

"Why?"

"Because you can win a lovely gift. Do you have to question everything I ask of you?"

She sighs and takes the bill from me signing her name on it.

"Good girl."

I take the other bill and also sign my name on that one before putting it in the envelope. I give the envelope to Lance who does the same.

"Now can the table heads please take out the bill with the highest denomination?" The MC asks and my mother, our table head glows. Looking so much younger than her 58 years.

"And... The winner is... Anastasia!" She beams. A young man carrying a basket filled with various goods comes over to our table and hands it to Anastasia.
"Told you to trust me didn't I?" I tease her while she inspects the basket.

"It is lovely, thank you."

"Anastasia, thank you so much for your generosity. I don't want to sound greedy but I was hoping if you are willing to donate some of your time." My mother asks sweetly and I do not like where this is going.

"Uhm, sure Mrs. Grey. What can I help you with?" Anastasia asks politely.

"Dear, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Grace?"

"Uhm, I am sorry Grace it is," Anastasia says and my mother waves her hand dismissively and smiles at her.

"It is alright dear. I just don't like all the formality." She replies and I scoff. That is a new one my mother never ever lets acquaintances call her by her first name. Anastasia got that privilege ridiculously fast. "Anyway dear. Every year we have the first dance auction. Every single lady offers her first dance to the highest bidder. It is a fun way to raise more money for our cause." My mother continues and hot raging fury lashes through me.

There is no way I will let Anastasia sell herself off to a bunch of drooling old farts. She is mine and my alone. I am not even going to entertain the notion of any these fuckers bidding on her. The thought alone makes me feel sick to my stomach.

"I would love to help out with the auction," Anastasia answers her kindly and I see red.

"No. You will not put yourself up there on display for some random assholes to bid on you. I forbid it." I snap and Anastasia gasps.

"Christian don't be ridiculous. I know Anastasia is your first girlfriend but it's tradition. Your brother's dates went on stage all the time." Mom interjects

"Well I am not Elliot and Anastasia is not one of his easy broads. I do not wish to broadcast my relationship with Anastasia yet to avoid any nonsense with the paparazzi." It is only a partial truth. I can hardly tell my mother that other men touching my girl make me sick.

She is quiet for a moment.

"I understand that Christian. But Anastasia is wearing a mask nobody will recognize her. It is for charity." She pleads.

I sigh and pull out my checkbook from my pocket.

"They will know when I bid for her. I never bid for anyone except for Mia." I take my pen out and write a 100,000 dollars on the check. "Here, consider this my bid for Anastasia's first dance. I doubt anyone will have the means to pay this much." I hand over the check to my mother and she gasps.

"Wow, Christian this is really very generous. Are you sure?" My mom asks and I roll my eyes at her. It is not like I cannot afford it.

"Of course I am." I reply dismissively.

"Well, thank you very much. You know how much this will help those in need."
I wave my hand dismissively "Don't mention it." I grumble.

Anastasia bends towards me eyes blazing.

"I wanted to do the auction." She whispers.

"Don't start with me. Not now. You are the one that did not want to alert the general public of our relationship. Now you're fighting with me just because you like to fight."

"I did not know we were fighting. I thought I was communicating. You know, making my opinions clear."

"Your opinions are duly noted, Miss Steele, but I stay by my decision. You won't be up for auction. Having said that you owe me your first dance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I just bought your first dance for tonight for a 100,000 dollars. I will be collecting it after the auction." She stares at me open mouthed seemingly unable to comprehend what I just told her.

"You did what?"

"I paid my mother a 100,000 dollars to have the very first dance of this evening with you." I say slowly this time.

She looks at me bewildered like I have grown two heads.

"You are insane." She finally says dryly making me chuckle.

Dinner goes smoothly and I buy a first edition of Pride and Prejudge for Anastasia during the auction. I intend to give it to her later. Several business acquaintances come up to our table during dinner, hoping to get the chance to do business with me. It is annoying. I rather focus my attention on Anastasia.

"Yo bro!" I hear Elliot calling me. I turn around and see him coming over to our table with the Kavanagh girl in tow. Anastasia pales and stiffens next to me.

"Shit." She whispers under her breath and I glare at her.

"You said you could handle this." I hiss under my breath.

"Yes, yes I will ok? Just a little shocked that's all."

"Whatever, deal with it or I will." I warn her.

"Elliot." I nod at him.

"I had to see for myself. Mom told me you brought a date." He says and I roll my eyes at him.

"Elliot, I would like you to meet my date, Anastasia, Anastasia this is my older brother Elliot."

"Lovely seeing you again Anastasia."

"Thank you, I guess it's been a while." She replies smiling.
I see Kavanagh's eyes widen behind her mask.

"Ana?!!" she almost yells in recognition.

"Kate, hi." Ana murmurs.

"Why didn't you tell me you would be here tonight as Mr. Grey's date of all things." She sounds hurt and indignant.

"It was a last minute thing." Ana murmurs.

"We need to talk." Kate says resolutely and hooks her hands into Anastasia's leading her away from me before I can object.

Dammit!

"Have fun girls." Elliot says and smirks at me. Asshole.

"Shouldn't Kate get ready for the first dance auction? Mom said she had no issue with selling herself off to the highest bidder. I can already see that you two are a match made in heaven." I snap at him.

"Relax bro, let them do their girl talk. She has plenty of time."

"Ah, boys glad you two or here now. Let's go to my office, there is a very important matter I need to discuss with the both of you." My father interjects effectively stopping our discussion.

Right he mentioned something about business earlier I thought it only applied to GEH and not Grey construction. We dutifully follow our father to his office before my mother could interfere. She hates it when we discuss business at charity events.

My father's office is large, mahogany bookcases filled with books stand proudly against the walls. His oak desk stands on a beautifully woven Persian rug and a large Chesterfield couch stands in front of the ever blazing fireplace. An antique globe stands proudly next to the couch. The entire room smells like a mixture of expensive Cognac, Bourbon, and Cuban cigars.

I remember feeling both awed and intimidated by this room when I was a boy. I used to stare at the globe for hours fantasizing of all the exotic lands at the other part of the world. It provided a welcome escape from the painful memories with the crack whore.

My father sits down at his desk opens his drawer and pull out three crystal glasses and a bottle of Remy Martin XO. He pours us all a glass and opens his cigar box offering one to each of us. He only does this when some serious shit is going on.

I take the glass and a cigar from the box I take out the guillotine and cut the head of the cigar off before lighting it up. I take a soft draw savoring the sweet tobacco taste in my mouth.

"What is this about dad?" Elliot asks whole take a sip of his Cognac.

My father puffs on his cigars a little before taking it out of his mouth to inspect the tip. He sighs and takes another draw.

"I got a tip from a friend of mine a US attorney who investigated corruption at the labor department after you reported the whole incident with Olympia shipping company. Off the record, that investigation is closed but secretly they are still at it." My father says.
"So? What has that to do with us? I reported that bullshit in the first place. They investigated and got them convicted case closed." I say a little tersely.

"Well no, turns out the corruption went much deeper than that and even more companies are involved that they previously thought. This whole thing appears to be nationwide. They are not only looking at GEH but also at Grey construction, some other construction companies, the tech giants and even Boeing. So my advice to you guys is beat them to the punch. Order a full audit of every single one of your companies and subcontractors. It will earn you goodwill, prevent damage to your respective companies and saves you the trouble of months-long government ordered audits." My dad concludes.

Great! This bullshit is just what I need right now. Ros will be pissed. It will put a strain on the finance department. We probably have to hire some more people until this nonsense is done.

"Tell your friend thanks for the heads up. It is much appreciated. I will order a full review of all my companies and subsidiaries first thing tomorrow."

"So will I thanks, dad." Elliot says while taking another draw of his cigar.

"Good. Now let's go back before your mother blows her gasket." Dad chuckles and opens the door of his office and leisurely strolls out. I follow suit but am immediately stopped by Taylor.

"Mr. Grey we have a situation." Taylor says sounding a little out of breath.

And I am instantly alert.

"What is it?"

"Mrs. Lincoln cornered miss Steele in the dining room and I don't think this is going to end well." He quickly replies.

"Son of a bitch." Damn you, Elena. I asked her to stay away from this event and Anastasia yet like always she ignores my wishes. I am furious with her right now. I sprint to the dining room hoping to curtail any damage she might do to my girl.

"You crazy bitch." I hear Anastasia say and see Elena gasping and grabbing her cheek.

"Don't you ever try to contact me again!" She yells and storms out of the room. For a moment I am transfixed by the whole scene. Hardly able to comprehend what happened.

Elena looks at me she is furious.

"Are you going to let her speak to me like that Christian? I knew I should have intervened with her training earlier. She has zero respect for her betters. You made a mess out of this Christian. A mess that I need to fix." She spits out furiously. Anger courses through me. How dare she?

"I told you to stay away from here, from her. You should have listened. Why don't you ever fucking listen!"

"Now I know why you wanted me away from her. You failed training her properly. You let your ridiculous feelings for this girl get in the way. How many times do I have to tell you love is for fools Christian? I am done seeing you lose control. Tomorrow you will hand the girl to me so I can properly train her and you won't get her back until I am done." She seethes.

Rage blood boiling red hazing rage is all I feel. Hand Anastasia over to her? Let her train her?
Touch her? Take her from me? Over my dead body. NOBODY takes her away from me she is MINE and mine alone! I want to yell at Elena punch some sense into her thick skull but something stops me.

"I am not your fucking sub anymore. You don't get tell me what I can and cannot do. You will NEVER EVER take Anastasia away from me. How I train her is entirely up to me. Don't you ever assume otherwise or try to intervene again. I have asked you nicely a couple of times for the sake of our friendship. But make no mistake if you ever try to intervene again I will crush you."

Elena looks at me both shocked and aghast.

"Christian, she was disrespectful to me. I am your friend I am only trying to help." She almost pleads.

"If I ever need your help I will call you. I told you to stay away you brought this on yourself."

Elena walks over to me a grabs my biceps. Her blue eyes are wide and pleading.

"I know I promised to stay away but I just want to see how everything was progressing. I know... I am a nosy old woman but I just could not help myself. I only went over to her to introduce myself and she blew up at me. It is not right Christian. I earn some respect not only because I am your best friend but as a human being."

I sigh and step away from her. She is my friend, my only friend. Maybe Anastasia was rude to her. There was no need for her to be rude.

"Look Elena I will talk to Anastasia. But I meant it stay out of my relationship with her ok? I know you mean well but it is simply none of your business."

"But Christian.."

"Elena, this conversation is finished. I will talk to Anastasia about what happened and if she was in the wrong she will apologize. Now if you will excuse me I need to go find her."

I take another draw from my cigar and quickly set out to find Anastasia. Why does Elena never do what I ask of her? She knows how important Anastasia is to me. Why can't she honor a simple request? Was she always like this? So nosy, interfering and clingy? It is annoying and frustrating. I am not her fucking sub why does she feel the need to treat me like one. Because you still are her good little sub. A small vindictive voice resounds in my head it is unnerving and I quickly suppress it not willing to even entertain the idiotic notion.

I round the corner and spot Anastasia sitting alone at the dock near the boathouse. The moonlight softly illuminates her hair and her silver dress sparkles brightly. Her beauty is ethereal, breathtaking but there is a deep sadness that is emanating from within her. It is a notion that I can hardly handle and for the first time I have no idea what to say to her. I want nothing more than to dispel the sadness from her and make her happy but I have no clue how. So I just stare at her on my secluded spot in the dark. And for the first time since the crack whore died, I feel like a helpless, impotent little boy again.
A tip of the veil

Anastasia

I look out over the water of Meydenbauer bay. In the distance, hundreds of small lanterns float over the water, illuminating it in their calm wake. The pale light of the bright full moon diffuses into countless silver speckles on the calm waters. It is an unearthly, magical sight to behold, and before my 'relationship' with Grey, I would have relished in the beauty of it all. But looking at it all now, it does not conjure up the same awed filled feelings I would have had before all this happened. These feelings of loneliness, anger, hatred, and sadness are so overwhelming that it feels like I am drowning in them. I don't know how to handle this toxic cocktail of emotions, but I know I need to put a lid on them soon before they destroy me.

I never in my life hated anyone before, not like this. Grandma Wilks, my mother's mother used to say; Hate is a deadly burden that eventually squashes the life out of those who carry it with them. I remember her telling me that after mom divorced Ray and married number three. I hated him so much for destroying their marriage. But grandma Wilks said that hating him would hurt me in the long run. In the end, we all get what we deserve, God will always balance the scales in due time. She would say and urge me to let go, and I did. When my mother divorced that sob six months later, I knew she had been right. She was a sweet, kind-hearted woman just like mom and for the longest time, I thought I was the same. But these feelings of anger and hatred that threaten to choke me have violently ended that illusion.

Yet, at the same time right now, I relish in the anger and hatred I feel for that vile woman that harassed and tried to ruin me. Maybe because I don't have to deal with the loneliness and sadness that hang as a thick cloud over my head. I still cannot believe what Kate has told me. Jose and Jimmy have both left the country and they did not even call me to tell me about their new jobs. Kate said they tried to contact me but were not able to. I don't believe her I had no missed calls from either of them. What hurts most though is that I thought they were my friends. How can Jimmy call Kate but not me? Anger and hatred are good, they give me strength if only for a little while. My mind slips back to the horrid encounter with the blond troll. Thinking back on how she cornered me makes my blood boil all over again. I barely feel the cold gush of the wind that has swept over the water. My mind is still reeling from the past events as it conjures up the memory.

"You! I need to speak to you." Two bony hands push me back into the dining room I tried to vacate after my conversation with Kate.

"Excuse me?" I say indignantly to the tall blond woman standing in front of me. I recognize her immediately as Grace's friend from the saloon. It is her! His abuser and she is bristling at me. She looks like an old, haggard Valkyrie that has had too many face-lifts and botox treatments.

"Kneel!" She sneers after slamming the door behind her. What the hell? Is she insane?

"Look, lady, I don't know what is wrong with you and frankly I don't care. But don't think for a minute that I will kneel down for you." I say and try to pass her. She blocks me and pushes me back. Fury courses through me. How dare she?

"I just knew that he would fail to train you properly. I guess it is on me to fix his failures again. That boy always managed to get himself into trouble. I spent years trying to help him out, teaching him control of his emotion and I am not going to let some mousy little girl destroy my work. I will never allow that." She murmurs that last part more to herself than to me and I blow up. Uncontrollable anger sweeps through my veins. This woman is one sick and twisted bitch.
"I am not a dog that needs training and don't even think for a second that I will let you touch me. You did not train him you fucked him up more than he already was. What you did to him has nothing to do with BDSM and everything to do with your own fucked up desires and he is too stupid to realize this. Well, I am not going to be dragged down in your sick games. I want nothing to do with you and you have nothing to say about me." I am practically shaking with fury.

"How dare you judge our lifestyle! You know nothing about me and Christian and what we have. I will order him to give you a good caning for your insolence. You will learn how to respect your betters come hell or high water. You fucked with the wrong woman, you dumb brat. I own Christian and you will soon learn that this will be very painful for you." She cackles like the old, deranged ugly witch she is.

"I know that you are one fucked up deranged bitch and that is frankly all I need to know. You fucked up Christian but don't think for a second that I will let you do the same to me. Now get out of my way or I will make you!" Her face reddens in fury and she lifts her hand up to slap me. Ray's self-defence lessons immediately kick in and I block her before slapping her in her face with all the strength I can muster. My hand makes contact with her cheek and the sting of the slap tingles on the skin of my hand. The sound of the slap reverberates through the dining room and her face is a picture of complete horror. Seeing her like this is extremely satisfactory but I don't dwell on it too long. I quickly make my way to the door barely registering Christian who is standing at the door opening stock still and completely stunned.

I was too angry and reeled up to go back to the party. I needed somewhere quiet where I could process everything that happened. The dock near the boathouse stood out like a bastion of peace drawing me in like a moth to a flame. I don't know how long I have been standing her now, all I know and feel is the turmoil of emotions that wreak havoc inside of me.

I hear something or someone rustling behind and I smell the faint scent of cigar smoke. I swirl around to see who dares to bother me. I am in no mood for company. I let out a sigh when I see Christian standing behind me near the shrubberies near the side of the manor house. The glowing tip of his cigar[HM1] eerily illuminates his handsome face.

"How long have you been standing there spying on me?" I sound petulant even to my own ears.

He shrugs his shoulders noncommittally before stamping out his cigar.

"A while." He replies soberly.

"Shouldn't you be fanning at your mistress' feet like a good little pet?" I spite and for a brief moment, fury passes his face.

"She is not my mistress! She hasn't been for the longest time I am no body's pet." He growls out.

"Well tell that to her because she thinks that she owns you and by proxy me as well."

"I am my own man; nobody owns me, not you and certainly not Elena. So we can put that nonsense to rest immediately. Elena is my best friend she tends to be overbearing at times." He replies apologetically.

I cannot help myself and let out a sharp laugh.

"Well, with a friend like her you don't need enemies. That woman is vile Christian, the devil incarnate... Why can't you see that she is manipulating you?"

He holds up his hand stopping me.
"Enough Anastasia. You may not like her and I understand that, but you don't have to demonize her."

I scoff "She is doing that all by herself I don’t need to do that for her."

He sighs and runs his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"Look, Anastasia, Elena told me her version of what happened. She said you were rude to her." He begins tentatively and I scoff again loudly.

"I bet she did."

He moves towards the dock until he is standing in front of me. His hand softly brushes mine sending a tingle down my spine and in that moment I loathe the effect my body has on him more than I ever have before.

"Care to tell me your version?" He asks, not unkindly.

I want to tell him no because frankly, I am afraid that I will get so worked up again that no coherent word will escape my mouth at the same time I know I will never accept a no.

"She cornered me in your parent's dining room after my conversation with Kate. She demanded that I kneel for her like I was her submissive or something. I basically told her to go fuck herself and she went mental. Ranting and raving how you failed to train me properly and taking me over from you. I told her to take a hike again and she lost it. Tried to slap me but I blocked her and slapped her instead and stormed out of the room."

He lets out a low chuckle and gently strokes my cheek his hand feels hot to the touch.

"Her version was slightly different. She told me that you had been rude to her when she tried to have a normal conversation with you. She demanded that you apologize to her but I am guessing that is not going to happen anytime soon."

"I will never apologize to her, not even when hell freezes over."

He chuckles again.

"I figured as much. Look, Anastasia, I told Elena to back off. She will not bother you again, I promise you."

"Just keep that bitch away from me." I warn.

"I just promised you I would! Ugh look I am sorry she harassed you, I truly am. I made sure she won’t do it again. I don’t know what else you want me to say." He says sounding a little desperate and I decide to let it go.

"I’ll take your word for it." I murmur.

"Good, thank you. Now can we go back to the party? You still owe me a dance."

The anger I feel for him and that horrible bitch has subsided a little only to let the sadness come true again. I don't want to dance with him and act like everything is honky dory while I feel so miserable.

"I rather stay her and watch everything from afar. I don't feel like partying."
He runs his hands through his hair again and stares up at the heavens probably looking for some divine inspiration. I inwardly scoff good luck with that, I think sourly.

"What is it that you want Anastasia? I am trying to understand you. I know our agreement is not ideal but you promised you'll try. What can I do to make this easier for you? Tell me because I am getting a little desperate here."

What can he do? Let me go I want to tell him. But I don't I did promise him that I would honor our agreement or whatever this fucked up shit is. And the sadness I feel at this moment in a lot of ways has not so much to do with him. It is not his fault that Jimmy and Jose abandoned me without not so much as a word.

I slump my shoulders and stare at the ground. He gently pushes his finger on my chin and lifts my head up I am surprised to see the concerned look on his face.

"Tell me, Anastasia." He presses on.

"It is silly; I don't think you will understand."

"Try me." He persists.

"Did you ever think you knew someone pretty well only to discover you did not know them at all?" I ask.

"I pride myself on being a good judge of character. So no I never had the displeasure."

I inwardly scoff. Good judge of character my ass if he was he would have dumped the Lincoln bitch a long time ago. I don't think he even has any other friends than that woman. I don't feel like talking to him anymore. He is too dense to understand or feel what it is like losing a friendship. I am pretty sure he has close to zero empathic ability hence I am stuck in this mess with him and he won't let me out. The familiar wave of sadness and dread I have associated with him comes back in full force again.

"Just never mind OK? I knew you would never understand. Can you give me a moment alone please?"

"No Anastasia, I am not going to leave you until you tell me what is going on with you." He snaps and I know fighting him is pointless and I break.

"You want to know what is going on? Ever since this arrangement, my life has been fucked up. You have stripped away my autonomy and turned me into your plaything, forcing to do your bidding. My friends have abandoned me and to top it all off my co-workers are gossiping about my every move. I feel miserable and alone and it is your entire fault." I am trembling and hot angry tears spill from my eyes. I expect him to yell at me, argue with me again but he doesn't. Instead, he gently wipes my tears away before pulling me into his warm embrace and I feel myself relax into him. I feel dazed and confused about not only his but also my own reaction. For some reason, I feel safe in his arms yet completely sickened by my own reaction to him.

"Oh, Ana I am so sorry. I truly am. But I cannot let you go. Lord knows I tried to forget you tried to accept your rejection. But I can't." His confession and apology leave me dumbstruck, confounded even. Is he sorry for forcing himself on me? For taking away my autonomy my life? It does not make any sense at all.

"Why did you do it Christian? You knew I didn't want you I told you a thousand time. Why did you persist?" I pull away from him and scan his face praying for an honest answer.
"I just want a chance Anastasia a chance to try and make you happy. I know you feel the attraction just as strong as I do. You promised me you would give our arrangement a try. Please, just give me one chance to make you happy that is all I am asking. And if I fail, I will try and let you go." His voice is hoarse and pleading, tugging on my heartstrings, only adding to the turmoil of emotions that I am feeling. I did promise him I would honor our arrangement; it is just so hard for me to do that. Maybe because he forced me or maybe because I feel so alone, lost, and isolated from everyone and everything. I hardly see Kate, and Jimmy and Jose have left the country without so much telling me. My parents are in Boston. I have literally no one but him. I want to hate him, be mad at him and hurl all kinds of abuse at him but I can't. He looks so vulnerable and hurt, like a lost little boy starved for attention and love. For the first time, I wonder why he is the way he is. What happened to him when he was a little boy? I know his birth mother died when he was young, but this seems to go so much deeper.

"I already told you I will honor arrangement. It is just hard sometimes. Especially now, it feels like I am all alone. I always considered Jose and Jimmy one of my best friends but I guess that feeling was one sided. They did not even bother telling me that they were moving out of the country. They told Kate but not me."

He looks uncomfortable for a moment.

"Maybe they left you a message?"

"No, I have no missed calls or voicemails." I reply sadly.

"Where did they move to?"

"France and Kenia."

"Well, there can be a list of reasons why their call might not have arrived on your phone yet. It could be that you have connection issues or a problem with your provider. Have you tried calling them?"

"Yes, I get a disconnected tone immediately."

"Well, that means there is something wrong with the connection. If you want I can have the tech team at GEH look into it. There is a reason why we are one of the biggest telecommunication companies in the world. In the meantime, use the land line at home to call them again." He offers and gives me a small smile.

"I can?" He looks puzzled for a minute.

"Of course." He replies almost offended.

"Thank you Christian."

"You are most welcome Anastasia. Now, about that first dance." I sigh and give him a little smile. In honor of our arrangement, I should grant it to him. I realize that I never really accepted honoring this arrangement for myself. I continued to struggle against it; I know for sure now that he won't let me go until the six months are up. Fighting him is so exhausting and in the end, it only gives me more pain and sadness. I am strong enough to survive these months, I know I am. I might as well make the best out of a bad situation.

"I guess I do owe you my first dance. You paid a fortune for it after all." He takes my hand and leads me back towards the party. A rendition of Frank Sinatra It's Got to Be You plays loudly through the evening air. Christian leads me on the black and white checkered dance floor and
lowers his hand to my lower back, turns me around so I am facing him. He then pulls me against his chest and we start to move to the rhythm of the music. People are staring at us like we are some curiosity, it makes me feel uncomfortable and I almost stumble over my own feet. Christian pulls me closer and smiles at me.

"Ignore them. You are dancing with me." He says while moving us gracefully over the dance floor. It goes so smoothly and soon I am enjoying myself and forget the starring people. It is just him, me, and Franky. Like we are stuck in our own little bubble. The idea is disturbing. Soon the song ends, and we are interrupted by his father.

"I would love to have a dance with your date Christian." He says while smiling brightly at me.

"So do all the other men here dad." He replies annoyed.

"They are not your father." Carrick says good-natured and winks at me. Christian sighs audibly and scolds at his father.

"One dance. That is all you get." He snaps and storms off to the side of the dance floor leaving me a little stunned. Why on earth is he so angry?

Carrick takes my hand and smiles down at me.

"You must forgive Christian. He never brought a woman in public before, hence he is displaying some caveman tendencies."

I am baffled. Sure, I never saw pictures of him with a date before, but I never thought he had not taken anyone out before. The girl that killed herself in his apartment, surely he must have taken her out?

"He hasn't?"

Carrick chuckles.

"No, you are the first. I know there was a girl he was seeing but that turned into a disaster after he broke up their relationship." He is quite for a moment before continuing. "He never took her out, we only found out that he was seeing her after she killed herself. It shook Christian up badly. My wife and I never thought Christian would have any kind of relationship after that. Seeing him with you is the first time I have ever seen him so in love. It is a true delight to see him like this."

My mind is numb, unable to process all this information. Christian is not in love with me. All we have is some strange sex filled arrangement for his sick pleasure. The idea that he loves me or I love him makes me nauseous. Love has nothing to do with what we have or do for that matter. How can his father even think that? Is that the reason the girl in his apartment killed herself? That he force her into a similar relationship I have with him now, used her, and then dumped her like yesterday's trash? And she could not handle it? The thought is chilling and I need to know more.

"He never told me anything about her." I reply softly.

"He never told us anything about her either. Christian is a very closed person. Grace and I adopted him when he was four. Grace was the attending physician when they brought him in. He was severely malnourished, abused and traumatized. He did not speak at all. We only had a vague idea how is life must have been with his birth mother. We tried to coax him out of his shell but he remained mute until he was seven. It was Mia, our youngest daughter that made him speak again. He loved her instantly; he still does."
Once again, I don't know what to say. I knew that he had a rough early childhood but I never expected anything like this. My stomach contracts and my heart aches from what I just heard. Not talking for three whole years? Holy shit! This is all so confusing, and at this moment, I wish that I had never received all this disturbing information. I cannot afford to care for him. Getting through this ordeal unscathed means locking up my feelings and being dispassionate about him. Deep down, I want him to be an asshole to me so I can stay angry and aloof with him and keep him at arm's length. It keeps everything clear and once my contract is up, I can leave without feeling a sense of guilt or worse, loss. But I have no defense against this. The song ends and Christian immediately cuts in again.

Carrick chuckles again.

"Have fun son. Ana, it was lovely talking to you I hope to see you again soon." He bows gracefully and moves away leaving me alone with Christian again.

"What did you discuss with my father?" He immediately demands.

"He said he was happy because you appear to be happy. That he had never seen you like this before" I mutter absentmindedly still reeling from Carrick confessions.

"Did he now?"

"Yes."

"And did he tell you what he meant by that?"

"Just that you are a very closed person, that you never brought a date to these events. Not even the girl that killed herself."

He stiffens and glares at me.

"I never had a relationship with Leila. She was a submissive. I never wanted anything more from her than her submission." He growls.

"But you want the same from me. You made me sign that contract." I blurt out.

He looks at me bemused.

"You are different Ana. What I have with you is completely different from what I had with Leila."

"How so? She signed a contract just like I did. Did your force her, too?"

A scowl appears on his face and his eyes turn to slits.

"Leila was a willing sub. I never forced anyone into a 'relationship', for lack of a better word, with me before you came along. All my previous partners have been very willing in spite of what you might think. Quit making me out to be some devil." He seethes and strengthens his hold on my arms to almost painful. I can handle the way he is now much better than when he is vulnerable because it reminds me what he really is and hardens my heart towards him.

"I am sorry." I mutter not wanting to anger him further.

"You should be." He mutters petulantly. "You bewitched me, Anastasia. These feeling I have for you; they scare the hell out of me. They make me do things I never dreamed of doing."

His words scare the hell out of me. He told me before he had feelings for me but I don't dare to
contemplate on what he means with that. Feelings should not be part of the relationship we have.

"You are in love with me?" I blurt out.

He looks at me surprised, pained even.

"I am incapable of loving anyone. I don't know what these feelings are I have for you. All I know
is that they are deep, alien and troubling."

"Then let them go. Feelings should have no part in our arrangement."

He scoffs loudly.

"Your naivety is both frightening and disarming Anastasia. If I could let them go, I would have
done so a long time ago. They are a plague for both of us. Like I said I cannot let you go, Ana." He
sounds sad, ashamed even.

The song ends and he leads me off the dance floor effectively ending our conversation and leaving
my feelings in disarray again. The rest of the evening is spent talking to other guests and watching
the firework display at midnight. I am incredibly tired when we finally get home. Christian
excuses himself, saying he has some work to do. He does expect me to sleep in his bed like every
night I have been here. I am just glad I have some time to myself even though I am too tired to
think about everything that happened today.

The weekend goes by in a blur Christian has spent most of his time hauled up in his office, and I
took the time to explore the house and the meadow surrounding it. I enjoy being her on my own
without him. It gives me time to think and process all that has happened, and I have come to the
conclusion that whatever happened to him as a child should not concern me. After the contract is
up, I will be gone from here and he will no longer be my problem. Being attached to him or
developing sympathy for him will only hurt me in the end.

Monday morning comes all too soon, and Christian makes small talk with me over breakfast. It is
another novel thing he has been doing since the ball and it's unsettling because it seems such a
normal thing to do. I have to keep reminding myself that nothing about this situation is normal.

When I get to work, the entire department seems to be in disarray. Emily is going through boxes of
paperwork that seem to have dropped here from the archives.

"What's going on?" I ask a stressed Emily.

"Mr. Grey has ordered a complete audit of all his companies. It is freaking insane. We all had to
come in an hour earlier. Didn't Miller call you?"

"No, he didn't. I just thought we had to be in at 9." I say a little miffed. Why didn't he call me?

Emily shrugs. "Well, maybe he forgot you." She says but does not sound convinced of her own
explanation.

I walk towards my desk and boot up my computer to check my work schedule. It all fun relatively
light work. It makes me feel bad I want to help out preparing for the audit. An uneasy feeling
creeps over me. Christian! He must have interfered! How dare he! He knows how hard I have it
already. That people are gossiping about me behind my back. This will only add fuel to the fire.
They will all think I am his girlfriend and that he is giving me preferential treatment. I am so
furious at him I want to storm up to the twentieth floor and really give him a piece of my mind. But
I know it won't help. I quickly go through my tasks so I can go and help out Emily. Who is
extremely grateful for all the help. The task is time-consuming and soon we are engrossed in the work.

"Miss Steele." Sawyer calls me and I look up from my desk.

"Here. Mr. Grey insists that you eat. It has been way past lunchtime." He says handing me a Chicken Caesar salad and some garlic bread. I have been so busy that I hardly have noticed the time. I am shocked to see that it's already 13:30. I should have figured that Grey was keeping an eye on me, I think sourly.

"Thanks." I mutter and take the bread and salad from him.

"You're welcome." He nods and walks away. I feel people staring at me again and it's making me feel uncomfortable. I take my food and move to Emily's desk offering to share my lunch with her which see gladly accepts. It is nice talking to Emily; she is so down to earth and genuinely friendly. It is past five when we are done for today and Sawyer comes to pick me up. Christian is already in the car when Sawyer opens the car door for me.

"Good evening Anastasia." Christian asks good humored.

"Good evening." I murmur.

He grabs my hand and gently rubs it.

"How was your day?"

"Fine. Busy the audit you ordered has the entire department in a twist." I pause for a second not knowing if I should confront him about what happened today. "Did you ask Mr. Miller to take it easy on me?"

He looks confused for a moment.

"No, I did not ask him to do anything regarding your work. I promised you that I won't interfere with your work and I find it offensive that you think that I broke my word." He says tersely.

"I just thought.."

"You thought wrong." He snaps before continuing in a more conciliatory tone. "Why did you think I would break my promise to you? Have I given you any indication that I would do that?"

"Uhm, no not really. It is just that Mr. Miller called everybody in at 7:30 this morning except for me and when I got to work this morning only nice easy tasks where on my work schedule. It set me apart from my colleagues and I know they are still gossiping about me behind my back. I don't want to be regarded as the 'lazy princess'. " I try to explain my feelings as best as I can.

"I see. I don't know why Miller did this. But I will talk to him and order him to treat you like anyone else."

"Thank you."

When we get to the mansion dinner is already waiting and Christian talks about a telecom company he is taking over and that he might need to travel to New York after Christmas. He expects me to accompany and assist him.

"What about my internship?" I ask a little irritated so much for not interfering with my work.
"What about it? You accompanied me to Italy this is exactly the same thing. When I need extra assistance I am free to ask any employee I want for that assistance. There is nothing abnormal about that."

I realize that he is kind of right. I did go to Italy with him and debating this with him has no use and will only antagonize him.

After dinner, he excuses himself telling me he has some work to do. I am in no mood to read and decide to indulge in some channel surfing before taking a long hot shower. The shower door opens and a cold draft of wind chills the damp skin on my back. I turn around and stare right into Christian"s eyes. The look in his eyes is feral and intense. He is stark naked his penis stands long and erect against his perfectly sculptured abdomen and he is breathing heavy making his chiseled chest heave. I desperately try to swallow down the lump that has formed in my throat. He takes the washcloth from my hand and squeezes some bath foam on it.

"Turn around." He hoarse whispers and I tense up when I feel his cock pressed against my thigh. I know he is very much aroused and we have not had sex in weeks. He promised me he would not initiate anything until we knew each other better and I felt more comfortable with the situation but right now I am not sure if he will keep his word.

'Relax Anastasia. I just want to shower with you. I am not going to try and have sex with you." He says tersely.

"You wouldn't?" I reply sounding surprised even to my own ears.

"I told you I wouldn't yet. Not until we know each other a little better and you feel a little more comfortable with our arrangement. Truth or dare remember?"

Right truth or dare. Does he expect me to ask another question? I turn around and look at the small round scars marring his chest. Carrick's words from last weekend invade my mind. What happened to him before he got adopted? Is whatever happened to him part of the reason why he is so fucked up now other than what that horrible woman did to him? I realize that I really need to know this, maybe if I do I will be able to understand him better and it will make this entire ordeal easier for me to handle.

"Truth or dare?" I ask hoping he will bite.

He chuckles a little.

"No Anastasia, It's my turn now I believe you asked me a question already the last time we played this game. I want to know more about you."

"Me?" I shriek. I don't want to talk about me he knows enough already.

"It's only fair. Quid pro quo Anastasia."

"There is not much to tell." I say a little defensively.

"I'll be the judge of that. So what is it going to be Truth or Dare."

I could just pick dare but I already know that I won't like what he will let me do. I sigh and look away from him.

"Truth." I whisper and he smiles at me.
"When your stepfather and mother divorced you went to live with your mom and new step dad only to return to your stepfather in Montesano eight weeks later. Why? Remember Anastasia be truthful with me like I have been with you." He warns and my stomach plummets.

Anything but that question that forces me to deal with those dark six months my mother married that asshole. I suppressed those horrible memories for years and right now they are coming back in full force. Ray took care of everything and saved mom and me without question or hesitation or obligation. He never judged or questioned mom; he was a rock when we both threatened to drown. He never made me talk about what happened but here I am in front of a man demanding to know this deep dark secret and who is by all accounts a similar monster like number three was. The irony of it all is almost painful.

"Well?" He asks impatiently.

I sigh and knowing that lying to him is not an option. He will probably know if I do that. He told me the painful truth about him and that bitch troll I think I owe him just as much courtesy. I sigh again and mentally prepare myself.

"Alright... I'll answer your question." I finally reply desperately trying to reign in my raging emotions that are threatening to overwhelm me. "Stay strong Ana. Stay strong!"
**Stuck in limbo**

*Christian*

When I was seven or eight years old, my parents took us on vacation to Vienna. I remember the countless beautiful baroque buildings and small alleyways in the historic city center, but what really made a lasting impression on me was a biblical painting by the famed medieval Dutch painter Jheronimus Bosch displayed at the Vienna Museum of Art History. I stared for God knows how long at the dark apocalyptic painting, absorbing every detail of it in my mind. Christ in Limbo was the name of the painting and it resonated with me instantly. I had no idea what limbo meant, but the image spoke for itself, a testament to the artistic greatness of its creator.

After some time, my father came to stand next to me studying that beautiful piece of art with me. Neither one of us spoke; we just stared at the painting in silence for the longest time. After a while, my father spoke up. "I guess this painting captures everybody's imagination because we all can relate to it. We all feel like we are stuck in limbo at times. That dark place between heaven and hell where there is no love or hope only death and despair. Don't you agree Christian?" I remember shrugging my shoulders. "I guess." I whispered back unable to articulate how well my father just described how I felt for as long as I could remember.

"We don't have to feel like that Christian. Christ sacrificed himself so we all could be free of pain and sin. So, we would never get stuck in limbo like he did when he died on the cross for us all. So, we could join him in heaven when our time on earth is fulfilled. Nobody is beyond redemption Christian." To this day, I can still hear my father's words echo inside my head. I never believed him then, and I certainly don't believe him now. The only way a wretched creature like me can taste heaven is to drag one of God's Angels to the pit of my personal hell. I did that to Anastasia; I took her and forced her to be with me, drowning us both in my misery. No wonder she does not trust me. The air around us still feels pregnant with unspoken pain and accusation. It is slowly killing me because I need to know. I need to know what happened and I need to hear it from her lips, because, for some bizarre reason, earning her trust makes me think that I have a shot at redemption.

"Anastasia. Tell me." I demand again a little more forcibly this time.

She looks down her knotted fingers unable to meet my gaze, and for a moment, I am convinced that she will never tell me. The feeling is so depressing that it almost threatens to overwhelm me.

"Alright... I'll answer your question." She finally says knocking the wind right out of me. This is it! She is finally opening to me. A strange feeling swells in my chest. I am desperate to hear what she has to tell me.

"When I was fifteen my parents split up. It was all right at first, they remained great friends. Mom and I even moved into the house next to Ray so we could see him every day. It was almost like they weren't divorced at all. On my sixteenth birthday, mom took me to Olympia for a girls' day out."

She swallows and her voice quivers for a moment before she continues again.

"We were having lunch when this man, Stephen Morton spilled his drink on her." She smiles wryly. "I know it is such a cliché. He apologized furiously to us and insisted on buying her new blouse and our lunch. He was all charms and smiles and before I knew it, he completely wooed her
They started dating soon after that. I did not like him and neither did Ray. There was just something about him that was off. We did not tell mom how we felt about him though, she seemed so happy and in love. Still, we were both shocked and surprised when they announced they were getting married after a couple of weeks of dating. I pleaded with mom to think about not rushing into things, but she was adamant that she loved Stephen, telling me that she just knew he was the one. So, I kept my mouth shut again not wanting her to be unhappy because of me. They married mid-October and we soon moved to Texas because of his work...

That is when everything turned into a nightmare. It turned out Stephan had no job. Instead, he was a conman with a gambling addiction on the run from creditors. He owed hundreds of thousands of dollars to people across the country. Mom was too in love and blind to see at first. He kept making excuses saying that it was all a misunderstanding; that the people owed him money instead of the other way around. His creditors kept appearing at our door, some of them were so shady even naive 16-year-old me could see that. It was around then when money started to disappear from my mom's purse. He tried to blame me for it but mom did not buy it. They argued and that is when he first slapped her right in front of me before storming out of the house. I felt so guilty I was the reason they fought and mom got hurt.

Mom did not want to talk about it. She just ignored what happened and sent me to my room. I was so hurt and angry. The next day she had covered her bruised and acted like nothing had happened. I knew I could no longer live there. I could not bear to see my mom beaten up again while she ignored the problem. So, I asked her to live with Ray again. She was so sad when I asked her that it made me feel so bad like I was abandoning her. So, I told her to forget about it all.

A couple of weeks after that incident, things started to escalate. Stephan started drinking heavily and he became even more abusive. Not only towards mom but also towards me when mom was not around. I kept my mouth shut about it. I did not want to burden mom further. He could stay out for days drinking and gambling and what not. One evening he came home again drunk out of his mind. Mom was out grocery shopping with our next-door neighbor old Mrs. Lewis. Neither of us thought he would be coming back home that evening. He started to make lewd comments and touch me inappropriately. I yelled at him telling him to not touch me. When he didn't stop I kicked him as hard as I could and ran upstairs locking myself into my room. He was furious and kept pounding on my door. I was so scared...

She is silent for a moment. Her voice is barely a whisper when she continues talking.

"Sometimes when I close my eyes I can still smell the stale stench of alcohol emanating from every rotten pore of his body." She whispers.

It feels like someone punched me in the gut knocking all air out of my lungs I can barely breathe. Flashes of the pimp and the smell of his filthy cigarettes assault my senses and I feel sick to my stomach. I ball my hands to fists but barely feel my nails digging into my skin. Anger, red-hot anger, scorches through my body. Morton is exactly like the pimp! And you are exactly like Morton and the pimp. A small taunting voice rings in the back of my head. But I quickly suppress it. I am nothing like those to monsters, right?

Ana stares out of the window for a moment before continuing her harrowing story.

"Thankfully Mom and Mrs. Lewis arrived and he took off cursing and screaming. I finally broke down and told mom everything. She booked me a flight to Seattle that very same day. She said she could no longer keep me safe and I was better off with Ray. I begged her to come with me. I remember her smiling sadly at me saying: "I made my bed now I have to lay in it." I did not understand what she meant, why she just could not come with me? It turned out that Stephan had
stolen almost every penny she owned. He forged her signature to clear out her bank account and take out loans in her name. The money she used on my ticket was all the money she had left. I still remember crying my eyes out at the airport. It felt like I was abandoning her to that monster. She made me promise not to tell Ray that he was abusing her, I guess she felt ashamed of what happened.

Ray never pushed me to tell him what had happened in Texas all he said was; "Are you alright kiddo?" when he picked me up from SeaTac. When I told him, I was fine he just nodded and hugged me tightly. But I guess he always knew something was wrong. Mom called me at every day at 20:00 sharp, and one evening a couple of days after I went back to Ray, he wanted to talk to her alone after I was done. I only overheard a little bit of what they were saying. Ray was both angry and sad, I will never forget how he pleaded with her on the phone to come back to Montesano but she didn't listen."

Her voice is soft but hoarse and her eyes are moist. She quickly blinks and looks intently at the floor for a minute like it is the most fascinating thing she has ever seen.

"One evening she did not call. She was always very punctual calling at 20:00 exactly every night… We tried to call her multiple times her but she did not answer her phone. Dad told me not to worry, that she might be out or something... But I knew deep down that he did not believe that at all. I felt anxious, sick even. I just knew something was wrong. When the phone finally rang hours later, I almost tripped over my own feet to answer it hoping to finally hear my mother's voice. But it never came, it was a doctor from Dallas General Hospital informing me that my mother had been assaulted and was lying in the hospital. She was in bad shape and they weren't sure if she was going to make it. Her neighbor Mrs. Lewis had found her on the lawn of her house badly beaten. She saw Morton speeding away from where she was. It was like my entire world was collapsing around me and there was nothing I could do about it. I have never felt so scared, guilty, and helpless before. I kept thinking that if I had not abandoned her and left for Ray this whole thing would never have happened. Ray immediately booked us on the first flight to Dallas to go see mom. He never spoke he just brooded and stared out the window the entire flight. I felt so isolated and alone on that flight. But I guess Ray was dealing with it in his own way. When we finally got to the hospital and I saw mom lying on that bed surrounded by machines and covered in tubes I broke down completely. She looked so small, fragile and lifeless nothing like the sweet, vibrant woman she always had been. The thought if losing my mom literally paralyzed me with fear. I just stood there nailed to the floor in the door opening of her hospital room."

I try to swallow down the lump that has formed in my throat. Images of a scared little boy desperately holding on to the lifeless body of his dead mother assault my mind. My stomach contracts painfully and I feel nauseous. Even though I try to suppress and deny it, I know exactly how she felt because I have felt the same.

She remains silent for the longest time and so am I, too afraid of my own reaction. The importunate ticking of the large grandfather clock in the corner echoes through the living room. It is the only sound filling the room for the longest time and it is grating on my already fried nerves.

"If it wasn't for Ray I think I would have collapsed on the ground. The strangest thing was though after a minute of seeing her like that I felt anger like I never felt before. I was angry because she abandoned me in a lot of ways. No matter how often I begged her to come back to Ray and me, she refused pridefully and remained with that asshole. And now she dared to abandon me again. I remember yelling and screaming at her, so badly that Ray and a nurse had to drag me out of her room. Ray was calm and collected like always, holding me close to him while I cried my eyeballs out. I guess I just really needed to let everything out and Ray understood me like no one else did. After that, I was finally able to go back to mom and sit with her. Slowly but surely, she got better.
After two weeks she was strong enough to tell the police what happened that fateful day. Morton came home drunk again and found out she was leaving him. After months of careful saving, she had an enough money to finally do so. He became furious and assaulted her before running off like the coward he is. The police found him in some drug hole and arrested him. He never had his day in court though. His father is a well-known lawyer in Texas. He claimed that Stephan was reduced mentally insane at the time he beat up mom. Drugs and alcohol destroyed his judgment. He made a deal with the DA. He never went to jail but was sent to an expensive private rehab facility and mental institution."

She scoffs as tears stream down her face and I realize I want nothing more than comfort her and take the pain away. I never felt anything like this before. What others felt never really affected me. I am a sadist, Elena said so and she knows me better than anyone does. These feelings I have for her, they scare the hell out of me. What have you done to me, Anastasia?

"I guess when you have money you can get away with everything. It was just all so unfair. My father, he was always calm and gentle but when he lost it when he heard how easy Morton got off for what he did to mom. I don't know what happened exactly but I remember mom begging him to let it go. She just wanted to move on and forget about it ever happened."

Guilt, an overwhelming sense of guilt, washes over me, fuelling the anger that I am feeling right now. That is right asshole, you are exactly like Morton. That small taunting voice rings in my head again. I am nothing like Morton or the pimp! I want to scream at the voice in my head. Everything I did to Ana was because she needed to realize she loved me and we are meant to be together. I need to lash out at someone or something.

"Where is this Morton fucker now?" I all but growl and quickly regret it when I see Anastasia visibly shrink a little at my outburst before a surprised look appears on her face.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair in frustration.

"I need to know. As your Dom, I am responsible for your health and safety. I need to know where this Morton guy is to determine if he is still a threat." I say in a much calmer tone of voice as a way of explanation.

She shrugs.

"I don't know. Mom moved to Georgia after it happened. He tried to contact her a couple of times after he got out. Mom told Ray and Ray made him stop I guess cause after that he never bothered her again."

The rage that I feel inside me is boiling over. I want to punch something. I know men like Morton. They are junkies, always looking for another score; they lack any control or discipline. They prey and latch on the weak and use and abuse them. Once they have their victim in their grasp they never let them go. Not even when their victims are nothing more than empty shells. The pimp was the same. Men like Morton never quit. No, I need to teach him a lesson he will never forget. I need to talk to Welch right now.

"Well not knowing is not good enough Anastasia. I need to make damn sure he never bothers you or your mother again."

There is a bewildered look on her face for a moment and she slowly blinks at me like I am some wild animal ready to pounce her any second from now. A soft noise escapes her throat but she is unable to articulate a coherent sentence. It is both tragic and comic.
"Just leave it alone, please? Morton is in the past and I would like to keep him there. He has not bothered me or my mother. Ray took care of it. I don't need you to be my misguided knight in shining armor."

Her words are like daggers straight into my soul. She does not need you, Grey. The thought is so incredibly painful that I simply cannot deal with it. I want, no I need her to need me. I want her world to begin and end with me; like mine begins and ends with her. Anger surges inside of me boiling my blood.

"Don't be ridiculous Anastasia. I am not going after him because of some savior complex. I am doing it to protect my asset. And you my dear are nothing but an asset albeit a priced one." I snap. Her face falls but she quickly recovers staring at me defiantly.

"This is exactly the reason why I did not want to tell you this. You are a temporary fixture in my life you already messed up my life enough as it is. I don't need you to conjure up old demons which mess up my life further. I did not sign up for that." Her voice is high pitched but firm unwavering and it is like she is pushing the daggers firmer in my soul. She is mine forever and I will never ever let her go. The sooner she will understand and accept this fact the better. I glare at her fury taking me over completely.

"You are mine until I am done with you. During that time, you will let me do whatever the hell pleases me." I hiss. I need to get out of her before I lose any semblance of control. I quickly turn around and storm out of the bathroom slamming the door behind me with a satisfying bang. I feel like a total asshole this not how I wanted this conversation to go. I wanted to be there for her support her like a friend but I royally fucked up.

"FUCK!" I scream and punch against my bedroom wall. Pain flashing through my fist. I don't care what Anastasia says. Morton is a goner. Predatory assholes like him never change he is just like the crack whores pimp. I quickly take my phone from my nightstand dripping water all over the display but I don't give a fuck. I dial Welch number and he picks up on the second ring.

"Welch it's Grey. I need you to run a complete background check on Stephen Morton, Carla Adams' third ex-husband. I want to know everything about him. When he pisses, eats or shits I want to know I want eyes on him 24/7. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir crystal. I will get on it immediately." That's why I do business with Welch. He is loyal as fuck and never questions me.

"I want this information ASAP. Make it happen." I snap and end the conversation and throw my phone back on the nightstand dripping water all over the display. I grab a towel and dry and get dressed. I need to channel my anger and something or someone. I really want to punch the shit out of something.

Taylor is already waiting for me in the foyer he must have seen me approaching on the cameras in the security room.

"Sir?"

"I am off to the gym." I growl.

"I am coming with you, sir."

I nod at him and walk up the stairs to my private gym in the sky. I briefly consider calling Claude for a moment but then decided against it. It will take too long for him to get here and if I don't punch something soon I will explode.
I am sweaty and slightly calmer but horny as hell after a few rounds with the punching bag. Not being able to give in to my needs is beginning to get frustrating. I know I promised Anastasia that I would not touch her until I had earned her trust but I am beginning to regret it now.

I punch the back one more time and let out a roar of frustration.

"Fuck!" I yell. Taylor looks at me slightly concerned but he knows better than to ask me anything.

I decide to run a few miles on the treadmill to tire myself out and stop my mind from spinning. After an hour, I am exhausted and make my way back in too the apartment to take a quick shower. When I am done, I decide to do some work in my office.

My inbox has literally been flooding with emails and I have a ton of missed calls from Ros, Barney, my mother, and Elena. I sigh loudly. Elena has been hounding me relentlessly ever since her spat with Anastasia at the Coping Together event. Her pushiness is beginning to annoy the hell out of me. Why can't she just let me deal with Anastasia on my own merits? I decide to deal with her and my mother later.

After having been three hours on the phone with Ros and subsequently Barney over a possible acquisition of a nanobot company I am tired, have a headache, and still horny as fuck. I want to fuck Anastasia desperately I feel a little unhinged. I stare at my phone for a moment, Elena and my mother's name light up the display. I run my hand through my hair in frustration knowing that I must deal with both today. I decide to deal with Elena first. Maybe she can shine some light on the whole situation with Anastasia.

"Christian." She purrs through the phone and I feel my head begin to throb; she can be so tiring at times.

"Hi, Elena. Why did you call?"

"Always so tense lately Christian. Do I need a reason to call you?"

"You never call without a reason Elena." I reply pointedly.

She laughs a joyful laugh.

"You know me so well Christian. How are you and the girl?" she finally asks getting to the heart of the reason for her persistent phone calling.

I sigh.

"Could have been better. We had a fight this morning. She told me about her adolescent years and her mother abusive second husband."

Elena is quiet for a minute.

"Oh, I am very happy she is opening up to you Christian. It is a sign that she is finally starting to give into you.. maybe even trust you. It must have struck a chord with you when she told you that." Elena says compassionately.

"It did. It made me think about things you know. I kept wondering if I was just like her mother's abusive husband... Just like him the pimp. I am not like them right Elena?"

"No of course not Christian! You are an extraordinary man! Passionate, kind, intelligent, brilliant and a little unconventional. Why would you even think such a horrible thing?"
"Because I forced her Elena..."

"Christian stop the nonsense right now." She snaps. "She signed the contract, didn't she? She stole from you and you gave her a choice. She chose to sign your contract and she should honor that. She should be grateful that she is not rotting in jail right now. You helped her in every way possible you took care of her father and her financial woes she is just an ungrateful little child who is stomping all over you. That is why I told you to take back control. You are losing it Christian. You need to show her that you are the master of both of your universes and she should submit to you."

I hate to admit it but I know she is right. I have rendered too much control over to Anastasia. I kept my end of the deal without question or additional demands. What if she never trusts me just so she can avoid being intimate with me? The thought is both infuriating and unsettling. But at the same time, I don't really want to force myself on her. I want her to want me for me. That is the crux of this relational dilemma.

"Look Elena I am working on it alright what else do you expect me to do? I can't force myself on her."

"I am expecting you to take control like I taught you Christian. Quit letting her guilt trip you. You are not forcing yourself on her! She agreed to be your sub with all that entails. She signed your damn contract! You should punish her for messing with your mind! You have needs, Christian. Give into them or they will tear you apart. Please for your health and sanity Christian. It pains me to see you so lost."

Elena is such a good friend. Always looking out for my wellbeing. She was there for me when no one else knew exactly what I need. I feel like an asshole for snapping at her for her persistent meddling. She has a point. Anastasia needs to understand that my patience has its limits and that I won't allow her to deny me indefinitely.

"I appreciate you looking out for me but I will be alright. Anastasia knows the rules and if she doesn't, I will happily remind her again. You are right I should be firmer with her but I am still in control." I say sounding weak even to my own ears and Elena pounces immediately.

"Well if that is true Christian, why haven't you made her apologize to me? The way she treated me at your mother's event was appalling."

I suppress the urge to scoff. Typical Elena to bring that up again.

"That is your word against hers. Her version of events that evening was slightly different from yours. I am not going to force her to apologize to you. Besides, you should not even have been on the event in the first place."

"But Christian that all shouldn't matter! A sub should never talk to a Dom like that. She should have been modest and respectful." She is right in principle but I am still a little irked of that she confronted Anastasia after explicitly told her to leave her alone.

"Well, she isn't your sub-Elena. You should have heeded my warning and left her alone. That is all I am going to say about this. Good day Elena." I say curtly and hang up the phone. I am no mood to beat this dead horse of a conversation again and she knows this.

I dial my mother's number but get her voice mail. I call her assistant at the hospital who informs me that she is in the OR assisting with a surgery. I hang up and check grandfather clock near the door. It is three in the afternoon still early. I will call my mother later.
I finish working for today and go and look for Anastasia. I smile a little when I find her in the library engrossed in a book. She is wearing a sexy a-line light blue dress that brings out her magnificent powder blue eyes. Her dress is a little hiked up, exposing most of her legs and a part of her thighs. God, it's erotic. I feel my cock hardening in my pants and I want nothing more than to bury my head between those sweet thighs of her. I need some release soon before I turn insane.

"Good evening Anastasia." I say startling her.

"Mr. Grey, I mean Christian hi..." She says a little awkwardly and I know she I still reeling from our fight this morning.

There are so many things left unsaid making the issue still unsolved.

"I am sorry I seemed harsh this morning. I am just trying to look out for you. I am contractually obliged." I say and give her a wry smile.

"Stephen Morton is not a threat anymore. He is a ghost of the past, a place I'd like to keep him."

"Let's not rehash this argument again Anastasia. It is pointless. Morton will stay in your past don't you worry about that." It is a half-truth I will still go after him she only will never know about it.

"Good. Thank you for leaving it alone sir... I mean Christian." She hastily corrects herself.

"That dress suits you Anastasia you look beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I want you to take it off."

"I am sorry, what?" she asks bemused her face is a mixture of dread and shock.

"I want you to take off that dress and your underwear." I say enunciating each word slowly and deliberately.

"But you promised me... You wouldn't do anything... I mean you said you wouldn't..." She says her voice laced with anxiety I hold up her hand and stop

"And I won't. I do however want to look at you I want to see you naked. I have needs Anastasia and since I cannot fulfil these needs the way I want to yet, because of the promise I made you. I need to look for an alternative way to satisfy them. So, I am asking you one more time take of your clothes."

For a moment, I think she is going to refuse but to my relief, she hesitantly starts to undress.

"What... What are you planning to do?" She whispers while slipping the dress from her slim shoulders. I don't even realize that I am holding my breath. God, she is breath-taking.

"You will see."

After a moment, she is just in her bra and panties. And I just stare at her Goddess like figure. I want to run my hands all over her creamy skin and breathe in her sweet scent. I unbuckle my belt and unbutton my jeans and boxers freeing my hard rock cock.

Anastasia gasps loudly.

"Christian. Sir, I don't."
"Hush. Take off your bra and panties."

"But..."

"Anastasia, I won't ask again. I have given you my word that I won't touch you nor will I expect you to touch me. Now take of your bra and panties lay down on the futon."

She slowly does what she is told exposing herself to me. My mouth is dry and I feel the blood rushing through my veins.

"Spread your legs for me. I want to look at your pussy." My voice is hoarse unrecognizable even to my own ears.

She dutifully obliges giving me a full-frontal view of her pussy. I feel my pulse racing and my mouth is dry like sandpaper. Her pussy is perfect. Lush and pink with perfectly even inner and outer lips. I move my hand down and firmly fist my cock. A shiver runs down my spine as I imagine plunging inside of her.

"Give me your panties." I command, and she bends over to pick them off the floor pushing her gorgeous breasts together. I lick my lips and groan; what I wouldn't give to come inside of her again.

"Here." She whispers.

I take them from her and inhale her intoxicating scent.

"Fuck! Baby, you smell so good." I growl fisting my cock tighter and start to move my hand up and down my shaft. That familiar feeling of butterflies flying around my stomach takes hold of me and a tingling sensation creeps up my spine.

I begin a milking stroke, squeezing the head of my dick easing the pressure and I slowly increase the phase of my hand. I'm salivating over every bit of pleasure I can get. I push her panties against my nose again breathing her sweet essence in. I feel overwhelmed, bewitched even.

Some precum drips from the head of my cock and I wipe it off with her panties. The silk feels soft and luxurious on my skin. The idea of her scent on my dick is exhilarating and I pick up speed moving my pantied hand faster and down my shaft. I close my eyes and tip my head back for a moment imagining her lush lips around my dick. I open them again and move a little closer towards her. I want her to see what she is doing to me. That she is turning me into a savage wild animal craving her like drugs.

I stare at the mound of her cunt. Her skin looks smooth hairless and soft. My eyes move down to her slit and her exposed entrance. I feel a jolt in my stomach when I see a little glistening wetness coating her sweet pussy. Fuck yes! She is aroused by this! I moan at the spectacular sight and I must fight off the overwhelming urge to push my cock inside of her. Her eyes are wide and her pupils are dilated. Her facial expression is a mixture of fear and something I cannot place. It is almost as if she can read my mind. It is as unnerving as exhilarating.

I squeeze my cock tighter messaging the head of my dick faster with each passing stroke desperately chasing my impending orgasm. My entire body tingles with the sensation and my cock pulsates and jerks. I let out a roar and shoot my load all over her panties. The release is euphoric and for a moment, I feel punch drunk but it quickly subsides.

I try to regulate my ragged breathing before wiping the rest of my dick of with Anastasia's panties. There is an awkward silence between us. Anastasia looks away from me. Her cheeks flushed and
she fidgets uneasily with her fingers.

"Here." I say and throw the panties at her.

She looks at me a little shocked and dazed.

I scrape my throat feeling strange and a little uneasy. Was she ok with this? A little voice says naggingly I quickly suppress it. We made a deal I did not dishonor it.

"Get dressed Anastasia we will have dinner soon." I pull up my boxers and pants and leave the library not sure what to do with myself. I decide to pour myself a drink in the living room.

I stare out the window drinking in the beautiful sight of the Puget Sound. The water is the bluest of blue and the sky has burst out into a spectacular array of red, orange and purple hues the last rays of today's sunlight.

I always wanted to live near the water. I used to sail up and down this strip of coast alone, admiring the houses on the coastline. Sometimes I fantasized what it was like to own a house like this being married to the love of my life and raise a family of my own. But such dreams were not for men like me. Elena always said Love is for the meek and the foolish only people like her and me were too smart to be snared by Cupid's arrows. Now, I secretly wonder if that is true. These feelings that I have for Anastasia are unlike I have ever felt before and what is even crazier is that I want her to reciprocate my feelings more than anything in the world. Is this what love feels like? I scoff aloud. If so, love is truly a cruel, heartless mistress and the irony of that thought is painfully stunning.

My blackberry buzzes and my mother's name appears on the screen.

"Mother."

"Christian dear, how are you?"

"Fine mother. How did the surgery go?"

"Thankfully it went very well. The little girl will make a full recovery." She says, relief clear in her voice.

"I am glad to hear it."

"The reason why I called is because I want to invite you and Anastasia for Christmas. Your father and I really want to celebrate this Christmas at the lake house in Montana with all of you. And it would be amazing if Anastasia could come with you. It would make your father and I are so happy that you finally found someone."

I feel conflicted. On the one hand, I really want to celebrate Christmas with Anastasia and my parents. On the other hand, I am afraid because the relationship I have with Anastasia is not conventional. What if they notice something? Deep down I know I want to live my fantasy if only for a moment.

"Mother I don't know ..."

"Please just ask her Christian and let me know if she can make it as soon as possible." Hearing my mom beg like this stirs something inside of me. I have always been a shitty son even after all she has done for me. If this makes her happy, maybe I can try to curb my doubts about this, right?

"I will. Good evening mother."
"I love you Christian have a great evening." She says before hanging up the phone.

I put my phone back in my pocket and turn around Mrs. Jones is standing at the entrance of the room.

"Mr. Grey dinner is ready." She informs me,

"Have you informed Ms. Steele yet?"

She smiles at me and nods.

"Yes, she is already in the dining room.

"Good. Thank you, Gail."

I follow her out the living room to the dining room where Anastasia is already seated. She looks away from me and moves nervously on her chair. Is she upset about what happened earlier?

"Are you alright?" I ask her.

"Yes..." she answers hesitantly and I know she is not truthful. I hate it when she lies to me.

"Did it bother you... what I did. Earlier?"

"It was a shock. I wasn't prepared for it I guess..."

"You did not answer my question. I asked if it bothered you." I snap annoyed by her evasiveness. She shrugs noncommittally.

"I have never seen a man do that. Especially not in front of me. I wasn't feeling really comfortable..." She replies softly.

"Because it aroused you?"

She gasps loudly and flushes again.

"I wasn't..." She begins to protest and it annoys the hell out of me. Why can't she just admit that she is attracted to me? It would make this whole thing some much easier. I slam my fist down at the table in utter frustration.

"You were! I hate it when you lie to me." I hiss. She looks fearful for a minute and I kind of regret my outburst.

"Oh, for God sake Anastasia stop acting like a prude. Feeling aroused by this is a perfectly normal human reaction. It is nothing to be ashamed about."

"It just felt awkward. I signed your contract and I am grateful to you kept your promise and did not touch me. This whole thing was just a shock to see I guess."

"So, you are ok with it?"

She shrugs again.

"I guess... I just did not like it when you threw my panties at me. It made me feel cheap and used." She whispers.
I wanted her to know that she belongs to me. It was my way of marking her.

"Noted. I will give them to you next time." I mutter still feeling irritated. She should be grateful that I did not fuck her outright.

She opens her mouth to say something again but Gail comes in with our first course. Creamy seafood chowder with garlic croutons. It looks and smells delicious. I take to opportunity to change the subject. It is of no use beating a dead horse.

"My parents invited you over for Christmas at their lake house in Montana. We will stay there two weeks."

"Oh ..." I put down my spoon and stare at her.

"What is it, Anastasia?"

"I was hoping to spend Christmas with my parents. I mean Ray will be released from the hospital next week and you know we just want to spend time together." She says hesitantly.

I feel anger well up in my gut. She signed the fucking contract she knows her ass is mine for six months. How the hell does she presume that she get to spend Christmas with her folks?

"That is very presumptuous of you Anastasia. My mother loves you and wants you to be there. I understand why you want to spend your Christmas with your parents. I know your family is important to you. But I would like that you stay with me this Christmas. Maybe we can go visit your parents the day after?" I offer to soften the blow.

Tears form in her eyes and it tugs on my heartstrings it is an unfamiliar feeling. I hate to watch her cry over this. She sniffles and has long stopped eating.

"You don't understand. This may be the last Christmas I can spend with him. The operation was successful but the cancer is still not gone yet. What if he never gets better? I know I signed the contract I know I am yours for six months but please let me spend Christmas with my family." She begs and it's like a punch it the gut.

Tears form in her eyes and it tugs on my heartstrings it is an unfamiliar feeling. I hate to watch her cry over this. She sniffles and has long stopped eating.

"You don't understand. This may be the last Christmas I can spend with him. The operation was successful but the cancer is still not gone yet. What if he never gets better? I know I signed the contract I know I am yours for six months but please let me spend Christmas with my family." She begs and it's like a punch it the gut.

This could be an opportunity to earn her trust and make her love you. A little voice rings in my head and it's like an epiphany I have been chasing her so hard and kept her on a short lease for months and it has not brought me what I want most from her. Maybe if I give her this little bit of freedom she will start to trust me? It's an intriguing idea. My mother would surely understand that Anastasia would rather spend Christmas with her parents if I told her about Ray's situation right? Besides, if this idea is successful Anastasia will be spending the rest of her Christmases with me and my family.

"Alright." I say before I can stop myself and she looks at me shocked. "I will let you go spend Christmas with your parents. I am not a monster Anastasia even though you keep thinking I am. I do this in good faith Anastasia just to show that I trust that you honor our arrangement. I guess what I am saying is that it is a way for me to earn your trust."

"You really mean this? You will let me spend Christmas with my parents?" she says bewildered.

"Yes, it is a show faith, Anastasia. I told you I want to earn your trust."

She smiles at me a breath-taking smile that makes my heart skip a beat.

"Thank you, Christian, thank you so much. You don't know how much this means to me." She says
tearfully.

"I can guess." I say and give her a wry smile.

"My jet will fly you to Boston on the 23rd and pick you up again on the 26th. Sawyer will stay with you at all times I need to know that you are safe." Her face falls. Did she really think I would let her go unsupervised? How incredibly naïeve.

"But you said you wanted to earn my trust." She says dismayed.

I need to nip this in the butt and fast.

"I do. But since your face has been on various media outlets I cannot take any chances with your safety. Sawyer coming with you in non-negotiable." I say with an air of finality. It is a half-truth the other half is that I want to know where she is and what she is doing always. I don't trust that she would not screw me over.

Surprisingly she agrees without a fight.

"Ok, I guess. Thank you again for letting me go." She says earnestly.

"You're welcome, Anastasia. You are very welcome."
Christmas

Anastasia

Over a million small snowflakes dwindle down from the dark grey sky. The icy northern wind blows harshly over the open tarmac of Logan International Airport, and I shiver uncontrollably. Sawyer opens the door of the black Audi Q7 that is patiently waiting in front of us. I silently slide into the backseat of the car and watch with detached interest as Sawyer moves onto the front seat to ride shotgun with the driver.

The car moves at a snail pace over the snow-covered busy Boston roads. The entire city has been covered with a thick blanket of snow for a few days now. According to the weather channel, the northeast of the US has been hit by the biggest snowstorm in decades at the start of this week. It was almost enough for him, Christian, to reign in on his promise that I could spend Christmas with my parents. Thankfully the storm cleared up after two days and he reluctantly let me go. The relief I felt was almost overwhelming and I thanked God for giving me this small break from him.

I stare out the tinted windows admiring the countless Christmas lights that illuminate the city in the early evening. It is a magical sight to behold like a winter wonderland. I watch a young couple share some roasted chestnuts. They are huddled closely together on a bench and look so happy. I wish with all my heart that I could have a relationship like that someday; after this whole mess is finally behind me. Another couple with two unruly young children desperately try to get away from toy filled store windows. I cannot help but smile a little when I remember that I was just the same at that age. It drove my parents nuts. I realize more than ever that it's the mundane things like shopping with my mother or sharing a meal with friends that I have come to miss most since this whole thing started.

The car continues its journey through Boston traffic and I silently wonder what kind of luxury hotel he has put my parents in and what guise he used to explain the whole situation to them. I dread having to answer questions about our sordid relationship to my parents. What should I tell them if they ask about him? About Us. When Christian and I visited dad in Boston after he had his surgery he introduced himself as my boyfriend but our relationship is hardly conventional. I feel myself getting anxious and a tight knot settles in my stomach. I feel a little nauseous. I am just glad that I do not have to explain Sawyer's presence to them since he will be staying in his own hotel room. Thank God for small favors I guess. I take a deep breath and briefly close my eyes to center myself again.

I open my eyes again and resume my staring out of the car window. I am surprised to see that the streets have become significantly narrower and more residential. Classical 18th-century lanterns cast a warm soft yellow glow over the red brick stone terrace houses and the unblemished snow. The whole vibe from it all feels like something straight from a Dickensian Christmas card.

The car comes to a halt in front one of the red brick stone terrace houses with dark green window hatches and Sawyer exits the vehicle.

"We are here Miss Steele." He says curtly when he opens the door. Confusion swirls inside me. What an odd place for a hotel.

"Ana! You are finally here!" I hear my mother's sweet voice brimming with excitement. I turn my head towards the door of the house and see my mother standing in the door opening beaming at me.
For a brief moment, I am nailed to the ground before I launch myself into her waiting arms.

"Mom." I sob breathing in her balmy scent. It is familiar, comforting and it calms me instantly.

"Come in sweetheart, it is bitter cold outside." She says, ushering me in. She looks up and smiles at Sawyer who is standing with my suitcases behind her.

"You must be Luke Sawyer. Christian, told me you would accompany our Ana." She says brightly and I am stunned.

What? Has he been in contact with my parents? What details has he told them about our sordid relationship? And why aren't we staying in a hotel? So many questions whirl around my head.

"Mrs. Adams, it is very nice to meet you." Sawyer says politely.

"Please do come in and close the door. It is freezing." She replies brightly.

Mom grabs my hand and leads me through the small hall to the light airy living room. Our feet click rhythmically on the light oak wooden floors. A beautiful decorated Christmas tree stands in a corner and roaring fire blazes in the fireplace. Above it, three bright red, white and green Christmas stockings hang proudly. By the looks of it, they have been knitted by mom.

"Annie!" Ray says happily as he shuffles through the door.

"Daddy!" I squeal and jump into his arms. All questions momentarily forgotten.

"Woah, Woah calm down sweetheart. You nearly knock your old man off his feet." He chuckles.

I cannot believe how good he looks since the last time that I have seen him. He gained weight and has a rosy blush on his cheeks.

"You look great daddy."

"I feel great Annie. The cancer is in full remission and I am just short of a clean bill of health." He glows. I feel elated my daddy is going to be alright! All the worry and anxiety I had about his health are melting away and it feels like someone lifted a million-pound weight off my shoulders.

"You three want some hot cocoa?" mom offers with a smile.

"That is very kind of you Mrs. Adams, but I need to report to Mr. Grey that we have arrived safely. If you just could show me where miss Steele is sleeping I can bring her suitcase to her room." Sawyer replies politely.

"Oh, yes, of course, follow me." Mom says and escorts him up the stairs. The questions that I suppressed minutes ago come back with a vengeance. I don't want to barrage Ray with them so I decide to grill mom when she gets back.

"So sweetheart how have you been? It looks like you lost some weight." Ray says a little worriedly.

"Busy, but fine." I quickly reply the last thing I want is Ray worrying about me.

He looks at me intently for a moment.

"Your internship coupled with school does seem demanding and your boyfriend Christian does not seem like an easy… boss… You just make sure you have enough fun. It is important." He says
with a wry smile and I know he is fishing for something. He probably wants to know more about my 'relationship' with Christian.

"I will be fine dad just don't worry about me OK?" I smile at him and gently squeeze his leg.

"I am your dad it is my job to worry about you sweetheart."

"Nobody is going to worry about anything now. It is almost Christmas!" Mom says while whirling in carrying a tray with three steaming cups of cacao.

"I put some marshmallows on the top just the way you like it." She says brightly.

"Thanks, mom."

She sits down next to me and dad and takes a sip of her cocoa.

"I just like to say that I am grateful. After everything that has happened this year with Bob's death and Ray's illness, we still have each other. It is nice to be able to celebrate together in a real house instead of an impersonal hotel or worse a hospital room. I should write a thank you note to your... friend Ana."

It is time to get some answers once and for all. I need to know what they know and if and why Christian has been in contact with them.

"Did Christian, arrange this place for you guys to stay?"

"Yes. He has been taking very good care of us and all the other ex-employees that worked with me at the Olympia shipyard. He called me and all the other employees personally after he launched an investigation into the company. He has offered to cover all the medical costs of those who got sick working for the company. Even the people that did not work there when he took over the company. He did not have to do that you know. He might have the reputation of being an asshole but he is a good man and I am glad to have him as a son in law." My father says with a definitive nod.

'I know I had my reservations about him first but I have seen the pictures of you and him, Ana and you look so amazing together and after all he has done for us... well let's just say I am thankful that he came into your life Ana. You don't have to tell me anything about your relationship but I highly doubt he would call me up and tell me that you are taking a private security officer with if you two are not really serious... I just need to know if you are happy? If he makes you happy?" Mom asks concern edged on her face and I curse at him internally.

Did he play this sick game to try and legitimize our so-called relationship? ? I never in a million years expected that he would weasel himself into the lives of my parents and put me in this position. Forcing me to play along in this charade of his. I am completely flabbergasted by how much effort he has put in to get into their good graces and how successful he has been. An insane part of me is almost flattered and it's messing with my mind.

"Mom it isn't like that... yes we are involved but don't expect to hear any wedding bells soon. Our relationship is... complicated. He is just really overprotective of me." I shrug hoping my reply satisfies her curiosity.

"I understand that. A man in his position needs to be careful with those and for those around him. I am just glad you have someone like him Ana. Knowing that you are safe and cared for means the world for your mother and me." Ray says earnestly and I am glad they have accepted my answer.

"So how long have you two been staying in this house? It looks lovely and I really like to have a
tour." I say quickly changing the subject.

My mom smiles brightly and quickly launches into the story. Telling me that Christian arranged this place for them a little over three weeks ago after the doctor told them that dad did not need to stay in the hospital 24/7 anymore. Originally the plan was that he would stay with mom at the hotel. But after Christian called my dad the ask how he was doing he arranged this for them in Boston's iconic Beacon Hill neighborhood. It makes me feel angry knowing that he has been in contact with my parents behind my back. Why could he just tell me? What are his motives for doing this exactly? Does he really care about them or is just another rouse to gain control over my life? This is all just so complicated and these questions are driving me insane. Maybe I should call him and ask him? I am so caught up in my own thoughts and emotions that I hardly hear my mother asking me something.

"Is that OK Ana?"

"Anastasia?" she asks louder this time.

"I am sorry what?" I hastily reply.

"I would like to go Christmas shopping tomorrow. Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure." And I give her a tentative smile. I hate shopping and she knows it.

"Are you alright baby girl? You seem distracted."

"I am alright mom just a little tired."

She smiles at me.

"Well, it has been a long journey. How about I give you a quick tour of the house and show you to your room so you can rest up a bit?"

"You two don't mind?"

"Of course not, honey. Now go on and get some rest. Ray says and squeezes my leg gently.

I give him and kiss and follow my mom out of the living room into the spacious and luxurious kitchen. I let my eyes wander through the kitchen and drink in every detail. A big built in stove fits perfectly onto the granite counter and white kitchen cupboards hang proudly on the plastered walls. The same Oakwood floors from the hall and the living room also run through the kitchen floor. The whole room feels warm and homely.

"It is beautiful, isn't it? Although I still haven't quite figured out how that stove works my chicken casserole came out ruined last night." Mom sighs ruefully and it makes me smile. Mom's cooking has always been hit or miss. The only thing she can make really well is fresh pasta something she learned from her mother who was of Italian descent. I don't remember much of her. Only that she was a petite sweet woman with an angelic voice. She could sing the most beautiful songs. It broke mom when she died.

"Are you sure it was because of the stove? Or was it because of your cooking?" I tease her and she chuckles.

"Ray said my cooking has improved since the last time he tasted it."

"Ray eats everything mom." I tease back.
"Oh, can't you just let me have this one compliment?" she teases back wraps her hands around my waist and pulse me into a warm embrace I realize just how much I missed her these last few months.

"I have missed you, mom."

"Oh, baby girl I have missed you too. I am so happy that you are here." She says and pulls me into a closer hug.

"Come let me show you the rooms upstairs." She says sniffing a little and I know she has gotten emotional again.

We walk up the large white spiraling staircase to the second floor of the house. There are 4 bedrooms with their own bathroom ensuite on this floor there is also a small library and an office on this floor. On the top floor, there is a sauna and fitness room. All in all, the house is huge although not nearly as big as Christian's solitary mansion on the Puget Sound.

After my mom has given me a quick tour of the house she leaves me to unpack my things in my room located next to hers. The room feels light and airy. Black and white pictures of various flowers and landscapes hang on the ammonite colored walls. A large queen-sized bed stands against the wall in the middle of the room. I almost squeal when I see the cozy reading corner near the window. I quickly unpack my suitcases and hang my stuff in the large walk-in closet. This whole house is opulent and luxurious and I cannot quite understand why Christian Grey of all people would put in so much effort just to please my parents. Is it to score points with me? Make me think he is not such a bad guy? Or is he trying to win over my parents just to pin me down? Or maybe he genuinely cares about my wellbeing? I quickly dismiss that last ridiculous thought. I am pretty sure he is incapable of really caring for another person. Nevertheless, these questions keep spinning around in my head and I realize the only way to get them answered is to ask Christian.

I sigh and start to unpack my clothes from my suitcase putting them in the large walk-in closet near the door. I am tired from the flight and I decide to lie down for a second and close my eyes.

"Anastasia?" I faintly hear my mother's voice calling me.

"Anastasia wake up. It is dinner time." She says again while gently shaking my shoulders.

Dinner time already? I only closed my eyes a minute ago.

I open my eyes and see a familiar pair of eyes smiling back at me.

"Come on sleepy head. It is almost seven and your dad is getting hungry. You know how grumpy he gets when he is hungry." She jokes.

I slept for more than an hour yet it feels so much shorter. I smile at mom and clamber of the bed.

"What are we having for dinner?" I ask.

"Your dad ordered Chinese. Apparently, he thought I needed a break from cooking." She says and he face falls a little. It is endearing and I cannot help but smile. When we were still a family Ray used to order in every week using that same excuse. I guess some things never change.

Dinner is fun; mom and Ray keep joking with each other and it reminds me once again just how much I have missed them. I almost choke up when Ray declares that mom is his best friend and I am the best thing that ever happened to him. She gently squeezes his arms and tears well in her
eyes. Even though they split up when I was 16 they have always remained a close friendship. But most of all they have been my greatest champions. It makes me feel loved and safe.

"I love you, Ray. You are the best thing that happened to Annie and me." She replies tearfully.

Ray scrapes his throat and gently squeezes her arm.

"Enough with the sentimentality for today. Who wants some Port?" he asks sounding slightly hoarse changing the subject like only he can, making mom and me smile.

"If you pour us some glasses I will plate some cheese and bread. I could use an evening snack." I quickly offer.

"That would be great honey. There is a big collection in the fridge. Courtesy of Mr. Grey's personal shopper." Mom beams and I am instantly reminded again how much he controls all aspects of my life. I push back the thought determined not to let it ruin my time with my parents.

It is almost 1:00 when I go to bed. I cannot remember the last time I had this much fun with my parents. I feel slightly tipsy from the liberal amounts of port I drank tonight. I quickly shower before I jump in the soft queen-sized bed. I am supposed to go Christmas shopping with mom early morning. I inwardly groan. The prospect of wrestling through throngs of Christmas shoppers is not exactly appealing to me but mom loves it.

I pull the covers over me and close my eyes. The loud buzzing of my phone startles me, and I groggily grab my phone from the nightstand. What idiot would call me at 1:30 in the morning.

"Hello." I say sleepily into the phone.

"Well, hi there Annie Steele." Jimmy's cheerful voice rings through the speaker.

"Jimmy!" I almost squeal with excitement. "It is so good to finally hear from you."

"Hear from me? I thought you had forgotten all about little old Jimmy. I have been trying to get a hold of you for weeks! Kept getting a number is not in-service message. Was worried sick about you."

"I am sorry Jimmy never meant make you worry about me. There was something wrong with my phone service but is apparently fixed now since I am speaking to you." remember Christian telling me that his team would be looking into that problem. It seems like he kept his word and got it fixed. It is weird; thus far he always seems to keep his word. Does he really want to earn my trust so badly?

"Well, I am glad it is fixed. How have you been? And be honest with me Annie." He says bluntly as ever.

I instantly know what he is aiming at. He probably saw the pictures of Christian and I. I cannot tell Jimmy what happened with Christian. He is such a good friend and supported me when Christian humiliated me in front of a group of executives. The memory still leaves me reeling and anxious. I will never tell what Christian put me through. It will only make him upset and there is nothing that he can do about it anyway.

"I am alright. Dad is doing much better now. He is almost cancer free. I am celebrating Christmas with him and mom."

"I am so happy to hear your daddy is going to be OK. How is your mom?"
"She is fine. Thank you for asking. We are going Christmas shopping tomorrow."

"Damn I wish I could join you guys." He chuckles. "So how is work?" He asks tentatively cutting through the heart of things.

"Work is fine it all worked out in the end." I lie. "It keeps me very busy especially combined with college." I offer him a nonsensical platitude.

"So, tell me how have you been? How is Paris treating you?" I say quickly diverting the attention away from me. I much rather hear what he has been up to. He is silent for a minute and for a moment I am afraid he is going to continue with his inquisition. Jimmy has always been very perceptive so he probably knows I am not being truthful.

"Paris is great! I am learning so much new stuff here. When I am back home I will open my own restaurant."

Thankfully Jimmy does not decide to press me about work and Christian and we quickly fall into easy conversation. It is nearly 3:00 clock when we finally hang up and I quickly fall into an easy slumber.

I wake up to the delicious smells of fresh coffee and bacon and my mom's insistent chattering. I quickly wash up and dress before going downstairs for some breakfast.

"Morning Annie." Ray says without looking up from the morning paper.

"Hi, dad. Hi mom." I kiss them both and sit down at the breakfast table.

"Made you some pancakes." Mom says proudly before depositing something that has little resemblance to a pancake on my plate.

"Eat up so we can go shopping." She says impatiently and I groan softly earning a chuckle from Ray.

I quickly take a few bites and swallow them without really chewing it so I don't have to taste it.

"That is all you going to eat?" Mom asks concerned when I put my plate in the kitchen sink.

"Yes, not really hungry. Let me brush my teeth so we can go." I give her a small smile before sprinting upstairs.

I am exhausted when we finally get back to the car after a day of relentless shopping. My feet hurt and my arms feel heavy from all the bags that I am carrying. I don't think that there is a shop in Boston left that we have not visited today. Mom is in her element and chatting up a storm. I love my mother to dead but her insistent chattering has given me a headache. I want nothing more than to go home take a shower and read a book in the quiet of my room. Sawyer opens the trunk of the car and I help him load our gifts. Mom has bought way more things than I did a lot of presents are for her friends at her arts and crafts club.

I hated that Sawyer had to come with us. It made me feel annoyed and uncomfortable that he was walking behind us like some babysit. Mom thought it was funny she told me that it made her feel like a celebrity.

Sawyer opens the passenger door of the Q7 and mom and I climbed in.

The car smoothly moves through the snowy Boston streets and I marvel at the throngs of
Christmas shoppers crowding the streets.

The melodic ring-tone of Sawyers cell-phone blasts through the car speakers. Sawyer quickly pushes a button on the steering wheel and the sound abruptly stops.

"Good afternoon sir." Sawyer says politely immediately grabbing my attention. Christian... Of course, he needs to check up on me via Sawyer. I sigh and continue listing the phone conversation Sawyer is having. Not caring that I can only hear one part of it.

"Yes, This morning sir."

"Fine sir. We are on our way home."

"I would an assume so sir." Sawyer says while quickly glancing at us through the rear-view mirror.

"Yes, I will make sure she is packed and ready tomorrow morning sir."

"Will do sir." Sawyer says before pressing the button on the steering wheel again ending the conversation.

No longer paying mind to mom's insistent chatter I silently wonder what Sawyers phone call with Christian was all about. Has he decided to reign in on his promise last minute? It will be Christmas tomorrow and it is a 6,5-hour flight to Montana where he is at it means I would spend most of Christmas day alone in the sky... My stomach churns would he do something so cruel, promising me something that means the world to me only to rip it away from me at the last minute? I feel anxious and uneasy and it is driving me crazy. I can't live with the uncertainty.

"Sawyer..." I begin tentatively.

"Yes, Miss Steele."

"What time do we fly back to Seattle on the 26th?"

"21:00 Miss Steele." He answers guilelessly and I breathe a sigh of relieve.

I am still celebrating Christmas with my parents! Then... Who needs to be packed and ready tomorrow? What is Christian up to?

.....

A familiar frisson of excitement unfurls in my belly. It is still dark outside and the warm blankets lie heavy on my body. Christmas morning has come and I feel like a little girl again impatiently waiting until I can unwrap my Christmas presents. I stretch my legs and slowly push the blankets away. The morning air feels cold on my skin but it does not bother me. I glance at the alarm clock it is just 7 am and I am sure my parents are still fast asleep. I quickly get up brush my teeth and dress in some comfortable sweats I brought with me. It is one of the few items that are truly mine and hasn't been purchased by Christian.

I silently walk downstairs and enter the living room just to take a quick peek at the presents under the Christmas tree. It feels like I am 5 years old again and I am barely able to contain my excitement. I am stunned at the number of presents under the tree. I knew mom bought a lot of stuff yesterday but not this much. The amount of presents under the tree is just insane. Ray must have bought so many presents for mom and me. It makes me feel sad uncomfortable even. Ray never splurged money he has always been thrifty maybe he is not getting better? The thought is so painful that I quickly suppress it, besides Ray would never lie about something like that.
I take one last glance at the Christmas tree before moving towards the kitchen to make a spectacular Christmas breakfast. The fridge is stuffed with so many delicious foods my mouth starts to water. My parents really did go all out for Christmas.

Soon the kitchen is drenched in the delicious smells of bacon, croissants fresh brewed coffee and eggs, pancakes and waffles. I quickly set the table and decorate it with various Christmas ornaments. After everything is done and I finally set the last plate on the table. I cannot help but take a little pride in my early morning achievement.

"It smells great in here sweetheart." Ray's comments while walking into the kitchen.

"This table looks so beautiful Ana. You did an amazing job." Mom says proudly.

Breakfast is delicious and fun. Ray offers to clean up so mom and I can go and relax in the living room. I cannot wait until he comes back so we can start opening the mountain of presents under the tree. My curiosity is killing me.

"I left some food for Sawyer." Dad says when walking into the living room with the dish towel still draped over his shoulder. "I figured he might be hungry, never seem him eat since he got here."

"Well, I think he will appreciate Ray. Now come to your daughter is dying to open these presents and so am I."

Dad gives us both a small smile. "Just let me light the fireplace first I think the atmosphere needs to be perfect."

"Ugh, that will take so long!" I know like I sound like a petulant child but I cannot help myself.

Both of my parents burst out in laughter.

"I am glad that some things never change." Mom says and squeezes my leg gently.

Moments later there is a blazing fire inside the fireplace spreading a comfortable warmth through the living room. I quickly grab the first present from under the tree, a medium sized box and read the name tag. I smile at Ray and hand him the present. I don't recognize the paper so I am guessing mom bought it for him.

Ray calmly opened the present and suddenly let out a gasp. "Holy smokes!" He breathes out.

"Well, what is it, Ray?" Mom's asks excitedly.

"Press box season tickets for the Mariners! This is just too much Carla? Annie? You guys shouldn't have bought me something so expensive…"

Mom looks surprised and turns her attention to me. She must have noticed the equally surprised look on my face.

"I did not buy you season tickets, Ray. I bought you socks and a new cell phone. And I don't think Ana bought you those either. I am guessing you have a real-life Santa clause to thank for this."

Christian! He must have done this… Why would he do something like this? And how does he know that Ray always wanted Mariners season tickets? My mind is reeling and I hardly hear my mom cry out in shock and surprise when she opens her present. I turn towards her and see her clasping a bronze statue of a man. I recognize the style it looks like a work of mom's favorite
sculptor Alberto Giacometti. Ever since I was a kid mom has been obsessed with his work. He has been a huge inspiration for her own art.

"How? How is this possible. It is a real Giacometti. This work is priceless!" She exclaims.

Mom can hardly contain her excitement expertly studying the statue.

"Well one thing is for sure this Santa has some very deep pockets. He must really like you, Annie." Dad says winking at me. I feel dazed unable to fully comprehend what is happening. Is this another one of his ploys to get my parents to like him or to buy my affection? Maybe he just wants to give you a really nice Christmas? The small voice inside my head whispers. I quickly shake that thought unwilling to believe that is the case.

One after the other expensive gift is unwrapped by each of us. After an hour or so there is only one small gift left under the tree. I stare at the huge amount of gifts next to me. A pair of beautiful pearl earing's lies on the pile of first editions of Hardy's and Austen's. The old books form a shrill contrast with the designer clothes, technical gadgets, and jewelry I have been given this year.

"Her Annie, this final one seems to be for you." Ray hands me the small box and

I quickly rip off the paper curious and anxious to know what it is. I open the box and stare at the engraved golden locket in complete shock. How is this possible? How did he know? How did he even get it? My heart constricts and my throat feels dry like sandpaper. I feel tears well in my eyes unable to contain the overwhelming emotions I am feeling.

I look up at my mom feeling guilty and ashamed. I take out the locket and gently trace my dumb over the engraving before opening it. The familiar solemn face of Saint Philomena patron saint of children, babies, and lost causes stares back at me. I never thought I would see this locket again. It belonged to my grandmother. She had given it to me shortly before she died, telling me that it would keep me safe.

Even though she had been ill for a long time her death was still unexpected. Or maybe mom and I both refused to see how ill she really was.

My mother had a younger brother named Adrian. He died when he was just 5 years old. It nearly destroyed my grandma. My grandfather bought her the locket with Saint Philomena after they buried him telling her that Saint Philomena is the patron saint of children Adrian's soul would be safe.

I had to pawn it a couple of months back to pay my bills. I never told anyone about what I had done, especially not my mother knowing it would break her heart. When I went back to retrieve it a couple of months ago it had already been sold adding to my already sky-high pile of misery. How the hell did Christian know? He must have been stalking me that is the only logical explanation. He must have bought it from the pawnshop owner before I could get it back. I feel a surge of anger rushing through me. How dare he? At the same time, another part of me is profoundly grateful that he did. Pawning the locket was one of the hardest things I had to do.

"Oh, Anastasia why did you never tell me anything." Mom has tears in her eyes.

"I felt so ashamed mom and I did not want you to worry. You had enough stuff on your plate."

"But this was not your decision to make Anastasia. You know how much that locket means to me, to us! You should have come to me, Ana."

"I know mom and I am sorry."
She sighs and opens her mouth to chastise me again but Ray stops her.

"Carla, I think Annie got the message. If you want to blame someone blame me."

"This isn't about blaming anyone Ray! It is about honesty!" She snaps back.

"I swear mom I was going to get it back. I am really sorry you are right I should have told you."

"You should have indeed! Just promise me from now on you will tell me everything."

"I will mom. I promise."

There is a brusque knock on the living room door and Sawyer enters swiftly.

"I hope I am not interrupting but there is a sleigh waiting outside hoping to take you all for a ride. Complements of Mr. Grey who wishes you all a Merry Christmas."

Of course, he would I think sourly. Maybe he really does mean it the small voice in my head rings again.

"Well, that sounds like a lot of fun." Dad says cheerfully. I guess he is thankful for the break in this tense situation.

"Well, I guess some fresh air will do us all some good. A sleigh ride sounds really exciting." Mom says and gives Sawyer a small smile.

I quickly get up and turn on my coat before walking outside towards the lovely red and green sleigh pulled by two beautiful white horses.

"Good afternoon ma'am." The sleigh driver an elderly man with a short white beard and twinkling blue eyes says cheerfully. He helps me into the sleigh and then helps mom and dad in who are crooning excitedly.

The sleigh ride is amazing. Boston's old town is covered in snow and looks like something from a picturesque Christmas card. Soon our earlier tensions are forgotten and we fall back to easy conversation. After two hours or so the sleigh stops in front of a cozy looking building and the driver lets us out.

"Mr. Grey has asked if I could deliver you, folks, here. It is the best restaurant in town so I was more than happy to oblige." He says smiling.

The door of the restaurant opens and a slender man with his chef's head still on greets us enthusiastically.

"Ms. Steele, Mr. Steele, Mrs. Adams. Welcome to the White Goose I am Fred Anderson head chef and I have the honor to serve you your Christmas dinner today." He says while ushering us into the restaurant.

I am stunned silent at the interior it looks like a snowy forest a winter wonderland. Pine trees with snowy tops stand around a gorgeously set table. Thousands of Christmas lights are scattered over the snowy floor and soft melodic Christmas songs croon over the sound system. I cannot believe how much effort they put in to create something this incredible. A waiter immediately comes to our table and pulls out our chairs.

We are the only dinners in the restaurant and I am pretty sure Christian rented the entire thing and
paid for the extravagant decor. I decide to park my reservations about his motives for now and just enjoy it all.

"Today we have prepared a special menu for you. Curtsy of Mr. Grey." Chef Anderson says smiling and hands us all a white and gold menu.

**Christmas Menu**

**Canapes**

*Pumpernickel Bread, Rosettes of Smoked Salmon, Chive Cream Cheese.*

*Chorizo and Prawn Skewers.*

*Asparagus wraps with lemon mayo.*

Maison du Bosquet Viognier 2014

**Starters**

*Lemon Grass and Saffron Crepes, Duck and Shrimp Stir-fry.*

Domaine de la Vougeraie Côte de Beaune 2011

**Intermezzo**

*Lobster, langoustine Ravioli with Limoncello cream sauce.*

Brocard Chablis Grand Cru Valmur 2015

**Maine course**

*Rib beef with Shallot and gravy.*

Or

*Roasted Turkey with spiced cranberry, apple, and sage stuffing.*

Penfolds St Henry Shiraz 2008

Domaine de la Chênepiere Moulin à Vent 2012

**Dessert**

*Individual Egg Nog and Raspberry Cheesecake, Black Cherry Coulis, Chocolate and Mint Biscuit.*

*White and Dark Chocolate Log Cake, Cinnamon Ice Cream, Chantilly Cream.*

Pedro Ximénez Ximénez-Spínola 2015

**Aftermath**

*A selection of local cheeses and slices of bread.*

Colheita port 1951
"I have never seen so many courses in my life not used to all these fancy foods."

"I am sure it will all be delicious Ray." Mom says while rolling her eyes at him.

"I have no doubt about that." He shots back.

Turns out that dad is right the food is absolutely delicious. Every single thing has been prepared with so much love, care and attention it is just simply incredible. But what I love most is the happiness on my parents faces this entire day. It has been so long since I have seen them genuinely happy.

"Annie, Carla I would like to tell you both something." Dad begins quietly. "I know I am a man of little words. I am not used to wearing my heart on my sleeve. I guess that I want to say is that I love you both and that I am truly grateful to spend this Christmas with you two. I don't know what the future will bring so each minute I spend with you guys is a precious minute for me and I want to spend as much time with you as possible. So, once the doctors tell me I am all better I want to take you guys on a road trip through America to celebrate life, love, and family."

Mom has tears in her eyes and so have I.

"I love you too daddy." I lean over and hug him drinking in his familiar comforting smell. No matter what Christians motives are for doing all this I am simply grateful that he did do this. It has brought us all closer together and for the first time in a long while I feel hope blossoming in my chest.
Burning confessions

Christian

Mommy and I are playing with my cars on the floor. Mommy has the red car and I have the green. I like it when he is not here. I like it when it is just me and mommy and no one else. Mommy rolls the red car over the carpet she smiles at me, but it is a sad smile. Her smiles are always sad... 'Go get it maggot.' She says. And I jump up and run to get the car. Maybe mommy won't be sad anymore if I get the car. I want mommy to be happy.

The door of the apartment slams open and I stand stock still in fear. NO! Not him he always hurts me! He always hurts mommy he makes her sad. I want to run, to run and kick him chase him away from mommy so he cant hurt her anymore but I cannot move.

'Come here slut! I have a friend in need.' He sneers and grabs mommy by her hair dragging her into the bedroom. Mommy yells and cries but he does not care. Another man enters the apartment His hair is messy and his teeth are brown. He grins at me a mean grin.

'I am gonna fuck your mommy you little bastard and you are going to watch.' He grabs me and pushes me into the room with mommy and him. HIM kicks mommy and she yelps in pain. I feel mad, really mad. I kick the man who is holding and he hollers I run to mommy and kick HIM.

'Leave mommy alone! Leave her alone!' I scream and kick HIM as hard as I can. The other man grabs me and throws me to the floor. Something hot is pressed against my back it burns! It hurts so much! I scream and cry out for mommy. I see mommy staring at me, her eyes are wet but she does not help me.

I wake up with a start and feel the sweat dripping from my chest and back. It feels like I cannot breathe. I gasp desperately trying to get in some precious air. The scent of burned flesh is still logged in my nostrils. Where the fuck am I? I squint my eyes trying to get my bearings in the dark bedroom. Right, I am at my parent's lake house in Montana. Far away from that ramshackle apartment in Detroit where I spent my early years with that goddamn crack whore. After all these years she is still haunting me in my sleep. She is a particularly persistent ghost that I cannot seem to lay to rest. I should have known that the nightmares would come back. Ana has been my dream catcher for these last months I should have never let her go and celebrate Christmas with her parents. It wrecks havoc on my own piece of mind.

I look at the clock, it is nearly 5 am and I know from ample experience that sleep won't come for me again. I swiftly get out of bed and put on my tracksuit. The only way to clear my mind is strenuous exercise. I take comfort in the fact that she will be at my side again tonight and will not ever let her go again.

I am not surprised to see Taylor already waiting for me by the back door. He knows all about my fucked up sleeping habits.

'Morning sir.'

'Taylor.' I say and nod at him. He opens the door and we start our 5 kilometers run around the lake. Montana is named big sky country for a very good reason. There is nothing but wilderness and valleys protected by indomitable mountains as far as the eye can see. The fast cloudless sky stretches as far as the eye can see. It makes me feel insignificant and empowered at the same time. The first lights of dawn peer through the high mountain tops and slowly chase away the deep
blackness of night. The fresh snow crunches under my feet as I pick up the phase. The cool fresh mountain air clears my head and the nightmare slowly fades away to the back recesses of my mind.

A thick layer of ice covers the lake in front of my parent's house. The early sun rays cast a warm glow over the ice creating a low hanging vapor over the lake. It is a spectacular sight to behold. The entire run takes less than 15 minutes a good time for a 5-kilometer run. I opt to go for a quick shower before calling Sawyer to get the latest updates on Anastasia. I cannot wait to see her again tonight. For a little while, I contemplated on having her come to Montana to celebrate new years with my parents. But I quickly came to the conclusion that I want to spend new years alone with her in my Aspen home. I do not want to share her with anyone one. My mother and Mia especially were both disappointed. Mia is dying to meet Ana and hoped she would see her after Christmas. It took some time to explain to Mia that I wanted to spend some time Ana alone. She eventually relented hounding me after I promised her that I would introduce Ana to her right after New Year.

I turn on the water heating it up just a notch under painful. Just the way I like it. The hot steam of the scalding water has completely enveloped me. My muscles instantly relax. I quickly later myself and wash my hair. Enjoying the soothing feel of the water. Showering always had a positive effect on my state of mind. It gives me a sense of complete autonomy over my life. None ever bathed me as far as I can remember. I switch off the water grab a towel and dry and dress. I decide to go with some khaki slacks a white button-down shirt and an ocean blue V neck sweater. The color reminds me of Anastasia's eyes.

I take my phone from the nightstand and quickly dial Sawyer. I am desperate to know how Anastasia is doing. Did she enjoy her Christmas?

'Morning sir.' He answers on the second ring.

'Sawyer. How is Anastasia doing?'

'Fine sir. She is having breakfast with her parent's bags are packed and we are ready to leave according to schedule.'

'Good. I trust that yesterday went smoothly?'

'Yes, sir. They seemed to have really enjoyed themselves. They all seemed happy with the arrangements you made. Mrs. Adams was especially taken with all the presents.'

'Did Ms. Steele appreciate her necklace?' I am anxious to know.

'Yes, sir it caused for a bit of a stir with her mother but all in all she appeared to be grateful for the gifts.'

I am intrigued. What is the story with the necklace? I resolve to ask her when I see her tonight.

'Excellent, I am glad she did. I will see you tonight. Keep me appraised of every development.'

'Yes, sir.' Sawyer replies.

I hang up and go in search of some breakfast. I am pretty sure Mia has cooked up something delicious again. I walk to the large kitchen and smile when I see Mia prattling around stirring in various pots and pans. She is talking animatedly to my parents to Mrs. Harris who is setting the large, rustic kitchen table. Mrs. Harris is a sweet set woman in her early 50s with sparkling green eyes. She, her husband and two of her sons take care of my parents Montana estate especially the horses. Her husband, Eric and my mother bought a couple of young wild mustangs a few years back and he and Mrs. Harris have been training them ever since. The horses are very dear to my
mother. She has been fascinated with Mustangs for as long as I can remember.

'Christian! Thank god you are here. I cant open this can of peaches because Elliot broke the can opener and left me hanging! How am I suppose to make my famous dulce de leche peach pastries!?She says dramatically.

I suppress the urge to smile. Typical Mia. She is exuberant, sweet, with a heart of gold but incredibly over dramatic.

'What do you want me to do about it?' I tease knowing she will blow up at me. She stops milling about and stares at me like I am some simpleton.

'I want you to fix it and open the can for me.' I grab the broken can opener from the counter and examine it. It is nearly broken in half. What the hell did Elliot do to it?

'Mia I can fix a lot of things but this is even beyond my capabilities. It is completely broken.'

'Well tell me, Christian?.. How am I supposed to make my pastries then?' she replies agitated.

'Why are you making a dessert for breakfast is a better question.' I counter. Mia is an incredible cook. She went to culinary school in France the same one I fucked Anastasia's friend Jimmy off to.

'Because you will be leaving soon and won't stay for dinner. I can't let you leave without trying my peaches! It is my signature dish !' she says petulantly. Right, we are back at this again. She is still mad I won't spend New Years with Anastasia in Montana.

'If you would just stay for one more day I don't have to stress so much, Anastasia can try my signature dish and I get to meet her before the years' end.'

'Seriously Mia I want to spend some time alone with Anastasia and I have asked you to respect that. Please stop trying to guilt trip me it won't help. You can make your signature dish on January second. For now, some toast and an omelet will suffice.' I say pointedly and put down the can of peaches back on the kitchen counter.

'But Christian..' She begins giving me her doe eyes and I find it hard not to cave. I hate it when she does that. Mia is one of the only people that has me wrapped around her finger and she knows it. She has done this ever since she was little. This time, however, I will not give in to her spending time alone with Anastasia is more important to me.

'Enough Mia. Just drop it I won't change my mind so stop trying.'

'Fine whatever Christian. Just open the damn can for me.' She says while pushing the can back in my hands again.

I sigh take a spoon from the drawer and press the head of the spoon against the seam of the can before rubbing it back and forward making sure to put enough pressure on the seam of the can. Soon the material gives way and the can opens. I demonstratively put the can back in front of Mia and she glares at me.

'Thank you.' She says petulantly.

I shake my head and sit down at the kitchen table and open the morning paper.

'Coffee Mr. Grey?' Mrs. Harris asks.
'Yes, please.' I nod at her and she purrs me a steaming hot cup of coffee. I take a lump of sugar and forfeit the cream this time.

'Here.' Says Mia while she unceremoniously places down a plate with toast scrambled eggs and bacon in front of me. I fold the paper and set it away to read later.

'Thank you, Mia.' I say sweetly and she rolls her eyes off me still smarting from not getting her way.

'Good Morning little brother and little sister!' Elliot says while waltzing into the kitchen in his running gear. One of his large grubby hands dives into my plate stealing a piece of toast. It is pissing me off enormously. I hate it when people take food from me.

'Dammit Elliot get your sweaty paws out my damn plate.'

'Jeez Christian, what has crawled up your ass and died?' He teases. He turns around and grabs a couple of freshly baked toast from the kitchen counter and shoves it in his face.

'Elliot get your filthy hands of that plate!' Mia shrieks furiously. 'Why can't you act like a normal person and wait for breakfast like everybody else does. And go take a shower. You stink!'

'Why are you two so angry today? You both need to get laid but please don't take your frustrations out on me.' He snaps and storms out of the kitchen almost bumping into mom.

'Kids please stop this animosity towards each other! I would like to celebrate the holidays with peace and understanding. Especially in my own home. It is not often that we get to spend time together and Christian will be leaving in the afternoon.' There is a hint of disappointment in my mother's voice. I feel a small stab of guilt in my chest. I do not like to disappoint my mother. I take another sip of my coffee before muttering an apology to her.

She sits at the table with me and we are soon joined by Mia, my maternal grandparents, and my father. Mrs. Harris quickly serves out Mia's breakfast feast for us all. My grandfather immediately engages me in conversation.

'You want to join me for a hike around the lake later son?' he asks. I adore my grandfather he has always been kind and respectful to me no matter how much of a pain I was. He is 80 now but still as fit as any of us.

'Oh, I was hoping that we could all go horseback riding after breakfast I have been dying to take the mustangs out.' My mother interjects.

He gives her an indulgent smile.

'Anything you want to do is fine with me Gracie.'

It has been a while since I went horseback riding. My old piano teacher Ms. Kathy had horses and I regularly rode in my teen years.

'Anything left for me?' Elliot enters grumbling.

'There is plenty left Elliot so relax.' My dad says without looking up at his plate.

'Are coming horseback riding with us, Elliot?' I ask a peace offering for our earlier spat.

Elliot good-natured as he accepts my offer gracefully.
The sun shines brightly and a gentle mountain breeze graces my skin. The cool mountain air has gotten a little warmer since my earlier morning run. I enjoy the warm sun rays on my face and the crispness of the winter air. I walk towards the stables after changing into jeans and a thick warm sweater. I push my brand new black Stetson on my head. I cannot help smiling a little when I was a Christmas gift from Mia. She bought one for each of us saying that we should spend our time in Montana in style.

'Howdy partner.' Elliot teases while tapping his head.

'I cannot believe she bought us these heads.' He chuckles.

'Well, it does not surprise me it is so Mia.'

'True C, true.'

'Hurry up you slowpokes we are waiting for you!' Mia says galloping towards us on her horse. She is wearing pink leather boots and an obnoxiously glittering pair of jeans. She comes to a halt in front of the stables.

'Flanagan and King are the only ones left. Mr. Harris already saddled them both.'

'I take King.' I immediately say. 'Flanagan is lazy so he is better suited for Elliot.'

'Fuck off.' Christian, he growls I tap my head and smile. 'Likewise Lelliot.'

King is a large sturdy dark brown stallion with white feet and a hot-headed temperament. In a way, he is just like me. He lifts his head and softly neighs when he sees me. I gently pet his neck and scratch his nose.

'He is more than ready to go, Mr. Grey, he has been cooped up in his stable for two days so he might be a little explosive.' Mr. Harris says appearing from one of the stable boxes.

I tap my head in greeting.

'I keep that in mind. Thank you, George.'

'I have fun, sir.'

I take the reins from his neck and escort him outside. I put my foot in the stirrup and smoothly climb in the saddle. King breezes and neighs ready for action. I smile and gently nudge my feet against his belly and he sprints away. I decide to let him blow off some excess energy I shift my right foot a little backward. 'Go King!' I yell and he jumps into a gallop. Running into the wide open space. The wind blows in my face and it feels just like I am soaring. Free and happy. It is exhilarating. Why am I doing this not more often? Maybe I should get a horse and build a stable on the meadow? I wonder if Ana likes horses too. I turn King around back to where my Mother, Mia, my grandfather, and Elliot are waiting. Grandma and my father decided to stay home to play bridge with Taylor and Ryan. Grandma Trevelyan is not as fit as grandpa.

My mother beams when we ride towards the horse trail. 'I have been wanting to this ever since we got here. I am so happy doing this with my kids and father.' She babbles.

Montana is beautiful. Large snow covered pine and fir trees flank the snowy trail the little stream next to it is completely frozen. Countless icicles spike downwards from the rocks in the frosted water. It looks like a frozen waterfall. The trail veers to the right and we enter the large open snowy plains. The sound of muffled horse hooves on the ground is rhythmic, soothing even.
'Come on let's get some action going. The last person at the foot of the mountain is a loser!' Elliot howlers and speeds away. Quickly followed by Mia and grandpa. Who are equally as excited.

'Calm down! We do n't want accidents!' mom yells at them worried before speeding her horse up to leaving me behind.

'Come on King. Let's show them!' I quickly overtake my mother and grandfather I spur King on harder and he passes Elliot with breakneck speed. Mia's and her horse Sapphire a horse so dark she looks almost blue are within reach.

'No way Christian!' She yells and squeals spurring her horse on harder. The distance between us grows. Mia has always been an excellent Amazon she has been riding since she was six and owns two horses of her own. The foot of the mountain gets closer and closer. 'Come on King harder!' I urge him on hoping to get closer to Mia. The distance between us gets smaller but Mia and Sapphire remain to fast for us to overtake. We are nearing the foot of the mountain and they are still nearly a foot ahead of us. Mia slows down knowing and comes to a halt at the foot of the mountain winning the race. She cheers triumphantly and pets the neck of Sapphire. I reach her within seconds followed by my mother and grandfather. Elliot and Flanagan are last to reach our destination and I cannot help but laugh at him.

'Once a loser always a loser.' I tease.

'Fuck off Christian.' He snaps back.

'Boys language.' Mom admonishes.

'That was exhilarating!' Grandpa says with a huge smile on his face. 'Its good to let loose now and again.'

'Agreed.' We all say in unison.

We continue the trail at a slower pace only switching to a gentle trot now and again. Two hours later we are back at the house. My muscles ache a little from the three-hour journey but it is not really unpleasant. A hot bath will make it go away soon enough.

I take Kings saddle off and clean his hooves before brushing him clean. I throw his blanket on and lead him back to his stable.

'Thanks for the ride buddy.' I say and give him an apple which he greedily eats up.

Back at the house, Taylor is waiting for me along with Ryan.

'Sir, Stephan just informed me the plane is waiting on a private airstrip near Missoula.'

'Thank you, Taylor. I am ready to go within the hour. Tell him to standby.'

'Yes, sir.' He says and sounders of. I decide to take another shower before I go. I smell of sweat and horses and I highly doubt Anastasia would appreciate the odor.

Once I have showered I put on some gray slacks and a button-down white shirt. I stare at the louche fucker in the mirror a moment before averting my eyes. I hate looking at myself. I quickly comb my hair and make my way downstairs again. It is time to go and meet Anastasia in Aspen. Butterflies are bouncing up and down in my stomach. I cannot wait to see her again, not having her
near me almost drove me insane. I haven't had a good nights sleep in days. I can hardly believe that I have survived all this time without her. But maybe that is exactly what I did. Surviving not living. It is funny really, realizing how someone I have only known for a few months can have such an incredible influence on my life. I scoff Master of the universe my ass.

I hear voices in the hallway and see my entire family waiting downstairs for me.

'Do you really have to go? We would be more than happy to have Anastasia here with us celebrating new years.' My mother asks imploringly.

'I know that mom and thank you. But I would really like to spend New years with just the two of us.'

She smiles at me, a sweet motherly smile and her hazel eyes light up a little. She gently brushes my cheek with the back of her hand. The only place she can touch me.

'I never thought I'd see the day you be so completely in love. It is such a delight to see Christian.'

Love? I want to laugh at the notion. My mother is such a hopeless, naive romantic. I am incapable of loving anyone. What I feel for Anastasia is something entirely different it is a dark, primal all-consuming feeling; A selfish, unrelenting, unending need for her that I cannot control. But you want Anastasia to love you… That taunting little voice in the back of my mind is a truth I cannot deny nor accept putting me in a split. How can anyone love me? Especially her? After everything that has happened between us? I am a sick, twisted unlovable bastard the rotten fruit from an equally rotten tree. But I want no, I need Anastasia regardless of that fact and I will take her any way I can have her. Even if it means hurting her. She is mine and mine alone an Angel I stole from God because he never cared for me. He owes me her so I can have a little light in my perpetual dark and bleak world.

I bent forward and kiss her on the cheek.

'Thank you for the great Christmas mother.'

'Oh, Christian don't be silly. I am your mother it is my job to make all your Christmases great. Promise me you and Anastasia will come and visit us soon.'

'I promise.'

'Son. Have a safe flight and say hello to Anastasia for me.' My father says gruffly and gives me a firm handshake.

'Sure thing dad.'

'Well little bro, since you are leaving me now to get laid which I totally understand. I demand beers and a Mariners game with you first thing next year.'

I roll my eyes at Elliot.

'Sure thing Elliot.' I say and give him a firm handshake before turning my attention to pouting Mia.

I open my arms to her and slowly walks over to me. I envelop her in a firm hug and kiss her hair.

'I promise you, Mia, Anastasia and I will come and visit soon.'

'You are always busy or traveling and we barely get to see you. I hate that you are leaving us so
soon now.' She pouts.

I hate disappointing my family especially Mia. But it is for the best. I am no good for them. They deserve someone better than a dark, sick bastard as their sibling and son. Elena said that distance was the best I could give them so I would keep them safe from my darkness and I know she is right.

With a final wave, I say goodbye to my family and enter the waiting black Range Rover that is taking me to the airport. Taylor drives us on to the main road with Ryan riding shotgun.

I stare out the tinted windows but hardly absorb the rugged but beautiful Montana scenery. My mind is too preoccupied with thoughts of Anastasia. She will be airborne soon it takes longer to fly from Boston to Aspen than Montana to Aspen. One of my other jets is flying her to Aspen. I wonder how she liked her Christmas. Will she be able to trust me now even just a little bit? Will she be more malleable now that I have shown her my good side? God, I hope she is. It has been more than over a month since we last have sex and I don't think I will be able to keep this dry spiel up for long. Not with her. It is like she has brought me to live from a lifetime of not living. Sex with her is like heaven on earth it is exhilarating, comforting and all-consuming. I scoff internally what else do you expect from sex with an Angel, Grey? I don't want to take her just on the basis of the contract even though she consented to me when she signed it. But I don't think I am able to stop myself if that's the case. You are one sick and fucked up son of a bitch Grey! That little voice in the back of my mind scolds me. Nobody had ever this effect on me Anastasia is driving me insane.

The car stops on the private airfield a couple of miles away from Missoula.

Taylor opens my door while Ryan loads in the suitcases. I climb the stairs and enter the plane. Stephan Doyle my pilot and Carol Griffith my co-pilot greet me politely. A young brunette stewardess I have never seen before introduces herself as Allison Richards. I hate getting a new flight attended on my flights. What the hell happened to Rebecca my regular flight attended?

'I will be attending to your needs today sir.' She says all breathy and flirtatious. Clearly willing to do more than just serving food and drinks. I have to suppress the urge to snap at her. She is beautiful. I suppose my type. Petite, her dark hair is wavy and her light green eyes are sparkling. She would have been excellent sub material a year and a half ago, but now I don't spare her a second glance. The truth is; she can not hold a candle to Anastasia. No woman does and that thought is deeply unsettling.

'Where is Rebecca?' I grunt at Carol and Stephan.

'Sick, came down with the flu.' Carol answers apologetically.

I sit down on one of the chairs and strap my self in.

'Bring me a brandy and something to eat the moment we are airborne.' I snap annoyed at the new flight attended like she is to blame for Rebecca's flu situation.

'Yes, Mr. Grey.' She scurries off a little miffed but I don't give a flying fuck. I have half of mind to fire her on the spot.

The seat belt buckle springs on Stephan disembodiment voice rings through the intercom informing me that we are ready to take off.

The woman brings my drink and a club sandwich.

'Here you are sir.' She says. Instead of leaving me after bringing my stuff she keeps standing
annoyingly near my chair batting her eyelashes at me.

'What?!' I snap irritated and completely fed up with her unprofessional behavior.

'Anything else sir?' she answers quickly.

'No. We are about to take off, so sit down and don't bother me again unless I ask for you.' I growl.

'Yes, sir.' She says disappointment edged in her voice.

I drain my brandy and watch the scenery quickly passing by. Stephan is taxiing the plane and quickly stirs us on the runway. The plane picks up speed and suddenly I am pressed back into my chair the plane has reached escape velocity from the earth gravitational pull. The buildings on the ground become smaller and smaller as the plane climbs higher into the sky.

Stephan corrects course a couple of times making the plane tilt to the right. After 15 minutes we have reached cruising altitude and all I can see is a cloudless sky outside my window. The seatbelt light switches off again.

Stephan informs me through the intercom that we will reach Aspen in 1 hour and 12 minutes. I cannot wait to see Anastasia again she will land a couple of hours after me since it takes longer to fly from Boston to Aspen. I feel the butterflies fluttering in my stomach again. This new feeling has become a familiar companion over the last few months. It is as terrifying as it is thrilling and it's making me restless. I decide to do some work to take my mind off things. My email box is flooded with work-related email and I diligently get to work on them starting with the once Marcus send me about a potential take over Kavanagh Media. It is an interesting proposal it will allow me a great deal of control of what is written about me in the media and it is an excellent tool to keep Ana's best friend and Elliot girlfriend, Katherine Kavanagh in line. If Anastasia would ever tell her something about what we have I will have some major leverage against her. It sounds hard but my experiences in the business world have thought me to always have an ace up your sleeve. I am engrossed in the proposal hardly realizing the time fly by. I write notes on the side of the document for Marcus to take into consideration before pursuing this acquisition.

The seatbelt light flickers on again and Stephan informs me that we are about to land soon. After 15 minutes the 'plane lands smoothly on the runway and taxies on the tarmac.

I undo my seatbelt and make my way to the plane door where that annoying flight attended is already waiting.

'Did you have a nice flight, sir? She asks with the same flirtatious manner. I roll my eyes and order her to open the doors. You should think she has gotten the hint by now.

I move from the plane on to the tarmac with Ryan and Taylor in tow. A black tinted windowed Escalade is waiting for us and we quickly get in.

It takes about 40 minutes to drive to my Aspen property. It is located high in the mountains and has astonishing views of the surrounding mountains. I had it designed by an architect fuck buddy of Elliot named Gia Matteo about two years ago.

Taylor steers the car through the electric gates and drives onto the long driveway. The sounds of small rocks crushing beneath the wheels of the heavy vehicle is clearly audible. He stops in front of the front door and Ryan opens my car door. The house is a real modernistic statement. It is entirely made out of steel, wood, and glass and is completely self-sufficient energy wise.

Mrs. and Mr. Bentley my housekeepers greet me politely at the door and inform me that dinner is
ready whenever I want to eat.

'Thank you, both. I will eat when my Ms. Steele gets here. I ate on the plane so I don't require anything to eat now. I will be in my study.'

'Certainly sir.' Mrs. Bentley says and gives me a polite smile.

'Taylor, inform me when Ms. Steele has landed and is on her way.'

'Yes, Mr. Grey.' He nods and I leave them to do some more work in my office. Just to keep my mind off Anastasia.

Over an hour later I have gone through most of my important mail and I am restless I cannot wait for Anastasia to get here. I stand up from my chair and walk towards my liqueur cabinet to pour myself a Cognac. I swirl the amber liquid around my glass and walk over to the tall glass windows. The mountain view is breathtaking from up here. Not only the peaks but everything is covered with a thick blanket of virgin snow. The deep green pine trees, ferns, and various holly bushes form a stark contrast with the winter wonder landscape.

Maybe I should take Anastasia for a walk on one of the many trails? Would she like that? I take a sip of my Cognac it leaves a pleasant burn down my throat. The persistent buzzing of my cell phone pulls me from my window viewing. I check my watch, Anastasia won't be landing until well over an hour. Who the hell is calling me now? I pick up my phone from my desk and look at the caller ID. I sigh, it is Elena. For a brief moment, I tempted to ignore her before I decide to take her call. She is my only friend after all.

'Elena, what do I ow the pleasure.' I answer curtly.

'Since when do I need a particular reason to call a friend Christian?' she chastises me.

I roll my eyes knowing full well she can't see me.

'Elena, you never call without a reason.'

'Ouch Christian, that hurts. Is that how you see me? Calling you for things? I thought you knew me better.'

'I am sorry Elena. That wasn't very kind of me.' I reply mollified and feeling a little ashamed for letting my anxiety over Anastasia's arrival out on Elena.

'No Christian it wasn't. I don't know what has gotten into you lately but you are acting short-tempered and wound up it seems to me like your needs are not getting met...

Christ, I know where this is going. She is trying to meddle in my relationship with Anastasia again.

'Elena stop it, don't go there.'I warn. 'I am fine. Just tired from my flight from Montana.'

She is silent for a moment.

'Oh, so your back in town again I thought you would spend your holidays with your family in Montana. Don't worry I understand your reticence for family events.' She says a little conspiratorial. 'Since you are back in town I would like to invite you to my new year's party at the club.' She beams.

Here comment on my family annoys the hell out of me for some reason. I know I am not good
enough for them, she does not need to rub it in.

'No, I am not in Seattle.' I snap. Feeling a slight flurry of joy in rejecting her. It's a new feeling.

'Oh,' she says disappointment oozing from her voice and it delights me. I decide to go for the knock out punch, feeling a little vindictive.

'I will be staying in my Aspen home celebrating new years with Anastasia.'

'Oh.' She says again and is silent for a moment. 'Are you sure that is a good idea? It seems like you are spoiling her too much. Please, believe me, I don't want to interfere I mean I respect your wishes. I am staying out of your relationship with the girl. But she might take advantage of you if you give her too much of your soft side. I am afraid you won't get what you need. I just don't want you to get hurt.' She says imploringly and I find it hard not to heed her call after all, she has always looked out for my best interests.

'I know Elena. I have everything under control. Don't worry about it.'

'Well, then I wish you a happy new year.' She says softly.

'You two Elena. Same goes for Isaac.'

'Thank you.' She replies. I tell her goodbye and hang up the phone. Elena's words are still ringing in my head. I have given Anastasia my softer side hoping she'll trust me enough to continue the psychical part of our agreement. But what if she doesn't? This has been nagging on my mind for days now. Elena is right; the beast in me needs feeding and if Anastasia does not come around I might need to get tougher with her again. I stare at the few important emails left. I don't have the energy to finish them today. That feeling of anxious restlessness has crept up on me again. I down my tumbler and move to the living room to play my piano. One the few things that always brings me solace.

I don't know how long I have been sitting her caressing the keys playing one soulful piece after another. It must have been more than an hour. Because Taylor has informed me that Anastasia has landed and is on her way over to me. Excitement and trepidation course through my body. I am finally going to see her again after three long days. I hope my plan has paid off and she is more amenable to my wishes. I long to hold her again, to feel her again, to be inside her again. My cock hardens at the thought and I lick my lips. I leave my piano and phase around the living room feeling like a caged lion begging to be set free.

At last Mrs, Bentley opens the front door and Anastasia walks in gracefullly. For a moment I am lost for words she looks absolutely stunning in her gray pencil skirt and white blouse. Every time I lay eyes on her she takes my breath away. No woman ever had this effect on me.

I walk over to her holding my hands out. All I want to do is hold her and feel her again I am drawn to her like a Mott to a flame.

'Anastasia.' I gently grab her shoulders and place a soft kiss on her cheek. The smell and feel of her! And to my surprise, she does not push me away. I feel elated.

'Christian.' She quips back.

'I trust that you had a pleasant flight?' I inquiere.

'Yes, thank you it was nice.'
There is a little awkwardness between us and I hate it. I want her to be comfortable with me, it is the first step of trust.

'Good, good I am happy to hear it. I am sure that you want to freshen up before dinner'

'Yes, that would be lovely thank you.' She replies softly not looking me in the eyes.

I take her hand and lead her to my bedroom.

'This house is really beautiful, Christian.' She comments and I swell with pride.

'Thank you. The architect that did design this house is a friend of Elliot. She also redesigned aspects of my house on the sound. I could give you a tour of this place later if you want?

She looks up at me and for the first time in a while, she gives me a little smile.

'I would like that.'

'Here we are.' I say and open my bedroom door. 'This where you will be staying. The bathroom is adjoined.' I point to the right side of the room.

She looks a little surprised when she sees my clothes folded on the chair near the bed.

'This is your room?'

'Yes, why?'

'Oh, I just thought.. You know .. We would sleep in different rooms?'

Her comments annoy the hell out of me I told her time and time again that I sleep better with her. She sleeps in the same bed as me in Seattle why the hell is she making an issue out of this?

'I already told you I sleep better with you next to me. I don't understand why you are making an issue of this. You sleep next to me back home.' I say pointedly.

'Yes, you are right. I am sorry. I thought maybe you wanted to sleep alone on holiday.' And I am surprised how easily she acquiesces.

'Well, I don't. There are towels in the bathroom closet. I leave you to it.'

Not sure what to do with myself I decided to check on dinner. I walk to the kitchen and see Mrs. Bentley stirring in some pots and pans.

'Mrs. Bentley, what time can dinner be served?'

She smiles at me.

'In fifteen minutes Mr. Grey.'

'Good.' I nod at her.

I decided to make myself useful en set the table surprising Mrs. Bentley.

'Robert can do that sir.' She says referring to her husband.

'It's alright feeling a little bored anyway.' She gives me another smile and continues her cooking. It smells good.
fifteen minutes later the table is set and dinner is served. Anastasia, however, is still upstairs. I sigh and walk upstairs again to see what's keeping her. I briskly knock on my bedroom door before opening it. She is standing in the middle of the room in some navy blue yoga pants and a white woolen sweater. She looks gorgeous and I can hardly keep my eyes off her.

I startled her because she nearly jumps. I hate that she is so on edge around me.

'Dinner is ready. Boeuf burgeon and mashed potatoes. Mrs. Bentely's signature dish.' I say by way of explanation.

'Oh, it sounds lovely I am almost done. Just putting my socks on.' She gives me tight smile and puts on some hideously looking multi-colored knitted socks that look like someone stole them from a poor unsuspected circus clown.

Apparently, she notices the look of distaste on my face while I am looking at her socks.

'My mom made them for me.' She says a little apologetically. And I feel like crap I should have figured that is was a gift from her eccentric mother.

'They are quite colorful.'

She looks at them again and smiles.

'Yes, they are. But so is my mom.'

She puts on some equally hideous plush orange cat slippers. 'I am all set.' She comments and I point at her slippers.

'Another gift from your mother?'

And she laughs her first real genuine laugh and it makes my heart soar. For the first time since this arrangement, she seems at ease around me.

'How did you figure?'

I grin at her.

'Lucky guess.'

Dinner passes in the same lightheartedness and it gives me hope, hope for the future. Maybe she will learn to trust even love me after all? The thought is almost too painful to bear. I know that nobody can or should love me I am a monster but it is something I want more than life itself.

After dessert is served she is quiet and introspective gone is the lightheartedness from earlier and it puts me on edge again. Suddenly she stares up at me while fingering the golden necklace around her neck. I recognize it as the locket she pawned off to some shady pawn shop a couple of months back. God! The shit that I had to pull to get that thing back still annoys the hell out of me.

I had known the owner Clay McGill, from hearsay. He is a real piece of shit. Julian Reese one of my more unscrupulous acquaintances's still had an ax to grind with him and he owes me a lot of favors. That asshole McGill gave her far to little cash for it and he was planning on having it melted the moment she left his filthy shop. He actually tried to rip me off demanding 200k for it when I tried to buy it back. When I refused to pay that ludicrous amount of money he said he did not have it anymore. So called in one of my outstanding favors with Julian. The next morning the locket and a copy of the Seattle times were on my desk at GEH. I opened the paper and was
greeted with the blaring headline **Pawnshop boss savagely assaulted.** He learned the hard way that nobody fucks with Christian Grey.

Finally, I can't take the silence between us anymore. I need to know where we stand.

'Is there something wrong with your dessert?'

She looks up at me a little startled.

'No, no. It tastes great.' She sighs and puts her fork down and looks at me.

'Thank you for all the presents. My parents really appreciated them.'

'Only your parents?' I arch my brow slightly confused didn't she like what I got her?

'You shouldn't have you know… it made me feel uncomfortable. Like you were trying to buy me or something.'

Fucking hell why does he always feel the need to dramatize everything. It was Christmas I bought her presents it's not a fucking big deal!

'I did not need to buy you I already own you.' I snap unable to control my temper. She looks at me shocked and indignantly and I somewhat regret my outburst.

'You may own my time for a couple of months but you will never own me.' She snaps back. Oh, baby how wrong you are. I am in no mood to fight with her at the moment.

'I am sorry I shouldn't have said that.'

'No you shouldn't have.' She replies petulantly

'I just wanted you to have a nice Christmas. Money means nothing to me, Anastasia. I am worth over 70 billion dollars a few season tickets a statue and a locket mean nothing to me. But I know how much it means to you and your folks.' I reply pointedly. She looks shocked again.

'I don't give a shit about your bottom line Christian. How did you know anyway? What my parents like? How did you know about the locket? I haven't told anybody that I sold it.' Her voice is soft almost a whisper.

'Language.' I growl I hate it when she swears its unbecoming. She rolls her eyes at me and I nearly explode.

'Anastasia, don't push me.' I hiss.

'I am sorry.' She has the good sense to look contrite. 'Please answer me.' She pleads.

Shit, how am I going to explain this one?

'When we visited your father in Boston he told me he was a huge Seahawk fan, as for your mother looking at the sculptures she makes and posts on her webpage it does not take a genius to figure out she is a Giacometti admirer.' I deliberately leave out the locket how do I explain to her that I had been watching her for months? She will never understand...

'What about the locket?' She eyes me critically.

Fuck! I need to come up with something plausible quickly.
'When we made our arrangement I went through your finances. I found a receipt for your visit to that pawnshop so I sent Taylor to get your necklace back.' Half truths are the strongest lies.

By the look on her face, it is safe to say that she is not convinced by my explanation. She is smart and inquisitive and I cannot help but feel proud of her.

'How? I went to that pawnshop prior to our arrangement and the owner told me he did not have it anymore. I remember it clearly because he was quite skittish and wanted me out of his shop asap. The whole thing was quite strange.'

I knew that shit would come back and haunt me.

'Anastasia that pawn shop owner is a notorious liar and a thief. Out of all places, you could have pawned that locket you choose to most shady of them all. He obviously lied to you. How much did he give you for it 200? That locket was worth over 2 grand he conned you pure and simple.'

'I feel so stupid.. It is just that I needed the money really badly.'

'Don’t. You got the locket back so there is no need for guilt or sorry’s. Regret and guilt are useless emotions.’ she looks at me indignantly clearly vexed by my opinion on the matter.

'I disagree…' she begins but I stop her.

'Let's not do this today Anastasia. Come, I owe you a tour of the house.’ I have had enough conflict for tonight. I offer her my hand and thankfully she accepts it.

After 30 minutes we have done almost the entire except for the library and the cinema.

'Come we have two more rooms left.' I say to her and lead her out of the pool room.

'How many houses do you own?’ She inquires and her interest in me delights me to no end.

'5. Two in Seattle the home where we are staying and a penthouse in Escala that is currently on the market, This one, the one in Italy and one in London.’

'You own a house in England?’ she asks slightly awed and it makes me smile. Of course, an English lit student as herself would be charmed with Jolly old England.

'Yes, my European headquarter is located in England. I will take you to London sometime.' 'Here we are.' I open the library door and are thoroughly satisfied when I hear he gasp. Unlike the libraries in my other homes, this one is stark white with dark mahogany wood and glass shelves. It's modern just like the rest of the house.

'Do all your houses have libraries?’

'Yes, books have always been a big part of my life. They offered solace when humans could not. A world where I could escape to and get a reprieve for my own problems if only for a little while.’ It's another dark confession she has gotten from me without asking.

Her eyes connect with mine and an unspoken understanding passes between us binding us together on some primal level. Its unsettling and unbalancing me leaving me with far too many unanswered questions. I scrape my throat desperate to get out of this room into safer territory.

'Come there is one more room left.’ I take her hand and stir her back to the hall. We walk together in silence. The cinema room is placed in the basement area of the house. It has its own bar with the
popcorn maker. A big U shaped couch stand in front of the IMAX screen and a long gas light fireplace has been built in the wall under it. Anastasia is once again awestruck when we enter and it makes me gleeful. I am so happy that I able to impress her this way.

'This is out of this world Christian. I think it looks better than the cinema at your Seattle place.'

'You think? I might change it then.' I grin at her.

'Why? It's your place.'

I shrug she would be surprised if you knew what I would do to please her.

'Well I rarely if ever used that room and if you want to use it to watch movies I rather you like it.'

She looks confounded for a brief moment like she does not understand nor believes what I just told her.

'It's fine just the way it is and if I am grateful that you allow me to use it.' Her voice is soft and melodic.

'I want you to feel comfortable with me Anastasia.' I say and gently push a runaway strain of hair behind her ear. That unearthly magnetic force is pulsating between us and I have to try my hardest resist the urge to kiss those sweet plump lips of hers. Why shouldn't you kiss her? You own her right? Just take her... The beast inside me roars. And for a brief moment, I want to give into my primal nature.

She scrapes her throat and steps back awkwardly. I curse myself for making her feel this way. Quickly Grey mend this!

'You want to test this room out and watch a movie?' I blurt out hoping to make her feel comfortable again. 'We can have popcorn and drinks.' I feel like a blathering fool.

She wrings her hands and I prime myself for her rejection.

'Sure.' She says surprising me and I can hardly contain my elation. I feel like a teenage boy again going on his first date. Only I never went on a date I had Elena. It all feels bittersweet somehow.

'Why don't you pick out the movie while I make popcorn and drinks.'

'You let me pick out the movie?' she says disbelievingly. 'Anything I want?'

'Yes. Any movie you like is fine with me. To be honest I have no idea what's fun to watch. I seldom watch movies.'

'Really? Why don't you like films?'

I shrug noncommittally.

'Just like you I prefer books and let my own mind make the pictures.'

'I get what you mean.' she says and gives me a small smile.

I turn on the popcorn maker and it begins to pop immediately.

'What would you like to drink? We have milkshakes.' I say when I spy the milkshake machine. I did not know I owned one.
'Chocolate?' she asks delighted and I grin at her seeing her like this it stirs a whole lot of conflicting emotions inside of me. I want her to be carefree and happy at the same time I want so much more from her. I want her body, her mind, and her soul her complete and total surrender to me. Its like she is a part of that has been missing for so long but now finally has been found. No one ever had this effect on me it makes me feel alive.

'One chocolate coming right up. Found a movie yet?'

'Yes, a Christmas Carrol it has been a while since I have seen this.'

'Cool. I read the book in my teen years. You want me to turn on the fireplace?' I say while handing her the milkshake.

'Yeah sure.' She answers while pressing a button on the tablet turning on the IMAX screen.

I walk over to the fireplace and press the button but it refuses to turn on I press it again and hear the gas sizzling for a minute but the fireplace stays dormant. 'Dammit.' I hiss under my breath. Looks like I have to turn it on manually. I take some matches that from the drawer of the coffee table. I push the button again, light the match and stick my hand in the fireplace to turn it on. A large flash flame engulfs my hand. The pain is searing and I let out a loud scream. Pulling back my hand quickly I curse. The smell of burning flesh assaults my nostrils making me feel sick.

'O my God, Christian are you alright? Your hand is all red.' She softly grabs it and inspects the burn. 'Come you need to place it under lukewarm water to soothe the skin.' She gently stirs me to the bar and turns on the tap and checks the temperature and places my hand under the lukewarm water. All I can do is stare at her in mute admiration. Her sweet gentle care, her intoxicating scent, and close proximity make me heady. No one has ever taken care of me like that. Unwelcome memories of the crack whore and the pimp suddenly flood my mind. An overwhelming fear seizes me and it feels like I am losing control. I try to breathe but I cannot get enough oxygen into my lungs. The cruel voice of the pimp keeps blaring in my head. 'No, No, No, No, not the burn, please not the burn.' I feel it on my chest I scream and cry but it won't stop. I feel hazy like I am going to faint.

'Christian, please Christian. Shht its alright nobody is going to hurt you.' A sweet melodic voice is pulling me through the mist. 'Please Christian look at me.' Warm hands gently push my head up and a stunning pair of blue eyes greets me.

'Now concentrate on what I say. Can you do that Christian?' her eyes are besieging me. But I can't answer her my throat feels constricted. Like someone is choking me.

'Breath, Christian, breathe. You are having a panic attack nobody is going to hurt you ok?' Her voice is soft and pleading. I concentrate on her voice and on her lovely face while trying to take deep breathes. She slowly stirs me to the couch and sits me down before sitting next to me. Her hand gently presses a cool towel against my hand. 'Sssh, it's going to be ok. Everything is going to be ok, no one will hurt you.' She hums the mantra over and over again, its soothing. The fog inside my head gradually disappears and I can breathe more easily.

'Let me get some water for you.' She states calmly and gets up from beside me.

'No! No, don't go stay with me.. Please?' I cling to her desperately I don't want her to go. I want her to stay with me. She can't leave me, she is mine and mine alone. She opens her mouth and closes it again before sitting back to me on the couch. Minutes tick by and neither of us says something.

Suddenly I feel foolish for making such a display of myself. If Elena ever saw me like this weak,
scared and trembling she would be rightfully ashamed of me and I imagine that Anastasia feels the
same way.

'I am sorry..' I start not knowing what else to say.

She looks at me confounded.

'What for?'

'For my ridicules behavior earlier. You were only trying to help me..'

'Christian, you don't need to apologize you had a panic attack is nothing to be ashamed about or
sorry for.'

I stare at her unknowing what to say. I was so sure she would judge and ridicule me. She has every
reason to…

'Do you have them often? The panic attacks?'

I think about the question for a moment.

'No, not since my teen years.' I answer hoarsely. Elena beat them right out of me. She mocked me
every time I had thought me how to control them that way. She could never fix the nightmares
though.

'I guess something triggered them.' She says more to herself than to me.

She has no idea... The smell of burned flesh her sweet care where the crack whore failed. It was all
too much. My sordid past has been weighing on me for so long it has been my constant companion.
For some unfathomable reason, I feel the inexplicit need to tell her everything about my past with
the crack whore even though I know that she would probably enjoy my suffering. Who would
blame her if she did? That annoying small voice rings in the back of my head.

'Yes, the horrible acrid smell of burned flesh... It is not only seared into my flesh but seared into
my mind forever. Its one of the many scares my crack whore of a birth mother gave me in the short
time I was with her.'

'She burned you?' Anastasia's eyes are large and full of compassion but anger and disgust
unmistakably shape her voice.

I give her wry smile.

'No, she did not bother with me. She was neglectful. Half the time she was so out of her mind she
did not even know I was there. Her pimp though always knew where to find me... He was a real
piece of shit. When he was done beating her to a pulp he would come after me. No matter where I
fled he always found me.' I scoff loudly. 'He was especially cruel if I fled from him. I remember
one time I was about three or fours years old and I hid under the table. When he found me he grabs
and kicked me. Calling me a little shit and little prick. After a while, I learned not to cry anymore
and it pissed him off. So he lite up his cigarette, grabbed my hair and pulled me up. The stench of
alcohol, cigarette smoke and sweat emanating from him made me nauseous. He smiled his filthy
yellow teeth at me and said 'Let's see if you are still so though once I burn you.' He ripped open my
shirt and pressed the butt of his cigarette out on my chest. The pain the horrible burning pain is
something that I will never forget. I screamed and cried for my mother and she just stood there not
moving a muscle. After that first time, it became a sport for that sick fuck to burn me as much as he
good and that crack whore, the woman that was supposed to be my mother and protect me did
nothing!' I spit out the words angrily. I don't dare to look at Anastasia I would hate to have her scorn or worse her pity.

Anastasia has tears in her eyes and something about it hits me deep in the gut. It isn't tears of pity but of compassion.

'That is horrible Christian, why would anyone do that to a child?' she cries out.

'Don't cry for me, Anastasia. What's done is done. It turned out all for the better in the end.'

'How did that happen?' she asks her eyes still moist with unshed tears and her lips have become sweet and plump. How I long to kiss them.

'I remember lying next to her trying to wake her. She was so cold. I gave her my blanket and tried to keep her warm but nothing worked. I even combed her hair, she liked it when I did that. But she just did not want to wake up. She had finally killed herself. It took four days until her pimp discovered us. Do you want to know the really sick part of it? When the authorities came and tried to take her away from me I kicked and screamed. I did not want to let her go.'

Anastasia gasps loudly.

'Oh, Christian you were just a little boy. Of course, you did not want to let go of your mother. You loved her.'

I let out a humorless laugh. 'Loved her? Don't be silly Anastasia. I hated her I still do… she was an unfit mother a dirty worthless crack whore. I am glad she is dead.' There is a look of consternation on Anastasia's face. Her naivete is almost disarming.

'Grace is my mother. She was the physician who tended to me when they brought me in. She looked like an Angel with her white coat and gentle voice. For the first moment I met her she respected my boundaries. If she and Carrick had not taken me in I would have been dead by now. I will forever be grateful for what they did for me even though I am a lousy son.'

There are tears streaming down Anastasia's face again and for the first time out of her own free will, she caresses my face. Her touch is sweet a panacea for a wounded soul. I lean into her warm hand and I feel calm and centered. I half expected her scorn or worse her pity. But all I found is her compassion and understanding. I feel lighter somehow less troubled. She really is an angel and God owes me her for abandoning me when I needed him most. At least this way; even I can experience a little bit of salvation.
Submission

Anastasia

The room is pitch dark, not even the little bit of light coming from the alarm clock on my nightstand is able to penetrate the blinding darkness. My eyes feel heavy, but I gave up on trying to fall asleep hours ago. I feel hot and flushed Christian is holding me in iron like grip. His legs are draped over mine, and his arms cling to my upper body. I tried to move away from him into a more comfortable position, but it's useless. The further I try to run away from him the harder he clings to me. I sigh and stare at his face. I never realised just how beautiful he really is. His eyebrows form two perfectly straight lines above his face and are the same copper colour as his hair. His nose is aristocratic- straight edged and his lips seem almost perfectly symmetrical to each other. His jaw is strong, and the light stubble on it makes him even more attractive. But for all his beauty he seems haunted. Not even sleep appears to bring him any peace, and for the first time since our so-called arrangement, I am beginning to understand why. My mind is still reeling from his late-night confessions. My feelings and emotions are a jumbled mess, and I have no idea how to process them all.

There was a time, not so long ago, that I thought I would relish all the pain and suffering that would befall him. Every time I looked at him this feeling of intense hatred would burn my entire being. I wanted nothing more than hurt him as he had hurt me. But now this burning feeling of hate has been doused, and all I feel is a deep antagonising sadness every time I see him. I never realised that he was the very product of pain and suffering I so illly wished upon him. But at the same time, I am still angry at him I can't forgive or forget what he has done to me. It is something that I can't merely get past; at least not now and maybe never. He had no right to do those things to me, no matter how fucked up his formative years were. A sudden bolt of anger launches through me I am angry at him, I am mad at myself but most of all I am furious at his birth mother that disgusting abusive pimp and that hideous pedophilic woman. The depth of my rage shocks me I feel unbalanced and sick. I try to take a sip from the glass of water that is standing on my nightstand, but I cannot reach it because of Christians vice-like hold on me. Ever since I left him for a drink in the middle of the night and Christian had a nightmare he demanded that I always had a glass at hand. I sigh what good does that do me now? It is a question that goes so much further than a glass of water. I wonder if Christian thought the same when child services finally took an interest in him after his mother died. What if child services found them sooner and they got the help they needed? Would he still be this fucked up? What exactly made him the way he is today? Plenty of people get abused, but a lot if not most of them don't turn into violent abusers as Christian did. I remember grandma Steele telling me once that we are all responsible for our own choices. 'When Fortuna rolls her dice and hands you, your fate, the only choice you have is how to handle what she has given you.' she said; 'but we can choose how to deal with adversity, and it is those choices that will determine who we are and what we will become.’ It seems evident that Christian is not happy with who he is. Does he want to change? These last few weeks Christian has been trying so hard to win my trust. He has been kind and understanding and hasn't pushed me to continue the sexual parts of our arrangement yet... He has kept his word. I cannot help but wonder how long he will do so though and I do not want to find out if and when he finally snaps and reverts back to the monster he has shown to be. If I need to have sex with him again, I want to do it on my terms and conditions.

Can I honour my part of the arrangement? And maybe if I can do that, I can show him that what he is doing is wrong and that he needs help. Help to make different choices and be a better person. I wonder if I can help him change, perhaps that is what he needs from me. Maybe that is the right choice for me to make now because I know deep down if I don't let go of the hate and the anger I feel for him it will eventually burn me alive and turn me into a bitter, hateful and angry person, and
then he will have succeeded in destroying me. I choose not to let him control my life in this way, and maybe this entire horrible experience will end up having a silver lining if I can make him see the errors of his way. I scoff. This sounds naive even to my own ears, but what choice do I have? I cannot continue to live this way burdened by anger and hatred. This does not mean I forgive him I am making this choice for me. I tried to let go of my anger and hate I held for him before, but I couldn't do it. For some reason him opening up to me like he did yesterday makes it easier to try and do so again finally. Perhaps it is so because he seems much more human now, a flawed very damaged human who I can sympathise with. I feel bone tired, and my head hurts from all these questions and thoughts floating around my head. I sigh and close my eyes and wish for a moment of rest. Tomorrow will bring more answers I hope.

Light pours into the open curtains of the bedroom, and the cheerful sound of chirping birds fill the room. I must have eventually fallen asleep some were in the early morning hours. I look at the alarm clock shocked to see that its nearly noon.

'Good morning Anastasia.'

I look up and see Christian sitting on a dark brown Chesterfield chair in the corner of the room. He is wearing a white button down shirt and a light blue sweater. His hair is a tousled copper red mess on his head, and the stopple on his face has become even more pronounced and is slowly developing into a thick red beard. His grey eyes shine brightly, and a small smile plays on his lips. I wonder how long he has been watching me sleep.

'Morning.' I mumble feeling a little uncomfortable.

'You must have been tired. I am sorry I kept you up so late last night with my shenanigans.' He says a little contritely, and I hate that he is feeling guilty about sharing his past with me.

'Please don't feel guilty. I think I was a little jet-lagged. I am glad and honoured that you told me, thank you for trusting me. For sharing that part of your life with me.'

He looks surprised and then smiles at me shyly, and for a moment he looks like a sweet little boy.

'I told you, Anastasia. Your thrust means the world to me it is the basis for any relationship. I promised you that I would earn your thrust. I hope that sharing this with you helped you deal with some apprehension you had with my intentions with you.' He says suddenly sounding very sternly. His sudden mood swings give me whiplash.

'I am trying Christian. Believe me, I am trying.'

He looks at me intently and then nods. 'Good Anastasia that is good. Now get up and freshen up and get ready. I have plans for today.'

'Plans? It looks cold outside.' I lament. I kind of hoped that we could stay in this house today. I was really hoping to raid the library.

'Yes. It is a surprise. Just trust me it will be fun. Now get up wench!' He says smiling again.

There is that word again thrust. I gingerly get out of bed and move to the bathroom.

'I will tell Mrs Bentley to cook you up some breakfast.' He says and moves swiftly out of the bedroom leaving me to my own devices.

I quickly take a pee, wash my hands and brush my teeth before walking back into the bedroom. I
know I shouldn't be, but I am mildly surprised to see a change of clothes draped over the chair Christian just vacated. A cream-coloured cable knitted sweater and a pair of jeans.

The delicious smells of bacon and waffles fill the air as I walk down the stairs. My stomach rumbles promptly reminding me of my hunger.

'Good morning miss Steele.' Mrs Bentley says smiling.

'Good morning Mrs Bentley. It smells delicious.' I sit down on one of the kitchen chairs and smile back at her.

She serves me a plate of bacon and waffles which I gratefully accept.

'Coffee?' she asks while holding up the pot.

'Miss Steele does not drink coffee Mrs Bentley, only Twinnings breakfast tea. There is a new pack of it in the left kitchen cabinet near the window. I, however, do like another cup of coffee.' Christians deep timbre voice booms through the kitchen startling me.

'Of course sir.' Mrs Bentley answers quickly pour him a steaming cup before scurrying off to make me some tea. I am not used to people making me food and Christian reprimanding her like that is making me feel a little guilty.

'I am glad to see you dressed and eating. I want to leave the moment you are done eating.' He says while sliding down on the chair next to me.

'Where are we going?' I try again hoping to be more successful in getting an answer this time.

'I told you, its a surprise.' He says before taking a sip of his coffee.

'I don't like surprises.' I mope. He looks at me and scowls a little.

'Anastasia we talked about this before. You promised to give me, us a fair trial. If that promise was serious, you need to start and learn to trust me. What I have planned is suppose to be fun for both of us. Don't ruin this day with your petulant attitude.' He snaps, and I immediately feel contrite. I did promise him that. I really need to try harder.

'I am sorry..' I begin but he quickly interrupts me.

'It's fine. Just finish your breakfast so we can go.'

I quickly eat the remainder of my breakfast. For some reason, I don't want Christian to be angry with me.

'Ready?' He asks when I put the final piece of pancake in my mouth.

'Yes.' I reply and pick up my plate too but in the washing machine.

'Leave that for Mrs Bentley. Come.' He grabs my hand and ushers me outside the front door to a sleek, black sports car that reminds me of the batmobile. I haven't seen it before, but it looks stunning.

He opens the passenger door for me, and I get into the car. The distinct leathery new car smell waves around me. I expected the interior to be full of buttons, displays and gadgets but to my surprise, it is very sober.
'This car is amazing!' I tell Christian when he slides into the driver's seat. He gives me a lopsided boyish grin. It makes him look 10 years younger.

'I know. It is a Bugatti Veyron one of the fastest and most exclusive cars on Earth. She is completely hand built, and there is a waiting list of about two years to get one of these. I bought mine a couple of years back. I only use it when I am here.' He says proudly before putting the key into the ignition and pressing the start button. The engine roars to, and I am pushed back into my seat when he steps on the gas. It feels like I am in a roller coaster and I cannot help but smile.

He glances sideways at me and grins widely.

'You enjoying yourself?' He asks.

'Uhuh. This is amazing!'

The car glides over the road smoothly past the snow-covered rocks, hills and mountains. I don't even notice that we have been driving for over an hour. The landscape has slowly turned greener and flatter. Christian makes a sharp turn and drives onto a sandy road. He stops at a large open field at the end of the way. He gets out of the car and opens the door for me. I am kind of bomb that the car ride has ended.

'Wow, this was the best car trip I ever had. This car really is amazing. I would love to drive it sometime.'

Christian frowns at me his excellent mood seems to have evaporated suddenly.

'Anastasia this is a powerful car. Dangerous for a novice driver. You are not allowed to drive it.' He says sternly confusing me. I don't understand why he is so upset about of this. I open my mouth to say something, but he brusquely interrupts me.

'Come.' He takes my hand and escorts me through a small fence leading to the field. An older man with thick grey hair and a rounded belly comes running towards us and enthusiastically waves at Christian.

'Mr. Grey sir, welcome!' 

'Ron, nice to see you again.' Christian greets him warmly. 'I would like you to meet my girlfriend, Anastasia Steele.'

I am shocked and feel slightly ill. Girlfriend? It is the first time since he revered to me as his girlfriend and I cannot help but find that title highly inappropriate to describe the perverted nature of our relationship. Why did Christian feel the need to introduce me this way? Ron does not seem to notice my distress because he greets me excitedly.

'Lovely to meet you miss Steele.' He says while vigorously shaking my hand.

'Pleasure is all mine.' I answer back politely.

He turns his attention back to Christian again. 'She is good to go whenever you are sir.'

Christian nods at him. 'Excellent work Ron. Take us to her.'

Who is she? My curiosity is most certainly peaked. Christian escorts me to the far end of the field, and I notice a large basket and a whole lot of nylon fabric on the grass. Then it dawns on me he is taking me for a balloon ride! I can hardly contain my excitement. I always wanted to go for a
balloon ride it was kind of a distant pipe dream I had for a long time. I never expected that it would ever come true.

'We going for a balloon ride?' I ask disbelievingly. Christian glances sideways at me and grins.

'You seem happy about the prospect. Dare I say I pleased you, ma'am.' He teases cheerfully. His perpetual mood swings still baffle me. I silently wonder if that's one of the reasons why I find it so hard to trust him. Nevertheless, I smile at him the prospect of a balloon ride is just too exciting.

'I always wanted to go on a balloon ride!'

'Well then, It pleases me that I can make you wish come true. Ron here is an excellent aeronaut we will be in good hands.'

The hot air from the gas burner envelopes us when we stand before the basket. The balloon grows larger and starts to rise.

'Yes, it is ready sir! We can board!' Ron yells enthusiastically.

Christian gently lays his hand on my lower bag and helps me in the basket before boarding himself. Ron increases the heat on the burner, and suddenly it feels like the ground is shifting beneath us as the balloon slowly starts to rise into the air. I let out a squeal of shock and delight and Christian chuckles behind me. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gently squeezes me.

'You having fun?' He asks.

'Yes, Christian this is amazing!'

'Well, I am glad it pleases you. Come, have a drink with me.' He opens a compartment in the basket and takes out a bottle of champagne. He quickly pops the cork and pours two glasses handing me one.

I stare down at the ground that is miles beneath me. Its a novel and weird experience the land beneath us seems fast and open, but the man-made structures seem small and insignificant.

'Beautiful isn't it? I found out that flying gives you an entirely new perspective on the world. It has thought me to see things from a larger point of view and it has made me more humble and appreciative of our planet. At the end of the day with are just little specs in a huge place. It is soothing somehow.' Christian says pensively.

Looking down I see precisely what he means.

'I understand what you mean. The world does look different from up here. Its peaceful and quiet like all the problems in the world have just melted away. I wish I could stay up here forever.'

He nods and clinks his glass with mine.

'Too great heights.' He says.

'Too great heights.' I reply back and take a sip of the champagne. It tastes, unlike anything I have ever eaten. It is both sweet and sour at the same time. I really enjoy it. We stand in companionable silence in the middle of the basket for a while before I decide to move closer to the side of the basket to enjoy the view from there. I grab the edge of the basket and look down. Once again I am amazed by the aerial view. The earth looks like a patchwork blanket from up here. Suddenly I feel two strong arms pulling be backwards bumping me into a hard muscular chest before I can
comprehend what happens he spins me around holding me even tighter. Frightened I look up into his face. His facial expression is grim, and his eyes are slits giving him almost a snake-like appearance. What the hell is wrong now?

'Don't stand so close to the edge.' He hisses.

'What?' I ask feeling bewildered.

'You are standing to close to the edge! You could fall down!' His teeth are clenched, and he looks wild, fearful even. Once again he reminds me of a lost little boy.

'But its perfectly save Christian. It wasn't like I was hanging over the reeling. I think you are overreacting calm down. I was just admiring the view.' I say as gently as I can.

'I am not overreacting! It is not safe for you to loiter around the edge of the damn basket. You can admire the view from up here next to me.' He grunts out petulantly.

I feel exasperated, first the car now this. Why is he unable to see how over the top his reaction is? For such a highly intelligent man he seems to be unable to see reason at times. It is baffling.

'Christian, why would you take me on a balloon ride if you feel it is not safe?'

He looks surprised for a moment and mumbles something unintelligible.

'It's perfectly safe if you stay next to me.' He mumbles.

'Look, Christian. You want me to trust you right?'

'Yes.' He says giving a brief nod.

'Than you need to trust me too. You need to trust that I am able to make choices that are good for me and that I won't put myself in danger.' I plead with him.

Once again he looks surprised and is quiet for the longest time. Finally, he nods at me and says:

'Good point, well made miss Steele.'

All too soon the balloon lands back again on the farmers' field. I am kind of sad that it's over I have genuinely enjoyed myself flying so high over the Colorado hills and valleys. We say our goodbyes to Ron and walk back to the car.

'Here.' He suddenly says while throwing me a set of keys. I quickly catch them and stare at the blinking Bugatti logo on the key chain.

'You letting me drive the car?' I ask incredulously.

'Yes. You want me to trust you, don't you? Show me that I can.' He simply says.

'I get to drive the car?' I ask again unable to process what just happened.

'Yes, now go before I change my mind.' He grunts. I cannot help but squeal with glee. The feeling of excitement is almost overwhelming. Christian looks slightly horrified though.

'Don't worry I am a good driver.' I say and smile at him reassuringly.

'Don't tell me, show me.' He replies flippantly.
I press the start button and the car roars to life. I gently push the gas pedal, and the car immediately lurches forward.

'Easy!' Christian growls.

'Sorry.' I say sheepishly. This car is aggressive and responds instantly at the slightest touch. Soon I am getting the hang of it and the car smoothly glides over the road and Christian looks considerably less nervous.

'Take a right here.' He orders confusing me a little.

'Aren't we going back to your place?'

'Yes, we are, but dinner first. There is a great restaurant about 8 miles from here.'

'Oh, ok. I am kind of hungry.' I dare to admit, and he smiles at me.

'Good, I promise you, you are going to love Daffodils.'

The car continues smoothly over the road, and I cannot help but enjoy the ride. It drives like a dream. All too soon Christian instructs me to drive of the main road on to a narrow winding dirt road that, after about a 10-minute drive ends on a small concrete parking lot surrounded by forests. A large wooden log cabin stands proudly on the edge of the lot. The whole place looks Idyllic.

'Stay put.' He says when I park the car again baffling me. He gets out of the passenger side and walks around the car to open my door.

'Such manners Mr Grey.'

'I was raised a gentleman, Ms Steele. My mother would not want it any other way.' He says and gives me a mock curtsy bow.

The subtle scent of pine and smoked meat linger in the fresh early evening mountain air. Memories of childhood Christmases with mom and dad in our home in Montesano flood my mind. Suddenly I long intensely for those save and uncomplicated days. That time has passed as quickly as sand through an hourglass leaving me with a mere memory of bygone days. It makes me feel morose.

'Come, let us go inside.' Christian says. He takes my hand and leads me into the restaurant. The restaurant has a typical cabin-like atmosphere. There are wooden floors, walls, tables, benches and chairs everywhere with various rugs and Confederate memorabilia scattered on the walls and floors. A fireplace is blazing at the back of the dining room producing a genuine warmth.

A bottle red-haired waitress immediately greets Christian in an obeisance manner when she spots us.

'What a table for two Mr Grey?' She asks with a high pitched whinny voice. Christian just nods at her not sparing her a word. It is rather rude, to be frank. She leads us to a table near the fireplace and Christian holds my chair out for me.

'A bottle of Pinot noir and ask Percy for some Louisiana shrimps.' He barks at here before sitting down opposite of me.

'Of course Mr Grey.' She replies and scurries off.

'Do you come here often?'
'Daffodils is one of the best southern styled restaurants in Colorado. The owner is an old high school friend of my mother. My parents used to bring us here all the time when we were little and vacationing in Aspen. I have a lot of good memories of this place.' He says trailing his last sentence absentmindedly. For a brief moment, he seems to be lost in his thoughts, but he quickly focuses again fixing his eyes back on me.

'I ordered the Louisiana shrimps for starters. They are the house speciality. I also recommend the mashed potatoes with gravy, mac and cheese, Mississippi fried chicken, collard greens, bbq'd tomahawk with white gravy and biscuits, pit BBQed pork and slow broiled catfish.' He says pointedly.

'That is almost the entire menu!' I exclaim. He shrugs and gives me a small smile.

'What can I say everything here is good.'

I skim the menu again unsure what I really want to try especially since Christian just said everything is okay. Although I am pretty sure the catfish is a no, no. I hate catfish. I feel him staring at me. I look up right into his intense grey gaze. It is unnerving.

'Let me order for you, I promise you won't be disappointed.'

'Just don't order the catfish.'

He looks surprised for a moment.

'You don't like catfish?'

'No, I hate it. My grandmother used to make it every time we visited her in Georgia, and my mom always made me eat it. Even though she knew I hated it. She always told me fish was healthy and I should not hurt my Nana's feelings by refusing to eat it. She was just as good of a cook as my mom.' The memory of my grandma warms my heart. I miss her very much. She died two years ago.

He nods and gives me a small smile.

'Ok, so no catfish. I take it that your mom isn't an excellent cook?'

'She has her days but most of the time her cooking is pretty bad, and the worse thing is that she does not even know it. If she ever finds out how often Ray and I secretly ordered pizza or made grilled cheese sandwiches so we wouldn't starve she would have a fit.'

He laughs a real deep belly laugh, and I realise that I have never heard him laughing like this before.

'That bad he?'

I smile back at him sharing his mirth.

'Yeah, she really is that bad. How about you? Is there any food you don't like?'

The smile on his face slowly fades and grows quiet and contemplative.

'I'll eat anything. I guess when you have really known hunger you learn to appreciate every morsel of food handed to you.' His voice is soft, a mere whisper and the look on his face is pained.

I cannot begin to imagine the depravity of his early childhood. I am momentarily bewildered by
the compassion I feel for him. I never thought I was capable of having so much empathy for him.

I try to swallow down the lump that has formed in my throat. I need to know how bad it was. I don't really know why maybe it will help me understand him better? Yes, I guess that must be it.

'Were you often left without food?'

He scoffs loudly.

'The crack whore would be out of it for days when she was drugged up. She would not even notice me. A sweet old lady was living next to us. She would sometimes bring us something to eat. I remember trying to be as frugal as possible with those meals. Making sure the crack whore had something too. Not that she cared much about eating when she was high as a kite. But it kept me from starving I guess..... It was better when she was sober she would sometimes cook for us Mac and cheese, it was something she made often. I still love Mac and cheese..' His voice his a mere whisper and his eyes are distant and distressed. Its both harrowing and sobering to see him like this. He looks nothing like the great and powerful CEO pretends to be but everything like the lost, frightened, little boy he really is. It is heart-wrenching to see him like this. I want to make him feel better no one deserves to be treated the way he was treated as a child. I reach out and gently take his hand in mine. The motion seems to snap him out of his funk, and his eyes grow dark and feral. I shouldn't have touched him without his permission! How could I have been so stupid?

I quickly pull my hand away, but he snatches it back and gently caresses the back of my hand.

'I like it when you touch me.' He says hoarsely.

'Oh, ok..' I am at a loss for words not really knowing how to handle this situation.

'Shall I pour you a glass of wine Mr Grey?' I did not even notice the waitress coming back with our entrees en wine, but I am grateful for her interruption. She unashamedly flirts with Christian, hoping he spares her a glance. His face, however, has become an emotionless mask. There is not a trace left of the vulnerability he shown before. He looks up at her coolly.

'Get me a glass of water, sparkling. The wine is for my date.' He says brusquely and points towards my glass.

I look at him confounded. Why did he order a whole bottle of wine when he is not going to drink any?

'Don't you want a glass?'

He shakes his head before answering.

'No, I need to drive us back safely.'

'Well, you could have ordered me just a glass then. I am not going to drink an entire bottle by myself.'

He looks stunned for a moment and then smiles shyly.

'I guess you are right. I am not used to ordering one glass of wine, or drive myself home after dinner in a restaurant.' He looks at the waitress again who is standing lamely next to me. He rattles off various dishes before carelessly dismissing her. The way he treats her makes me feel a little uncomfortable, and I silently wonder how he got on top in the business world with such poor people skills.
'What is on your mind?' He asks while scrutinising me. How does he know?!

'Nothing, it is just... You were kind of crass with the waitress.'

He chuckles.

'That what's bothering you?'

'Well, yeah... Kinda...' I stammer.

'Anastasia, women like that, have ogled me furiously since I was a teen, it is tiring. I find their constant stares and flirtations rude, unprofessional and disrespectful to the woman I am with. As you know, I am not one to sugarcoat things. I let them know that I am not interested in a blunt manner so there can be no doubt about my position.'

'Oh, I see. I guess I am just not used to having people stare and flirt with me all the time.'

He looks at me like he has seen a Martian.

'You really have no idea do you?'

'Huh?' I reply not understanding his question.

'You truly have no idea how incredibly beautiful you are. Right now I can point out at least eight men that are staring at you. I want to beat the crap out of each and every one of them for doing so. They need to understand that you are mine!'

His? I am not some piece of property that he owns! I want to yell at him but decide to change the subject to something less contentious. I am confident my retort would have resulted in another verbal fight. I don't have the energy to fight him right now. He asks me about growing up in green, lush Montesano, and I ask him about growing up in affluent Bellevue.

The waitress comes again with our food I am shocked to see how much he has ordered. Fried chicken, Tomahawk steak, pulled pork mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, corn on a cob, coloured greens. Everywhere I look there is a dish.

'How are we supposed to eat all this?' I say gaping at him.

'By putting it in your mouth, chewing it and swallowing it, so it lands in your stomach.' He replies and I roll my eyes at him.

'You know, sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.' I retort.

'Is it now? I happen to find it a very effective form of communication. Did you know rolling your eyes at someone is very disrespectful?.' He comments while plating his plate full of food.

'Well, I am sorry I offended you.'

He chuckles.

'No, your not. Now eat your food.'

Christian was right everything is absolutely delicious. Before I know it heaps of various foods cover my plate and Christian seems to be delighted with that. We talk about movies, books, music and his love for science and building stuff. I cannot believe how witty, insightful and knowledgeable he is. I also discover his great sense of humour. I am genuinely enjoying myself
and his company. It almost makes me forget what kind of man he really is. The thought is disturbing, and I quickly suppress it. I don't want to think about any of that tonight. I just want to enjoy this day, and right now I will gladly settle for pretended normality.

Getting to know him this way and liking him is confusing the hell out of me. Right now, I am not really sure how to deal with these new feelings. My stomach is full, and the wine has given me a pleasant buzz. It helps me not to think about my situation.

I stare out of the window as the car drives smoothly over the road back to Christians Colorado mountain home. Small snowflakes dwindle down from the sky. The deep green colour of the pine trees on the side of the road creates a dark contrast on the canvass of night.

Christian effortlessly stirs the car to the gates of his mountain mansion and presses a button on his steering wheel. The gates immediately swing open giving us access to the estate.

'We are here.' He says while parking the car in front of the house. He gets out and opens my door before leading me to the house.

Before we are right and well inside Taylor comes striding into the foyer.

'Good evening Mr Grey. Could I have a word, please? Miss Steele good evening.' He nods at me. Christian looks annoyed.

'Taylor, my office. Anastasia, you have to entertain yourself for a moment. If you need anything just ask Mrs Bentley and she will get it for you.' Before I can respond, he turns on his heels with Taylor scurrying after him. I sigh and look around the foyer. Various pieces of abstract art form a stark contrast with the white walls. It all looks sleek, clean and modern just like the rest of the house. Christians penthouse in Escala has a similar decor. I guess when Christian picks a theme he sticks to it.

I decide to go to the library. I have been itching to spend some time there ever since Christian showed it to me when we toured the house.

I open the door to the library and breathe in the scent of old paper and leather. It makes me feel centred and calm. I idly scan the bookshelves looking for something to read, but somehow nothing seems to capture my interest. I look around, and I see the pool table standing at the side of the room. Funny that I had not noticed it before. I touch the edge of the pool table. The wood is smooth and cool to the touch. Memories of late night pool games with Kate and Jose flood my mind, I miss them both badly. The last time I spoke with either of them was on Christmas day. I just wish that I could see them again. I sigh knowing that seeing them won't happen anytime soon. The thought is depressing, and I quickly refocus my attention back on the pool table. I take out the triangle and carefully arrange the balls inside them before removing it again.

The cue feels heavy in my hands when I take aim at the neatly arranged balls. With a loud clang, the balls scatter over the far sight of the table, and I manage to pocket two striped balls. Excitement coursed through me. If Jose were here, he would have boasted about how well he taught me. It makes me smile.

'Nice shot.' The sound of his deep voices startles me. I turn around and see him prowling into the room his eyes are to orbs of burning intensity, but the rest of his face is an emotionless mask. There is something off about his entire demeanour, and it is unnerving me. Gone is the kind and funny man I had at dinner.

'Thank you.' I reply softly.
'Tell me Anastasia, was that shot a stroke of luck or do you play well?' The tone of his voice is slightly taunting, and it irks me. Why is he acting like this all of a sudden? I narrow my eyes at him.

'I can play quite well thank you very much.' He cocks his heads to the side and studies me for a moment.

'Do you now? Care to make a wager?' He asks lazily, and I am intrigued.

'You want to make a bet?'

He gives me a brief nod.

'That is what I said. We play a game if I win you will have sex with me tonight…' His tone is soft but deliberate. My stomach drops and I feel faint. So here we are again. I knew sex would eventually come up again. It was only a matter of time. He kept his word thus far but why is he making this lewd wager now? Is he acting like this because he is horny? He appears to sense my hesitation because he quickly speaks again.

'You still have trouble trusting me I see. ..You are of course free to decline. We could just play a game for fun?'

There it is again the word trust. Thus far Christian has kept his word but him pushing this subject makes it all feel a little dishonest. At the same time, I feel like a coward who is trying to backtrack on a long made deal, and that is dishonest on my part.

'What do I get that when I win?' I ask deciding to play his game.

'I subtract a week time from our arrangement.' He merely states surprising me. A week sooner out of his grasp. A week?! It's an offer I cannot refuse the sooner I am out of this fucked up arrangement, the better.

'Ok, I play.' I say without hesitation.

He looks unconvinced.

'Anastasia you need to be sure, my word is my bond I expect yours to be the same. You don't have to take the bet.'

His tone of voice annoys me. Does he see me as someone fickle girl who does not keep her word? Does really think I do not stand a chance against him? He is such an arrogant asshole!

'I know, but I want to.' I reply unable to keep the irritation out of my voice.

Christian seems to be unperturbed by my vexation.

'Excellent.' He smiles and places the balls back into the triangle before removing it again.

'Ladies first.'

I narrow my eyes and concentrate on the white balls aiming for the perfect break. With a loud clang, the balls scatter across the table, and I managed to pocket two stripped balls. That was a perfect break and should wipe that arrogant look of Christians face. I look up and see him idly playing with his cue, seemingly unimpressed with my break. Asshole I think bitterly. I aim twice more and manage to pocket two more balls before my third shot misses its mark.
Christian lazily walks towards the table.

'You are a woman of many talents Anastasia, you play well. I am impressed.' He gives me a sly smile bends over the table and takes aim.

'So, you admit that you underestimated me?' I ask haughtily. Happy that some of his arrogance seems to have disappeared.

A loud clang fills the room, and he pockets his first ball with flawless precision. He looks at me and gives me a wry smile.

'Maybe somewhat.' He admits before retaking aim, flawlessly pocketing his second ball. 'But then again, I have always trusted my own abilities above everyone else's.'

His arrogance is truly infuriating, and I become even more determined to win this game. Unfortunately, he does not miss a single ball. He lines the white ball perfectly behind the black eight ball. He aims and shoots the ball straight into the left pocket corner. He stands up and throws his cue on the table. It lands with a loud thud startling me. His stares at me with such intensity it burns.

My mouth is parched, and I swallow desperately trying to moisture my mouth. A part of me dreads what's about to come while another part of me feels relieved knowing, that, what was inevitable is coming to fruition.

'You see, Anastasia I never make a wager that I will not win. Pool is like mathematics, it looks chaotic at first, but there is perfect logic behind it. Only visible to those who look deeper.' He slowly saunters over to me each step, deliberate and resolute.

Instinctively, I take a few steps back and move behind the other side of the pool table. He stops mid-stride his mouth is slightly agape, and he looks hurt as someone slapped him.

'Why are you running from me? Don't ever run from me!' His face is wrought with anger.

'I am not…' I start, but he immediately interrupts me.

'You gave me your word! But you never meant it didn't you? You still do not trust me!' He snarls angrily.

'Christian, I…' I stammer at a loss for words. I promised myself and him that I would honour this bet, this arrangement but somehow actually doing so is incredibly hard. Why am I such a coward?

'You, you don't want me, you are just like her. ' Christian says dejectedly.

Gone are the anger, confidence and arrogance. The man in front of me is a sad, broken little boy. I take a tentative step towards him, but he does not seem to register it. His eyes are glazed over like he somewhere else.

'Fuck it!' He growls not looking at me and stalks out of the room. I am completely thrown off kilter not knowing what to do. I feel like shit, like a fraud who stole someone's lives savings. My word is my bond, and I tend to honour it. The decision is firmly made in my mind, and I decide to go after him.

I find him in the bedroom nursing a glass of Scotch he looks forlorn out of the massive bedroom windows. Soft Jazz music is playing in the background, and I notice two large manila folders on his nightstand. On the bed, two pictures of an elderly woman and a woman in her fifties lay on the
bed. They look familiar, but I cannot seem to place them. He turns to make like he has read my mind.

'It's funny that you are always wanted by those you do not want to be wanted by.' He says cryptically.

'I do not understand..'

He smiles a sad little smile.

'Of course, you wouldn't.'

He takes the pictures from the bed and throws them in the trash bin next to the nightstand.

The way he callously disposes of the pictures shocks me.

'They are of no consequence.' He says dismissively, and I do not dare to question him even though my curiosity has peaked.

'Christian? My word is my bond, and I will honour my part of our arrangement and the bet we made. These last couple of weeks you have held your end of the bargain and have given me the time that I ask for. I trust that you will keep your word because you have done so already. Therefore I would like to move further with our agreement.'

He swirls the whiskey in his glass, and when he looks up at me, the fiery intensity in his eyes has returned.

'I want you to want me Anastasia, the same way I want you. But I will have you any way I can get you even if it means by hook or crook. I am not a good man, Anastasia but you must have realised that months ago. When we do this there is no coming back do you understand?'

It is a chilling confession of something I already know and it makes me feel like my trust in him is enormously misplaced. Does he indeed intend to honour our full agreement? I swallow nervously.

'Yes, I do.' I reply softly.

Slowly but determinedly he walks towards me.

'My sweet, brave Anastasia.' His fingers softly stroke my face. I am nervous, apprehensive of what's about to come. He senses my distress.

'I promise it's going to be amazing for the both of us. Would you like a drink to calm your nerves?' He offers while pointing at a bottle of whiskey standing on one of the nightstands. I hate whiskey, so I shake my head.

'Come, sit on the bed with me.' He leads me to the bed, and I sit next to him. He puts his hand on my knee and starts to kiss my neck his lips are firm and warm against my skin. The sensation sends shivers down my spine. He moves attention to my throat and collarbone, his breath is hot, and the sweet smell of whiskey fills my nose. I can still taste it when he kisses me hotly on the mouth. His tongue meets mine demanding dominance.

The sound of lips crashing against each other is the only thing I hear its reverberating right through me cancelling out every other noise in the room. I tentatively kiss him back stroking his tongue with my own. His hands cup my breasts squeezing them roughly, and I cannot help but moan.
'Raise your hands.' He growls, and I comply he swiftly pulls the sweater over my head and makes quick work of my bra.

'So beautiful.' He murmurs he pushes me, so I am laying on my back on the bed. He opens the button of my jeans pulls them down with my panties, my feet are temporarily stuck in the leg of my jeans, but he quickly solves that inconvenience.

He pulls out his own clothes, and I am once struck by his beauty. His body is sculptured like a work of Giovanni Bologna, perfectly proportioned at every angle. I gasp at the sight of his penis it is hard, thick and large and the head covered with glistening moisture. I swallow still unable to grasp how it ever fit inside of me.

'Anastasia I am going to tie you up. Do you understand?'

'Why?' fear grips me and I am instantly transported back to that horrible night in Italy when he first raped me.

He looks pained.

'Because you cannot touch me.'

I am harshly reminded on the horrifying first years of his life. The small faded scars on his chest serve as a testament to that fact.

'What if I promise I won't touch you?'

A sad smile mares his mouth.

'You might inadvertently do so, and the results of that would be pretty ugly.'

Images of him hitting me flash through my mind and dismay fill me. A part of me wants to run far away from here, from him.

'What will you tie me up with?'

He picks up a blue tie that is draped over one of the chairs.

'With this. Now lay back down in the middle of the bed and put your hands above your head.' He instructs without preamble. I comply hoping it will be over soon.

He straddles me and ties the tie around both of my hands before attaching it to the headboard of the bed. He smiles.

'All set. You can't run away from me now.' His pupils are dilated, and there is a predatory look on his face. An uneasy feeling swirls around in the pit of my stomach, and I realise that despite my bravado and self-imposed promises I still fear him.

'Please, don't hurt me.' I whisper he looks offended.

'Your anxiety is tiring. I told you this will be great for us both. Just watch feel and enjoy.' He lowers his head to my breasts. His mouth clams down my nipple, suckling hard it feels warm and moist, painful and pleasurable in equal measure. I feel lost not knowing what to do. Fear, lust, pleasure and anxiety fight for dominance in my mind.

'Ah!' I cry out. The pleasure is almost unbearable.
'That's right baby, let me hear you.' His voice is husky, barely audible. He alternates between breasts, and I lose all sense of time. I feel his hot mouth on my belly his hot kisses scorch my skin. I sense his hand between my legs, and I buck when one of his fingers slips inside me. The intrusion is foreign sending shivers down my spine. He slowly moves it out of me before pushing it in again.

'Please.' Its a plea but I do not know what for. This is all so confusing.

'You are mine Anastasia do you understand?'He hisses.

The sudden sensation of his mouth on my most intimate parts sends shock waves through my body, and a rush of wetness dampens the sheets. He stops his ministrations and stares at me triumphantly. His facial expression is intense and feral. The smell of my own arousal hangs heavy in the air.

'Your body knows that you are mine. Soon you will understand.'

He bends his head continuing his exploration of my pussy. Sucking, licking, kissing every part of my vagina. Every caress and kiss sends me flying higher and higher, and I want, no I need more. Every other thought seems to leave my mind.

'Oh god.' I moan. His attentions become more rapid, furious even. Abruptly he pushes his tongue inside of me, the palpation is sensational sending me over the edge, and I tremble and scream.

'That's right baby let it all out.' I feel the thick head of his cock pressed against my pussy and he slowly pushes into me.

'Who's cock is inside of you?' He growls, but I am only vaguely aware of his words. His penis feels hard and soft at the same time the fullness is incredible.

'Say it!'He grunts again.

'Yours.' I moan going out of my mind with all these sensations.

'That's right. Mine!' He moves out again and slowly pushes back in establishing a slow rhythm. His finger strokes my clit. The pleasure is sensational. He pulls out of me again before slamming his cock in harder making me cry out. His rhythm changes moving in and out of me faster and deeper. He moans low in his throat, His rhythm is punishing brutal even a myriad of titillating emotions washes over me, and I explode around him. He shudders and grunts.

'Oh, Anastasia.' He cries out, and I feel his cum inside of me. He stills and collapses on me desperately kissing my neck and collarbone. His skin feels sweaty and warm, and his musky scent fills my nostrils. The weight of his body is slowly suffocating me and his panting heavily. My arms feel heavy from being tied up, and I cannot push him of me.

'Mine, mine, mine.' It is like a mantra spilling from his lips.

'Christian, please you are squashing me.' He looks up his eyes are glazed over, and there is an expression of undiluted joy on his face.

He slowly slides out of me and releases me from the restraints. Gently rubbing my arms before sliding off me.

'Don't ever leave Anastasia. I don't think I can ever let you go.' He looks at me earnestly. All my
fear and anxieties come back with a vengeance, and once again I am left to wonder if he will really let me go when our agreement is over.
There are few things more annoying than the insistent ringing of a telephone. The acrid sound abrasively echos through my office. I do not need to look at the display to know who is calling me. +44-891154891 I know it by heart it is haunting me, a poltergeist from my sordid past. The ringing stops, I never answer she should have gotten the message by now, but she is tenacious. She invaded my life two weeks ago when I was on holiday in Aspen with Anastasia. My sweet, smart, beautiful Anastasia she is the rock that keeps me from slipping into insanity.

I have blocked her number over a dozen times to no avail. I am impressed by her influence and connections. I told Andrea to never put her through, but even my stalwart PA feels her pressure. It matters not, she soon will realize that nobody harasses Christian Grey and gets away with it. Nemo me impune lacessit, Oh, the irony of that motto. It once belonged to the royal house of Stuart. The motto did not do them any good do, in the end, they were attacked and banished with impunity. But I am no Stuart. I take out the manila folder from my desk drawer. I can recite the information it contains in my dreams. I turn on my shredder and slowly feed the contents into its hungry blades. The past is dead and should remain dead. The phone rings again, +44-891154891. I have enough of it! I smash my phone against the wall. It gives a satisfying crack when it hits the wall and breaks into small pieces. I press the call button on my intercom.

'Andrea get England’s prime minister on the phone now! And send miss Steele to my office.' I need to put a stop to this once and for all and unleash my pent up frustration. Anastasia is the only one who can give me release and calm this raging beast inside of me.

'Certainly, Mr Grey.' Andreas disembodied voice echos through my office.

My conversation with the prime minister of England was short and to the point. I made it clear to her that she either reigned in that obnoxiously persistent woman or I would move my European headquarters to Amsterdam and ice plans for a computer chip factory in Newbury. She sputtered, of course, holding some diatribe about duty, history and honour but once I made clear to her in uncertain terms that I was not interested, she backed off and saw it my way. I scoff loudly. They always do in the end. Nevertheless, that phone call has put me on edge, and my frustration is treating to flow over. I close my eyes and take a steadying breath. Anastasia will be here soon, and all will be right again.

My desk phone buzzes for the millionth time this day.

'What!?' I bark through the speaker if Andrea is to blame.

'Mr. Welch and Mr Taylor are here to see you sir, and Miss Steele is running an errand for Mr Miller, she won’t be back for another half an hour. Sawyer and Prescott are escorting her sir.' She says entirely unphased by my outburst. That woman deserves a raise for putting up with my crap. An errand for Miller?! She is not his damn secretary and should not be bothered with something menial like running his goddamn errands. She is supposed to learn the ropes from him! I am furious, how dare he abuse her like that!

'Get me that mother fucker on the phone now! And send Welch and Taylor in.' 

'Yes, sir.'
Moments later, Welch and Taylor march into my offices while I am reading the riot act to Miller. 'But sir, surely as an intern she needs to experience all aspects of accounting Miller sputters.'

'Getting your damn shirts from dry-cleaning has nothing to do with accounting. Ms Steele is not your maid. Don't let it happen again or you can find yourself another job, do you understand me, Miller?'

'But..' He begins.

'I am not interested in your buts. Do what I say or you ARE Fired!' I slam on the end call button scowling at Taylor and Welch who are standing in front of my desk.

I slump down on my chair and gesture them to sit down on the chairs in front of my desk, equalizing our heights. I hate it when people look down on me.

'What is it?'

'We finally have the information about Stephan Morton you requested.' Welch speaks calmly.

'Good! That is about time, it took you long enough, hand it over.' I command.

Welch hands me a manila folder containing some files.

'Morton was tough to track down. He moved to Nova Scotia and is running a cheap motel at the coast, near Lunenburg. He changed his name to Andrew Peterson and is a debilitated.'

That last statement got my attention rapidly. Anastasia never told me he is paralyzed.

'What do you mean?'

'It is all a bit obscure, I had to dig deep to get his medical records and the police report unearthed, but both were incomplete. Apparently four years ago he got into a fight with an unidentified person outside a strip joint in Macon, Georgia. The person that beat the hell out of him left him for dead in the back alley of the establishment. There were no witnesses, and he was only discovered after one of the other patrons took a leak in the alley hours later. His injuries were so severe that doctors thought he would not make it. But he pulled through but was paralyzed from the waist down and had slight brain damage. He could not remember what happened, let alone remember who gave him a beating of a lifetime. Whoever it was put the fear of God in him because he immigrated to Canada immediately after he released from the Hospital and changed his name. His father gave him money to start a new life in Nova Scotia.'

I fantasied of destroying Morton a hundred times over but I was not prepared nor expected that someone else beat me to the punch I feel disappointed. Nevertheless, I am intrigued by the tale, some aspects of it do not make sense. For one, I do not believe that Morton had no clue who beat him up.

'What did the police report say?' I am surprised when Taylor answers it is Welch job to dig up information.

'That is the interesting part. Parts of the police report have disappeared, and so did a lot of the evidence. This was all, of course, very suspect but made sense to me after I found out who runs Macon's police department.' He opens the file he is holding and hands me an old picture. A stern-looking young man in a ranger uniform stares back at me.
'Meet first Lieutenant Derek Calhoun, he was the platoon leader of both Ray Steele and Frank Lambert and best man on Lambert's wedding to Carla Adams. But that is not all, we checked old phone records of both Calhoun and Steele and found out they were in frequent contact with each other. They still speak to each other today, but their contact is less frequent. We also found out that Steele had been actively keeping track of Morton's whereabouts. So here is my hypothesis; Steele waited patiently for the opportune moment to strike at Morton with the help of his buddy Calhoun who covered it up and made the entire case go away.'

This information is startling, and I quickly skim through the manila, looking for confirmation. Something catches my eye. It is a report from a private detective hired by Morton's father.

'It says here that a PI interviewed both Carla Adams who he immediately ruled out as a suspect and Ray Steele. Both had solid alibis. Adams gave an art and craft course in the evening at Montesano high and Ray was on a fishing trip at Lake Chelan with a Jose Rodriguez sr who confirmed his alibi.'

Taylor scoffs.

'Jose Rodriguez sr is another alumnus of Lieutenant Calhouns Boom platoon. They are all covering for each other. If my hypothesis is correct, Ray Steele could be a security risk for you if he ever takes finds out and takes offence to the unorthodox way you wooed his daughter. The man is meticulous, calculated and takes no prisoners. I suggest we put him on the watch list.

The comparison between my own character and that of Ray Steele's does not escape me, and neither does the irony of the entire situation. I just spend a small fortune to save his life.

'I do not think it is prudent for my relationship with Anastasia to put her father on my watch list.'

'With all due respect sir, what miss Steele does not know won't hurt her. Her father could be a potential threat once he learns how you wooed her. We should be prepared to deal with him in the event.'

'I will never find out Taylor, trust me.'

'We cannot be sure of that, sir.' Taylor immediately interjects. I pinch the bridge of my nose tired and annoyed with this conversation.

'Do what you need to do Taylor, just make sure miss Steele never finds out.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Anything else?' I ask wanting both Welch and Taylor gone from my office.

'No, sir.' They both say in unison. I wave my hand in dismissal, and they get up and leave my office.

I sigh and flip through the dossier again. Taylor is right, Ray Steele could become a problem one I need to be able to solve as soon as the need arises. I won't let anyone take Anastasia from me, Ray Steele included. At the same time, I cannot help but admire the man, we share the same way of thinking. It will be a pity if our relationship gets strained… I take one of the papers from the dossier and scan its contents feeling annoyed by this whole damn situation. The key to solving my problem as always is information. Being multiple steps ahead of my competitors made me the successful businessman I am today. It seems Stephan Morton's father has run into some financial difficulties and Stephan Mortons hotel is not doing that great either. Their economic vulnerability is a weakness I can exploit. Morton never wanted to tell who attacked him, a commercial offer at
the height of his financial ruin might persuade him otherwise. Having this information from Morton will undoubtedly lead to more evidence against Ray Steele and his army buddies. The evidence I will use in a heartbeat the moment he becomes a threat to my relationship with Anastasia. Right now, I will let Welch put some manpower on both Mortons, Ray Steele and his army buddies. I want to know everything there is to know about them. Content with my plan, I call Welch and order the surveillance.

I look at the clock feeling annoyed it has been over an hour since I was supposed to have lunch with Anastasia. I curse at Miller again for sending her on his stupid errands. If he weren't good at his job, I would have fired him immediately. I tap the intercom and order Andrea to bring me another coffee. I grudgingly open my email and start reading some proposals on several promising acquisitions, my team assembled. I am impressed with what they have come up with.

My door swings open and I look up from my computer half expecting Andrea with my coffee, surprisingly Ros storms into my office holding a sleeping Chris. She seems excited, her red curls bouncing wildly with every step she takes. Well, this is a surprise.

'Not that I am not happy to see you, but I thought this was your day off. How is my little man?' I get up from my chair and take my sleeping godson from her. I cannot believe how big he has gotten since the last time I saw him. He looks so fragile and innocent an unfamiliar feeling swirls inside my chest, making me feel uneasy.

'He is doing great, growing like cabbage if you ask me.' she smiles a sweet little smile and strokes his head lovingly. The tender moment only lasts a second and Ros immediately jumps back into business mode.

'I have some amazing news, Professor Berg just called me. He and professor Hoffman are on their way here now. I have sent one of the jets to pick them up immediately. Hoffman's research team has made an incredible breakthrough with the development of drought-resistant crops. According to Hoffman, it was the breakthrough his team was looking for. This is it Christian if it is really the breakthrough they were looking for we could be planting crops in the Sahara in a matter of years.' The excitement in her voice is palatable.

No more hunger... The thought is overwhelming. A long-held dream is finally coming into fruition... Not ever need a child go hungry again and feel the desolate ache of an empty stomach. Excitement unravels in my stomach.

'What time will they be here? I want to know everything about their discovery as soon as possible.'

'They should be here in about 30 minutes.' Ros says and strokes little Chris's cheek again. She turns to face me her face pensive.

'That reminds me, Christian, we need daycare in Grey House, sure we provide our employees with some cover in daycare costs, but I crunched the numbers, and it would be a lot cheaper for them and us to provide the service in house. Not to mention its good for parent and child bonding and it saves people from scrambling for a sitter or a daycare centre. I am on Chris duty today, and since my nanny has today off, I was forced to bring him with me. I cannot take him into our meeting with the professors it would have been a real solution if I could bring him to an in-house daycare centre. I don't know where to put him now maybe Andrea can sit him?' she muses.

'I will ask her if she has the time to do so.' I grumble not really happy to assign my irreplaceable PA to babysitting duties. Having a daycare at Grey house might not be such a bad idea at all. I scold myself of not thinking about it myself; it is an excellent way to retain talented employees.
'I want you to look into the cost and requirements of running a Grey house daycare, Ros. I think its a solid idea.'

'See Christian, I knew you would agree with me.' Ros says, smiling.

There is a rapid knock on my office door and Andrea strides in holding her trusted Ipad.

'Mr. Grey, Ms Bailey, Professor Berg and his colleagues will arrive in 20 minutes I prepared conference room one for their presentation. Mr Grey, I rescheduled your appointments for today, Your meeting with Marcus and his acquisitions team has been rescheduled for tomorrow at 13:00. Your meeting with Mrs Lincoln and Mr Miller on Escalva books is at 16:00 Your lunch with Ms Steele is moved to 13:00, and I rescheduled your appointment with Mr Yang of Yang shipping at 15:00.' She rattles off.

'Thank you, Andrea, Ms Steele will be up once she is back from her errand see that she is made comfortable in my office, Andrea.'

'Yes, sir.' She replies and scurries off again.

Ros stares at me with a foreboding look on her face.

'You seem to have taken a special interest in Ms Steele, more so than the other interns Christian. Has she forgiven your highly unprofessional outburst during her presentation a couple of months ago? Or is this your way of making up to her?'

Her enquiry irritates me. I do not wish to be reminded of my less than stellar behaviour when I commented on Anastasia's choice of clothing. If she just had given me a chance back, then I would not have needed to take such dire steps.

'I apologized for my behaviour Ros you do not need to remind me.' I snap at her.

'Why are you so interested in her Christian? Is it personal? I would totally understand why, but I do not need to remind you that pursuing a relationship with a subordinate, especially an intern, is highly unethical.'

How dare she interfere with my relationship with Anastasia?! She might be my friend and right-hand woman, but I would fire her on the spot and ruin her if she tries to interfere with my relationship with Anastasia. It is in her best interest to mind her own damn business.

'How dare you insinuate that my interest in her is anything else than professional? Ms Steele is an extremely talented writer and editor. Who do you think wrote my speech to the Vatican? She also has a knack for numbers because she single-handedly discovered some irregularity at accounting which I hold Miller responsible for. He is on her case because she made him look like a half-wit. Good work deserves to be rewarded.' Half-truths are always the best lies, and I am pleased with how smoothly and believably this one came out.

'Really? Irregularities at accounting? Under Miller? Phew, that is a tough nut to swallow. What was wrong?'

God dammed Ros why can't you just run with the story I gave you! I am getting tired of her constant meddling.

'The computer program controlling debt payments was not functioning properly. Ms Steele alerted Helen, who alerted me about this because Miller was unapproachable and refused to listen to her. I ordered her to test the controls. She did by wiring money over to her fathers lumber business. An
unauthorized company we never did business with. It went without a hitch. I gave Miller hell for it. You understand that Miller is not too pleased with her at the moment. So I am taking her under my wing. I want to recruit her for GEH as soon as she is out of college.'

I am proud of my spin of the truth I only hope it satisfies Ros's curiosity and she will stop prodding. The look on her face, however, tells me she is not really convinced with my explanation.

'She is beautiful, though.' She muses and I glare at her. She cracks and smile and drops the subject by asking me what time it is.

'Time to go to the conference room.' I grunt.

I follow her out of my office into the conference room located on my office floor. Andrea is already waiting with a diverse array of snacks and beverages. The smartboard is running, and notebooks and pens are set on the large glass and oak conference table. Once again, Andrea proved to be worth her weight in gold. I sometimes wonder what I would do without her.

Ros looks at her and gives her one of her most charming smiles. I roll my eyes at the gesture knowing precisely what she is up to.

'Say, Andrea, are you really busy this afternoon?' Ros asks all smiles.

Andrea blinks twice in surprise and then looks at Ros suspiciously.

'I need to finish up on some work.. why?'

'I need to ask you for a huge favour.' Ros says the broad smile never leaving her face. It is kind of eerie, and by the look on Andrea's face, I am guessing she agrees with my assessment.

'What exactly do you need from me?' Andrea asks tentatively.

'Do you mind babysitting little Chris for me during the meeting? I promise he will be good. It is my day off, so my babysitter has a day off and is out of town, and this meeting came as a surprise, so I am kind of in knots here. I swear I make it up to you somehow.'

Andrea looks pale and wide-eyed.

'I don't know.. I never babysat before, and I have still so much to do..' She stammers. Hearing the confident Andrea Parker stammer is quite shocking.

'You never babysat before? Not even in your teens? Wow!' Ros exclaims.

'No, I hated my neighbour's kids; they were brats, and I got a much better paying job at the Pizza Palace.' Andrea snaps back making Ros, and I chuckle.

'Please, Andrea, I beg you. Chris is charming and will rarely trouble you, I treat you dinner at Mendoza's next week..' Ouch, typical Ros going straight to the jugular. Andrea is a real foodie, and I am pretty sure she won't resist that offer. Mendozas opened about a year ago and already has 2 Michelin stars. Its the place to be according to some and has a waiting list of many months for mere mortals. I know Andrea has wanted to go there ever since it opened. I was planning on gifting her a dinner there as a bonus. Leave it to Ros to rain on my parade.

'Fine just tell me what to do. And I want to bring my mom when we go.'

Ros smiles brightly.
'No problem!' she says before starting a diatribe about feeding and diapers. I zoom out and stare out the window. Suddenly the atmosphere changes, it is like the air is filled with charged particles. Ana, I whisper and turn around to see her standing in the doorway.

'Mr. Grey, you wanted to see me, sir?' Her melodic voice echoes through the room. She is wearing a grey pencil skirt, a white blouse and dark flats. She truly is a sight for sore eyes.

'Yes, Ms Steele that is correct. Let's go to my office.' Its feels both weird and unnerving acting for formal and professional with her, here at GEH especially because I have spent every day between her legs since our Christmas holiday trip to Aspen.

'Christian you cannot bail now we have a meeting.' Ros says dramatically. She is one to talk; she is still debating the merits of baby oil with Andrea.

I look around the room in an equally dramatic fashion and give her my most charming smile.

'I do not see Berg and his colleagues here yet, no Berg means no meeting. And may he arrive before I get back, well you are a big girl I am sure you can entertain them in my absence.' I wink at Ros, gently take Ana's arm and lead her to my office. The door closes with a thud and his push her against enveloping her small body with mine. She lets out a surprised yelp.

'God,, I missed you.' I say and smash my lips against hers. Her lips are soft and warm against mine. She breaks the kiss, and it's then that I notice her hands pushing against my chest. Panic and surprise battle for dominates inside me. The burning sensation that I usually feel when someone touches my chest stays dormant; instead, I only feel the pleasant warmth of her hands. The entire experience disconcerting, and for the first time in a long time, I feel terrified. I push her back and let her go abruptly. Suddenly her soft, warm body feels scorching, like fire incarnated at the same time my longing for her intensifies; it makes me feel dazed and confused. I suck in as much oxygen as I can trying not to hyperventilate.

'Are you alright?' Her soft voice is filled with concern and everything I feel for her threatens to overwhelm me. I think I am going mad!

I try to smile at her, but my emotions threaten to overwhelm me. I repeat Elena's mantra in my head. Love is for fools, Love is for fools. I want to laugh at the ridicules of the situation I am incapable of loving. No, what I feel for Anastasia is merely unrestrained lust.

'I am fine.' I bark out harsher than intended. 'Just a little warm.' I say my voice softening this time. She looks unsure, and I point at the chair in front of my desk.

'Please, have a seat.'

She sits down and smooths down her skirt.

'You look terrific in that skirt.' I compliment her.

'Thank you.' She whispers in reply.

'Did you have lunch yet?'

'No, I haven't found the time to eat yet.'

'You need to eat! I order something for you so you can eat in peace in my office. I promise you Miller won't be bothering you anymore today. I told him I needed your services for some editing
'Oh, really hungry though..' She replies almost timidly.

'Anastasia don't start with me. You will eat.' She opens her mouth to reply, but I quickly change the subject. I am no mood to fight with her today. 'What kind of errands did Miller send you on?'

'I needed to pick up many aeroplane tickets for junior and senior personnel at the travel agency. Someone from accounting needed to sign off on the receipt, Mr Miller, asked me to do it.'

I cannot help but feel annoyed at Miller. Anastasia's talents should not be wasted on running dumb errands for that fool.

'I will tell him to send someone else next time, we did not hire you to run errands for lazy execs.'

'I don't mind really... I kind of enjoy going to the travel agency. All those tickets made me feel like I was going to travel the world. I liked that illusion.' Her voice is soft, almost timid.

'You want to travel the world?'

She looks up and gives me the sweetest small smile.

'Yes, I would. Before Rome... I never went out of the states. Mam and Ray are great parents but simply did not have the money for international holidays.' She shrugs. 'I did not mind really. I liked our holiday trips to various states. I guess now that I am older I want to see more of the world.'

Her confession grips me, and I desperately want to make her dreams come through.

'We can travel the world together. I will take a sabbatical year after you graduate and I will take you wherever you want to go. Just say the word.' The idea of us seeing travelling together is exciting, and I want her to say yes to my proposal badly.

She gives me a sad smile.

'We both know that this is never going to happen. In two months, we will go our separate ways, and we will be out of each other life.'

It feels like she has punched me in the gut the thought of her leaving me is unbearable. I know I'd give her my word that I would let her go after the contract is up, but deep down, I have always known that I am never going to honour that arrangement.

'We don't have to go our separate ways. The contract is just a thing, we can amend it if we wish to.'

A flicker of fear appears in her eyes, and it feels like a punch in the gut, how can she still fear me?

'I do not wish to amend it..' Her voice his a mere whisper but it feels like she screamed her rejection in my ear. She does not want to be with me no matter how hard I have tried to erase the image of the monster I am she still sees right through me staring straight at the rotten core inside of me. I have been diluting myself that what we have now, this camaraderie, was enough for her to start loving me. But now I know for sure. She will never love me or want to stay with me out of her free will. All we will ever have is this tentative truce between us. But the simple fact is, I can never let her go she is bound to me like I am to her. She is mine, forever. Yet I don't want her to be afraid of me. But how can I keep her without forcing her? It is a conundrum I cannot seem to solve.

There is knock on the door, and Ros pokes her head in.
'They are here.' Her excitement is palpable.

'I will be right up.' I grunt out the excitement I previously felt for Berg's announcement is nowhere to be found.

I take my phone out and call the local deli to bring over some chicken sandwiches and orange juice.

I turn my attention back to Anastasia again.

'Your lunch will arrive shortly. After you are done, go to Andrea and ask her for the Martin files. They need editing.'

'Yes, sir.' She replies, hoarsely.

'Let's go.' I say to Ros, who is still hovering at the door.

Berg and his colleagues' findings are absolutely thrilling, yet I cannot seem to focus on their presentation or muster more then platitudel enthusiasm. My mind keeps drifting off to Anastasia. How can I make her stay the same question keeps repeating over and over in my head, yet the answer remains ever elusive.

Berg and his colleagues drone on passionately, and I cannot fault them for that. The entire meeting lasts for a little more than three hours. At the end of it, I have managed to take some notes and agreed on providing additional funding and acquiring new test locations on the African continent.

'Mr. Grey, thank you so much for your time and your continued support for our project. You have no idea how much this is going to change the world, and it's all because of your kindness and generosity that we can do this.' Berg says while shaking my hand vigorously. He has an earnest look on his face, and his eyes are watery. It makes me realize how dedicated he is to this project, and my respect for him jumps tenfold.

'You are giving me to much credit professor I merely provide the funding, the success of this project is to sole efforts of you and your team.'

He smiles a crooked smile.

'Let's just say its a team effort of all of us.' He offers.

'I like that idea.' I reply.

'Thank you again, Mr Grey.' He says and walks over to his colleagues and Ros who are still talking animatedly, leaving me to my own devices.

I make my way out of the conference room into the hallway. Andrea's desk sits ominously empty. I walk farther down the hall and hear muffled voices coming from one of the smaller meeting rooms. I turn my attention to the room, the door is slightly ajar allowing me a peek inside.

Andrea stands at the table her usually perfectly coiffed hair looks frazzled, and she is furiously stammering an apology to the person standing to the side of her. She sounds like she is about to burst into tears. I walk closer to the door, allowing me a better look into the room.

Anastasia is standing next to Andrea, and for a moment, I am completely stunned. Anastasia looks magnificent like an angel descendant from heaven her chestnut hear radiates in the sunlight, giving it a reddish hue. She is softly singing while rocking Chris, who clearly had a temper tantrum gently in her arms. The effect of her action is immediate. Chris red, blotched, tear-stained, little face
morphs into a picture of serenity. She smiles, sweetly at Andrea in an apparent attempt to comfort her. The whole scene reminds me of Michaelangelo's Madonna and child, A perfect vision of motherhood; and then it hits me like a brick, Anastasia is the perfect incarnation of motherhood. Her, patience, gentleness, kindness and capacity for love make her so. She would never abandon or hurt her child; she would love her child unconditionally and would anything to protect it, unlike the crackwhore. I am staring right at the answer of my conundrum with Anastasia. If she had my child, she would be forced to stay with me, she would never deprive her baby of its father or the best life possible, a life with his parents together. We would be a family I know she would never love me, but she would love my baby, our baby unconditionally and therefore she would love a part of me, and that is enough for me and enough for her to stay. A baby will bind her to me forever.

Hope swells in my chest and a plan forms in my head. I tear my eyes and almost run to my office, closing the door with a bang. I press the call button on my speakerphone, knowing that Andrea needs to run to pick it up in time. It kind of makes me feel like an asshole, and I promise myself that I would make it up to her soon.

'Mr Grey sir.' She answers out of breath after the sixth ring.

'Andrea cancel the rest of my meeting today and send Taylor to my office, now please.' I try to say as friendly as possible.

'Yes, Mr Grey.' She replies, sounding a little surprised.

I and end the call and open my desk drawer to pull out a set of keys. I walk towards the largest Trouton painting and remove it from the wall. For a brief moment, I stare at the safe like object behind it. I turn the keys into the lock, and a keypad appears. I quickly enter the code, and the hidden door unlocks. I chuckle and enter the small secret chamber. The lights turn on automatically displaying the alphabetically ordered cabinet files inside. I walk over to the G drawer, pull out the file I need and chuckle. You see, you don't get to the top of obtaining power without gathering intelligence, dirt or leverage on people you encounter privately or work-related. I close the room and hang back the painting before sitting down at my desk.

The picture of Dr Stephanie Greene, one of the worlds top gynaecologists and esteemed colleague of my mother, her derelict husband and their gambling-addicted son are staring back at me. I browse the information and cannot help but smile. This is even better then I could have ever hoped for, and I almost pity the poor woman. Welch really has done an outstanding job with collecting this intel. It is funny, never in my wildest dream did I ever think I would require services for this very particular purpose, I always imagined it would be for something quite the opposite. I put the file in my briefcase just as Taylor knocks on my door. 'Enter.' I say.

'You wanted to see me, sir?' He asks.

'Yes, we are leaving. Tell Sawyer he needs to drive Ms Steele home tonight. I need to make a stop at Seattle memorial Hospital.'

'Are you alright, sir?' Taylor asks, concerned.

'I am fine.' I bark, annoyed that he asked.

'Very well, sir.' He replies stoically.

I grab my jacket and saunter out of my office.

Seattle Memorial is one of the oldest hospitals in the city and a frequent recipient of my charitable
largess. It is located in a 19th-century sizeable brown brick building near the city centre a few miles from GEH. Though the outside looks old, its interior is sleek and modern. Glass, stainless steel and white marble are found everywhere. I walk inside and hope my presence goes unnoticed. I am in no mood to entertain my mother or worse Virgil Carson, the hospitals' director and resident sickafant best known for his penchant for transvestite prostitutes. Not them I am one to judge someone else sexual proclivities although I am pretty sure his wife does not share my liberal point of view. Dr Greene's office is located on the third floor. Her waiting room is informative yet tastefully decorated. Her assistant immediately jumps up when she sees me.

'Mr. Grey, what an honour to meet you.' She squeaks while batting her eyes at me.

I have to suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her; instead, I give her my most charming smile.

'I need to see Dr Greene, is she in?'

She looks at me, surprised.

'Uhm, she was just about to go home. But I am sure she has time for you. Let me tell her that you want to see her.'

She gets up and rushes to Dr Greene's office. A moment later, she returns.

'Dr. Greene is available, Mr Grey.'

'Thank you.' I nod at her and enter Greene's office.

Stephanie Greene's office is richly furnished. Various items and medical models are set on classical pieces of furniture. It breathes a homely atmosphere. I am guessing its all a rouse to make her patients feel more comfortable.

'Mr. Grey, I must say that I am surprised to see you. What do I owe the pleasure?' She is sitting at her desk her blond hair tight up in a ponytail making her look much younger than 53.

I smile at her and sit myself down on one of the comfortable fluffy chairs in front of her desk.

'I do realize my visit is somewhat unorthodox, but I assure it with good reason. I need to make use of your services.'

She cocks her eyebrow at me clearly vexed at my seemingly pointless late afternoon intrusion.

'You do realize that I am a gynaecologist Mr Grey? I am afraid I won't be much use to you. I can refer you to a good urologist if you require medical attention.'

I am both annoyed and impressed with her snappy reaction. I am in no mood to drag this conversation on so I decided to cut right to the point.

'I am very much aware of your profession Doctor; I am in need six months worth of placebo birth control pills a subscription for folic acid.'

Her face morphs into a picture of absolute shock and horror. It is almost comical.

'I don't happen to have placebo birth-control laying around, and even if for some insane reason I had such useless pills in my possession I would never prescribe them to a patient, especially not a patient whom I do not even know. It would be a gross violation of every ethical and medical norm in existence. I do not know what you are planning Mr Grey, but you asking me for placebo birth
control gives me a most uncomfortable inkling, and I will not be apart of it.’

Ah, just as I feared good old Stephanie choose to take the moral high ground, her hypocrisy stinks to high heaven. I feel nothing but pure loathing for her. I narrow my eyes at her abandoning all pretence of respect and equality.

‘How is your son Stephanie?’

My sudden change of subject has an immediate effect. I smile a slow, predatory smile at her before continuing my taunt.

‘You look a little pale, are you feeling alright my dear doctor or shall I call for some help?’

‘Wha… what.. I..’ she stammers.

‘What is it, dear Doctor? Cat got your tongue? You see Stephanie, you have mistaken my polite question as a request among equals, but you and I are far from equal Doctor. When I told you I needed to enlist your help, it was not a request. I expect that you deliver what I desire tomorrow afternoon at the latest.’

‘Mr. Grey, I cannot in good conscience..’ She starts stammering again.

‘Spare me your sudden found moral high ground! How much has junior set you back now? 1,5 million is it? He is gambling away your money faster then you can make it, even with your little side trade in prescription drugs. You are nothing more than a high-class drugs dealer. Where are your high norms and ethics when people die from an overdose of oxycodone you provided?’

She looks dejected her eyes are filled with sadness.

‘Does, she know? The girl does she want kids?’ her voice a mere whisper.

‘You do not need to concern yourself with that question, it bears no relevance on you. Look at it this way, you are doing a good deed you are facilitating the creation of life instead of destroying it. The child that will be much wanted and loved unconditionally.’

She swallows and briefly stares out the window.

‘You must understand that I love Jake, as a child, he was the sweetest little boy, I just want him to be happy and free of this addiction. I never meant to sell all those pills, but I was desperate. Jake gambled everything away, and we were going to lose our house…’

For some reason, her confession irritates me. Does she not see the irony? Its people like her that get others addicted.

‘To be honest Stephanie, I could not care less; however, I am willing to help you out if I can count on your discretion cooperation. You will stop selling those prescription pills, and in return, I will make sure your son is no longer welcome in both the legal and illegal gaming houses in the state. I will provide funding for his rehabilitation and pay of his remaining debts.’

She nods and wipes the tears from her eyes.

‘Its a deal.’ She whispers, knowing that she got of mercifully.

At least it will prevent some pills from hitting the street. I guess its a double win for me.

‘We are done here.’ I get up and walk towards the door. I open it and turn around offering her one
last parting shot.

'I am a man of my word Stephanie I expect you to honour our agreement, I will have the pills tested so do not think you can screw me over, I will end you if you try.'

'I would never..'

'Good.'

I close the door and smile. A feeling of complete elation engulfs me. Mission accomplished!

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