Fifty Shades Forgotten
by WeAreJorus

Summary

I can't form the words. I don't want to. I can't accept it. I'll fall apart again. I've done that enough in the last thirty days to last ten lifetimes. I'm Christian Grey, CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation, I. Do. Not. Fucking. Lose. It. I clench my jaw, steeling my soul.

"Ana doesn't know me."
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

General disclaimer: I don't own the Fifty Shades works by E.L. James, nor would I claim to. I'm just here for a little fun. Enjoy the ride.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

"G'mornin Daddy."

Blue eyes peer at me from just over the edge of the bed, mere inches from my face. The loveliest eyes to wake up to in the morning, save his mother's. I bring my finger to my lips.

"Shh, Teddy, don't wake Mommy." I roll back, my right hand feeling across the sheets, but the other side of the bed is empty. Shit. In her even-more-clumsy-than-usual state, how does she manage to do that?

"Mommy say Daddy UP!" Ted informs me, pulling himself up on the bed by his dimpled elbows.

"Oh she did, did she?" I yank my little miniature into my arms, tickling him mercilessly. He squeals and wiggles, feet kicking out. Stopping before his face turns too pink, I clutch him to my chest, breathing in his baby scent. My son. My beautiful boy, the light of my life. "Good morning, baby boy."

Teddy pushes off my chest and glares at me, his eyebrows wrinkled. "I not baby! Big brudder!" He bounces up and down on my bladder on every word to drive the message home.

I laugh, which is no better for my full bladder than the bouncing. I lift my son about the waist and plop him down beside me, trying and ultimately failing to look contrite. "Yes, you're a big boy. And you'll be a big brother soon, we've talked about this, remember? Soon, not yet." I kiss his chubby cheek.

~oOo~

Ana has Ted in his chair at the breakfast bar. His face is smeared liberally with peanut butter, and squares of toast are strewn across his area of the counter. How he manages to miss his mouth is beyond me; the boy loves to eat. Ana is leaning, as best she can with her ever-expanding belly, over the counter, making faces at our son. She's so beautiful, hair twirled and pinned, a few stray tendrils framing her face, her curves hugged by her gray flannel dress. She must have a meeting this morning, I suppose. She's preoccupied and oblivious to my musings, and I snake my arms around her from behind, my hands coming to rest on our growing daughter.

"Oh!" Ana jumps a bit, then relaxes into my arms. "Good morning, Daddy."

I smile into her neck, placing a soft kiss against her warm skin. She smells heavenly. "Good morning to you, Mommy. How did you sleep?"
"Not as well as you did," she giggles, turning in my hold to wrap her arms about my neck. She rises on her toes, rounded belly pressing into me, and plants a lingering kiss on my lips. Her rounded breasts brush my chest, sending waves of need southward. I taste peanut butter and a hint of blueberry. Good, she's eaten, my mind changes gear. One less thing to worry over. Ana is so right to label me mercurial, as she does so often. It never ceases to shock me how I can go from carnal need to protector/provider mode in the blink of an eye. I'd never have paid mind to most of my tendencies without her. "You were so out," she says. "Did you enjoy your wake-up-call?"

"I did." I slide my hands downward to clutch her behind as my thoughts take their previous turn. She kisses me once more.

"No antics this morning, Mr. Grey," she chides me, bringing her hands down to my chest and fastening my top button. "I have to go, can you finish up with him? Gail called, she's going to be a little late."

I glance out our back window at the clouds rolling in over the sound. My stomach clenches briefly, and I bury the urge to insist she stay home today. We've had far too many squabbles about her safety and my control-freakishness, and at the end she's upset and I'm angry, and then she's angry and I'm upset. Never a pleasant way to start things, even on the occasion I get my way. Turning back to my wife, I nod, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "All right." I bend and kiss her belly as well. "Wear your jacket, it's looking nasty outside."

"I promise." She fingers my hair lovingly, then trundles off to brush her teeth.

My son had managed to gobble up the last of his toast, making my job that much easier. I dab a washcloth over his face and hands, eliminating the sticky mess. His shirt was another story entirely. The bib remained largely unspattered. Oh, little boys and their organized chaos. I tossed the bib onto the counter and managed to pull the shirt over his head without redressing his face with peanut butter; it joined the bib in a pile. Teddy raised his arms to me and I lifted him, settling him on my hip.

"Wish me luck!" Ana breathes, re-entering the kitchen. She plants a kiss on Teddy's cheek, and then pecks my lips. My free arm captures her, pulling her to me. Even in her rush to get out the door, she's breathtaking. Her eyes are wide, her face flushed with hurry, but she fits herself to my side and I lower my lips to hers, our tongues greeting one another. Her minty breath joins mine, and we lose ourselves in the moment.

"Mommy!" Ted gasps. The indignation on his face is comical, and Ana giggles, breaking us apart. It's one of the loveliest sounds in the world. She puckers her lips at him, Ted leans forward in my arms and gives her a loud, smacking peck.

"I love my boys," she tells us, adjusting the jacket over her arm.

"We love you, too," I say. God, I love her, so very much. "Good luck today, baby."

"Love, Mommy!" Ted bellows, and Ana blows him a kiss. Sawyer holds the front door for her, and they're off.

And I'm left with the task of dressing my son. Again. With any luck, he'll remain semi-clean until Gail arrives. I sigh... in two more months, there will be twice as many little clothes to change. And I'll love every minute of it.
"Thanks, Hannah."

"Sure thing, Boss." My assistant bows out, arms laden with folders.

Boss. A title I both love and hate, and love to hate. The past two years as CEO of Grey Publishing has been a whirlwind, a learning experience, and a train wreck, but a profitable one at that. Actually, it's run quite smoothly, thanks in great part to the mix of veterans on my leadership team; it's me who's the closet train wreck. Most days I'd love to give it all up and play editor again, but there are some things that make it all worth doing, not the least of which is Christian's overwhelming pride and respect for me. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him, and a handful of overwhelmingly talented writers would likely be lost in "The Pile" if it weren't for my position, so the value of what I do outstrips my occasional disdain for all things Executive. Hannah sneaks me the occasional manuscript to mark up, bless her, so it makes the rest a bit less stressful. I'm not sure what I'll do when she leaves to pursue her Master's Degree later this summer.

Post-meeting mental rant over, I sip my tea and log into my computer. There are four emails from editors, an event reminder from the ever-invaluable Jerry Roach, my right hand, and of course, an email from Christian. I smile.

From: Christian Grey
Subject: This Evening
Date: June 19 2014 10:27
To: Anastasia Grey
Ana,

I thought of something after you left. I'd like to discuss it with you over dinner. Gail has graciously volunteered Sophie to entertain our son when she arrives this afternoon.

Is this agreeable?

Hope your meeting went well.

xx

Christian Grey
CEO, Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc.
His formality makes my eyebrows furrow. It was like he went straight for the point, and then did the hot coals dance around it. He probably thinks I won't like it, whatever it is. And he's arranged for Teddy to be away, so he either thinks he's going to seduce me into whatever it is he wants, or whatever it is, I'll be upset, and he doesn't like for Teddy to see either of us upset. We've quarreled about that last part several times, too. Outright fighting in front of a child is one thing entirely, but sheltering Teddy from negative emotions could confuse him later. I sense another long discussion over this differing of our opinions on the horizon.

My phone rings.

"Grey," I answer.

"Hello, baby."

Now I'm jolted. "Christian," I try, and fail, to hide the surprise in my voice. "I just read your email."

He sighs. "I hope you're not overthinking it." He knows me too well, but if I know him equally, he's running his fingers through his hair.

"And... you're running your fingers through your hair."

He snorts. "Guilty." I hear the half-smile in his voice. "Please don't overthink it; if you say no, then that's that. I promise I won't push the issue. Just give it some thought, please."

The dance continues. I wish he'd just get to the point. "What issue is there to push?" I press him. "Come on, love. Out with it."

"Not now. Later." The command returns to his voice.

I sigh, exasperated. "Fine. But it's your fault if I don't get anything done today. I'll have it on my mind until you tell me, whatever it is."

"Duly noted." There's a pause.

"Can I get back to work now, Sir?"

He laughs. "Of course, Mrs. Grey. I'll see you at home."

I smirk. "I love you, Christian."

"I love you too, Ana."

There's another pause.

"Hang up, Christian," I order.

"I don't want to."

"Me neither."

Another pause.

"Count of three?" I suggest.

"As you wish, Mrs. Grey."
I giggle. "One..."

"Two..."

"Three."

We're such teenagers sometimes.

~oOo~

"Thank you Sawyer," I say as he helps me into the back seat. I don't think I'll ever be entirely used to having staff waiting on me every minute of the day, but I am grateful for Sawyer. At the very least, he makes climbing into vehicles far less awkward.

Sawyer nods, closes my door, and climbs into the front passenger seat. He's still uncomfortable with appreciation, but that doesn't stop me from expressing mine.

Ryan pulls out into traffic, and I slump back into the leather seat, rubbing the stretched-tight skin over my belly. It's hard to believe I'm going to get bigger, but I am. I was positively cetacean with Teddy. My head rolls to the right, and my eyes unfocus, objects passing in a blur, mingled with the raindrops clinging and streaking from the tinted window.

The two bright lights pause.

_Glass._

_I can't hear._

_Wet._

_It doesn't hurt._

_Cold._

_Dark._
"No." My steepled hands at my lips; the board falls silent. I take my time uprighting myself from the reclinable leather desk chair. My hands move to clasp one another in front of me, and I consider the state of my fingernails, my wedding band glinting off the evening sun through the panoramic window. "Our position must remain that of observation. They want us, of that we can be certain. Argyle's board wants to stay together, and they have the best chance of that with us. They're astute and talented people. We have to be patient, let them come to us." I sit back again. "If there is no contact by close of business Wednesday next, we'll revisit."

Lois starts to open her mouth, then thinks better of it. She lowers her eyes, her blonde curls falling forward. I greatly value her stance on all GEH matters, it more often opposes my own, and strangely enough, I like that. Far greater options on various dealings have been presented since she came to join the board. But she knows when to stop, and I appreciate that ever more.

"Sir." Taylor's voice interrupts from the boardroom doorway. My eyes are still flitting among the nine other pairs seated at my table.

"Yes, Taylor."

"We need to go, Sir. Now."

His tone is off. It's rare for Jason Taylor to interrupt a board meeting, and unheard of for him to issue any hint of a command in my direction. My eyes fly to his. Taylor's face is tight, ashen.

"Take over, Ros." My voice remains even. My legs obey. My heart pounds unsteadily, and we're in the elevator. Taylor pushes the button labeled G. I see the wood-paneled doors slide closed, feel us drop. "Well?" My throat closes, every nerve ending on fire.

The pause is unbearable. "It's Ana, Sir. There was an accident. She's pretty bad. Ryan just called from the ER... he said both she and Sawyer were taken to surgery.


"I don't know, Sir."

Kill me. Kill me now. My legs give out and I slump against the mirrored elevator wall as the door opens on the garage level. I don't care that Taylor is supporting me as I stumble to the waiting SUV. I don't even care that he gets into the backseat with me. My heart hurts. It hurts.

"I want to drive," I struggle against him, but I'm weak and unsteady. I need to get to her.

"I can't let you, Sir. Owen knows the way."

I want to scream. My hands shake. Then my shoulders, my face is wet. No, she can't see me cry. I drag my fingers across my cheeks.

"Dr. Treveylan, I have him. We're on our way. Yes, ma'am. I understand." Taylor clicks his phone off. "Your mother will meet us at the rear entrance."
I'm only vaguely aware that Taylor is talking, much less talking to me. *Ana. Hang on, baby, I'm coming. Just hold on.* "My mother?"

"Yes, sir. She was there when Ana arrived."

*Ana. Oh God, please let her be okay. Let her live. Let the baby live. God please..."

"Sir, we're here." Taylor grips my shoulder, and I stumble after him.

"Christian!" my mother's arm is around my waist, pulling me forward.

"Mom..." I can't form words. I just let her take me. Take me to Ana, to the other half of my soul.

She pulls me into an elevator, not releasing me. We get out on some floor, and she pulls me along again. She hasn't said anything. Why hasn't she told me? *Oh it's bad. It must be... God, please..."

She stops to sign something, and pulls me into a room. It's small, low-lit, there's a vinyl sofa and chairs. This is the room they take you to when they have to tell you someone died. I was in a room like this once, long ago... and suddenly, a haze fills me, a numb, care-not fog. It's blissfully temperate, and I wonder why I'm here. Then everything crashes in again, the stabbing pain returns to my chest. "I've lost them," I whisper. My knees make contact with the sterile tile.


*My Ana! She's... but that means... "My daughter..."

She pauses for an eternity, her hand over her mouth. "I'm so, so sorry, darling."

*This can't be happening. It can't be... "No... no no no no nononononono..."

Mom holds me, but I just can't bear it any longer. I push her away as gently as I can manage, falling back, wrapping my arms around my knees. *My wife may still die... my child, my poor, poor baby girl will never open her eyes upon the world. My family is falling apart..."

"Teddy?" I blurt out, despair turning to panic.

"Gail has him, Sir. He's just fine. Carter is with them."

Taylor's still here. I hadn't noticed. I press my forehead to my bruised kneecaps, willing this all to be a terrible nightmare, and not the reality it surely is.

Time passes. My father is there, my brother, my sister, they sit by me in turn. I hear the word 'breakdown' uttered. I can't look at them, can't see them. Mom leaves, and my fists clench. She'd only leave for an update, and my aching heart rips open, fresh in the agony of waiting to hear my dear Ana's fate.

"She's still stable, Christian," her voice soothes me, and I choke on another sob, curling into myself once again.

"Christian."

That voice rattles my anguish briefly enough, and I look up. "John."

"I came as soon as I heard." Dr. John Flynn often sits cross-legged in his office chair, and now, here he is, in much the same fashion on the floor beside me. "Where are your thoughts, Christian?"
I know this exercise. I'm vaguely aware that everyone has left. I imagine my father called him. They must think Ana's going to... No. No! "She can't die, John, she can't..."

"Your mother told me Ana's doing a bit better. She'll be out of surgery soon. Let's focus on that, all right?" He lowers his face, looking up toward me, like trying to coax compliance from a child.

"My... my baby..."

"I heard. I'm so sorry."

The words... I struggle to string them together. "Ana... I can't... I can't lose her, John. I can't."

"She's still with us, Christian. You know how strong she is."

I nod, my aching head bobbing like a doll. "She's the strongest person I know. So much more than I am. She's my life..." I swallow another sob.

"Breathe, Christian."

I suck in a ragged breath, and weary, sick relief floods my body. I hadn't noticed I was holding my breath. I haven't done that since I was a child... since I drove her away... since that fucker Hyde...

"Keep talking," he prods.

"I don't know what to do. I always know what to do, I always have a plan." I shudder. A new despair washes over me. "What am I going to tell her?"

Flynn shakes his head. He's at a loss, a reaction I'd never seen from the man before. "That you love her," he decides. "That it happened, that you're here for her, and that you'll get through it, together." He pauses. "I know, it's standard and clinical, but it's all I've got. There really is no easy answer sometimes."

My mother knocks lightly at the cracked door.

Flynn straightens, indicating for me to rise with him. My sore knees resist, but the rest of my body doesn't... I can't seem to make any decisions at the moment. He gestures me over to a vinyl couch, and then sits beside me. I put my head in my hands. I can feel Flynn looking at me. "Your mother would like to bring your daughter to you. It would be good... for you, and later for Ana... to be able to say goodbye to her." He pauses, and his voice softens further. "It might be your only chance before hospital procedures take over."

"She's..." I can't finish the thought.

"Christian," my mother says softly from the doorway. Her eyes are watery, filled with sorrow. "Would you like to see her?"

When I woke this morning, I saw my child's eyes. Laughing, gentle blue eyes. He was going to be a big brother. I could see him, envision him holding her hand, helping her learn to walk, to run, playing together. And now, I see him, alone in our meadow, picking flowers to place on her grave. I see Ana, sobbing beneath the great maple tree, a place she'd gone to daydream about our children. I see our family growing distant, isolated, lonely. And I see a little angel, my little Phoebe, a perfect miniature of her mother, with tears in her eyes. No. I won't let this tear us apart. I won't let her be forgotten. I want to remember my child.

"Yes, please Mom. I want to see her."
John stands and excuses himself. I hear him murmuring to my father in the hallway. My mother... I've never seen her this shaken, not since the Charlie Tango incident. She pulls the door closed behind her and approaches me, almost apprehensive, a white bundle in her arms. Tears shine in her eyes. She lowers herself to sit beside me.

"She's very small..." she says, unable to go on, and gently passes the bundle into my arms.

I sniffle. "Thank you, Mom."

And she is small. I pull back the blanket. Her tiny body is dark pink in color, and covered by a light dusting of white, downy hair. I remember reading about this in one of Ana's pregnancy books... this is my daughter.

"Hello, Phoebe," I begin. "My beautiful baby girl. You were always wanted. Always loved. And always will be." I lift her and place a soft kiss on her tiny forehead. Her skin is cold, and that does me in. I bring her body to my chest and hold her, rocking her, rocking myself. My mother holds me. She must have been through this other times with other patients, but this is different. This was her granddaughter.

I feel as helpless as I did when she and I first met. I turn to the woman who saved my life, and her expression mirrors mine. "Is she in Heaven, Mom?"

My mother nods, absolute conviction in her eyes. "I know she is."

~oOo~

More time passes. I'm unsure how much time. I tearfully relinquished my daughter's body back to my mother, with her word that she'd be kept safe and sound. My father said something about taking care of arrangements, and not to worry. Flynn spoke in my general direction for a while longer. I missed much of what he said, and then he went home, saying something about being on call if I needed... whatever I needed. Mia and Ethan brought food, but it felt like an incendiary device had gone off in the pit of my stomach. Mia cried. For the first time in my life, I couldn't bear her to be near me.

My mother walked me up to Ana's room in intensive care, explaining her injuries and what to expect, but the whooshing in my ears from my racing heart was such that I heard about every seventh word. It didn't really hit me until I saw her.

It was worse than after Hyde's attack, so much worse. She was hooked up to a multitude of machines, beeping, clicking, whirring, all keeping her alive. Her entire right arm encased in plaster, head bandaged, her blanket covering any number of other injuries. Dark circles ringed her eyes. A tube taped to her mouth, her chest rising and falling to the sucking sound of a ventilator.

I feel my knees weakening again, and my mother takes my hand, squeezing my fingers. "She'll be asleep awhile. You should talk to her though," she says.

I settle into the chair by her bed and lean against the railing. She's so badly broken, I'm afraid to touch her, and after feeling how cold and lifeless our daughter had been, I'm terrified Ana will feel the same way to me. It's irrational, I know. "Tell me again, Mom. please. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to pay attention the first time." And I brace for the rundown.

~oOo~

My vigil is arduous. 'Awhile' turned to 'indefinitely' when her brain began to swell. On day six, as Ana lay comatose, I left her side for an hour to bury our daughter. I pray she won't hate me for
doing this without her, but it was for our daughter's peace, not for mine or anyone else's, that I moved forward with her burial. We'll do a memorial when she wakes up, whatever she wants. Whatever will help her to forgive me.

If she wakes up. And this is becoming a bigger, graver if.

Gail brings Teddy by every day, and I see him in the waiting room. Children aren't permitted in the ICU. The hole in my heart rips open every time he asks about his little sister, and every time I soothe his 'I want Mommy' tears. I can't let him see his mother this way, even if he were allowed in. I know exactly how confusing and frightening it would be for him.

Mom called Dr. Sluder in to take the lead on Ana's case. She's been subjected to MRIs and other various tests every afternoon, but the results are never conclusive and rarely encouraging. I can recite the contents of her chart by heart, and while I don't have a very firm grasp on this kind of medicine, the neutrality of the vitals and orders written on the page pick at my desperation to take action, though there is none to take. None that I can take, that is.

Ray arrived late evening on the first day. Carla arrived on the second day and neither has left except to sleep and clean up I booked them in the dual suite at the Fairmont. Maybe that was inappropriate on my part, putting them together, but I really didn't care at the time, much above and beyond seeing that everyone was taken care of. Sawyer went home on bed rest after surgery to remove a ruptured spleen and was back for light duty after the second week. Ryan, quickly recovered from a minor concussion and bruising, insisted upon taking shifts at the door to the ICU. We spoke briefly, he voiced his feelings of guilt over what part he could have played in driving the SUV, but as the police report concluded, it wasn't his fault. The other driver, a known repeat-offender of drug and alcohol abuse, got behind the wheel that afternoon to buy cigarettes. They found his mangled body across the street.

And Ana... there's been no change. Twenty-three days, and other than the bruises fading and staples removed, she hasn't moved, hasn't taken a breath on her own, her eyelids don't even flicker as she sleeps. Mom uses long clinical terms to describe her lack of progress in the most gentle way she can, but I know better. The longer she sleeps, the less likely she is to wake. Devastation doesn't even begin to describe my grief. The reality that Ana may never open her eyes seeps into my soul like the blackest ink. It is poison.

Dad visits every morning and evening and makes me leave Ana to clean myself up, to change clothes at least once a day. I don't see the point, I'm not here to impress anyone, and I don't believe I smell. He visits for a while, mentioning things like DNR orders and living wills. I tune him out. Taylor takes orders from him in my stead; we haven't said more than five words to one another in days. Mia brings food and stays until I eat, though what she offers goes down like wood pulp. Next to me, Ana wastes away on a cocktail of intravenous fluids. Ros brought some paperwork by for my signature, but I said something harsh and she hasn't returned.

The nurses see fit to quarrel with me daily over Ana's treatment. Something about an electrode current therapy, which in layman's terms to me meant electric shocks. How barbaric, and this is supposed to be a hospital, where people go to heal from things like car accidents. My mother had to leave a patient to explain the procedure to me and to convince me to let the staff do their jobs. My behavior has supposedly grown increasingly atrocious, but I really don't care.

I can feel Ana slipping away. John stops by every afternoon, but for the first time as my therapist, he's of no help. I think my father is paying him to be sympathetic. Elliott and Kate took Teddy to stay with them after I insisted Gail not bring him by the hospital anymore. I hate myself for whatever damage this will do to my relationship with my son, and I miss him terribly, but it's what's
best for him.

The swelling in Ana's brain subsided in the third week, and they attempted to end her coma. Ana stubbornly refused. I was told that it isn't unheard of considering the extent of the trauma she sustained. She now sleeps of her own free will. I hate and I love and I hate how stubborn she can be.

I rest against Ana's mattress, her uninjured hand in mine. I talk to her, read to her, though I'm sure she can't hear me. I have to do something... anything.

"Ana, baby... please, please come back to me," I whisper, pressing kisses to her fingers. "I miss you. I need you. I love you."

And on the thirtieth day, her fingers moved.

I startled. Perhaps it was my imagination. I brushed her knuckles lightly with my thumb, and waited, what seemed like forever. And she twitched again. An alarm goes off, one of her machines. An orange light on the ventilator... Christ, no! I furiously punch the alert button on the wall. Seconds later, two nurses scurry in.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Grey. Ana's just trying to breathe. The ventilator doesn't like it when patients try to breathe on their own," she says, almost cheerfully. Nurse Two... I never bothered to learn their names... is disconnecting the breathing tube, and I see Ana's fingers move again, curling into her palm.

Oh God, it's happening. My mind sails into a joyous, if ever possible, panic mode. She's actually waking up... what do I say? What do I tell her? Will she hate me? Why didn't I prepare what I'd say to her? I chastise myself for this most selfish stream of consciousness. She's waking up, that's what matters. That's all that matters.

Nurse One moves down to check the chart, and I pick up Ana's fisted hand. "Baby, I'm here," I say to her.

"Please stand aside, Mr. Grey," Nurse One bustles back over to Ana, and I practically leap away as she reaches toward my chest to urge me out of the way. I haven't reacted quite that violently to a stranger's attempted contact in years. They're checking her pulse, checking everything, when Dr. Sluder strides in.

"Trying to wake up today, are we, Mrs. Grey?" she drawls, briefly consulting the chart Two is holding up for her and then feeling Ana's pulse. "What's happening?" I demand.

"Your wife is regaining consciousness, Mr. Grey," she says without looking at me. "Will you draw the shades for me, please." This is not a question.

"Why?"

Dr. Sluder is scurrying around, adjusting machines and checking Ana's reflexes. "Waking coma patients don't like bright lights, Mr. Grey. Please, the shades."

Stunned, I do as I am told. I move cautiously toward the bed, then stop about halfway. I am disembodied with uncertainty.

"Come on, darlin'," Dr. Sluder encourages, her fingers gently prodding my wife's cheeks.
Ana's eyelashes flutter. I'm dimly aware that I'm holding my breath, and in the time it takes to remember how to exhale, she's blinking slowly, sleepily.

"Good to see you, Ana," Dr. Sluder says to her. "You're in the hospital. You were in an accident. There's a tube in your mouth that was helping you breathe, we'll take it out in a minute. If you understand, can you give my hand a squeeze?" She seems satisfied with Ana's minimal response and has a third nurse, who has exchanged places with Nurse Two, remove tape from Ana's face.

"When you're ready, take a deep breath and then blow out, Ana." Dr. Sluder waits as Ana's chest rises, and then gently pulls the tube. Ana's cough is dry and weak. I'm glued to the spot, heart pounding, as Nurse One offers Ana water through a straw.

"Mr. Grey, come on over," Dr. Sluder waves toward my recently vacated bedside seat. Ana is so weak, so groggy, she doesn't... or can't... turn her head to look for me. I wonder sadly when she'll notice the flatness of her abdomen, and hear myself choke back a sob.

Ana closes her eyes, breathing somewhat laboredly, but the slow opening and closing of her pale, chapped lips tells me she's still awake.

Dr. Sluder and Nurse Three exchange acronyms and statistics for a minute, and then she tells me she'll be right back.

"Mrs. Grey, I'm going to make you a little more comfortable, all right?" Nurse One tells Ana. I see her name badge, Sharon. Anyone who makes my wife comfortable is worth remembering.

"Who..." Ana rasps, eyes opening, barely slits.

"What's that, Mrs. Grey?"

"Who's... Mrs. Grey..." Ana whispers.

The air leaves my lungs.

"That's you, honey," Nurse Sharon's cheerful demeanor replaced with instantaneous and dutiful concern. Her eyes flit to mine, gauging my reaction, or lack thereof.

What the fuck just happened?

"Ana, baby..." I say softly, leaning in toward her, picking up her good hand.

Her eyes take me in, brow furrowing a bit, lips parted in a small, confused 'O'. She pulls her hand from mine.

My heart plummets.

"Mr. Grey, may I see you outside?"

My head turns mechanically. Dr. Sluder's hand is extended toward me. It appears she's been back long enough to assess the situation. I turn back to Ana. Her eyes... is that, no... fear? I rise slowly, swallowing the rising sawdust from whatever Mia has fed me this morning and back out from the room. Ana's eyes are still locked with mine, and then she looks away. Nurse Sharon adjusts her pillows. I can't hear what she tells Ana, but she looks frightened. My Ana...

"Memory loss was always a possibility, Mr. Grey," Dr. Sluder is telling me, but my eyes refocus on the form of my mother jogging toward me up the hall.
"Mom... she's..."

"Awake?" my mother interrupts. "Yes, Taylor just paged me."

"No, listen... Mom, she's, she's..." I can't form the words. I don't want to. I can't accept it. I'll fall apart again. I've done that enough in the last thirty days to last ten lifetimes. I'm Christian Grey, CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation, I. Do. Not. Fucking. Lose. It. I clench my jaw, steeling my soul. "She doesn't know me."

My effort holds for a moment suspended in time, but in the end, it's worthless. And again, in as many weeks, my world comes crashing down.
Chapter 3

~ ANA ~

I was supposed to have a midterm today. I was supposed to get up, fight with Kate over who ate the last of the cereal and should go to the market, and then I was supposed to go to class, write a brilliant essay, meet with my academic advisor, and then come home in time to get ready for 'Merlot and a Movie' at the arts center. Jose's been excited about it all week. Now I have doctors hovering all around, asking me what day it is, what my name is, to follow the flash of a penlight when all it does is hurt my eyes. Why won't they tell me what's going on? My head hurts.
"I want my Dad."

My voice sounds awful. The one in pink scrubs, with 'Sharon' embroidered on the breast pocket, nods and walks away.

"Ana?" This doctor has light blue scrubs and sandy blonde hair. She looks kindly at me. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired... and confused," I whisper. Whispering is good, it hides the fact that my voice sounds so terrible.

"Are you feeling any pain?" she takes my left hand... ugh, what happened to my right arm? I'm never going to get any writing done with this thing. And it does hurt a bit, I realize. So does my pounding head.

"My arm hurts... my head a little more."

She nods, readjusting a bag of fluids dangling above me. The relief is almost instantaneous. My eyes roll back before closing.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Whatever you need, we'll see that you get it," she tells me. "Can we talk for a bit?"

I open my eyes, and she's seated herself next to me. Where the copper-haired angel was... why was he so sad?

"Ana, do I look at all familiar?"

My eyes are still adjusting, but I'm pretty sure I've never seen her before. It feels... wrong, to let her down.

"I'm sorry," I say.

She nods, kindly, but looks saddened. "That's all right, dear. I'm Dr. Trevelyan, but you can call me Grace. Would you mind telling me the last thing you remember?"

I think, hard. It sends my thoughts out of focus, like the second-guessing I feel on multiple-choice tests. I hate those. "Um... I remember I'm supposed to have midterms today. Can I go soon? I need to make sure my professors know I'm not skipping class. I'm graduating in a couple months." I swallow, my throat now dry from the exertion of forced speech. Grace looks at me, sadly.
"Ana, you don't have to worry about that, all right?" she reassures me. I'm not the best at reading people, but I know when someone's holding back. *What is it?*

I look toward the cup of water at the side table. Dr. Grace expertly understands and retrieves the cup, bringing the straw to my lips. The water tastes stale and antiseptic, but it's thoroughly quenching. "We'll have something better brought to you soon, when your specialist clears you."

"Um... does my Dad know? He's my emergency contact. He lives in Montesano." I just want my Daddy. I need a familiar face. My face itches, and my arm is too weak for me to lift my hand to scratch. It's terribly uncomfortable.

Dr. Grace must sense my unease. "Your parents are both on their way up, they should be here in ten minutes." she promises.

*Mom too? How did she get here so fast? Unless... oh no. My bottom lip quivers. "How long did I sleep?"

"About a month," she tells me, her voice full of sympathy. "We're all very happy to see you awake, Ana. You sustained a terrible head injury, and we weren't sure you'd come back to us."

*A month? Is she serious? Oh... graduation is so not happening now. I want to cry, but I don't think my body has the strength. "Why is it so hard to move?"

"Your muscles are in a state of pre-atrophy," she explains. "You didn't use them for a long time, so it's going to take a bit of therapy to get you back to where you were before." There's still something she's not telling me.

"There's more... isn't there," I ask. I don't want to know, but I need to know. But I don't want to. Shit, I'm scared. It must show on my face, because Dr. Grace picks up my hand again. I swallow, hard.

"Some time has passed from what you last remember. Quite a lot more than a month, actually," she explains, speaking slowly, carefully. "The head injury you sustained seems to have caused some memory loss. It's called retrograde amnesia, and it's incomplete, meaning you respond to your name and remember specific details, but there seems to be a period of about three years that you're missing."

*What? I gasp, and my chest heaves in a fit of coughing. "You're kidding, right?"* I say when I've recovered. I'm suddenly very tired, the spasms having drained all of my energy.

"Believe me, I wish we were having a very different conversation right now," she says knowingly. I don't have much left in me, but I need to know something while I can still keep my eyes open. "The nurse... she called me Mrs. Grey..."

Dr. Grace nods. "That's because it's your name. Anastasia Rose Grey. You married my son, Christian."

*What? That's impossible. Who? The copper-haired angel? That can't be... this can't be real. I'm going to wake up and it'll be some sick, twisted dream. It's the stress of exams. Yes, that's it. I can't be married, I've not even passed second base. No, this can't be real. My eyes unfocus, but whether from exhaustion or the overwhelming and unbelievable conversation I've just had, I have no idea. The ceiling spins and goes dark.*
"Can I get you anything, boss?"

Taylor has been standing over me for the last half hour. I'm not sure why. Probably because I pay him to, but I don't need a babysitter. "No," I swallow. But I feel something... remorse? This isn't his fault. I'm being an ass. I've been impossible, to everyone. Why is my sense of decorum rearing its fucking head now? "I'm sorry, Taylor. I know you're just doing your job."

He nods. "Sir."

My mother cautiously exits Ana's room. She folds her arms. "Well, she's back among the living, that's the important thing."

I nod to Taylor, and he moves away, but keeps within sight. "Tell me."

"She thinks she's supposed to take her midterms today. Senior year."

I squeeze my eyes shut, the blood rushes to my ears again. "Christ, she's lost it all." I want to hit something, put my fist through a wall. I've done worse. "How did this happen? Why these memories? Why not her whole life? Why not just the last couple of months? Why did she have to lose me?"

Mom shakes her head at me. "She's lost Ted, too."

Of course. And our daughter. I've got to be the most self-centered bastard in the universe. I swallow, hard. "I know, Mom. I just..."

"Oh Christian," she carefully wraps her arms around me. It's uncomfortable, but I bear it. This is my mother, I remind myself. She must feel my hesitation, because she releases me.

"I'm sorry, Mom... I'm so worked up."

"Don't apologize, darling. We all are."

"This is so..." I shake my head. "Hard."

"I know." She settles for clasping my hand. "We're going to take things slow. You should go home, get some sleep. See Teddy. Ana needs to rest."

"No... I need to stay. She needs me, whether she knows it or not. I can't leave her." I can't decide whether I sound desperate or unreasonable.

"You haven't seen your son in nearly three weeks. Go." She shoots a look at Taylor and physically walks me down the hall toward the elevator, continuing to talk at me. "I'm staying. She's familiar with me now. Her parents are on their way up, when she wakes again they'll be able to reassure her."

I feel the need to dig my heels in, but my mother's grip on my arm is much more firm than I ever recall. "But she'll think I don't care..."
"Nonsense, Christian. You're exhausted. Pick up Teddy, then get eight hours sleep, that's an order. I don't want to see you here before seven a.m."

I open my mouth to argue, then think better of it. I've gone fucking soft. I stop as she jabs the call button, and the doors open. "You'll call if anything happens. No matter the time."

"Of course. I promise." And she pushes me into the elevator. Taylor follows.

~oOo~

My son is focused intensely on his orange scribble. "Ted?" I call him, hoping offhandedly that it's a nontoxic crayon he's holding.

"Daddy!" he drops the crayon and launches himself at me. I scoop my boy up into my arms and swing him round, clutching him to my chest. I breathe in his hair, his baby scent so sweet and familiar and soothing.

"Did you miss Daddy?" I ask as enthusiastically as I can manage.

"No more bi-ness tips," my son insists in his two-year-old lisp. I flash a halfhearted glare at his aunt. I suppose it was a lie as the best form of defense, but evading the question may have been better, like we've been doing when he asks for Ana.

"Sorry," she mouths, balancing my niece, Ava, on her hip.

I nod. "Thank you, for looking after him. It means a great deal."

"We wouldn't have it any other way." Kate's very fond of Ted. "Your mom called to tell us the news. So... she's...?" Kate raises her eyebrows.

I return my attention to my son. "Teddy, go find Mr. Leo so he can come home with us," I set him down and his little toddler legs propel him from the room.

Kate waits patiently. I didn't know she had it in her, but she's mellowed quite a bit since becoming a mother; she's far less unbearable.

"She's... forgotten some things." I manage.

"Forgotten?" Kate asks, alarmed. "Like what... her shoe size? Her name? Is she okay?"

I sigh. "She thinks she's still in college."

Kate's mouth drops open. "Oh..."

I run my hand through my hair. "Yeah." I shake my head. I won't fall apart in front of Kate. I sniff, raising my eyes to the vaulted ceiling. "She didn't recognize me."

"Oh, God."

I nod. A silence stretches between us.

"It'll come back to her, Christian," Kate says, shaking her head. "She has to remember. You're far too memorable to forget for long." Kate, always resorting to sharp jokes to lighten the mood.

I scoff. "I hope you're right. For once."
"Daddy, go home now?" Ted has a raggedy, stuffed lion clutched under one arm and a soggy cookie in his free hand.

"Yes, we're going home. Say thank you to Auntie Kate."

Ted blows her a kiss with his cookie hand, and crumbs fly. I offer a smirk of apology.

~oOo~

"...good night stars, good night air. Good night noises everywhere." I close the book; my son is fast asleep. Leaning down, I press my lips to his forehead. "Good night, baby boy. I love you."

I leave his door cracked, night light on. He should be fine, but just in case, I'd set the baby monitor for good measure.

The open door across the hall causes me to falter. I quickly steel myself and pull that door closed before I see enough of the lilac-and-sage quilt draped over Ana's rocking chair. I'll have Gail deal with packing up those items tomorrow. We won't be needing them now.

My bed looms before me. My stomach tightens. I'm exhausted, but unprepared. The place I lay my head has never looked so unwelcome before. The last time I was here, the last time I truly slept, Ana was here. She was with me, we were together. She loved me then. We hadn't quarreled in a long while. We were having a daughter. Things were good. Really good. And now...

I turn on my heel, returning the way I came. My son, sprawled out near the edge of his big-boy-bed, looks damn peaceful, and I envy him. My eyes droop of their own accord, and I barely make it over the safety railing before passing out. I'm barely aware of my son curling up against my chest.

~oOo~

My phone angrily, albeit silently, wakes me. Shit. It's wedged painfully between my hipbone and the firm mattress of my son's sailboat-themed bed. Ted is still curled against me. Shit. I roll back slightly, my son's body twitching at the movement, and retrieve the offender. Caller ID flashes a picture of my mother. Shit.

"What's wrong?" I whisper harshly, attempting to extricate myself from the bed, pulling the covers over Ted and tiptoeing from the room. The door closes with a soft 'click'.

"Nothing at all, I was about to ask you the same." My mother sounds anxious.

"What do you mean?"

"It's... it's seven thirty." Shit. "Ted and I, we uh... had a late night," I explain, rubbing my face. "How's Ana?"

"She had a good night. She woke for a while, and Ray and Carla got to talk with her. She's pretty upset, which is understandable, but they've explained some general things to her, nothing about the children, of course. It might be better to let her gradually absorb things."

I sigh. "Yes, that's probably be best."

My mother pauses. This woman who raised me, cared for me, saved my life... I've not treated her so badly, not since I was a teenager... no, not even then. I've been horrendous to everyone, and she's been there for me, for Ana, more than the rest, and hardly looks the worse for it. I'm about to
apologize when I hear her voice again. "She's asked to see you."

I feel the blood drain from my face.

"She still doesn't remember, if that's what you're trying to work out. I can hear your gears spinning, dear."

I sigh again. "You know me far too well, Mom."

"Sometimes," she acknowledges. "She only wants to re-familiarize herself with her life. Where most others would be in perpetual denial, she's chosen to face this head-on. You married a strong woman, Christian."

"I did." The thought reaffirms my commitment. "I'll be there soon."

"I love you, darling."

"You too, Mom."

~oOo~

The mirror over our vanity is on my shit list at the moment. I've never found myself particularly attractive, not the way many women do, but I've steadfastly prided myself on maintaining my appearance. The figure looking back at me when I entered the bathroom was grandly repellent. I'd not realized how utterly the events of the past month had affected my appearance.

Twenty minutes later I'm showered, shaved and dressed, teeth clean and hair tousled in a presentable manner. I had to tighten my belt a notch, but things being what they are, it could be worse.

Teddy isn't in his room. A moment of panic stabs my gut, but relief takes over when I see that Gail has him on the deck, they're sharing waffles at the picnic table. I retrieve a yogurt from the fridge and join them; some vitamin D might do us all some good.

"Good morning, Teddy," I kiss the top of his head and sit across from him. His mouth is stuffed with a sticky mixture of waffle and blackberry jam. "Good morning, Gail."

"Good morning, Mr. Grey," Gail flashes a kind smile. "Your mother called me yesterday evening with the news. I hope you're doing all right."

I nod, swallowing a spoonful of yogurt. For the first time in as long as I can remember, my food has flavor. "As well as can be expected." I pause, trying to remember. "It's Thursday, isn't it?"

"It is." She's making faces at my son. I nod, spooning more yogurt. It's delicious, actually. Scraping the remnants of the crushed fruit from the bottom, I scoop it into my mouth and stand.

"I need to get back. I'll be home this evening."

"Would you like anything in particular for dinner?"

I kiss my son's head again. His waffles are far too interesting and delicious to pay his father any mind. "I'll leave that for you and my son to discuss."

"Six thirty?"

"That's fine." I hesitate on the threshold. "Gail... I wanted to apologize for my recent behavior. You
should know that I appreciate everything you've done for us. I hope you can forgive my lapse."

Gail looks floored. It's rare that I speak out-of-character to the staff, and I normally wouldn't, but this is Gail. And furthermore, I need to start setting an example for my son, even if I think he's too young to understand. Ana would expect it of me.

"There's nothing to forgive, Mr. Grey," her eyes are sincere, understanding. "What should I say if he asks?" she cocks her head toward Ted.

"The same as before." I consider this, and come to the same conclusion. Our son is only two. The difference between 'Mommy isn't here right now' and 'Mommy isn't here right now' is negligible at his age, but I can't get his hopes up of seeing her when she isn't even aware of his existence. That reunion would shatter them both, I fear. He hasn't asked once since I picked him up yesterday, and I'm not sure whether to be relieved or worried. I settle for an unhealthy dose of both.

~oOo~

My knuckles rap lightly on the heavy door.

Her liquid blue eyes, unfocused and turned toward the window, snap to my face at the sudden noise.

"May I come in?"

Her lips part, breathing quickens. She looks so weak, and yet she responds to me, I think. Her casted arm is slung across her belly, and the other lies limply at her side. She's clean and dressed in soft cotton pajamas. The bandages have been removed from her head, and her hair has been brushed and braided over one shoulder. The irony isn't lost on me.

I take her silence as an affirmative and enter cautiously. She watches my every move.

"I've brought you breakfast," I say, holding up her thermal lunch tote. My mother said you haven't been hungry, but I thought you'd like your favorite." I've reached her bedside and pull out a cup of greek yogurt. I suspect the reason she hasn't eaten is that she's having trouble lifting her non-dominant hand to feed herself, even if it's broth through a straw, and is too proud to admit it.

"No, thank you," she declines softly.

I gulp, regrouping my tactics. She's going to be difficult. I settle myself in the overwhelmingly familiar bedside chair and pull her rolling table between us, setting the yogurt on it and pull out a spoon I took from our kitchen. "Ana, I have to insist," I tell her gently. "You're far too light for my liking."

I'm not sure if it's the sincerity of my knitted eyebrows or the audible grumble that emanates on cue from behind her cast, but she nods once. I peel back the foil cover. I have to consciously stop myself from blending the contents; my Ana eats hers from the top down. Dr. Sluder just finished telling me that sometimes the slightest action or familiar process can stir a locked memory, and I have nothing to lose. Ana's eyes continue to grip onto me as I bring the spoon to her lips.

"It's good to see you eat," I tell her, remembering a similar conversation in a room not too far from this one. We continue in silence. I study the deep purple-gray rims beneath her eyes, the hollowness of her cheeks, the pallid tint of her skin. The few, light freckles dusting her nose and cheeks stand out in stark contrast.

"No more... please," she resists. The cup is only half empty, barely breaking through the barrier
between yogurt and fruit. I want to argue, but think better of it, setting down the spoon and pushing the table aside.

"Thank you," she whispers. She looks exhausted.

"Thank you, for letting me," I tell her.

A long silence stretches through the room. It's not uncomfortable exactly, just unfamiliar. I concentrate on the sound of her light breathing, and she keeps watching me. Looking for what, I don't know.

"Can I do anything? Bring you anything?" I offer.

She sighs, frowning. The 'v' between her eyebrows tempts me, oh what I'd give to kiss her there, for her to let me. I must resist; I refuse to frighten her.

"Tell me something," she decides.

The corners of my mouth twitch upward. She loves it when I tell her stories. "What would you like me to tell you?"

And in the following instant, she captures her bottom lip in her teeth. I inhale sharply. No. I mustn't react... it isn't appropriate. I close my eyes briefly, willing the autonomic, licentious reaction to cease. When my eyes open, Ana is still staring at me, but she looks frightened. Shit.
I can't imagine what I did.

I don't think he can bear to look at me. I haven't had the chance to look in a mirror yet, but Dad insisted I looked okay, so I can't imagine why he's... is he counting?

The copper-haired angel, my... husband, or so they tell me... his lips tremble with numbers. Nine... Ten... Eleven... oh no, he must be really angry to go past ten. And the way he's been looking at me since he arrived, almost... predatory.

There it is again, that wolfish gaze. But it's gentled a bit. Perhaps his counting worked.

"I'm sorry..." my voice is small.

He looks confused. "Whatever for?"

I gulp reflexively. "What I did to make you count past ten," I grasp. I really have no idea why I'm apologizing. And my voice still sounds awful.

"No, baby, I'm not angry, you misunderstood." Now he's uncomfortable. "You... biting your lip, it does things to me. Not your fault at all." His cheeks flush with embarrassment.

Oh my.

"So... what would you like me to tell you?" he continues.

I have no idea. My mind is supposedly empty, yet full of questions, none of which feel appropriate to ask. I have no experience with romantic relationships, and I can't imagine what I did to deserve this one. I must look confused, and that predatory gaze is back.

"Why do you look at me like that?" I venture.

"Like what?"

Like that.

"Like you want to... devour me." If I had the strength to shudder, I would have on the word 'devour'.

"Do I?" He looks around, as though the answer is written on the walls somewhere. "I suppose it's because... I love my wife. I want very badly to hold her hand, to help her through this." He hesitates, and his expression darkens. "But she doesn't know me. Every move I make dictates whether she'll learn to trust me again, and whether she'll ever remember... us."

Wow, we've cut to the quick. And his face has dropped from predatory to contritely sincere and sad in a millisecond. I'm not sure what makes me do it, but with what little muscle control I have, I push my left arm out from where it rests against my side, turning my palm up toward him. I can't lift it.
His gray eyes glitter, and he tentatively reaches out, brushing my palm with his fingers. He searches my face for permission, and in an instant my hand is clasped between both of his. His eyes are sincere and thankful.

"We met when your friend Kate fell ill and convinced you to interview me in her stead," he begins. "I took you for coffee; English Breakfast Tea is still your favorite. We chased the dawn together. You stood up to me, challenged me, angered me and loved me. You awakened parts of me I didn't know existed. Marrying you was the best decision I ever made. You're my best friend. And I won't let you go. Not now, not ever."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

"So? How did it go?" My mother stabs her cafeteria salad, waiting.

"I don't think she's sure what to make of me yet." I push the mashed sweet potato around my plate. "She let me hold her hand awhile though." I feel the corner of my mouth turn up in a disbelieving smirk, I'm still not sure whether she did it for her or for me, but I'm nonetheless grateful for that small contact. My expression isn't lost on my mother. Nothing gets past her. Well, almost nothing.

"That's a good sign," she tells me. "When we're done here, I want to introduce you to the physical therapist I'd recommend for her recovery. Have you talked to John yet?"

"Not yet." Mom wants a memory loss specialist to oversee Ana's mental evaluation and begin counseling her. I put my foot down. John's expertise is vast, though not specialized in amnesiac recovery, but he knows Ana, and I trust him. Mom couldn't argue with that. "I'll call him on my way home."

Mom takes a sip of her fluorescently colored and grotesquely artificial energy drink. "How's my grandson?"

"Helping Gail decide what to make for dinner, actually."

"Quite the little man of the house," Mom laughs. "Training him so early, you might be able to retire by the time he's six."

"Oh, I was hoping to have him take over by the time he's four. But there's no hurry."

She smiles at me, the first real smile in... so long. "I'm glad your sense of humor has returned." She reaches across to my hand and grabs it; I'm still holding my fork so it's a bit awkward, like she could be showing me how to feed myself.

"I missed my son."

I sniff. "I missed my wife. Still do, in fact."

"She'll be back. You're too good a catch for her to hide inside her head for long."

"I hope you're right."

~oOo~

Ana is asleep when I return to her room before heading home. Feeling bold, I brush a few stray
hairs from her face and press my lips to her forehead. She stirs, sighs, and drifts back to sleep.

From my jeans pocket, I retrieve something I'd meant to give her earlier, but had forgotten during our conversation. Her bracelet still bears all the original charms, but the ones I'd added when Ted was born and when she revealed she was pregnant with Phoebe, I've removed. They're tucked safely away in her jewelry box, waiting for her when she's ready to know about their significance. I slide her hospital ID band over and carefully clasp the bracelet about her wrist.

~oOo~

"Thank you John. I'll see you tomorrow."

Just enough time for one more call, and then I have all evening with my son.

"Ros, I need to see you in the morning."

"Christian, thank goodness. How's Ana?"

I'd hoped to keep this conversation professional, but then again, I'm dealing with Ros Bailey. She might as well be family at this point, at least where my mother and father are concerned. "She's... recovering."

"Good news. Eight fifteen all right with you?" I suppose she knows me well enough to know when I'm in no mood for pleasantries.

"Fine."

"See you then."

I wonder vaguely who else knows what. I've got to get this mush under control; I'm going fucking soft. Yes, my wife was in a horrible accident. Yes, it's going to take time for our family to return to normal. But I've always kept my personal and professional lives separate. Always, without exception. So why am I suddenly fearful of the questions and sympathetic stares I may receive when I get back to the office? *Get a fucking grip, Grey.*

~oOo~

"Daddy! Daddy!" My son is galloping full speed toward me and crashes into my legs, and I'm barely through the front door. He must have been waiting. I swing him up into my arms.

"How's my favorite son?" I blow raspberries on his cheek, making him giggle like a maniac.

"Welcome home, Sir," Gail greets me from the kitchen alcove table. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Thanks, Gail." I bounce Ted in my arms. "Are you hungry?"

"No!" Ted bellows.

"Teddy," Gail calls from the kitchen. "Tell Daddy what your new word is."

"No."

I raise my eyebrows.

"That's it. In all its contrary glory." Gail sets out plates and a rather hefty bowl of spaghetti. "The little man is the inspiration for tonight's meal. Enjoy," she waves me toward the table.
"It's quite a lot of food," I observe. "Would you care to call Jason over and join us?"

"Are you sure? I don't want us to take away from your time with Teddy," she hesitates.

"I insist. Besides, I fear dinner conversation with the 'No'-monster may be a bit one-sided," I touch noses with my son, and he presses my cheeks with his palms, forcing my lips into a pucker.

"We'll be right over, then."

~oOo~

"What was the inspiration for this, if I might ask?" I ask. It's absolutely delicious; thin spaghetti with a bolognese sauce on the side, but there are also pieces of large, green macaroni noodles mixed into the spaghetti, along with sautéed baby mushroom caps, broccoli and ground bison.

"Well, I called your sister-in-law this morning, and she informed me that waffles and spaghetti were about all the little tyrant has been willing to eat lately," Gail looks fondly at Teddy. "He's been refusing the F-O-R-K, and using F-I-N-G-E-R-S," she spells, something we do to prevent him knowing he's the subject of conversation, as well as to keep him from getting excited over something he can't have yet. He tends to pout. Ana says he looks just like me when he pouts. "Ted, tell Daddy how you picked out the mushrooms and broccoli for dinner," Gail encourages.

When Ted ignores her, she continues in a proud, hushed voice. "He got out his picture books and pointed at rocks and trees. He was very insistent."

"Shhh! No whis-pring!" Ted declares, imperiously.

Ted proves his caretaker a genius, as he deftly plucks a mashed handful of meatball-macaroni-mushroom and shoves it into his mouth. Kate hadn't informed me he was becoming a picky eater. I suppose I can't blame him; I imagined worse behavior in rebellion to his mother's absence. I can see from Gail's and Taylor's expressions that we're all thinking relatively the same thing.

"Your motives and picture-book translations are brilliant and very much appreciated, and dinner's delicious, as always. Thank you, Gail."

"Happy to help, Mr. Grey. I only wish there were more we could do," she clasps Taylor's hand fondly. He nods in agreement.

"You both do more than enough. I don't show nearly the level of appreciation you're due." I file away a mental reminder to have a sizeable bonus added to their compensation packages for the year, well above previous years'.

Taylor retrieves his phone from his pocket. "It's Welch, sir," he hands it to me.

"Excuse me." I rise from the table and move toward the hallway. "Welch."

"Sir, the background checks are done."

"And?"

"Patterson has an underage drinking charge from 1993, and Rhames is in custody proceedings with his ex-wife over their three children. Nothing specific to their occupation, Sir. Shall I email you their files?"

_Has no one ever heard of keeping their record clean? Patterson is out. Rhames... well, he might_
bring up children in front of Ana, and I should be the one to tell her about Teddy. I sigh. My mother insists these are the two best choices for physical therapy in the Seattle area. I make a mental note to phone Rhames in the morning with instructions on my wife's handling. "Yes. And I'll need a copy of Rhames' transcripts, as well as three letters of recommendation. Whatever you can find in the hospital files from when he was hired. Wake people up if you have to."

"Yes, Sir."

I hang up and return to the table. In the two minutes I was away, Ted has made a glorious mess, spreading outward from his placemat and slopping noodles and mush onto the floor. He's frowning and has his arms folded.

"We're a bit T-I-R-E-D this evening," Gail tells me, indicating to my son.

"I think we all are," I acknowledge. "Ted, are you finished?"

"Hmmph," he grumbles, his scowl deepening. I roll my eyes and move to extricate him from his safety chair. "No! Mommy!"

My hands freeze at his sides, and I feel myself go pale. I swallow, ensuring that my voice remains even. "She isn't here right now, Ted. Let's get you into a bath."

"No! No! Nonononono!" Ted squawls. I continue to lift him from his chair, and he kicks out at me, connecting with my ribs before I'm able to pull him to my chest. I wince.

"Sir, I can...."

"Thank you, Gail. I'll handle it."

"Mommy! Nonononono Mommy!" Ted's squawls have turned to red-faced tears as he continues to worm in my grasp.

"She isn't here, Teddy, I'm here," I try to placate him, carrying him into the master bath. I should know better than to think I can placate a tantrum, especially because he's had so few up to now, and when he did, Ana expertly calmed him. God, I wish she were here.

It's rather difficult to carry a screaming child and run a bath at the same time. I manage to get him out of his clothes, not without a great deal of resistance on my son's part, but in doing so, he manages to get as much of his food-smeared fingers on my clothes and exposed skin as he is able. I strip down to my boxers as well and, pulling a crying Ted to my chest, we sit down in the warm water.

"Shh, baby boy. Daddy's here," I soothe him, rubbing his small back. His head drops to my shoulder, tears flowing, but the lashing out ceases. He clings to me as though his life depends on it.

"Muhmuhmuh," his pleas garble. This is utter despair if I've ever heard it.

"I know, sweet boy. I know," I hush him, my heart breaking. "I miss her, too."

Reaching out, I retrieve a folded washcloth and soap, and run it soothingly over my son. He allows me to release him, sniffling and shuddering, resting back against my legs. He watches me. "All better," I tell him, once he's clean.

Ted's face is still splotchy and red, but his expression is one of resigned uncertainty. He reaches out to my hand and pulls the washcloth from me, and I freeze, bewildered, as he clumsily drags it over
my chest. He's washing me, as though he understands. My son is comforting me. The wetness on
my cheeks comes unbidden, unhindered. But I cannot take my eyes from my son. His forehead
creases a bit, and he reaches up, dragging the washcloth over my face. The soapy residue burns
my eyes.

"Aww better," he mirrors me, his voice quivery.

"Thank you," I whisper.

~oOo~

Ted slept like the dead that night. I know, because I took his monitor into the home gym with me. I
set the treadmill incline and ran four miles flat-out, my lungs heaving from lack of exercise. Not a
peep came from Teddy's room. I checked the market trend for the first time in a month, started
filtering through the hundreds of emails I'd neglected, and pored over a few reports. I drifted off for
a while on the living room sofa and was up before first light, grateful for the three-or-so
uninterrupted hours.

I stopped by the hospital briefly to wish Ana good morning, but she was sound asleep. I left her
breakfast with the nurses, said hello to my mother, and returned to the car. Taylor deposited me at
the door to Grey House at precisely eight o'clock. I ignored the mixture of shocked and
sympathetic stares as I bypassed the front desk. Shit. It sours me that people know my personal
business, no matter what little information they possess. The glances followed me from the
elevator and onto the twentieth floor. Andrea's gaze is a touch frightened.

"Is Ros in yet?" I ask her.

"Ms. Bailey is waiting in your office, Sir," her voice trembles a bit.

"Something wrong, Andrea?" My voice remains cool and even.

"N-no, Sir."

"Good. Call the board, I want them assembled tomorrow at nine."

"Yes, Sir."

Ros rises gracefully from the leather couch. Even she appears unsure of me. "Mr. Grey." And so
formal as well. She should know better... but then, the last time we spoke, I shouted at her.

"Ros, drop the formality, please." I move around the center table and motion for her to sit, and I
settle myself adjacent to her. I take a breath. "First, allow me to apologize for my behavior when
we last spoke. Things have been... difficult."

"I understand." And I know she does, Ros's sympathetic nature is one of the many reasons I
partnered with her; she sees a lot of aspects to the business that my colder scrutiny misses. Her
expression tells me that she wants to know more, but maintains a respectful distance.

"I appreciate you stepping up," I continue. "I hope I can count on you to continue. I intend to
slowly transition back into the office, but I ultimately need to focus on my wife's recovery. You
understand."

She nods.

I test the waters. "Incidentally, what does the staff know of the situation?"
"Only what was reported in the papers about the accident. I issued a memo to all departments insisting that the circumstance not be discussed and that you not be disturbed." Ros takes a long breath and lowers her eyes. "How is Ana?"

I swallow. I might as well tell her. "She lost the baby."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. So am I."

"Can I do anything?"

I sigh. "Just your job. I need to know I can count on you."

"Of course."

I get the rundown on our current projects, successes and failures. The latter are few. In and likely due to my absence, we let the Argyle deal slip away, but I'm not prepared to dwell on could-haves. She's picked up a few accounts that I hadn't given a fair amount of thought to, and her quick action more than made up for the loss. We move onto other potentials, and I'm relieved at how well Ros has managed in spite of my sudden hiatus, but I can't help but feel alien in my own office.

Two and a half hours later, I've had about all the business I can stand. My thoughts are everywhere but here, and I'm late meeting Flynn at the hospital. "Nine o'clock," I remind Ros and excuse myself.

"Sir, I have Dr. Trevelyan for you," Andrea holds out my cell phone. My stomach clenches.

"What's wrong?"

"Ana's all right, she's just upset," I hear my mother's digitized voice. "She's not very happy that John is here."

"I'm on my way. Has she eaten?"

"Yes, she woke up right after you left. I have a few patients to see before noon so I'm headed over to the practice, but I'll check in after that. Ray is sitting with her now."

"Thank you, Mom."

~oOo~

Ana shoots me a positively livid glare when I enter. Ray plants a kiss on her cheek and walks past me. "Good luck with that," he mutters.

She speaks slowly, but the ire in her voice is palpable. "When was anyone going to mention that memory loss warranted a psychological evaluation?"

Oh, her smart mouth.

"Was this your idea?" she continues.

"Yes, and no." Her jaw drops. I continue, trying to keep my voice soft. "Please, you misunderstand. The hospital's procedure is to do a formal evaluation to assess a plan for your recovery and to secure your release. It's rather impersonal, and Dr. Flynn is a friend. I asked him to talk to you because it would satisfy the requirement, and incidentally, John is familiar with you, with us. He
may be able to help."

"I'm not crazy."

"No one thinks that." I drop into the chair next to her, shaking my head to drive the point home.

She's silent for a moment. "You could have told me."

"I was going to this morning, but you were still asleep. I didn't have the heart to wake you. I intended to be here when he arrived, and I'm sorry that I wasn't."

She seems to accept this, but is still distant. "I want to know when decisions are being made about me. I can't help that I can't remember, but I'm not a child. You want me to trust you... that's not working for me right now."

"I know. I'm sorry." Oh, I itch to hold her hand, but I fear she would be quite put out. She looks as though she's still not sure about me, but the anger has been exchanged for irritation. I think she's a little smug that she's 'gotten me back' for keeping that from her.

"Fine. I'll meet him."

"I'm glad." Oh, fuck it. I reach out and give her good hand a squeeze. She's still wearing the bracelet, but hasn't mentioned it. Perhaps she's upset about that, too, but as it's still there, I leave it be. I release her before she has a chance to pull away and nod toward the door.

"Ana, this is Dr. John Flynn," I say, as Flynn steps inside.

"Thank you, Christian. I think we'll get along fine." Flynn's trademark benign smile is directed at Ana, and that's my cue.

I rise from the chair. "I'm going to meet with your physical therapist and see the facility; if you'd like, I'll introduce you this afternoon."

Ana sighs. "Whatever."

I nod, deciding to stalk out before my own anger bubbles over.
I can't believe he's making me do this. "So... what do I have to tell you to get this over with?"

Dr. Flynn chuckles. "Whatever you'd like. As far as the hospital is concerned, you're clear."

"Then why do I have to do this?"

"Because Christian asked me to. He cares so deeply for you, Ana."

I swallow. *Yeah, he supposedly cares, but he does everything behind the scenes and is rarely around.*

"Care to voice what you're thinking about?"

"You're from Britain, aren't you?" I deflect.

"That's correct."

"So... why are you in Seattle?"

"My wife is from here."

I gulp. I've got nothing else.

"Shall we get back on track?"

I sigh. "I suppose."

"You're angry."

Damn right I am. "And you're an overpaid charlatan."

I don't have time to feel guilty over my acidic outburst because Flynn suddenly laughs.

"What?"

"You've labeled me as such on more than one occasion."

This is news to me. "I don't remember that."

Flynn tames his expression, but still looks mildly entertained. "That's quite all right."

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Though you've now actually made my day."

"Don't tell Christian."

"Everything you tell me is in confidence, Ana."
"I have a feeling Christian won't like that."

"He rarely does. But the fact that you've surmised this speaks volumes; he's more familiar to you than you're willing to admit."

"Why does he make me so mad?"

"Because the two of you are very passionate about one another." He pauses, shifting in the chair. "Let me ask you this. What do you hope to get out of talking with me, should you wish to continue after today?"

"I want my life back," I say immediately.

"In what way?"

I'm not sure how he senses how torn I am, but maybe he's not the quack I pegged him to be. "I guess... well part of me wants to go back to college and forget all this craziness, call the last three years a loss. But I have a feeling that would disappoint a lot of people. This life, it really isn't mine. I don't feel like I belong in it."

"So, you're more worried about what everyone thinks of you."

"I guess I didn't word that very nicely."

"Regardless, it's how you feel, and under the circumstances, it's understandable. If I may attempt to summarize, you're feeling pressured into a life that you perceive isn't yours, and it would be easier to take the more familiar path. Does that sound right?"

"Just about."

"Well, that's a good place to begin."

"So, let's begin."

"All right, then." Flynn pulls his feet up into the chair and sits cross-legged. It's childlike and unexpectedly reassuring. "Can you tell me about the last events you remember before waking up here?"

"Why would they matter?"

"Sometimes the connection between similar events can cause the mind to function in unexpected ways, and it could explain why your mind chose to black out that time period. I can't say for certain why your mind chose to block out the time frame that it did, but it's like that particular file drawer was turned upside down and dropped through a shredder. It's all still there, just in mismatched pieces."

"Well, what about Christian? Supposedly I met him right after the last thing I remember, so could he be it?"

"Possibly. You took your midterms in March?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't meet Christian until May."

"I... oh."
Flynn smiles kindly. "Sorry, we're all trying to play catch-up. You don't know what happened since, we're fuzzy on what happened before. Let's try to meet in the middle, hmm?"

I swallow. So this might not have to do with Christian. But I'm still so mad, I want to blame him for something.

"Something you want to voice?"

*How does he know?* "I'm just mad."

"At who or what?"

"Everything," *Christian.* "Everyone." *Christian.* "I don't know. I just want to be mad." *And I hate that you're trying to make me admit it."

"Is it confusing?"

"What?"

"The inner monologue."

My jaw drops. "I hate that you might know what you're doing."

"Sometimes I do. It's a matter of reading body language."

"But I can hardly move my body, what's there to see?" I challenge.

"Your face is quite expressive," he points out. "Ana, I'm not here to pressure you. If you're not comfortable saying it out loud yet, you don't have to. I'm here to help you get to the roots, and you can decide whether to dig them up, if you'll forgive the gardening pun."

"I'm mad at Christian."

Flynn raises his eyebrows. "Now we're getting somewhere."

> ~ CHRISTIAN ~

"Well?"

"I can't talk about it, Christian. You know that."

"Please, John. She's so angry. I hate it."

"Yes, she is, and understandably so. I can't say more without breaching confidentiality."

"What can I do?"

"Just be there as much as you can, and as be sensitive as you can. Her father told her you'd stayed the entire time she was asleep, and now that she's awake, you haven't been around much."

"You didn't tell her why, I hope."

"Not my place to, Christian. You know that."
I sigh. "Thank you, John. Thursday?"

"I'll be here."

~oOo~

Carla and my mother are sitting with Ana when I return to her room.

"Goodbye, sweetheart. I'll call every day, and you let me know what you need from me, all right?"

"Go, Mom. You'll miss your flight." Oh no, she's upset. And why is Carla leaving? I suddenly feel horrible again. I've barely spoken to Carla or Ray since... since it happened.

"You're leaving?" I practically accost her in the hallway.

Carla nods. "I don't want to, but I've used all the time off I had saved up. Ana actually insisted. She wants things as normal as they can be, and that means I should go home. Besides, I've neglected Bob long enough," she jokes.

"Carla, I'm appalled at my behavior over the last month. I hope I didn't play a part in your decision."

"Not at all, Christian. You've been through the wringer yourself. Have faith, she'll find herself again." She pats my cheek, then draws me in for a sincere hug. "Take care of our girl, all right? My love to Teddy."

"Always."

The look on my mother's face when I approach the doorway again is positively conspiratorial.

"Do I smell plotting?" I joke, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Us? Never," she jokes back.

Ana just watches me warily. If she wants me to walk on eggshells, then I'm prepared to be an Olympic-class eggshell-walker.

"Ana, I know I mentioned it earlier, but is it still okay if I introduce you to the physical therapist I was telling you about? He's free in about twenty minutes, and it's an excuse to break you out of jail for a bit."

Ana furrows her eyebrows. I can tell the thought of escape is tempting, but that she's considering declining just to spite me. "Sure. Why not."

~oOo~

Neil Rhames is ruggedly athletic, but with a mild manner and a gentleness I would never have detected had I not took the time before meeting him to covertly watch him with one of his younger patients. Still, it's going to take a miracle for me to fully trust him with my wife.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Mrs. Grey. Your husband speaks the world of you." He doesn't move to shake her hand, fully aware she can barely lift it.

Ana blushes. "Please, it's Ana. Christian tells me you're one of the best."

He laughs. "I just love what I do. And if I'm any good at it, that's just a bonus. Why don't we do an
evaluation, see where you are in your recovery?"

I watch them from the bench in the corner. Rhames has Ana manipulate a few objects and then push against him with her good hand and both feet. He's very encouraging and remarkably appropriate. He tests her joint reflexes and reactivity before he unexpectedly calls me over.

"Mr. Grey, if you would, help your wife onto the table."

I'm all too happy to oblige; Ana reluctantly allowed me to lift her from her bed and into the wheelchair earlier, but she didn't exactly radiate warm fuzzies over the experience and doesn't seem any happier at Rhames' request now. However, she doesn't resist. Thankful that there is no longer the IV to contend with, I gently lift her too-light frame, careful that I don't jostle her casted, sling-bound arm, relishing the fleeting contact, and place her on the padded recliner table.

Ana blows out the breath she was holding.

"Comfortable, Ana?" Rhames asks.

"Not uncomfortable," she replies.

Rhames chuckles. "At least you're honest." He turns to me. "Mr. Grey, I'm going to show you a massage technique I'd like you to use after her sessions. What we're going for here is total muscle stimulation, and the usage she regains is going to come with quite a bit of soreness. These techniques will provide her a world of relief."

What? Oh this is such a bad idea.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Grey, it's really quite simple."

_Did I look afraid? Shit. I can't... no, won't... can't allow my body to become reactive. It's far too inappropriate._ My eyes flash to Ana's. She looks rather calm, I expected her to be alarmed at the prospect. _Shit._ I was hoping another angry glare would set my loins to rest. Instead I'm going to have to rely on sheer will. I swallow. "All right?"

She nods, reluctantly.

Rhames dictates a pattern of squeezing and pulling her arm and legs, and then helps Ana sit forward while I run my hands over her back and shoulders. "You're not new to this, are you Mr. Grey?"

"I've taken a class or two," I deflect. _From a certain Mrs. Robinson. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away._ I shrug off the passing thought before it can do any more damage.

"Well you certainly have the hang of it," he compliments. "Ana, would you like to set up a schedule? I can see you every afternoon if you'd like."

Ana looks to me, possibly for approval, and I nod. "That would be fine, thank you."

~oOo~

"How was that?" I ask her, seriously.

"Tolerable."

I nod. I'm going to get one-word answers today. It's nearing three o'clock, and I should be heading
home to our son in a while, but I feel compelled to take John's advice.

Instead of steering toward the elevator, I turn and head down the corridor.

"Where are we going?" she chirps.

"It's a surprise." The corner of my mouth turns up in a smirk. I almost wish she could see it.

I swing her chair around and pull her backward down the ramp. I'm only moderately aware that Taylor and Sawyer are lurking nearby. Ryan is in the doorway, trying to placate one of the nurses who must not have received the memo earlier, the one that says 'Mr. Grey is a major benefactor of this hospital and may take his wife wherever he damn well pleases.'

"Maybe we should go back," Ana sounds nervous.

"Nonsense. It's a beautiful afternoon, and you haven't been outside in a while," I deflect. I push her through the grassy courtyard and over to a shade tree. Turning her chair so she faces the tree, I plop down in front of her, my back to the trunk.

"Is there a point to this?"

I sigh. "I want to spend time with you. I've been neglecting you since you woke up, and I want to make it right." I pull her right foot from the metal rest and drag her sock off, commanding my fingers to push and pull against her heel and arch. "And... I'd like to know why you've been so angry with me. The real reason."

She hesitates. "You really don't have to do that..."

"I do, actually. It elates me to look after you. I should know your needs before you have them."

"That's an impossible goal," she scoffs.

"Is it? I feel you relaxing already." She can't argue with that.

"That's because you're a master manipulator, Mr. Grey."

"And you're very beautiful when you're irate, Mrs. Grey." I smile fondly.

She sighs, hard. I can see the gears turning. My smile widens.

"What?"

"Your wheels are spinning, Anastasia."

"Only because I can't be mad at you for what I was mad at you for earlier, so I'm trying to think of something else."

I barely contain my laughter.

Ana's eyes suddenly dart around. "There are suits watching us."

I look over my shoulder. "Security detail," I tell her, re-socking her right foot and moving onto the other. "Nothing to worry about."

"Why are they watching us?"
I smirk, concentrating on her left foot now. "Because I pay them to."

"What, they're yours?"

"Ours."

"But why?"

"Because, I need you safe," I say, as though it's the simplest concept in the world.

"What are we in danger from?"

"Anything and everything. In my line of work, one can never be too careful."

"But you're just a businessman," she points out.

"Oh, just?" I tease. "Ana, we're very wealthy, you and I. And recognized throughout the community. We have to be careful. There are quite a few unreasonable people out there."

She looks a bit taken-aback by this revelation. I realize I haven't actually mentioned the nature of our wealth to her before... it's difficult to comprehend that she knows nothing of us but what others tell her. She frowns. "You make it sound like there's been danger before."

"There have been... incidents, yes. Nothing for you to worry about."

"My accident?"

"Not one of those incidents." I swallow, not knowing what else to say.

"Then what kind of... incidents?"

I draw a deep breath. I was hoping we wouldn't go here. I can't outright lie to her; she'll hate me later. "Threats, and attempts to make good on threats have been made in the past. Usually pertaining to economic or environmental interests. A few personal as well. I try to stay out of politics wherever possible."

"Why? Politics might suit you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Might I remind you of your powers of manipulation? Exhibit A, my right foot. Exhibit B, my left."

I laugh. "Good point, well made as ever, Mrs. Grey. I shall endeavor to manipulate you every chance I get."

"Threat or promise?"

*Did she just? Why yes, she did.* My insides stir. I lower my voice seductively. "Both, my lovely wife."

She's suddenly quiet. I inwardly thrust my fist in the air, victorious. I've stumped her. A half-second later, I feel extremely guilty. She looks a tad ashamed of her move in our game. *She has enough to mull over, you shit. Change the subject.*

"So have you decided?" I ask.
"Decided?"
"What you're mad at me about now."
"Not yet. I'll let you know."
"You do that."

Oh, I love my wife, even when she's out of her mind. We're such teenagers sometimes.

~oOo~

"Evening, Gail," I drop my suit jacket over the back of the couch and loosen my tie. "Where's Teddy?"

"In his room, Mr. Grey. He isn't feeling very well today. I've been checking him every ten minutes and I have him on the video monitor in the kitchen."

"Is he sick?" I panic, taking the stairs two at a time and dash toward his bedroom.

"Your mother doesn't think so," Gail calls behind me. "He's just not himself today. She said to bring him in tomorrow if he doesn't work this off by morning."

Ted is absolutely pitiful. He's curled up in the center of his bed, in different pajamas than he had on this morning, fistiing Mr. Leo in one hand and sucking the opposite thumb. My hands are gently upon him in an instant.

"Hey, baby boy," I croon to him. "Daddy's here." His forehead isn't particularly warm and he's a good color, but Gail is right, he isn't himself. "Has he eaten?"

"Waffles and macaroni again," Gail tells me.

"Not exactly balanced but he's eaten worse." I pull Ted into my lap and rock him. He doesn't feel weak, just off. I pat my pockets, then inwardly chastise myself for leaving my Blackberry in the car. "Would you get my mother on the phone, please," I request.

"Sure. Back in a sec." Gail scurries off, returning a moment later with the cordless. "Here he is," she speaks into the receiver, then hands it to me.

"Mom, Teddy's not well."

"I told Gail to bring him in tomorrow if he isn't better by morning, Christian. It sounds like he's just in a funk. He misses Ana. Coming home may have stressed him out."

"You didn't tell me," I accuse her softly, as not to upset the balled up two-year-old in my lap.

"Perhaps I should have, and I apologize. I think he just needs some TLC. If you're really worried, I can stop by after my shift."

"I'd appreciate it. Thanks, Mom." I press the 'end' button.

"I hope I did the right thing," Gail worries.

"You did fine," I say, offering her a half-smile. "You know I worry."

She nods. "Dinner is ready whenever you are."
"Only if you'll share. I have your husband on some errands this evening; you shouldn't have to eat alone," I insist.

~oOo~

Teddy stuffs his mouth with bite-size squares of tenderloin and peas that he's mashed under his fists. I start to believe that my mother is correct from the expression on his face; he's sulking. It's a relief to know that his mood doesn't affect his appetite.

Mom arrives as Gail is clearing the table and checks Teddy over. She can't find anything obviously wrong with him.

"I don't know what to tell you, Christian. He's a healthy little boy, he just wants... well, you know."

"It's not possible right now." I hand Ted over to Gail and she takes him out the rear sliding door. I know they're going stargazing on the deck; it's one of Teddy's favorite things. I hope it'll cheer him up.

"When are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know."

"She needs to know, Christian. She's handling things remarkably well thus far. She'll be even more angry and upset and hurt and God knows what else if you wait much longer. She needs to know she has a child."

"You think I don't know that?" my voice goes up an octave. "It's only been two days. She's only had that long to begin to absorb the time she's lost, and it's so different from the life she had then. And she's been so wary of me, I don't want to push her away or make her feel obligated to this life. Teddy is just a baby. He's my responsibility. I can't let him be hurt if she's cold toward him. If she never remembers, she may hate me, but worse, she may resent him. I can't allow that."

"You always fear the worst, darling," my mother places her hands on my arms. "Try not to be afraid. Trust Ana. You know how strong, capable and understanding she is."

"You know what? I am afraid," my mother places her hands on my arms. "Try not to be afraid. Trust Ana. You know how strong, capable and understanding she is."

"You know what? I am afraid," I feel myself falling apart. What composure I've held since I woke this morning is crumbling. My bottom lip quivers. Shit. "My family is falling apart."

"Oh Christian, no." My mother pulls me into her arms. They aren't the arms I want, the ones I need, but they're familiar and moreover, she needs to hold me. "Tell her tomorrow," she whispers. "Just do it. I'll be with you. I can call Ray to come too, if you want that. Please, just tell her. And she's going to be upset. But she'll get over it, and then she'll want to see him, I just know it. And imagine what that could do for her recovery."

I gulp, sniffling. I feel like a goddamned infant, crying to his mommy. But as usual, she's right. She sees the good in everything, the most likely path, where all I see is darkness and despair. I hold her tightly against me for a moment and then release her, letting her brush the tears from my cheeks.

"Tell me what's in your heart, darling," she encourages me.

I scrub my nose against my sleeve. It's juvenile, but I don't give a damn. "Ana and Ted. They need each other, you're right."

"Good," she places her right palm over my heart, and I find myself reaching up to anchor it there. "I'll go say good night to my grandson, and then I'll see you and Ana tomorrow."
"Good morning." Christian is bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, carrying the insulated bag containing my breakfast. He smiles shyly, and it has to be the most heartbreaking smile I've ever seen.

"Hmm... jury's still out on the "good" part, but it's only seven thirty." I will my arm to lift toward the rolling table, hoping to prove I can do more than push buttons on the television remote. I make it about half way, but he's already pushing it toward me; this angelic-looking man who, in some alternate universe, just happens to be mine. How the heck that happened is still beyond me, and no one has been altogether forthcoming.

He sets the yogurt cup down and peels back the foil. I'm just barely able to get my arm onto the low surface and clumsily grasp the spoon.

"Here, let me..." he starts to take the spoon from me.

"Wait, I need to try," I tell him.

He sighs, indulgent. "All right." He pushes the cup toward me. It takes a while, but I get the hang of this... at least the yogurt is thick, whereas the cheaper stuff would be dripping from my spoon, this stuff has enough substance that I can avoid making a toddler's mess. He watches me intently for a while before speaking again.

"Ana, I'd like to talk to you about something this afternoon, if it's all right. Nothing is wrong, don't worry. There's just something... you need to know." He's brushing lint from his gray dress pants. They incidentally look quite dashing on him.

"Like what?" I say between haphazard spoonfuls.

"I'll... uh, tell you this afternoon. You're going to want backup for this one."

I drop the spoon. It splats to the table. "It's bad, isn't it..."

"No! No... not at all. Just... rather big. You deserve familiar support. Just let me know who you'd like to be here and I'll call them." He wipes up the yogurt mess and helps the spoon back into my hand. I just hold it, dazed.

"Kate," I finally say.

"Just Kate?" He looks bewildered.

"I've put Mom and Dad through plenty in the last month, and I haven't even seen Kate yet. How is she? She married your... brother?"

"That's right. Elliott. Two years ago in May, actually. And she's fine. I saw her briefly on Monday."

"You saw her? What did she say?" Oh God, I sound like such a gossip. Except this time, the gossip is about me.

"She wanted to know how you were, and that she'd come by soon."
"Oh." My next question has me a little afraid. "Are we still... friends?"

"She's your best friend, Ana." He sighs. "If you must know, we all thought it would be best to wait until you asked for specific people. The last thing we want is to overwhelm you, you're overwhelmed enough."

"Well thanks for making those decisions for me." I'm almost livid, but I don't quite have that level of energy, so I settle for pissed off.

"Hey, it's not like that, Ana please..." He pulls the spoon out of my hand, drops it into the nearly-empty yogurt cup and folds my hand between both of his. "I'm used to making sure everything runs smoothly, that everyone's taken care of. I used to be a lot worse, but you've tamed me quite a bit. I want to take care of you. Sometimes I do things in a way you don't always like, but you've come to appreciate the intentions behind them and we work things out, together." He pulls my hand to his lips and softly kisses my fingers. "I'm sorry."

I don't really know how to argue with him. First, he makes sweeping decisions on my behalf, and then he so sweetly justifies himself. I smell a vicious cycle... are things always this way? God I hope not.

I sigh. "I'm sorry, too."

He looks surprised. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

"Everything. My behavior. The fact that you had to make all these decision for me. The fact that you know all about me and I've never even met you before a few days ago, and I don't know what you expect from me." I can feel the hot tears start to well up, and they're making me madder. "I'm just so... angry. At what happened, at the state I'm in, that I don't remember a damn thing, that I can't do anything about it, that I have to learn to be a wife when quite frankly, I don't even have the slightest idea how to even be a girlfriend, seeing as I've never even been that before. My head is throbbing and spinning from the daily deluge of 'oh Ana, by the way...' that I don't know what to think anymore, and I doubt anything would surprise me at this point."

His eyebrows are up. Way up. "Wow."

We're quiet for a moment.

"Can I have some water?" I ask.

"Of course." He practically stumbles out of his seat, and on the way out I see just how those gray pants hang from his hips and... oh wow. *Stop it Ana*, I chide myself. I can't be attracted like that to someone I just barely know, even if he supposedly is my husband. It's just wrong... on so many levels. He strides back in, a bottle of some designer water in one hand. He plunks a straw in it, and holds it out so I can drink from it.

What the hype is over specialty bottled water is so far beyond me... water is water. It all tastes the same, even from the tap.

"Good?" he asks, and I nod, releasing the straw. He leaves the bottle on the table, within easy reach, just for me. "I need to be getting to the office, I have a few meetings to sort through but I'll be back this afternoon. Can I have anything sent over?"

"Have I written an autobiography in the last few months?" Dry humor never suited me, but somehow, I just made it work.
He laughs. It's a beautiful sound. "I'm afraid not. But if reading is your pleasure, I'll have Taylor bring you your iPad. There's a whole library at your disposal."

\textit{An iPad?}

"That would... be great," I offer an appreciative smile, but I must my expression must betray me, because he frowns.

"Is there something else?" he asks gently.

I open and close my mouth twice. \textit{Is} there something else? I don't know. I just don't have anyone to talk to, and he's in and out of here like the wind. I suppose I could talk to my security detail... what was his name, Lucas? No... Luke. Sawyer, I think. But he's so serious. It seems inappropriate.

"What is it?" Christian looks nervous.

"Nothing... I just..." I sigh. \textit{Out with it, Ana.} "It's going to sound immature, but I don't have anyone to talk to. I'm... bored." I look down at my hands.

"Oh. I can stay for a few more minutes, if you'd like," he offers. "And I can call someone to keep you company... you haven't seen Mia yet, have you?"

"Mia?" I search my limited mental Rolodex. Nada.

"My sister. She's your age and you've become quite good friends." He leans in closer. "The two of you can do some conspiring together, she's quite the talker." His grin is back, and it stuns me, a fact not lost on him. "What?"

A weak giggle escapes me. "A healthy dose of overwhelmed might do me some good. And to think I was worried about midterms," I ooze sarcasm.

Christian's expression goes dark for a fraction, but he quickly recovers. He's so practiced at his outward expression; I almost didn't notice the mercurial shift. "That reminds me..." he fishes in his pocket for his Blackberry, presses a few buttons and turns the screen toward me. "Proof of your graduation."

\textit{And proof of... us.} I recognize Kate's gray halter dress hanging off my frame, and I'm clutching a leather-bound folder with my purse... a diploma cover? And there he stands, tall and proud, garbed in a fine suit, arm circled about my waist. He looks flawless, and I... less so. The student center provides a cheery backdrop.

I admire it until the screen darkens, then raise my eyes back to his. "Thank you."

Suddenly, he bends and places a kiss on the top of my head. He doesn't linger, but where he's lightly placed his hand against my cheek, I get the feeling he wants to. He leaves me stunned.

"Laters, baby." And then he's gone.

\textasciitilde{oOo}\textasciitilde{}

"Oh Ana!" A gorgeous, raven-haired young woman practically launches herself at me.

"Mia!" a familiar voice chides.

\textit{Oh, so this is Mia.} I smile politely when she recoils, and Dr. Treveylan... \textit{Grace}, strides in behind her. Grace minimizes her exasperation. "Good morning, Ana, feeling better today?"
"Yes, thank you." I plaster on a brave expression.

"We're here to rescue you!" Mia is bouncing. "I hoped Christian would let me come see you, I love my brother but he just doesn't understand that girls need each other! We have so much to talk about. Want to get some lunch?"

Christian wasn't kidding. "Um, sure?" I default to Grace.

"Let's wait for Kate, then we'll all go to the cafeteria for a bite. Ana, I scheduled your physical therapy in an hour, okay?"

Oh, more therapy. Immobilized, I can hardly argue. "All right."

"Oh my God..."

Kate has appeared in the doorway, and her hand is over her mouth. Her eyes are brimming. I feel a lump form in my throat, and tears rush to my eyes as well. And for the second time in as many minutes, a friend launches herself at me. No, a sister.

"Oh Ana, I've missed you so much," She cries onto my shoulder. "I was so afraid."

"I'm here, Kate. I'm fine, I promise," I try to console her, but I sound about as choked up as she does. It doesn't help that I can't really hug her back. She releases me and looks me over. "So, you really don't remember?"

I shake my head. At least my neck seems to be obeying commands. I wish my good arm would; I think I used it up manipulating the spoon earlier. "I hope you can help me fill in the blanks; all of you, of course." Kate looks a little cheered by this. She wipes her cheeks with her fingers. She looks a teensy bit older, more sophisticated, her hair is cut and colored differently, but she's the same Kate. Still, the difference chills me a little... just one more shred of evidence that this sickly-sweet nightmare is reality, and that my reality is a dream from long ago.

"I'm really glad you're here, Kate," I tell her.

"Me too, sweetie."

Lunch conversation isn't as uncomfortable as I'd initially anticipated. Mia is bubbly, warm, and tremendously caring, a lot like Grace, and proof that nurture can win over nature, as Grace mentioned quite proudly that all three siblings were adopted at a young age. Holy cow, Christian was adopted? I should have guessed; he looks nothing like Grace, and neither does Mia. I have yet to see Mr. Grey; Grace says he's working on an important case this week and sends his best. I wonder about the different last name thing between them; I guess I have to chalk that up to the century we're in. I picked at my tuna salad, just the tuna part anyway, as I'm not dexterous enough for spearing greens, and the fiery inferno below would have to freeze over before I'll let anyone feed me again. My arm is getting really sore, and I haven't even been to therapy yet.

Grace wheels me down to the gym, which incidentally looks like a place kindergarteners go to play. "Come along Mia, let's let Ana and Kate have some time."

Mia looks reluctant, but promises to see me soon and gives me a genuine hug. "Love you, Ana. See you soon."

"See you, and thanks for coming, Mia," I tell her.

"Nice to see you again, Ana." Neil Rhames takes over my chair. "Who's your friend?"
"Dr. Rhames, this is Kate, my best friend. Can she stay?"

"Of course she can," he offers charitably. "It's always helpful to have support in recovery, and it seems you have that in abundance. Shall we get started?"

I'm on the bench again, but this time, he's stuck small, round patches with wires attached all over my good arm and both legs. "Your core is regaining strength appropriately, but your extremities are still confused, wouldn't you say? Your broken arm will have to play catch-up, but that's all right. This won't hurt, but you'll feel a tingling sensation." Rhames pushes a button on the control box, and boy is he right.

I'm definitely sore and even more limp when it's over. Where I couldn't will my muscles to move properly to lift eating utensils, that machine had them practically doing cartwheels. And now, I'm exhausted.

"You okay, Ana?" Kate fluffs my pillows. She looks concerned.

"Yeah. I hope you never go through anything like this. It sucks."

She laughs sympathetically. "I bet. Let me do your hair."

Kate's nimble fingers pull my unruly locks into a French braid down one side of my head, and when she's done, she insists on applying some lip gloss. I just let her; I'm too tired and sore to fight anything she does. She could do a makeover for all I really care, so long as she's happy. She's so good at taking care of people. I told her once that she should join the Peace Corps, but she looked at me like I'd had three heads. She tells me a bit about what she's been doing with her career; the internship after school had opened doors for quite a lot of independent journalism, and she took that and ran with it.

Then she told me about Ava, her daughter, and I'm floored. I can't picture her as a mother, and now she really is one. She whips out her iPhone and starts scrolling through pictures of a happy, blond and blue-eyed little girl. She's just darling. Sitting up, crawling after a toy, smiling up at a man who I can only guess is Elliott, and playing with a slightly older boy with copper curls.

"She's precious, Kate," I say, holding back tears. I've missed so much, it's so unfair. "I can't wait to meet her."

"Oh, she loves her Auntie Ana! She's saving her raspberries just for you, as usual."

"What are you ladies talking about in here?"

It's almost electric, this change in atmosphere. Christian has his suit jacket draped over one arm, the top of his shirt unbuttoned, and his hair looks a little more unruly than it did this morning. Something behind my belly button stirs, and I'm immediately anxious. Moment-of-truth anxious.

"Just showing Ana some Ava pictures. I was just about to remind Ana that we named Ava after her, but then you so charismatically interrupted, Christian." Kate's smile says she's just teasing, but I sense a slight, well-covered edge of hostility. I wonder if I should be worried about it.

I must look distracted by this latest of musings, because they're both staring at me. "Sorry... after me?"

"Well, you wouldn't let us use 'Ana', so we got creative and went with 'Ava'. The intent was the same. You are her godparents, after all." Kate looks awfully proud, but then, she usually does.
"Yes, well... we'd reluctantly take on the little monster if you were found unfit... remind me to call Social Services in the morning, Ana," he says with a touch of disdain, throwing a counter to the earlier jab.

There's a brief silence. "So, Kate's here... you wanted to tell me something?" I nudge.

Christian's eyes widen, his lips part and he looks suddenly strained. Whatever it is, it must be bad. Or frightening. He quickly composes himself, however, and comes to the opposite side of the bed and settles there. He picks up my hand, and I wince a bit.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No... it was shock therapy day downstairs. They were giving out free samples," I joke, hoping to lighten the mood, but Christian looks even more apprehensive. "I'm a little sore, that's all."

"Do you need something for the pain?"

"The nurse gave me some ibuprofen. I'll be fine." I give his hand a testing squeeze. "Go on."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I don't know why this is so fucking hard, or why I'm so fucking angry. I practiced what I'd say all morning. Between mergers and acquisitions, we have a son. Liquidating this company and that company, and we have a son named Teddy. Organizing relief shipments to central Africa and mobilizing relief workers, and oh, by the way, we have a beautiful son named Theodore, and he misses you terribly. Oh, I'm so fucking angry. Not at Ana, no, but at this God-awful situation. If the waste of flesh that took my unborn daughter's life and left my wife so badly broken were still alive, I'd brutally murder him.

Get a fucking grip, Grey. You can't let her see you like this. I suck in a breath.

"I spent all day trying to think of the right way to tell you." I blow the remaining breath out and draw in another. "I'm feeling very nervous, but you shouldn't be. I don't want you to be, because this is a good thing. It's big, but good, all right? Will you trust me?"

Ana looks from me, to Kate, to me, and back again a few more times. Kate nods reassuringly. She sighs. "Okay."

Another breath. "I apologize for not telling you earlier. I didn't want to overwhelm you, or make you feel obligated in any way. This is the biggest hill I'll ask you to climb with me for a while, because it concerns another member of the family, a most important member, in fact." I pull out my Blackberry again, thumb a few buttons until I reach the picture Kate forwarded to me earlier. I hope Ana doesn't hate me or Kate for testing her, but we had to see if it would trigger her memory, and sadly, it didn't. It's one of Ana's favorite pictures. I turn the screen to face her.

"That's Ava," she recognizes immediately. "Kate just showed me this picture." She looks confused.

"Yes, that's Ava... but the other child, the boy..." I swallow, looking down. "That's Ava's cousin, Teddy. He's two, and he's... ours."
I raise my eyes to meet hers, but she's still staring intently at the picture. In it, Teddy is smiling brightly, his blue eyes sparkling, and he's holding out a wooden block toward Ava, who's returning his smile with brilliant affection.

Ana's breathing has quickened, and she looks dazed. In the thirty seconds it takes for the screen to go dark, she hasn't blinked once.

"Darling?" I whisper, afraid to startle her.

She continues to stare into space where the picture was. "W- what?" she mutters, mindlessly.

"We have a son, Ana."

"A son?"

"Yes."

"I have a son?"

"Yes."

Her eyes finally rise and meet mine. "I'm a mother?"

"Yes," I breathe.

"He's... two?" I see her gears spinning... clunking is a more apt description. Of course, we're coming up on our third anniversary later this summer, and it's obvious she's doing some back-calculating.

"It's not what you think," I begin. Oh for heaven's sake, she thinks I married her because she was pregnant. She's never felt worthy of me, when quite the opposite, I couldn't be less worthy of her. "You conceived on our honeymoon, or shortly after... we were never quite sure of the exact date. Teddy was quite a surprise." You can say that again, Grey. If she never remembers the last three years, she must never know how badly I reacted. Dammit, I can't bear to entertain the idea... she has to remember. She has to.

"Is he..." she trails off. I'm not sure she knows what she wants to ask.

"What would you like to know, love?"

She gasps a few breaths, still shocked. "Everything."

I smile, exhaling sharply. Yes, of course she wants to know all about him, but where to begin? "We named him Theodore Raymond, after my grandfather and after your father. He was born May ninth, seven pounds, three ounces. And so beautiful. He was talking before his first birthday, walking shortly after. He's brilliant, and so intuitive. Loves to draw and to stargaze. I hope he'll inherit the company, but you insist he'll be a cartographer, and an explorer. He has such a sense of things, and of people... for instance, the night before last he sensed I was upset, and he comforted me." My face falls. "I don't want you to feel obligated in any way..."

"Is he all right?" she interrupts. How does she just know?

I blink a few times, and she looks increasingly anxious. "He's... not been himself. He misses you terribly." I swallow, guilt ridden by this admission.

Ana's eyes brim with tears. She speaks slowly, carefully. "Is... is he the reason you've not been
around much?"

I close my eyes briefly. "Yes." When I open them, her face is consumed with shame. *Shit.* This was
the last thing I wanted to result from such a monumentally difficult conversation. "You have no
grounds to feel guilty over this, love. Please, please don't feel that way," I beg her. My hand is still
holding hers, and it occurs to me that her fingers are gripping mine quite tightly.

"Ana," Kate interjects, pulling a packet of tissues from her purse and dabbing Ana's eyes. "We've
all been taking turns with him. You don't have to worry, he's being so well cared for. He just spent
the better part of two weeks with us, and he and Ava are the best of friends. Keeping him occupied
until you're ready to see him isn't a problem at all."

"No," Ana cuts in. "I want to see him." She looks from Kate to me, and I feel the radiating resolve.
"I want to."

I gulp. "You're not ready."

"I don't give a damn if I'm ready, I want to see him," she demands.

"Ana, you can't even hold him, which is exactly what he'll want if he sees you," I try to reason with
her. "We should wait."

She shakily pulls her hand from mine and lifts it, higher than I'd seen her do that morning. It's not
long before she lowers it to the bed, but she's made her point. "That will have to be good enough."
She looks positively determined to get her way. "If my son needs his mother, then that's exactly
what he'll get. Now, tell me what I need to know."
"She was very insistent, Mom. She wants to see him. Now."

"Well I'm both surprised and not," my mother's voice reaches through the Blackberry. "How did her therapy session go?"

"A bit off topic, but she says it was fine. She's sore, but her coordination has improved drastically more than I'd expected. Can you pick up Ted and bring him?"

"Sorry, darling, I'm tied up at the practice. Perhaps you should encourage her to wait until tomorrow morning; she'll have time to process, and I'm sure Teddy's going to be cranky by the time someone can get him over there. Now don't think I don't know what you're thinking; you want to give Ana everything she wants, and that's very noble of you, it's part of what makes you such a wonderful husband. Spend the evening with her. She's cleared for a reasonable menu, so order in and talk. Ted can wait one more day. They both can." My mother has to share the honor of being able to stun me silent with a deluge of words; she and my sister are famous for it. I've since learned to recover quickly.

"Mom, you encouraged me to tell her, and I have. Now you want me to ask her to wait. Why do I still let you tell me what to do?" I assert, exasperated.

"Something Italian, I think," she suggests, ignoring my exclamation. "The Italians are masters in the art of familial bonding." I can hear the smile in her voice. The women in my life are maddening.

"Yes, Mother," I sigh and press the 'off' button. Honestly, my mother is a genius, and she knows it. Ana and I had anything but a traditional courtship, and what limited information I've fed my mom about that time... she just gets it, gets me. I don't get how, but she does.

"Sawyer."

"Yes, sir."

"Ana wants lasagna from Vignetto's, all her favorite things, for two. And stop by The Creamery for her caramel gelato."

"Anything else, sir?"

"I suppose flowers would be a good idea as well," I say, more to myself than an instruction.

"Ranunculus, sir?"

"If you can find them, I'll give you a raise." I'm feeling generous today.

He smiles. A rarity. "I'm on it, sir."

"Taylor."

"Sir?"
"Track down Dr. Sluder, and begin making preparations. I'd like to get Ana home as soon as I can get her cleared, the next day or so."

"Right away, sir."

I sigh, my thumb pressed against my bottom lip, tucking my psyche into its most efficient and comfortable zone of strategy and manipulation. Private nurse hired, check. Ana's favorite meal on the way, check. Now, to go to war with my wife.

~oOo~

"You're trying to keep him from me," Ana blanches, her voice trembling. "Why would you tell me about my son and then keep him from me?"

"Ana, baby, please be reasonable," I plead with her. She's on a rant the likes of which I've rarely seen; this is on a whole new level. "I'll bring him to you myself, first thing in the morning. Baby, please don't cry."

Kate took her leave, feeling the storm brewing while I was out in the hall. I don't blame her one bit, and I'm glad she's not here to see me beg... but Ana deserves a friendly face. I try to make mine as friendly, or at least as contrite, as possible.

Her tears are flowing now. In her left palm is the crushed tissue Kate handed her. She hasn't moved to wipe her face, and her nose has started to run. She's an absolute wreck. I retrieve a handkerchief from my back pocket, leaning in as unthreateningly as possible. "Hush now," I soothe. "I'd never dream of keeping you apart. I want you to see him, and he you, more than you know. But as upset as you are, can you see that it's a bad idea today? Don't you feel that may upset him? You don't want that, do you?"

"No one told me." She's quiet, accusatory.

"I'm telling you now, love. There really wasn't a right time, but I felt before now was too soon, and I begged everyone else's cooperation. The blame lies with me. Please, please don't be angry at anyone else."

She sniffles, considering. She's so, so tired. I fear she may pass out before dinner arrives. "I'm sorry," her voice quivers.

"No, baby, please don't be," I tell her. "You've been through so much, you're entitled to be more than a little upset. Frankly, I feel you've handled everything we've told you remarkably well."

She sniffles again, her tears slowing.

"That's it, baby." I brush her hair away from her face, tucking a few loose strands behind her ear. "I promise to bring him to you in the morning. You have my word."

"I'm sorry..." she blubbers. "I'm such a loose cannon. I don't know what's wrong with me." This declaration brings on fresh tears, and I'm quick to mop them up. "I just... I want to see him. I'm not sure why... I feel like it's something I need. I don't know. I'm so confused... how can I feel such a need for someone I can't remember?"

My heart is breaking as I continue to mop her tears. Should I... no, she'll recoil from me. But she needs comfort... oh, fuck it. She's so light, and to my great surprise she doesn't fight me, doesn't even exclaim as I collect her into my arms, pulling her onto my lap. I will myself not to become aroused, as sudden contact after a prolonged absence often does to me, though the thought makes
me sick. I don't have to try very hard. Her tears and weakened form are anesthetic to my libido.

"Ana, baby. thank you." I rock her gently, cradling her head against my neck. "Thank you for being honest with me. You have no idea what that means to me." She is limp against me, the occasional snuffle causing her body to spasm. It must be terribly uncomfortable. I press my lips into her hair. Hospital shampoo doesn't suit her. It wrenches my gut; she hardly smells like my Ana. More proof that she isn't herself. But she is mine. I must look after her better. I simply cannot let her slip through my fingers. "Hush, baby," I soothe her, softly.

She nuzzles into my neck; whether it's an automatic response to the closeness or she's just trying to be comfortable, I don't care. My eyes close in response, and I pull her closer. We sit this way for a while, long after her tears have stopped. Remarkably, she's still awake.

"Better?" I whisper.

She nods. It's subtle, but I feel it. I notice everything when it comes to the woman I love. My heart aches, because eventually, I'll have to release her.

"Are you hungry?"

She nods again. It makes me smile.

"Good. I've ordered your favorite."

"I thought yogurt was my favorite," she mumbles.

A soft chuckle escapes my lips. "I suppose your favorites have changed in the past few years. I only know your current ones, though yogurt is rather long-standing. If you prefer, I can bring you pancakes and bacon tomorrow morning." I think back to the morning after our first night together at Escala, Ana dancing around the kitchen wearing just my shirt, making pancakes for breakfast. If only she knew just how cherished the simple gift of her cooking makes me feel.

"I'd like that," she tells me, with just a touch more confidence in her voice.

"Then consider it done." I press my lips to her hair. We're silent for a few moments. "Do you need anything? Would you like to lie down?"

She sighs, and it's a nervous exhalation, one I've learned to spot well. "Can we stay like this a while longer?"

I gasp, and my eyes close at her request. "Yes, baby. Of course. As long as you want to. I'm here," I tell her. It's like it was in the beginning... she trusted me implicitly, even then... even when she knew exactly what kinds of things I'd wanted from her, expected of her. It's in these small moments, these subtle revelations that my Ana tries to shine through. And shine she does.

"I'm going to try to break you out of here in the next few days," I tell her, trying to fill the silence. Somehow, the long stretches of no talking are uncomfortable. "I'll make arrangements however you'd like. I'll move into one of the guest rooms. My mother has a list of private nurses she's recommend to help with your recovery. Anything you need, I'll make sure it happens. How does that sound?"

Ana tenses suddenly. "Um... okay." There's little conviction in her voice.

I attempt to rein in the creeping panic. "What is it?"
Her breathing has quickened slightly. "It's just... more to think about. I think my mind is full at the moment."

"You would like to leave the hospital, wouldn't you?" There's more. I feel it, she's holding back.

"Of course."

I lean back just enough as to cup her face and look down at her, to study her expression, and I'm met with one of apprehension. *Is she afraid? Of me?*

"Ana, please tell me. Whatever it is, you can talk to me about it."

"I um... I sort of saw myself going to stay with Dad for a while, he even asked." She looks ashamed. Ray never mentioned this offer to me. I'm her husband, for crying out loud. He should know better. I make a mental note to call him on the way home.

"When were you going to mention this?" I try to keep my inflection sympathetic, but I suspect failure when she tightens again. Very reluctantly, I shift her gently out of my lap, back onto her bed and arrange her pillows. "I apologize; I didn't mean to sound that way. I assumed you'd come home to us... you belong with your family."

"Dad *is* my family," she retorts.

"That's not what I meant..." I run my hand through my hair. "We've missed you, Teddy and I. We love you." I suddenly regret this unintended manipulation; she has no way of reciprocating, and likely no desire to either, considering the way I've just behaved. I'm panicked to salvage this. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you feel obligated. I said you'll have everything you need, and if staying with Ray is just that, you'll have it. I promise."

There's a timid knock at the door. Sawyer has returned, arms full.

"Will you at least eat?" I beg.

She nods.

~oOo~

It's dark when Taylor pulls up the drive; I don't even bother having him drop me at the front door. The conversation with Ray didn't go well. He admitted to asking her home with him, and he was more gruff and protective than I've ever known him to be. In fact, he was downright grizzly in his refusal to even consider encouraging Ana to come home, as though the suggestion were offensive, spouting recollections of a number of his comrades from his Army days and their post-traumatic memory loss stories. It suddenly occurs to me that what's happened to Ana is affecting everyone more profoundly than I'd allowed myself to believe.

Gail has beaten me to Teddy's bedtime story, so I watch, arms crossed, from his bedroom doorway. Gail would have been a fitting mother, she's so animated in her storytelling, trying to engage my son. Teddy, however, still isn't into it.

I hope tomorrow's reunion will help him heal. I pray it isn't a disaster.

Gail takes notice and waves me over. I kneel down next to him, brushing his baby curls back. "I love you, Teddy. I have a surprise for you tomorrow."

Ted's droopy, blue eyes widen for a few seconds, then blink into weariness. My poor baby boy.
He's about given up. I restrain the flow of anguish that's begun to pool in my chest, kiss my son's forehead as he closes his eyes, and retreat to our bedroom.

I can't bear this. I don't know where I got off thinking she might actually want to come home. My shoes and clothes make a trail behind me as my feet find the cold stonework of our bathroom floor. She doesn't want you, you fool. She doesn't know you. How could she ever want what she doesn't know?

The subtle, eerie glow from the stained glass skylight is all I need to find the shower controls, and the jets flow icy cold. I cringe under them, but it's a fitting distraction from the hopeless, aching pain in my heart. My hands find my hair as hot wetness finds my cheeks, and I curl in on myself, bitterly thankful for the solitude. No one will ever see me this way, not ever again. No one but my Ana. I forbid it.

The mere, fleeting mention of her in my mind sets my body to stir, and the all-too-familiar need is there, making itself sadistically known. In more than three years, I've never had to do this. It's never been without her. My resistant hand finds its goal, and it's a matter of quick, simple release.

The aftershock sickens me. What have I done? I drag myself off the stone floor, my mind settling into an uncomfortable flatline. Towels bring more comfort than I deserve. Her pillow... its fresh, clean scent, still smells of her.

I have to give her what she wants. I will, even though it will surely end me.

~ ANA~

"Good morning, Ana."

It's later than I intended to wake up is my first thought when the voice wakes me. Sunlight streams through the window. I wanted more time to prepare. My heart starts to thud the way it does when a loud noise wakes me, though the voice could be described as anything but loud.

"Good morning, Dr. Grace." I rub my eyes, and then it dawns on me. Though my arm is still quite sore, it's obeying. I give my legs a test flex. Yes, also sore, but mildly responsive. Progress is good. Progress means I can get out of here. But to where, I still have yet to decide, and Christian didn't make that any easier with his concessive plea to take me 'home'. I don't even know where that particular home is, but one thing is for sure... it isn't mine.

"Still sore?"

"A bit. Am I that transparent? I don't recall wincing... no, I actually tried rather hard to internalize the pain. Nothing gets past Dr. Grace, it seems.

"I'll get you something to take the edge off," she smiles kindly.

"No... I mean..." What do I mean? "No, thank you. I'm fine. I'd rather not take any more meds, if that's all right." And I need a clear head today. My... son... is coming to see me. I have a son. This is so surreal.

Dr. Grace and her knowing smile are back. "I just meant some ibuprofen. Are you sure?"

"Oh," I say. "I guess that's okay."
She returns and hands me the tablets and a cup of water. My dexterity makes me proud, and it doesn't go unnoticed.

"You're doing so much better, Ana. It's so good to see." She holds up a stack of neatly folded clothes. "Would you like me to help you get cleaned up? Christian and Teddy will be here within the hour."

This sets my pulse to racing again. Dr. Grace senses my panic and rubs my arm soothingly. "It's all right, dear. You won't be alone, I promise."

Christian must have told her. I wonder if he included the part where I was an incoherent mess. How humiliating. And what she must think of me... I'm supposed to be mother to her grandchild. Some mother I am, panicking about our reunion. Well, to me it's a first meeting, but for him... Oh God. I'm not sure I can do this.

Dr. Grace and one of the nurses put me into a warm bath. It's rather comforting. The scent of the shampoo, jasmine I think, is a balm to my frazzled nerves. My hair is dried, brushed and clipped back away from my face. The brief glimpse of my reflection in the en-suite bathroom wasn't exactly pleasant, but given the raw material, it could be worse.

I've been dressed in soft lavender cotton lounge pants and a long-sleeved heather shirt, rather pajama-like without quite being pajamas. My comfort seems to be a recurring theme, here. I could care less what I'm wearing, but I'm glad for the bathtime pampering. Dr. Grace helps to put my bracelet back on... where it came from in the first place is beyond me. I was finally able to get a good look at the charms yesterday after Christian left, and now I have more questions than before... the first being, What do they mean?

"They're here," Dr. Grace tells me, bringing an end to the stream of passing thoughts. "Are you ready? Do you need a minute?"

Do I? My breathing quickens. No. It's now or never. "No... it's fine." My fingers find each other and twist into a series of knots. Dr. Grace gives my knotted hands a squeeze, goes to the doorway and waves, and then moves to stand by the window.

Christian appears at the doorway. His eyes are rimmed with barely-concealed fear. Nestled in his arms, snuggled into his neck is a little boy with copper curls, just like Christian's. Christian whispers something to him, and he turns his head.

My heart stops.

We have the same eyes.

The boy's lips mouth the word... it can only be 'Mommy'.

I don't think. My good arm rises of its own accord, and reaches toward him.

Christian shuffles forward, his expression shifting from fear to hope. The boy is straining forward, arms outstretched. "Gently with Mommy, Teddy," he says softly, and, with only the slightest hesitation, places the boy at my side.

And something connects. Whether it's his warmth, his sweet baby scent, I don't know... but something is just... right. His little body is heaving with sighs and whimpers of relief, and after a long moment absorbed in him, I realize he's softly crying.

"Shh..." I soothe him, tucking him under my arm. I stroke his back awkwardly, as my other arm
would be more well-suited to this task but remains encased and useless.

I look to Christian for reassurance, and he nods, blinking rapidly. It takes me a moment to realize that he's trying not to cry.

Little Teddy's dimpled fists clutch my shirt. There's a sense of urgency, of desperation in his hold on me, and not just physically. He has me entranced. I try so hard to pull any whisper of remembrance, any memory of him, and I can't. But he's... mine. How do I just know?

Teddy's tears slow, and he unburies his face to look up at me. His nose has run gloriously and his cheeks are splotchy pink, but his eyes are clear and blue, exactly like mine. He notices my cast. "Ouch, Mommy," he declares.

"Yes, baby boy. Mommy was hurt for a while, but she's getting better now," Christian tells him gently, coming forward again to wipe his runny nose with a tissue. Teddy sits back and shakes his head in resistance, but it appears Christian has had some experience with this, and Teddy's face is relatively snot-free in seconds.

Teddy mopes for a moment, then continues his appraisal of me, his eyes scanning my face, looking to the now-dormant machines off to one side, and then tentatively reaching out to brush his toddler fingers over my cast. He looks back to my face as though asking permission, and I nod. I begin to worry if he senses my nervousness, or worse, my lack of recognition. Considering the looks on Christian's and Dr. Grace's faces, I think I'm passing the test with flying colors. However, the only judge I'm interested in satisfying is the two-year-old giving me a diligent look-over.

His scrutiny continues, passing over me, up and down, like he's making sure that I'm really here, that I'm real. He must have had a real bond with his moth- I mean, with me. I have to keep reminding myself that to him, I've just been gone a month, that he knows me, that this is far more delicate and open-wounded for him than for me.

Teddy suddenly puts his hand on my unusually soft belly, patting it gently. "Sur-sur bye bye?" he asks.

I hear two gasps. Christian's face is suddenly ashen, and Dr. Grace has her hand over her mouth. Both appear in a great deal of pain.

"What did I miss?" I ask, confused. "What's he talking about?"

Teddy looks to Christian expectantly, and then turns his eyes back to me. He's confused as well. What did he say?

Christian gulps, and Dr. Grace stifles a sob. My heart plummets, and my mind taunts me. One information bomb, coming right up. And I hope it's not what I think it is. Sur-sur... sursur, sister? Oh please, God, no.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "Something you want to tell me?"

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I take a few breaths. I. Must. Not. Cry.
"Ana, please... let my mother take Teddy so we can talk about this," I say in my gentlest voice.

"No!" Teddy dives under Ana's arm once again, and Ana pulls him into her side, clutching him to her. Her frosty expression indicates that she has no intention of relinquishing him. My mother has made no move to take Teddy; rather, she's frozen to the spot. I can't say I blame her, with a storm of this magnitude brewing.

"Please, we shouldn't argue in front of our son," I beg her.

"I wasn't aware we were about to argue," she says, her voice remarkably even. It occurs to me that she's using him as a balm, but this isn't fair to him... he won't understand. He's too little.

"I can't... explain... in mixed company," I inject my meaning into the words.

"Ana, honey..." my mother interjects.

"Find a way." Ana's voice is still even, but there's a new edge to it... sadness. *Fuck. She knows.*

My heart hurts, all over again. It *hurts.*

"Mom, will you wait in the hall... please?" I ask, and hear her shuffle away. The heavy door clicks shut. I am without backup, without rehearsal, just... without. I mechanically drop into the chair at Ana's side.

I'd hoped Teddy would forget. I'd not thought he'd bring it up. The possibility of the current situation had not even crossed my mind... I should have remembered how excited he was, that he associated Ana and the baby indistinctly from the moment we'd told him. More pain... that's the last thing either of them deserves. I'm failing miserably as a husband and father. *My Ana would be so disappointed in me.* I should know exactly what to do. I'm failing them.

Ana's expression changes subtly, as though she's reading my last deprecating thought, and for a mere second, I think I see recognition in her eyes. It's all I have, so I cling to it.

"Ana, Teddy... I have something to tell you." Teddy's head turns slightly and I can see his eye peeking at me. "Can you come out so I can talk to you?" I ask him. It's a long moment before he relents. He pushes himself to a kneeling position, but his hand rests on Ana's chest, almost protectively. The gesture stabs my heart with a pinprick of pride. He is, after all, my son... he's protecting her... from me.

I suck in a breath. "Teddy," I begin, "I know that we all talked about how you were going to have a baby sister." I require another breath, not only to continue my story, but to keep it from being broken by a quivering voice. "We all wanted her very, very much. But something... happened, and she had to go away."

"Where go?" Ted's voice rings clear and innocent. I swallow the lump in my throat.

I offer my family a small, sad smile. "Heaven."

Ana mouths words at me, eyebrows knitted together. 'The accident?'

I nod.

Her eyes close, and I realize that on some level, she's feeling the loss as I did a month ago. Teddy's expression is one of pained confusion. I'm sure all he's able to comprehend at this point is his own disappointment, but then, his consideration of others often amazes me.
"Teddy, do you need to ask anything?" I prod. Flynn had said this revelation would likely confuse him, and to be receptive to any questions he has, and to answer them as honestly as is age appropriate.

"Why?" he says.

"Why what, Ted?" I encourage him.

"Why sur-sur go-way?"

Oh, this is hard. I can't explain the mechanics of death without scaring or confusing him, and I'm not sure how Ana will react to my bringing spiritual beliefs into this very serious conversation, but if I know her well, and I hope I do, she'll appreciate my answer.

"Your baby sister... she had another job to do," I tell him. "It's not a job like Mommy or I do when we go to work, this is a very special, very important job; much more important than any other job in the world. And since she was such a special girl, and because she loved her big brother so much, she decided to become an angel."

Ana's eyes have opened, and a single tear has run down her cheek. Her eyes are so understanding, so loving, and also grieving. In this moment, I know she approves.

"Angel?" Teddy clasps my attention once again.

"Yes." I swallow that awful lump again. "She's your guardian angel, and that means, she's always with you, always watching you, and she'll be there to help protect you, even though you can't see her."

"She 'tect Mommy too?"

"Yes, Ted. Phoebe protects Mommy too." I need to stop talking, otherwise I'm going to weep in front of my son.

"Teddy," Ana's soft voice rises. "Will you let Daddy take you outside for a few minutes? Mommy and Daddy need to talk for a while, okay?" Her eyes move from Teddy's to mine, and I feel her understanding. She's taking this so well... too well. And she's handled Teddy beautifully. I'm endlessly proud of her.

Teddy nods, and I gently scoop him up. He wraps his arms around my neck, his eyes trail behind me, and I know he's still glued to his mother. I won't keep him away for long. "Blow Mommy a kiss," I say, and he does. Ana mimes catching it, holding it to her heart, as she always has, and my heart stirs with hope.

~oOo~

"My mother was there when they took her... she worked on the baby herself, but nothing could be done. She was just... gone."

Ana and I spent a half hour talking through what happened that day. She cried, I cried. I made her nibble on the pancakes I'd brought, but considering the depth of today's revelation, I wouldn't be surprised if it puts her off this breakfast food forever.

"Are you okay?" She asks me, genuine concern edging her voice. My Ana would be more worried about me than herself, as well. She's coming back to me in pieces, in feelings and nuances, it seems. The least I can do is to be forthcoming.
"Honestly," I shake my head, "No." I shift a bit in the chair. It's all too familiar and just as uncomfortable. "I used to be able to talk to you about all manner of things..." I trail off. Ana's expression of betrayal pins me where I sit. "I don't mean that unkindly, love, not at all. I just don't want to burden you, not with things you don't understand."

"Then help me to understand," she demands, her eyes narrowed. "She was my child, too." The tone has gone from melancholy to tense and distrustful in as little time as she's often accused me of allowing my moods to swing.

"I'm trying," I promise her. "I really am." I shift from the chair to settle on the edge of her bed, and I pick up her hand. It surprises her, I think, and she doesn't pull away from me.

"Yes, you're very trying," she snaps, but squeezes my hand. My heart picks up speed. She's said this to me before, as well. She isn't remembering, but she's... adapting?

"I know," I admit to her, returning the squeeze. "And not to diminish any part of the confusion you've experienced since you woke up, but this is difficult for me to navigate as well. If I tell you too little, it makes you feel as though I'm keeping things from you, and if I were to tell you too much, it could be too overwhelming for you to handle, and I don't want to hurt your chances of remembering. Please, please know that my intention is for you to know everything," I implore. "I want you to come home with us this afternoon. We can leave as soon as the doctor clears you."

Ana's expression drifts, and her eyes lower. She looks torn.

"What is it?"

Her eyes flicker to mine, then back to her fingers a few times. My stomach churns, my heart races with fear.

"Please, Ana. Tell me."

"I... um..." She closes her eyes and sighs. "I think I'm going to go home with my dad for a while."

"What?" I heard her, and I wish I hadn't. My heart sinks.

She swallows. "I think... it would be better, for everyone. I'm going home with my dad for a while."

I'm not sure what to say, but I'm holding my breath, and it's getting painful. I blow it out quickly and inhale again. "I don't understand," I say.

"Everything's so... new, and confusing and sometimes uncomfortable. I haven't had time to process it all. I don't know how I can be expected to remember when I haven't had time to really think."

"So that's it." I can't help but allow the hurt in my voice to escape. "You're running." I fold her hand between mine and bring it to rest at my lips. The abandonment I felt when she left me those years ago comes creeping back, and I suddenly have the urge to be sick.

"I'm not running away, Christian," she tells me. "I'm just going someplace familiar for a while. If our positions were reversed, wouldn't you want familiarity?"

"And who will look after you? You can't expect me to just..."

"I don't expect anything from you," she interrupts. "You've done so much for me. I can't burden you with something over which you have no control. And what if I never remember? I can't hurt
you like that."


"I'm not going there to hide, Christian. You'll still see me, and I want to know Teddy. Maybe it's a good sign that I felt something when I held him, I don't know. But I want to be around him, and I'd like for you and I to get to know each other again, slowly. Maybe we went too fast before and maybe that's part of why I can't remember, I just don't have any answers. But I agreed to talk with your guy Flynn. Maybe he can help. Maybe he can help us both."

"So that's it." I'm being petulant, I know. She has it wrong, of course. She couldn't possibly guess what we were about back then. But what else can I do? She's leaving me. *Leaving me. It hurts.*

"What else is there?"

We're both at a loss. "I don't want you to go," I whisper to her fingers.

"I know." And she does, she understands, on some level. Just not on mine.

She can't go. It isn't safe, away from home, away from the protection our home provides. She needs me to look after her. She needs her security personnel. She needs Teddy. And Teddy needs his mother, and I can't let anything stand in the way of this.

"Ana, I beg you to reconsider. I'll do anything," I plead my case, trying to keep my voice even. "Ray can come to stay with us. I'll move to one of the guest rooms, as I said before. I need you home, where I know you're safe. I need to know you're taken care of. If anything were to happen to you..."

She sighs. "But hasn't something already happened to me?" She means the accident.

"Yes, you're right. But I am... paranoid, and used to having things under control. *I need* to know you're safe," I reiterate. "It's the most important thing to me, knowing the people I love most are safe and taken care of. Please, baby." I kiss her fingers. "What must I do?"

She blinks, watching my face. It's like she's working something out. Does she feel my despair? Can she reach deep down and feel how powerful this need is, to have her safe? And I realize, for the first time since she woke, that so long as she's safe and happy, I can live with her not loving me.

"There's more, isn't there?"

"More?"

"More."

I sigh, and a twisted part of me wants to laugh. "This whole thing between us started with more, my love." *Oh, fuck.* It just slipped out. I was thinking it, not intending to say it. *Shit.*

"What does that mean?"

"It means..." *How shall I put this?* "It means, that once upon a time, our positions were, of a fashion, reversed."

"I don't understand."

"Do you want to?" The crease in my forehead is pleading.
She nods. "Yes."

I can't breathe. She has me between a rock and a hard place. I have her attention, and though she hasn't said it, she may allow me to take her home if I were to give in to her curiosity about us. But our relationship was anything but traditional, and I'm still, three years later, processing exactly what happened to lead us to each other, and why she went along so willingly, knowing how dark I once was.

But if I tell her nothing, I may certainly lose her. "I'd like to tell you everything, Ana. I'm just afraid you won't understand." And it's the truth. She deserves nothing less than my honesty, even if it is vague.

"Try me."

I sigh again, feeling for a way to salvage this. It dawns on me to try a new tactic, it worked before, early on. "Baby, I want you home. That's the bottom line. How we get you there is entirely up to you. In that, I am at your mercy." I keep my eyes locked on her, drawing her in, searching for any sign of recognition, of response to me. I'm certainly not out of practice in the art of seduction, though I am about a month rusty. I run my fingers over the creases of her palm. "I propose that in exchange for your agreement, I'll employ Dr. Flynn as a medium to help us get reacquainted, and that includes, but is not limited to, how we came together in the first place." Oh, the double entendre of that final statement. "What do you think?"

"Well, wouldn't you tell me that anyway?"

"I would, but it might be easier to bear if there were a neutral but informed party present," I negotiate.

"I still don't see what's in it for me."

"Our son isn't enough reason?" I slip again.

She blanches. "That's not fair."

"No, it isn't. I'm sorry. That's not what I meant," I stammer. God, I'm really grasping. "I want you to see him every day, and he you." I exhale. "I'm only thinking of what's best for our family as a whole."

She's on the fence. I can see her gears spinning, and I know I've reached her. I deploy my expression of utmost contrition for the situation she's in, and the sincerity to match that of my offer to her.

She sucks in a long breath. "I need to call Ray."

My heart sinks. I close my eyes. I've lost her.
Chapter 9

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I can't believe I've let this happen.

I bring her fingers to my lips and kiss them, briefly, lovingly, and then release her hand. I fish in my pocket for my Blackberry and hold it out for her. "Speed dial eight." Mechanically, I rise and carry myself from her room.

I'm vaguely aware that my mother is cuddling my son, who appears fast asleep. Everything else is fuzzy. I drop into the chair next to them. My eyes unfocus. I'm staring straight ahead at... nothing. I clench and unclench my fists. I need to control something... now.

"Darling?"

Who am I kidding? I have no control. "She's doesn't want to come home."

"Oh, Christian," comes a whisper of disbelief.

I drop my head into my hands. My family has fallen apart. The only woman I will ever love doesn't want me.

"Let me talk to her."

"No," I insist. "No, Mom. I can't force her. I won't." I cannot control this, even though I want to. Desperately. I hear her soft voice from beyond the doorway. I'm not sure what she's saying, but I think she's being gentle in explaining the situation to Ray, like she knows I'll listen and doesn't want to hurt me. Maybe she pities me. I did bare my soul, after all. "She has to find her own way."

My mother rarely gets emotional, over anything. She's always been so self-contained. But now, she's struggling not to cry. I know my mother loves Ana. But I've come to understand that it's not just Ana, but what Ana has done for me, that's led my mother to love her so deeply. I can't stand the thought that my mother might turn her back on Ana over this. I know deep down that she won't, but the fear is still there. "Please, Mom. Please don't blame Ana. It isn't her fault. She doesn't understand. She doesn't know."

"Then help her understand."

"I'll try." I have to. "But I won't force her."

"Christian?" It's Ana's voice. She's calling to me.

I stand, rigidly and put one foot in front of the other. Her eyes are tinged with apprehension. "I got Ray squared away." She holds out my Blackberry. Our fingers brush when I take it from her, the usual electricity between us just an echo. The phone sinks into my pants pocket like iron.

"Can I do anything?" I test. I'm not sure she'll let me.

"Um... sure. Get me the heck out of here." Her smile is small, but brave.

I nod. "Dr. Sluder will be here soon." I'm not sure what else to say.
"What's wrong?"

I struggle to maintain my flat expression. I won't get upset. She doesn't need to see me break down. She's made her choice, and for now, I need to support her in it, as I promised when I married her.

"Christian?"

"Hmm?"

She's trying to weave her fingers together, like she does when she's not sure how to handle me, but it looks difficult to do with her cast swallowing her right hand down to her knuckles. "You're upset... I thought this was what you wanted."

"What?" My heart leaps. I immediately quelch the surge of hope. She can't possibly mean... did I read her wrong?

"What do you mean?"

"You... still want me to go home with you... right?" She looks unsure.

Oh God... please. Don't do this just for me, Ana. "Of course I do," I assure her. My hope has returned full flame. I perch on the edge of her bed, just within reach but not touching her. "But... I thought you'd made up your mind?"

She swallows. "What you said... about doing what's best for our family..." her voice quivers. “I was ready to go home to Montesano. Before you told me about Teddy, I just wanted to go, to start over. Maybe get to know you again, I don't know. But now that I know, I want to be near him. I thought our family... you didn't call us your family, you said it's ours. "She sighs, as though she's thought of something brilliant, but then it tries to escape her mind before she can recount it in its entirety. “It just... made sense. You... you included me as an equal. That's what 'our' meant to me. I still want the familiar, I'm drawn to it. I'm rather craving it, to the extent that I still feel like running. But though I have a million reasons to go, I can't shake the reasons to stay. Maybe I need the people I've lost more than the ones I know."

"Oh, Ana." I can't help myself. I gently fold her into my arms. She tentatively brings her good arm around my waist, her fingers coming to rest at my lower back. "My brave, strong Ana." My nose settles in her hair, and I breathe in her fresh, sweet scent. The familiar current passes between us. I've missed it, so very much.

A timid, nervous laugh escapes her. "I don't know about the strong part, but I'll be brave."

"No, baby. You are strong. You're one of the strongest women I know." I release her, not wanting to push my luck. I feel fortunate that she's let me touch her at all, but then, I have to remind myself that she never really was resistant to my advances. Perhaps this won't be so hard... what am I saying? She doesn't know me, doesn't know the things I've done, she won't be expecting how twisted I was when we met, how different my lifestyle was from what she's probably expecting. And with circumstances so different now... oh, God. I suddenly recall the volume of non-vanilla items strategically hidden throughout our bedroom. Those will have to go at once.

She must see the string of emotions cross my face, because she looks as though she's suppressing panic.

"Second thoughts?" she murmurs.

"No, baby, never," I reassure her. "I just had a lapse in my schedule; a meeting I'd arranged for this morning," I cover.
"Oh," she says, apparently convinced. "If it's important enough to make you look that worried, maybe you should go."

"Perhaps I should stop in," I agree. "But I am the boss," I add. "If you don't want me to go, I can cancel." Please say you want me to stay. Please...

Her pupils dilate slightly, and she looks torn. "I shouldn't, um... don't cancel on account of me. I'll be fine. Supposed to be brave, right?"

I try to conceal my disappointment. But then, she's agreed to come home, and I can use a short time away to clean house. "All right. I'll see you in a little while; my mother will bring Teddy and sit with you, if you'd like."

"That would be nice. Thank you," she blushes. Oh, her sweet, sweet face, and how it betrays her reactions to me.

I plant a soft kiss on her forehead and give her good hand a final squeeze. "Don't get into any trouble."

"I'll try not to," she smiles.

~oOo~

The ornate trunk's lid closes with a satisfying click. That should do it. All the toys, add-ons, novelties and instruments, along with Ana's skimpiest articles of... well, I wouldn't call them clothing... and even a piece of sculpted artwork have been stowed. I turn the iron key and test the handle; it's firmly locked. Every square inch of the house is now entirely G-rated.

I rise, and Gail is still standing behind me. She's remarkably stealthy. I hand her the key. "If you wouldn't mind hiding this somewhere in your apartment, I'd appreciate it." There's little chance Ana would even enter the Taylors' private living space above the garage, much less rummage through it. Gail accepts the key, but doesn't move.

"What is it?" I ask, not sure I want the answer, by the way her expression flickers with uncertainty. I've known Gail a long time. She's well aware and ultimately accepting and silent of my previous lifestyle, which is why I asked her help in packing things away. A few years ago I would not have been interested in her polite opinion, but as far as we've come, I'm not as hesitant to allow it.

She folds her arms. "Are you sure this is a good idea, sir?"

I shake my head. "I'm fortunate enough that she's agreed to come home. I don't want to jeopardize what little comfort she'll have in such an unfamiliar place. I'd rather she get the right idea from me, than the wrong idea from these things. Besides, there are plenty of other things to... jog her memory."

"I understand." She pockets the key. "I'll put it in Jason's safe."

I nod. "Incidentally, is it too late to ask you to prepare your chicken stew for dinner tonight?"

She smiles. "I've already started it."

I laugh. "Jason told you."

"He texted me from the hospital. We're both very glad she's coming home."
"No one is happier than I am." I sigh, then launch into the rest of the laundry list. "The physical therapist and his assistant will be here at one o'clock to set up equipment in the gym, and Luke will be working with the home nurses this afternoon to address Ana's mobility and safety concerns, so just keep an eye on things and give them access to whatever they need. And another thing... I need some of my effects moved to the blue bedroom. I'll be sleeping there for the time being."

She nods, her smile turning sad at the end. "I'll get right on it."

~ ANA ~

I'm sore again. This time, it's more my legs than anything else. Rhames had me doing these weird, assisted, one-legged lying-down bicycle moves that had my knees shaking and toes cramping from the strain of trying to lift limbs that hadn't been used in a month. The guy is a task master. I just want to re-learn to walk, not train to be an Olympic runner. I focus on thoughts of Teddy, and look down at the scribble he'd left on my cast with a Sharpie while he and Dr. Grace kept me company earlier. She's since taken him to get some lunch and to nap, and I'm grateful. I wouldn't want him watching me like this.

One of the suits brought me back to my room. The one called Sawyer, I think. I'd seen him lurking in the hallway over the past few days. I catch him with this look of utter sympathy, and then he looks away, like he's ashamed. It's kind of touching, but more irritating; I'm tired of people feeling sorry and worried for me. I feel fine. Well, aside from the soreness. And immobility. And memory loss. And, strangely, guilt. I'm fine. Really.

And in a few hours, I'm going... somewhere. I can't call it home if I've never seen it. I'm feeling overwhelmingly looked-after, and I imagine that will also be the case where I'm going, if my... husband... has anything to do with it, and I imagine he does. He doesn't reveal much. So many things run like clockwork around him, so I can only assume he's a very practiced puppeteer. I get the impression he's very good at getting his way, and that worries me.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Shit, it's the shrink. He's leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, mildly studying me. He might have a field day with what's in my head. "Oh, hello," I manage.

Flynn smiles at me. "Christian tells me you're going home today. How do you feel about that?"

I snort. "That's the most stereotypical shrink query of all time, isn't it?"

Flynn laughs. "Yes, it is. But it has its purpose."

"Is he here?" I look past him into the hallway.

"He's on his way. May I come in?"

I wave to one of the chairs, wincing as my muscles protest.

"You're improving quickly," he casually observes, settling into the seat further from me. "Dr. Treveylan is very impressed. Have you recalled anything since we last spoke? Anything seem familiar?"
I shake my head. "I met my son this morning."

"Tell me about that."

"What's there to tell? I didn't recognize him. He looks like Christian, and a bit like me, so I know he's ours... and he knows me. He let me hold him a while. Something felt right about being with him. But that's all I have."

"That says a lot more than you think, Ana."

"How so?"

"You're still being skeptical, still questioning, still lining up the facts. You're allowing your instincts to help you decide what's true and what isn't. You say that being with Teddy felt right, and that's because, on a subconscious level, your brain knows that it is right."

"So if going to physical therapy feels wrong, and it does... I shouldn't go anymore?"

"Very amusing. Glad you're regaining your sense of humor, baby." Christian has arrived. His hair is ruffled, and the top button of his shirt has been unbuttoned. Oh my. He looks... breathtaking. No one alive should be this beautiful. And what exactly does he see in me? He's way out of my league.

"Christian, why don't you join us? Ana was about to tell me how she feels about going home."

Christian saunters to the other side of my bed, taking his time. Oh, he must know the effect he has on me. This is so humiliating, and in front of my therapist? Has he no shame? Oh right, of course not. He's master of his universe.

"And how do you feel about it?" Christian prods. He looks genuinely interested now. I'm cornered.

"Cornered," I voice the unspoken thought.

"How so?" Christian looks concerned.

"Okay... maybe not so much cornered as at a disadvantage," I admit.

"Would you feel more comfortable if we speak in private, Ana?" Flynn suggests.

I look from Flynn to Christian, and back again. "Probably not."

Christian looks flustered.

Flynn on the other hand, seems pleased. "That's very honest of you. And considering the circumstances, it'll be very beneficial if you continue to be as forthcoming as you can. It'll go a long way toward building trust. And in an unfamiliar setting, you're going to need to trust those around you. Now, let's talk about your concerns regarding going home. What would you say are your top three?"

I think hard for a moment. "Relationships."

"Yes, that one is a whopper. And that's where the honesty is going to help you most. There's a very solid support system around you, and we can talk more about how to approach difficult and uncomfortable topics that will probably arise. What else?"

Difficult and uncomfortable topics? Like what? Focus, Steele... I mean, Grey. Shit, this is hard. "Teddy."
"Another good point. For now, just be yourself. He knows you. Let him direct things. He's still very young, and so he'll likely be oblivious to your memory loss. Your physical state may upset him, so just be reassuring. And what's one more?"

This is the hardest one to admit. "I don't want to lose myself."

"How so?" It's Christian this time.

I shrug, marveling that my shoulders obey somewhat, and I try not to cringe from the sharp discomfort associated with the movement. "Everything so far is so different from what I'm used to, and I haven't really left this room long enough to make a comparison. My independence is gone. I'm not used to people doing everything for me, watching me all the time. Some parts of it feel right, and then something happens and I'm reminded of how alien everything is. I feel like Alice, falling down the rabbit hole. Every time I wake up, there's a second when I think I'm about to take my midterms, and then I end up facing the shock of this situation over again. Everyone's expecting me to assimilate, but I don't want to become a spectre, doing what's expected and flitting mindlessly in this collective of lives that I don't feel a part of."

"This is a very thoughtful observation, Ana," Flynn leans in toward me, resting his elbows on his knees, his fingers woven together. "The fact that you've moved on to the awareness of what may happen if you allow your independence to be taken away suggests that you probably won't let that happen. If you need reassurance, keep in mind how you feel physically. You're making progress toward regaining full mobility. As you improve, your independence will follow. And if you ever feel uncomfortable about the way something is being handled, be open about it. You're free to call me any time you need backup. All right?"

I nod, and a part of me wants to ask if it's a customary offering, or if he senses that I'll need an advocate. Christian leans over and takes my hand, giving what could be either a reassuring squeeze or a reminder that I should know I belong with him. This current passing between us is a powerful thing, and it's making my judgment a little fuzzy. I'll need to work up the nerve to ask him about this radiating intensity... or maybe I should ask Flynn when Christian isn't around, that's assuming he knows anything about Christian, aside from what I've just assumed is an acknowledgement of potential control issues.

"Christian," Flynn prods, "Can you say that you'll be supportive of Ana's recovery of her independence, no matter the outcome?"

Oh my. Speculations, intensified. One ticket to the lion's den, please, and make that a front row seat.

"So long as her safety isn't compromised, I'll live with whatever she decides."

It's strange, being spoken of in the third person when the speaker is staring straight at me. There's a burning behind his eyes too. It has hooks into my soul. What have I gotten myself into?

"Ana? You'll keep an open line of communication with Christian?"

Do I have a choice? "So long as I can take things slow, yes."

"That sounds reasonable." Flynn rises. "I'll stop by on Tuesday afternoon to check in. Do you have my number, Ana?"

Christian fumbles in his jacket pocket, pulls out a shiny black phone and hands it to me. "Almost forgot. Your new phone. Speed dial six."
I stare at the sleek piece of technology. "But I..." I almost say I already have a phone, but of course I don't. Not the one I remember, anyway. And whatever phone I might have had was probably obliterated with my arm, my recent identity, my unborn child... cripes, this is too much to handle.

"Ana?" It's Christian this time.

"Sorry," I shake my head. "I zoned."

"You sure?"

I nod, bravely. I'm not ready to delve right now. I need time to process first. I need these reminders to stop jumping into my head, startling me again and again.

Flynn considers my expression with concern. "Use that number, Ana. Day or night, I'll be on call. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Excuse me, John? Can you sign her paperwork?" Grace has appeared in the doorway again, sans Teddy. She flashes a smile at me, and I try to hide my disappointment when I return it.

Christian studies the scribbles on my cast. "Teddy?"

I nod.

"Be right back." He strides out, returning a moment later with another sharpie, or perhaps, he's borrowed Dr. Grace's. Maybe I should just start calling her Grace, as she's asked, but it's weird. I've only known her a few days, and she's been more in charge of my care than the doctor assigned to me. I guess I'll adjust. In my musings, I've missed a bit of Christian's illustration. On an edge of Teddy's earlier scribble, he's joined our initials with a heart, and what looks like a flower. He's no artist, but it's very sweet.

"There." He snaps the cap back on.

I can't help but smile at his work. "Mr. Grey, are you being romantic?"

The corners of his mouth turn up. "And what if I am?"

"I won't be bought with hearts and flowers, you know."

He gasps, and his pupils dilate. He swallows. "Yes, you will. Again."

The determination in his assertion renders me speechless. I'm suddenly struck with a need to know everything about our early life together. I only wish my body were as lithe and rambunctious as my mind.

"So, what would my wife like for lunch?"

*Wow, he changes gears fast.* "Umm... I'm not really that hungry."

He looks hurt. No wait, that's irritation, definitely. "Ana, you must eat. Tell me."

*What is it with him and food?* "Can't I just wait till we leave? How much longer?" I deflect.

"I'm not sure. I'll get you something from the cafeteria, and ask my mother on the way." He pats my knee and strides out again, taking the sharpie with him.
"Up you go." I lift her from the wheelchair that my mother insisted she ride in to the side exit where Taylor is waiting with the SUV. She's far too light, and swaddled in a heavy blanket. I gently settle her into the back seat, buckling her seat belt, cocooning her in. It occurs to me that this vehicle replaced the one in which she almost lost her life. It's a good thing I thought to have this one customized with all manner of safety features. It's likely even more reinforced than the one used by our President.

"Christian?"

My thoughts have apparently moved me to still with my hands in her lap. "Sorry." I resume snapping her into place, making sure nothing is in the way of the door, and I shut it carefully. "Let's get her home in one piece this time," I mutter.

"Yes, sir." Taylor holds the rear door on the other side for me, and then climbs in. My mother waves from the walkway. She's going to check in on Ana later after I get her settled in.

Ana is weak, I can tell. But she's putting on a brave front. Her cast is in a sling and encased by the blanket, but as Taylor pulls into the roadway she leans to the right and bumps into the door. Shit. In one movement I unbuckle my seat belt and wrap my arm around her shoulders, placing my hand between her casted arm and the door. Mom told me that the hospital staff wasn't happy about discharging Ana so early; they wanted to keep her through the weekend. I'm beginning to understand why. She's struggling just to sit upright. I should have brought pillows to pack around her. Perhaps some bubble wrap... that's what my wife needs. A suit made entirely of bubble wrap, so she won't get hurt. No... a giant hamster ball! That might work. I need to stop this ridiculous tangent before it gets any sillier. "We'll be home soon, baby."

"Is Teddy there?" she murmurs.

"Yes. Mom sent him home with Sawyer."

"Remind me who everyone is?"

I told her briefly of who has access to the house, among the staff and security, and she's seen most of our family, with my father being the one exception. "This is Taylor," I nod toward the front seat.

"Glad to see you're well, Mrs. Grey," Taylor chimes in.

"Thank you," Ana replies.

I continue. "Sawyer is the one who's been standing outside your door most of the week. Ryan is the shorter one. Reynolds has been on leave, you'll meet him next week. And Carter is on Ted duty. Gail keeps our house in order. Ben tends the grounds, he's very good at blending in, so you may not see him."
"That's a lot for a family of three," she muses.

I chuckle. "Some would say it's rather light, for a family of our standing."

Ana is quiet for the rest of the ride, and I wonder if it's because of my last comment. She'd finally gotten accustomed to the wealth, or at least, learned to tolerate it. Now we're back to square one, discomfort central.

I lift her gently from the car, still wrapped in the blanket, and she sinks into my arms, melding to me. Her body radiates exhaustion. Sawyer holds front door, and to my great surprise, lining the entry, are Ryan and Gail, the two day nurses, Elliott, Kate and Ava, my father, Mia, Ethan, and... Ray. Ted is in Ray's arms, fast asleep again.

"Dad?" Ana's voice is weak, but uplifted.

"Hi Annie, thought you could use some backup." Ray looks to me for a moment, and I think we're okay for the moment, an improvement over how we left things after our earlier conversation.

"We're not going to stay and bother you," Kate chimes in. "We just wanted to be here to welcome you home. You can call on us any time, for anything. We're here for you."

"Thanks." Ana's eyes flit to the unfamiliars, but she's too exhausted to absorb introductions, I imagine.

"Thank you all," I say. "I think my wife needs to rest now. You're all welcome to stay, of course." On that note, I carry her, probably too carefully, toward the master bedroom.

I bury my nose in her hair and inhale, unsure when I'll next have the opportunity. The nurses follow in behind me. I reluctantly hand Ana over to them. "What can I do, baby?"

She's watching me with tired eyes as the nurses unwrap her and settle her into bed. "I think I just want to sleep," she murmurs.

I nod. "Okay." I move forward and lean down, press a soft kiss to her forehead, caress her hair with my fingers, and reluctantly turn to leave, looking back just once before exiting. And to my great hope, her eyes are still on me.

~oOo~

"How many times must I say it? She doesn't remember anything." God, my brother is irritating. I take a sip of the wine. The taste is off, or perhaps I'm a bit off. I'd bet on the latter.

"I'm just saying, there's got to be a reason she remembers everything but you," Elliott states the obvious.

"And you think I haven't worked that over and over again in my head since she woke up?" I snap, wearily. "Enough. I'm tired of talking about this." I swallow the dregs in my glass and rise for a refill. Something different this time, I think. "I'm surprised you're here, Dad. How is the case proceeding?"

"It's finally settled. Took bloody long enough." Dad looks rather tired. His tie hangs loosened from beneath his collar. I suspect he can't go into any detail due to the nature of the case, and he doesn't offer any more information.

"Jose called," Kate pipes up.
"Oh?" I stop filling my glass. Mrs. Kavanaugh-Grey has my undivided attention.

"He's been doing some freelance photojournalism across Europe the last couple months and only just got the message about Ana. He got back to Portland last night and asked when would be a good time to come up to see her. I only told him the basics. He's really sorry he didn't phone earlier."

Of course he is.

"I'll mention it to Ana later." Perhaps much later. I drop the wine bottle in the door of the fridge.

"What can we do, son?" My father is a hero in his own right. Growing up, I'd see him come home, weary from long hours at the firm and in court, and then dive right into meeting whatever my mother or us kids needed.

I retake my seat on the couch and shake my head. "It means a great deal that you're here. I don't know what else there is to do... I've hired one of the best physical therapists in the Seattle area, Ana has a handful of the finest private nurses Mom could find, and we're scheduled to meet weekly with the neurologist. John is working with her as well. I just want to integrate her back into the family as carefully as possible. Ana will dictate whether she wants our support or our distance." My eyes have again unfocused, and I'm staring past the glass wall, into the rainy backdrop of the sound.

"Well... when she's ready, your mother and I would like to have a family dinner to honor her recovery."

"That would be nice, Dad. Thank you."

"Have you been back to Grey House yet?"

We slowly build into a dialogue around work, and I take the opportunity to brainstorm a few acquisitions I'd discussed with Ros earlier in the week. Dad is blessedly fluent in the inner workings of my business; I can discuss any aspect with him without having to explain a great deal. He just gets it. This whole situation has made me stop to think how seamlessly I've taken for granted his expertise. If he wasn't around... no, I'm not going to grow some morbid sense of 'what-if' from this. I'm grasping again. My father senses that my tone has become a cover for what I'm trying not to feel, and excuses himself to make a phone call.

"She's going to be okay," Kate's voice breaks through the stretch of silence. Elliott is squeezing her hand, and nods his assent. Ava is asleep on his shoulder, oblivious.

Ray steps quietly down the stairs. "Ted's asleep. I think I'll head home, unless you need me to do anything."

"Please Ray, you're more than welcome to stay as long as you'd like," I offer, suddenly panicked. Shit. I hope no one noticed. I swallow and steel myself, rising to meet him in the foyer. "Ana may want a familiar face when she wakes."

"And I'm only a couple hours away," he fishes his keys from his pocket. "Getting pretty behind in the shop. Call if she needs anything, will you?"

"Of course." I extend my hand, and we shake briefly. I wonder if he's leaving because he really does need to work, or if something of this situation is uncomfortable for him. I can't fathom the latter, but I can look into the former. Discreetly.
"Did Ray take off?" My father re-enters from the sliding glass door, dropping his phone into his pants pocket.

"Only just."

"'Did he take the envelope I left?"

"Envelope?" My eyes sweep the room, and fall upon a manila envelope resting on the entry table. "I suppose not. I'll send it by courier in the morning."

"That's all right, I'll take care of it." My father picks up his jacket and folds it over his arm. "I'd better be off as well. Your mother will be by in a while." He picks up the forgotten envelope and shakes my hand. It's been three years, but he still respects my longstanding boundaries, with very few exceptions. "Give Ana my love."

"I will... Dad?"

"Yes?"

What is that?" I indicate the mysterious envelope.

He shakes his head. "Just something Ray needed my opinion on. You take care, call if you need anything."

I nod. The heavy oak door closes behind him with a stately click, and against my better judgment I stand there, baffled. What kind of advice would Ray need, besides legal? I must look into this.

"Mr. Grey, your wife is asking for you." The nurse waits patiently.

"Of course."

She's supposed to be resting. It's only been an hour. The room is dark, the shades are drawn but tiny slivers of gray light from the cloudy evening sky peek through the seams in the window coverings. "Ana?"

"Hi."

"Hi... is everything all right?" I push the door almost-shut behind me.

"I can't sleep."

"Would you like some company? Kate's still here, I can..."

"I wanted to talk to you." Her voice is small, but her eyes are bright.

"All right." I cross to her bed and tentatively perch on the edge of the bed. "Do you need anything?"

She shakes her head. "Why me?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

She slowly sucks in a breath. "I mean... what you said in the car, about... a family of our standing... what does that mean?"

Oh, here we go. I shake my head. "You don't need to worry about that, baby. It's just wealth, it's
nothing." I softly run my index finger down her cheek.

"It's not nothing, though... It's not how I envisioned myself, not that I ever envisioned myself in any great detail with anyone in particular. But... what if I don't want all this?"

"All... this?" I wave my hand at the room. "Ana... it's just a room. In a house. In a neighborhood. A family lives here. Our family lives here. Does it bother you?"

"A little," she murmurs. "Okay, a lot. Why me?"

"Why not you?"

She breathes deeply for a moment. "I'm... nobody."

I gasp. "That's just not true," I tell her, swallowing. It hurts, really hurts, to hear her say such a thing. "I don't want to hear you talk like that about yourself. You're everything to me."

"Why?"

I blink at her for a moment. "Because you brought me to life."

Confusion crosses her face. She doesn't believe me.

"Let me guess, and you tell me if I'm right, hmm?" I begin. "You're thinking, what does a successful bachelor see in a newly graduated literature major whose only life experience revolves around books and hardware store merchandise?"

"I'm not a bad cook, either," she jests, almost but not quite pouting.

"Yes, of course, how can I forget?" I smile gently. She knows I have her pegged. Imagine this. I have no depth, just a lone businessman with few aspirations outside the world of mergers and acquisitions. I go to work, buy failing companies, fix them, make a profit. I dine out alone, return to an empty penthouse, continue work from home, attend the occasional charity event, and sleep when it is convenient. Everything is in grayscale, and I'm content. One day a marvelously intelligent, beautiful woman falls into my office. We talk, I flirt, she flees. I pursue. I work hard to win her trust, though she might say I wore her down. I laugh suddenly, finding such truth in the statement. My Ana did love to tease. I sigh. "She forced me to rethink parts of my life I'd long since set in stone. She believed in me. And eventually, I realized she wanted me too, really wanted me, and not for the reasons others might. I respect her sometimes-disdain over the wealth I freely share with her, and yes, it is quite significant. But..." I heave a breath, "I'd give it all away, just to have her back again."

Her eyes leave mine, drifting downward to where she's trying to entwine her fingers again. There's shame on her face, and I'm sure it's burning in her eyes. Shame I caused. I bring my fingers to rest under her chin. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad," I tell her. "Please don't look away." I feel her gulp, and she tentatively raises her eyes to mine again. And yes, the shame is there.

"I want you to know how much I love you, Ana. That's why I said what I did. And I would. I'd live in abject poverty again, for the remainder of my life, just to have you remember me, remember us."

Now it's her turn to gasp. I've said too much, as usual. She does that to me, even when she doesn't know she's doing it. What an effect she has.

"Again?"
I sigh. *Shit.* I wonder how well I can skirt the issue. "My mother told you I was adopted, hmm?"

She nods.

"Did she tell you how I was found?"

She shakes her head, brow furrowing. *Oh, I have her attention. Perhaps she'll be satisfied with half the story, the less-gruesome half, of course.*

"My biological mother was an addict... and a prostitute," I smartly amend the terms I've used in the past. "She was exceptionally neglectful. I remember regularly going a day or more without food. She... killed herself when I was four. It was a while before anyone found me. It was probably the hungriest I've ever been." I swallow and gauge Ana's reaction.

"How could anyone..." she trails off.

I offer her a shy smile. "I'm fine now. Grace and Carrick have been the best parents anyone can ask for. And I was fortunate enough to have the support necessary to start my business. I vowed at an early age that I'd never be hungry again. My primary goal in business is geared toward building clean energy and sustainable infrastructure in third world countries to improve food production and distribution. It's been my life's work, until I met you."

Ana looks... awed. There isn't another word for her expression, but it's marred by a single tear that drips from the corner of her eye and runs into the crease by her nose. I gently wipe it away with my thumb.

"Please don't cry."

She sniffs, blinking back a second wave of tears. "Is that why you're always trying to feed me?"

I nod, giving a half-smile. "It's very important to me, to see that you're healthy. The very least I can do is to properly feed my family. That's the least any husband and father can do." I brush the back of her hand with my fingers. "At the risk of sounding pushy, are you hungry at all?"

She sighs. "Not really..."

I'm not surprised, having given her so much to think about.

"... but I'll try to eat, I probably need to," she interrupts my disappointment.

The corners of my mouth turn up. "Good." I kiss her forehead gratefully. "I'll bring you something."

"Can I..." she groans, trying to shift under the covers.

"Baby, lie still. Don't strain yourself."

She stills, defeated. "I don't really want to be cooped up... can I eat out there... with you?"

I sigh, pursing my lips. "I'll bring dinner here for both of us."

"Please, I..." she struggles again. God, she's exasperating.

"Ana, I won't have you hurting yourself. You're exhausted," I scold.

"Please, Christian?" Her eyes... oh, the Puss in Boots gaze. Teddy does it too; the things he absorbs
from his library of animated movies. But Ana hasn't seen the movie yet, or at least, she won't have remembered, I don't think. I can't bear that look. It has me melting.

"All right. Let me arrange things; I'll be back momentarily." Her eyes follow me from the room again.

"Everything all right?" Mia bombards me in the kitchen. Gail's stew smells delicious.

"Ana would like to join us for dinner," I announce. "How is it progressing?"

"The stew's ready; Mia has kindly made some bread and Kate brought a salad," Gail informs me.

"Splendid." I walk through to the casual dining area, surveying the table, and return to the living room to snatch a wing chair from the corner. It should be more comfortable, not to mention secure. I place it just left of the end.

Kate emerges from the kitchen, arms laden with placemats and silverware. "We've got the table, you worry about Ana," she instructs. The imperious Kate, giving orders in my house. I roll my eyes. I don't have it in me to fight with anyone right now.

"Your dinner awaits, milady," I return to Ana and lift her gently into my arms. The nurses have pulled a warm robe over her pajamas and socks onto her feet. It'll have to do, and I'm grateful for their careful attention. Ana sinks into my arms again. She's so trusting, even though she barely knows me. And she's so light, my stomach wrenches at the thought. She's never been this light before.

"Mommy!" Ted runs to us as I emerge from the hallway. He clamps onto my leg, but Ethan is quick to the rescue.

"Hello Teddy," Ana manages. She looks absolutely smitten with our son, and my heart bursts with hope.

"Your Mommy's going to have dinner with us, Ted-bear," Ethan tells him. "Can you show her your best table manners?"

Ethan settles Ted into his booster seat between himself and Mia. I'm glad the two of them are getting their kid-fix with Ted and Ava; they're much too young to start a family. They haven't even hinted of marriage, for heaven's sake. I shake off the thought. Ethan is a decidedly worthy young man, but he's dating my sister. It's not a control-freak thing at all. Any older brother would have reservations about his baby sister's relationships.

"It's good to see you, Mrs. Grey," Gail sets a plate before her. Everyone else is busily serving themselves.

"Umm... thank you," Ana says, looking to me.

"Gail," I mouth to her.

"Thank you, Gail."

"You're quite welcome." Gail smiles warmly and then disappears into the kitchen.

Ana lifts her fork timidly. I watch her a while, making sure she's steady, before paying any mind to my plate. Oh, it's so good to see her eat. I'm soon aware that I'm not the only one watching Ana intently. Ted's eyes are locked on her as well.
"Thank you," Ana murmurs as I settle her into bed again.

"For what?" I wonder. I haven't done anything above or beyond. On the other hand, my family really stepped up tonight, not surprisingly, but it was comforting to share a meal with them, awkward as it was. Mom even showed up near the end to drop off Ana's pain meds, and I fixed her a plate to take home. The house really felt rather empty when they left, even though Ana is here now. But really, she isn't. So why is she thanking me?

She snorts, closing her eyes. "For humoring me."

I gasp. *Ouch.* "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

She shrugs, then winces. "I don't know."

"Why the hostility, baby?"

She stares blankly at me for a moment, and then, to my horror, her face crinkles, and she chokes on a sob. "Oh, baby, no." I draw her into my arms, gathering her into my lap, and hold her to my chest. She shudders as she sobs. *What's brought this on? Was it something I did?"

"Shh... Ana, it's all right. I'm sorry, so sorry, baby. Tell me what I can do. I'll do anything." And I would, I'd do anything for her, if only she'd ask. In this moment, I'd drown myself to see her smile. Morbid, yes, but I'd do it. My heart bursts with pain.

"Please, baby. I need you to tell me."

"Make... me... remember..."

"Oh, Ana." The lump in my throat dissolves, and against my sheer force of will, I'm crying with her. "I'm trying, baby. I'm trying so hard."

The concept of crying is still largely unfamiliar to me. I can count the number of times I've cried during my life on my two hands, and they've all occurred within the past three years. Half of those happened within the last month. The loss of ability to control oneself is distressing enough, but to share it with someone who is equally or exceedingly upset is unbearable. I need to get it together, for her.

Her sobs slow after a time. I don't know how much time. Her breathing slows, hitches, and slows again. The sniffling ends. I focus on her breathing, and it helps to bring mine under control as well. "Ana?"

When she doesn't respond, I carefully pull away a bit, bring my fingers to her chin and tilt her head back. She's cried herself to sleep. I sigh, not from relief, but some emotion I can't readily identify. I wedge my fingers into my back pocket and yank out a handkerchief, wiping the tears and other fluids from her face. Settling her back against the pillows, I pull the duvet over her and lie beside her a while. Again, time passes. I'm not sure how much.

"I love you, Anastasia," I whisper to her. "Please, please believe that, if nothing else. I'm here. I'll always be here." My lips press gently against her cheek, lingering a moment, before leaving her to the evening darkness, and hopefully, a peaceful night's sleep.

~oOo~
"Mr. Grey."

Ana was just here, in my arms, and then she wasn't. She was running from me. Why? She's never run from me before, except in play. And she was terrified.

"No, Ana..."

"Mr. Grey, wake up."

My eyes shoot open. There's light filtering in through the roman shades, they're blue... of course, I'm in the guest room.

"Mr. Grey," the voice again pulls me.

"Gail," I mumble. "Have I overslept?"

"Sir, I can't find Teddy."

Shit. I'm on my feet in an instant. "Where's Carter?"

"She's not here yet, it's still early," Gail quickly tells me, chasing me down the hall. "I went to check him before I started breakfast and he wasn't in his bed. I've looked just about everywhere; Jason is checking the video logs."

Panic sets in. If he's hiding somewhere, or worse... if one of the nurses left a door open... oh, my little explorer... wait, the nurses? "Did you check the master suite?"

"Not yet, but the doors were closed. Teddy still can't quite manipulate the door handles."

I'm at the double doors in an instant, throwing them open.

The morning nurse is already there, in one of the armchairs of the sitting room, reading. She holds a finger to her lips. My eyes fly past her into the bedroom, and my heart tumbles into a normal rhythm.

Teddy is fast asleep, curled in a ball against Ana's left side. Her arm is draped around his tiny body, and her head is turned toward him.

Light footsteps approach from behind. "Oh good, you beat me to it," Taylor says softly.

I exchange a 'let them sleep' glance with the nurse, and she nods. We back carefully out of the room, and I pull the doors closed with the softest click.

"The nurse let him in around midnight," Taylor tells me over coffee. "He paced at the door for a while, couldn't quite reach the handles. I remember Sophie doing that when she was little, getting out of bed and curling up with me. They grow out of it eventually, sir."

I nod. "How is Miss Sophie?"

Taylor chuckles. "She's fine, thank you. Excited to start school."

"Will she be returning soon?"

"I uh... thought it best to let her stay with her mother a while, at least until Mrs. Grey is better," he says, thoughtfully.
"That's very considerate Taylor, but unnecessary," I tell him. "Sophie is always welcome here. And it may do Ana some good to see familiar faces."

And I completely believe this. In fact, I've decided to change my tactics altogether. Ana has handled everything thus far so well, I don't think anything has jarred her enough to wake her memory. And so, perhaps total immersion is a better plan.

"Thank you, Sir. I'll see she comes over one day soon."

"Good." I drain my cup and set it on the counter. "I'll be ready to leave in fifteen minutes."

~oOo~

"No, Ros. It's just not good timing. Tell them I'll consider a visit once they've signed the preliminary agreement. I'm not leaving my situation at home for a maybe. You can get us there."

My phone beeps at me. Shit, low battery.

"I wish you'd reconsider. I know it's not the greatest time, but they don't take me seriously. It's part of their culture. You'd have them eating out of your hand in just a few days. Please think about it?"

She's twisting my arm. And she does have a point. I'd have the full deal signed and done in a matter of days, with a cherry on top. "I have to go. You'll have my answer within two hours." I click the phone off. Now my wheels are spinning. I need a new plan.

"Taylor, turn here. We're making a stop."

"Yes, Sir."

~oOo~

"Anyone home?" I call. The main floor is deserted, as are the bedrooms, and Gail is nowhere to be found?

"Down here!" comes my mother's muffled voice from the lower staircase. I hear the volume on some recording go down. I descend the steps, curious as to what they could possibly be watching in our home theater. It's so rarely ever used.

So this is where everyone has been hiding. Gail is on the floor in front of the giant screen, entertaining Ava and Teddy. Kate and Ana are cuddled in the center loveseat, my mother on Ana's other side and Mia in the giant, red beanbag chair that Ana insisted we have down here. The afternoon nurse is reading in one of the loungers off to one side, and Carter lurks in the far corner... it's the only word I have to describe the standard posture of my son's caretaker and security detail. I sigh. *I've descended into the estrogen ocean.*

"Christian, join us," my mother waves me over. And it occurs to me that they're watching our wedding video. Kate scoots discreetly from her seat and plops down on the floor, taking Ava into her lap. Ava squeals. My feet move mechanically. I've yet to discern whether Ana asked for this attention, or if she had no recourse. The females in my family are rather liberal in the moral support department.

"Hi," I kneel down by her feet, offering the peonies I bought on the way home. Her eyes flicker from the screen, to me, to the flowers, then back to me. I must have startled her.

"Hi," she answers. Her expression is mild, but unreadable.
"For you." I set the bouquet in her lap. She considers them for a moment.

"I'd better go start dinner," Gail excuses herself.

"Yes, I need to be going as well, Elliott will be expecting us home soon," Kate scoops Ava up. "I'll call you tomorrow, Ana."

"I didn't realize it was so late," my mother worries, artificially. "Come, Mia. I'll drop you on the way."

I've just cleared a room. *It never gets old,* I muse. I have to admit, I'm grateful for their discretion. Ana is still considering her flowers.

"Do you like them?"

She gives a small nod, and a shy smile.

"Are you not talking to me?"

She opens her mouth, seemingly surprised by the casual observation. "Just a little... overwhelmed again."

"I can see why you might be." I rise enough to slide onto the loveseat beside her, pulling her legs to recline across my lap. We watch the quieted video for a few minutes. The videographer really was brilliant, cutting to different times throughout the event, and inserting effects here and there to make some angles look as though they came from an old film reel. It's tasteful, intimate, and unique. But I'm sure Ana's paying no attention to the special effects. The scene cuts away from toasts and back to our first dance. My arms are around her, pulling her so close to me, and her hands tease through my hair. Our noses touch. We smile, whisper all manner of sweet everythings, and then we kiss. Tastefully, intimately. I revel in the memory.

Ana sighs, softly.

I finger the knot in my tie, loosening it. "We don't have to watch this, if you don't want to."

"It's okay. I asked your mom if she had more pictures of us, and this is what she brought." She pauses, still fixated on the screen. "Can I ask you something a little strange?"

"Of course. You can ask anything you like." My eyes are locked onto her, but she's still gazing straight ahead. I wait.

"Promise not to laugh?"

"I promise."

She swallows. "Is it... do you think it's okay that... that I'm attracted to you?"

"I think... that it's very okay," I tell her. My heart soars. Why is she asking me this?

"You don't think it's weird? I mean, the way I see it, I just met you. And you're so sweet, and caring, and supportive, and I feel so strange and disconnected... and, yet, good... when you touch me or hold me. And then I see something like this..." her eyes still haven't left the screen. Now we're sharing a mutual toast, entwining our arms as we take a sip of champagne. "It looks so natural for us to be that way. Am I making any sense?"

"A little." I run my hand smoothly from her knee to her ankle. "Something about *us*... it's starting to
feel right, isn't it?"

She nods.

"Baby, look at me."

She turns her head, taking me in for a moment. Then her eyes gloss over. Her pupils dilate, and her mouth drops open, her lips forming a tiny, perfect 'O'. Her breathing increases for a moment, and then her eyes close and she slumps back against the cushions.

"Ana!" Oh God, Ana, no...

“Baby, baby please… oh God please don’t do this!” I pull her limp form against my chest; feel her breath against my neck. Oh thank heaven, she’s breathing. She stirs, a weak moan escaping her lips.

"Ana? What is it?" She doesn't answer. I bring my hand to rest on her cheek. "What's wrong, baby?"

She swallows. "Tie."

"What?" I look down, my loosened tie... oh, it's the tie. The silver tie.

That tie.

My heart is in my throat. "Ana? Did you remember something?"

She nods, still dazed.

Oh, God. "What did you see?"

"Wedding."

Oh. "Yes, I wore this tie in our wedding. You asked me to."

She shakes her head. "It was on the floor. By a bed. A big driftwood bed with blue sheets."

What... the time I watched her sleep? At Escala, is that what she means? She remembers that? My heart is in a tailspin. "Do you remember anything else?"

She nods, slowly, unsure.

"What, baby?"

Her face crinkles, and her eyes fill with uncertainty, even fear. "My hands... it tied my hands..."

Oh. Fuck.
Damn it all. *What do I say to that?*

"It's not what you think." I start to take her hand but she freezes, and I think better of it. *She's remembering!* my brain screams at me. I swallow. "Please, let me explain."

She waits. Her uncertainty is a rusty crowbar, prying into my soul, making it bleed out. "Why would you ever have reason to tie me?" she whispers.

"It's really quite harmless," I implore her, shaking my head to show her I'm out of any ideas to placate her, that this is the truth. "I told you I had a rough start in life... I was uncomfortable with certain kinds of touch. I avoided physical contact with everyone."

She still looks afraid. *God, don't let my horrendous past and strange, selfish lifestyle choices turn her from me. I beg you.*

"While you and I were getting to know each other, I wanted you to touch me, but I couldn't bring myself to let you. When we were... intimate, early on... you consented to having your hands bound so that you wouldn't touch me accidentally. It was mutual, Ana. If you had said no, even hinted at it, I wouldn't have. Please believe me."

She's silent for a long moment, and then shudders a sigh. "You might have warned me."

I shake my head, closing my eyes. "I was afraid of your reaction. And frankly, it's not something that would have gone over well at any point. I wish you knew everything. I wish I could inject it all into you in one fell swoop, but that isn't possible and you're going to have to trust me." My voice has gone up a few notes, and I realize I'm getting upset. *What does she expect me to do? Tell her everything; show her the contents of the locked trunk in the closet? She'll run for the hills. I know I feared that last time and she stayed, but this is so much different. And now I'm between a rock and a hard place... she's right in wanting to know, but she can't possibly expect me to tell her everything exactly when she thinks she wants to know. And the tie? Why the fuck did that trigger her, of all things? Why not something else, anything else? The fates have it out for me.*

I suddenly have an idea. Moving slowly, as not to startle her, I loosen the remainder of the knot and slip the tie off. I fold it in half and hold it out for her. "Here."

Whether she moves automatically at being handed something or if she really is curious, I have no way of knowing. She tentatively fingers the textured silk, and I lay it to rest in her palm. She considers it for a moment, and then brings it to her nose, inhaling, her eyes closing.

"Ana? Is there anything else?"

She opens her eyes, swallowing again. "Did that happen... before?"

"Before?"

Her eyes flicker to the forgotten video, now playing through a second loop.
"Before we were married? Yes. Quite a while before."

"Oh." She seems instantly placated. I believe I've inadvertently found a get-out-of-the-doghouse card. “But you don’t mind now?”

I search her expression for permission, pick up her good hand, and bring it to my chest, placing her palm over my heart. My pulse picks up; a bare hint of anxiety is all that remains of the longstanding phobia. “You cured me of it. You.” I raise my eyebrows to drive the message home.

She curls her fingers slightly, and I can’t tell if it’s because she wants to hold onto me, or if she’s trying to pull away. I release her hand, and she relaxes, laying her palm flat again. Now it's my turn to swallow, uncertainty flooding my brain again. "Are we okay?"

She nods. "Guess so."

"Hmm." I wonder if it's the right time to bring up the trip. Better to get it out in the open, I suppose. "Do you think you'll be all right on your own for a few days?"

"What?" Her hand falls to her lap, her fingers brutally crushing the tie.

"I have some business to attend to in Mumbai. It can't wait, and I can't send anyone else. Do you mind?"

"Um... no. Of course not." She minds. I can tell. I know her well enough to see that this clearly bothers her. She wants me, despite this newest revelation. She wants me near her, like she did in the beginning, and as before, she's letting her thoughts dictate her feelings, rather than the other way around. I'll have to talk to her about this at some point.

"I don't really want to leave you, baby. If you'd rather I stay..."

"It's all right. You do what you need to. I'll be fine." Of course she will be. But my 'out' was in her asking me to stay. Ros, it looks like you're off the hook.

"Okay." I lean forward, before she has a chance to recoil, and press a kiss to her forehead. "So... you're attracted to me?" I distract her. The corners of my mouth turn up, coyly.

She flushes bright pink. Such a lovely color. "It's just a pretty face, baby."

~oOo~

"Grey residence."

"Gail," I begin. "How are things at home?"

"Just fine, sir, it's good to hear from you. You've just missed Ana, she's gone to bed already."

"Oh. That's all right." I will the disappointment from my voice. I hate the time zone difference. "How is Teddy?"

"Rambunctious as ever. Carter has her hands full." There's something else.

"Out with it, Gail. What aren't you telling me?"

I hear a sigh. "Ana took a few steps today."

"She did?" Now I sound like a proud, but devastated father, like I've missed my own child's first
steps. Like I almost did with Teddy.

"She's really improving. I think you'll be amazed."

"I'm sure I will be. Has she remembered anything else?" I'd mentioned the tie memory to Gail and to my mother, separately of course, so that there would be no surprises if any other memories surfaced. Gail is well aware of my previous lifestyle, and my mother knows just enough of it that she didn't cringe in shock when I told her what Ana had remembered. I'm terrified she'll remember one of the other events while I'm not there to explain them. As the fates would have it, she'll probably remember one of the spankings next. Or the belt... I perish the thought before it stops my heart.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Thank you, Gail."

"Anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"No, that's all. I'll be home in time for dinner tomorrow."

"Understood. We'll see you then."

I click the phone off, content to watch a fourth sun rise and stretch in its daily journey to the Arabian Sea. I really must bring Ana one day. We have an entire world left to explore.

~ ANA ~

"Go ouside, Mommy."

"What, Teddy?"

My mind has wandered again. I keep drifting back to a forty-page Charlotte Bronte comparison paper I was in the middle of writing. I'd gotten deep into dissecting Jane Eyre's flighty infatuation with Mr. Rochester, and now I don't even know where the file is to see what else I might have written. I wonder how well I did on it... Mr. Bearley was one of my favorite Literature professors, but he wasn't always my biggest fan. I'd like to think it was because he was pushing me to never settle for good enough, but now I may never know. Unless I have another flashback, and I'm not even sure I want to have another, if it's anything like the one I had a few days ago. I need to focus.

My son is tugging on my good hand, making the charms on my bracelet rattle. I still haven't asked what they mean.

"Go ouside!"

"Okay, sweetie, give me a minute. Go stand by the door." For the first time all afternoon, Teddy does what he's told. He's been terribly contrary. I'm not sure what to do about it, having so little experience with children, but as I'm supposed to be his mother, no one interferes with advice on how to handle him. I find myself wishing Christian were here. It's strange how much I think of him, possibly miss him, even. I just met him, for heaven's sake.

I use my good arm as leverage to help push myself up from the couch, which is difficult to do with only one arm in the first place, but to make matters worse the cushion is so soft that it sags instead
of springs, and my legs are wobbly. I've only stood up three days ago, and just walked yesterday and for a while this morning, so this is probably a bit dangerous. The glass-top coffee table needles my better judgment.

Carmen, my favorite of the nurses, is at my side in an instant. She's much stronger than she looks. "Let me help you, Mrs. Grey," she says, bringing a steadying arm about my waist and letting me lean on her.

"Thanks, Carmen. Back door, if you don't mind."

She helps me settle in one of the deck lounges near Teddy and an assortment of what appear to be his outdoor toys. They consist of an assortment of bright, primary-colored, vintage metal-frame miniature construction vehicles: a dump truck, a bulldozer, a backhoe, and a few others I can't identify. I have to assume that Christian bought our child these over-the-top playthings. I doubt the names Tonka or Fisher Price have ever been uttered in this house. Everything in Teddy's room is designer. Everything that's his outside his room might as well be, too. I sigh.

The woman, Carter, has stealthily followed us out and stationed herself at the far corner of the deck, leaning against the railing with her arms crossed. Her eyes, so light ice-blue that they're almost white, sweep all around from beneath her feathery, cropped blonde hair. She's like a spy, petite, quick and silent. She gives me the creeps. She's also the only person Teddy's listened to this week, so I tolerate her. I don't think she's fond of me, either.

My right arm itches. Grace took me for a checkup with the neurologist at the hospital yesterday, and as a bonus, I got my cast off. It smelled terrible. My arm looked and felt like a limp, wrung-out noodle, but thankfully I don't have to look at it except in the bath, as it's now in a rigid, Velcro-happy elbow sheath contraption hidden inside a hospital-blue sling. It's the latest in invalid fashion. It makes me feel just gorgeous.

Sarcasm aside, I am feeling better, at least physically. I'm not sure about everything else. I've defaulted to going along with everything. I talk to Ray every day for a little while, and Mom calls every few days; they try to encourage me as best they can. Spending time with Kate has been the most helpful, I think. She's told me all about her wedding, our family vacations to Colorado and Montana, some things about Christian and his stalker-protector tendencies, and all about Teddy and Ava. She swears if they weren't cousins, they'd end up married one day, and I can see it; the two little ones just love each other.

She started to talk about her pregnancy with Ava one day, but changed the subject rather quickly. She seemed flustered after that. I wonder if it's because of the baby I lost, but not remembering any of that, I'm not sure how to feel about it. I think I should be upset. I feel ashamed that I'm not grieving. I don't know what arrangements were made, where or even if she was buried. Nothing. And I don't feel right asking anyone, especially not Christian. I don't want him to have to relive the pain again, just so I can have closure. Maybe it's better left alone, unless or until I remember on my own.

I shudder at the thought. After that single, short-lived, monumentally confusing and potentially dark flash into this whirlwind fantasy of a life, I'm not really sure if I'm ready to remember anything else, or if I ever will be. Christian's quick explanation could hardly have been rehearsed, but it has me doubting myself. Regardless of what I saw, he has this subtle way of disarming me completely. I don't know if it's practiced or if he doesn't realize the effect he has, and I'm not sure how his "rough start in life," the neglect and malnourishment, could lead him to fear being touched. So what changed? Did it just take time?

Flynn wasn't much help, and now I regret telling him what I saw. He knows something. He
redirected the conversation too quickly not to have some insight. I'm worried that it's bad, but then I worry about any number of things. Still, what I remembered is just too unusual to ignore. So how is it, in his absence, that this one thing I can't seem to ignore slides so effortlessly, almost unconsciously from my mind, and the swell of a certain longing for this man I hardly know takes its place? No matter what I do, the longer he's gone, the more this desire grows.

"Theodore, no!"

Carter has flown across the deck and launched herself onto my son, swatting him on the back so hard something flies out of his mouth. I've been oblivious the whole time.

"What happened?"

"He tried to swallow a pebble, Ma'am." Every time she speaks, I want to shudder. Even her voice is creepy. Teddy is crying with wild abandon from the shock of her assault. His chubby toddler arms are reaching for Carter, and she swings him up onto her hip. My son must be part chimpanzee.

"Maamaamaaaa..." he wails.

Carter brings him to me and carefully places him in my lap. Great, she gives him everything he wants, too.

I feel like a terrible mother. I sat there, daydreaming, while my son proceeded to choke himself on a pebble he took from a potted plant. I'm unfit. I just hold him awkwardly, as he cries pitifully into my neck, a stream of tears and snot sliming down to the rim of my t-shirt.


His tears continue to flow, but he raises his face to stare at me. "You shouldn't eat things that aren't food. Okay? Teddy, okay?" I shake my head for emphasis.

He nods, his face still crinkled, his mouth still wide, mid-cry.

"Everything okay, Ma'am?" It's Sawyer. He's been hanging around a lot since Christian left, and I don't think it's because he's my personal security detail. I think he's a little paranoid, or just obsessed with the job. Maybe a bit of both. I'd guess he's bored also; so much security and so little to actually protect. Right now, he looks guilty.

"Think so. You don't happen to have a tissue, do you?"

He whips out a handkerchief and hands it to me.

"Perfect, thanks." I mop Teddy's face and clean the slime from my neck. "You're not going to want this back." It's practically sopping.

He holds out his hand anyway, amused. "I'll toss it in the laundry for you."

Security that also does laundry... the staff sure is multipurpose. I wonder if Gail has rescue diver certification in addition to her mad chef skills. She interrupts my thoughts by poking her head out of the sliding glass door.

"Mrs. Grey, Mr. Taylor called. They're about twenty minutes out. Would you like to get ready?"

Oh yes, my surprise. "Right, thank you Gail."

Seventeen minutes later, I'm changed, hair brushed, and standing in the foyer. Well, leaning on the
entry table for balance, actually. I can handle a few minutes of standing on my own. I hope.

My heart picks up a fluttery rhythm as the form of the black Audi SUV bends and curves through the thick, inlaid glass of the heavy oak front door. The next moment is one of those times when you don't know exactly how you got somewhere, but suddenly, you're there, and suddenly, I'm staring into one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. And the molten gray eyes, they have me pinned, weak where I stand, from the depth of emotion radiating behind them.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi." The corners of his lips turn up, and he steps toward me.

I feel my cheeks flush, and I look down the length of my blue sundress to my white patent leather flats.

"Hey," he softly recalls my attention, his finger moving to lift my chin. "You look beautiful, Ana."

I sway on my feet a bit.

"Whoa," he whispers, curling his arms about my waist, steadying me. My good hand moves to his upper arm. I can feel the muscles flex through his suit jacket. My sling rests between us, but the soft cast is so much thinner, it's hardly in the way. "You're doing so much better." He smiles with wonder.

"Surprise," I say, habitually biting my lip and almost immediately releasing it, remembering what he said to me about that. The move isn't lost on him however, and his pupils dilate.

"I would really like to kiss you now, Mrs. Grey."

He's asking permission! The mix of feelings is so confusing, so raw, shooting straight to my belly and zapping out to my extremities, and in that moment, I want his mouth on mine. I. Want. Him. I nod, almost imperceptibly.

His hesitation is brief, but also endless in sustaining my anticipation, and then his warm lips brush mine, ever so lightly. His sweet breath blows warm against my face, our noses touch, and the aura is intoxicating. I'm so thankful that his arms are around me, because I'm about to fall. In a move of sheer impulse, I lean into him, pressing my lips fervently against his, unrestrained. He falters for only a half second, and then responds, holding me tighter, molding his mouth to mine. Bravely, I run the tip of my tongue along his lower lip, and he moans into my mouth. Oh, what a delicious sound.

My legs choose that moment to give out. Christian seamlessly lifts me into his arms, and parts his lips, allowing my tongue access. I lose my nerve. He presses his forehead against mine, his eyes still closed, and smiles. I've never seen this smile before.

"Welcome home," I whisper against his lips. Christian kisses me chastely once more, and then carries me to the wraparound sofa, not bothering to set me down but instead settles me into his lap. I think he likes this.

"I should go away more often, if it means coming home to a welcome like this."

Oh, please don't, I want to say.

Christian senses my timidity. "Did you miss me?"
I blush again, and nod.

"Really?" He looks relieved, and delighted. I nod again. He presses his lips to my cheek, and then looks me over. "You look so much better, Ana. How are you feeling?"

"Stronger. Less freaked out, I suppose." Flynn said to be honest, and not to sugarcoat, so these are the best adjectives I can offer.

"That's good. Really good." He continues to gaze upon me in wonder. His eyes must have been implanted with rose-colored lenses, because I personally think I look a few steps away from gaunt, pasty and miserable, but the way he looks at me... there's a primal hunger in his eyes.

"Daddy!" Teddy bounces off the bottom step and runs headlong around the sofa toward us. He crashes into Christian's legs, and I'm not sure how, but Christian is able to heave Teddy into our collective lap without jostling me at all.

"Easy there, baby boy," he coos to our son, one arm wrapped around Teddy and the other around me. "Were you good for Mommy?"

Ted nods. I decide not to inform him of the pebble incident.

Christian buries his nose in Teddy's hair and inhales, closing his eyes. The arm around me tightens, and I lower my head to his shoulder, snuggling in close. It feels so new, so different, and yet, so right. Why the hell can't I remember any of this?

"I love my little family," Christian murmurs. "You two make me so happy."

Fuck the laws of physics; I melt into this man. What did I ever do to deserve him? All I did was inherit the clumsy genes that caused me to stumble into his office, or so the story went. My low self-esteem won't let me entertain the possibility that he really was attracted to me from the start. Surely he could have had anyone he wanted, so why me? Why was I The One? What did I have to do, say, or give up for this? The last thought fills me with dread. I quickly tuck it away, filing it for later pondering. Right now, I intend to relish this delicious moment with my... family.

And then my stomach interrupts by growling rudely.

"Mommy hungry!" Teddy squeals. His announcements are quite startling sometimes. I wonder if that's a more recent thing, or if he's always this way.

"I think we'd better feed her then, don't you?" Christian tickles him, inciting more squeals. He sets his miniature on his feet. "Go find Gail and wash your hands."

"No!" Teddy shouts, but runs off in the direction of the kitchen anyway. I get the feeling he just likes the word, whether he's in the mood to be contrary or not.

Christian returns his attention to me, tentatively placing his left hand over my belly. "Have you been eating?"

"Some," I tell him. The anti-seizure medication my neurologist prescribed has been messing with my appetite. This most recent declaration of need from the front line of my digestive system is uncommon. It's become more of a reminder that I need another dose.

"You really must eat," Christian scolds. "Come." He lifts me as he stands. How he can so effortlessly rise from this black hole of a sofa is beyond me. He carries me through the kitchen to the more informal dining table and settles me into one of the chairs. I must admit, it's far cozier
than eating in the dining room, more intimate, and the seating is much more comfortable.

Christian brings me a rather generous bowl of shrimp fra diavolo over linguine, returns to the counter for a moment and then comes back over, holding out a handful of my meds, along with a glass of sparkling fruit juice. *How the heck does he know what I'm taking?*

I hold out my hand, letting him pour the six pills into my palm, and I glare at him quizzically as I dump them into my mouth all at once and then take the glass and wash everything down. He returns my glare with equal fervor.

"What?" he insists?

"How do you know what meds I'm taking?"

"It's my business to know. Now eat," he says, as though the discussion is over. Like heck it is. Where did the mood swing come from? And I can see why he'd be emotionally predisposed to ensuring that he and everyone he cares about is well fed, but the dictatorial manner isn't well received, at least not by me.

*Are you always like this?* I want to ask him, but he's fastening Teddy rather securely into his fancy booster seat, and I may be new to this mothering thing but I know better than to have an adult discussion around a child.

I don't know whether the meds are having an immediate effect or if it's the sudden tension I've created by thinking too much about this, but my appetite has decided on eloping with my stomach, and they're off to some faraway land where they can poke fun at me in private. I absentmindedly twirl the pasta with my fork.

"Ana," Christian's voice has a warning edge to it. How can he go from being so loving and sweet to this rather unwelcome persona so fast? And why? A more pressing question might be, why does his despotic expression make me want to cry? *Oh no, Ana... you are not going to cry. Not over your noodles. Not where he can see.*

My chin disobeys and begins to tremble, my lowered eyes welling with tears. His hand is on mine in an instant, stilling my fork. What I'm sure are red-rimmed eyes rise to meet his, and I'm startled to see tenderness and contrition staring back at me. Christian's brow is furrowed. "Are you okay?"

I nod, blinking quickly to banish the tears.

"Do you want something else?" is also uttered silently from his lips.

I shake my head, and Christian's face changes again, to a look of utter defeat.

"Please," he implores me. I swallow down this rising edge of nausea and nod, defeated as well. I force down a few, tiny bites. Our son is shoving broken noodles and plain shrimp pieces into his mouth, oblivious.

We sit mostly in silence until Teddy directs his attention toward pulverizing his pasta rather than eating it, and Christian calls for Carter, who is inexplicably lurking around a corner, and takes the little one for his bath, leaving Christian and I alone with our tension.

"You've barely touched your food, Ana. It's very important that you gain some weight; I need you healthy."
My heart has begun to pound forcefully in my ears. It's another side effect of the meds. I close my eyes and breathe.

"Talk to me, baby."

I'm so close to spewing all over my lap, and there's barely anything in my stomach to come up. "I can't eat any more," I murmur.

"Please try," he implores me.

"I think I'll be sick."

He sits back, unsure what else to do. "It's your medication, isn't it?"

I nod. Dr. Grace picked up my new prescriptions the day Christian left for his trip. It's a cocktail of anti-coagulation agents to break up clots that may have formed during my month-long unconscious vegetation so that they don't dislodge and create blockages, and preventative anti-seizure drugs, standard procedure after a head injury like the one I sustained. Apparently, it's not extremely common to have seizures after one head injury, but she told me that I had another during the blackout years, so they're just being cautious. I must still be a real klutz to be knocked over so easily. It's a wonder Christian ever had an attraction to me... maybe he just likes the plain, dorky, clumsy type.

He leans forward again, curling my fingers with his. "Ana, it's very important that you accompany your meds with something to eat. You need them to absorb properly so they can do their job. Please, tell me what I can do."

I'm desperate not to put any more of this dish, which to anyone else would be delicious, into my stomach. But then, I'm sure Christian isn't going to drop the matter, and that makes my stomach churn more. I hunt for some middle ground. "Maybe I can handle some crackers," I suggest timidly.

"Of course, I'll get some for you," Christian's face alights, as though he'd never thought of this. I wonder how he placated my nausea during pregnancy, if I even had any. He glides away from the table, taking my barely eaten pasta back to the counter, then disappearing into the walk-in pantry and returning a moment later with four boxes and a bag, a variety of cracker-looking products with gourmet brand names I'd never heard of before. "Which would you like?"

I opt for the most harmless, a hexagonal flatbread cracker sprinkled with pink sea salt. He watches closely as I nibble on one. Remarkably, my stomach begins to settle.

"Better?"

I nod, taking a small sip of the sparkling juice. It's surprisingly refreshing. My eyes start to droop. Not only do the meds make me sick, but they also make me sleepy.

"It's bedtime for you, isn't it?" Christian cocks his head to the side, watching me.

I nod again. "I'd like to say good night to Teddy first."

"I'm glad you two are getting along so well, I was worried," he says. "May I come with you? Or would you like some time alone with him?"

"Of course you can come. I yawn, my sleepiness becoming blatantly obvious. Christian rises and slowly pulls my chair back, then carefully scoops me into his arms. How he just knows I can't
handle walking at the moment I have no idea, but I'm grateful. He really is the dedicated caretaker type. He buries his nose in my hair for a moment, and then carries me toward the stairs.

~oOo~

I left Christian and Teddy in bedtime-storyland. James, the evening and overnight nurse, accompanied me to get ready for bed. Accompanied is too soft a word, actually... he carried me into the bathroom, helped me into my pajamas, helped me stand at the sink to brush my teeth, and then carried me to bed. The ritual is exhausting. All the while, my brain nagged me. According to Kate, Christian can be very possessive, controlling, and very, very jealous. She was careful to use nicer words, but it wasn't hard to get her general drift. The last description has me wondering how, if this is true, did Christian consent to a male nurse?

My eyes droop. I roll onto my left side, dragging my knees to my chest. It's about all I have any energy for.

"Good night, Sleeping Beauty," I hear Christian whisper, and his lips brush against my forehead. My eyes spring open.

"Mmm..." I groan.

"Everything all right?" he worries, pulling the duvet over me.

I sigh. "I have so many things to ask you."

He smiles. "Such as?"

Where do I even begin? "Why did you hire James?"

"Your nurse?" Christian's brow furrows. "Does he make you uncomfortable? I can have him replaced immediately."

*He's serious!* "No, nothing like that. I just... I mean, he helped me change clothes. You're okay with another guy seeing me undressed?"

"Are you going where I think you're going with this?" Now he's smirking. "Ana, James is gay. He'd not be caring for you in that capacity otherwise."

"Oh." Now I'm a little embarrassed, and feeling really, really slow on the uptake.

"His partner works at my mother's practice," he explains further. "She trusts him, and therefore, so do I."

"I'm sorry," I mumble.

"For what?"

"Assuming, I guess."

He chuckles. "Well, you assume correctly on one point; I am quite the jealous type. You'll have to forgive me for that."

"Oh." It appears my vocabulary has taken its leave.

"So, is that all?"
"Hmm?"

"You said you have many things to ask me," he reminds me.

"Right." Something dawns on me. "He can't hear us, can he?" My nurse usually parks not far away in case I need anything.

"Of course not baby, I would have told you. He's sorting your meds for tomorrow."

I sigh. "Why do you call me that?"

"What, 'baby'?"

I nod.

"A pet name, that's all. It started in jest and it just stuck. You don't like it?"

"I didn't say that." I yawn.

"You're exhausted. I should let you sleep." He brushes a few stray wisps of hair from my forehead.

"Don't go yet," I beg sleepily.

"You want me to stay?" His voice is hopeful.

I nod, and he smiles. "All right. Just until you fall asleep. I have a few calls to make," he tells me, kicking off his shoes and moving around to the other side of the bed. He slides in beside me, on top of the covers. Tentatively, he curls his arm around my waist, and I press back into his chest. I feel him sigh in my ear, and he says something... but I'm already drifting.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I'm unusually warm. My eyes shoot open, and I gulp a breath. The last image I remember was absurdly startling; Ana was being carried away in another man's arms, a man without a face, to be quite vague. It takes several seconds to remember a conversation from the night before, and to associate my false assumption with what I dreamt.

*Shit, I must have fallen asleep.* Ana is still tucked against my chest. It's no wonder I'm so warm; it's been over a month since I felt her in my arms when I woke. I inhale, the scent from her hair filling my soul, comforting me. I relish the feeling for a moment, knowing full well I should get up and take care of a few things. Ana suddenly shudders.

"Sam..." she mumbles.

I freeze. *What the hell?* I wait a moment, and she says the name again, somewhat more distressed. *Who the fuck is Sam?* Her breathing has increased, and she shivers again. "Ana," I whisper to her. "Baby, it's all right. Wake up, Ana."

I feel her still, and her breathing slows. A moment passes, and she rolls back against me. I scoot back to give her room, my arm still draped over her waist, and she stretches out onto her back. Her eyes meet mine, the ambient light from the dim night lamp just enough for us to see each other. "Are you all right?" I ask.
"You're here," she whispers.

"I'm sorry, I fell asleep as well," I apologize, resisting the urge to bombard her immediately about her dream.

"S'ok," she mumbles, stretching weakly. "Something happen?" She's blinking at me. My expression must be giving me away.

"You were talking in your sleep."

"Oh... happens sometimes. Kate thinks it's a hoot, tries to get me on tape. What'd I say?"

I shake my head.

She frowns at me. It's adorable, and I want to kiss that 'v' between her eyebrows, but I'm too busy trying not to be upset about this fucker named Sam.

"Don't do that, Christian. Tell me what I said." Her face is serious.

I sigh. No easy way to avoid. And besides, I really, really want to know. "Who's Sam, Anastasia?"

Ana's face becomes suddenly sad. Great. I made her upset, just what I was trying to avoid. She bites her lip, but it's in an effort to keep from crying, I think. What the hell did this Sam do to hurt her?

She sniffs. "Sam's... he's gone."

Oh, no.

Who was he? A member of the family I didn't know about? A friend? More than a friend? She would have told me. She never mentioned him before. Who the fuck was he?

"I'm sorry baby," I tell her. And I am, despite my raging curiosity. "Tell me about him."

She sniffs again. "I haven't thought about him much, with everything that happened. I feel so guilty. He died back in January... well, my January, I guess," she rambles. "Ray took such good care of him. He called after classes started to tell me, I'd just seen him a couple days before. I wasn't with him." Her face crinkles. "I promised I'd be there when it... happened, and I wasn't with him." Ana begins to sob.

All I can do is hold her. Who was this? A brother? Was my information wrong? Did she have a sibling I didn't know about? Now I'm the one feeling guilty. She'd suffered a great loss just before I met her, she'd never mentioned it, and I'd jumped to improper conclusions. My mind is running wild.

It's quite a while before she calms, but she does, eventually. I pull a handkerchief from my pocket, vaguely aware that I'm still wearing my suit pants, and wipe her tears away. "I'm sorry," she mumbles.

"Hush, baby, don't ever be sorry for sharing your feelings with me. You can tell me anything. I'm surprised you hadn't told me about him before."

"I didn't?" she murmurs, and I shake my head.

"Do you have a picture of him?" I ask gently, hopefully.

She nods. "The book... Ray brought it while you were gone. I think I left it on the coffee table."
"I'll get it for you." I press a kiss to her temple, rise carefully from the bed as not to jostle her, and stride across the hall and into the living room. Clicking the dimmer switch to the lowest setting, I can just make out a white, padded vinyl photo album with gold trim. In the corner are the words 'The Steeles' in gold lettering to match the trim. It looks homey, well-worn and loved. I resist the urge to flip through it, instead I tuck it under my arm and switch the light off as I leave.

Nurse James is settled in an armchair just off the master suite, reading some thick novel. I appreciate his discretion in staying out of the sitting room while I slept with my wife. We exchange a polite nod, and I re-enter the suite. I set the photo book in her lap and naturally help her sit up, stacking pillows behind her before retaking my place at her side.

She opens to approximately halfway through the book and begins flipping through the pages. Photos of different shapes and ages, tucked into plastic sleeves, a few with labels, most without. I can't see if there is anything written on the backs, for there is almost always another photo facing away on the next page. I hope she'll let me see the entire album, as many of the photos are of a younger Ana, as a sweet child, then as a lanky but beautiful teenager, and with a multitude of my favorite expressions. I'm reminded of the canvas photographs Jose took years ago. I wonder offhand what her opinion of them is, now, and if she's seen them all.

She stops on a page about two-thirds through. "This was Sam," her voice quivers.

My heart melts. The center photograph is a six-or-seven-year-old Ana, and in her arms is a gangly, wiggling puppy. Ana is grinning broadly, her front teeth missing. A series of scenes of them playing in tall grass, chasing one another, sharing a slice of watermelon, dressed as a circus clown and lion for Halloween. Ana slowly turns the pages, allowing me to absorb, and taking the time to reminisce herself. Ana gets older, Sam develops into a sleek, beautiful animal. A greyhound, perhaps? His dark brindle coat shining in the sun, Ana with her arms around him as they slept. Even a picture of him fishing with Ray. Then another page, and Sam is a bit gray around the muzzle, spread over a blue couch and looking quite pleased with himself. The last picture is blurred slightly; an Ana I recognize with a thoroughly grayed Sam curled across her lap, sitting before a Christmas tree. I think this might be just before she lost him. She closes the book.

I fold her into my arms, still in disbelief that I never knew. She must have been awfully upset by his memory to mention him, and the subject of pets never came up. "Thank you, for sharing that with me."

"Thank you for listening," she sniffs, turning her head to gaze up at me. Her eyes... she has those 'kiss me, kiss me Christian' eyes, the same I first saw all those years ago after she was almost run down by that idiot cyclist on the sidewalk. I can't help it when she does that, when she subconsciously gives herself up to me. I lean down and brush my lips against hers. They're so soft when she cries. She doesn't try to take things further this time, but meets me equally. I'm only a little disappointed, but I understand. Before, it was in reunion, and this time it's a need for comfort and reassurance. I end the kiss before it has a chance to become uncomfortable for her, but keep her wrapped securely in my arms. Oh, how I've missed those lips.

"Sleep now, baby." I pull one of the pillows from behind her so she can lie back, and she curls into my side. I marvel at how trusting she is, just as she was in the beginning. She drifts again, and after a time, I follow.

~oOo~

It's not difficult to extricate myself at first light, but undesirable. I'd lay here with her all day if I could. But I need a shower, and she'll need breakfast when she wakes. Our son is still asleep. I dress quickly, brush my teeth, ruffle my clean-wet hair as usual and make my way to the kitchen,
thankful that Gail isn't in here yet to shoo me out. She's well aware of my lack of cooking skills, but I can handle something as simple as what I have planned. I set out a breakfast tray, a glass of orange juice, and set two slices of wheat toast to brown while I go in search of Ana's and Teddy's favorite crunchy peanut butter from the organic market. I spread the warm slices, cut them into triangles and arrange them on a plate, fold a cloth napkin and fill a small cup with her morning meds. On the way back to the bedroom, I pluck a pink rose from the arrangement off the hallway and place it on the tray.

Setting the tray by her side, I raise the roman shade, and morning light floods the room. Ana stirs.

"Ana baby, time to wake up," I whisper, brushing my lips briefly to hers. She blinks delicately up at me. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Good morning," she smiles shyly.

"I've brought you breakfast," I say, rearranging her pillows again and settling the tray across her lap.

"This is so sweet, Christian. Thank you," she says.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Grey." I unfold the napkin and tuck it into her nightgown. She picks up the rose and inhales it, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Mmm, beautiful," she murmurs.

"You certainly are, my love." I enjoy her blush, and then hold out her meds. Her expression turns to apprehension.

"Can I eat first and then take those?" she asks.

"Actually, after last night, I planned for this," I tell her. "This was your preferred breakfast during the first trimester. Apparently, peanut butter has some pretty strong anti-nausea properties, at least where you're concerned." I try to keep my face hopeful. Honestly, the mention of her pregnancy tears at my heart, but as she has no room to mourn, I'll keep it together until this afternoon when I see Flynn.

She measures my face for a short time before opening her hand for the medicine. She downs half the orange juice. "I hope you're right," she says, setting down the glass and picking up the toast. She chews thoughtfully for a moment, and swallows.

Then her eyes glaze over, and her jaw goes slack. I panic. Is she choking? Having a spontaneous allergic reaction? What?

"Ana!" The tray is out of her lap in a second, and my hands are at her cheeks. "Baby, talk to me, please! Ana? Ana, please baby... say something!"

It's the longest thirty seconds of my life. She slumps over, unconscious for mere seconds, then blinks, and gasps. Her eyes refocus, and dart around the room.

"Ana?"

"Peanut butter..." she whimpers.

"What's wrong, Ana?" God, this is killing me.
"I was eating peanut butter with a spoon... in a white kitchen with dark wood... and I was... big... and then the kitchen here, a high chair, and a mess of peanut butter... Christian! Where was I?" her breathing is erratic, and her eyes are still shifting.

"It's all right, baby," I reassure her, unable to will my lips not to smile. The elation I feel is indescribable. _She's coming back to me! _"That was Escala, the apartment where we lived until a month before Teddy was born," I tell her.

"Escala?"

"Yes."

She blinks rapidly. "I remember... it's almost familiar," she sounds a bit more confident. "Can we go there?"

I panic, and I pray that I buried my reaction before she could see. I can work with this... have a team paint the former playroom and redecorate within a day. I believe I can stall at least that long. "Sure, love. Let's get you a bit stronger first, all right?"

"I feel fine. Can we go today?"

I sigh. "Perhaps one evening this week. I promise we'll go soon, all right?"

She swallows, but doesn't look too happy. In fact, she looks rather dazed. "Okay."

I take her good hand in both of mine and kiss her knuckles. "I'm so glad you've remembered something else," I tell her. "One step closer, hmm?"

She nods, but there's a wall between us now. It's my fault. If only I could tell her everything, but then she'd run from me. I'd lose her forever.

I can't bear to lose her.
"Christian, you know I can't tell you that." Flynn continues to regard me passively. He does that whenever he thinks I'm being unreasonable. I'm desperate to know what Ana's told him. I hate not knowing what she's thinking, especially now. How the fuck can I help her if I don't know?

"Did she specifically ask you not to tell me?" I demand. This session isn't going well.

"I can't tell you that either, and even if I could, do you think that knowledge would be productive?"

Fucking Flynn. I'd be angry that she didn't want me to know, if that were the case, he's right. And if she hadn't asked him to keep her sessions private... well, I'd never know, because he'd never tell me. I'm fucked either way.

He sighs. "Why don't we get back to the point? Her emotional swings, for one, are indicative of mild post-partum depression. She did say I could let you know that much."

"Wait, Ana's depressed?" I panic.

"As I said, it's mild, just a hormonal imbalance. It happens sometimes, and she'll be fine. You'll just want to be as sensitive as you can be."

That didn't happen with Teddy, she was fine. That was traumatic enough but she didn't wind up with depression. "I have been sensitive," I insist. "I've been sensitive every goddamn second since she woke up. I'm a master at walking on eggshells, checked my flaming temper, well beyond your clinical recommendations, mind you. I've become a bloody saint for her. And now she's depressed?" I'm flabbergasted.

"It isn't your fault, Christian. It's quite common, and coupled with the stress of her memory loss... let's just say it's very confusing for her. She's handling things better than anyone could have anticipated, given the circumstances."

"Why hasn't she remembered more? And why those triggers? Peanut butter and a fucking tie?"

"It's hard to say. Every head trauma is different, every amnesiac episode is unique. It may continue to return in fragments until there are enough pieces that the entire picture comes into view. Or the pieces may remain disjointed, and she'll remember the flashes but not the connecting memories. You should be prepared for her to never fully remember, but that's a worst-case scenario. We really don't know what will happen. The thought is unsettling for you I'm sure, and I sincerely hope that isn't the case. But in the event that it is, how do you feel you should prepare?"

"Prepare?" I'm floored. What I just heard was that Flynn's given up on Ana's recovery, though my sometimes... okay, rarely... rational side reminds me that he presented all the options and I've latched onto the worst one, as usual. "How am I to prepare for the woman I love to never remember me? I'm better now because of her, because of who she was to me. I can't live indefinitely without my Ana."

"She's still your Ana, Christian," he lectures, ever so calmly. "To deny this is disrespectful to her, don't you think?"
"But she's not..."

"She is." Flynn has never interrupted me before. I blink at him, dazed. "She's exactly the same; she hasn't become a different person. She's still your wife. She cares deeply for you. It's true that she's unaware of how you two began, and that's going to be a very difficult conversation for both of you, but remember that she trusted you then, implicitly. She'll be all right. You ought to talk through it with her. We can have a joint session, if she's agreeable."

Flynn has this uncanny ability to pick up on my biggest insecurities and lay them out, like a road map, even if all I've done is skirt the main issue. "Don't fucking do that," I hiss.

"You're here for exactly this, Christian. I'm not going to soft-pedal over the one issue that's weighing on you today." The corner of his mouth twitches up.

I hate that he's right. And I'm grateful that he knows what he knows. At the moment, he's all I have. "I fucking hate this."

"I know. How shall we proceed?"

*He's asking me? My stomach twitches, the bile churning. How the fuck should I know what to do? I pay him to tell me what I should do.*

"Inner monologue doesn't help anything, Christian."

"Shit." I stand, pacing to the corner, turning, and pacing back to the opposite wall. I run my index finger across my bottom lip and back. My hand is shaking, I'm not sure why. My conscience is screaming at me, but I can't hear what it's saying for the blood pounding in my ears. My other hand, fingers curled into a ball at my side, is shaking as well, nails biting into the palm. I breathe deeply to quell the rising panic. It catches me by surprise, this state of alarm, and I can't rise above in time to squash or, at the very least, cover it.

A choked sob bubbles up in my throat. *No! I won't lose it. Not even in front of Flynn, he hasn't seen this in our sessions for a long time. I'm better. I am. This frightened little sot isn't me anymore.* I bring my hands up to cover my face, to shield myself until I can get it together, but wetness touches my fingers. *Fuck.* The sob escapes, and another. My body has betrayed me to a series of tremors, and my legs no longer support me. My back finds the wall and I slide down, coming to rest on the carpeted floor. *Where the fuck is this coming from? I was fine a minute ago. Well, not fine, but in control. What the fuck? What is this?*

"Hey." Flynn is closer. He's come to join the sob fest. *Arms around yourself, Christian.*

I instantly drop my knees to sit cross-legged and my arms come around to hug myself. It looks ridiculous. I marvel offhand that I obeyed so quickly. My breathing slows, eyes open, and through the blurring tears I see him sitting before me, mirroring my position. A tissue box rests between us.

"Take your time."

I will my breathing to slow further, resisting the urge to wipe my face just yet. Amidst the confusion and emotional turmoil, there's an unexpected edge of humiliation and gratitude. If I had to have a breakdown, I'd rather it happened here. I don't know how long I sit there exactly, and he doesn't push me. He just waits. I know what he wants.

"I want my wife back, the way she was. I want her healthy, and for her to love our son. I want her to want me again. I want the last two months to have been no more than a horrible nightmare. I want that fucker who caused this to burn in Hell for all eternity..." the anger rolls off me, and then
"a bitter stab takes its place. "I want my daughter." I ramble off everything I can think of that I want, regardless whether anything can be done. Some desires are impossible, but they're there anyway, and Flynn tells me they're just as important. How, I'm not always sure. "I don't want her to hate me for the things I've done. I'm so afraid."

I can hear Flynn's breathing match my own. I think it's on purpose. "That's right." He holds out the tissue box, and I rip a few, more forcefully than necessary, from it.

"I know what you're going to say," I mumble, exhausted.

"Oh?" Flynn cocks his head to the side.

"And what do you think you should do about those things?" I mock his voice, raising it to a higher key.

Flynn chuckles. "And?"

I sigh. "I don't know. This is why I come to you."

He nods. "That's still difficult for you to admit." He stands, holding out a hand to me. I'm feeling thoroughly patronized, but I take it anyway. He pulls me to my feet. I return to the couch, blowing my nose.

To my surprise, he sits down next to me. "Are you up for a few suggestions?"

I nod. I'll take anything. I'm reaching the end of my fuse, and I don't want to be around Ana when I get there.

"You're actually doing all the right things," he says. "I know you're used to getting faster results when you work harder. Unfortunately with people, it doesn't always work that way. Ana feels how much you care. She's doing much better than any of us expected, the depression aside. Just keep supporting her, and let whatever happens, happen."

"That's it?" My eyes are wide.

"That's it. You can't force it."

I heave a sigh. "I know."

He's quiet for a moment. "How are you handling your needs?" he asks carefully.

I snort. "I'm handling them. Exercise and whatnot." Oh please, let's not get into this.

"Nothing wrong with whatnot. It's perfectly natural." He shifts. Oh yes, the good psychiatrist is uncomfortable discussing what I do with my body parts as well. Good, he ought not have brought it up. "And one more thing, before we're done."

I relax. Flynn's closing remarks are typically bolstering; reinforcement of ideas and affirmations. I toss the bunched-up tissues in the trash.

"You should visit your daughter."

I freeze. "Excuse me?"

"Your mother tells me you haven't been back since she was laid to rest." He hands me my jacket. "Bring her flowers. Talk to her. Tell her everything. What you told Teddy about her had to have
come from some deep-rooted belief. It won't solve things, surely, but it'll help you sort through what you're feeling."

*I can't.* "All right."

"Good. We'll reconvene in a few days."

~oOo~

Fucking Flynn. He expects the impossible. It's a shame his office is in the city... the jogs to and from sessions were monumental in helping me sort through our discussions, and now, I have to bottle it up on the drive home, especially when I'm not driving myself. My stomach has yet to un-knot. I hate this. It's unbearable. I need to get out.

"Pull over."

I escape into the unseasonably chilled afternoon air, let the cold pierce my lungs and still my soul. I close my eyes, leaning back against the car door. *Fuck.* The guilt has crept in unbidden. I straighten and tap the window, instructing Taylor to stay put. My legs carry me forward. The air is penetrating, but my jacket is folded across the backseat of the SUV. Doesn't matter. The cold is all that's holding me together.

"Pink and green hydrangeas." The teenage, pierced and tattooed salesgirl looks frightened, exchanging a glance with the elderly florist, who gives her the "whatever he wants" instructive stare. With shaking, black-painted fingers, she ties a generous bunch with raffia, and I throw down a few twenties.

"Llandover." Taylor nods and pulls the vehicle into traffic. I hold the stems with tender fingers, careful not to let the blossoms bruise.

I step out of the car outside the carved oak gate, donning my jacket. "Take a turn around the block, Taylor."

"Yes, Sir." There's sympathy in his voice, but henceforth maintains a respectful silence.

I'd originally bought this parcel of land a few years ago to honor my grandparents, my mother's family, who'd inspired my ecological sensibilities. It was meant to be a "back to the earth" resting place for them, when the time came. It couldn't be a further sight from those ridiculously commercialized and absurdly visible concrete memorial parks littering the freeway, with their manicured lawns and fake neon bouquets upon tacky metal-plaqued headstones. I never imagined when I bought this beautiful, natural place that its first resident would be my infant daughter.

Leaves had settled over the mossy ground, dampness and detritus marrying in an essence of woods and of leaves, of life’s eternal circle. The single plot within the grounds is not immune to nature’s processes. Groundcover has begun to encroach, as was encouraged, and the fresh earth has settled away.

"Phoebe Anastasia Grey." I caress the name, expertly scripted into the small marble garden stone. Below is a single date, the worst day of my life. But there's more... and I immediately sense my mother's loving interference. "Always wanted, always loved, and always will be."

Oh, I remember those words. I said them as I held my child for the first time... and for the last time. A lump rises in my throat, and I drop to my knees, placing the flowers I brought for her next to her name. "You'd be here by now... I'd be holding you in my arms this minute. I'm sorry, little one. So sorry that I couldn't protect you. I failed you."
I sniffle, blinking to compose myself, though no one is around to watch me blubber like a fool. This is my daughter, damn it... and if I'm going to talk to her, I'd better damn well show some decorum. It's the least she deserves. I sit back, arms wrapped around my grass-stained knees, and I start talking.

"A friend said I should talk to you... I know you can't hear me, but I'm going to talk anyway, all right?" I pause as an unusually warm breeze flutters briefly through. "I don't know where to start," I sigh. "I'm so lost without you. Your mom... she's gone from me as well... she's been my lifeline since we met, and now she's lost. I don't know how to find her, to help her find her way back. She doesn't know me, the real me. I can't tell her the rest. She'd leave us for sure. Maybe I'm being ridiculous to think she won't have the same reaction to the truth as before, but things aren't as they were then. I've changed, and she's still weak and unsure. I'm a lucky bastard that she's chosen to come home, but it's so difficult and frustrating, and..." a sob comes unbidden into my throat, and I swallow it down, tears stinging my eyes again. *Why am I telling my daughter this? Oh fuck it, I'm telling myself.* "And she doesn't want me, not the way I need her to."

If I know Flynn, and I'd better after seven years or so... he's be emphasizing the word 'yet' on the end of that last statement. And he'd have a point; I'm the most impatient person I know. When things don't go smoothly I get frustrated, angry even, and then I'm impossible to be around. The most patience I've ever had, I've had with my family, with Ana and Ted. And it would have grown with a daughter in my life, I'm sure of it.

"I've been letting the company stagnate; it's so unimportant to me now... but I have to go back, I have to support my family. The last thing I worked on before all this... happened... was a gift for you, to ensure you had the best of everything, all your life. And now..." I raise my eyes to the sky, not sure what to say. "I just can't bear to see anything that has to do with that... I'm sure Ros can handle what to do with it, but... I don't know if I can bring myself to talk about it. I can't have a breakdown over business issues. I've been working mostly from home; I went out of the country for just less than a week and spent every day panicking that anything could happen to your mom or your brother while I was away, and that I was too far away to stop it. I've become so irrational, I can't stand to be away from them for any length of time," I ramble.

"And then there's you... I haven't been back here for you. And I'm sorry... so sorry, my dear, sweet child. I'd give it all... every asset I hold, my own life... to see you, for your mother to hold you, even once. I love you, Phoebe. You're forever in my heart."

The strange warm breeze blows through again, lifting me from my sadness, and I hear the light hum of the SUV's engine in the distance. I should be getting back to my family. I stand, brushing remnants of the forest floor from my trousers. I blow a kiss over my daughter's resting place.

"I'll visit more, I promise. And as soon as your mother is ready, I'll bring her to say hello. You won't be forgotten." I'm not sure how I tear myself away, but my legs carry me from this place. I pause before the gate to compose myself, retrieving a handkerchief. I won't allow myself to be seen this way by anyone, even Taylor, though I'm sure he understands.

Taylor readjusts the rearview mirror. "Home, Sir?"

"Please."

The Blackberry zaps against my thigh. I heave a sigh and retrieve it.

"Grey."

"I have the information you wanted, Sir," Welch's disembodied voice comes through the earpiece.
“And?”

“Mr. Steele began bankruptcy proceedings four days ago, over a carpentry shop in his name just outside Montesano. He’s been in the red for quite some time. Looks like your father is taking point on the paperwork, but without his firm’s stamp on it. Appears to be under the table. Want me to get the numbers? Might raise some flags.”

“Yes. Tomorrow.” I have no more words.

“I’ll get right on it.”

I press the end button and roll my eyes back, willing them to dry and brighten. It’s not a long drive but they do feel a bit less puffy by the time the driveway is under us. I do a quick check in the side mirror for good measure, though.

“Ana?” I call from the front door, sliding off my jacket.

Gail pokes her head out of the kitchen. She holds a finger to her lips and pads softly toward me.

“How is she?” I keep my voice low.

Gail sighs. “Well, Dr. Treveylan stayed a while this morning. She didn’t see a reason to take Ana in for a checkup, but Ana’s been pretty tired all day. I think Teddy’s been homing in on her ups and downs. He snuck in there an hour ago when he was supposed to be napping in his room. I peeked in about twenty minutes ago. He’s curled up right next to her.” She looks torn, like she ought to be ashamed of intruding upon our private chamber, but in our son’s best interest, I’m glad she did.

“I appreciate it. I’ll go check on them,” I say. Gail holds out her hands and I pass my jacket to her.

“What time will dinner be ready?”

“Is six thirty all right? The roast needs a bit more time.”

“That will be fine.”

Teddy is indeed curled into Ana’s side, both are peacefully oblivious to my presence, and so I leave them that way, closing the double doors with a soft click. I really have no aim, no destination, so I begin to wander, in body and mind. The house isn’t big enough to get lost in, and I don’t really want to end up in the solitude of the finished basement, though the door handle is within my grasp, and our wedding video is perversely tempting. I pass it by. The piano looms from the corner of the parlor. I’m not sure it’s a good idea; I’d rather not wake my family, as the acoustics of the room are the reason it was placed there. Oh, fuck it. I need the outlet.

I pull the sliding pocket doors closed and lower the piano lid. There are so many things tugging on my heart, and even more numerous screaming in my head… only the music can help to suck all that poison away. My shaking fingers find the right keys, and a slow, somber theme rises not from the instrument, but from within, channeled through the strings. After a time my shoulders relax, the trembling in my hands ceases and my eyes drift closed. I am lost in the colorful strain, my soul taking over where my mind and body often fail. This saves me, from myself.

I end one song and begin another. I haven’t bothered to turn on any lights, and so as the sun sets, these east-facing windows darken and I’m thrown into the shadows. How appropriately it illustrates the piece. My eyes close again. My fingers could carry me anywhere, and I’d go, if only it would save me from facing reality, if only for a short while. A low rumble accompanies the next sequence of chords, and as I realize it’s not distant thunder but the opening of the pocket doors, my
eyes fly open, and everything happens at once.

Ana, wrapped in her lilac silk robe, locks eyes with me. I’m about to smile at her, in hope that she’ll come sit by me as she always has, but that was before. She hasn’t heard me play yet, not since… has it really been so long since my fingers touched these keys? Her face changes, her pupils dilate. Her left hand grips the wall, and she sways.

“Ana!” I’m on my feet in a second, but my mind is screaming again. She’s going to fall. She’s going to fall before I can catch her. I move like lightning as Ana sinks to the ground, and it’s happening in slow motion. The floor is hardwood. She’s going to hit her head again. She’s going to break. I’m going to lose her. No, no, no, nononono…

I’m nowhere near yet. In a flash, her body slows. Hands are on her, softening her fall. “Mrs. Grey!” I hear. By the time I reach her side, there are more footfalls.

“Ana? Ana!” My voice is raw. “Baby, please,” I beg, my hands on her. Sawyer is cradling her head. I pull her into my arms and hold her to me, tapping her cheeks, stroking her face.

“Is she breathing?” Taylor is pulling Sawyer up from the floor, taking his place. Gail is pacing not far behind.

Ana stirs with a groan, her brow furrowing. Her eyes crack, and she blinks slowly up at me. Oh, thank God.

“Gail, please call my mother to come,” I order, eyes not leaving Ana’s face. “Ana, are you hurt?”

“I don’t think so,” she mumbles. I pull her in close, gathering my legs underneath me and stand, carrying her against my chest through the throng of staff and into the adjacent living room, settling into the corner of the long sofa. I examine her face.

Ana’s eyes are only partially focused; she looks confused as she has after the last episodes... Is that what this was? I press a kiss to her forehead. “Baby, did you remember something?”

“I didn't know you played.”

I smile softly. “Yes.” I suddenly have a novel idea... to suggest what she may have seen, and if I get it right, gain her immediate trust. It can't hurt to try. “You often come to sit next to me when I play. You've found me there so many nights when I can't sleep. I'm sorry I woke you, I did try not to.” I wait. A few long moments pass; it seems she’s gathering her thoughts.

“I remembered sitting by you, it was here, but then it was somewhere else, a white room, like a museum. And I was sitting on the piano... Did that happen?”

My stomach turns to ice. The one time I put her on my piano, of the countless times she's sat by me, listening. She had to remember… that. I'm glad the staff has disappeared. I hear Gail on the phone, it distracts me from the panic long enough to get the notion that she's reached my mother and set her on her way. I can't avoid the question. She'll not trust me if I do, and Flynn said to be straight with her.

I swallow. “Yes, that happened, at the apartment downtown.”

Her breathing increases. “And... what happened next... did that happen as well?

Shit. She means the impeccable piano sex. I lower my eyes. Never before have I felt discomfort over my commonly unorthodox methods of seduction, especially regarding the act leading up to my
joining her up there… well, especially for her virgin mind. I meet her eyes and nod, the heat rising in my cheeks. Am I fucking blushing? That's a first. Well, Mrs. Grey, it seems there is no end to the firsts we've given each other. I smile slightly, and her cheeks also pink, quite a feat for someone so pale.

She looks somewhat uncomfortable. “That wasn't... the first time, was it?” she asks, hesitantly.

“First time? On the piano, or ever?”

Her eyes widen. “Ever.”

I smile. “No, our first time was strictly vanilla.

“Vanilla?”

“Traditional.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “Did I like it?”

My smile broadens. “Very much, I think.” Are we really discussing our intimacy?

My whatnot twitches. Shit. No, this can’t happen, not right now. She's not ready, I'm not ready... wait, I'm not? Impossible, I'm always ready. I need a distraction, big time. Ana is staring at me, curiously. She must see how uncomfortable I am, no one sees that but her. I press a kiss to her forehead. Taylor enters the kitchen with a grumpy little boy in his arms. I feel terrible, in the last ten minutes I'd forgotten all about Teddy. I'm fortunate that my right hand man is always on top of things when I can’t be. I return my focus to Ana. “How are you feeling? Are you hungry?”

She nods, and I'm grateful.

“You're not wearing your cast,” I notice. The blue wrap and sling are gone.

“Your mom said I could stop wearing it; it actually feels pretty good.” She lifts her somewhat more slender arm and turns it over, showing me.

“I’m glad,” I tell her, and I’m actually relieved. Aside from her body’s reactions to these random memory flashes, she’s improved by leaps and bounds every day. “Are you tired? These episodes seem to exhaust you.”

She nods. “A bit. I’ll sleep tonight, though. I’m actually a little hungry.”

I don’t bother asking if she’d rather walk. I’d rather she didn’t. I stand, lifting her into my arms and carry her to the dining table.

~oOo~

Thank you for stopping by again,” I say, holding the car door for my mother. She’d looked Ana over, deemed no permanent damage, and made another probably pointless appointment with the neurologist, most likely to placate me. I think she senses my frustration, and pats my hand in reassurance.

“You’re handling things fine, darling. I know it isn’t easy. She’s remembering, that’s the important part.”

“Tell Dad I apologize for keeping you,” I add.
She snorts. “Your father doesn’t mind one bit; he’d have come also, if it weren’t for this series of suits he’s been involved in; they’ve kept him late most nights and he has a few other clients keeping him busy.”

Yes, I can think of one in particular.

She kisses my cheek and climbs into the car. “We’ll see you a week from Saturday for dinner. We’d love for you to stay the weekend, if Ana is willing.”

“I’ll mention it to her,” I promise, closing the car door. I watch her Mercedes disappear down the driveway with my hands stuffed in my pockets, wishing again that she’d finally permit me to buy her a safer vehicle.

I rush a bit through Teddy’s bedtime story, eager to say good night to Ana before she falls asleep, and then I feel guilty. I’ve hardly spent sufficient quality time with my son since Ana woke, and almost no time at all a month before that.

“It’s a special night, did you know?” I bring a quiet excitement into my voice. Teddy’s eyes grow wide. I set down his book and gather him into my arms, inhaling his sweet baby scent. He’s grown to dislike being regarded as a baby, but he’ll always be mine, and will just have to live with that. I carry him from the bedroom and down the stairs, exchanging a fleeting glance with Gail as we pass the kitchen, and I scoop up a chenille blanket from the basket by the back door. Sliding the glass door aside, the moonlit sky welcomes us.

“We’re going to fall asleep watching the stars, would you like that?” I ask Teddy.

“Uh huh,” he answers with wonder. I smile and kiss his cheek.

“Do you always know what I’m thinking?” a sweet voice startles me. My eyes dart around, finally falling upon the deck chaise, and Ana, curled upon it.

“I endeavor to,” I say, moving to sit beside her. “May we join you?”

She smiles. “Of course.” She scoots over, and I settle against the reclining back, pressed against her side. She’s awfully chilled. Ted scrambles into her lap and I shake the blanket out over the three of us. She snuggles into my side.

“Baby, you’re freezing,” I say, bringing my arm around her shoulders and pulling her close.

“I was about to get up for a blanket, but you beat me to it.”

I hope she’s not just humoring me. Ana’s rarely shown that she has any sense of self preservation. We lay in silence for a while, the three of us, taking in the view, marveling at the crisp, clear starscape, listening for Teddy’s gasps as he spots the occasional spark of a rogue meteor.

“I was thinking about what I remembered,” Ana says softly.

“Later, baby,” I deflect her, gently, indicating to our oblivious child.

Ana becomes silent, but nods once against my shoulder. We’re all quiet for a while, and eventually, Ted drifts to sleep on his mother’s chest. I could live in this moment forever, my family safely in my arms, but it’s getting cooler, and I’d prefer the safety of the indoors for those most precious to me. I shift, and she gets the idea, sitting up slowly as not to disturb our sleeping boy. I drape the blanket around them and walk them slowly up to Teddy’s room, watching as Ana puts him to bed. She’s a natural, though it feels new to her.
She switches off the lamp and we back out of the doorway, clicking his monitor on and shutting the door softly. Ana turns to me. “Stay with me tonight?”

My heart sputters. “Are you sure?”

She nods. “I wanted to talk for a while.”

“You’re not too tired, after what happened?”

She sighs. “I just really want to talk to you.”

I smile, shyly, not sure where this bashfulness is coming from. I feel like a lovesick teenager, and since I never was one, I must default to my imagination.

Ana takes my hand and pulls me after her, into our suite. I feel the static connection between us, the current exchanged by our fingers, and it lights me up inside. It’s as though, somewhere deep down, my Ana is still in there. She escapes to the bathroom briefly, and I take the opportunity to quickly change into a t-shirt and pajama bottoms. They’re still a bit loose, though my eating habits have improved; they have for all of us over these last weeks. Has it really been so short a time? She emerges from the bathroom in her lilac silk gown, sans robe, and my eyes widen. She’s far too thin and pale, but she’s ever my beautiful wife.

“You’re quite a sight, Mrs. Grey.”

She blushes, looking down at her hands, clasped by her belly. I close the distance between us and lift her chin with my fingers.

“Hey love, don’t be embarrassed. I love looking at you, and I want you unashamed of your appearance. Do you understand?”

A flicker of defiance flashes in her eyes, but then she nods. I barely begin to wonder if I’ve intimidated her, when she throws her arms around my neck and her lips meet mine. For barely a second, I’m not sure what to do, how to react, but then my body takes over. My hands curl around her back, my left running up her spine to between her prominent shoulderblades, and my right coming to twine in her hair. Her tongue pushes into my mouth, brazenly, and mine comes to meet hers. Her breathing is fast, warm, blowing in my face. She makes my body want her, need her. The fire builds in my belly, searing up to my heart, and straight down. God, this is too much. “I can’t,” I whisper against her lips.

What? Of course you can! She’s offering herself freely, and you’re her husband!

My subconscious, the part of me that’s had most of the control over this aspect of my life, berates me.

“What, why?” she breathes.

Because I want my Ana. “It’s… too soon,” I tell her. “I don’t want to take advantage.” Well, at least that’s also true.

“You… don’t want me,” she assumes.

“Oh but I do,” I tell her fervently, pressing a short, sweet kiss to her lips. “I do, so much, baby. You have no idea how much.” I pull her to my chest, cradling her there. “It’s just not the right time.”

“You mean it’s not the right time… for you.” Her voice trails off and she looks down. Somehow, I’ve managed to cut her deeply. The rejection washing through her is visible, cold and final. She steps back.
“Baby, it's not what you think,” I say, moving tentatively toward her, trying to quell the panic in my voice. She raises her hand and I stop, her palms mere inches from my chest. I feel the spark between us, and it's pure agony. My breaths are suffocating.

“What is it, then?” she demands.

I blink. How do I explain my fear? I hardly understand it myself. I swallow the rising sour in my throat. “Ana, you're my whole life,” I tell her. “I'm not good at expressing my feelings, and frankly, how you feel is so much more important to me.” She frowns, and I continue. “I'm so glad that you want me. I want you as well, you have no idea. But I spent a month worrying that you'd never wake up, and now just a few weeks trying not to break you, and I'm afraid.”

“You're afraid of me?” She stares at me, aghast.

“No, baby, you don't understand.” I reach. “I'm afraid I'll hurt you. I can't, I won't do that.” There's more resolve in my voice than I intended.

“So you won't touch me.” It's not a question.

“Well right now you're not letting me. What do you want Ana? Seriously, what do you want from me?” My eyes are wide, my temper seeping through the cracks in my resolve. I'm buzzing with misdirected fury, at myself, at this abominable situation, but it has nowhere else to go but right in front of me. Her face crinkles.

“Oh Ana, baby I'm sorry. I'm not angry with you.” I move through her wall of resistance and wrap my arms around her, and at first she lets me, her hands grasping the front of my shirt, but then she shoves against me with a strength I've not felt in so long and had no idea she was still capable of. I stumble backward, stunned.

Ana backs to the edge of the bed and sits, letting her head fall into her hands. Is this her, or the depression? I'm at a total loss, and stand there like a fool.

“Just go away,” she whispers.

“Baby...”

“Go! Get out! I don't want you near me!” she yells.

She's throwing me out. She’s really throwing me out of our bedroom. She just doesn’t understand, and at the moment, I’m not sure she wants to, either. I find myself dazed in the hallway outside my office with no recollection of how I arrived there. My mind must have been on auto pilot. I thrust the double doors open; they hit the walls with a bang. I should call my mother because I know she'll be up, to dredge some insight. I should call Flynn at this hour, just because I can. But I do neither. My brain spasms in my skull, unable to grasp my anger, my fear, or whatever this emotion is. I can't name it. I really can't even properly feel it, but it's there, stabbing me in the temples. It hurts.

“Sir?”

Taylor. Shit. I don't know how I got to my desk either, but my head is resting on my arms. I look up at him bleakly.

“Are you all right, sir? I heard some commotion on one of the monitors.”

I shake my head, pinching the bridge of my nose. Shit, my eyes are wet. “I don't know.”
“Is there anything I can do?”

I shake my head again. “You're up late,” I observe.

He nods. “Just getting something I left in the control room,” he holds up a folder. “I don't mean to interfere. Heard a yell through the north monitoring station, wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“She threw me out.” The words escape my lips, unchecked. He might as well know; I can trust Taylor to be discreet. I wave toward one of the leather chairs, and he sits. After a while, I find my voice again. “I don't know what I'm doing. This is so far beyond anything I know. What would you do?” I honestly want to know. Jason Taylor is only a few years older than I am, has a daughter, is happily married, and has been my right hand for seven years. I respect his experience and value his opinion.

“I'm not sure I'd be doing anything differently, sir.”

“Drop the sir, Jason. You can speak freely.” I rub my face, irritated.

He sighs. I'm aware that he's not generally comfortable speaking his mind; an early military career and then service to me would send most men into PTSD without ever setting foot near a war zone, and Taylor has that under his belt as well. “Honestly? I'd probably be in the same place right now. You're doing a better job than any of us expected and better than most similar people probably would. It's a very difficult circumstance.”

I laugh, unexpectedly. “You expected me to do worse?” Taylor blanches.

“That’s… not what I meant at all...”

It's all right. I said you could speak freely. I want you to be straight with me.” I wait for him to continue.

He swallows nervously. “If I might explain better, part of my job entails making sure your daily life runs smoothly. I can only do that if I have a sense of how you handle what life throws at you. I admit that Gail and I talk, but never outside the limits of our Nondisclosure Agreements, and always within the bounds of making life easier for you and Mrs. Grey. We're both torn up that you're going through this.”

“I appreciate that. I do.” It strikes my heart how he speaks of himself and Gail as a unit, as a 'we.’ I want that feeling with Ana again. “I have to tell you, your service to us has been exemplary. It's hard for me to express that. I know Ana does... or did, in my stead. I hope that my sometimes inexcusable behavior isn't cause for either of you to think twice about continuing with us.”

“Not at all. It's the challenge I look forward to every day. This is where we want to be.”

I nod. Something Ana said a long time ago plants itself in my heart. “My wife has long considered you both family. I make sure our family is taken care of. Is there anything you or Gail need? Anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask.”

Taylor swallows again. So, there is something.

“Out with it, Jason.”

He sighs. “It's a doozy. Sophie wants a puppy. Her mom's allergic, and it's just not practical here. She's been begging me for at least two years. I hate disappointing her, but I can't think of a way to
I smile. Dogs really aren't my thing, but exceptional children often need certain things in their lives, and for reasons they can never properly articulate. I should know. Oh, the things we do for our children. “I’ll think on that for a bit.”

~oOo~

I've seen Flynn once more since I've been back. Seen is the operative word. Phone calls don't count. His standing instructions are that I record my thoughts and... feelings... in written form. How one writes their feelings is one matter entirely. I still don't clearly identify most of mine with any true definition to give the multitude an order of descriptive names, and to write “I am angry today” is just plain fucking stupid. I'm not starting a diary, for fuck's sake.

Ana avoided mention of our spat the following morning, and I let it go, content to let sleeping dragons lie. My Ana would want to talk about it, and now that I'm the one who realizes we have to discuss our disagreements, she’s the one doing the avoid-dance. She won’t hold my gaze for long. I’d give anything to see inside her mind right now.

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We pulled up outside Escala at ten to four. Gail had supervised a total redecoration of the “playroom” yesterday, and it’s now a streamlined, off-white sitting room, or so it looked in the photos she emailed. I hope to God the Ozonator I purchased did its job of eliminating any lingering fresh-paint smell.

“We lived here?” She asks again, her eyes taking in the shiny panels of the elevator. I’ve told her as much more than once, and in my agitation I’m almost short with her. We haven’t really acknowledged our tiff from the other night. She’s only trying to piece her life together, for Christ’s sake.

“That’s right, baby. You moved in with me around the time we got engaged, and we lived here together until just before Teddy joined us.”

She nods. I take in a quiet breath to dispel my anxiety. It doesn’t work.

The doors part into the foyer. The center table presents us with a welcoming bouquet of cream roses and greenery, and I’m thrown back a few years. This is one of Gail’s trademark arrangements. She’s gone all out, I marvel. Ana is still in the elevator, her eyes wide and wary.

“Come along, Ana. You wanted this, remember?” I extend my hand toward her, and after a beat she takes it, and follows me into the great room. A silent moment passes, and I release her, crossing my arms patiently. “Poke around. Let me know if anything looks familiar.”

She takes her time. I’m reminded of this spring when we took Teddy to the San Diego zoo. I'd just awarded a grant to a behavioral science group at UCSD, which helped to fund the addition of a small wild cat from Asia, and I brought Ana and Teddy to watch its release into the new enclosure. To see the tiny feline cautiously explore every corner, every rock, every inch of groundcover, I’m reminded by the way Ana is now peering around corners and running her fingers along textures and over objects. She’s like the cat, exploring the unfamiliar, but her fear isn’t that of wary prey, at least I hope not. I think she’s afraid something will trigger a memory, in the same way as before. It can’t possibly be an experience to look forward to.

My gut clenches painfully when her fingers test the door handle to what was once our playroom.
She pushes it tentatively open and steps into the darkness. I’m not far behind, the light from the hallway casting our shadows over unfamiliar furniture. I fumble for the light switch.

The dimmer is the same, a touch panel that raises the ambient lighting with subtlety. Before us stands a wraparound sofa, a central ottoman, a smattering of chairs and a number of shelves and display cases that have been brought from other rooms as fillers for this one. Books and art pieces, some familiar and some not, litter the surfaces. The walls are a warm cream, like the roses in the foyer. The stereo is gone, replaced by a towering potted palm. I sneak a glance near the crown molding, and there isn’t a trace of the former stain. If I didn’t know this room so… intimately, I’d have never recognized it.

Except for the scent of polished wood and citrus. I know that scent well. My pulse ignites, whether by sensory association or my fear that she’ll make the same connection, I have no idea. The light seems suddenly brighter, and I know my pupils are dilating.

Ana crosses decidedly to the far wall, the fastest I’ve seen her move since we left the car, to the exact place where the wooden cross was, and places her hand against the wall. I’m rooted to the spot. My feet are lead weights; I have to force myself to move closer to her, to be present, to at least appear open and supportive, when all I’d rather do is curl into a ball and pretend I’m home and everything is as it should be. I don’t know how, but I see it coming, and this time I’m there where she falls.

“Ana! Oh God, baby. I’m here, I’m here.” Of course she’d have an episode in here. I might as well have left it as it was, for all the good this visit has done. She’s probably just seen everything, seen me like that… seen the worst I’ve done to her. I’ve dropped to the floor, pulling her into my lap, cradling her as she blinks drowsily.

“Oh dear God no. ‘You’re safe, baby. I’m here, I’m here.’ My hand caresses her cheek. I don’t know why I didn’t think to bring backup, Gail perhaps, or Flynn… either could have been a salve to what is likely going to be a terrifying next few minutes for her. How could I have been so stupid? She’s still blinking, but her focus is returning, and she squirms a bit in my hold. I loosen my arms around her, not wanting her to feel trapped, but afraid she’ll hurt herself in this weakened, disoriented state. My voice is low, as gentle as I can manage. “Did you remember something, Ana?”

She nods. “The room… it was red. The walls. And there was wood. Lots of wood, and leather, and singing… and you, you had feathers… and you wore faded jeans and you looked really, really mad…”

Her face crinkles, and to my overwhelming surprise, she turns into my chest, sobbing. She’s obviously frightened of what she saw, but not of me. But why? My confusion may actually rival hers, for the moment. Flynn told her to try to recall as many details as possible after an episode, no matter how seemingly insignificant. I suddenly realize I’m doing nothing to comfort her, and I tighten my arms around her, rocking gently.

“I don’t know what to say, how to soothe her, but whatever I decide to tell her, I must not lie. By omission is forgivable, but I must not tell an untruth, especially not to Ana. But where the fuck do I begin? “Yes, baby. This room’s walls were red once.” I tell her softly. “And there was a stereo, and wood furniture. And I still have those ripped jeans; you love those old things…” I trail off. I don’t know what else there is. Those memories aren’t from one specific time, and not one of them, except for her misinterpretation of my expression, sets me in a bad light. Fortune appears to be on my side. “I wasn’t mad at you. I promise.” And it’s the truth; even the two times I got carried
“Do you want to go home now?” I ask. Her tears have receded to shuddering sniffles, and she nods into my shirt. I press a kiss to her forehead, and she sighs. “Talk to me, baby. Tell me what frightened you.” I nearly regret asking. You need to be open and supportive, Grey, I chide myself.

She sniffles again. “It wasn’t this fragmented before… the other times,” she begins. I wrench a handkerchief from my back pocket and brush the tears from her cheeks as she continues, brokenly. “It was dark, and your face… it was so angry. I thought I’d done something to upset you. Everything else came in flashes, a wooden bench, and red, all around was red…”

“Hush baby, it’s all right. I’m here. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“It’s different now,” she observes.

“Yes, it is.” I wait, but she’s fallen silent. “Home, now?”

She nods. I lift her as I stand, and she curls into me. She’s silent until I have to set her down to press the call button for the elevator. “I’m sorry about the other night,” she offers.

“Why? You did nothing wrong.” I must look as incredulous as I think I do, because she reaches up to touch my face. I lean my cheek into her hand, placing my hand over hers to hold her to me. “I should have given you what you wanted.”

The elevator dings and we step inside, silent again.

“I’m… glad you stopped me,” she says softly.

I glance down at her, and her watery eyes once again bore into my soul. “I don’t quite know what to say. That’s rare for me,” I admit.

“That’s okay…” she shakes her head, looking down. “I just don’t know what to do with myself sometimes, and these feelings… they’re new to me. I’m not sure how to process them. I’m sure they’re probably right, but you were right to stop me. It wasn’t the right time; I would have felt guilty afterward. That’s not how I envisioned my first time to be. I’m sorry… you’ve been so patient…”

“Oh, Ana…” I can’t help myself, and she’s swiftly in my arms again, pulled close to my chest, right where she belongs. “I promise you… when we’re both ready, it will be very, very special.” And perhaps, I can begin to make up for the selfish manner in which I handled our relations early on. If my Ana were here, I hope she would be proud of the man I’m trying to be.

~oOo~

I’m angry again after just a few hours, but I’m not writing it down. Ana went to bed early after a quick conversation with my mother. She didn’t touch her supper, to my great disappointment, and there’s been a manner of tiptoeing around one another, the source of which I can’t seem to isolate. Ana doesn’t deserve this. Perhaps I do, but she doesn’t. She didn’t deserve to have those years taken from her. My daughter… God rest her precious soul… didn’t deserve to have her life stolen from her, before she’d even begun to live. Yes, I’m fucking pissed again. I thought we’d bonded a little over her experience, and while she hasn’t quite avoided me, she hasn’t been as eager to spend time
together as before. It's about all I can manage to keep from being angry around her. So I'm supposed to write down my feelings, get them out on paper, so I won't take them out on anyone else. Fucking Flynn, thinks he knows best. He's not right this time. This isn't helping.

Another week passes, another two sessions, and more phone calls than I'd care to count. A plethora of angry words, scratched so hard into the leather-bound notebook that a few pages are torn and bleeding ink. It's all I can do to be tender and understanding with Ana, who is going about her recovery, enjoying our son, and trying to get to know what's left of me. She's started to relax around me again, I think, but there's a wall between us. She's trying... so perhaps the wall is entirely of my own design. I'm no closer to figuring out how to tear it down without frightening her away.

"When were you going to tell me?"

I look up from my computer screen. How long she's been standing there watching me, I'm not sure. Her forearms are crossed, the long sleeves covering fading scars on her no-longer-bound arm. She's positively livid, and doing nothing to cover her displeasure. Ana's always been so beautiful when she's angry with me.

"Tell you what, love?" I really have no specific idea why she's angry, but the boulders of acid in the pit of my stomach drive me to believe it has something to do with what she remembered in the playroom.

"That Jose called? Four times? Starting three weeks ago?"

Oh. I close my eyes with relief. "That."

"What, is there something else you're not telling me?"

"Of course not, love," I rise and come around the desk toward her. She takes a step back, and I stop. "Kate wasn't supposed to tell you yet," I distract.

"Kate? She knew too?" Ana rolls her eyes. "Of course. Who else is keeping things from me?"

"No one, baby. I..."

"So it's just you and Kate, running the show. She's supposed to be my best friend, Christian. You're not supposed to recruit her to go behind my back. You're also not supposed to filter my calls. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Concern for your recovery?" My grip is slipping. I can't hold on much longer. "I don't know... I'm a jealous man, Ana. Is that what you want to hear?"

She gasps. "That's what this is? Jealousy? You're afraid that a guy who is like a brother to me, whose father is best friends with mine, is going to steal the spotlight? What reason would I have to marry you if I'd had feelings for him? I don't know what's happened in the last three years, but I seriously doubt I became that kind of person," she says with disgust. "Jose holds no attraction for me. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it." I'm mad. And it's building. Keep the sentences short, Grey. Hold the fuck on. She's not herself.

She nods. "Then if you'll excuse me, I'm going to drive down to Portland today to see the exhibit he's just opened. I'll be back by dinnertime."
"What? You'll do no such thing."

She scoffs, eyes widening. "You're kidding, right?"

"I most certainly am not. You're barely recovered, Ana." Oh, how to salvage this.

"Exactly, I'm recovered. I'm off all but just the one medication, I'll be just fine for one day." She rolls her eyes again. "Oh why am I justifying this to you? I'm going." She turns on her heel.

"Stop right there," my voice thunders, eerily quiet. I've let go. I must reshape the situation before she bends it to her will and bad things come of it. She freezes, but doesn't turn. "You're not driving yourself anywhere, much less to Portland. You know what happens when your memory tries to come back. And even if that weren't of my utmost concern, the roads are wet from all the rain. I won't have you risking your life out there just to prove a point. That's final."

She turns slowly. The radiating anger in her eyes in palpable. I should know, I'm radiating an unhealthy dose of my own. "Excuse me?" she whispers.

"You heard me."

"I wish I hadn't. Was I aware of this before?"

"Aware of what?"

"That you're a complete and utter control freak?" Her words drip with venom.

The label makes me laugh suddenly. "Baby, when you're mine, you do as you're told." Oops. The words are out, and my subconscious is reaching for them, shouting, come back!

She inhales sharply. "I am not your property."

"No, that's not what I meant..."

"How the hell was I okay with this? I may not be worldly but I wouldn't have chained myself to someone so disrespectful, who doesn't support who I am and the friends I keep, someone so..."

"Domineering?" I suggest, my own anger unleashed. I've had enough of this. If she wants to throw names, I have a few of my own to add. "Or perhaps we should go with overbearing, difficult, cantankerous, bossy, frustrating, despotic, moody, stubborn, cross... there's a thesaurus worth of adjectives you've used on me over the last three years, it's hard to keep track."

Her exhale is quick and disbelieving. I've stumped her again. My verbal victory is short lived, however. "You're crazy."

"Baby, you have no idea." Our eyes lock, neither of us budging. "Taylor!" I shout.

"Sir?" He must have been within earshot for much of that. I really don't care.

"Mrs. Grey would like to go to Portland today. I'd like you to drive her. Take Sawyer with you. Please return her before dark, and make sure she wears a jacket." I go back to my desk, exhausted from the fight, and suppressing the wave of nausea from my concession.

"Very good, Sir. Ma'am?"

Ana is still frozen. I don't look at her, but I can see her by periphery. I barely see the figures on the screen. They could be characters in Chinese for all I care. "Go, Ana. It's what you wanted."
"Thank you, Taylor. Let me just say goodbye to Teddy first."

Every sound over the next several minutes vibrated in surround stereo through my skull. The hard footsteps of her leather boots, Teddy's disgruntled squeal at his mother's departure, the revving of the Q7's engine as it powers up the drive and out of earshot. All that's left are the plinks of drizzle on the glass wall behind me.

What the fuck just happened?

The pen in my hand snaps, and I drop it into the trash. I wasn't aware I'd picked it up, much less that I was gripping it to death. I run to the half bath to scrub the blue-black ink from my palm. What the fuck was that? We hadn't had a fight like that in over a year, and that was back when she was in her right mind. I could have just ruined everything in one fell swoop. And worse, I risked driving her into the arms of the photographer. In recent times, I've become more confident that her feelings for him are purely familial and platonic at best, but as she doesn't even recall the nightclub assault incident, I'm not sure her judgment is where it needs to be. Fortunately for me, Taylor is well aware of where I stand with the junior Mr. Rodriguez, and Luke is very guarding of Ana. So much so that I'd swear he has feelings for her as well, but his professionalism over the years, not to mention his psychological evaluation, indicates that his feelings are purely protective in nature. So I have nothing to worry about. Right?

Damn it, I should call Flynn. My mind is running away with me. I'm afraid something will happen on the road, that she'll be in another accident, even with Taylor behind the wheel this time. I'm afraid that Jose may take advantage of Ana's memory loss to push his luck. And I'm afraid my temper tantrum has driven her away, and I don't just mean to Portland. It would serve me right if she left me over my atrocious behavior. Sure, my own smart mouth has gotten me into trouble. But can't she see, on some level, that I'm just trying to keep her safe?

I need to get out.

I don the water-resistant navy track suit Ana gave me for my birthday. I'd begun to train for a marathon this year, a to-do item on what Ana calls my "bucket list." Ever the supportive wife, she's been my biggest cheerleader, not to mention that she's been an inspiration by jogging short distances with me along the forested trail that weaves between the properties of our neighborhood. The rain is sparse and rolls off the lightweight nylon as I wish my troubles would shed from me, but no such luck. I have some serious damage control to do when she gets home.

Reynolds keeps pace about ten meters back, his footfalls echoing mine along the mulch path. Even after all the mess with Hyde was over, I was paranoid enough, yes I admit it, to keep the current security force. Despite my recently verbalized list of character flaws, the original three Taylor hired have stayed, likely due in part to their generous compensation packages, but hopefully also, because Taylor did his homework and selected individuals who take the task seriously. Carter had been a godsend when Ted was born; a Navy Seal with a degree in early childhood development isn't something you see on every other military resume. And as a bonus, our son adores her. Ana, both mine and the reset version, find her a bit creepy. I really don't see why.

Ana. Of course, my thoughts always return to her. I came out here to escape, to let my heart pound, to stretch my legs and my lungs until they burn, to empty my head of all the garbage, the frustration, the anger, to see more clearly the path I need to take, and not the one under my feet. I need a new plan. Something, anything to make her see that I mean well, that I'm just a protective son of a bitch, sorry Mom, who can't help but exert the will to keep my loved ones safe. If she were my Ana, eye rolling aside, she'd understand. This version of her simply doesn't get it, and for the time being, until she remembers on her own, I don't want her to get it. But I still have to do
something, take the first step toward making things right.

And at the corner of the trail, at the wrought iron gate of an adjoining property, is one such aforementioned path.
I'm still so fucking pissed. I thought getting out, seeing a friend who I'd originally thought had written me off, would help take my mind off that horrible scene from this morning. And it did, for small moments. Jose's pointy goatee, for example, took my mind off Christian's episode for about twenty seconds. Then his urban European photos, blown up in all their architectural glory, probably distracted me for another fifteen seconds each, though a few actually reminded me of Christian, or at least, his cold, sterile, sky-castle at the heart of downtown. And then I'm mad again.

How dare he? When you're mine? Well, I'm not his, at least not in the property sense that he seemed to indicate. Is this a new protective-possessiveness since I lost my memory, or was he always like this? If his list of descriptives is any indication, I think it's safe, albeit cringe-worthy, to assume the latter. Then why in God's name did I consent to eternal matrimony? This is so ridiculously fucked up. He has some explaining to do, and so does another friend of mine.

My Blackberry pings.

From: Christian Grey
Subject: Forgiveness
Date: August 17 2014 16:03
To: Anastasia Grey

Ana,

I beg you to forgive my behavior toward you this morning. I was out of line.

There is so much you don't understand. I love you, and with the depth of my affection is an exceeding need to keep you safe. Your assumption was correct; I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you, and I would like to be. But some things are largely unexplainable. They need to be felt. I'm not sure how, or even if, I can portray certain events from our past in a way that won't bring on some very uncomfortable misunderstandings. That aside, my handling of our conversation this morning was atrocious, and for that, I sincerely apologize. You are in no way my property. Rather the opposite... I am yours. Always and forever.

I would like to make it up to you, in whatever manner you choose.

I have a gift for you. A peace offering, if you will. I'll see you in a little while.

xx

Christian Grey
I read it three times, reeling at his apology, and frowning at the formality of his signature. *What? There are things he won't tell me, because no matter how he tells me, I'll misunderstand him? He can't find a way?* He's so strange. There's just something about him, something I can't put my finger on, something I can't let go of. In the short time I've known him he's managed to draw me in, like "moth, meet flame... ZAP!" But then, he has this uncanny ability to drive me nuts at the same time. I shudder at the negative side of my emotional spectrum, and hope that it's just in reaction to his actions, and not his personality.

I lean to the right and rest my forehead against the glass. Rain droplets pelt and streak across the tinted windows, shining like beads, lit up by the halogen of swiftly passing cars.

My vision suddenly blurs. A pair of square truck headlights approaches in slow motion, seeming to almost stop, a moment suspended in time. A chill runs through me, and I feel the spray of shattered breakaway glass, the stench of oily, wet asphalt. The sensation of blood rushing to my head, being suspended upside down. Numbness. So... tired...

"Mrs. Gray! Ana!"

I blink, blessed air rushing into my lungs. The vehicle is stopped, my door flung wide open and Sawyer's hands are at my shoulders, bringing me back to the present.


He sighs with relief. "She's back, T."

Taylor is turned toward me, and he's on the phone. "She's all right, Sir. Yes, Sir." He presses a button on the handheld and holds it out. Christian's disembodied voice rises from the device.

"Ana? Baby, are you all right?"

I struggle to find my voice. "Um... I think so." I pause. "I think I just saw the accident."

"Oh, baby, no." His voice is laced with despair. "Everything's going to be fine. Taylor is going to drive you to the hospital. I'll meet you there."

*Oh, please... not there again.* The thought of returning to the hospital, or any medical facility for that matter, is thoroughly unpleasant. "No, I'm fine, I don't need to go," I say quickly. "I'm just a little shaken up, that's all."

"Anastasia, please, you should be looked over."

"I really don't want to go to the hospital, Christian... this happened before and I was fine, right? Your mom said so herself."

He sighs. "Fine. I'll call my mother to come have a look at you."

I nod. *Stupid, he can't hear your head rattle.* "I'm not hurt... I just want to come home." Home. When did the big house become home?

"All right. You're only ten minutes from home, baby. I love you," he says tenderly, and then his

"Yes, sir?"

"Sit in back with her. Keep her awake and talking. Make sure she stays warm."

"Understood."

Taylor takes the phone off speaker, and Sawyer shuts my door, moving to the other side and sliding in beside me. His hair is beaded with rain droplets, his jacket splotched with water stains. "Can I do anything, ma'am?"

I shake my head, eyes still dazed. "Make me forget?" I suggest.

Sawyer shakes his head. "I would if I could, ma'am. I can't forget it either."

"What?" I startle. "You saw it too?"

"I was there, ma'am."

"You were?" I'm still so unfocused. Of course he was, he just said so.

He sighs. I'm vaguely aware that Taylor has pulled back into the flow of highway traffic. "I can't tell you how sorry I am for what happened that day." He fishes in the rear of the SUV and drags out a travel blanket, draping it around my shoulders. I don't remember unbuckling my seatbelt; Luke must have done it. He wraps me securely and re-fastens the nylon strap, clicking it into the buckle.

"Were you driving?" The thought comes unbidden into my brain, but bypassed the filter. I'm sorry the instant I said it.

"No ma'am, I wasn't," he looks so utterly guilt-ridden.

I can't seem to find any words in me.

"Please keep talking, Mrs. Grey."

I inhale deeply. "Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm just fine. Why do you ask?"

"You were there, too." I reason.

"I was, but I wasn't as badly injured. Just a ruptured spleen and some bruising."

"Oh, just," I mumble sarcastically. My eyes are dragging. I feel so sleepy. I have to keep talking, Christian said to stay awake. I'm not sure why. "Did they let you keep it?"

"Keep it?"

"Your spleen."

Sawyer chuckles. " No, ma'am. I wasn't aware that was an option."

"Oh."

"Why?"
"I don't know. My cousin got to keep his appendix in some smelly preservative. Put it on a shelf like a trophy. It was creepy."

He chuckles again. "I can imagine."

"We're almost home, Mrs. Grey," Taylor says from the driver's seat.

Sawyer's eyes are on me, like he's not sure what to do with me. "Can I ask you a question, ma'am?"

"Sure."

He swallows. "What's it like?"

"What, remembering?"

He nods.

I sigh. "Like getting the wind knocked out of my. I see it, I think I'm supposed to recognize what's happening, to know what it means, but it doesn't connect."

"Sounds uncomfortable," he says after a moment.

"Just confusing. Frustrating too, sometimes." And exhausting. I don't think I have the energy to continue the earlier fight with Christian now. I was so looking forward to giving him a piece of my mind, but the email and now the resurfaced memory fragment have numbed me, my rehearsed rant falling away.

"Forgive the question, ma'am. It was out of line."

"It's okay, Luke. You care, that's a good thing."

He nods once.

Taylor brings the vehicle to a stop at the side entry. In a second, my door has been flung open again and there he is, in all his copper-haired glory, gray eyes shining. His hands are on my face, unbuckling my safety belt, lifting me into his arms. "Are you all right?"

I nod, pressing my forehead to his neck as he carries me. I want to resist, to remind him that I can walk, but I don't have the energy. "I'm still so mad at you."

I feel him swallow. "I know, baby. I'm still so mad at me, too." He carries me into the suite, but instead of bringing me to the bed, he settles me on the sitting room chaise lounge and pulls a nearby blanket over my legs. He drops down beside me, eyes searching my face. "My mother is on her way to look you over. Can I get you anything?"

I shake my head. I'm not sure what to say to him.

"Did Jose feed you?"

I nod, and he seems satisfied, and then hesitant.

"Did you get my email?"

I nod.

He sighs. "May I ask what you remembered?"
Yes you may, I want to say, but I think better of it. He's being so contrite and caring, the Christian I've grown so fond of, and I don't want to be the cause of another of his mood swings. "Headlights, broken glass, rain... I think I was upside down. Sawyer was there."

Christian blanches. "You saw Sawyer?"

"No, we talked about it on the way. He was there that day; I guess I just mentally placed him." I see Christian's expression, and I think I can deduce that he's hoping his face would be the only one I'd see in a resurfaced memory. It sure would help things make sense, I can definitely admit that.

"Do you remember anything else?" he asks gently.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry."

"Oh no, baby, don't be." He folds me tenderly into his arms, smoothing my hair, rubbing circles over my back. I push my arms out of the blanket and grip the lapels of his linen shirt. I want to shake him for earlier, but I'm content to hold him to me, so he can't escape into his master of the universe persona, but he smells positively delicious, like fabric softener and his expensive shampoo. Maybe this is how to do it: keep him close and he's the Christian I like to be with; approach with hostility and he puts up the forcefield and opens fire. I'd do anything to avoid option two again. Anything, except giving into his will and losing myself, that is... this was my fear from day one.

"Thank you, Gail," I hear Christian's mother's muffled voice from the hallway. She pushes the door open and Christian releases me, tucking the blanket around my shoulders again. "Hello, Ana, I heard you had another episode today. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. It's actually thanks to Christian I'm not being scraped off the highway... I shouldn't be driving," I say.

Dr. Grace gasps. "You weren't, were you?"

"No! No, I wasn't," I explain what happened, and she nods her assent.

"I'll make another appointment with your neurologist; I think we'll want to make that a regular thing for a while," she decides, taking a penlight from her purse and shining it first into one eye, and then the other. "It's rare but not unheard of for resurfacing memories to cause short lapses. You feel all right, otherwise?"

I nod. "Just confused that I can't place what I saw, that's all."

"Totally understandable. Have some dinner and relax, and call me if you need anything, all right?" She kisses the top of my head and stands.

"Okay, thank you for coming," I tell her, and she smiles.

"Christian, walk me out?"

"Of course, Mother," he rises. "I'll be right back, love." He kisses my forehead and exits, pulling the door halfway closed behind him. I lay my head against the back of the lounge, breathing deeply. In what feels like only a minute, he's returned, sitting beside me and tucking a stray lock behind my ear. "Aside from the obvious, how was your day?" he asks.

"It was good," I breathe. "Nice to see a friendly face. Jose told me a lot. Even admitted a few things, I think I understand better why you're not sure about him. He's real sorry about the baby."
He sends his condolences."

Christian gulps, and his eyes take on an old sadness. "That was thoughtful of him."

I sit up a bit and spontaneously wrap my arms around him. He hesitates, but then leans into me, holding me as well. "I'm sorry, Christian... I didn't mean to bring that up again."

"It's all right, baby, nothing to be sorry about. While we're on the subject of apologies though, I have one of my own, and I do owe you an explanation." He releases me, gently pushing me to lie back, and brushing my cheek with the backs of his fingers.

"You don't have to..." I start, but Christian interrupts.

"Yes I do, Ana. I've gotten my way, every single day of my adult life. I still expect it, and when you entered my life, I instantly felt the irresistible urge to protect you from all manner of things," he explains. "These two tendencies double down on your free will, and we've clashed rather viciously, as you experienced this morning. In the end, I'm glad I got my way today, as things could have turned out very differently, but I was wrong in how I went about it." He sighs. "It's devastatingly hard to admit, but I was an... arse, as you've so finely put it in the past. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"An... arse?"

"Yes."

"I've called you an arse?"

He smiles. "Yes."

I blink. Name calling really isn't my thing. "Have I really called you all those other things?"

"Most of them in print, but yes."

"In print?"

"Email banter is one of your specialties, Mrs. Grey."

I snort. "I'd like to see some of those."

His smile fades a bit. "I'll see what I can dig up for you." He kisses my lips briefly. "Are you hungry?"

I nod, a little less enthusiastically than he probably expects, but more so than I feel.

"Good. But first, would you like your gift now, or after we eat?"

"Gift?" I eye him warily. "Is it meant to placate me?"

"Not at all, baby. It just rang out as something you'd really like. So... now?" He studies me expectantly.

I nod, giving in. Whatever it is, I'd better make it look like I like it. He's so happy to give to the people he loves, this much I know. A grin spreads across his face. He pecks my lips again. "Wait here."

He leaves, pulling the door mostly closed behind him again, and shouting for Mrs. Taylor. So
apparently, he has an accomplice in his plotting. The thought makes me smile.

It's several minutes before I hear him bump the door open again, his arms laden with a large, wicker picnic basket covered in a tartan blanket.

"A picnic? For dinner?" The thought is pretty nice actually, but the weather outside would disagree.

He laughs gently, setting the basket down on the floor beside me. "I don't think you'd want to eat these." These? I swing my legs over the side of the chaise and tentatively pull back the blanket.

My heart melts.

Two miniature Sams climb over each other, struggling to escape from their wicker prison. Christian lifts them out and sets them in my lap. I choke on a sob. Wagging tails whip my forearms, tongues caress my skin, and warm, wiggling bodies, one slate gray and one fawn brindle, bump against me, stumbling over my legs, rearing up to reach my face. My arms come around them immediately.

"Oh Christian," I gasp.

"Do you like them?"

"I love them," I sob, laughing at the same time. "They’re like my Sam." The memory hurts, wrenches my heart, but these new lives in my lap return my old friend to me.

Christian grins like a little boy. "Good. Because I'd hate to have to explain to Teddy why we couldn't keep them."

"He's seen them already?"

Christian nods. "Helped me name them, too. I'd like you to meet Ludwig and Tess," he introduces the gray and fawn respectively. "A neighbor's whippet had puppies; I saw an advertisement when I went running this morning. The Avery family was only too pleased to have them come live with us, a good home close by and all that." He pats the gray one fondly.

I regain my composure, cuddling the little ones. "Why not Beethoven and Durbeyfield?" I tease.

Christian laughs, amused that I made the connection. "If you'd like. Though you can explain that to our son, and teach him to pronounce them."

I smile fondly at him. "I love them, Christian. And the original names too. Thank you."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

White walls. Damn these white walls, in all their sterile coldness. The squeaky oxford sneakers, white coats, bright fluorescents. They’re all distracting me, keeping me from my love. From Ana.

“Ana!” I call to her, the white laminate tiles slippery under my bare feet. The janitor in a navy jumpsuit sneers coldly, pushing his filthy mop in my path, his sharp, jagged, grimy teeth bared. The floor tilts and I slide down the long hallway. It’s getting dimmer, more crowded… I have to elbow my way through a throng of brittle, elderly nurses in silly white hats. They smell of medicine, and I don’t think they can hear me. They’re blocking me on purpose. “No! I need to get
“Christian!” My mother spreads her arms, and there is no one else. She holds out her hand for me. Her eyes are sad.

“Mom? Where’s Ana? Where’s my love?”

She brings a finger to her lips and pulls me forward, into a dark room. The room. The one we spent thirty days in, consumed with grief and worry. My heart pounds. She’s there, in the bed, pale, skeletal and frail, more than she ever was. No...

“No… Ana?” I pick up her cold hand. Her skin feels like crepe paper. “Oh baby… no…”

“It’s time,” my mother says.

Time? Time for what?

A machine beeps. The tone dulls and lengthens, as with a low battery, and then another joins the first.

“What’s happening?” I demand? I look from my mother to Ana, and see her chest fall once more. It doesn’t rise again. My blood runs cold.

Oh God… “No! Ana! Baby, no!”

The light is everywhere.

“No!”

My eyes burst open. Chocolate walls… this is our bedroom. The familiar color pulls me back into some semblance of reality; I’m drenched and freezing, tangled in satin bedsheets. My arms shoot out frantically. I’m alone in our bed.

“I’m home. It was just a dream. Not real,” I tell myself, violently kicking off the sheets and swinging my legs over the side. I need to find her. I have to make sure she’s all right. My legs carry me, barefoot and dressed in damp pajamas, bursting through the master suite doors and striding across the house. “Ana?” I call. My heart pounds. The kitchen is deserted. So is the great room. “Ana!”

And then I see her.

A gathering of the staff, plus Teddy and Taylor’s daughter Sophie, are surrounding the deck, watching the children play with the puppies, but in this moment, my eyes are only for Ana. She’s sitting further back, curled in one of the deck chairs, just watching. I move through the sliding door, come behind her and, without warning, curl my arms around her shoulders. She jumps a little.

“Oh! Good morning,” she greets me, bringing her hands to rest on my forearms.

I sigh into her hair, press a kiss to the top of her head and inhale slowly, soothing myself. “I couldn’t find you,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry,” she replies. “You looked so peaceful; I couldn’t bring myself to wake you.”

“Please, wake me next time,” I beg her softly.
She pushes back against the chair. I release her and she stands, turning into me and gasping a little when she sees the state of my t-shirt. “You’re soaked,” she observes, but brings her arms around my waist regardless. I hold her to my chest. “What happened? Bad dream?”

I nod against her cheek. “I thought I’d lost you. I needed to make sure you were all right,” I say, suddenly consumed with the urge to be completely honest, to tell her absolutely everything. I hope for her sake it doesn’t last long.

“I’m here,” she soothes, running her hands over my damp back. And she’s right, she really is here. Flynn was right, I suppose. I really must begin to regard her as my Ana, because she is. She never stopped being mine. I’m trembling, but no longer from fear, because she really is here with me. I’ll take her any way I can get her, as always.

“You’re freezing, Christian. Go change into something dry and then we’ll have breakfast, all right?” She pulls back. I search her face, her blue eyes are filled with concern. For me. I heave a sigh and nod. Her gaze follows me back into the house. Aside from Taylor, who gives me a brief nod, everyone else is oblivious, and I’m relieved about that.

I’ve returned not ten minutes later, far more presentably. Ana takes a moment to appreciate my appearance, rising again to greet me, this time bringing her lips to mine. “Good morning,” she murmurs. I suppose it’s a sign of forgiveness for yesterday. I hope she’s forgiven me. I have to ask.

“Forgive me Ana, for yesterday.”

She sighs. “Talk with me, next time.” I understand the subtlety; she’s asking me to level with her. She’s negotiating. My Ana always negotiates. Her forgiveness is worth this concession. My lips curl upward.

“Agreed. Wholeheartedly.”

She kisses me again.

There’s a tugging on my pants leg. “Hey!” Teddy hollers, toddling his way over, a determined look in his eyes and wraps both arms around his new canine companion. Ludwig yips in surprise and releases the linen fabric. I roll my eyes as Teddy awkwardly returns the dark puppy to its circle of admirers. I sense the imminent destruction of rugs, clothing and various textiles over the next few months.

Sophie giggles. She’s holding a struggling Tess in her lap. “Miss Taylor,” I call, curling my index finger at her. She’s instantly wary. The child is intimidated by me. I’m not sure why. She hands the puppy to her father and walks over to me, timidly, shoulders forward.

“Hi Mr. Grey, Mrs. Grey,” she greets us nervously.

“Your dad told you about Mrs. Grey’s accident, didn’t he?” I ask.

“Yes, sir. I’m glad you’re getting better, ma’am,” she says, formally. She’s more than unnerved, she’s downright apprehensive. I turn slightly to Ana.

“Dearest, this is Taylor’s daughter, Sophie. She’s staying through next week before school starts. She’s been accepted at Brighton, isn’t that right, Sophie?”

“Yes, sir, I’m very excited.” Her face brightens a little.

“I imagine you are,” I bend a bit so I’m at her level. “It’s quite a responsibility, representing
yourself admirably at a new school. Do you believe you’re up for it?” I ask, maintaining a 

businesslike tone, though a smile threatens to crack.

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Grey,” she promises, and I have no doubt of it. However, I’m not through 

with my run of intimidation.

“Do you believe you’re up for even more responsibility?” She nods quickly. I risk a short glance in 

Taylor’s direction; my head of security is running two fingers over his bottom lip in amusement. I 

raise an eyebrow and turn my eyes to his daughter. “Do you like the puppies?”

She nods again, hopefully.

“Good. Because frankly, Mrs. Grey is going to need quite a lot of help caring for them. You’ll be 

in charge of their care when you’re here. Will I be able to count on you to live up to this task?”

My stern expression has lost its effect. Sophie’s face breaks into a wide grin, and in less than a 

second she’s thrown her arms around my neck. “I won’t let you down, sir,” she squeaks in my ear.

I roll my eyes and hug her gently, before patting her back and releasing her. “Make sure you clear it 

with your father. Now go have Mrs. Taylor show you what they eat,” I instruct.

“You really didn’t have to do that, sir.” The group has largely broken up; Gail and Sophie have 

taken the puppies inside, and Ana has scooped up a squealing Teddy and followed them. The 

remaining staff has scattered, shamefully brushing off the giddy effect of a cuteness fix.

“I take care of my family, Jason,” I remind him. “Besides, they made Ana happier than I’ve seen 

her in a long while. Two birds, you know.” I thrust my fists in my pockets, uncomfortable in the 

moment. “Have you made arrangements for this evening?” I change the subject.

“Yes, sir. You’ll have Owen and Garrett. Which vehicles will you be taking?”

“Has the Allroad been delivered?”

“It’ll be here within the hour.”

“That and the five, then. And do me a favor… look into what it would take to put in an invisible 

fence. Map out the yard and get a few quotes, I won’t have those little monsters running off and 

breaking hearts in my home. And make whatever modifications necessary to the alarm systems so 

they don’t go setting everything off. Better yet, I’ll make a call to Gia and have her draw up plans 

for a small room for them off the kitchen. Just fix the alarms in the meantime.”

“I’ll get on it, sir.”

“And don’t work too hard, Jason,” I smirk.

“Oh, I don’t think Sophie will let me,” he chuckles.

~ ANA ~

Teddy hummed all the way to Bellevue. It was rather cute, and helped distract my nerves a bit, but 

there’s a creeping feeling that I’m about to get a massive dose of family overload, and I’m still 

shaky on the word family as it pertains to my in-laws, with Kate being the only exception. I look
over to Christian, and he’s scowling.

“What’s wrong?”

He glances toward me, and then returns his eyes back to the road, his expression softening a little. “Nothing, baby. Just work stuff.”

“Oh. Anything I can do?”

“I wish there was. But thank you.” He smiles. I return to looking out the window, not looking at anything in particular, letting my eyes lose focus so everything blurs together. It’s relaxing. I glance over to Christian after a few minutes, and he’s scowling again.”

“Spill.”

Christian glances over to me again, and the corners of his mouth twitch up. “Our little bumblebee’s racket is getting to me today, that’s all.”

I turn and peer into the backseat, and Teddy has instantly stopped, but he’s scowling straight ahead. It takes me only a second to realize he’s exchanging an identical look of displeasure with his father in the rear-view. I snicker, and Teddy catches me, his face blossoming into a smile. I’m siding with my little man on this one.

“Welcome, Ana,” Grace pecks my cheek and relieves me of Teddy, who snakes his little arms around his grandmother’s neck. I swear, Dr. Grace doesn’t look old enough to be anybody’s grandmother, but since I’ve known her, she’s filled the role exceptionally, except that I’d hoped to use Teddy as a human shield against family overload, and now I’m feeling exposed and nervous again.

“I’m so glad you’re well, dear girl,” Christian’s father greets me with open arms. He’s warm and strong, and has an Alan Rickman look to him. I didn’t notice that before, but then, I’d only seen him just that once, the day I left the hospital. He releases me before the embrace becomes too awkward and I have to do that ‘okay, enough’ back-pat. I hope to get through the weekend without being mortified too many times.

Kate deposits little Ava in my arms without warning. And what a little blond angel she is; I didn’t get to really meet her properly the last time, still playing the good little invalid and all. “Hi sweetie,” I coo. I’m a little surprised with myself, baby talk isn’t usually my thing, but this little girl is absolutely delicious. Her cheeks dimple as she smiles up at me.

“Well let’s go be girls somewhere and let the boys do their… whatever.” Mia steals Teddy from Grace, heaving him into her arms and striding through the front doors.

Kate giggles, leaning toward me as we follow after her. “She’s been in quite the mood today, maybe we’ll get some good gossip,” she conspires under her breath. I look back over my shoulder. Christian looks worried. I offer him an ‘I’m okay’ smile, and he nods.

“So what’s up with you, M?” she shrugs, combing her fingers through Teddy’s messy locks. Kate glares at her. “Okay, okay!” she holds her hands up. Ted scampers off to a wicker basket and digs for toys; apparently the Greys keep a stash of kid-friendly things around the house, and I’m grateful for the distraction it provides my son. Mia sighs. “I’m having trouble with
Ethan, that’s all.”

“What do you mean? Are you guys having problems?” Kate asks worriedly, leaning forward. “Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No… no, please don’t say anything. He’s been really distant the last couple of days. I don’t know what to do.” Mia twists her fingers together. “Can I tell you guys something? You have to promise not to say anything. I mean it.”

“Of course, Mia, you can tell us anything,” Kate promises.

“I’m serious, Kavanagh. I know he’s your brother, but you can’t repeat this. I’m trusting you.”

“We won’t say anything, Mia,” I tell her.

Mia glances from Kate, to me, and then back to Kate. She heaves a breath. “Ethan as much as asked me to marry him last week,” she whispers.

Kate gasps, bringing a hand to her mouth. “I hope you said yes!”

“I wanted to, I did,” Mia starts talking faster, completely flustered. “But he didn’t really give me the chance, he kinda fudged it; we’d talked about the future, and he said he wanted to ask me, but he wanted to ask my dad first… oh you guys, it was so un-romantic, and I just wanted to cry.”

I’m trying to absorb all this information; I wasn’t completely aware that Ethan and Mia were dating; Mia hadn’t talked about him the few times we’d spent together in the past weeks, and I hadn’t really gotten that impression when Ethan had been over for dinner the night I went home. Ethan’s like a little brother to me too, I mean, he is Kate’s little brother, but he’s always been both cool and weird at the same time. I guess I’d assumed he was gay. I vow to keep this uneducated observation to myself. Ava is dozing in my arms, and Teddy is happily pressing buttons on a toy helicopter. Thank goodness for the obliviousness of children.

Kate scoots over to Mia and puts her arm around the dark-haired girl’s shoulders. “I could kill him.”

“You can’t say anything!” Mia squeaks.

“I won’t! But seriously Mia, his brain to mouth filter is broken. He always says what he’s thinking, doesn’t bother rewording, it just comes out like vomit. I’m sure he had something awesome planned. So, do you know if he talked to your dad?”

“Yeah, he went to Dad’s office Thursday, came back looking like somebody died. I’m so worried that Dad scared him off, we’ve barely spoken since.” Her face crinkles.

“Have you talked to Grace?” I ask.

Mia shakes her head. “I can’t ask Mom, I don’t want her and Dad to fight over whatever this is. You know what they got into with both your weddings.”

What? “Actually, I don’t remember,”

Mia blinks. “Oh, Ana, I’m so sorry… I keep forgetting. Um… Mom and Dad had pretty rare disagreements about your prenup and then over Grandma Grey’s heirloom ring for Kate, it got pretty bad a couple times. I’d not seen them that mad since Christian was getting in fights in school, and I don’t want them pitted against each other again over me and Ethan. I couldn’t bear
the guilt.”

Prenup? Christian was fighting? We’re going to have words later, my husband and I. I think it’s about time I demand full disclosure. I’m tired of feeling like a stranger in what’s supposed to be my life. But for now, this is about Mia. I only wish I had an idea what to do.

“What would you like us to do?” I ask.

Mia shrugs. “I don’t know. Nothing, really. I just wanted to talk. I can’t think of what to do myself, and I hate being alone in dealing with it.” She brushes her fingers over her wet eyes, swiping away the tears. “We should probably get back; Mom will wonder where we’ve gone.”

~ CHRISTIAN ~

“What’s this about?” I demand. My father’s taken it upon himself to invite the younger Kavanagh sibling and myself into his office. Invite is too polite a word, but little Kavanagh doesn’t know that. Coerce is more like it… the softening of the voice, slowing of speech as a means of calming or subduing, much as he used to do to lure me into a conversation about one of my many juvenile fuck-ups. In short, this can’t be good, but I don’t care. I stiffen immediately, my body responding to what may ultimately prove to be an unfounded accusation, unfounded as I have little contact with the other to-be-accused. Ethan has taken one of the seats opposite the desk and Dad is in his high-back desk chair. I remember too many times spent in my youth on the side of this desk, not one of them pleasant. I straighten, leaning against the arm of the other seat and fold my arms over my chest. If I’m to be accused, I’d like to at least appear to have my bearings.

“Ethan has something he’d like to ask you,” my father announces, gesturing to the bundle of nerves to my left. “I’ve decided to reserve judgment until after you’ve given yours.”

I raise an eyebrow. This is news. “How generous of you,” My following smirk is wary. “Might I ask what this pertains to?”

Ethan opens and closes his mouth several times. God, he’s beside himself.

I roll my eyes and sigh. Of course, he needs something only I can give him. Something I have in abundance, likely in a quantity I won’t miss. “How much, Mr. Kavanagh, and more importantly, what’s it for?”

“I… no, that’s not it at all,” he stumbles over his tongue. “I would never… that’s to say, this isn’t…”

“Calm down, son.” My father’s risen from his chair. He walks around his desk and leans against the front. “Tell Christian what you’ve asked me.”

Yes, he’s fractionally less intimidating from this position. I’m slightly relieved myself, more that this isn’t about money, as I’d originally thought. Dad looks almost amused. Ethan still looks terrified. He heaves a ragged breath. Jesus, I hope he doesn’t cry.

“As you know, Mia and I… we’ve been together a long time,” he stumbles, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. “She means the world to me, and I think I mean as much to her. I… I’d like your blessing to ask for her hand.”
I laugh. Why am I here? “You’re asking me?” The boy looks devastated. Yes, he’s a year older than my wife, but he looks like just a boy, especially now. “Why the fuck are you asking me?”

“Christian,” my father warns. “Mr. Kavanagh has already asked me the same. And as Mia’s father, the blessing traditionally falls to me. However, you’ve been closer to Mia than I ever was. You were there for her many times when I couldn’t be. Therefore, I thought it only appropriate that Ethan should receive this blessing from both of us. And I expect that you’ll treat this as seriously as I do.”

“And what about Elliott? Shouldn’t he have a say?”

My father snorts. “Elliott is as oblivious as you are intuitive. Besides, he wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut.”

My stomach is frozen. I shouldn’t have to do this. I don’t want anyone to ever have my sister. The thought that this boy has probably already had her makes my blood sour. Would I have been this uncomfortable if this was my daughter? Of course not. She’d be locked in an ivory tower, bound by a chastity belt, having taken a vow of eternal celibacy. No man would have ever touched her.

But this isn’t my daughter. I force myself not to dwell on the fact that this situation will never come to be for her. This is about my sister, my crazy, talented, usually tactless, darling sister. Mia was the center of my universe when we were children. She was the light in a sea of darkness. Part of my salvation, I owe to her. She deserves all the happiness in the world. But can Mr. Kavanagh give her such a thing? I close my eyes. In the last three years, my eyes have only been for Ana. I’d largely neglected Mia, and a surge of guilt washes over me. But as I think back, I notice subtle memories, her laughing smile, dancing with Ethan at various charity functions, sharing a secret between them, the time I’d caught them making out behind the tent, taking my rowboat into the sound on a calm morning, tipping it on purpose and laughing hysterically together. They didn’t know I’d been watching.

“Christian?” my father’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Are you going to respect her? To always put her before yourself, and to love her no matter how angry you are or how stupid a thing she’s done?”

Ethan’s eyes brighten, sincerity shining from within. “Yes. Always.”

“Do you promise?” I demand.

“Of course!” he vows, without hesitation. “Mia’s my life. I’d do anything for her.”

I sigh heavily. For some reason, I believe him. “Then you have my reluctant blessing.” I offer my hand, and he shakes it. “I do hope you have a suitable proposal in mind.” I share a glance with my father. He’s pale, but barely suppressing laughter. Yes, Dad. I can be reasonable. I believe he was looking forward to watching me frighten the pants off the Kavanagh boy. Oh God, this boy is going to be my brother. Lord help me.

~oOo~

“You brought home a neighbor’s puppy?” My mother’s face is incredulous. So much so that she’s stopped cutting vegetables. I absently crunch on another carrot stick, my eyes pointed out the long
kitchen window where Elliott is tossing my son in the air. I’m seconds from intervening when I see Ana, leaning against the deck table, call out something I can’t hear, and Elliott stops, shrugging, and sets Teddy down. My father coaxes him over with a Frisbee, their three-on-three game briefly suspended.

“Plural, Mom. Puppies. Just two… Ana had a dog as a child, had just lost him before the memory gap, so it’s still a bit fresh for her. I thought they might cheer her up.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing, darling,” she resumes cutting, and I marvel at her skill. I still have trouble with most food preparation; Ana’s largely refused my help in the kitchen since that finger-slicing incident that resulted in a trip to the emergency room. How humiliating to be sedated for stitches… I run my finger absently over the scar across my thumb.

“Out with it, Mother,” I say, exasperated.

She gives me The Look. “I simply mean that you can’t just take them back when you tire of them,” she lectures. “We didn’t have pets for you children for good reason; our busy lives wouldn’t have allowed for their proper care and attention.” She doesn’t mention that my instability wouldn’t have been good for a family pet, if one had been in my path during a particularly frustrating moment, and she doesn’t have to. The thought makes me shudder. I’d have felt horrible, having taken my anger out on an innocent being. I’m not sure I would have let that happen even then, but I certainly was unstable.

“I understand your concern, Mom. I do,” she meets my eyes and the message passes between us. “But Ana adores them, and Teddy will have companionship and learn responsibility. I did think this through.”

My mother sighs. “All right, darling. Then I’m happy for you. Did you get everything squared away with Ethan?” She smiles conspiratorially. I roll my eyes.

“God help me, he’d better take care of her,” I growl.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.” Mom’s smile has turned wistful. This can’t be easy for her; all her children grown, getting married and having children of their own.

I have the sudden, irresistible urge to ask her. “Mom, how do you do it?”

She cocks her head to the side. “Do what?”

I sweep my hand around. “All this. Everything. Taking care of everyone, and then letting us go. It’s so natural, so effortless. Everything you do, it draws us back home. How?”

She smiles. “It’s not as easy as it looks.” She sets down the knife and wipes her hands on her apron, then turns to me. “Thank you, for letting me know that you’ve noticed.”

I can’t help myself. I step in, curling my arms around her, pulling her against my chest. My mother… she didn’t bring me into this world, but she gave me life. Her arms come up tentatively, palms softly against my back, and I exhale, closing my eyes. It’s so… right. I wish I’d been okay with this contact long ago. I crave it now, as she runs her hand lightly up and down my spine. It calms me. She just knows.

“We’re so lost right now, Mom. I don’t know what to do,” I whisper.

“I know, darling. I know.” She holds me tightly, and then moves to release me, but I hold on.
“Not yet. Please,” I beg softly.

“Okay. It’s all right, Christian.” Her palms resume their soft caresses over my back, the once-forbidden zone desperate for my mother’s loving touch.

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” I breathe into her ear. I’m not about to cry, thankfully, but feel desperate, needy even. “I want her to remember us. I need her to remember. I want her to have her life back, the way it was. Everything was right and good. She was so happy. She doesn’t deserve this.”

“Hush, Christian,” she soothes. “You haven’t done anything wrong, quite the opposite, actually. You’ve been an amazing husband and father, and even more so since Ana woke up. She’s recovered beautifully in such a short time, because of you. I’m blown away at how well she’s done. And she is remembering, perhaps not in the way we’d hoped, but the memories are there. She’s been talking to John?”

“Yes.” The one word is all I can manage.

“Then you’re doing everything right. Just have faith and be patient. She’s still scared…”

“She’s scared?” I pull back suddenly. “Of what, of me?”

My mother hasn’t quite released me, and my hands are at her shoulders. I’m torn between the need to be held further and the desperate drive to know. “Tell me,” I demand.

“No darling, she’s afraid of what she doesn’t know.”

“She’s told you this?”

“We’ve spoken.” This is news to me.

“What has she told you?” My mind races with half-formed conclusions.

My mother’s hands run up the length of my arms, over my shoulders and cup my face. I grasp her wrists, gently but firmly, holding them there.

“Well, she’s a bit intimidated, but more with the situation than with you. These memories, and the way they surface, she’s afraid of what they mean, since she doesn’t remember the circumstances surrounding them. She hasn’t yet connected herself to what she’s seen, and it bothers her. Imagine yourself being thrust into a situation where you don’t remember how you came to be there, but that everyone around you expects you to assume a role that is completely unfamiliar and more than a little uncomfortable.”

“I only expect her to be herself,” I say.

“Then tell her that,” Mom urges me. “She’s taking direction from you. Ask her what she wants. Really ask her. And really listen to what she tells you, even if you don’t like what you hear.”

“What if…” I can’t say it. But I have to. “What if she wants to leave me?”

“Oh Christian, I don’t think that’s the case… she’s crazy about you, even now. She wants to be near you. She told me that she worked really hard to walk again for you, and that your reaction was so much more than she’d expected. She’s working so hard to come back to you. She needs to know that her efforts aren’t going unnoticed.”
“She thinks I don’t notice?”

“No, darling, I’m telling you that you need to show her that you notice. You need to more than notice; you need to cheer her on, every step of the way. Don’t leave her on her own to cope with this. Take some time off, spend it with her. She’s making great strides with Teddy, but that’s because they spend all day every day together. The company will be there when you get back. Okay?”

“You think that’ll help?” I’m grasping. I’ll take any suggestion, no matter how farfetched at this point, and this sounds completely reasonable. So why hadn’t I thought of it?

“I know it will. Now help me with these.” She releases me and turns back to her food prep, handing me a bowl. I put my hands up.

“Oh no, I’m not allowed to work with food. My wife won’t let me.”

Mom laughs. “I’m not asking you to cut anything. It’s doubtful you’ll gouge yourself with a wooden spoon; here, mix these together.”

~oOo~

“What do you suppose they’re up to?” Ana asks me. I’ve come up behind her, wrapped my arms around her waist. She’s watching Ethan and Mia stroll along the path toward the dock.

I chuckle. “He’s about to propose.”

Ana spins around in my hold. “You’re kidding!” I shake my head. “You knew?”

“Yes. He asked Dad’s permission this afternoon.”

Ana’s jaw drops.

“Please keep it to yourself; I’m sure they’ll want to announce it.”

“But how do you know?” she demands.

“Ethan sort of asked my blessing as well.”

Ana looks confused. “That’s not exactly traditional, is it?”

I laugh. “No, it isn’t. But I appreciated it all the same.”

She turns around in my hold again, resting her hands over mine. The moonlight is fairly strong, but the distant pair is shrouded in darkness and privacy, so there’s really nothing to watch. She’s quiet for a while.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I whisper.

She sighs. “Did you ask Ray? For me?”

“Yes.”
“And how did that go?”

I chuckle. “We’re married, aren’t we?”

“Seriously though, what did he say?”

“He asked, obviously, what the rush was, and I said that I knew my mind wouldn’t change, no matter how much time passed, and that I didn’t see reason to make you wait, since it was what you wanted. And then he consulted with you.”

“He consulted with me, on your proposal?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not very traditional either.”

“Well I’d already asked you, so it was more of a formality.”

She pauses, considering. “What else did he say?”

I think back. “He demanded that I take good care of you, that I let you be yourself, and to always talk to you before things have a chance to get uncomfortable.” Now it’s my turn to be quiet. I ponder whether I’m living up to those promises.

“Stop that,” she chides me.

“What?”

“You’re wondering how well you’re keeping you word.”

“How do you do that?” I whisper.

She shrugs. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

I nod, my chin resting on top of her head. “You know me so well. Even when you don’t think you do.” I press a kiss to her hair and rest my cheek over that spot. I rock her from side to side. We’re both quiet for a few moments, enjoying the cool evening air and lightning bugs over the landscape. I sigh. “I have a short business trip to Manhattan next week, and then I’d like to take a few weeks off. We can go on vacation, wherever you’d like. The house in Aspen, Europe for a second honeymoon, time out on the boat, somewhere new, or just stay home, you choose. Whatever you’d like, we’ll do.”

“You’re going to New York?” Her voice is small, worried.

“This will be the last trip for a while, I promise.”

She sighs. “You have a boat?”

“Correction, we have a boat.”

“Have I been on it before?”

“Oh yes, many times. You’ve indulged me and taken sailing lessons, in fact. We haven’t been out for a while; perhaps we’ll go this weekend. Would you like that?”

She looks down at her hands.
“Ana, what’s wrong?”

She sniffs. Oh, what have I done?

“Baby?” I turn her gently in my arms, cupping her chin so she has to look at me. Her eyes are tearing, but she hasn’t given in yet. “Talk to me, please.”

She sniffs again, shaking her head. “It’s silly.”

“Don’t do that, baby.” I take her hands and lead her to one of the lounge chairs, pulling her into my lap. “Talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking about. No matter how trivial you think it is, if it upsets you, I need to know.”

She shudders a sigh. Her fingers pick at her charm bracelet. She’s still wearing it, despite everything. “Please don’t be mad,” she begins, her voice apprehensive. “Was there an argument about our wedding? About a prenup or something?”

I sigh. “This family is a gossiping bunch,” I remark offhand. “Anastasia, we didn’t sign a prenuptial agreement. Did someone tell you that we did?”

She looks confused. “No, not exactly. It sounded like there was some disagreement though.”

“There was. But I refused to drag you through a prenup. I trusted you then, implicitly. Regardless what others thought of our rather sudden engagement, I didn’t feel that one was necessary for us. If you ever decided to leave me, you might as well take everything. My worldly goods mean nothing if you aren’t here to share them.”

“You trust me that much?” She sounds incredulous.

“Yes. No question.”

“But there’s still stuff you won’t tell me.” Her voice is torn, likely between the weight of my admission and the depth of this feeling of disconnect, between what she wants to know and what I’m not ready to tell her, and the war within her is preventing a deluge of tears. My heart breaks for her.

“Ana, my love… I have been telling you things. You will know everything, in time. I promise you.” And it’s true, I will tell her… I have to, or risk losing her again. I struggle for a compromise. “How about you ask me some questions, and I’ll answer them the best I can. If I can’t right now, I’ll give you the best answer I can for the moment. All right?”

She sniffs again. I shift slightly to fish a handkerchief from my pocket and hand it to her. She dabs her nose. “Can I start?”

“Of course you can.”

She gulps. “What’s with everyone carrying handkerchiefs? Isn’t that something out of the eighteenth century?”

I laugh. Of all the things she wants to know. “Dad always expected Elliott and I to carry one at all times. You’ll find most society gentlemen carry them. It’s a little formal, but there you have it.” I tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “What else?”

She looks down at her bracelet again.
“What do these mean?”

The corner of my mouth curls upward. I felt this coming for a while. I take her hand and twist the bracelet around. “I gave this to you for your twenty-second birthday, the first as my wife. I gently tug the charms in line and go through them one by one. “Speaking of our boat, this is *The Grace,*” I finger the catamaran, named for my mother. We visited your mother in Georgia and I took you soaring,“ I indicate the gilder. “On our first... date, I took you for a ride in my helicopter,” I push the Charlie Tango charm across the chain. “The cab and Eiffel Tower were intended to commemorate your first visit to Europe on our honeymoon.”

Ana gasps. “We went to Europe?” Her face turns from hopeful to devastated in a heartbeat. *And she calls me mercurial,* I muse. I can only imagine how cheated she must feel, knowing she’s been somewhere she’d only dreamed about and not remembering the fulfillment of that dream.

“We’ll go again soon, baby. I promise,” I brush her cheek with the back of my fingers. She blinks for a moment, burying her tears. I revel in a bit of pride over her ability to control the flood of emotion. “Shall I continue?” I ask. She nods.

“The bed is a bit of a private joke between us... we’ve spent quite a lot of time in ours.” I smile shyly. “And the ice cream; I mentioned that our first time was vanilla. You were my first in that respect, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” I steel myself for the explanation with which I’m sure I’ll have to follow.

“In what respect?” she asks, her voice small.

I take a deep breath. “My love, you weren’t my first... but you were the first who meant anything to me. I love our vanilla relationship.”

She gulps. “What other kind of relationship is there?”

My heart picks up its tempo. “I’m a little nervous discussing that... may I take a pass? I promise full disclosure, sometime in private. All right?”

She nods, but continues to eye me warily.

“You two all right out here?” My mother pokes her head through the sliding glass door.

“Fine, Mom. Just talking.” I tighten my arms around Ana’s waist.

She smiles. “I won’t bother you, I just wanted to let you know that Teddy’s tired, I’m going to give him a bath and put him to bed, all right?”

“All right, thank you, Mom. We’ll come say good night shortly.”

“Maybe I should...” Ana begins, and I bring my finger to her lips.

“Let her. She loves to be the doting grandmother.”

Ana swallows, I see the little knot in her neck jump. She’s still nervous about my hint of disclosure.

“May I continue?”

She nods.

I smile wistfully at the key charm. “To my heart and soul,” I tell her. She smiles at this.
“And the C is for your name?”

“That’s right,” my smile widens.

This leaves the heart locket. I slip my fingernail into the crease between and it pops open. Ana gasps.

“I didn’t know it opened,” she says, bringing her wrist closer so she can see. Cropped and cut to size is the picture I snapped of us after some particularly emotional lovemaking aboard our honeymoon yacht. It’s tasteful, not hinting at anything at all, just the pair of us in our natural state. I glance over to gauge her reaction.

Her eyes have glazed over. A second later, she slumps over in my arms.

_Shit._
“Ana? Ana!” I frantically tap her cheeks with my fingers. “Oh baby, not again… Ana!”

I hear the sliding door. “Son?”

“Dad, get Mom!”

“Hmm…” Ana squirms, brow furrowing.

Oh, thank God. “Baby, come back to me. Wake up. Please, Ana,” I say softly to her, struggling to keep the fright from my voice. “Everything will be all right. It’s just another episode; my mom is coming to help. Don’t be afraid.”

My mother appears at the sliding door, softly hushing someone, telling whoever it is to stay put. She approaches with resounding calm. Her eyes place her in full doctor mode, covering whatever worry might exist. Her fingers come to Ana’s carotid pulse. “Another one?”

I nod. “The picture in her locket charm, from our honeymoon.” Ana’s eyes flutter, but don’t fully open.

“Let’s bring her upstairs,” my mother instructs me, moving away. I lift Ana as I stand, clutching her close to my chest. Elliott and Kate glance frantically between us. Kate’s hand covers her mouth. I assume they’ve been made aware of these occurrences, but witnessing one is a different matter entirely. Mom whispers a “she’ll be fine” in their direction and follows behind me.

I pass the third floor bathroom, hearing Ted splash in his bath. My father pokes his head out the door, and I hear a whispered exchange, but I’m already elsewhere. I settle Ana on the guest bed of my childhood bedroom, the semi-darkness enveloping us. I don’t have even a passing interest in the alterations my mother has made to the room since our last visit, only to note that despite the unfamiliarity, it feels fairly comfortable. Ana is blinking up at me, her eyes clouded with confusion.

“A boat… a big boat,” she mumbles.

“That’s right, baby,” I soothe her, holding her palm in mine and brushing her hair off her forehead.

Mom enters silently, moving to sit on the opposite side of the bed. “How do you feel, dear?”

Ana takes a few cleansing breaths. “Tired. Confused.” She looks from me, to my mother, and back again. Mom gently flashes a penlight over her eyes, watching her pupils react. She pockets the light, satisfied.

“Any breakthroughs?”

Ana shakes her head slowly.

“Mom, can we have a minute?” I say, not really asking.

“Of course.” She gives Ana’s other hand a soothing squeeze and rises. “I’ll be in with Teddy if you
need me.”

The door clicks, its distinctive sound familiar all my life, even now in these uncertain surroundings. “Are you all right?” I ask her, gently. Stupid question, but it’s what came out.

She nods.

I swallow. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She nods sleepily, but without hesitation. Her free hand reaches up toward my face, and I lean in closer, feeling her fingertips brush my cheek, and then she begins a dedicated study of my features, tracing across my forehead, my nose, the line of my jaw. My eyes close of their own volition, and I inhale deeply. I feel her palm come to rest against my cheek, and she guides me down to her. I have never felt such beauty in a simple touch, so innocent and pure as she is at this moment. I couldn’t rightly appreciate what I had the first time I’d ever touched her, not when my thoughts and plans for her had been so shrouded in darkness. This is my second chance.

Our lips touch, and a brilliant light bursts forth behind my eyes, blinding my brain from reason. She wants me. Her fingers weave into my hair, lips parting against mine, inviting me. She tastes of sweet lemonade, of late summer strawberries, and of... Ana. My love, so familiar and yet, so new and untainted. Our brief kisses of the last few weeks hold nothing over this meeting of mouths and tongues, of gentle hands in soft hair, our bodies pressed against one another. I indulge our appetites a while longer, then pull back to run my nose along hers, smiling.

“I thought you wanted to talk,” I whisper.

“I did,” she breathes. “I changed my mind.” She pulls my mouth back to hers.

Ohhh... this is so monumentally unfair. My lips respond, and hers, warm, soft and willing, melt my insides. I. Want. Her. So. Much.

But I can’t... not like this. Not yet. Like throwing a crowbar into rapidly spinning gears, the steam train that is Christian Grey's libido comes to a clunking, grinding, metal-tearing halt, the devil within me throwing a ripe tantrum. I hover over her, panting. “I don't want to stop,” I tell her.

“Then don't,” she whispers, tugging at my hair. She raises her lips toward mine. Every cell of my being pulls me in, but I move back instead, just out of range. Her eyes are dark with want, a twinge of confusion lurking behind.

“Baby, let's talk, all right?”

Ana's brow furrows. She opens her mouth to protest, but I bring my finger to her lips. “I know you're over-thinking, and you shouldn't. I. Want. You.” I raise my eyebrows, hoping to drive the message home. “I want you so much that it hurts me; I'm in pain this minute from wanting you.”

Ana swallows, watching my face. She blinks a few times. I don't think she knows what to make of me, or of herself, at the moment. A wave of disappointment creeps into her features, subtle and guarded.

“Your episodes thus far seem to confuse and exhaust you,” I continue. “I don’t want to push you further than you’re able, and I refuse to waste any chance we have to help your memories resurface, to help you connect them to our life, but moreover, I’d be devastated if I allowed something we did in haste to bring you to harm.”
“But... I feel fine.”

I roll onto my side and gaze down at her, knowingly.

She scowls right back. “I'm not going to get my way, am I.” It isn't a question.

“Neither of us is getting our way at the moment, love. If we were, we wouldn't lying here debating the point. I am truly elated that you want me.” I brush her temple with my lips. “Talk to me, baby. Describe for me what you remembered.”

Ana flushes. *Oh, this is going to be good.* The remnant libidinous demon within me greedily rubs its scarlet hands together, and I poke it through cage bars with a spiked cane. *I must* remain open and understanding.

“You can tell me anything, baby.”

She nods. “It's just flashes. Being on a boat, taking pictures, then we, um...” she pauses. “But after, you looked sad.” Her eyes widen suddenly, and she looks shocked. “Was it me?”

“Of course not, baby,” I soothe. “As long as we've been married, you've never made me sad, at least, not by your own fault.” I swallow, wondering how exactly to word what I should tell her, fighting the urge to skirt the issue entirely. I don't endeavor to re-establish the control freak persona she sees in me, not after what happened Thursday morning. I readjust so that I'm sitting, my legs folded under me, hands clasped in my lap. Almost the submissive pose, but not quite; it’s far more sincere than that. “Ana, do you remember when I mentioned that there had been past threats against us?”

She nods.

“Well, there was one in particular that arose at Grey House after we married, while we were overseas. It upset me a great deal, because I was worried for you, that the perpetrator might target you to get to me. Things turned out all right in the end...” *skirting, Grey, skirting,* I chide myself, “but it made me considerably paranoid and emotional at the time.” *No, it's not skirting. I'm not going to feed her anything that might frighten her needlessly. And most importantly, nothing I said was an outright lie.*

“Grey House?” Ana frowns, confused. Always stumped on the minor details, my little missus.

“Just a nickname for Grey Enterprises, fewer syllables, you know.” I shrug.

“Grey Enterprises?”

“And Holdings.”

“I saw your email signature... what does all that mean?”

I raise an eyebrow. She's stumped me now, I realize I haven't gone into any detail of what I do. “It's just the name of our company, baby.”

“Our company?”

“Ours.” I lean in and kiss her briefly, chastely. She still looks confused. “Back to the issue?”

She blinks. “You're not into anything illegal or immoral, are you?”

Wow. “Of course not,” I say, stunned. “Have I given you any reason to think so?”
She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, really. That just spilled out, I don’t know what came over me.” She
worries her fingers together over her belly. I clasp them and they still.

“No need to apologize. You’ve been doing so well and learning so much, it’s easy to forget that
there are some everyday things you don’t know.”

She nods, but remains silent, her eyes cast downward to our joined hands.

“Ana?”

She swallows, and then looks up at me.

“How are you feeling?”

She sighs. After a beat, the corners of her mouth twitch upward. “Overwhelmed. Again.”

I nod, returning her smile, hopefully. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure you’d say
you’ve been overwhelmed every day of our life together. And I hope,” I say, bringing her hands to
my mouth and kissing them, “that you might also say that you’d not trade it for anything in the
world. It seems the impression you’ve always given me.”

She smiles. A genuine, you-really-do-know-me smile, reflected in her tired eyes.

“You should sleep, baby.” I lean in and press a kiss to her forehead.

“Will you join me?”

Her invitation warms my heart. “I’d love to. But after a while. I’m going to look in on our son and
answer a few emails first, is that all right?”

“I can look in on Teddy,” she moves to get up. It doesn’t take much strength at all to discourage
her.

“It’s all right baby, I’d like to. You rest. Our bags are by the dresser. Get comfortable and I’ll be
back in a while, all right?”

She nods again. I lovingly brush her cheek with my fingers. With my hand on the doorknob, she
stops me.

“Christian?”

“Hmm?”

She offers me a shy smile. “I like kissing you.”

My grin hasn’t been so joyful, so fulfilling, not in months. “And I you, Mrs. Grey. I’ll be back
soon.”

I softly close the door behind me, praying that she’ll not fret over our discussion, that she’ll indeed
rest, but this is Ana. She does exactly as she pleases. I sigh. Descending the stairs, I go in search of
my father. We have some business to discuss.

~ ANA ~
The ambience of a gray Seattle morning floats lightly through sheer window coverings, and for a moment, I don't remember where I am. I recall a similar experience from my junior year; Kate had finally turned twenty-one and begged Jose and I to take a road trip to Napa that summer. We stayed in this little bed and breakfast next to a vineyard where we drank wine all day and sat around in the sun, and the next morning I woke up with a momentary lapse of what I was doing there, and a monster hangover to boot. I sigh, as the creeping feeling of my amnesiac excuse sinks in. I don't even know what part of the house I'm in.

The other side of the bed is mussed, but empty. My fingers run absently over the creased linens. A passing impulse has me rolling closer, and I breathe in the unoccupied pillow. Yes... he was here. The delicious scent of Christian’s shampoo activates the synapses of my brain, and I'm suddenly overwhelmed with an irresistible urge to find him and... I don't know what. I've never felt this way about anyone before. The feeling of being jilted by the familiarity of our intimacy is, in a word, unnerving. We have a child, for heaven's sake. I saw a flash last night of what might very well have been his conception, but it was like watching a memory through someone else's eyes, like it wasn't mine to see, and the thought is sour and strangely embarrassing.

I need to get up.

I must have fallen asleep without changing clothes; I don't remember putting on pajamas but here I am, in a blue silk nightgown. No bra, yesterday's panties... did he undress me? The wave of realization is brief, disappointing but not unwelcome. I would like to have been awake for that. I set the thought aside, pulling the more feminine of the two overnight bags onto the bed and dig for something to wear. I can't find my brush, so I give up and go hunting for a bathroom.

Showered, dry and dressed and having found my brush neatly aligned on the bathroom sink with my toothbrush and an assortment of other bathroom implements, I venture from the high-arched hallway to a winding stairwell. I'm thankful for the fact that I haven't put on shoes, as I can be a little stealthier in my descent. I must have been in a finished attic or somewhere, these stairs just keep going. My senses are heightened, absorbing everything, but most distinctly the sound of voices, and the gentle argument of strings and a piano. The smell of something delicious invades my nostrils, of warm peaches and nutmeg, but it's secondary to the music. It draws me in, and I follow it.

“Read it again.”

“I am reading it, you're not coming in at the right part; I'm telling you.”

“Look there, the second line. The A-flat leads. You're not following, you're leading.”

“You're not listening. Would you like to handle both instruments yourself?”

“Don't be like that, Mia.”

“I'm not being like anything.”

There's a pause. “Just try it this way, please.”

“I thought it sounded fine the first seventeen times. If you want to mess up a good thing, be my guest.”

I lean in the archway of the formal living room. Mia is cradling an enormous cello, dragging a bow back and forth; her long fingers nimbly press this string and that, a brilliant engagement ring
glinting upon her left hand.

Christian is a sight at the dark wood piano, even with his back to me. His hair is tousled wildly, and though I can't see his expression, his body radiates deep concentration, shoulder and back muscles rippling through his fitted white t-shirt. I now understand what it means to drool over a man, and to my great delight, this one is already mine. Why on earth he wants me is quickly becoming the second biggest conundrum of my life.

“Now you're skipping notes.” Mia has stopped and glares at Christian.

Christian lifts his fingers from the keys and runs them through his hair, making it stick up further. “You're truly exasperating. How Ethan is going to keep you in line is beyond me.”

I giggle.

Christian spins on the antique piano stool, and his face lightens immediately. “Good morning, love.” He strides purposefully to me and gathers me in his arms. “I'm so happy to see you. Did you sleep well?”

I nod against his shoulder. “You play beautifully. Don't stop on my account.”

“Thank you, baby.” He releases me, bringing his hands to rest on my hips. “Did you recognize the song?”

I shake my head. “I should, shouldn't I.” Once again, not a question.

A flicker of sadness passes over Christian's expression, but he quickly recovers. “You've heard the piano solo a number of times. Come. Listen to my sister screw it up.”

Mia's jaw drops, and the indignant glare is back. Christian deposits me on an elegant wingback sofa and retakes his seat at the baby grand.

“Good morning, Mia, and congratulations,” I greet her.

“Good morning yourself, and thanks. Don't listen to a word my brother says. He's still sour that I beat him in the guild competition that one time.”

“Mia,” Christian warns.

“What? It's the truth.”

They pick up from what I assume is the beginning, and even if one of them misses the argued cue, they don't stop this time. I get lost in the music. I'm not sure how much time passes, but the cushion suddenly shifts, and Kate is scooting silently toward me, snaking her arm around my shoulders.

“Are you okay?” she mouths. I nod, snuggling into my best friend's hold and dropping my head to her shoulder. Christian looks up briefly from his playing and smiles softly at us. I'm not sure what the deal is between my best friend and my husband. Sometimes they needle each other playfully, other times they're downright broodingly hostile, but it's times like these, when I see the mutual respect, that I wonder most what might have transpired to breed such a dynamic.

The melody ends, and Kate and I both clap admiringly. Christian rises and takes a dramatic bow. Behind him, Mia rolls her eyes.
Kate pats my knee and rises. “I'm sent to bid everyone, come in to breakfast,” she recites in the English tongue of Emma Thompson.

Mia giggles. “You did that a little too well.”

“Why thank you.” Now it's Kate's turn to take a bow.

Christian looks between us, perplexed.

“Shakespeare, big brother,” Mia verbally jabs him. “Much Ado About Nothing was on while you men we're off doing Lord-knows-what in the boathouse.”

“You're exceptionally annoying. You do know that, don't you?” Christian's eyes flash mischievously. On a whim, he scoops her swiftly over his shoulder and carries her out of the room, with Mia squealing upside down.

Grown siblings, acting like children. “I think they've filled our extended family entertainment quota for the week,” Kate snorts. “Come on. We're not missing this.” She grabs my hand and drags me toward the kitchen.

Christian and Mia in turn swat one another's behinds. From the breakfast bar, Elliott snickers, baby Ava flailing in his arms. Ethan is wide-eyed as Christian deposits his burden in the younger man's lap.

“You'll want to tame your fiancée, Kavanagh. She's becoming a little too mouthy for my liking.”

Mia giggles, and Ethan pulls her close, kissing her. “Oh no, she's just fine as she is,” he smiles, keeping eye contact with the object of his love.

Christian rolls his eyes and retreats to my side. Playful Christian is darling; I had no idea.

“Nobody panic, we found Mr. Leo,” Carrick announces behind us, bouncing a sullen Teddy on his hip. His cheeks are pink from crying, his chubby arm clutching the raggedy stuffed lion, thumb deposited firmly in his mouth. My arms open immediate to take him.

“Did you lose your friend again, baby boy?” I ask him.

“Hmm,” Teddy grumbles and buries his face in my neck. Somebody's grumpy this morning.

Christian watches like a hawk as we eat. I'm not put off by the gesture like I used to be, it seems part of the package. The large-family dynamic is spectacular; overwhelming, but adaptable. Only-children really do miss out, I think. I look to Teddy, who's watching Kate and Ava intently as Kate expertly breastfeeds her daughter under the cover of a blanket while eating her own breakfast. I wonder, was I so brazen when Teddy was an infant? It doesn't seem like me. But he watches, fascinated at the wriggling bundle under the blanket, and I wonder what he's thinking. Will Christian want more children, after what happened? How many did we talk about having? Do I want more? I think so, seeing the family dynamic around me and wishing I'd have grown up with such quantities of different but loving support. I sigh, meeting Christian's gaze. It's hard enough, dealing with an awakening of feelings I've never had for anyone, and integrating them into a ready-made life, complete with complications, secrets and drama. I'm running to catch up.

And what about the 'vanilla' thing? He took a pass last night and I went along, if only to save what I sensed could be a long and uncomfortable discussion better had in privacy. What kinds of experiences could he possibly have had? And with how many women? We're they all women? My stomach sours on the last two thoughts, and I'm apprehensively grateful that I don't have any
experience to speak of for a basis to let my imagination run wild.

I'm suddenly aware that Christian and I are still fixed on one another's expressions, and he's just watched mine turn from pensive to downright fearful. His brow is furrowed. I blink rapidly to bring myself into the present, and he cocks his head to the side, reaching for my hand, brushing my knuckles with his thumb.

“Later,” I mouth.

Christian nods reluctantly.

~oOo~

“Why don't you put Teddy to bed and then join me for some tea?” Christian whispers, holding the front door for me. Our boy snoozes obliviously on my shoulder after a long, hard day of rough-housing with his father and Uncle Elliott. I think Grace was relieved to see things wind down after a planter in the yard was knocked over and broken. The ensuing debate over branding the guilty party proved quite entertaining. If something had been broken when I was growing up, there was no debate, because it was clear that I'd probably done it, the klutz that I am, or was.

“Sure,” I whisper back. Teddy had been bathed and dressed in pajamas before the ride home, so it's a short matter of arranging him in his bed and clicking on the night light and monitor before closing his bedroom door.

Christian is taking a humming kettle off the stove when I return, and there’s a soothing aria playing in the background. I lean over the counter, watching him.

“Where are the puppies?” I wonder aloud.

“Sophie has them tonight.” A gentle smile plays on his lips. “Taylor assures me she'll part with them in the morning, willingly or not.”

I was looking forward to cuddling them this evening, but I hide my disappointment.

“Come.” Christian carries two steaming mugs to the black-hole couch, waiting for me to sit before carefully placing one in my hands. I sip tentatively. He sits next to me, not too close but not far at all, cross-legged and beautiful.

“Hmm...” he breathes. “Thank you for getting me into the tea habit. It's done wonders for my sleep.”

“You're welcome,” I say, not realizing that I'd been responsible, but getting the idea anyway.

We're quiet for a few minutes before Christian sets his mug down. “So, tell me, what were you thinking about this morning at breakfast?” he asks gently.

My pulse picks up. I'm not sure how to answer him without what might be construed as word vomit. The questions and assumptions themselves were definitely brain vomit, and I'd spent all day trying in vain to mop up the mess. “I'm not sure how to ask without sounding accusatory,” I say honestly.
He opens and closes his mouth a few times. “Should I pre-empt with an apology?” he offers. “Whatever you think I've done…”

“It’s not like that, Christian.” Oh, how to ask? “I just… I'm worried about something you said last night. The stuff you took a pass on, actually. I started coming to what are probably really absurd conclusions and I couldn't stop thinking about it all day…” my voice trails off. Christian's gone pale. He looks down at his hands, the way I do sometimes when I'm ashamed. The knot in his neck bobs up and down as he swallows.

“Oh… that,” he shifts uncomfortably. “Do we have to talk about it right now? I'd hoped your memory would have returned and we wouldn't have to.”

“So I already know all about whatever this is?”

“Yes.”

“Before or after?” Relating knowledge to occurring before or after the wedding has become monumental in establishing a level of trust, and thus far, he's not lied to me…. that I know of.

“Baby, you were quite aware by the end of our second date.”

Oh! Then it can't possibly be that bad.

He shifts uncomfortably. “Anastasia… I had a vastly different worldview when we met. I lived my life by a very strict set of rules, never deviating. I mentioned to you how uncomfortable I was with certain kinds of touching, that you let me tie your hands, do you remember that?”

I nod. How can I forget?

He closes his eyes briefly and takes a few breaths. This bothers him on some level I haven’t yet reached. “Please, baby, I’d rather not talk about it now. We’ve had a good weekend. I’m tired, you’re tired… let’s just go to bed and leave it for another day.”

Yes, it can be that bad. I swallow. “Was I okay with it?” my voice is small.

His eyes open, pleading. “Some of it.”

“I don’t understand.” But I’m scared. I’m clutching the nearly empty mug for dear life. If I were any stronger, I might break it.

Christian’s gaze alternates between my face and… everywhere else, as though there are answers written on the walls, and he’s desperate to find the right one. “Ana, please… I’ve never outright asked this of you before, but may we seek John’s counsel, together, to discuss this further?” His voice holds an edge of panic. “I’m very uncomfortable anticipating your reaction, because I fear you’ll misunderstand.” He rises… how does he do that so gracefully? …and picks up his mug. He holds out his hand for mine. I wordlessly hand it to him, and he moves away to the kitchen.

What just happened? I can’t fathom whatever could be so bad that he’d fear my reaction that much. What does he think I’ll do? Something drastic? That’s just not me. I’m not a fan of drama, and this is getting ridiculous. I drag myself up from the couch and follow after him. He’s at the sink, having placed the mugs in the basin, and is gripping the counter edge.

“Christian?”

His eyes fly to me. I must have startled him. His breathing is quick.
I inch toward him. “Talk to me.”

He shakes his head, his eyes reaching for the ceiling again.

“Hey,” I’m standing before him, calling him back to me. His gaze returns, fearful as ever. I must be brave. Whatever he’s keeping bottled up, I need to give him the benefit of the doubt, to allow him time for explanation before I jump to a conclusion. My fingers come to his cheek, and his eyes close, leaning into my hand. He grasps it after a moment and turns to press a kiss into my palm.

“I love you,” he whispers. “So much.”

“So talk to me.”

He shakes his head. “I meant it, Ana, I need Flynn’s help with this.”

“You need my therapist to help you?”

He laughs. It’s sudden and nervous. “He was my therapist first.”

What?

“I’ve been seeing him for years,” he answers my unspoken question. “Your husband has issues, Ana. You knew this going in, and yet you’ve stayed.” He brings the hand he’s holding to his chest, spreading my fingers over his heart. It’s pounding furiously. “I’ll never, ever hurt you, or give you reason to fear me. The thought of doing so is abhorrent to me. This is all you really need to know. The rest, it’s in the past. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” It does. I can’t imagine what it is that has him so scared of my reaction. Is he a serial killer? He said there was nothing illegal about it, but then he also said something about a shift in his worldview... did he once perceive illegal things to be morally sound? I’m so confused. “If we sit down with John, will you tell me?”

He blinks. “I’ve said I would.” His hold on my hand tightens, and his pulse continues to thump under my palm. “Please promise me you’ll remember the person I am now, and that I’m very different than I used to be. I need you to be open-minded, baby. I can’t go through this without you.”

I cock my head to the side, gauging him. I want to believe what he’s saying, that whatever this horrible secret is, that he’s moved on from it, and that it’s not so horrific that I’d take Teddy and run screaming from the house. Heck, if that were the case, wouldn’t I, in my right mind, have gone long ago? I hope that I’ve kept my integrity all this time, that I haven’t somehow sacrificed my values for the sake of this known and yet unknown secret. To do so really doesn’t sound like me. I may have wavering regard for my self-worth, but I’m not an idiot. “I promise. When can we go?”

Christian sighs, not in relief, but in what seems like resignation. “I’ll call him now, and ask for an appointment tomorrow morning, before I leave for New York.” He’s quiet, and his pulse has slowed just a little. “This way, you’ll have a few days to reflect, and to decide if... you want to stay, or... not...” his breath hitches.

I’m not sure what possesses me, my apprehension of the last short while is clear, but I step in, snaking my arms around his back, holding him to me. For some reason, I need this, need him, before whatever innocence that exists between us is stripped away by his impending revelation. His arms come around me as well, hesitantly, as though he doesn’t want to frighten or cage me, but is nonetheless desperate for the contact. His lips press against the top of my head.
“Why do you think I’ll leave?” I murmur into his shoulder.

“Because you did once,” he whispers. “I can’t bear to lose you again.”

~oOo~

John Flynn studies us, separately, from his desk chair. He's leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands folded before him.

I glance to Christian, but he doesn't notice... his eyes are locked with Flynn's, a mental exchange transpiring between them, the likes of which I can't even begin to comprehend. I'm at a monumental disadvantage, and my stomach clenches. Christian told me on the way here that John knows everything. I wish I knew what *everything* meant. I'm not even sure whose side the great Dr. Flynn will be on, but I'm pretty sure it won't be mine; apparently he’s known Christian longer.

“So, what can I do for you both this morning?”

Christian audibly inhales, reaching over the barrier created by the arms of our respective chairs to grasp my hand. “Ana has asked some very difficult questions about our past. It's important that she have answers, but I'm... apprehensive, of her reaction. I'd hoped you'd be a character witness. I don't want my wife to be afraid of me when it's all been said.” He looks to me, sincerity radiating behind his watery gray eyes. I give his hand an answering squeeze, my heart thumping disjointedly.

“I'm honored, and more than willing.” John shifts, pulling his legs up and crossing them. “Ana, would you like to start by restating whatever questions you have?”

I swallow. When I find my voice, it's small and trembling. “Christian hinted at having other kinds of relationships. I'm not sure what that means; my limited knowledge doesn't allow my imagination much room to run wild, but not knowing really scares me. And also...” I glance over at Christian again, his jaw is set, rigidly, “he says he was a different person when we met, and that I left and it changed him. I want to know how.”

“I see. Well first, allow my experience with both of you, together and separate, to reassure you. Ana, you and Christian have a very healthy, loving relationship, and one of the strongest bonds I've ever witnessed in many years of counseling. He's never lied to you, and he won’t hurt you. Please bear that in mind, all right?”

Oh my. The reassurance is heavy, and all-encompassing, but it unlocks a new level of my fear, that whatever Christian is keeping from me could lead me to believe that he's frightening, even dangerous. Both now have reassured me that Christian won’t hurt me, so that must mean I might see him as capable of it. I suppress a shudder, manage to nod, and Flynn turns to Christian.

“Full disclosure would be best,” he advises.

Christian closes his eyes for a moment. I think he's counting again. When he opens them, his pupils are dilated. "Ana, I love you. You mean more to me than my own life. There was a time not long ago, when I didn't think myself capable of these feelings, and I conducted myself in a way that I'm now ashamed of. I can't begin to make amends for some things, but we've put those events behind us in the interest of moving forward.” He shakes his head. “I don't even know how to say it without intimidating or frightening you.”
“Why don't you start at the beginning, and we'll follow you?” Flynn directs.

“Right,” he nods. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, I think he's organizing his thoughts. “I told you I had a rough start in life,” he addresses me again. “My biological mother was neglectful, she didn't protect me as she should have. A male acquaintance of hers, he was violently abusive... and left marks. It's the reason I avoided being touched. After I was adopted, I didn't talk for nearly two years. Mom and Dad sent me to a series of therapists, I was always under one treatment or another, and I was always so angry. I got into some terrible fights, expelled from a number of schools. And then, when I was fifteen, a former friend of my mother's seduced me.”

The words are flowing from him like water through a flume, direct and unhindered. His grip on my hand has tightened, and I think he's afraid I'll pull away. I could chew on what he's already revealed for a week.

“She was married at the time,” he continues, “and we pursued the affair for a number of years. She introduced me to an alternative lifestyle that tempered and focused me, helped me excel in school and later in business. I owe my success to that lifestyle.”

“Be specific, Christian,” Flynn prods, and Christian stops short. I can see his thoughts backtracking in his expression.

“It become more difficult to talk about as time passes. I used to be able to discuss it without flinching, but now, it's borderline humiliating. I can't believe I behaved the way I did in the past.”

He gulps. “Ana, before you came into my life, my relationships with women were that of a Dominant-submissive nature. I objectified women. It was always mutual; the roles were clearly defined and strictly maintained. I was accustomed to giving orders and having them followed immediately without question. The day you came into my life, your flustered demeanor falsely struck me as submissive, and that is why I initially pursued you. But in getting to know you, you changed my entire world. You were so new and different to me, it was a wakeup call. At first I resisted, tried to integrate you into my lifestyle, even tried to convince myself that I was no good for you, when it was clear that you weren't the submissive I'd hoped you’d be. I tried and tried to make things work my way, to convince you that you could adapt to being that way for me, but you wanted more, and I was afraid of what that meant. I craved you, nonetheless.”

I... have... no... words. He was a what? Dominant? What does that mean? His grip on my fingers is borderline painful. I flex them and he loosens his grip, but doesn't pull back, and neither do I. I don't think I could pull away if I wanted to. I’m stunned.

“I… don’t understand,” my voice cracks.

Christian bows his head. “John, could you…”

“Of course,” Flynn picks up. “A Dominant-submissive relationship, or D-s from here on out, is one in which one partner submits to the other’s will. For those who choose the lifestyle, it can be carried out in a safe, sane manner, and the respective roles satisfy an inherent need that typically cannot be otherwise fulfilled. In Christian’s case, the need to dominate another person rise from the desire to compensate for the lack of control he experienced in his first years of life, and his overprotective nature, from the guilt he felt in being unable to protect his birth mother from her fate, and in some ways, out of the anger he felt toward her neglectful position toward him. Does this make sense?”

Does it? I have to fight for air; I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath. My voice is even smaller, higher, when I can finally speak again. “But what does that mean he did, specifically?” I mean, what exactly does it mean that you do?” I turn to Christian, awkwardly appalled that I’d first asked
as though he weren’t here, and his head is still down, his eyes closed.

“It means that I… hurt you,” his voice shakes. “The last person on earth that I’d risk hurting, and I did. I’m so sorry.”


“A major part of the D-s relationship involves a willingness, and often enjoyment, in giving or receiving pain. To couples who crave this type of stimulation, it’s expected, but to someone who is first introduced to this lifestyle, it can be a touch unnerving. From what we’ve discussed in years past, your initial reaction was one of willingness to try, as a means to an end, as you’d not explored your sexuality before you met Christian. He proceeded carefully with you, with full awareness of your inexperience, and you agreed to try, while he agreed to explore the possibility of more than just your physical relationship. Christian believes he’d already fallen in love with you, though he wasn’t able to fully grasp such a new and unexplored emotion at the time.”

Flynn pauses to gauge my reaction. I think I’m still blinking, but I’m not sure. My stomach sours as I think about where he’s going with this. He must be satisfied with my expression because he continues. “After a time, you were curious to know the extent of your respective limits. Mind you, there were safewords agreed upon beforehand, so that you could make him aware that you’d reached your tolerance limit and that he should stop. During a particular encounter, Christian admits he got carried away, but you also conceded that you neglected to use the safeword when you’d reached your limit. It drove you apart for a short time.”

“What did he do to me?” I blurt out.

“I hit you… with a leather belt,” Christian whispers.

What the fuck?

Christian lets my hand drop and pulls away. I don’t have brain cells left to ponder why, not with that mind-bomb he just detonated.

“In retrospect, the act wasn’t important… what you need to focus on, Ana, is the effect it had on Christian’s perception of the act. Christian, would you continue, please?”

He’s shaking. I’m the one who should be shaking, and there he is, all jittery and upset. What about me? What about how this is affecting me? I can’t speak. If I do, I may throw up.

“You left me that night,” he says softly, staring at the dark carpet. “I didn’t want you to, I begged you not to go. The remorse I felt immediately after was so intense, like nothing I’d felt in my life; I knew I couldn’t do that to you again, and I never have since. But still you went, after making it clear that you felt you couldn’t give me what I needed. And it was your leaving that made me realize that I didn’t need the lifestyle the way I once did, not with you. And what’s more, I didn’t want it. The thought of causing you such pain, it’s revolting to me. It cleared my head. It made me realize that what I wanted was you, just you, and I’d take you any way I could get you.”

There’s a pause. I’m suddenly aware that they’re both looking at me; I don’t know when Christian raised his eyes from the floor. Flynn’s gaze is unwavering and expectant, while Christian’s is contrite, wary.

“You haven’t said much, Ana,” Flynn coaxes. “It’s a lot to take in, I understand. Where are your thoughts?”

Where are my thoughts?! The man I married, married… this man I thought to be so kind, caring,
protective and gentle has been downright abusive toward me. “What do you want me to say?” I mumble.

Flynn sighs. “Christian, I need you to step outside for a while, please.”

*Oh yes, send him outside so he can beat the receptionist.* My mind is a flurry of images of Christian growing devil horns, wearing the expression I saw in my red-walls episode, sweating over me with a fiery whip. *Shit… is that what I was seeing?* Why in God’s name would I allow him to hit me? Had I completely lost my mind?

The door clicks shut. Flynn is still calculating my expression, whatever expression I have. I feel so blank inside.

“You’re perfectly safe, Ana. You can say whatever you need to.”

I shake my head, and my eyes refuse to blink; I just stare back. I can’t comprehend what he’s told me, what Christian revealed, what they seem to have agreed is normal, sane behavior.

“It’s shocking to hear, I know,” Flynn continues. “The very first conversation I had with Christian, I wasn’t immediately sure I wanted to continue with him; I didn’t feel qualified to help him with his burden. But I did my homework, and gave him my best effort. I came to understand the inner workings of the D-s lifestyle, and in doing so, perhaps I’ve become desensitized to how frightening certain acts can be to those who had never been exposed to them. A trained submissive would be able to compartmentalize the emotions, separate them from the experience and in doing so, could evoke a positive reaction to something commonly perceived as negative.”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “How can you be so clinical? He assaulted me!” I shriek.

“Yes, he did. Well, actually, he simply struck you. An assault is an unlawful attack, and as I said, you’d consented.”

Wow. I expected him to deny it. He stops my forward rant in its tracks.

“I’m not going to attempt to rationalize it. To you, someone who was new to the lifestyle, it was an extremely negative experience, and you have every right to feel whatever you need to feel about it. But you need to understand, you asked him to show you just how bad it could get. That’s not to say you were at fault, which is absolutely not the case, but you need to know that it was done at your request. You were doing it for him, because you both cared deeply for one another. You wanted to give him what he needed, and in the events that followed, you made him realize that he didn’t need that part of the lifestyle any more.

“In what kind of lifestyle would someone consent to, or worse, enjoy being beaten?” I’m still shrieking. I need to keep it together, or I’ll have a nervous breakdown. “Who else knew about this?” I demand.

“There are only two people in Christian’s life who have full knowledge of his past: you, and me. Grace and Carrick know about the affair, which ended almost ten years ago, but they have no knowledge of the lifestyle Christian had lived until you came into his life. He’d prefer that his parents’ knowledge continue to be limited. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor are aware of some of the technical aspects, and they’ve signed away the right to discuss it. Your friend Kate found some literature you’d left in the open once, and you managed to derail her questions. No one else knows, or needs to know. This kind of lifestyle is a social taboo, and sharing knowledge of it would do far more harm than good. Which leads us back to your original question… what kinds of people do you suspect might be drawn to the submissive aspect of such a relationship? I want you to think about
“Aren’t I supposed to be the one asking the questions?” I must look appalled, because John’s face softens considerably, and it’s been more than understanding since we began.

“Please, Ana. Think about it.”

“Fine.” My head swarms with images of naked forest nymphs in one of those silly online video games, prancing around a large male, fawning over him, and then submitting to his inevitable wrath. But this isn’t a game, and there really are women—and possibly men—out there who crave this idea of submitting. But who would do that?

“Maybe someone with daddy issues?” I offer.

“That’s a reasonable and quite correct guess. Who else?”

I shake my head. “Someone who was abused… like Christian, my heart tells me. But then he chose to dominate others… I’m on to something. “But Christian said he was abused… and then he became dominant, so that can’t be right…”

“No, you’re exactly right,” Flynn tells me. “A traditional submissive is most often one who was forced to submit as a child and then carried that mindset into adulthood. Christian was treated as such, but then was introduced to the lifestyle by someone who was deeply involved already. He was provided the training, and frankly, had the intelligence, to grasp the Dominant side of the lifestyle, and he embraced it. Christian is hardly what I could call weak-minded… actually, he’s one of the strongest men I’ve ever met. The demons he’s confronted, the decisions he’s been forced to make, have made him rise above. I’m sure you’ve noticed his finality about things you may have discussed. It’s his way of coping with things he feels may leave his realm of control; once he’s decided something and stands firm, you can bet your life he’ll live by his decision. This is how I am sure, and you should be as well, that he would never hurt you.”

“But he already did.”

“And the act almost destroyed him. Ana, it happened once, and under very controlled conditions. You’ve both spoken to me about it. You knew it was part of the lifestyle. You’d already decided that the sexual aspect of your relationship was more than agreeable, and you reasoned that if you knew how bad the opposite end of the spectrum could be, anything in between would be bearable, even pleasurable. He stated how many times he would strike, and he didn’t deviate. After it was done, he tried to comfort you, but you wanted nothing of it. You talked briefly; he asked why you’d asked him to do it, and you revealed that you’d fallen in love with him. It shocked him, he decided he was no good for you and you parted ways. It was less than a week later that he contacted you to reconcile, and by that time, you’d realized that the physical pain you’d endured was insignificant compared to the pain of losing him, and so you reconciled. By then, he’d begun to understand how badly he’d behaved, and vowed never to hurt you again. And ever since, he never has.”

The room is spinning. I close my eyes, willing my mind to rest, but it’s still deciding whether to be in full alert or to succumb to the numbness. I vote for the latter, and my conscience agrees, for once. “He’s not like anything you’ve told me today.”

“That’s true, he isn’t, and he hasn’t been for a very long time. His Dominant nature rears its head from time to time, but usually in the context of your well-being. For instance, he told me about his little slip before your recent trip to Portland, and he feels very badly about that.”

Christian told him? “Is nothing in my life private anymore?”

“Of course it is. Nothing said here leaves this room, unless you and Christian, together, decide to
discuss it. Christian was quite upset about what he’d said, and asked my advice on how to make
amends.”

“So you’re the reason he gave me the puppies,” I accuse.

“I’m sorry… puppies?”

“The puppies he brought home to say he was sorry.”

Flynn is startled. He swivels his chair toward the desk and presses a button. “Could you send Mr.
Grey in, please.”

I swallow. I’m not ready to see him again, but it doesn’t look like I have a choice in the matter.
Flynn’s eyes are trained on mine, and a hint of understanding passes between us. He’s on my side, I
think.

“Welcome back, Christian. Please, have a seat.”

I can’t look at him. I see his body pass through the room and peripherally sink into the adjacent
chair, but I’m still too raw to focus on him. I fear if I see his eyes, I may fall apart.

“Do you want to tell me why you’ve decided that buying your wife’s happiness is a good idea?”
Flynn chides him. The tone has an edge of humor, at least, I think it does.

Christian is silent for a long moment. “Um, I don’t believe I understand,” he says quietly.

“Ana tells me you’ve made some furry additions to the family.

I hear an audible sigh next to me. “Oh, that. Yes, there were puppies for adoption in our
neighborhood, I brought two of them home before the weekend. What’s that to do with anything?”

“Might I ask why? It appears to me that you chose to cover your verbal blunder of last week by
buying your wife presents again. I’ve told you before that this doesn’t provide a long term solution
to your problems.”

I think I see what Flynn is doing. He can’t chastise Christian for something he’s done so long ago,
something that had been laid to rest, but he can for something more recent. He’s doing this for my
benefit, to make me see Christian as nothing more than a human being who makes mistakes and
learns from them. He’s much better than I thought.

Christian hesitates again, stumped, I think. “In my defense, it wasn’t an attempt to placate, it was
an effort of love. Ana likes this particular breed. No one in our household or among the staff is
allergic, and I thought they’d be good companions for Teddy, and Jason’s daughter has wanted a
dog and can’t otherwise have one. It made everyone happy all around. I don’t see the point in this
line of questioning.”

“So you did this for everyone, is that right?”

“So there is a point to this? I’d rather like to know if my wife will allow me to return home after I
conclude business in New York on Friday.”

So much for Flynn’s distraction; the tables have turned on me again. But thankfully, I think I was
right about Flynn’s shift in loyalty, at least for the moment. “Ana, is there any clarification you
need? Anything either of us can explain for you? This session is more about your comfort than
anything else.”
I shake my head. I don’t think I can handle any more information for a while.

“All right. I’m available any time you want to talk, and Christian has already assured me that he’ll be sensitive to all of your needs in this matter. You’re in charge. But can you agree that what we’ve discussed today remains confidential among the three of us?”

I nod. It’s the least I can do… besides, if there was someone to tell, I doubt they’d believe me. I can’t even talk to Kate… I love her, but she doesn’t know how to keep her mouth shut. I imagine I’ll be back here, in this room, every day this week. Right now I just want to go back to sleep, to pretend this didn’t happen.

“We’ll get back to you on your question, Christian. Ana, would you prefer a separate ride home?”

Do I? For some reason, I don’t feel unsafe. Perhaps it’s the numbness I felt earlier, I don’t know. I shake my head.

“Do you need to speak to me alone before you go?” Flynn is really trying to reassure me, and I appreciate it. I wish I had it in me to be thankful.

I shake my head again.

Flynn nods. Our eye contact finally breaks, and he rises. “We’ll be in touch. An open line of communication is the way forward. Let me know what either of you need.”

We’re silent in the elevator. Peripherally, I see that Christian has his hands in his pockets. I think he’s trying to look the least bit threatening. He holds the car door for me to get in, but doesn’t slide in next to me; he gets into the front passenger seat instead.

“SeaTac, please,” he quietly orders.

Taylor pulls into traffic, and we briefly connect in the rearview mirror. I think he can tell that something is wrong. He seems to have a real sense of our family. It’s a long, quiet drive, and I stare out the window. It’s a better view than the back of Christian’s head. He hasn’t turned once to speak to me, or even look at me. I wish I knew what he was thinking, and it dawns on me… is he angry with me? Because I didn’t say anything after he came back into the room… he could have taken it as my decision that I’m done with him.

Wait, what am I saying? Am I considering letting him close to me again, after I know what he’s done? Am I? It shocks me that the answer isn’t a definite, resounding ‘no.’ He’s hit me. Flynn rationalized it, and everything he said made sense. Even the things he asked me to rationalize made sense. Is it Christian’s fault that he is the way he is? Or was… because aside from the relative insignificance of what he said to me in his office the other day, he’s been in no way the person described to me this morning. I don’t know what to think. And I continue to think, and not to think, all the way to the airport, and we’re there before I come to any conclusions.

Both Taylor and Christian get out; we’re not at the curb but on the tarmac, and there’s a jet with a Grey Enterprises logo on the side. There’s another of his toys I was unaware of. The rear hatch opens, and I hear luggage being carried out and the door clicking shut again, and then Taylor’s form is carrying two rather large suitcases up the stairs and into the aircraft. I wasn’t aware he was going… so how am I going to get home?

The back door opposite my seat opens, and Christian is there, blocking my view of the plane. I have no choice but to finally look at him. His eyes are weary and sad, his voice, quiet. “Sawyer is coming with me, he’s already on board; you’ll have Taylor to look after you this week.” He looks down at the leather seat. “Ana… please call me if you need anything, or even just to talk… I love
My heart dies a little, absorbing his pain. He softly closes the door and walks to the ramp, exchanges words with Taylor and ascends the steps. He turns back for a moment, placing his hand over his heart. Then he’s gone.

Taylor slides into the driver’s seat and maneuvers us back to the highway. I look back in the direction of the airport, and the timing must be right, because a moment later, I see the small white jet ascend, bank east, and then disappear into the clouds. I sigh. I have way too much to think about, and though I’m mentally exhausted, I need a distraction.

“Taylor, what are your plans for Sophie this afternoon?”

“She wants to go swimming, Ma’am. I’d planned to take her to the public pool in Magnolia. Did you have something else in mind?”

“Oh. Not at all. Um, you’re welcome to use the downstairs pool at the house, if you like.” I’m not sure what I was hoping for, perhaps an idea what I should do with myself. Perhaps I’ll take Teddy somewhere… but where? We haven’t really left the house except to go to Bellevue, and aside from playing with his toys and watching the stars at night, I don’t really know what he likes to do.

Taylor interrupts my thoughts. “That’s a kind offer, but I think Sophie hopes to meet some friends from the community center. Would you and Teddy like to join us?”

“What? Oh, that’s okay. You should spend the day with Sophie.” I hope he didn’t think I was inviting myself along. Now I feel terribly self-conscious.

“It would be our pleasure to have you along. My daughter is very fond of you.” Taylor’s voice is gentle, avuncular even.

“Gail should come along too, then, don’t you think?” And what would Christian think? *Wait, am I kidding? I don’t give a hoot what he thinks.* I make a conscious decision not to give him another thought for at least a few hours. My brain needs a break.

“Are you suggesting she take the afternoon off?” he chuckles.

“Why not?” Something dawns on me. “Is Christian still in charge even when he’s out of town?”

“Ma’am, I take my orders from you when he’s away, unless it conflicts with your safety. Then I default to my own judgment, even if it goes against Mr. Grey’s instructions. He’s asked me to look after you this week, and an afternoon picnic at the pool seems like a good way to do that. We’ll have to bring security, of course.”

Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a lengthy statement from Christian’s right-hand man before, or a laugh, for that matter. “Okay. Count us in.”

~oOo~

“Again, Mommy!”

“Again?” I say, mock-incredulously, flipping back to the first page. It’s a short book, so why not? I
read through, animating my voice at just the right parts. I somehow remember this book from childhood, a book about a young bunny named Morris who receives a ‘disappearing bag’ as a Christmas present, and hides throughout his house as his siblings search for him. There’s skating, mixing, and beautification involved, and Teddy loves how silly it all is.

“Okay, Morris had to go to sleep, and now so do you,” I tell him, closing the book and setting it on his side table.

“I not tired!” Teddy declares, rubbing his eyes.

“Oh you’re not, are you?” I tease. “Well, if you don’t sleep now, it’ll be night forever, and tomorrow will never come.”


I ruffle his soft, copper hair and press a kiss to his forehead. “Nighty night, Ted-bear.”

I wander down the hallway, willing forbidden thoughts to stay away, and failing miserably. I can’t help but wonder where Christian is exactly, it must be late in the city but then, Christian doesn’t often sleep, so I imagine he’s somewhere productive. I stop at the portrait at the top of the stairs and consider it for a while. I’ve stopped here more times than I can count since I came here, and each time, I have a renewed sense of wonder for the two people, newly husband and wife, in the canvas photo. Christian is impeccably disheveled, hair mussed and bowtie undone, sitting slouched at the end of an iron bench, while I recline lengthwise in a pristine cream silk sheath dress, head resting in his lap, our fingers entwined. I try to see myself in that place. I looked so elegant, so content, so trusting, and Christian, he’s so relaxed here. I haven’t yet seen him this way; he’s always so tense, so angst-ridden, as though the weight of the universe is upon him.

And then I’m looking up at him, as he smiles down at me. There’s so much love in his expression, passionately wild almost; and then I’m in his arms as he swings me around on a dance floor as others watch, and then he’s feeding me cake. It’s exotic and sweet on my tongue. And then he kisses me, so deeply, lovingly. Is this real?
“Mrs. Grey! Wake up, Ana!”

“Thank God she didn’t fall down the stairs…”

“Get Dr. Trevelyan on the phone. Ana!”

Someone’s shaking me, tapping my face. I’m limp again, and the effort to push them away is weak. “Benches and cake,” I mumble.

“Open your eyes, Mrs. Grey.” That’s Taylor. Definitely Taylor.

I squint, opening one eye cautiously, and then the other. Taylor’s face is creased with worry.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Grey.”

I blink for a moment, trying to get my bearings. “I did it again, didn’t I?”

He nods. “Gail is getting your mother-in-law on the phone. How do you feel?”

I run through the usual checklist. *Fingers and toes, check. Eyesight and hearing clear, check. Memory, yep… still missing. Head, doesn’t hurt. More questions now, double-check.* “Same as the other times.”

“Okay. I’m going to help you to your bedroom, all right?”

I nod. It’s weird, having another man carry me, but I’m sure it’s something Christian would have insisted upon. Taylor is bulkier, his strength is more evident where Christian’s is subtle. He sets me on the bed and Gail comes in behind him on one of the wireless handsets. “She’s awake. All right, here she is.” Gail holds out the phone to me. “Dr. Trevelyan, for you.”

“HI Grace.”

“Ana, darling. I hear you’re having a rough night. How do you feel?” I love the way she downplays it. Her reaction is so unlike Christian’s, he’d be beside himself. *Ugh, I can’t get him out of my mind.*

“I’m fine. Same as before. Tired, mostly.”

“That sounds about right. I’m on my way there to look you over, otherwise we’ll never hear the end of it from Christian. Would you like me to bring you anything?”

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary. I think I just want to go to sleep.”

“I’m coming anyway. Did you see anything new?”

“I think I saw parts of our wedding. I’d just been looking at the bench portrait at the top of the stairs. It was kind of comforting, but I don’t remember it happening.”
“That’s too bad. It’s only a matter of time; just keep believing that, all right?”

“I will.”

“Everything will be okay, dear. I’ll be there soon. Call Christian, all right?”

I sigh. “Okay. Thanks Grace.”

“See you in a while.”

I click the phone off. The Taylors are hovering in the doorway to the sitting room; I think they’re trying to give me some privacy on the call without disappearing altogether.

“Grace is on her way,” I tell them. “Did anyone call Christian?”

“Not yet, ma’am,” Taylor admits. “Would you like me to?”

“No, thank you, I’ll… I’ll do it.” I stare at the handset. “Wait,” I call after Gail, just before she clicks the door shut behind them. “What’s the speed dial for Christian’s cell?”

“It’s number three.”

“Thanks.” No more stalling, Anastasia, I chide myself. If I don’t call him, Taylor will, and Taylor can’t talk him out of rushing home, which is the first thing he’ll probably do, the control freak that he is. If no one tells him and he finds out later, he’ll be all kinds of angry, he’ll probably fire Taylor; of these things I’m certain. And if he hears it from someone else first, like his mother, he’ll wonder why Taylor didn’t tell him, and once again, Taylor’s out of a job, and then there’s the anger thing. I’ve heard him on the phone enough times when something’s gone wrong with whatever it is he does; I don’t think I’d ever known anyone to get so upset before, not ever Ray when I totaled his car right after I got my license. God, how did I end up with such an unstable wreck of a husband? Am I nuts? I must be. I hold down button three.

He picks up on the first ring. “Hi,” he says, his voice soft.

“Hi.”

He pauses. I think I hear him swallow. “How are you?”

“Um, that’s kind of why I called… don’t freak out, but I had an episode a little while ago.”

“Oh, God. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. No damage.”

“I’m coming home.”

“No… please, stay there. I’mokay. Your mom is coming, she’ll call when she’s done with me. I’m not ready… yet.”

I hear him sigh. “Ana, I… are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Is Taylor there?”

“He was, hold on…” I take the phone from my ear and press it to my shoulder, then call out.
“Taylor?” The bedroom door opens. “Yeah, he’s here.”

“May I speak to him, please?”

I hand the phone over.

“Yes, sir? Fine, sir. Gail and I. No, we don’t think so. Top of the stairs. On the carpet, that’s right. Yes, sir. On the monitor, so maybe just over a minute. She seems fine, sir. In bed. Yes, sir, I will. I understand.” He hands the phone back to me. Taylor appears none the worse for wear, so I think he’s safe from Christian’s wrath.

“Baby, are you certain that you don’t want me to come home?” his voice practically begs. I wonder what voice he used on Taylor.

“Far be it for me to forbid you, but I’d rather you didn’t.” My voice, on the other hand, isn’t forgiving. I’m not ready yet, nor do I know if I ever will be.

I hear another shuddered sigh. “I understand. Taylor will stay with you until my mother arrives, all right?”

“Okay.”

“And you’ll have her call me?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Oh baby, I’m so sorry you had to go through that alone. I should have been there. I’m so sorry for everything.”

I’m not sure what to say, so I say nothing.

“Ana?”

“I’m here.”

“Thank you for letting me know.” He pauses. “I love you. So much. Please call me, no matter what the time, if you need anything. I’ll be here.”

“I know.” And I hang up. I suddenly want to cry. He was so sweet and loving, and I was unbelievably cold. He didn’t ask what I saw; he was far more concerned with whether I was all right. I feel a strange pang of guilt over my behavior, but I’m still so angry. I’ll break down that anger into whatever else I’m feeling tomorrow, after a good night’s sleep. Right now, I want to be angry at him; it’s so much easier to manage than being afraid.

“Mr. Grey asked me to stay with you until Dr. Trevelyan arrives. I hope that’s all right.”

I nod, plunking the phone down on the bedside table. I stare straight ahead at the chocolate accent wall.

“Can I bring you anything?” he offers.

I shake my head. I’m so filled with sulk; I might as well regress to my son’s level.

Taylor sighs. “Mrs. Grey, I won’t pretend to know what you’re going through, but your husband is a good man. I sincerely hope everything turns out all right.”
His words hit me, if only slightly, driving me momentarily from my funk. Jason Taylor really does get it. I turn my head and offer a sad smile. “Thanks.”

~oOo~

There’s a wetness on my fingers, and then something slightly sharp clamps down. I groan, and clutch the wiggly body to my chest with one arm, reaching out to find the other. When I have them both, they still for only a minute or so, and then they’re back to wiggling. There won’t be any more sleeping in for me today.

“Puppies!” Ted squeals, abandoning his mess at the breakfast bar. Carter struggles to get him clean before releasing him to the floor, and the three little ones chase each other around the great room.

“Good morning, ma’am.” Carter seems a bit less creepy today, I’m not sure why.

“Good morning,” I manage, retrieving a yogurt from the refrigerator. Perhaps eating will make me feel less like a zombie. I suppress the raging thoughts, piling up like a threatening migraine, willing them to stay away until I’m at least fed. I don’t want to feed Christian’s fury, and I’m sure he’s still monitoring my intake from afar, the damned control freak that he is. God, I’m angry again. I need to manage it better.

There’s a text from Christian.

~

I hope you slept well. I miss you. x

~

I don’t doubt that he misses me. And I did sleep all right; at least, I think I did. I’m not tired, and I’m none the worse for wear despite last night’s episode, but I can’t seem to shake this funk cloud that’s surrounded me, and ignoring the facts doesn’t help, they just spring back to hit me in the gut like a suckerpunch. I really, really want to talk to someone, but of the two people I can actually talk to, there’s one I don’t particularly want near me right now, and the other will dissect everything I say and ask me questions I really don’t want to answer. I realize I’m not going to get anywhere if I keep things bottled up… my stomach can’t take it… so I dial the latter.

~oOo~

“Thanks for coming all the way out here,” I feel the need to justify the meeting place. Taylor and Sophie are nearby, but out of earshot, throwing Teddy’s stale crackers to some interested ducks.

“It’s no trouble at all. I’m actually glad you called.” John Flynn sits down on the bench next to me. “What would you like to talk about?”

A weird giggle escapes me. “Like? I don’t like thinking about any of this, much less talking.”

“Yes, perhaps I should find a more neutral way of asking. So, what do you need to talk about?” he
humors me. I must sound ripely annoying, to everyone.

I sigh. “I’m sorry for the way things just fall out of my mouth. I don’t mean to offend, it just sounds that way.”

“You’re entitled to more than a little hostility, considering what you’re carrying around. What do you want to accomplish today?”

“I don’t have a laundry list; I just don’t know what to think. I’m having trouble processing all of this; it’s so outside the realm of anything I understand. Does that make sense?”

“Of course. You’re operating outside your comfort zone, as you had to when you and Christian met and he first revealed his lifestyle to you. But then, he revealed a little to you at a time, and in a different order than you’ve experienced in the past month, and therefore, it’s different to process. Before, you learned of his lifestyle, and not the reasons behind it; those were revealed later, and so you had time to absorb his needs gradually. He took things very slowly with you. When you said no, he didn’t proceed. The times you safeworded, he stopped. If you didn’t, he didn’t know that he needed to, and that’s why you ended up hurt by his actions.”

“You make it sound like it was my fault.”

“Not at all… I’m just explaining the rules. They were written down, in fact. There was a contract in place to ensure your safety, and that laid out the terms and guidelines…”

“A contract?” I interrupt.

“You never actually signed it, and eventually you both decided against it, but Christian honored the rules, regardless. He wanted you to feel safe. He always put your well-being first; even today, and even with the D-s lifestyle so far behind him, it’s his top priority.”

I pause, looking down at my twined fingers. “How can you be sure he’s left it behind him?”

“The fact that you’re asking tells me that you’re not willing to give up on him, Ana. That’s a very brave decision,” he commends.

He doesn’t sound patronizing at all. I feel so close to snapping, and that small gesture keeps me from it, but barely. “I guess I’m not. I’m so scared, though. Are you going to answer my question?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you like to answer questions with questions.”

He chuckles. “You’re right about that. Part of my job is to make you think, to help you form your own conclusions. I can help you weed through the facts, but only you can come to the conclusions. My opinion really doesn’t count.”

“It counts to me. You may know him better than anyone right now.”

“That may be true at the moment, but you’re supposed to know him the best. And you will again, one day. For now, think about this… how might you be able to tell that he’s left those undesirable behaviors behind him?”

“You’re just asking my question.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Humor me.”
I swallow. “I never would have expected to find out what you told me yesterday. I imagined other things, illegal things…but not this. It’s so unreal, I still can’t imagine Christian like that. And now that I know, every time I think about him, I see him angry. But he’s not really like that. He’s been nothing but kind and understanding…well, except about my trip…and it’s hard to connect that we’re talking about the same person. The only time I see that he could possibly be capable is when he goes into control freak mode. It’s difficult to imagine that he’s…hit me. I keep wondering if there wasn’t the slightest bit of malice behind it.”

“How do you think with him at present, do you think he’s the slightest bit malicious?”

“No.”

He smiles knowingly.

“What?”

“You didn’t hesitate.”

“Didn’t, did I? What does that mean?”

“You really want to know?” he asks.

“Yes.” I think.

“It means you’ve already decided to forgive him.” Flynn considers my expression before continuing. “There’s something you’re holding back, though. Why do you think that is?”

Am I holding something back? I stop to think about it, but come up empty. “How do you know?”

“Know what?”

“That I want to forgive him.”

Flynn pull his feet up to sit cross-legged on the bench. “Because you’ve accepted that he isn’t that way now. There’s still fear of the unknown, and that’s keeping you from trusting your instincts. You were afraid of what you didn’t know, and now that you know, you’re afraid that if you don’t react as you’re supposed to, that you’re betraying your conscience. Which in a way I suppose you are. Hitting another person is wrong, this is what we’re told from a young age. But in the context of the moment, it wasn’t wrong, it was agreed upon, though the results were unpleasant for you. Now that you understand what drove him to that kind of behavior in the first place, and now that you know he won’t ever let it happen again, you want to move forward. You’re too understanding a person to sit on this for long. So I ask again. Why do you think you’re holding back?”

“Because I want him to…” my word vomit nearly escapes. I gasp.

“You want to punish him.”

“How does he always know? How do you do that?”

“I told you, I know you both very, very well.” Flynn puts his hand on my shoulder. The contact stops my impending shudder. I’m appalled at myself.

“I can’t believe that’s what I want…”

“Hey,” Flynn calls my attention, and I make eye contact. “It’s a completely natural reaction, and one I noticed long before you left my office yesterday. You want him to feel the hurt you felt when
you learned what he’d inflicted on you. To you, as you are now, the act was a betrayal of your trust, because you don’t remember the events leading up to it. So now, you need to figure out how to express your hurt and anger. Christian is hurting terribly as it is, I promise you. Taking your frustration out on him isn’t going to help you move forward, and it may actually hurt you both.”

“So what do I do, then?”

“You’re going to take it out on me.”

What? “You can’t be serious.” I look toward Taylor and Sophie, but they’ve rounded to the far side of the pond; unlikely to hear, though I’m sure Taylor is mindful of our every move.

“I’m very serious.” He takes my wrists, moving my arms to cross over my chest, so I’m hugging myself. “We’re going to try a technique that I’ve often used on your husband. You’re going to unleash your frustration toward me, imagine I’m Christian. Say whatever you feel. Don’t hold back.”

“I can’t do that.” I’m appalled he’d even suggest it.

“Would you rather risk damaging your marriage beyond repair? Because that’s what you’re doing.”


“So say it. Hurt me.”

“I’d rather hurt him.”

“Well I’m him right now. Hurt me.”

“I can’t!”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps you’re no good for him.”

“How can you say that?”

“Is it true?”

“No, I…”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know!”

“Yes you do.” His voice rises. “Stop hiding behind your excuses and say it.”

Excuses? I feel as though he’s punched me. The words bubble up before I can stop them. “I don’t want to remember him!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m afraid!” More word vomit.

“Why?”

“Because I love him!”
Oh!

Flynn stops, and I’m furious. I can’t believe I just… wait, what? What did I just say? My mouth drops open. “Oh my God…”

“It’s all right.”

I’m appalled at myself, and when the tears silently fall, all I can do is blink. I have no idea what I’m doing, what to think, and I momentarily forget where I am. Did I mean it? I said it… so it must be true. I love Christian Grey. I love my husband, the man who was there when I awoke in a strange place, who was kind and understanding, who made me feel welcome and wanted, who helped me feel a little more like myself every day. How can I possibly want to hurt him, regardless what he’s done?

“Hey,” Flynn calls me back to the present. “Good job.” He’s smiling at me, offering a handkerchief. What the hell is up with these handkerchiefs?

I mop my face and blink a bit more. “Did I just…”

“Yes.”

“You did that on purpose,” I conclude.

“I did. Sorry about that. There really wasn’t a better way.” He considers me with softened eyes.

“So… what now?”

“Well, you admitted the three things that really matter. The first, though it may seem important, is really irrelevant. Whether you eventually remember him or not isn’t really up to anyone. It’ll either happen, or it won’t, and there really isn’t anything left for you to be afraid of about him. Second, you admitted your fear. We can work through that, now that we both know why you’re afraid. And third… well, that’s food for your own thought, at least for now.”

I sigh. “Are you going to tell him?”

He chuckles. “As far as we’re concerned today, this bench is my office. It stays between us. Besides,” he leans in closer, “you’re going to tell him.”

~oOo~

As he has every evening, Christian answers on the first ring. “Hi,” he answers softly.

“Hi.”

“How are you?”

“I’ve been better. You?”

“Same.”

We pause.
“The moon was full last night. Did Teddy see?”

“Yes, he saw it. He’s not feeling well, so we didn’t stay out long.”

“Is he all right?” Christian is suddenly alarmed.

“Yes, it’s just a cold. He doesn’t have a fever. Your mom gave me some medicine to give him.”

He sighs. “You’re so good with him. Is there anything I can do? Do you need anything?”

“Just… come home tomorrow.”

There’s another pause.

“Is that what you really want?”

_Is it? It’s my turn to sigh. “Yes.”_

I think I can hear his smile. “Thank you, baby. You have no idea what that means to me.”

_Oh, I think I do. “Let’s take things slow, okay?”_

“Of course. Whatever you need, you’ll have it. I promise.”

“Thank you.”

Another silence.

“Ana?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll make it right. Everything. I promise you,” he vows.

“I don’t want to talk about it. It’s done. In the past. Not worth dredging up again.”

He sighs again. “I understand. Has John been of help to you?”

“Some.” _Maybe more than some, I’m not sure yet. “Just sorting through things.”_

“You can talk to me as well,” he offers.

“I know. And, I will.”

“I’m glad. I’m curious to know what you saw on Monday evening. You never did say.”

“Oh, that. It was… parts of the wedding, I think. I was looking at the picture at the top of the stairs when it happened.”

“I see,” he exhales. “I’m glad it wasn’t a frightening memory.”

“Me too.” Something dawns on me. “Christian?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Why, um… I’m wearing rings, in a lot of our pictures. But I… can’t find them. Did… did I… lose them?”
“No, baby. I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you. After the accident, the paramedics had to cut them off you, so they’ve been at the jeweler. I’ve since forgotten to pick them up. Did you want to wear them?”

Umm… I hadn’t thought that far. “If you still want me to.”

“Of course I do,” his voice softens further, if that’s even possible. “Few things would make me happier; I’ll have Taylor pick them up first thing in the morning.”

“Um… okay.”

“Is there something else?”

Is there? *Just say it, you chicken. Three words. Say them!* “I… um, I’m glad you’re coming home.”

*Chicken.* My conscience clucks at me, flapping her elbows. Maybe I’m just not ready yet.

“Me too, baby. I’ve missed you.”

“Can we, um… go somewhere, like you talked about last week? I’m… going a little stir crazy.”

“Of course, Ana. Wherever you’d like to go. Just us, or should we bring Teddy?”

“I, um… can I think about that?”

“Sure. Ana?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you.”

I swallow. “I know.”

~oOo~

Friday morning dawns gray, like my mood. I went to bed last night feeling fairly more positive, after our conversation, by far the longest since he left, but my funk is back. *What changed?* I clear the sleep from my throat, and it feels a little sore. *Shit.* I think I might’ve caught Teddy’s cold. Tess peers at my pillow-squished face. “Morning puppies,” I rub the girl’s ears, and turn to look for Ludwig, in time to see him squatting by the door.

This day is not starting well.

By lunchtime, my head is in a fog. Teddy is grumping on the sofa in front of the widescreen, having tolerated my attempt at cuddling him this morning. I can’t seem to make him feel better, so I gave him his cherry-flavored syrup and left him to snooze in the company of vintage Sesame Street. Evidently, we have the entire multi-decade series on Christian’s entertainment server. I hear the Yep-Yep aliens in the background. They used to scare me to death as a child, but for some reason, Ted loves them. Makes me wonder if he’s really mine. Okay, that was a joke. Even in sickness I still have a sense of humor, albeit a sarcastic one.

“Mrs. Grey, Mr. Grey is on the phone,” Gail interrupts my cloudiness.

“Of course. I’ll take it in the kitchen.” I rise from the barstool, ignoring the slight dizziness. I can’t
believe I’m sick. I never get sick. At least, I never used to. I don’t know about the last three years, though, and I haven’t asked. Line one blinks expectantly at me.

“Christian?”

“Ana, I’m glad I caught you. My flight has been delayed a few hours due to the weather. We’ll take off as soon as we’re cleared.”

My heart leaps and sinks at the same time. The effect is mighty confusing. I shake it off. “Oh. Um, okay. Should I do anything?”

“No, baby. I just didn’t want you to worry. I’ll be home as soon as I can. I’ll call when we take off, all right?”

“All right.” I’m not sure what else to say. “I um… hope you have a safe flight.”

“Thank you, baby. How is everything at home?”

“There’s a miserable little boy on the couch, he won’t let me cuddle him,” I pout.

“Oh, my poor little one, may I speak to him?”

I bring the phone over to Teddy, who’s contorted himself between the cushions, one arm around his stuffed lion, the opposite thumb firmly plugged between his lips, his nose running profusely. It all looks very uncomfortable. I grab a tissue and wipe his face before he has the opportunity to protest. “Ted, your daddy’s on the phone.”

For a two-year-old, he’s amazingly dexterous. He takes the phone in his snot-and-saliva-smeared hand and coughs into the receiver. I can hear Christian’s voice through the speaker, but I can’t make out what he’s saying. Our boy gives short, one-word answers, and then presses the off-button.

Great.

I take the phone back with two fingers, deposit it by the kitchen sink, and go in search of another, clean receiver. It rings as I pick it up, startling me.

“Hello?”

“My son hung up on me.”

“He’s only two.”

“Yes, I suppose that explains it. He wasn’t very interested in talking.”

“That could have been because I wiped his face before handing him the phone.”

Christian laughs. “He isn’t very fond of that. I hope he isn’t giving you too hard a time.”

“I’ll manage.” I clear my throat.

“Are you all right? You sound a little off.”

“Just sharing Ted’s germs.”

“Oh no, baby… I’ll be home soon to look after you, all right?”
“You don’t have to… I’d rather you didn’t get sick too.”

“I want to take care of you. Besides, I haven’t had a cold since I was a child. I doubt I’ll catch anything. You should rest though, I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Okay, but I’ll be fine, really.”

“Rest, Ana. Please, for me.”

“I will.”

“I love you. See you soon.”

“Okay.”

I click the phone off. *I love you too, Christian.* I’m still a damned chicken. Last night, before I went to sleep, I rationalized that he should hear those words in person, when I’m ready for him to hear them, and that’s why I haven’t said them. But I think I’m still coming to terms with what they mean, and to be honest, Christian still scares me a little bit. But is it what he did that scares me, because I don’t remember it, or is it the depth of his emotion toward me, and toward his family? Maybe it’s both. I have a headache. I arrange for Carter to stay with Teddy for a few hours and then go to lie down.

When I wake, it’s dusk. My head is stuffy. *Great, I’ve missed the day.* I wonder offhand if Christian is home, but he said he’d call before takeoff. I wonder if Gail told him I was asleep and he asked her not to bother me.

I pull a robe over my silk pajamas, surprised by the chill in the bedroom. Either it’s unseasonable cool for late August, or the rain today has brought a front from the north. Either way, I put on my wooly slipper-boots for good measure.

“Is it going to snow?” Gail teases when I enter the kitchen.

“Ha ha.” I attempt to smell what appears to be a brothy noodle soup on the stove, but my nose fails me. *Stupid cold.* “Where’s Teddy?”

“Carter put him to bed about a half hour ago.” She retrieves a small box from the pantry and hands it to me. Cold medicine. “Take some, and I’ll get a bowl of soup ready for you.” She hands me a glass of juice, and I do as I’m told. “Mr. Grey called an hour ago, they were about to take off. He should be in before eleven.”

“Oh, thanks.” I dig into the soup, surprisingly hungry. “I hope you and Jason had a good week with Sophie.”

“We did, thanks. Jason is driving her back to her mother’s now, so the house is pretty much empty; I think Owen is in the control room tonight until Mr. Grey and Luke get back.”

“Oh, okay. Will you be around?”

“Sure, I can stay until they get home, if you’d like. Want to watch a movie?”

“I’d like that, if you don’t mind my germs.” I offer her an apologetic smile.

“Pshh,” she waves it off. “If I haven’t caught it by now, I’m not going to. I’m going to start some laundry, but I’ll be back in ten, okay?”
“Okay.” I return to my soup.

There’s an insistent whimper to my left. The puppies, corralled in their temporary enclosure, are staring me down, expectantly, tails wagging. Ludwig yips.

“What?”

More tail wagging.

“Do you need something?” I peer around to their food dishes, and they’re full. I roll my eyes. “Do you need to go out?” Like they understand. They’re puppies, I doubt they understand yet that this is their home; it’s only been a week. I climb down off the stool and lean over the railing to pick them up, one dog under each arm, awkwardly slide the screen door open, and set them down. They spring off into the yard, barking.

Oh, shit. In my cold-induced idiocy, I didn’t consider leashes. I haven’t had to take them out before; Sophie had taken full responsibility, as Christian had asked. I panic, and take off after them.

There’s just enough light that I see them leaping through the tall grass, like the Key Deer I saw on the way to Islamorada the time Mom and Ray took me to Florida. It’s not so cute this time. Teddy’s going to be so upset. How could I be so stupid?

Ludwig tears off to the left. I think he must have seen something and chased it, and I follow, hollering at them, but as they’re puppies it isn’t doing any good, and just makes my throat hurt more. My lungs don’t like all this running, either. I’ve made it down to the beach, just a meter from the water, when Tess tears across, nearly knocking me off my feet, and Ludwig is in hot pursuit. The little blurs that they are, they reach the edge of the woods, and the dark canopy swallows them up.

Oh, please God, make them stop. Please, I’ll do anything, I reason with the higher power. Anything could happen to them in there, they’re little and so fragile, and there’s Heaven-knows-what in those woods at night. An eagle could swoop down and eat them up. I mutter any number of expletives under my breath, and continue after, as fast as I can, considering my boots are hindering me, and, hopping, I discard them, one by one. The forest opens upon a mulched trail. I trudge along, shaking, listening for a bark or whine, or any kind of puppy sound, and I’m losing my mind. I’d never have let this happen to Sam. In a way, I feel as though I’m letting him down, and the thought makes me want to cry. If something happens to those puppies, I don’t know how I’ll be able to forgive myself.

The trail forks, and again, and again… I don’t know how many times. I begin to doubt that a dog in pursuit of small woodland creatures would have the sense to stick to a trail, and after splashing through a rather large puddle, I step over a fallen log and trudge through the squishy greenery. I think I’ve torn the leg of my pajama bottoms; my leg itches a little, but it’s too dark to see if I’ve scratched it, and right now I couldn’t care less. I still can’t hear anything that sounds remotely like two rogue dogs, and the pounding in my ears doesn’t help. My nose is running liberally, and my sleeve becomes a makeshift tissue. I have to stop. I force myself to quiet, my pulse, my breaths, everything, and just listen.

And listen.

And by golly, the angel of Sam must have taken pity on his dear friend, because I do hear a whimper, and it’s close. In the last of the evening light, I see a rustling in some ferns, and hear another whimper. I whistle. Why didn’t I whistle before? God, I’m stupid. Tess peers out of the foliage, and I run to her. She’s filthy, and favoring a front paw, but she’s safe, and just as quickly in
“Okay,” I breathe. “Okay little one, you’re safe. Let’s find your brother.”

It’s a bit more difficult to navigate a densely wooded area when carrying a dog, even a small one, I’ve decided. In my relief over having accomplished half of the dog-retrieval mission, I wonder when backup will arrive; I doubt my absence has gone unnoticed. I sure could use the help. I hope there’s an emergency vet open at this hour. It gets darker, and though it’s just a day past full moon, the cloud cover mutes the light considerably. I don’t remember praying this hard, not since Sam died, that he’d forgive me for not being there. And now I’m praying for the whimpers of a little dog, because in the darkness, it’s all I’ve got. I’m not going back without him, and that’s assuming I can even find my way back, I realize with a shudder. Oh God, am I lost? I whip my head around, and what little I can see, spins. I need to sit down. I fold my legs under me, dropping to the ground, clutching a shivering Tess against my chest. I can’t be that far from the trail, I reason with myself. It forks a lot, but one of the paths has to go somewhere, maybe another backyard, and I can find the street and walk home. After I find Ludwig. I’m fairly pleased with my plan, but my head is still floating. I just need to rest for a minute.

A distressed yelp pierces the night air, and chills me straight through. Oh God, please don’t let him be hurt. Please, I beg. I hear it again, and I stumble forward, Tess bouncing in my arms, and then it comes again, closer. It’s so dark. I’m terrified what I’ll find, and I lose my footing over a tree root, taking the fall on my side to avoid crushing the bundle in my arms. She squeals anyway.

“I’m sorry, girl,” I soothe her. My hip and elbow throb. I hear a yip, but it doesn’t seem quite as distressed as before, and it echoes below me. I prop myself on one hand, still holding Tess, and I have to thank the root I tripped over, because before me is a chasm, an uprooted pit at the base of a toppled, ancient tree. And at the bottom, is an equally filthy little dog.

“Thank you, Sam!” I say aloud, my insides cheering. My head swims with elation, or exhaustion… but no matter; by the grace of some really, really forgiving deity of furry family members, I’ve found the little ones. Perhaps I can get them home and bathed and myself cleaned up, and Christian won’t have any idea we were gone in the first place, I tell myself. I tie the belt tighter around me, and tuck Tess in the V created by the robe lapels. I’ll need both my hands, and I hope my right arm is up to the challenge. Tugging on a dangling root, I find footing here and there, and monkey my way downward.

The bottom is a muddy pit of overlying roots and forest litter. Ludwig is so overcome with doggy joy that he launches himself at me. Sam did this every day when I came through the door; Ray called it excessive-greeting-syndrome. I choke back a sob at the thought, and tuck the little guy into my robe with his sister. I must be a sight. Gail is going to laugh so hard, and then I’m going to bed. After I wash the dogs.

My head is swimming again, and I’m getting ahead of myself. I need to get home. I grab hold of the climbing root, brace my foot against a crumbled rock, and pull. The root snaps, and I fall backward onto a mesh of roots and a squish of mud. Great. Let’s try this again. I get up and immediately fall forward, catching myself against the dirt wall of this mud prison; my ankle is wedged among a tangle of roots. Great. I twist it, pulling and straining, but it won’t budge.

Fantastic. I need a new plan. There must be someone looking for me by now, the staff is paranoid enough.

“Hello?” I call, and then cough. “Can anyone hear me?”

I realize suddenly that I’m sweating, and it’s cold. The breeze can’t reach me down here, but it’s
uncomfortably chilly. My head has begun to pound, or maybe it already hurt, and I was too
distracted to acknowledge it. I’m overcome with an overwhelming sense of dread. I wipe my runny
nose again on my sleeve. I have to get out of here.

I call out again, and listen, but hear nothing. My throat is burning. I think I’m shivering, but I can’t
tell if it’s me or the puppies. They’re huddled against me, not going anywhere. Oh, God… why?
Why lead me to them and then… wait, I said I’d do anything. “That’s not what I meant!” I yell,
bringing on another round of coughing. What do I do? I pull weakly again, but my foot is as stuck
as ever, and pulling only hurts more. I lean back against the damp roots. Christian is going to be
beside himself. I swallow, and it hurts. Christian. Please, please find me. I feel my wrist, and my
bracelet is gone. Oh, no. Did I lose it? I don’t remember taking it off, and I don’t remember
wearing it earlier. I have no idea, but I have nothing to hold onto, except the puppies. My heart
pounds and I realize suddenly, I’m terrified.

It’s so dark down here, and cold. I try to yell again, but my voice cuts off in a sob, and I can’t
squeak out a sound. Now I know it’s me that’s shaking. This can’t happen. Oh please don’t let this
happen. I squeeze my eyes shut, despite the darkness, and try to conjure Christian’s beautiful face.

And I hear a voice. My eyes burst open, into darkness. I call out, but I don’t hear myself, save the
echo in my ears. I hear the voice again, louder, and it’s… singing? Another voice joins it, and
another, a choir of voices? Something stings… over my arm, spreading over my belly, down my
legs, and the singing is louder. More voices, swirling together. It’s so loud. I can’t think, and the
stinging in my body… oh!

And then, everything dulls, mercifully, like fading pain, and slips away.
Chapter 15

~ CHRISTIAN ~

“I don’t know when, Ros. The next day or so, I imagine. Greg Lynch at the Manhattan office will be in touch with the specifics.”

“I understand. Have a good time. Give Ana my best.”

“I will.” I hit the ‘off’ button and lean back in my seat. I have half a mind to go to the back for a nap, but there’s only an hour left, and it’s likely I won’t sleep. My patience is thin, as it usually is, after many days away from home. Sawyer has been a competent stand-in, but it’ll be a relief to have Taylor back at my side; this man has my wife’s habits down but not many of my own, to make day to day operations easier. I allow my eyes to close, willing my brain to be still, for once. I can’t wait to see my wife and son.

“Sir?” Sawyer interrupts my nap attempt, after I don’t know how long. His face is ashen. “I have Taylor for you. It’s urgent.”

My eyes fly open. The last time Taylor approached me with an urgent matter it was to tell me that my wife may be dying. My fingers snap the phone from him. “Taylor?”

“Sir, Ana’s missing. She went out the back door with the dogs; it looks like they ran off and she went after them. Owen is out there with a flashlight and Gail is with Ted. I’m almost to SeaTac to pick you up. The local Search and Rescue are on the way.”

Christ. My gut clenches with terror. “When did this happen?”

“About twenty minutes ago. Owen’s not sure which way she went; the porch cameras don’t see past the edge of the lawn. She can’t have gone far, Sir. We’ll find her.”

“What’s our ETA?” I bark at Sawyer.

“I’ll find out, Sir.”

“Why wasn’t anyone watching her?” I shout at Taylor. My heart is pounding.

“I’m not clear on the specifics, Sir. I put priority on finding her.”

Of course. I’m a complete shit, looking to blame someone when there are more important things… one most important thing… my wife. My free hand has clenched my hair, pulling to the point of pain. “Call Garrett in. Light a fire under Search and Rescue, get everyone. I want teams looking for her five fucking minutes ago.”

“I’m on it, Sir.”

Oh, God. Please. Not again. Let her be all right.

“We’ll be landing in twenty minutes, Sir.”

I glance at Sawyer and jerk my chin toward the other flight phone. “Call Carter in, and get Welch to send anyone he can spare. Apprise them of the situation. I want them at the house immediately.”
“Yes, Sir.”

I fumble with the speed dial. It rings three fucking times before someone picks up.

“Christian?”

“Dad, I need help.”

~oOo~

Blue strobes. Uniforms. *Yes, they’re here. They’re here to help. They’ll find her. I’ll find her.*

“Christian!” My mother bursts from the front door. Her eyes are red. *Please, no...*

“Where’s Teddy?”

“Upstairs, Mia is with him. Everyone else is out looking, but...”

I brush past her.

“Christian?”

I don’t hear. Or I choose not to.

“Christian, they found her shoes!”

My feet stop moving. My mother’s fingers gently clamp down on my arm. “They were by the water, Christian… they’re going to bring in a marine unit...”

*No, no, no...* My heart stutters. *There has to be an explanation.* “Taylor!”

“Right behind you, Sir.”

“Christian?”

“Dr. Trevelyan, I’ll stay with him.”

I throw the back door aside and it shudders... the same door Ana slipped out, not two hours ago. *God, Ana, where are you?*

My fear turns to unbridled fury, it’s the only emotion I have to stay focused. Wrenching my jacket from my arms, I set off at a run. The tall meadow grass drags on my legs; I make a mental note to have it mown down and ripped out. And the scattering of beach rocks as well...

“Sir! We’ll have to ask you to return to the house, this is potentially a crime scene.”

I’m momentarily struck furious by the uniforms on my beach. *No one gives me orders.* “This is my fucking house, and my wife we’re looking for,” I bark. “Why the hell aren’t you looking for her?”

“Sir, we can’t discuss our investigation at this time. Please return to the...”

“Enough! What aren’t you telling me?”
“Sir, if you’ll allow me,” Taylor pants next to me. “Gentlemen, Mr. Grey is understandably upset. If there’s anything you’ve found that might help us find his wife, it would be beneficial for you to tell us. We’re in no way attempting to interrupt your work, but you understand that time is of the essence.”

I marvel for a split second at Jason Taylor’s calm, and then my fury sets to boiling again.

The two officers look at each other. “Our findings are inconclusive. There’s one set of tracks spanning the beach. She could have gone either way, or into the water.”

“Thank you,” Taylor urges me to follow. “Sir?”

My feet involuntarily break into a run, and I’m easily outpacing my right-hand. *Seattle’s finest… no better than inspector gadget.* “What if she did go into the water, what if someone dragged her?”

“Sir, she was chasing the puppies. It’s doubtful they would have cleared those pilings, it’s more likely they were chasing something and headed into the woods, which is exactly what we should do.”

I hadn’t realized I’d voiced that thought out loud, but for a fleeting moment I’m grateful for the man’s intuition. “Ana!” I call out, again and again. I can’t see far ahead, and a light comes on to my right. Taylor apparently had the sense to pick up a flashlight. He hands it to me, mid stride.

I bear left at the fork, taking the route I normally run, on autopilot. It’s increasingly difficult to squash the waves of panic. *She has to be out here, simply lost and trying to find the puppies. Someone will find her and call us. She’ll be safe at home soon. I’ll tell her I love her, and then I’ll never let her out of my sight again, as long as I live.*

“Ana!”

“Mrs. Grey!”

Bobbing lights appear ahead, another search party. Good, someone has brains enough to have covered some ground. I race past.

“Christian?”

*Dad?*

I skid in the mulch, glad I had the sense to don athletic shoes on the flight, and Taylor nearly knocks me down. “Anything?”

“Not yet, Son. We’re about to head off the trail. What part will you cover?”

“How far up the main trail has anyone gone?”

“We haven’t seen anyone yet,” Elliott tells me. “Other teams went to check the north trail.”

“I’ll take this trail to the end and start back through the woods.” My feet are already in motion. “Call me the minute you hear anything!”

“Stay together, we don’t want to lose you as well!” Dad booms.

I mapped the trails here, in preparation for timing my runs… there are fourteen loops on the south side of the property, and six on the north. Some eventually run onto the grounds of the adjacent estates. I have to hope that Ana may have found her way to one of them, though they’re so far…
but if she had, she would have phoned… *No. you can’t get into worst-case-scenarios, Grey. You need to function.* I wrack my photographic memory for the paths I mapped, interested for the first time in what lies beyond them, how far they are from one another, and what barriers *I, or she,* could encounter. I’ve never had to think of things like this before, and I’m desperately sorry that I didn’t spend any time at all on these details.

My voice is raw from calling her name. We’ve neared another search pair, and later another, and another… I hope to God they’re not re-covering the same ground. I don’t stop to ask. The doom level within me rises sharply every minute, despite my efforts to quash it. There are at least a hundred acres out here, for Christ’s sake. My heart has been thudding horribly since the flight, and hasn’t stopped. Overexertion is of the least concern… I couldn’t stop my feet moving forward if I tried, even if I have a coronary. *Why hasn’t anyone called? Why haven’t they found her? Or seen either of the dogs? Unless she has them… yes, what if she’s picked them up and cut through a yard and been walking home by the road? She would have stopped at one of the homes and called, wouldn’t she?* My heart stutters, making me momentarily lightheaded, as my stomach sours… *of course she wouldn’t… my Ana has the worst self-preservation skills on Earth. I swear, I’ll log this entire forest and pave it over, environmentalists be damned.*

My face contacts with the ground.

“*Sir!***

Gasping mouthfuls of leaves and dirt…

“*Mr. Grey, stop!*”

Arms… my arms are stuck…

“*Red, Sir! Red!*”

*What? No…* I feel my autopilot shut off, like a switch, the current dies and I can see, sort of… light, wobbling over me.

“*Mr. Grey, talk to me.***

“*Jason…***

“Yes, Sir. We need to stop. It’s after two, Sir. We need to go back, get some water and clean you up. You’re bleeding.”

“I’m…” *Yes, my head hurts. My fingers feel… they’re smeared with red… red, Red… “No, I have to… have to find…”***

“Sir, please, we’ll keep looking, I promise, but we’re no good to her like this.” His hand is out, toward me.

“*Jason? Where’s my Ana?***

“We’ll find her. I promise you.” He hauls me up, grasping my arm, my body twitching with anxiety at his touch, and pulls me to stumble forward again.

It’s so dark…

“*Oh my God, what happened to him?***
Mother… I can’t…

“Ran into a low branch, Ma’am. Any word?”

*Hands on me, push me down. Head hurts… I know that scent…*

“Not yet… Carrick is working with the police…”

*Stop it, that burns…*

“Christian, hold still, I need to clean it…”

“I’m going to check in with my team and head out again, can you keep him here?”

*No… I have to go back… she’s there…*

“I’ll try… Christian, stop! Mia!”

“What, did they… oh my, what happened?”

“Get my bag from the car, the red one, Mia. Christian!”

*Red, red… red…*

“Christian Trevelyan-Grey, you stay awake, do you hear me?”

“Ana… where’s my Ana…”

“Oh darling,” arms come around me. “They’ll bring her back to you. They’re trying so hard.”

*I… hear… despair…*


“Christian? How are you feeling, dear?”

4:46. *What?*

The mug falls from my hands, clattering to the ground. There’s something covering me, a blanket… I throw it off. “It’s almost five?” *I rasp. My voice… what happened to my voice?*

Everything clears suddenly, like a breath after suffocation, and my heart plummets. “Where is she?”

“Oh darling, they haven’t found her yet…” my mother’s eyes are rimmed in red.

*Red.*

“How did I miss so much time?” I demand. My feet try to propel me forward, but I stumble, and my knees make contact with the hardwood floor.

“Christian, easy…” her hands are on me again. “You’ve had a concussion, Jason brought you home and went back out to look for Ana. You haven’t said a word in hours.”

My heart is breaking. “I can’t lose her, Mom… she’s sick, what if she’s hurt, or cold…”
“Darling, everyone is doing their best,” her voice breaks. She kneels beside me and I’m swept into her arms; she rocks me.

“I have to…”

“You’re in no shape to go out there, Christian. I can’t lose you too.”

But you will, if anything has happened to her. And the creeping worst thoughts trickle in, like a rising tide over a flat beach. Drowning… her body washes up miles down shore… Exposure… anything out there can hurt her, my little, fragile Ana… a wild animal, she could have fallen… what do I tell my son in a few hours when he wants his mommy…

A ringing. Garbled chatter, and another ringing, different, but just as insistent. The hiss of a radio.

The irritating buzzing of my Blackberry.

Realization dawns. Oh God, I have to answer it. Please, dear Lord, don’t let her be dead. I’ll do anything. My hands are quaking as I yank the device from my pocket. I drop it. My mother picks it up and hits the speakerphone.

“Sir, we’ve found her. She’s alive. I’m sending you coordinates.”

My heart stops.

“Oh…” my mother cries. I’m on my feet in an instant and stumble out the door, my suddenly still fingers hitting buttons, pulling up the GPS, my knees screaming.

“Christian! They found her!” My brother is jogging toward me. He’s covered in grime, I can’t imagine why I notice. He sets off beside me.

“Taylor sent coordinates. Where is she?” I rasp.

“They found her near a fallen tree. She got stuck. Puppies are there too, amazingly.”

“Is she all right?”

“I don’t know. It’s almost a half-mile off the trail. Dad’s with her. He just called me, said to find you and bring you.”

My heart is trilling again, this time, with hope. I get another chance. I don’t care if she never remembers us, what we had; she gets another chance to know me. We get another chance. Elliott’s holding onto me, keeping me upright and moving; I can’t grasp my weakness. We cut right at the end of one path; there’s a fluorescent mark on a tree, lit up by his flashlight. I don’t remember ever seeing it before; I must not have been anywhere near her, I realize, and my gut twists with guilt. My self-loathing is short lived as we spot a team ahead, wearing reflective jumpsuits and carrying a backboard. Paramedics. We fly past, and beyond, a fluttering of lights, like fireflies, spark in the early dawn.

She’s there… my Ana is there!

“Ana!” I cry out, and the lights point at me, blinding me… I break from Elliott’s hold and barrel forward, my lungs screaming. I’d give all my air for her, and more. Charging through a tangle of enormous roots, I come to a stop. An officer holds two bundles, the puppies, I think… they’re unrecognizable. My father is there, and Taylor… their backs are to me.
Ana…

My father turns. Ana is in his arms. “Christian…”

“Oh my God…” I’m thrown forward. She’s not moving… “Ana?”

“Hmm…”

My heart constricts. She’s so pale. Her eyes flutter, lips are a light purple. My father is clutching her to him, rocking her. Jason vigorously rubs warmth into her legs. Oh God… there are streaks of blood at her chest and down one leg…

“Christ, Ana!” My hands move to her face.

“May we take a look?” The paramedics have caught up, their question likely out of protocol as they don’t wait for a response, pushing us aside. My father releases her to them, but I resist… I have to stay with her, she needs me.

“Please, Sir, we need to work.”

“No! She’s my wife!”

“Christian, please,” my father chokes, his arms surrounding me, hauling me away, and I fight him but for the first time since I was a child, he’s stronger than I am. My head spins, and I watch, helpless, their hands on her, instruments checking her. One covers her with a metallic sheet. Their voices are low.

“We need to move her now,” one of them announces. Move her? They position the backboard and roll her onto it, tucking the sheet around her and securing her with straps, then lift her. Jason instructs them to follow him, flashlight in hand but hardly necessary in the early dawn light. Dad has brought my arm about his neck and curls his around my back; I haven’t the proper strength to resist, and I don’t give a damn, all I need to do is to stay upright and follow, to stay with her.

“Is she going to be all right, Dad?” I don’t recognize my voice.

“I hope so. I think we got to her in time. She was very cold.”

“There was blood… she’s hurt…”

“Everything possible will be done for her, son. I promise you.”

“Did she wake?”

“For only a moment, as your man Taylor lifted her out of that damned hole. She called your name, son.”

They carry her swiftly, carefully, following Jason’s lead, around the side of the house, through an access gate in our privacy wall. More strobes, they hurt my eyes… an ambulance waits in the drive.

“I want to go with her…” I mumble, my voice weaker now.

“Cary!” My mother bursts from the side door. “You and Elliott drive Christian, I’ll go with Ana. Keep him awake!” She climbs into the back, I see Ana’s feet for only a second and they close the doors. They’re taking her.
“I’ll drive you. Your car is blocked.” Jason jogs past, and I lurch forward to follow as my legs give out. Dad holds me back from a much nastier impact with the ground. My world is unraveling.

“On your feet, bro.” Elliott... he’s here. Perhaps he was here all the time, I don’t remember... where’s Teddy? Where’s my wife? I want my family... I’m being shoved into the back of a car, and slammed against the seat as it takes off. Where are we going? Someone holds me upright, belts me in, I feel trapped. I want my Ana. Someone’s touching me. Stop it... no, no...

~oOo~

Throbbing. Incessant and all-consuming, my brain is on fire. I must escape... wakefulness evades me, my eyes are unresponsive. So are my hands, my mouth... everything. A cloud of murmuring envelops me, changing, growing. Voices.

“Oh my baby boy...”

“Calm down, Gracie. His doctor said he’ll be fine, he just needs rest. How’s our girl?”

Yes, Ana... where’s Ana, is she all right? There are fingers at my forehead... my mother’s... they brush away the pain, dull it slightly. “She’s doing better. That fever may have saved her life, but the ordeal has lowered her immunity considerably. She’s on a strong antibiotic among other things, though the gash on her leg was fairly superficial. We’ll have a clearer picture when she wakes up.”

“She had those puppies bundled in her robe, Grace. She was keeping them safe. I think I have a new understanding of Christian’s gripe about Ana’s lack of self-preservation. That precious girl martyrs herself at every turn.”

Finally, they see...

“She has so much love inside her. Our boy couldn’t have been more fortunate than to stumble across her.” Warm lips press against my cheek.

“I think she stumbled into him, is the story, my dear.”

“So it is. I should get back, sit with Ana a while.”

Don’t go... I want to... I need my Ana...

~oOo~

The haze surrounds me, tempts the unconsciousness to return, and I resist. My eyelids won’t obey. There’s an undercurrent not unlike adrenaline coursing through me, zapping my extremities, but contrarily refuses to bring life to my body. The mumbling grows louder.

“We’re going to move Mr. Grey to his wife’s suite, sir. Dr. Trevelyan’s orders. Please follow us.”

Move? To Ana?
The support beneath me wavers, and I feel the sensation of momentum through my toes, working its way up. My head lolls to the side, bringing on a fresh wave of pain and nausea. I fight the urge with the will of semi-consciousness, fearing the result of regurgitation during what I perceive is sleep paralysis. As a child, I would often almost wake from a nightmare but be pulled under again, unable to wake myself forcibly as one of my many shrinks had taught me. It was unbearably frightening. This is different; the nightmare is real. My Ana… she must get well. They’re taking me to her… I’ll be with you soon, baby…”

~oOo~

Less pain, more stiffness… my body doesn’t want to move; my arms and legs are solid iron. My hand, though… there’s something in it, a warmth… it pulses with a light, tingling spark. I know that feeling…

Ana…

My voice… I can’t rouse it, can’t bring forth the tiniest sound.

She’s holding my hand. Is she awake? She’s not moving. Is she all right? She’s warm, I know nothing else. She’s here, beside me. I feel her. I will her to know how much I love her, that I’d do anything to take her pain, to take her sickness upon myself, that I’d die for her.

My breathing is so loud, it lulls me. Unconsciousness drags me under.

~oOo~

I’m exceptionally warm.

My eyelids finally obey, peeling back slowly. I wince at the brightness of my surroundings. It becomes bearable, though the ache in my head returns, and everything appears enveloped in a quivering haze. I find myself in a large hospital suite, not unlike the one in which Ana spent a month not long ago. I test my fingers and toes, and they obey fairly well, though weakly, then my arms… one side is pinned, heavily. Funny, I don’t remember injuring it. I roll my head to the left.

Ana is curled into my side. She’s very warm, pinning my arm under her, her own draped across my belly, an intravenous tube taped to her hand. Her breaths practically steam against my chest.

“Oh, Ana…” My arms shift and pull her to me; her heat is radiant, but I don’t care. She’s here, alive, when things could have ended so much worse. What’s more, she’s turned to me, whether consciously or in her sleep, it makes no difference… she wants to be near me, on some level. Am I forgiven? At this very moment, I don’t mind if she doesn’t yet… I need her in my arms, safe, warm, and secure. I could spend an eternity in this moment.

I’m distracted by the opening of the suite door. My mother peers in. I sigh with relief, gently waving her over, careful not to disturb my wife.

“Oh Christian, thank Heaven,” she whispers, hands immediately going to my forehead and wrist,
ever the physician.

“Mom…” I struggle to speak, my voice raspy. I recall suddenly the overuse from calling out through the woods... last night? The night before? “What day is it?”

“Sunday afternoon,” she tells me. “You took a nasty blow to the head, do you remember?”

“Yes.” My focus returns to Ana. “How is she?”

“Still feverish, but responding well to treatment. I think she’ll be just fine. It was very fortunate that they found her when they did.”

“It was.” I close my eyes briefly, and at the images that greet me, I open them again. “Teddy?”

“At Elliott and Kate’s. They insisted.”

“Good. Thank them for me. And the puppies?”

“Gail rushed them to a veterinarian, they’re recovering.”

I want to laugh, but I resist. “At least Ana’s little adventure wasn’t in vain,” I rasp, dripping sarcasm. I think my mother senses my mood, and lets the comment slide. I lower my eyes and attempt to calm my breathing; my head has begun to pound again. It’s only now I notice my relative state of undress, and the hospital gown that covers me. “Who undressed me?”

“Your father and Elliott did, dear. You gave the nurses quite a difficult time, or so I heard.” She smiles knowingly.

“I did? “I don’t remember.” I can’t imagine what I might have done in a state of delirium. I hope I didn’t embarrass myself; I can only imagine the extent of Jason’s efforts at damage control. I backburner the thought.

“It’s all right. You have an excuse.” She kisses my cheek briefly, and then reaches over to smooth Ana’s hair away from her face. “I’ll bring you something for the pain, okay?”


“Let her rest. She doesn’t get another dose of her cocktail for an hour.”

I sigh. “Thank you, Mom. I couldn’t wake but I could hear voices, you ordered the nurses to bring me to her. I’m grateful.”

She smiles softly. “I love you both so very much, Christian. Please don’t frighten us like that again.”

My heart darkens. “Ana and I will have words on that very issue,” I murmur.

“Be gentle with her, dear. She means well. You know that, better than any of us.”

“I do. And I will.”

~oOo~
It’s darker when I wake again. The only light in the room comes from the cracked door, and the low fluorescents illuminating our attached beds.

Ana is still curled into my side, more tightly than before, if even possible.

My arms pull her in close, my hand running soothingly up and down her arm. She’s still warm, perhaps not quite as before, but it’s evident she’s ailing. I press a soft kiss to her forehead.

“Hmm…” she moans.

“Ana, can you hear me?” I whisper, stroking her flushed cheek with my fingertips.

She doesn’t respond, and my bladder brings my awareness to some rather personal needs. I carefully extricate myself from my dear wife, tucking the light blanket around her shoulders, and set my feet on the cool tile. My head still isn’t on straight, and the room dives a little to the right. I hold onto the bed railing and then a nearby chair to safely reach the en suite bathroom.

The stitched cut on my forehead taunts me in the fluorescent lighting above the mirror. It’s near the hairline, and seemingly expertly closed, but unsightly. I wash the skin around it carefully with a washcloth, and then the rest of my exposed skin, for good measure. I find a toothbrush and scrub my sleep-sticky mouth as well.

When I reemerge, I notice a folded pair of pajama bottoms and t-shirt on the chair that had helped me balance, and it helps me again as I quietly wrestle myself into the clothes. Enough with the hospital gown; unsuitable is the only nice word I can think of to describe the garment.

In the joined bed, Ana trembles softly. Oh no. I make my way to the side I’d vacated, and slip back in as carefully as I can, bringing my arms around her again.

“Hmm…” she coughs weakly, and her eyes open a crack.

“Hello, my love,”

She blinks for a moment, still shivering. “Cold,” she whimpers.

“Okay… it’s okay sweetheart,” I murmur. I pull her in closer, running my hands up and down her blanketed back.

“Is this… real?” she asks, her voice small. She sounds congested.

“Yes, baby. Thank God you’re safe.” I bring my lips to rest at her damp forehead.

“Are you mad?” She asks, her voice cracking.

Oh Ana, you have no idea. “Relieved.” It’s the only word I can manage, without lying outright. It breaks my heart, that my raw anger still exists after all this time, and that any of it could be directed at her after such an ordeal. “I’m not letting you out of my sight for a while.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

Christ. Her quick resignation chills me to my core. She really was afraid, of me. I’m appalled with myself all over again. I’d thought we were making some progress… well, she’s allowing me to hold her. I have my work cut out for me.

She raises her chin to look up at me. “Christian, what happened?”
“Don’t you remember? You were lost…”

“No, your head,” she reaches up to my forehead but hesitates, unsure whether to touch me. She settles for brushing my hair aside. It is getting rather long again.

“An argument with a tree, I think. I’m fine. The details are a bit fuzzy.” I offer her a brave smile. “I’ve been admitted as well.”

She still looks worried.

“I’m fine, baby. I promise.” I capture her wandering hand and bring it to my lips for a kiss before tucking her back under the covers. My fingers go to her forehead. “You’re still awfully warm.”

“Then why do I feel so cold?” She mumbles.

“Well, you were out there all night, wet and exposed to the elements, it was rather unseasonably chilly. And I imagine, at the temperature you are now, everything must feel a bit cooler.”

She shudders a sigh, and I guess she accepts the explanation.

There’s a tiny knock at the door. If we’d been asleep, we might not have noticed, but I’m grateful for the warning nonetheless. Mom peers through the door again. She smiles when she sees we’re awake. “May I come in?”

I wave her over, then replace my arm around Ana as she begins to shiver anew. Mom carries two cloth bags to a rolling table and unpacks them. “I hope you’re hungry. Mia sent over some soup and bread for you.”

“Oh, that sounds perfect, thank you.” I can’t hide the overwhelming gratitude in my voice. I’m famished. I’d settle for something generic from a can, which is probably what they serve downstairs in the cafeteria, but to dine on my sister’s gourmet variety is an utter blessing, and Ana deserves nothing less. “Do you think you can eat something, baby?”

She nods. “I need to use the bathroom though.”

“I’ll help you with that,” my mother insists, rolling the table around to my side and returning to help Ana untangle from her IV. I almost protest, to insist on helping her myself, but I remember how unsteady I was a few hours ago. Reluctantly, I release my wife to my mother’s care. She’s shivering a bit more.

“Cold, darling?”

Ana nods. “I need to the bathroom though.”

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“Cold, darling?”

Ana nods. Mom goes to a shopping bag in the corner and produces a fluffy lilac robe, and helps Ana to put it on. I busy myself with the contents of the table while my mother helps Ana in the bathroom, setting out two bowls and spoons and unwrapping a loaf of warm grain bread. Oh, I love my sister. I raise the beds evenly and arrange the majority of pillows on Ana’s side, the way she likes them.

Mom helps Ana back into bed and reattaches her IV. She’s largely stopped shaking, but the undercurrent is still there, likely from weakness and hunger, and my heart sinks at the thought. Her hair has been brushed, and there are fresh pajamas under the new robe. She leans back to rest against the nest of pillows and sighs. My mother takes such good care of her.

“Wait… where’s Teddy?” Ana gasps, as though she suddenly remembers she has a son. Her expression is one of anxiety and guilt. My heart aches for her.
“Relax baby, he’s with Elliott and Kate, isn’t that right, Mom?”

“Gail and Ina took him home late this afternoon. I thought you’d want him there when you go home tomorrow.”

“Ina?” Ana asks. She’s tentatively leaned forward to attempt her soup, a mouthwatering corn chowder. I rub the small of her back reassuringly.

“Carter, baby. Tomorrow?” I question.

“Straight home to bed. No funny business about looking after each other. I’ve already spoken to Jason about it. You both need a few days’ rest, at least.” My mother’s first name basis with the help has forever been irritatingly endearing. “Eat up, and buzz the nurse if you need anything. I hate to drop-off and run, but I haven’t slept more than an hour since you arrived.” She rounds the bed and kisses my stunned cheek before I regain my senses. A number of souring scenarios present themselves.

“Taylor will drive you.”

“That’s not necessary, darling, but thank you.”

“Mother,” my voice changes without warning. “Taylor will drive you. I know he’s here.”

My mother blinks. For the first time, I see how exhausted she is. She appears to want to argue, but with me, with my fears, knows better. She nods. “All right. That might be best, thank you.”

“Taylor!” I call, and beside me, Ana jumps, her spoon plunking into the bowl. I immediately regret the outburst, and find her hand in apology.

Taylor appears in the doorway mere seconds later. “Yes, Sir?”

“Please drive my mother home, and arrange to have her car dropped off by morning.”

“Right away, Sir. Can I bring you anything?” He’s business as usual, but I can see the relief behind his eyes.

“My Blackberry and a laptop.”

“Of course. Ma’am?” he gestures to my mother.

“Sleep well, both of you. Don’t work too hard, Christian. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Mom.”

Taylor holds the door for her, and moves to close it behind him.

“Jason?” I call again.

“Sir?”

I sigh. “Thank you.” My eyes radiate the sincerity of the message, of all the appreciation I have for the man who may have saved both our lives. I can’t begin to fathom how to repay such a debt.

The side of his mouth twitches up into a small smile. “You’re most welcome, Sir. Ma’am,” he nods to both of us, and pulls the door closed behind him.
I sigh again. “I owe than man so much.”

“Me too, I imagine,” Ana sniffles. She sounds congested again. I pluck a tissue from the box next to me and hand it to her. She turns away and blows her nose gently.

“Feeling all right?” I ask.

She nods. “Well enough.” She yawns. “The soup is good.”

I try some, and nod my agreement. It’s difficult to resist picking up the bowl and tipping it back. I haven’t been this hungry since… well, a long time. I look over at Ana between bites. She’s picking at her bread.

“Tired?” I ask.

She nods, but that’s not it, I can tell.

“Something on your mind, baby?” I prod, gently.

She turns away and sneezes into her elbow. I fish out another tissue and hand it to her.

“Too many things,” she sniffles once she’s recovered.

I nod. “I understand. I’ll, um… move over to the couch to sleep tonight.”

“No, I…” She stammers. “I didn’t mean… I don’t want you to go. Unless you want to,” Her broken uncertainty is interrupted by a fit of coughing. Christ, it sounds uncomfortable. My hand returns soothingly to her back, where I rub circles until she’s recovered again.

“Shall I call the nurse?” I offer.

Ana shoots me a look that clearly states, ‘don’t be ridiculous.’ It’s so… Ana. “It’s just a cold, Christian.”

“I’ve never seen you with a cold.” I try my best to look contrite, but her expression is so familiar, I can barely suppress a smile. A resurfacing thought sobers me. Out of habit, I run a hand through my hair. “We should talk.”

Her focus returns to the soup. “I know,” she answers quietly.

I gulp uncertainly. I thought she’s offer at least a little resistance. Oh, how the tables have turned. “I want to know how you feel about what I’ve revealed to you,” I begin, carefully. “If I may clarify, or reassure you in any way…”

“Christian, don’t,” she interrupts me. “I know you hate yourself over it; Dr. Flynn didn’t have to tell me. I can’t quite wrap my head around it. But I can’t see you doing that to me.” She waves toward the tissue box, and I hand her another. I set the box on her table, waiting patiently for her to clear her nose again. She sighs, bringing on another fit of coughing. God, if I could take her discomfort upon myself, I would, without hesitation.

“That’s not part of your life anymore, is it? At all?”

“No,” I declare quietly, emphatically. “I would sooner cut off my hands than harm you.”

She nods, and then her lips press into a flat line. “I have one question though, and after you answer, can we agree never to speak of this again?”
My heart swells with her impending reprieve. *Is she really going to let this go so easily?* “Yes, baby. We agreed to the same long ago. Please ask me whatever you need.”

Ana twists a dry tissue between her fingers, frightened again. She shudders a shallow breath, and I think it’s to avoid another coughing fit. Her clear blue eyes appear preemptively sorry for what she’s about to ask. “What did you feel when you hit me?”

To say that I was unprepared for that one, specific question is akin to declaring the meaning of my life can be summed up in a day of sailing. I’d never fathomed she’d ask. I don’t know the answer.

“I… never thought about it.” The anxiety wells up inside me, cutting off my air. John never asked. Ana never asked. “Please don’t take that as an excuse, that I don’t want to answer. I do. I’ve just put it behind me so long ago, I never felt the urge to delve. Give me a minute please,” I stammer.

I close my eyes, and compel myself to breathe evenly, returning the air to my lungs. How do I begin to answer? How did I feel then? Six strokes. *I remember how many. I’ll never forget how many. I was nervous at first… she asked me, asked me to do it… and I was afraid of how she’d take it, how it would make her feel. I told her what would happen, ran my hand over her, preparing her, and then I gave myself over. All uncertainty was shed. It was exhilarating, bringing the belt down upon her, to hear the snap as it contacted her skin. And then she cried out… oh, how it twisted my broken soul, to hear her scream. No… she asked me to. I couldn’t let her think I wasn’t serious; I couldn’t stop, not unless she told me to. I reminded her to count, and she did… every word was a scream. She cried after the second strike. I should have known then, that she couldn’t take it, that I was hurting her… but did I? Did I know? I assumed she’d safeword if she needed to… but then how did I know she needed me to stop, and why didn’t I? I knew she’d need my comfort afterward, and I followed through, but why didn’t I stop? Why didn’t I know? Oh, God, this hurts…*

I feel her suddenly shift beside me, jolting me from the swirl of thoughts and dredging of long-buried feelings, and then her hand closes around mine. *Oh, Ana. Warmth floods through me. I can do this. I can tell her. I need her help. My eyes open, slowly, gauging her expression.*

“I’m sorry, baby. I’ve worked so hard to bury what happened that night. Digging it up is…”

“difficult.” I swallow, taking a deep, cleansing breath. “We agreed on six. It excited me, at first the anticipation of control, of complete domination. After the first stroke, you cried out… and for a second, I wasn’t certain I should continue, but you didn’t safeword. It shocked me. I thought you would if you’d reached your limit. I thought, at least if you’d forgotten the safeword, you’d say ‘stop’. But you didn’t. Each one after… it was so hard. You cried, you were so distressed… I couldn’t think. I didn’t know anything else; I thought perhaps you wanted me to continue…” I choke back the bile that’s threatening to rise further in my throat. “And then I finished.” My breathing hitches. “I was so relieved to stop,” I shake my head. “I immediately tried to comfort you, but you wouldn’t have me. You… yelled at me.”

Ana’s expression is so sad. It’s not one of hatred or fear, as I’d expected, but one of compassion. Her fingers come to my cheek, to stroke my stubbly skin. “Thank you,” she whispers.

I shake my head. “I’ve never thought about that before. Not in that way, not with that depth.” I bring my hand to hold hers to my face. “I should be thanking you, not the other way around. You’re the best therapy I’ve ever had. You’re my cure.” I sigh. “I love you, Ana. Now I know for sure, I did love you then. I hated hurting you, even while in the act. I’d have done anything you asked of me.”

She nods, and there are tears in her eyes. *She understands.* She blinks, sniffling, and they drip down her cheeks.
“Oh no, baby… please don’t cry.” I brush the tears away with my thumbs, cupping her face in my hands. Her own fingers haven’t left mine. I lean in, slowly, timidly, asking, and my nose brushes hers…

“Christian,” she whispers against my lips.

We’re so close.

“Yes…” I breathe.

“I… have a cold.”

Oh… that.

“I don’t mind,” I whisper back, and, smiling softly against her lips, I kiss her, gently, sweetly. It’s brief, but it helps to convey my message, that I love her, that I’d do anything for her, regardless what she feels for me. And considering that she let me, she must feel something for me as well.

I sigh, pulling away enough to pluck another tissue from the box and dab her cheeks and nose. “Shall we talk a while? If you’re up for it, I mean. I’m sure you’re tired…”

“I’d like that,” she squeaks, her congestion getting the better of her. She blows her nose again. I pull the disheveled blanket from the foot of the bed and tuck it around her.

“So ask me something. Anything. I’m an open book.” I lean against a pillow and prop my head on my hand.

She thinks for a moment. “What’s your favorite color?”

I laugh, softly. “I don't really have one. You must see by now my passion for all things pale and simple, you’ve seen our old apartment.” I consider her for a moment; she’d like more of an answer than that. “The color of your robe is lovely. I suppose I like light colors more. I suppose white could be my favorite color, if I had to choose only one.”

“White isn't a color,” she smirks.

I snort. “Says who?”

She shrugs. “It isn't.”

“Yes it is, actually. Chromatically, it's the presence of the entire visible spectrum, where black is the absence of all color. Counterintuitive, isn't it?”

She shrugs. “I guess so. I didn't know that.”

“Well now you do. You know, I don't think you ever asked me that. I like this game. Keep going.”

She thinks for a moment. “Favorite food?”

I laugh. “My mother's pot roast. Are we sticking with favorite things?”

“Movie?” She asks, ignoring my tease.

“Don't have a current favorite; there are quite a few we like to watch occasionally. Not big on television, that's our son's department… perhaps you should ask him?”
“That's easy... Sesame Street. He's watched nothing else all week.” She sneezes. My poor wife and son, sick at home for days while I indulged in another business acquisition. It was worth it in terms of the bottom line, but not when it comes to the well-being of my family. We wouldn't have lost our shirts for that one company, far from it... regardless its future worth, which is considerable. With my hands, I gently encourage her to lie back, and she does, resting against her side on the pillows. I pull her robe around her and adjust the blanket, stroke a few stray hairs from her forehead, and on impulse, lean in to press a kiss to her warm skin.

A nurse knocks on the door frame, carrying a tray. “Mr. and Mrs. Grey, I have your medication.” He's a hefty young man, dressed in navy scrubs, and appears fresh-minded. Heaven forbid the nurses' station would send a sleep-deprived intern, else I might... have a problem. I suppress the master-protector, control-freak instinct for the time being. The nurse smiles, bringing the labeled cups to us, along with a pitcher of water. His name tag reads ‘James’.

“What is it we're taking?” I ask, bringing my arm around Ana's shoulders as she tries to sit up again. The effort makes me mildly dizzy.

“Tylenol for you, sir... And for Mrs. Grey,” he consults a slip of paper, peeking at the pills in the cup. He obviously didn't fill the prescription himself. "Pseudoephedrine, a multivitamin and a tetracycline antibiotic. Would you like something besides water to take them with?"

His no-nonsense attitude coupled with the air of accommodation suggests that my mother has exchanged words with him personally. “My wife would like some hot tea, if you can manage it.”

“Of course.” He adjusts the drip on Ana's IV, and bows out of the room with an "I'll be back shortly."

“Here, baby. This will help you feel better.” She takes the pills and some water willingly, and then leans into my shoulder while I dry-swallow mine. I lean back against my pillow, bringing her with me.

“More questions?” I ask her gently.

She shakes her head, suddenly exhausted. I hold her close, and she drifts, her radiating warmth enveloping me once again, and I soon follow her into unconsciousness.

When I wake, Ana has turned away from me, but her back is nestled into my front. Her temperature has mercifully evened out. My head is propped on my bent elbow, so I don't disturb her as much when I sit up. My laptop and phone are stacked on a side table, and our rolling tables have been cleared, save an insulated carafe on Ana's, along with a teacup and box of quality assorted teas. The nurse is apparently well-informed.

I stretch, careful not to jostle the bed and find that the earlier dizziness has subsided. The itch to make contact with the outside world crawls up my spine and urges my fingers to open the laptop and switch on the Blackberry, being sure to set it to silent.

I sort through about sixty emails, forwarding several for Ros to handle, and reply to a few, including one to a buyer concerning Ray Steele's carpentry shop. I've solved the matter of the impending bankruptcy by flooding his business with orders from a relatively unconnected subsidiary, and I've also asked Elliott to pass a few of his clients along, quietly of course. I'm rather pleased with the results. My response to the buyer is short, I'm not really concerned with what he purchases, simply that he meets the quantity requirements I've laid out. I press ‘send’ and turn my eyes briefly to my wife.
She's trembling again. I lean over for a moment to hold her close, hoping it will pass, and it does. Her temperature feels normal, finally. I press a kiss to her hair and pull the covers up to her shoulders. She does look peaceful. I gaze at her lightly breathing form for another moment and then return to my work.

I approve a couple of background checks to keep human resources moving forward with some replacement hires, all pretty dull, standard stuff. Ros could do it, but I feel better having the final say on who works in the building, now that Ana's publishing office is under the Grey House roof.

My Blackberry buzzes. A text from Ana's mother.

~

Ray and Grace have been in touch about what happened.

Please call as soon as you can, I'm worried.

~

I note the time is just after four in the morning. Carla has little sense of time zones; this isn't a first occurrence by any means. I slide quietly out of bed and pad into the nearly empty hallway, exchanging a nod with Jason, who goes back to whatever he’s reading. I pull the door mostly closed behind me.

Carla picks up on the second ring.

“Christian? Oh thank goodness. How’s my girl?”

She does sound worried, more than worried. It dissolves my exasperation, instantly. “She’s all right, Carla. She’s sleeping at the moment.”

I hear her blow out a breath. “What a relief… even more so to hear it from you. How did this happen?”

“I haven’t had much opportunity to ask, to be quite honest. We’ve both been asleep most of the last couple of days.” Manage your temper, Grey. You’re fluent in a parent’s protective instinct by now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and she really does sound it. “Your mom did mention that you were injured as well. How are you holding up?”

“Well enough, thank you. Want me to have Ana call you when she’s up to it? Perhaps this evening, after we’re home and settled a bit. I’m sure Teddy would like a video chat as well.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Christian… I’m sorry if I woke you. I just remembered the time difference. I was so worried, I forgot.”

I snort. “Forgiven. You’re fortunate I’m an early riser, even in this place.”

“Take care of yourself, all right? And my little girl?”

“Always.”
I click the ‘off’ button.

“Can I get you anything, Sir?”

I shake my head. “Thank you, Jason. Once again, you’ve probably done far too much. Above and beyond really is your calling.”

“Just doing my job.”

We’re quiet for a moment. “You’re the one who found her?”

He nods. “I’d run into your father and a few LEOs not a quarter mile before, so he was the first who could get there. I sent him the coordinates; he helped me lift her out. Her foot was stuck. Otherwise she might have been able to climb out.”

“Jesus.”

“Really… someone sure was watching over her.”

“I heard my Dad say she had the puppies bundled with her. How are they, by the way?”

“Gail brought them home late yesterday. One had stitches for a gash and the other has a sprained leg. Nothing too serious. I took the liberty of calling a contractor out to install the invisible fence, name of Martinez. He’s going to work with Ben this afternoon to get it in the ground. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Now all we need is a dog trainer, and we’ll be all set.”

My number one nods. “I’ll get right on that, Sir.”

“Enough with the Sir, Jason.” I turn my most grateful stare on the man whom I owe… well, more than I can comprehend at the moment. “You saved Ana’s life. You probably saved mine. You’re there, in the right place, just when we need you. I can’t begin… to express how much that means to us.”

Jason Taylor just blinks. The man has no words. It’s a time when ‘I’m just doing my job’ isn’t enough.

“But I’ll think of something. And you’re going to let me.”

“That’s not n…”

“It is necessary, Jason. It’s the least I can do.” I extend my right hand, and he shakes it. The exchange is brief, but it ends with mutual half-smiles, the best two men can do in the emotion department. I leave him to his novel and shuffle back into the suite.

Ana’s trembling again. I climb back into the bed, pulling her curled form against me, and wait for it to subside as it did before. I can’t imagine her new fear of the cold, of the outdoors, of the dark, of inescapable situations, of the helplessness of being alone… I hope John is free a lot this week.

She whimpers, and it’s a frightened sound, one she rarely makes. Her hands are balled in fists and pulled tight to her chest. I run my hands lightly over her robed arms, and what were shivers have grown to tremors.

“Can’t… get out… please… help…” she mumbles.

She’s shaking rather violently, and I wonder suddenly if she’s having convulsions, though I’ve never seen such a thing and have no basis for comparison, but I begin to panic, nonetheless. “Christ, Ana!” I sit up, rolling her onto her back and giving her a light shake. Her eyes fly open, and my hands go straight to her face.

“Baby, it’s all right…”

No sooner have I touched her skin that she gasps as though I’ve shocked her, and jerks away from my touch, her eyes wide.

“My God, Ana, it’s all right,” I try to mollify her, but her gaze is shocked and wary. I drop my hands gently to her shoulders, and she jerks away, violently, emitting a gasping shriek as though my touch is charged. *Christ, what’s wrong with her?* I pull my hands away as one would recoil from touching a lit burner. “Whoa, Ana!”

She blinks rapidly, and her eyes appear to shift from whatever panic had gripped her, to focus properly on me. Her breaths come heavily, and she coughs a bit. I have to consciously force myself to resist touching her, given her reaction, though my hands itch to comfort her. I wait. And wait. Seeing her so scared and sick is unbearable.

She recovers from the fit, but she’s still trembling. I have no idea what to do.

“Ana, please… talk to me. Are you cold? What can I do? Did you have a nightmare?”

“I don’t know,” she mumbles, sniffling.

I’m at a loss. “What can I do?” I ask again.

She shrugs, shaking her head. I think she’s at a loss as well.

“How are you feeling?”

She shudders. “My skin is crawling.”

“Should I get the doctor?”

She sniffs again. “No, no… I think I fell asleep on an anthill in the woods, it felt like I was being bitten everywhere.”

My eyes sweep over what skin is exposed. “You don’t have a mark on you, save the scratch on your leg,” I remind her. “Might it have been a dream?”

“Maybe… but the music was so real.”

“Music?”

“Voices… it started out as one, then more and more and it kept getting louder… it was so dark… and they wouldn’t stop, and I was stinging all over…” her voice quivers.

“Oh, baby…” my hands come up automatically to comfort her, and she shies back once again. “All right, it’s okay, baby. I won’t touch you,” I reassure her, backing my hands away, bringing them to clasp in my lap, visible and harmless. I can’t imagine what’s brought this on; random delusions haven’t been a part of her recovery… until now. The ordeal must have affected her more than just physically. “Tell me what I can do.”
“I’m sorry, it’s just…”

“Don’t apologize, Ana. I want to help you, but you need to talk to me. Tell me more.”

She shakes her head. “That was all. I climbed into that hole to get Ludwig out, my foot got stuck… it was getting colder so I bundled us together… it got really dark and then I heard the voices, and I felt stinging up my legs and over my body, the voices got louder and louder… and…” she shakes her head again, then her eyes lock with mine. “I don’t remember what happened after that, until I woke up here.

A flashback, perhaps? But what on Earth… I feel the blood drain from my face as the truth hits me. The music, voices, beginning solitarily and building, increasing in intensity and volume. The darkness, likely a result of being blindfolded... and her body, stinging.

Fuck. Our first flogger scene.
Chapter 16

~ CHRISTIAN ~

My eyes close of their own volition and I sigh heavily. This is going to throw her again... and until now, she's miraculously given me second, third, fourth chances... if anything can doom the progress we've made, it's our lifestyle of kinky fuckery. I often forget how utterly innocent she was when we met.

“Christian? Are you okay?”

When I wrench my eyes open again, she's staring at me with overwhelming concern.

“I'm all right, baby. I believe I've worked out what you're remembering.”

She waits.

Why can't I just say it? Oh and by the way, Ana, I hit you other times and you liked it? You asked me to? You outright ask me to spank you on a semi-regular basis? God... she'll never accept this. But as my stomach twists in fear, I know one thing... I. Must. Not. Lie.

“It's not what you think,” I begin. How many times have I begun an explanation with these words? Too fucking many to count. “It may seem strange, but I need you to trust me, all right?”

Ana studies my expression for a moment. Amazingly, she nods, albeit slowly as though she's not sure. We're interrupted by a sneeze, she blows her nose and recovers. “This has something to do with that… unusual lifestyle stuff… doesn't it?”

I frown. “Yes.”

She nods in acknowledgement. “Do I even want to know?”

“I'd like to explain,” I say hurriedly. Christ, I'm flustered. My head has begun to throb and I ignore it as best I'm able... I'm so out of my element. “You deserve to know everything. I want you to know.”

She nods. “Okay.” I see her Adam's apple rise and fall as she swallows. She's nervous.

I resist the urge to take her hand. Mine are still clasped harmlessly in my lap where she can see them. I take yet another deep breath. “It was... a scene, of sorts. You were blindfolded, which is why you can't remember seeing anything. Removing one of the senses heightens the others. You wore earbuds, which explains the music... and again, this was an attempt at increasing other sensations, by inhibiting your ability to hear me, to anticipate what I was doing. And the stinging...” I swallow. This is the most difficult to explain. I form the words as gently as I can. “I imagine the memory may have frightened you. But the sensation you remember was not in any way meant to hurt you, quite the opposite, actually. I used an implement made of long, leather fingers with beads on the end. When I tapped it across your body, it brought your blood to the surface of your skin and made you very sensitive to... other activities.”

She frowns. “Other activities?”
I swallow. This has never embarrassed me so much before. She's so innocent. “I... kissed you all over. And then... I made love to you.”

She emits a tiny gasp. “Oh.”

I nod. “We've shared the experience a number of times.”

She looks a bit dazed, but not fearful. She blows her nose again, and then considers me expectantly. “Before and after?”

“Yes.” I offer a shy smile. It's all I have.

“Why?”

*Why what? Why did I... we... do that? Why is it pleasurable? Why not something else?* “Because it's something we like to do together.” I subtly emphasize the *we.*

“Oh.” She sniffs.

I cock my head to one side. “How do you feel about it?” Damn it all, I'm reduced to channeling John Flynn.

She blinks. “Okay, I guess. Now that I understand.”

I sigh. “You're amazing, Ana. So understanding and accepting of what we are… were… together. I've always marveled at you're ability to take me as I am. I love that about you.”

Her fingers knot around a dry tissue. She sniffs again. “My skin's not crawling anymore.”

If that isn't an invitation, I don't know what is. My hands unclasp, reach up tentatively, and brush her cheeks with my fingers. She closes her eyes and leans into me, seemingly desperate for warmth, affection, reassurance, I'm not sure what exactly, but on cue, my arms open for her, and I pull her close.

It's a balm for my headache. Her breathing slows, and I rub her back soothingly, and soon, she drifts once again into unconsciousness.

~oOo~

Teddy attached himself to our legs the moment we were out of the car, and he hasn't left Ana's side since. The puppies are on lockdown in Teddy’s old playpen in the Taylors’ apartment until further notice, on Gail’s insistence. She’s vowed responsibility for Ana’s brief disappearance and subsequent hospitalization, and inadvertently mine, and if caring for the dogs alleviates her conscience, she can have it. I’ve already assured her at some length that none of this was her fault, but she’s been brooding, regardless.

My mother’s recovery instructions are fucking ludicrous. Staying in bed for hours when not sleeping isn't a reasonable request. Ana yes, but me, not a chance in Hell… and she ought to know me better. I’ve instead parked on the chaise in the master suite sitting room while Ana and Ted nap in our bed; I can work and keep an eye on them both at the same time. I was unaware until now that my son snores like a bulldozer. It must have to do with his congestion. Ana is mildly restless,
waking about every half hour to blow her nose.

Gail prepares a delicious turkey-noodle soup that we devour as though we haven't eaten in days... Oh wait, we really haven't, save Mia's hospital chowder. Ana returns to bed, Teddy throws an incoherent tantrum and won't be placated by anyone. I cuddle him awhile but he fights me, making my head pound beyond the baseline throbbing I've quietly endured. I finally place him in front of his beloved Sesame Street monsters and after a time, he quiets.

I return to my work.

I find Ana on her cell, curled up and speaking quietly. She nods in acknowledgement of my entry and holds up a finger. I retake my place and fire up the laptop, just able to make out that she's talking to Ray, the meddlesome, overprotective sot that I am. My focus splits uncomfortably between an investment portfolio and the smattering of words I can garner from her conversation, the most attention-grabbing of which are "I'll talk to him."

It's a while before she hangs up, but when she does, she rises from our bed and pads over to me. I close the laptop immediately.

"Everything all right?" I swing my legs over the side to make room for her, and she sits, her expression mildly upset.

She shudders a breath. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, anything.”

She swallows. “Did you flood my dad’s shop with orders to keep it from going under?”

Shit. I lower my eyes. You're busted, Grey. “Yes.” What the fuck? Since when am I ashamed of my business methods? When I look up again, she’s staring at me with some unnamed emotion. I can’t quite place it, and it scares me a little. I gaze back with sincere contrition, and an edge of pride. “I’d do it again. I take care of my family.”

“But he didn’t ask you to do that.”

I sigh. “No, he didn’t.”

Without warning, she throws her arms around me, knocking me off balance, and we fall together against the back of the chaise. I curl my arms around her tentatively, dazed. She isn’t angry?

“Thank you,” she whispers against my neck.

“You’re welcome.” I breathe in the scent of her hair, the familiar jasmine soothing my aching head. When she finally releases me, I tuck her under my arm, and we lie together. She runs her fingers softly over my chest. I marvel at the feeling, but our conversation still has me a bit nervous. “May I ask what he said to you?”

She sighs. “He’s not happy. It’s his darn pride. He’s not sure it’s you, but he suspects. What’s all that stuff for, anyway?”

“A number of halfway houses in the area, and a few Habitat for Humanity projects. You and I support them every year through one of our foundations. Honestly it just made sense. Two birds, you know.”

“You might have asked him, though. He feels like a charity case.”
“He shouldn’t feel that way. His work is helping people in need. I’d hoped to send a few recovering individuals his way as apprentices, if he’d be willing. He seemed interested a few months ago when I approached Elliott with the same.”

“I think he might like that, once he’s cooled off a bit,” she murmurs into my shoulder. “Do you want me to talk to him?”

I kiss the top of her head. “No. I should have been open from the beginning. I’ll do it.”

“Okay.” We lie together awhile, neither speaking, allowing our breathing to synchronize. Her congestion has eased, remarkably.

“You sound better,” I murmur.

She smiles softly. “The cold medicine is finally working. It’s making me sleepy, though.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, baby. It’s hard to see you sick,” I tell her, pressing my lips to her forehead. Her skin is warm, but not too warm. She feels like… Ana. I leisurely run my fingers up and down her arm. Something dawns on me.

“Ana, where’s your bracelet?”

She tenses. “Oh…” her voice becomes tiny. “I think… I might have lost it.”

“Lost it? When did you notice it was gone?” I’m surprised, but try to keep my voice gentle. She ought not fear my reaction; it’s just jewelry… I can always replace it.

She shakes her head. “In the woods, but I don’t know if I lost it there or took it off before…” she raises her eyes, hooded by long eyelashes. “I’m sorry,” she squeaks.

“No, baby, don’t get upset. It’s all right,” I tighten my arms around her. “It’s easily replaced.” Pressing my lips to her temple, I tentatively release her. “I’ll be back, all right?”

She nods.

There’s a clinking coming from the kitchen, as though the dishwasher is being emptied. Never having done this myself, I’m offhandedly distracted by the sound. I sigh in the hope that Gail’s mood has brightened, but remain pessimistic. She can be awfully hard on herself. Her back is to me.

“Do you happen to know if…” I begin.

Gail startles, dropping a glass. It shatters, shards skittering across the clay tile.

*Shit. I hope she’s wearing shoes, because I’m surely not.*

“Oh!” she exclaims. “I’m so sorry, Sir!”

“Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think so. My shoes saved me.”

“Good. Stay where you are. Where is a broom?” I insist.

She points to the pantry. “Rear left corner.”
I’m mercifully out of range of the land mines, as is the entrance to the pantry, and I find a hand broom and dustpan rather quickly. I pass it to her over the breakfast bar. “May I help?”

“No thank you. I’m so sorry,” she says, kneeling down out of sight, and I hear the clinks and pings of glass as they’re gathered in the pan. “I’ll replace it tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it. Sure you’re all right? Please be careful down there.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m just a bit jumpy, that’s all. I do apologize.” She stands again and empties the pan into the trash. “I’ll run the vacuum if the noise won’t bother anyone.”

“Of course, good thinking. Please do.” A moment of uncomfortable silence passes between us.

“You had a question…” she prompts.

“That’s right,” I recall. “Ana’s rings… did Jason pick them up?”

“Yes, Sir. They’re in the top drawer of your desk.”

“Thank you. Also, have you by chance seen her charm bracelet? She thinks she may have lost it outside somewhere.”

“Oh, yes, Ina found it in the couch on Friday. Teddy may have hidden it there, the little darling,” she says, an air of fondness for our son in her voice. “I cleaned it and placed it in Mrs. Grey’s jewelry chest.”

“Oh, excellent. Thank you.”

“Of course, Sir.”

I sigh. “Gail,” I frown, “out with it.”

She considers my expression, confused.

I continue. “You’re either still torturing yourself over what happened, or something else is wrong. Which is it?”

“I’m sorry, Sir. It’s a difficult thing, forgiveness.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re questioning my forgiveness?”

“No! No… my own.” She says nothing further.

I sigh, running my hand through my hair. “We’ve been through this. You’re not directly responsible for our security. I don’t have to see my reflection to know that my eyes are blazing. I take a deep breath. “Listen, Gail… I know you feel badly about what happened. I can’t tell you not to feel this way, but I’d rather you didn’t, because no one blames you, or Jason for that matter. You’ve both been exemplary, as always.”

She lowers her eyes, a trademark indication of submission, and it makes me uncomfortable. She nods.

“Why don’t you take a few days for yourself. I’m taking Ana away for a week or so, and there isn’t much to be done around here. You and Jason are due some vacation, besides. Whatever you need to do to work through this. And if you need anything from me, you ask. Are we clear?”
“Yes, Sir.” There’s an air of gratitude in her voice, and an edge of her undeserving outlook toward generosity. Gail has always been this way. “Thank you.”

“I mean it. Whatever you need.”

She nods.

As Gail suggested, the box with Ana’s rings is in my desk. I pocket them and stroll purposefully to the great room, find Teddy fast asleep on the couch with the Count yapping comically about bats on the flatscreen. I switch it off, lift my son’s limp, sleeping body into my arms, and take him upstairs to his room. Tucking him in, he groans, but doesn’t wake.

I find Ana snoozing quietly on the chaise, and regret making her wait. Her bracelet is right where Gail said it was, shiny and bright. I retrieve the two missing charms, sighing to myself, and slide them onto the silver rope, securing the end. I sit down beside her, lean in and press a kiss to her forehead. She wakes with a little gasp.

“It’s just me,” I say.

She blinks up at me, her face softening. Her lips curl into a smile. “How long did I sleep?”

“Not long. Here, give me your hand.” I hold her bracelet from either end.

“Oh,” she breathes, “thank goodness. Where was it?” she holds out her wrist, and I gingerly fasten the clasp.

“Gail thinks Teddy may have been playing with it. It’s happened before. It was between the couch cushions.” I curl my fingers around hers and raise her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. It makes her giggle. Oh, how I love that sound.

“Thank you.”

“I have another gift for you,” I say, digging into my pocket, and presenting her with the little red box. I try, and fail, to keep my expression even. She must see how nervous I am.

Ana gasps. She looks from me to the box and back. She gulps. “Is this what I think?”

I nod, offering a gentle smile. “Yes.”

She frowns at my expression, tentatively reaching out for the box, but pulls back. She’s nervous too. I sigh and go the extra distance, placing the box in her hand.

“I want you to have them, Ana. Whether or not you’d like to wear them is entirely up to you. I won’t… I’ll understand if you’re not comfortable.” I barely stopped myself from saying that I won’t mind if she doesn’t wear them, and I’m relieved; it would have been a lie. I would mind. I do want her to wear them, to bind herself to me, to be mine again. But I will understand if she chooses not to. It’s the very least I can do.

Ana traces the box with her fingers. “You… you were going to say that you won’t mind if I don’t…” Her eyes burn into mine. “But you do, don’t you?”

I shake my head, blinking. “How is it you read me so well?”

She shrugs, bashfully. “I’m trying.”

I nod. “That you are. Another thing I love about you.” I lean in and brush my lips against hers.
When I pull away, her cheeks are flushed. She’s so lovely. “If you’re still willing, I’d like to take you away somewhere. The family has agreed to host Teddy so you and I can have some alone time. Would you still like to go?”

“Where?”

“Where would you like to go?”

She shrugs again. “I don’t know. Is there anywhere you want to go?”

I ponder for a moment. I really hadn’t given our getaway much thought considering the week we’ve just endured. “We could go to Greece. It’s lovely there in the late summer.”

Ana blinks at me. “Have you been?”

“Once. Family vacation when I was a teenager.”

“Hmm. Where haven’t you been?”

I snort. Where haven’t I been? I’ve been to every continent save Antarctica. Perhaps I’ll sail there once, just to say I’ve been. What an adventure that would be. But no, this has to be someplace we can relax, reconnect; someplace free from the stress of tourism and the pulse of a big city.

Someplace coastal.

“Sicily?” I suggest.

Ana’s eyes widen. “You’re… serious?”

I chuckle. “Why not?”

She shrugs. “It’s not every day a girl’s beautiful husband wants to take her to the old world out of the blue.”

“Beautiful husband?” I turn on the full megawatt smile, just for her. She’s making my day, my week, even. This time seven days ago, we were barely speaking. I squash every hint of negativity that could possibly ruin this moment. It’s a struggle, but I manage it.

She flushes, lowering her eyes. She’s still clutching the box, but it’s largely forgotten. “You must know the effect you have,” she states courageously. “You’re too good at this.”

“At what?” I need to hear her say it.

“This…” she twirls her finger in the air. “All of it. Making everything run like clockwork. Taking care of me, of Teddy, of your family, and mine. You worry, too much sometimes, but you don’t want anyone to know that you do. You really care. About everything. And it’s what I love about you.”

I blink. Did I hear correctly? My voice is deathly quiet, gentle. “You… love that about me?” I test the word.


“Oh, Ana.” My heart stutters, whether with joy, relief, or sweet, sweet affection, a combination of all those and more, much more, I’m not certain. “I love you, too.” More words… she deserves
more words, but my wits are scattered and I can’t gather them. Her hands reach out to cradle my face, and when she makes contact with my skin, a current passes between us, setting my body ablaze. I pull her to me, crushing her lips with mine. My head pounds, but I don’t give a damn. I want my wife. She wants me. She loves me, found a way to really love me in spite of myself, again. She’s extraordinary, exquisite… and mine.

Our tongues dance, fingers brushing skin, tangling in hair, breaths blowing hot and fast over cheeks. She pulls away ever so slightly, panting, and I’m sadly grateful for the interruption. My head hurts. Her eyes are bright with emotion.

“Christian, are you okay?”

_How does she know?_ “I’m all right, baby,” I assure her. “My head hurts a bit is all.” I kiss the tip of her nose, and her eyes flutter.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I promise.” Or I will be, after a good night’s sleep next to my wife, who incidentally, loves me. Loves me, and delights in looking after me. I can’t allow that just yet, though, and warm up a distraction from her worry. “You have two more charms now, look.”

She looks puzzledly at me for a moment, and twists the silver rope to the end, sliding over the clasp until the recent additions are on top. “Teddy,” she gasps.

My heart leaps into my throat. “You remember?”

“Oh, no… I’m sorry, it just… it makes sense,” She runs her finger across the little silver bear. Her eyes flit to mine. “You’re disappointed now,” she assumes.

“No…” I start, then correct myself, my heart having plummeted from its height. “Well, a little. It’s all right though. You’re intuitive, as ever, Mrs. Grey.” I watch her, my expression mild, showing her I’m all right, and her eyes lower to the last charm in the lineup.

“A bird?” She looks puzzled again.

“A small, very pretty bird… an Eastern Phoebe,” I tell her. “I bought it months ago. Gave it to you after we’d agreed on her name. I thought… she can still be part of you, this way.” I swallow the rising lump, avoiding an embarrassing display, but barely.

Ana’s fingers come to rest tenderly on my cheek. “I wish we could have known her.”

I nod. It’s all I have. Leave it to me to turn things bittersweet. “Bedtime?” I suggest. She places the ring box, since forgotten, on the side table and takes my hand.

~ ANA ~

It’s afternoon on Thursday before Christian makes mention of our vacation again; he was quite insistent that the details remain a surprise. His mood has been positively giddy. I think it has something to do with Monday’s revelation, which didn’t come out quite the way I’d intended. I’d envisioned something rather flowery and Victorian, like the characters in my favorite novels but as I have no real-world experience for comparison, it could have been worse. His reaction more than
made up for the way the words fell from my mouth, and his forgiveness of my awkwardness is a relief. Honestly, Christian seems to revel in my innocence. I’m glad I told him, glad I no longer have to berate myself for being chickenshit, but I want to take this slow, or at least, my brain does.

My body has other ideas.

We sip chilled pink champagne and relax in oversized leather seats, the Friday night city lights below us twinkling and dancing, until we’ve risen above the clouds and they’re no more. Christian moves from across the low table to settle beside me, picking up my hand and bringing it to his lips.

“Hungry, Mrs. Grey?”

For food, or for you? my libidinous inner monologue teases. “A little. I brought snacks,” I hold up a packet of crackers fished from my travel bag.

Christian chuckles. “Our jet has a full service kitchen. The attendant will make us something.”


He shakes his head, smiling at me. “There's also a full bedroom in the aft cabin.”

That’s news to me. My eyes flit toward the rear, just past another set of seats where Sawyer has planted himself out of earshot, there’s a door I hadn’t noticed before. A flying luxury hotel suite, that’s what this is. “Have you slept in there?”

“Yes, and so have you. Our first night as husband and wife were spent on board,” he leans in conspiratorially.


“You're gears are spinning, love.” His voice brings me back from la-la land, lips curled in a knowing smile, and I feel my face go pink. “It's all right. I think we'll stick to actual sleep tonight.” He doesn't insert a "no pressure" assurance, which is strangely comforting, and I realize that such a declaration would actually make me feel pressured, unobliging, inadequate... he's my husband for heaven's sake, and he must have needs. And what's worse, I have no idea how to fulfill them, no idea what I'm doing, or how to even begin.

“Care to clue me in?” He's still gazing amusedly at me.

My eyes flit to my lap. He's still holding one of my hands, and it's clasped between mine, as my fingers worry around each other. He gives my hand a gentle squeeze.

“Not until you're absolutely ready, baby,” he whispers. His eyes are serious.

All I can do is nod.

I sleep, somewhat restfully, and somewhat not, in his arms. The sky-bed, as I jokingly remarked, is surprisingly comfortable. I snuggle into him, my back to his front, and on occasion he nuzzles my neck, my ear, strokes my cheek... his warm breath across my skin setting me alight.

“Mmm.” The sound of utter tranquility bubbles up in my throat. I. Am. So. Comfortable. This man, having told me such unbelievable things about his past, is so amazingly attentive, and so gentle. There’s no longer a doubt in my mind that he could ever hurt me, and every confidence that he’d protect me from harm. I never imagined I’d have this life. It isn’t what I wanted or even hoped for,
but now that I have it, I’d have a hard time letting it go.

I only wish I knew what the journey here was like.

“Ana?” Christian murmurs.

“Hmm?”

“Are we okay?”

“Mmm.”

He chuckles lightly. “Are you coherent?”

“Mmm.” I smile a little. I turn in his arms until we’re nose to nose. He brushes his along mine, and kisses me chastely.

“Are you sad that we left Teddy behind?” he asks.

Yes. But then, I don’t want him to feel bad. “A little,” I say quietly. “But he’s in good hands, isn’t he?”

“The best.” Christian kisses me again. “I’m glad we’re doing this. Getting away, just the two of us.”

I nod, burying my head in his neck. He holds me close. My mind begins wandering, to and from this and that, meandering through things I want to ask, skirting things I’m not sure I should. I settle for a mild one. “Christian?”

“Yes?”

“What do I do?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I… don’t understand the question.” He brings his fingers under my chin and tilts my head to meet his eyes.

“I mean, job-wise. Every time I wanted to ask, something would come up and I’d forget. So?”

He chuckles. “Oh, that.” Shifting a bit so he can look at me better, he plants a kiss on the tip of my nose. “You’ve been running a publishing company for the last two years.”

My brain blinks spastically. I think my eyes do too, but I’m too focused on the former. “I… what?”

“Grey Publishing, formerly Seattle Independent Publishing. You’re CEO. Though normally, you leave the routine stuff for the board to fight over and squirrel away in your office all day reading manuscripts. Watching you read can be very entertaining, baby.”

I’ll chew over that last bit later… “Wait… rewind. A company? How? I just barely graduated…”

“Maybe I should explain,” he interrupts lightly.

“I think you’d better.” There’s an edge of staggered hostility in my voice.

Christian sighs. “Please don’t be mad… again. You were, at first, but… just please, don’t be mad at me, okay?” His demeanor has gone from gently teasing to scattered and abashed, like that of a teenager trying to talk his way out of something.
“I’ll try not to be.” Oh Christian, please don’t drop another bomb, I’m begging you. My subconscious is gripping her seat, white-knuckled.

He nods. “Fair enough. Let’s see… shortly after we met, you took an internship at SIP, and, forgive my control-freakishness, but when I found out about it, I bought the company.” I open my mouth to interject; what, I’m not sure, but he brings his finger to my lips. “Please, baby. I was, and still am, very protective of you. Back then, it was probably a little over the top…” A little? “… and when you found out, you were understandably upset; you’d believed I’d interfere in your career, but that was never the case. You excelled at the position, and when the editor suddenly left, you were asked to step in for the interim. No one knew we were together, and I promise you, I didn’t have a hand in your advancement. At least, not until after we married and I signed it over to you. It was one of your wedding gifts.”

_A one of?_ I don’t even want to think what else there was, but I’m sure it was over the top as well, if his… our… style of living is any indication. I swat my subconscious back into her cage with a witchy-looking broom. “Is that all?”

“Yes.” His eyes are sincere, searching.

I’m quiet for a moment, just absorbing. A company? A freaking company? What on earth am I going to do with a company? I like the idea of reading all day; I could live with my nose in a book for eight hours and be perfectly content with my career. But an entire company? “It’s a lot to absorb,” I admit, finally.

“It is, I know. I have to say, you seem far more accepting than before. I’d like to hope it’s because somewhere deep down, you know it’s all right, and not because you’re sitting on a barrel of angry primates.” The teasing has returned, tentatively. I’m still having trouble getting a handle on his mood swings. Oh, Christian and his lighthearted twisting of common phrases…

“You’re playful tonight, Mr. Grey,” I observe.

“And you appear to be in a very forgiving mood, Mrs. Grey, if I’m reading you correctly.”

The corners of my mouth twitch. I really _am_ in a mellow mood, and it surprises me. “I might be.”

“Might?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Might.” I mouth.

He smiles. “I suppose that’s better than the alternative. I’ll take forgiving Ana any day.” His hand comes to rest at my waist.

“I bet you would, since you seem to be in trouble with me often.” I tease.

I bask in his good humor, and his dancing gray eyes, for only a moment before he interrupts.

“Oh, I am, am I?” he chuckles. “So, more questions?”

_Plenty._ The list grows with each answer, each glimpse into this life. The last one ended on a more positive note than I’d originally envisioned, so I dig for a slightly more dangerous one. And with this man, I’m aware I could be asking for it. _Be brave, Steele… err… Grey._ “Are you doing okay, you know… waiting… for me?”

His intake of breath doesn’t go unnoticed, and his fingers tense slightly on my side. When they relax, I know he’s working things out. He appears to spend a lot of time processing his feelings on
a spur of the moment basis. It’s intriguing. It’s only then that I realize the question could be taken two ways, and whichever he’s latched onto, it’s the one that weighs most heavily on his mind.

“Ana, if you mean sex…” he shakes his head slowly, the tip of his nose brushing mine. He sighs. “I will wait, as long as it takes, for the time to be right. It isn’t an issue. I can manage my… appetite… until then. Now, if you’re referring to me waiting for you to remember, that’s another matter entirely.” His eyes are suddenly very, very sad. “I don’t see it as waiting. You’re my Ana, in every way. I see more of my wife inside you each day, and as much as I want you to remember, as much as I’d give for that to happen, to help you regain what you’ve lost…” he swallows. “I’m okay. As long as I have you… all is right in the world.”

Wow… this is what real love is. I press forward and my mouth meets his, pulling him to me, and holding tight. His lips part, inviting, and I thrust my tongue into his mouth, meeting his and tasting, feeling. His hands at my side brush my waist where my shirt has ridden up, and the familiar spark of his skin against mine zings through my belly. Is this what lust feels like? Oh, I want him.

Christian rolls me onto my back and hovers over me, all warm cotton pajamas and mussed hair, pressing me into the mattress. His weight is intoxicating. His lips leave a trail of kisses from my earlobe and down my jaw, across my neck, and down to the neckline of my silk top. His fingers rest lightly on my sides, his thumbs brushing the skin over my ribs.

Suddenly it’s blindingly bright. I blink and turn away, and he’s there, holding me, his smile as radiant as the setting sun that warms us. It’s strangely comforting and familiar, this shell beach, the salt on the air… oh, it’s happening again. And for the first time, I’m aware, I’m not lost in the dream. I know this place, or I’m supposed to. I’ve been here, I’m sure of it, but I don’t know where here is.

Christian’s hands are on my belly, my very round belly… oh my… his thumbs caress my sides, over my ribs, skimming the seam of what appears to be a light blue bikini. What boldness, to wear a bikini in this condition… though the way Christian is holding me, brushing his lips over my neck, it must have been more for his benefit. And I feel so beautiful, in his arms. This man loves me. Me, and no one else. My Christian.

The beach fades into darkness as the sun sets, but I know what’s happening… I’m returning to reality, and I let go.

I’m increasingly aware that I’m being lightly shaken.

“Ana!”

“Hmm…” I grumble. I wish I knew why these damn episodes make me so tired.

“Oh, baby… thank God.” I feel the rush of his relieved exhale flow across my skin. “Are you all right?”

“Need… a minute…”

“Okay. I’m here, love.” His lips brush my forehead, my eyes, my cheeks, and I breathe in the scent of him.

“How long…”

“Less than a minute. Baby, I hate to leave you, but I need to tell the captain to land. We should get you to a hospital.”
“No…” I protest, my hands reaching out for him, grasping his shirt weakly. He worries far too easily. “No more hospitals. It’s the same thing every time… more trouble than it’s worth.”

He sighs. “Ana, please… I fall apart inside every time this happens. What if this is the one time they scan you and find something?”

I giggle weakly. “Only in some silly medical drama on TV.”

“Ana, this is no joke.” His expression is borderline frantic.

It’s my turn to sigh. “I know. I’m sorry. I’m okay, really.”

His eyes search my face, and I try to scowl, to make him laugh, or just to break the furrowed line between his eyebrows. I must not be very good at it, or his worry is just too great. I lift my hand to his face and brush his cheek with my fingers. He grasps my hand and holds it there, leaning into my palm and closing his eyes. When they open again, he’s calmed a bit. *That’s the secret… touching him.*

“Let me at least make Sawyer aware of the situation.”

“Christian, there isn’t a situation,” I plead. “I’m fine. Please. A hospital is the last place I want to be.”

He sighs. “All right. But let me apprise him. Just in case, baby. I like to cover all the bases.” His eyes unfocus for a second and the corner of his mouth twitches, as though he’s remembering something.

“What is it?”

He snorts. “It’s nothing. When I come back, I want to hear what you remembered.” He tucks the blanket securely around me and plants a sweet, lingering kiss on my cheek. “I’ll just be a minute.”

It’s probably been three or four when he returns. I’m not exactly sure. The hum of the plane’s engines lulled me from reality until I heard the door click open again. He slides back in next to me and searches my tired expression.

“You didn’t tell them to land after all, did you?”

Christian has the audacity to look mildly hurt. “I told you I wouldn’t. I don’t like being second-guesed.”

*Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.* Jeez, he looks wounded. I raise my fingers to brush his cheek. “I am sorry.”

He closes his eyes briefly, and when he opens them again, they’ve softened considerably. He turns into my hand and presses a kiss against my palm. “What did you see?”

I sigh. “It was different this time.”

“How?”

I shake my head slowly, working through the memory as I go. “I was aware of what it was. I um… I knew I was having an episode. Everything around me was familiar, but I couldn’t place it, like the other times; I knew I’d been there, but I didn’t know where *there* was.”

“Describe it for me.”
“A beach, at sunset…” I breathe, pulling from the memory. “The sand was all shells… it was really warm, humid… you were there, sitting behind me. Holding me. My suit was blue. I was…”

“Pregnant. With Teddy.” His eyes are bright with recognition.

I wondered about that. I’m guiltily a little glad; this would be a miserable and awkward conversation if it had been our daughter, though secretly, I wish I had some recollection of her to hold onto. It isn’t fair to her memory that her own mother doesn’t remember her short life, and we’d been the closest that two people can be.

“Penny for your thoughts, love?”

I’ve drifted into my own thoughts again. “Sorry. Just wishing I could remember.” I readjust under the covers. “The sun was setting over the water… were we in California?”

“West Florida, actually. Naples. A state park, aptly called Lover’s Key.”

I giggle. “Vacation?”

“And a little business on the side. You were trying to persuade a new author to sign with you.”

*Oh. Ana Grey, the mobile publisher. “Did I succeed?”*

He chuckles. “You did. And additionally, a half hour later you talked me into giving a sad girl a job.”

My brow furrows. “I did?”

“Let’s just say she wasn’t sad anymore after you finished with her,” he teases, bumping the tip of my nose with his.

“You’ll have to explain that one.”

“Would you like the long or short version? I’d like for you to at least get some sleep tonight.”

“It’s a long flight, if we’re going where you say we are. I’ll sleep later.” I shift again, and he tucks me under his arm.

“Very well. Once upon a time,” he begins cheekily, “we ventured to Florida on vacation. You quickly grew tired of the pampered beaches near our resort, and so we ventured north to a small coastal park.” He smiles at the memory. “You were more in your element there than I’d seen you in quite a while, outside your work… you later said it was because the people were so much more normal. So you went for a walk, not leaving my sight, of course, and a girl about your age scolded you for collecting shells. Apparently it isn't permitted there, for future reference,” he nuzzles my cheek with his nose, making me giggle.

“So then what happened?”

“Well, in all your compassionate and literary wisdom, you took more than superficial notice that she’d been upset by something other than your illicit crustacean pilfering, and the two of you got to talking. Mind you, I knew nothing until you dragged her over and informed me that I'd be giving her immediate employment.”

“*I did that?* Wow. I find that I'm awfully pleased with myself. Somewhere in this whirlwind of a strange, overwhelming relationship, I grew a pair. *Perhaps I've still got that in me*; I tuck the
thought away for future perusal.

“You most certainly did. I had her on a plane to Seattle the following week. Miss Smith now co-heads our environmental oversight department. She's quite shrewd. You and she have lunch from time to time.”

Another acquaintance, or friend… I have no idea… whom I’d probably never recognize in passing. I decide something, spur of the moment.

“I'd like to go back to work.”

His eyes widen, he shifts and peers down at me, brows furrowed. “I'm not sure that's the best idea, Ana.”

“And why not? I need to get back to reality at some point. If I could do it before, I'm sure I could figure it out now.”

Christian’s lips are a flat line. Why is he being like this?

“I'd rather you didn't, Ana. Very few people are aware of your memory loss. You may be treated differently…”

“So... you're afraid of what people will think?” I interrupt.

“That's only part of it, love.” He sits up, crossing his legs. “Let me explain something to you. In our world, we're quite literally a power couple. When you and I are doing well, or at least, when nothing of notice is happening, the company does well, and our investors are happy to do business. Aside, the media thrives on what they know of us, publicly and privately. Don't misunderstand me; I don't give a flying fuck what anyone thinks of me, I never have. I don’t much care if the company takes a dive for a time, until the news blows over. But I take jibes and insinuation toward you very seriously, and if you go back to work, it's only a matter of time before the public gains awareness of the situation, and I won't have anyone question your credibility. And with the loss of our child on top of it…” he trails off. It's a long moment of even breathing before he begins again. “I'm afraid, Ana. I don't want you treated differently, with kid gloves or otherwise, whether it’s out of sympathy, snobbery or media interest. You don't deserve it. And what if you had an episode there?” His expression is lost.

I understand his point, somewhat. He's an overprotective control freak who wants everything in life just-so, and has a low pain threshold for anything unknown. I wonder how he'll be the first time Teddy gets taunted in school, heaven forbid...

“Don't people know about the accident, though?”

He swallows. “Only some. I didn't actually read what was written in the papers until after you woke up; my father handled the PR and did whatever damage control was necessary.”

I frown. “Does he work for the company too?”

He blinks for a second. “No, baby. He has his own firm, but he looks out for our family interests, of course.”

Why didn't I know this? I chide myself. Oh, my life is so confusing. This escape is probably exactly what I need at the moment. I shake my head. “So what do people know?”

“Just that you were in an accident, and that you're recovering. Everything else has been kept
private. Only our families and John know of your memory loss.”

“And Jose.”

“Yes, him too.”

“Why does it matter who knows?”

He shakes his head. “I told you.”

“No, you just said you don't want people to treat me differently. Well, they already know about the accident, and I’ve been locked away so long that they’re bound to speculate. Besides, it’s my story to tell. Sure, there will be some sympathy and stares, but I can handle it. Shouldn't this be my decision?”

“Baby, I'm just thinking of you, and of our family. I don't want you to have to deal with any of it.”

He runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up every which way, clearly exasperated. “Listen, we'll find a way for you to start working again, if that's what you really want. But it's the potential for media camping outside our gate that concerns me. It's a wonder they didn't catch wind of your little adventure last week. If they were to get word of your condition...” he sighs. “I just don't want you to be burdened with that on top of everything else.”

I sigh. He's conceded that I might return to some semblance of whatever career might be left for me, but honestly, I don't get all the worry about the media. We're not Hollywood celebrities. “Christian, what would happen if people found out? If they knew everything?”

“Everything?” he exclaims, alarmed.

“About the memory loss... and the baby.”

He gulps a breath. “Imagine news vans parked outside our home and Grey House at all hours. Random strangers stopping you on the street, asking personal questions. A entourage of security following you every second of the day. I’d likely be in the office ninety hours a week... I’ve done it before. You’ve been against living this way from the beginning.”

*Doesn’t security follow me every second of the day anyway? “Can I tell you what I think?”*

“Of course. Doesn't mean I'll agree.”

I snort. “I think people are going to talk, regardless. And so what? They'll be all ‘poor Mrs. Grey’ and then get on with their sad, meddlesome lives after someone far more sensational trips on a sidewalk somewhere and breaks her face. This doesn't worry me all that much.”

Who knew our conversation would turn from shelly beaches to media frenzy in a matter of twenty minutes. Christian’s fingers are knotted in his lap. “And what about Teddy, hmm? What do you propose we tell him when he starts to notice how things are? And if he sees his mother regarded with disrespect?”

I square my shoulders. How I do this lying down I'm unsure, but as I'm still too tired to sit up, it'll have to do. “It'll be a lesson in humility for sure. But isn't it better to show him how to handle such things with integrity than to hide from them?”

Christian blinks at me, as though this never occurred to him. *What is he, an adolescent? Dr. Flynn indicated as much. This must be what he meant. It's a lot to process.*
“The ivory tower,” he murmurs.

“What?”

His lips twitch, a smile threatening to overwhelm his confused expression. “You used to chide me often enough that I’d locked us away in Escala, largely out of the public view. It suited us most of the time, and myself all of the time... I didn't desire anything different. You called the place my ivory tower, insisting that I hid there purposely, in an effort to avoid real life.”

“I did?”

He nods. The smile breaks through, and he glances up, as though he's thanking the heavens. “You always were the best medicine.” His eyes return to mine, his knotted fingers loosening and he picks up my hand. “We'll do whatever you want, baby. I'd rather you work from home though, please. We’ll get out more. I'm letting my fears get the better of me again. It’s something I’ve worked very hard to overcome these past few years.” He swallows, his eyes boring into mine. “You have no idea, how hard it is to give up control. But I’ll do it, for you. So long as you’re safe about it.”

Oh, I think I'm getting the picture. I sigh and decide to change the subject. I open my arms, and after only a moment's hesitation, he crawls under the covers again, snuggling up next to me. I run my fingers up and down his arm. “So tell me about where we're going. What will we do there for a week?”

He sighs, pressing a feather-light kiss to my temple. “Just be together. Talk about things; get to know each other again. Relax.”

I smile. “That sounds nice.”

“Nice?” There's a teasing edge to the word.

“What's wrong with nice?”

He laughs. “I ought to teach you the real meaning of the word. Again.”

I wonder what he means, but I sense it will be another long story, and I'm rather tired. “Mr. Grey, you sure are a man of many moods today.” I try, and fail, to stifle a yawn.

“Guilty as charged. Now sleep.”

~oOo~

"I can't believe you've never been on a roller coaster," I say, incredulous. Christian gapes at me as though he's deciding whether to laugh or retort, and in the end it's the former. He's been in such high spirits these last four days, gazing at me as though it’s our honeymoon, and maybe it is, a little.

For me, it's so much more, holding hands as we meander through hundred-year-old towns, past weathered, smiling faces, endless clay pots bearing leafy, red flowers, and stopping to watch friendly stray kittens play, though Christian discourages me from petting them. In this place, each wine has a story, every street a colorful history. Kate could write a book from what I've absorbed this week alone, and Jose's photographic perspective would keep his gallery in business for years. I
don't mention these musings to Christian; this experience is just for us, for him and for me.

We eat, quite a lot actually. Food is the culture here, and I've never seen Christian more relaxed. I wonder if it was part of the reason he chose Sicily, but whatever the reason, this corner of the world is truly amazing.

"Why is that so hard to believe?" he teases. "It's never been something I aspired to. Have you?"

"Of course." I try to ignore his slightly uneasy expression. "But you must have been to a county fair," I continue.

"Nope. I had rather fine-tuned interests in my youth." He traces the tablecloth with his index finger, and it's distracting. I wonder offhand if he's doing that on purpose.

"Okay," I try to change the subject. "Like what?"

He takes a calming, deep breath. "I enjoyed playing the piano, reading, and staying active, mostly."

I nod. "You're not giving much away."

He sighs. "I wasn't in the best place as a child. Emotionally, anyway. I had the greatest family any adoptee could ask for, but it's hard to be part of a perfect family when you're not perfect." He's wistful for a moment, and then smiles bashfully. "I'd rather not talk about my childhood, if that's all right."

"Okay." I can give him that. "What should we talk about, then?"

We instead launch into a discussion of his recent business ventures, of his various efforts to improve life in struggling countries. He's so passionately illustrative; I knew he was bright from the beginning but this... It's a whole new level of brilliance I've never seen from him. I'm enraptured. I wonder at times whether he's told me these things before, but I don't feel for a second that he's humoring me; he's far too excited.

The hotel he's chosen is a rugged little bed and breakfast tucked away on a side street, but the balcony of our suite overlooks the coastline. It's breathtaking. Security is relaxed; Sawyer and a local guy named Antonio follow discreetly behind as we weave through ornate, historical structures and local shops. We've already purchased, at Christian's insistence, several items to take back as gifts. They're more extravagant than I'm used to, even now, living this high society lifestyle, but Christian seems to think they're appropriate, so I go with it.

Today, he's brought his camera. It's a very technical thing, black with lots of buttons and knobs and I'm sure a setting for every light level and scene, and I've caught him again and again, snapping a picture of me when I wander away, distracted by something antique or intricate, and smiles bashfully when I catch on, his long lashes brushing slightly blushed cheeks. The man is adorable.

We snack on little fried squids, a popular item here in Messina, and they're surprisingly good, not slimy as I'd expected. Other tourists, and it's not hard to spot them, also seem taken with this local delicacy. I wonder just how touristy Christian and I look, but as the locals seem to celebrate its visitors, I banish the musing immediately.

"You look beautiful today," he whispers to me out of the blue, draping his arm around my shoulders. I don't feel exceptionally pretty today but I smile up at him, leaning into his hold and tentatively curling my arm about his waist, and he grins back. He likes this. Suddenly he glances up
"Shit, Ana!" he exclaims, yanking me aside and I stumble, twisting and lurching over the clay brick sidewalk.

He pulls me tightly to his chest, righting me, and a get a faint whiff of clean linen and soap.

I blink, and his gaze turns to blazing bewilderment. I don't know what's just happened, but his expression has me mesmerized... wait, where are we? Peripherally, the building immediately over his shoulder is no longer whitewashed stucco, but cold, gray concrete, and the sun is no longer shining. Crap... my stomach flips.

It's happening again.

I absorb what details I can but seemingly suspended in time and at such close range, there isn't much else to see. I hear traffic though, and his scent... it's positively intoxicating.

And then he's above me, his mouth moving, and my ears begrudgingly return to function, like the volume slowly being turned up.

"Ana? Talk to me, love, please," he implores, his voice bearing an edge of anxious fright. Over his shoulder, I see Sawyer keeping the concerned onlookers away.

"Baby, please."

"I'm okay," I gasp. "I knew it was happening." I test my somewhat fuzzy brain, less muddled than before, and realize I'm not quite as tired as I've become accustomed after an episode. Christian lifts me in his arms and carries me to a waiting car. He slides in beside me. I note that Antonio is at the wheel. How did he get the car so fast? And how long was I out?

Christian's arm is curled protectively around me, his other hand at my cheek, turning my face toward his. "Your eyes look all right," he notes. "How are you feeling?"

My eyes? Oh... his mom must have told him what to look for, I venture to guess. "Less tired. You were holding onto me on a city street, that's what I saw," I tell him. "What really happened?"

"A vendor's cart swerved, nearly knocked you down. When I pulled you back... that's when it began."

"How long this time?"

"Barely twenty seconds. The shortest yet, I think."

"Wow." Am I getting better, perhaps, or at least adapting to what's happening? Maybe they'll get so short that I won't even pass out anymore. That would be far more convenient and less embarrassing. "Do you have any idea what I saw?"

He looks out the window for a second. "You once tripped and nearly fell into the road in Portland, after we first met. That might have been it; I pulled you back that time as well."

"Oh," I sigh. "Thanks. For both times."

He chuckles. "Anytime, baby." Some of his humor has returned I think, though his eyes still appear pained.

Christian insists on carrying me up to our room, setting me upon a cushioned lounge chair on our
balcony. It's still quite warm in the late afternoon, and the sea breeze feels nice. I close my eyes, allowing time to process the experience, and a cold glass is pushed into my hand.

"Drink this."

I don't think chilled juice is going to stop the flashbacks, but it seems to make Christian feel better, or at least, like he's taking proper care of me. I down the beverage in a few gulps and pat the edge of the cushion, and he sits down beside me, taking the empty glass and picking up my hand. "Feel all right, love?"

"Fine. I promise." Jeez, how he worries.

He nods, offering a gentle smile, but then his expression falters, and behind his eyes I see raw anxiety, his breaths shorten and he starts to shake. He turns his face away.

"What is it?" I worry that I've done something. He was a model of composure less than a minute ago. I palm his cheek and turn his face back toward me. "Talk to me, Christian, please."

He draws a shuddered breath. "It frightens me to death when I can't wake you." His voice cracks, his face crinkles and he forcefully stifles a sob. Oh, sweet Christian, these bouts of unresponsiveness have traumatized him into one of his polar mood swings. My heart breaks for him. I pull him down to me, holding him as best I can, and he cries quietly in my arms. He needs this, this outlet for his pent up emotions, and while it’s unnerving to see such a strong soul in a rare moment of weakness, I don't mind. I stroke his soft hair and whisper what reassurance I can.

He quiets after only a moment, thumbing the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry. That rarely happens."

"Don't you dare apologize," I tell him. "I have to remind myself how hard this must be on you. I wish I could grasp just how hard."

"I'm all right, baby. That took me by surprise. Things often do, where you're concerned." He offers me a small, brave smile. There are so many shades of his personality. Shades, hmm… it feels a familiar concept. "Are you hungry?" he interrupts my train of thought.

"Sure," I concede. I'm not really, but he might cheer up if he sees me eat; he does endeavor to feed the world… might as well start with his broken wife.

~oOo~

"I want to take you somewhere special today," Christian announces softly, almost bashfully. I've just taken in a mouthful of soft-cooked eggs and toast, and have to consciously chew and swallow before I'm able to respond. The time it takes gives me the opportunity to work up something equally subdued.

"You'll have to be more specific, Mr. Grey. Everywhere we've been this week has been special." I look up at him from beneath long lashes. His almost inaudible intake of breath isn't lost on me.

"It's a surprise."

Oh! "Do I generally like your surprises?" The words are out before I can stop them. I don't think I've ever been this feisty. What's wrong with me? Whatever it is, it has my husband hooked. My
husband. God, that word is laced with exciting possibilities.

"As a matter of fact, you do." He smiles... seductively?... and we've not even finished breakfast. His expression slides into one of deep consideration, and he rubs his thumb back and forth across his bottom lip. It's quite distracting.

It suddenly dawns on me that he could be undressing me with his eyes, and I him, but he has the advantage of knowing what's under there. How did we get here exactly? Oh, right... surprises.

"So... what does this surprise entail?" I bat my lashes, and feel absurd. I've never seduced anyone before, at least not in my broken line of memory, and I feel rather stupid doing it now.

"We'll, Mrs. Grey, it wouldn't be much of a surprise if I told you, now would it?" His eyes have darkened. He could be a predator under the disguise of the world's most beautiful late-twentysomething. Hmm, that brings a good question to mind.

"How old are you?"

He laughs. "That's quite a change of subject." He stops when he sees my lost expression, and his smile turns to one of apologetic amusement. "Thirty one."

"And I'm..."

"Twenty four."

"I know, I was just doing the math, jeez."

A hint of concern was his over him. "You're in quite a mood this morning, baby. Anything I can do?" He reaches across the table and takes my hand, running his thumb over my fingers.

I wonder idly if it bothers him that I haven't worn the rings, as he grazes my ring finger. I really had given the idea serious thought. It needs to feel right, and perhaps one day it will; it just doesn't yet. I swallow, shaking my head. "Sorry. Just another random tangent."

He nods sympathetically. "We'll go once you've finished, all right?"

The car winds over gravel roads, up hills and along small, mostly-dry streambeds dotted with those opportunistic red flowers, I think they're the same ones I'd seen all over the towns. Christian has opted for shorts today, and I think it's the first time I've seen just how lean and sculpted his legs are. And his feet... oh my. His sandals are the rugged kind, showing the light dusting of hair on each toe. I've never been vain, quite the opposite... but there's something to be said for the science of attraction. He looks ready to go traipsing across the countryside, but as he's approved my similar, more feminine sandals and choice of white cotton eyelet skirt, I doubt we're set to stray far from the road. I pause to rethink after we get out of the car, and he straps on a green backpack.

"Are we hiking?" I ask, more than a little uncomfortable with the idea, my subconscious reminding me of the statistical probability of falls and injuries where I'm concerned.

"Just a bit of trail walking. I'm fairly certain you can handle it," he smirks, holding out his hand and I take it, trusting him, but doubting myself. He has his work cut out for him. If I walk away from this without at least a few scrapes, it'll be a blasted miracle. I hope he knows what he's in for.

It's a worn, hard-pack dirt trail, probably one frequented by tourists, but hardly what one would consider 'touristy.' The surrounding foliage is hardy and green, with the increasingly familiar red-flowered bushes poking out here and there. The trail widens and the first line to the left opens on a
stone wall, and in the distance I see a valley populated by a smattering of rustic, clay roofed buildings, and further out, the Tyrrhenian Sea. It's breathtaking. We pass the occasional cypress, the only flora I can identify by name, and I'm reminded of the comment made by Diane Lane's friend in Under the Tuscan Sun. It makes me smile.

Christian is mostly quiet, taking everything in, I suppose, pointing things out to me once in a while and answering my silly questions. He's very knowledgeable. I wonder to myself if there's anything he doesn't know or can't do; he seems a wealth of talent and information, and again, I'm feeling inadequate.

"All right," he sighs, exasperated, "what's the face for?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't give me 'hmm,' Ana. Out with it. What's bothering you?"

"Me?" I scoff. "I could ask you the same."

He sniffs. "I don't know what you mean." He drags off the backpack and pulls the zipper with distracted fingers. He digs for a moment, retrieving an aluminum water bottle and hands it to me. "Drink," he instructs.

We've not been walking a half hour, but I comply. I see Sawyer lurking about thirty meters behind, toting his own pack, and eyeing every direction suspiciously, but with subtlety. Until now I thought we'd been alone. I suppose Christian's paranoia knows no bounds, we're half a world away from home, for heaven's sake.

I finish drinking and hand the bottle back, and he takes his turn. While he rummages in his pack, I walk over to the stone wall and lean on it, taking in the view.

"Ana," he breathes.

I look back at him over my shoulder, but he's already behind me, snaking his arms around my waist, pulling me back a bit.

"I don't like you this close to the edge without me. Your record is rather colorful when it comes to accidents." His lips are at my neck. I've worried him again it seems, and he's covering his anxiety with gentleness. It's so much better than the usual tone of admonishment; he really is trying.

"I didn't mean to worry you," I say.

"You never mean to, baby." He kisses the top of my head. "But regardless, you do worry me, often."

I sigh. "Maybe it's just you, worrying. I don't think I would have spontaneously hurled myself over the wall."

Christian laughs softly. "Perhaps not. But with you, I'd rather not risk it." He's quiet for a moment, rocking me from side to side. I feel him smile in my hair. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is," I agree. "Thank you for this, Christian."

"Anything for you, Ana."

I lean back into his hold, and he tightens his arms around me. "You really mean that, don't you?"
"I do." He sighs into my hair, and then loosens his hold, maneuvering himself between me and the wall. At first I think it's out of concern for my safety, but then I see... his eyes are blazing.

"It means so much that you're here with me, Ana," he breathes. He looks down, bashfully, and a smile touches his lips. When he raises his eyes to mine again, they're warm and wanting. "I spent a long time last night lying awake, pondering the best way to ask you something," he begins. "I'm really nervous, which doesn't help. I want to deserve you again. I dare to dream of our future beyond the immediate; I want to give you everything your heart desires..." he scoffs, "and I can't believe the number of times each day I use the word 'I.'" He sighs. "Ana, I hope you have at least a sliver of an idea how deeply I feel for you. You deserve everything you want to have and do, and it's my hope that you'll allow me to give you those things, or at the very least, be there for you on your journey. I promise to spend every day, every hour, helping you to fulfill your dreams, no matter what they are or how they evolve, and to support you, wholeheartedly, to hold you dear in my heart, to cherish and protect you, if you'll have me."

My head spins, and somehow, I remain on my feet. Is he doing what I think he's doing? Oh God, he is! My heart stutters frantically.

The setting suddenly shudders and shifts, darkening. No! No, this can't happen, not now... Oh Christian, how he'll panic...

It's dim where we are, in some wood-walled room filled with flowers and twinkling string lights, and he drops to one knee before me, holding a beautiful diamond ring. His mouth moves, but what he says doesn't match.

"Ana, my heart and soul are in your hands. I'm stronger with you by my side. Every day you give me hope, and remind me how precious and beautiful life is. I want to marry you, all over again. Please... be my wife?"

Oh, my. My breaths are real, not imagined, quick and responding to my pulse, but I'm in control. This is so strange. Why didn’t his lips match his words?

Christian gazes up at me, hopefully, as though he already knows my answer.

“Ana?” His lips didn’t move at all that time. What in the world? And then, it finally dawns on me. Oh no...

I’m in both places at once.
"Baby, you're killing me here."

My head spins, *in slow motion* is the only fitting description for the sensation, and the surroundings fade... literally fade... from the twinkling darkness into the brightness of late morning. I squint.

"Ana?" Christian's expression is concerned, bordering on desperation.

"Don't panic," I whisper. "I think I just had an episode."

His eyes widen, and he stands, his hands immediately going to my face, my shoulders, running down my arms, his eyes fixed on mine. His fingers return to my cheeks, and I see that he has the ring, the engagement ring I'd left behind in the little box on the dresser, slipped around the tip of his pinky, forgotten for the moment.

"You didn't pass out," he states the obvious, his voice light and bewildered.

"You don't know the half of it," I mumble.

He raises his eyebrows. I take it as an invitation to continue.

"I heard everything you said. Every word. And my answer is yes, incidentally... but what I saw was you, proposing in some wooden greenhouse with Christmas lights all around. Your mouth didn't match the words I heard..." I gasp. "I think I was here and there at the same time."

Christian blinks spastically. "The boathouse." His eyes trail from my eyes to his hand, the ring glinting. His mouth curls into a gentle smile. "You're saying yes?" he asks.

And somehow, it clicks; this is what I needed. A proposal, the one I'd missed, now a part of my growing collection of memories, and now I have two. Both heartfelt and special. Wearing a ring, this ring, no longer troubles me. I nod. "Yes."

His relief and joy are palpable. Soft lips claim mine, gently but possessively, and life... yes, life... blooms around us, enveloping us. He kisses me like a man who adores his wife. His arms curl around me, pulling me to him. "I love you," he whispers against my lips. "I love you so much."

I smile, opening my eyes, and there he is, just inches away, staring back at me. It takes my breath away. His hands drop, running down my arms, grasping my hands and bringing them up between us. He kisses the knuckles of my left hand, deftly slips the ring off his pinky and slides it with great care onto my ring finger. It's a tad loose, but it feels... right. His hand grasps mine, as though he's lost for what to do next, and I twist so our fingers lace with each other.

"I love you, Christian."

He sighs, his eyes drifting closed. "Say it again," he asks.

"I love you."

He gasps. "Again." His eyes open, hooded and full of emotion.
I smile, elated. "I love you."

His hands move to my cheeks, he pulls me forward and plants a soft, lingering kiss on my forehead, and then wraps his arms around me. "I can't believe what just happened," he breathes.

I giggle softly. "Which part?"

"That you're all right, that you didn't collapse... I'll have to call my mother in a while and tell her... but moreover, that you've said yes, after all you know of me, after all I've put you through, that you still want me."

His self-appraisal saddens me a little, but from what Dr. Flynn and I discussed, it's not unexpected. He's far less flawed than he thinks. "I do want you. I love you."

Christian smiles broadly against my neck. "I love it when you say that."

"I love you."

He tightens his arms around me. "Thank you, baby." Again, he rocks me from side to side. "Thank you."

Over Christian's shoulder and further down the path, I see Sawyer, pretending to mind his own business, but he's smiling warmly, too. It's an incredible thing, knowing how much the staff cares.

"I want to give you a wedding," Christian distracts me from my musings. "Whatever you want to do, anything you'd like, it's yours."

Oh my. "Maybe just a renewal," I interrupt. "I've seen the video, our wedding was beautiful, so much more than I've ever dreamed, but we've already done that, haven't we? Another wedding isn't necessary."

"I want to do it for you, baby," he counters. More than just a wedding, I want to give you memories, cherished times between us that you can hold onto. It's important to me to do that for you."

"You do that already," I pull back and take his face in my hands. "You've given me so many memories, and most importantly, you've give me... you."

"I've always been yours. From the moment I laid eyes on you." I can tell he's remembering our alleged first meeting, where I supposedly fell into his office... several people have told me their account of the story, and though there isn't a lot to tell, the focus has always been Christian's ensnarement. "You captured my heart that day, and you've never let go. You beguile me, Ana."

I giggle. "Right back at you, Christian."

A warm, late summer breeze caresses my skin, ruffling the seam of my skirt and reminding me where we are. "Shall we finish our stroll?"

He nods, his smile that of a little boy on Christmas morning.

~ oOo ~
"Yes, Mom. She seems fine. Mm-hmm. All right. I will. Here she is." Christian holds out his Blackberry to me, and I bring it to my ear.

"Hi, Grace."

"Hello, sweetheart. Enjoying your trip, I hope?"

"I am," I tell her. "It's so beautiful here, I've never seen anything like it. How's Teddy?"

"He's just fine, spoiled, but that's all Carrick's fault," she teases. It makes me giggle. "So, you've had two more?"

"The short one, and then the one I was awake for. I was aware of what was happening on both sides, if that makes any sense."

"Yes, Christian told me what you described to him. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Better than fine, definitely better than any of the other times. Not tired at all."

"No headache, dizziness or blurred vision?"

"Nope, just a little disoriented when I came back to reality, but that went away immediately."

"Any reason to think you might need to get checked out before you fly home?"

"I can't think of any."

"All right. If there are any others before you leave, though, or if you feel strange in any way I'd rather you were safe than sorry. I know you're not fond of hospitals."

"Deal. Can I talk to Teddy?"

"Of course. He's just woken up, let me go find him."

I hear shuffling, a deep, muffled voice in the background and then what I think is Grace's, before a little boy's voice comes through loud and clear.

"Mommy?"

My face breaks into a grin. "Hello, Teddy."

"Go to zoo, Mommy," he announces excitedly. "You come too?"

"Oh baby boy, I'm really far away today, but thank you," I placate him, hoping he won't be too disappointed, and a flood of guilt washes over me. I've already missed his first two years of life, or at least I feel as though I have, and even though my knowledge of child development is limited, I know there will come a day when he'll want little to do with his parents, and I should cherish that he wants to be with me now. I'll make it up to him when we return.

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow, okay?"

"T'morrow?"

"The day after that."

Teddy pauses. "Oh." I think the concept of time has escaped his two-year-old mind. Christian
gazes at me expectantly.

"Want to talk to Daddy, Teddy?"

I hear a rustling, and since I don't get a verbal answer I can only assume his response was in the form of a phone-rubbing nod, and I hand it back.

"Hi, Ted-bear!" Christian says enthusiastically. They talk for a few minutes, and then Christian holds the phone away and looks at the screen puzzledly. "He hung up on me again." He redials and quietly speaks to Grace (I think) for a few more minutes, walking onto the balcony for what I can only suspect is some privacy. I wonder if he's talking about me, but if he is, it can only be out of concern, so when he returns, I don't press him.

"Hungry?" he asks. It's nearly sunset, and we walked quite a bit today.

"Of course."

~oOo~

“Christian?”

“Hmm?” he looks up from a clipped stack of papers.

“Do you have any pictures of Teddy when he was a baby?” I ask, feeling a little stupid. I should have specified whether he has any on him at the moment, as we’re settled onboard his jet. Of course we’d have pictures at home, what I’d already seen were in decorative frames littered through the house. What first-time parents wouldn’t have an obnoxious number of them?

Christian snorts, his lips twitching into a smile. “Millions. But I assume you mean right now,” he fingers through his messenger pack, a soft chestnut leather thing with the capacity of Mary Poppins’ carpet bag, for all the things I’ve seen him pull out of there this week. He retrieves a thin leather folder and passes it to me. “Poke around there, see what you can find.”

I open the cover, it’s his iPad. A shiny black thing, it lights up to a picture of a model glider when I press the center button. Sliding my finger to unlock it, I’m met with a full screen of apps, efficiently organized by type. There’s no second screen. I tap the collection labeled ‘Media’ and then one called ‘Photos’ and scroll down… there must be tens, perhaps a hundred albums. Some by date, others by event. I hover over one entitled ‘Phoebe,’ seeing a preview of what looks like a sonogram, and my heart lurches. No, I can’t deal with the emotional turmoil right now, perhaps another time.


“Start with ‘Blip,’” Christian suggests, noticing my dilemma. I move down to the bottom and find an album with that title, just above one entitled ‘Renovation.’

It begins with a sonogram as well. A tiny jellybean inside an otherwise empty black-and-white orb, this can only be our son, my Teddy.

“Blip?” I ask, and Christian sets his reading next to his seat and moves next to me.
“It’s what you called Teddy, from the moment you discovered him until his birth.” He leans in to observe as I flip through the next photos, a series of side shots of me, as I grew. And grew. Holy shit, I was huge. There are a few interspersed of us together, Christian’s arms wrapped around me from behind, fingers spread over my belly, kneeling before me with his hands teasing up my shirt, leaning in to press a kiss below my protruding belly button.

“So beautiful,” he comments softly, and I lean toward him, resting my head against his shoulder. He takes over the tablet and continues through the album.

I wonder offhand what it was like for him, realizing that he was going to be a father. “How did I tell you?” I ask.

Christian tenses. His finger pauses on the screen, and he lets out a long, steady sigh. “Carefully.” I feel him swallow, and raise my eyes to gauge his expression. It’s resignedly abashed. “I handled the news very badly in the beginning,” he tells me. “I just wasn’t expecting to become a father so soon. I behaved horrendously, but you were patient with me, and I came around. My mother gave me what-for as well.” His eyes meet mine. “In case that particular memory surfaces, please know that I’d do anything to change my initial reaction. I beg you not to hold it against me.”

My subconscious is on her knees, praying that whatever drama he’s referring to stays buried. I nod. “Okay.”

Christian presses his lips to my temple, and returns to the album. “And here he is.”

I’m practically upside down in this photo and covered by a blue sheet, and Christian leans in close, a small bundle in his arms, a warm, relieved smile teasing his lips.

“He was a C-section baby?” I say, trying not to sound appalled. “How did I get talked into that?”

“You both were in danger,” he murmurs, his voice pained. “He was in distress. You were exhausted. I might have lost you otherwise.”

We’re quiet for a moment while I absorb the gravity of his words. It’s no wonder he’s such a basket case when it comes to my well-being. I nuzzle into his shoulder, and he sighs. He flips to the next photo.

I’ve seen this one on the bookshelf in Teddy’s room but seeing it now, in the context of our conversation, boldens its meaning. Our first real family photo, it seems, places the three of us snuggled in what can only be a raised hospital bed, I deduce from the blue-dotted print on the sheets behind us. Teddy is a swaddled, fuzzy blue bundle between us, and our eyes are only for him. It feels such a private moment but I can’t tear my eyes away.

“Mom took this one, before the rest of the family came up to meet him,” he says, his voice brightening. Another mood swing! Just a moment before he’d been headed down a path toward the dismal. Gosh, I wonder if it exhausts him as well, it sure does me. He flips through a few more, shots of various family members holding baby Teddy, lots of Christian with Teddy turned against his shoulder or cradled in his arms, the two gazing at each other, and a few of me struggling through an initial diaper-change. God, we recorded everything. If the next albums are any indication, I may be able to relive Teddy’s entire life, moment by moment. The thought makes me smile.

“More?” Christian asks. The last photo bounces against the edge of the screen, indicating that it’s the last in the series.
“Yes, please.”

~oOo~

Christian rises gracefully from our corner table at The Sirocco. “Ana, this is Hannah, your assistant.”

The approaching, scholarly girl has to be about my age. I’m not sure why this surprises me; I suppose I’d been expecting a high-school student intern, for whatever reason my brain would conjure that up. She looks as nervous as I feel.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s good to see you.” She’s wide-eyed and if I’m reading her a little better now, she’s more excited than nervous. I think I might like her… again. Christian said that I did.

We’d shared a long talk after arriving home, at which time he’d relented a little too wholeheartedly on the returning-to-work issue. I was thrown off by his sudden willingness to compromise, and while I couldn’t complain, I wondered idly if he had something else up his sleeve. He then actually suggested bringing an outsider into the fold, and then it was my turn to be apprehensive, especially when he’d used the word ‘outsider’. Then he’d told me about Hannah.

“Well, I’ll leave you ladies to it.” Christian drew me in for a soft kiss on the cheek, gestured for the two of us to sit, and strode casually out to one of the waiting vehicles with Taylor on his heels. The silhouette of the black SUV curved and warped in the vintage glass window as it pulled away from the curb. My two burly babysitters struggled to blend in two tables away.

“So,” I begin, not really knowing where to begin. I decide to go for the direct approach. “You know me, and even more importantly, you know my job better than I do at the moment. I need a gross reintroduction to my career, and all the while, you’ll have to forgive me for not knowing a thing about you or the work we’ve done.” God, that probably wasn’t very comforting. I wish I knew the level of our familiarity going into this, but I feel completely blind.

Hannah nods, all business. “I understand. Mr. Grey has filled me in a little bit, and I get that there are some things that are totally need-to-know, so let me know if I accidentally step into that territory.” She pulls a tablet out of her purse. “I’ve brought some old schedules and material from the second quarter and we can go over that, get an idea where you left off.”

I giggle. “Let’s order first, I’m starving.”

By the time what I suspect is our very own elite wait staff clears the remains of my mushroom salad, I have a pretty good idea what relational page we’re on, and an even deeper respect for Christian’s desire to help people. He’d only mentioned that Hannah had worked for me from almost the very beginning, when Grey Publishing went by another name. He hadn’t gone into any detail the lengths he went to reacquire her for me, that she’d left with my highest praise in pursuit of a Graduate Degree in Literature, that he’d begun her reacquisition on our first day in Sicily, and that he’d offered to compensate her tuition and all living expenses, plus what I sense is a generous salary, to step in as my assistant while taking classes locally in the evening and online. I was astounded and very much humbled, to say the very least.
“And that’s why they call it ‘distance learning,’” she laughs.

I join in her good spirits for a moment, and then we quiet as our drinks are refilled. I lift the flute of sparkling juice to my lips, considering the position I’ve been thrust into. “Do you have any reservations about this arrangement?”

“Oh, not at all,” she waves my concern away. “When Mr. Grey called me last week, it was a godsend; I hadn’t felt right since I left. I mean, I’m excited to be in school again, but I missed the job instantly. Thank you so much for having me back.”

“Believe me, Hannah, the pleasure is mine.”

“How is Teddy?” she asks, taking a sip of her diet soda, and for a second, I think she sees something behind me, because she pales, eyes wide.

I turn briefly, but not seeing anyone except Luke and Garrett I turn back, and she’s gone from pale to tearful. “Are you all right?”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Grey… Mr. Grey told me not to ask any personal questions, it just slipped out. I’m terribly sorry,” she pleads.

“No, no Hannah, it’s all right. Teddy’s doing great.” I reach out and pat her hands, clenched around her drink glass, and she nods. An idea brews, and I feel preemptively guilty for it. “Hannah, if you’re willing… what do people know about what happened?”

Her eyes widen again and she gulps, and I fear she feels she’s being wedged between a rock and a hard place. It can’t be easy, receiving conflicting directions.

“It’s okay. I need to know.”

She sighs. “I don’t want to cause difficulties between you, Mrs. Grey… you’ve asked me to keep some things quiet before, and it’s hard. I need to know that what I tell you won’t complicate anything for you.”

I smile. She’s terribly thoughtful, and definitely intuitive… she seems to have a good grasp of the dynamic between Christian and me, and perhaps, we might discuss some of her observations, but later. “I appreciate that. And, I can assure you that this stays between us. All right?”

She nods. “Well,” she begins, lowering her voice, “Everyone’s pretty sure that your accident was worse than what was reported in the news. The board at GP needed some decisions made and Mr. Grey wasn’t available in your stead, so things came to a standstill for a while. Everyone was worried, and no one was telling us anything. Ms. Bailey came by to sign some things for Mr. Grey, and she wasn’t saying anything either. The day before I left for Rhode Island, we got word that you were taking an extended leave of absence, and… um…” she trails off.

“It’s okay, Hannah. You can say it, you won’t offend me. I promise you.”

She draws in a breath, and it dawns on me that she may be steeling herself from her own feelings, not just my own. I wait patiently for her to continue.

“I kept in touch with Lacey, she’s a copywriter from nonfic…” she describes when I look confused, “… she said everyone took the leave of absence to mean that you were at least okay, that you probably had the baby and were going to take time off with your family… but after a few weeks and no birth announcement…” she shudders. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Grey…”
“So they do know.”

She nods. “Suspect, at least. I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head. “I wish I could remember.”

“Me too.” Hannah squeezes my hands, folded limply on the pristine white tablecloth. “I can tell you some things, if you’d like.”

I nod, allowing the corners of my mouth to twist upward in a sad smile. “I would.”

Our main course arrives, and though served beautifully, the real beauty is in hearing details of the last few years of my life through the eyes of this bright and well-spoken young woman. She tells me of our overwhelming accomplishments, past lunches where we’d plotted and schemed our authors’ way to the bestsellers’ lists, and of the series of fudge-ups along the way. She mentions a number of people, some who she interjects are this person and that director of such and such section, some of which I have to use my imagination. Then she tells me a story of an evening shared over several bottles of celebratory wine in which I’d held her responsible for my son’s conception.

And then she tells me about Phoebe. About the sonogram that’s still on my desk at the office, next to a photo of my family. About the lunchtime shopping trips for little girl nursery things. About the surprise baby shower they’d held just a few days before my absence began…

It suddenly feels horrifically real. My eyes well up with tears, but thankfully her phone beeps, breaking me from my sudden sadness.

“Wow, it’s later than I thought… I’m supposed to be somewhere in twenty minutes, and we haven’t gotten much done, have we?”

“Actually, we’ve done plenty. Let’s do this again next week, and trade emails in the meantime.”

We both stand. “Where do you need to be?”

“Across town, actually… I hope I can get a cab this far south.”

“Nonsense. One of my boys will drive you.”

“Ma’am?” Luke Sawyer is on his feet instantly. “Mr. Grey would like you to call him at your earliest convenience.”

“I’ll do that. Would you or Garrett take Hannah across town? I’d like to walk around the shops here a bit before I go home.”

“That’s… uh… going to need clearing, ma’am,” he tells me a little nervously, as though he’s not sure of my reaction.

“Which part?”

“I’ll just get a cab, Mrs. Grey, but thank you…”

“At this time of the afternoon, you’ll never make it. Sawyer,” I turn back to him, “please take Hannah, and Garrett will stay with me. We won’t go far. I’ll call Christian about it.”

The babysitters exchange knowing glances and Garrett hands over the car keys. With a nod of acknowledgement from Sawyer, he gestures for Hannah to
follow him. She hugs me briefly.

“I’m just going to use the restroom; I’ll be out in a sec.”

“I’ll wait right here, ma’am.”

I marvel at the comfort of my heeled sandals; usually I have blisters from wearing anything taller than an inch. I guess that was the old me. The new me, the married, executive me wears heels, and there are tons in the closet at home. I wonder idly if I’ve worn each pair at least once. Why my footwear is on my mind as I enter the ladies’ room is beyond reason, especially considering the weight of the conversation I just shared with Hannah. I wonder what Christian wanted? I’m soon distracted from that particular line of thought when I discover that the stall I’ve chosen has no purse hook. Well… fuck. Restroom floors are never to be trusted, even the ones inside five-star restaurants. Neither are toilet seats, for that matter. I’m glad no one can see me, holding my purse with one hand and my skirt with the other, balancing in heeled sandals and hovering to keep my bottom above the germy rim.

There’s a framed ad for an upscale boutique on the stall door, and for a second, I think I see the lights flicker. No, I did see it… and weren’t the tiles off-white a second ago? I blink, dizziness creeping into my brain, and I shake it off, awkwardly yanking up my lacy undies while trying not to fall over. The words on the ad swim before my eyes… what the heck? A poster advocating safe sex stares admonishingly at me. Have I entered the Twilight Zone? I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping my imagination has simply run with me, but knowing beyond reasonable fear that it’s happening again.

I picked the wrong day to go shopping.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

“Grey.”

“Christian?” The way my father articulates my name fills me with trepidation. I’ve not heard this tone before.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“We need you. At the hospital. It’s your mother.”

Fuck me. My soul shatters. “How bad is it?” I demand, my fist clenching around the phone so hard that it should break. Not my mother... Not her, please…

“She collapsed at work. I’ve just arrived, Mia is with me, Elliott is on his way. We’re waiting to hear from the doctor.”

“Taylor!” I shout, grabbing my suit jacket, leaving the desk chair whirling behind me.

“Sir?”

“Which hospital, Dad?”

“Virginia Mason. We’re up on the third floor.”
I click the phone off and relay the directions to Taylor.

“Is it Mrs. Grey, Sir?” he asks, checking his phone and tapping at his earpiece. Of course, if it were Ana, he’d likely know before I did.

“No.” I suck in a breath, my heart collapsing in on itself. “It’s my mother.”

~oOo~

“Sawyer, Grey. Have my wife call me the second she’s done. No, there’s no message. The very minute, Luke.” I end the call. I don’t want to drag her away, she’s been looking forward to this since we returned, but God, I need her. I need my wife.

I dial again.

“Ros Bailey.”

“It’s me. I hate to do this to you, but I’m taking leave again. You should have everything you need to handle the Aries merger.”

“I think so. Anything I should know?”

“No. I’ll check in tomorrow.”

“Understood. Take care.”

I hang up, ready to dial a third time, and realize there’s no one left to call. No security measures to be taken, no business deals to tie up, no reservations to arrange or incidentals to purchase. The dread I’m trying desperately to hold off by keeping busy, by setting things in motion… it spreads thoroughly and unsympathetically. There’s nothing left for me to do, except wait until Taylor delivers me to the side door.

Mom. She’s been my rock, the one person I’d known, felt deep in my soul… would always be there, steadfastly waiting in the background, quietly working her magic. I’ve been so worried that I’d taken Ana for granted, when in actuality, the one I’d blindly relied upon has forever been Grace Trevelyan-Grey. And now, I didn’t know how much longer she’d be there, or if the clock had run out, and I’d missed my chance to be there for her.

I’m a selfish, horrible son.

“Christian!” Mia’s embrace swallows my midsection, and unlike any affection we’ve ever shared, I pull her to me, crushing her to my chest, drawing strength from God-knows-where to maintain composure.

“What news?”

“Nothing yet. Dad’s talking to the doctor now.” Her eyes are reddened, welling with tears. “Elliott’s still on his way. Oh, Christian… I’m so scared.”

Over Mia’s shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Dad pushing through the hydraulic doors. At first glance he’s a man on a mission, but as he get closer, I feel the devastation pouring off of him. God, please… no.
“They’ve already taken her to surgery. It looks to be a ruptured intracranial aneurysm. Could be a few hours before we hear more.”

“Oh God, Mommy…” Mia whimpers, turning into our father’s chest. She’s still gripping my hand with hers.

Mom is never hurt or sick, ever. Never a cut finger, not even colds when we’d had them as children. She’s immune to everything, the healthiest and most careful person I’ve ever known. “How did this happen?” I contemplate, realizing a second too late that I’d said it out loud. The blood squeezing through my chest rushes loudly in my ears.

“I have no idea.” Dad’s voice is a whisper through Mia’s hair. “We’ll know more soon. Your mother is going to be fine,” he tells us both, nodding his conviction, but his eyes tell a different, grim story. There’s more, Mom’s doctor must have said something else, and he won’t tell us.

“Sir!”

Taylor jogs up the hall toward us, fingers at his earpiece, face ashen. My stomach plummets through the ground. I pull out of Mia’s grasp, and blessedly, Dad gets the message and leads Mia away.

“What is it?”

“Mrs. Grey has given Ryan the slip, Sir. His alarm went off when her phone went out of range. She isn’t answering. Sawyer is heading back to assist.”

“Heading back from where?” I demand. ”Why the fuck wasn’t he there?”

“Mrs. Grey asked him to drive her assistant to another engagement while she stayed behind, said she’d call and clear it with you. I assume you received no such call.”

“No.” My phone is at my ear instantly. It rings. It keeps ringing. It goes to voicemail. “Shit. It must be on silent.” Or she’s in trouble. I dial again. I don’t wait for a greeting when the line connects. “Welch, I need eyes tracking my wife’s phone.”

“On it,” came the trained reply.

I hated myself for what I had to do next.

“I’ll be back,” I mouth in my father’s direction, and he nods, Mia tucked tearfully under his arm. With an apologetic glance, I turn my back on my family.

Elliott nearly rams into me coming off the elevator.

“Bro? What’s happening, how’s Mom?”

“Dad will fill you in,” I rush. “I need to go. Look after them for me.”

“You’re kidding, you’re leaving? Dude, this is Mom!”

“It’s not business.” I choke on my breaths. “It’s Ana.”

“Wait, what?”

“I have to go… please, tell them nothing. I’ll call for updates.” I squeeze his broad shoulders with both hands.
“Yeah,” he half nods. “Okay.”

My phone beeps. The elevator doors close on Elliott’s retreating back as Welch’s voice comes through.

“I have her. Heading North on First passing Columbia.”

“Send the coordinates. Then call in the other shifts…” I breathe heavily as I prepare to admit my worst fear, “… this could be another kidnapping.”

Taylor powers the SUV out of the parking garage as I shout orders into the phone, my knuckles white from gripping the leather seat. Horrific thoughts race through, stabbing my soul with each pass. *My poor Ana… she must be terrified. What if she’s hurt? Unconscious? Oh dear God…*

“Sir, Sawyer has caught up to a vehicle he believes may be carrying Mrs. Grey. White Escalade, turned east on Virginia. He’s following.”

“Get us there!” I bark.

Taylor weaves through the afternoon traffic, expertly avoiding red lights and active crosswalks. He comes around the block, pointing us the same direction as Sawyer’s vehicle, but somewhere in front, and he slows. “We should see them within a minute. We’re going to try to block them in… what? No!”

“What?”

Taylor utters a rare expletive. “The vehicle has just pulled over three blocks back… suspect has exited the vehicle… female, fair, late twenties, navy pantsuit… Sawyer, approach with caution!”

“Pull over!” I demand, looking wildly out the back window, hands fumbling to unbuckle my seatbelt. Taylor swerves to the edge of the curb.

I take off down the wide sidewalk, the driver door slamming behind me as well. My heart sprints, barely keeping up as I power through the second crosswalk, and I see them ahead, Sawyer speaking to a tall woman… and she’s carrying a BlackBerry… *Ana’s phone?*

“Where is she?” I shout, eyes flying to the described vehicle and back to the perpetrator.

“Who?” The woman insists, exasperated. She turns back to Sawyer. “Let me get my brother, he’ll straighten all this out!”

“What’s your brother got to do with anything?” I demand.

“Are you boys together?” She raises her eyebrows, looking between Sawyer and myself. Slowing footfalls alerts me to Taylor’s arrival.

“You have my wife’s phone, explain yourself!”

“This is your wife’s? How the heck do you know? There must be dozens like this one…”

“Does your brother know where my wife is?”

Her eyebrows shoot up further. “Listen, bucko… I don’t know what you’re on, but I found this phone abandoned in a restaurant bathroom. My *brother,*” she emphasizes works in there, “and I’m going to give this to him to deal with. If you want to come along, you can sort it out there. But I swear if you come
any closer I really will scream.”

A fucking Good Samaritan. My fury is eclipsed only by the creeping realization that if Ana’s phone is here, and Ana isn’t... then she’s still missing, and I really, really don’t want the police involved again, especially after their multitude of screw-ups in the woods. My tangential paranoia is in overdrive, momentarily eclipsing my fear... if we leave the scene now, we’ll surely appear guilty of attempted harassment, and I need my men out looking for Ana. I sincerely hope Chief Metz is in. There’s no way I’m calling my father to have me bailed out today, of all days. My thoughts shift momentarily to my mother, and I quickly shift them underneath my growing pile of fears.

“After you, ma’am,” I gesture toward the door. She looks at me like I have three heads, and then proceeds up the steps, looking over her shoulder every few seconds.

I swiftly converse with the troops. “Sawyer, check the vehicle and be absolutely fucking sure Ana isn’t in there. Then go back and pick up Ryan, start casing the area around the Sirocco. Taylor, follow and search the restaurant, grill the manager, the staff, anyone who might have seen anything. I’ll be in touch shortly.”

“Sir,” come the replies, and I jog to catch up with the phone-bearer.

Two hours later, I have no fucking answers, little freedom, and the dread has grown to an unmanageable level.

“Chief, I need to be going. I’m of no use here.”

“Hmm... you know I’m going to have to consider this a missing person’s case by nine o’clock tomorrow morning, Mr. Grey, regardless that you’re declining police assistance for the moment.”

“I’m aware.” Please, just let me fucking go. I could have your job for keeping me here.

The middle-aged man scowls at the stack of papers in front of him, his thoughts obviously focused anywhere but. “All right. I don’t have to remind you not to take the law into your own hands, though. We don’t need another Jack Hyde incident.” Thank the fucking Lord!

“That was more my wife, if you recall,” I scoff bitterly, my insides twisting at the recollection, and I rise from the vinyl seat across from the Chief’s desk. He shakes my hand, and as I turn to go, he grips it harder, pulling me around again. His strength surprises me.

“I should advise you not to leave town.”

I raise my eyebrows. “For fuck’s sake Chief, are we there?”

“Hmm.”

I shake my head. Keep it together, Grey. Just another few seconds. “I have no intention of leaving town.” He releases my hand with a nod, and I exit the office, sans my wife’s phone. It’s in a storage locker downstairs, held as evidence, and I’ve been assured that no calls were made to or from it today, save the ones Ryan and I made initially. That’s assuming Seattle’s ‘finest’ aren’t withholding information.

Reynolds is waiting downstairs when I exit the building. The sun has moved near the horizon, once again making me painfully aware of the time-sensitivity of the situation.

“Anything?”
“Not yet, Sir.”

I plug my phone in to charge and dial Taylor, putting it on speaker. “I’m with Reynolds. What do you have?”

“Nothing more, Sir. Best we can tell, she left a couple minutes after Ryan, according to two of the day staff. Nobody’s seen her since. Shift change was about twenty minutes ago, but the owner is still there. Don’t think the police would find anything at this point if they tore the place apart… looks like she left of her own free will, though we can’t figure out why she didn’t take her belongings.”

“Idiot Samaritan told police she found the phone on the floor in a corner… Ana could have still been in there at the time. Shit! Didn’t she bother to look?”

“It would appear not. The contents of her purse were largely confined to the stall she used; I found the bag wedged behind the stall door, which suggests that she left in a hurry…”

“Were there signs of a struggle?” I interrupt, my blood running cold again.

“None. I checked twice, Sir.”

“Shit!” I pound my fist repeatedly on the dashboard. “Fuck! Where the fuck is she?”

“I won’t rest until we find her, Sir.

“Ditto, Sir,” Reynolds piped up.

My phone beeps. Elliott, fuck. “I have to take this.” I switch the call and turn off the speaker, my heart thudding wildly in my chest. “Grey.”

“Mom’s out of surgery. She made it.”

My body sags with bitter relief against the seat. “Tell Dad I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“What’s going on with you?”

I hesitate, much too long. “I’ll get back to you.”

“Bro, wait! What’s wrong?”

“Elliott, please worry about Mom. I’ll be there as soon as I have Ana.”

“Ana? She’s right here.”

“What?” My heart nearly stops.

“Just walked in. She’s… hold on…” I hear mumbling in the background, and then as if by magic, I hear the most beautiful voice in the world.

“Hello?”

My throat clenches. “Ana… God… don’t move. Stay there!”

I thumb the switch button, and a new emotion fills me… anger. “Taylor, she’s with my family at the hospital.” On that note, Reynolds turns the SUV sharply in the direction of Virginia Mason, and I grab the Oh-Shit handle.
“Thank the Lord. I’ll meet you there.”

My breaths have grown to the strength of gale-force winds. A day’s worth of adrenaline departs my body as through a sieve, leaving behind an edgy fatigue and a nasty contempt for how things could have gone so wrong. The more clear-headed I become, the more I’m at a loss for how I could have controlled any of it, and that scares the shit out of me. I close my eyes, forcing the breaths to slow, or at least to even out, silently reciting what’s most important.

_Mom is alive. She’s alive and recovering. Ana is safe. She’s with family. I’ll be with all of them soon._

But despite these affirmations, despite the semblance of control I think I’ve garnered between leaving the vehicle and catching up to Taylor in the third floor corridor, somewhere along the way, I lose it. I see Ana, slouching in a chair next to Elliott, and I fucking lose it.

“Where the fuck have you been?” My knees ache where they’ve hit the tile floor, my hands bloodless-tight where they clasp around the seat of her chair, arms shaking with fury. “Do you understand what you’ve done to me today? Any idea what you’ve put me through?”

I hear myself, teeth gritted through the words. Her bottom lip trembles, her eyes like watery glass, but the shame I feel for scaring her holds no candle to the pent-up rage. ”Answer me!”

“Bro, stop!” Elliott throws his arm between us, a barrier to protect her… from me. Something snaps inside, and my fingers loosen their grip. I blink, the anger subsiding, the wall of control going up. I rise, and Elliott tentatively pulls his arm back. Ana’s eyes follow me, but I can’t quite read her.

Elliott calms his voice. “We’ve all had a terrible day. Let’s just take a sec and calm down. You all right, Sis?”

Ana nods halfheartedly.

“Taylor!”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Please take Mrs. Grey home. Make sure she eats something.”

“Right away, Sir. Ma’am?”

Ana pushes herself up, weakly, and follows, carrying her sandals. There’s a flesh-colored bandage at her right knee. My eyes trail after her until she disappears around a corner.

I pull out my phone, dropping into the chair Ana just vacated, putting up a finger to shut my brother up, if only for a few seconds.

“Chief Metz.”

“Metz, Grey. I’ve found her. You can call off the dogs.”

“Good to hear, Grey. I hope you won’t mind if I send a patrol by in the morning to confirm.”

“Of course I mind. But don’t let that stop you.”

The Chief laughs, jolting me momentarily from the enveloping gloom. “Tell your father he owes me a round on the green.”
“I’ll do that.” *Not anytime soon.*

I set the phone in my lap and lean back in the seat, scrubbing my fingers over my face.

“Start talking, brother.”

“Hmm. Not now, Elliott.”

“Yes. Now.” I open my eyes, and he’s staring me down. God, I want to deck him, but I haven’t the energy. I want to see my mother, see for myself that she’s still with us, and then I need to go home and get an explanation for where my wife has been these last several hours. I suspect I won’t like the answer, and that I’ll hate myself a lot more than I did this morning, and a little more than I do now.

“Where’s your wife?” I deflect.

“Home with Ava. They both have colds, don’t change the subject.”

I sigh. “She gave security the slip. Not sure if it was intentional, and no, I didn’t just help things by behaving like a raging bull, you don’t have to say it.”

“Hmm. Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“She said something about getting lost. She was real thirsty. Drank about a half-gallon right before you showed up.”

“What else?”

He shrugs. “She seemed tired, kind of dazed. A nurse brought her up, said she was looking for Mom… like she didn’t know yet. You didn’t tell her?”

“Didn’t have the chance.” Another piece of the puzzle falls into place, while others scatter.

We both stand when Dad appears in the hallway.

“How is she?” My voice sounds weak, pleading even.

“Better. The doctors want to keep her several days for observation. She’s awake, Mia’s sitting with her. I’ll know more once her test results come back. We should visit one at a time until she’s a bit stronger.”

As much as I want to rush down that hallway… and I almost do just that… Elliott has been here all day, waiting. “Go on,” I nudge him.

“You sure?”

I nod in the direction of the doors.

He blows out a sigh, puffing his cheeks, and disappears down the hall.

I drop into the seat again, Dad settling next to me.

“You finish whatever deal snatched you away?” There’s a bitter edge to his voice.
I don’t have it in me to be elusive. Or snarky. “Wasn’t business, Dad. It was Ana.”

The edge shifts to barely-concealed alarm. “What do you mean it was Ana? Is she all right?”

“She is now.” I lean forward, elbows to knees, dropping my face into my hands.

“God, Christian, you could have told us!”

“You had enough to worry about, Dad.”

“And I was angry with you on top of it! You ran off with barely a word, I thought you were closing some deal or merger or something. You need to tell us these things, son. We’re your family!”

“And berating me doesn’t help the situation. I’m sorry, all right? I’m fucking sorry!”

“Christian…”

My legs push me up out of the unforgiving plastic chair. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m… I’m…”

Dad’s arms lock around me suddenly, before I’m aware enough to resist. I stiffen, but the breaths coming in waves and the wetness on my cheeks are enough distraction to prevent me lashing out. I let him hold onto me, more for him than for me, the litany of apology on my lips.

“Shh… It’s all right.” His voice is uncomfortably soothing. “It’s all right, son.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. I should have told you,” I whisper. “I should have been here.”

Another set of arms encircle my waist, and it takes only a second to realize they belong to my sister. Dad and I both pull her into us. I don’t think I’ve ever shared in a group hug before, not with adults, at any rate. It’s another long moment before we release each other, but Mia keeps my hand.

“Walk me down? Ethan’s plane landed an hour ago, he’s on his way here to pick me up.” She sounds exhausted. Dad waves us on.

“How’s Mom?” I ask gently.

Mia sighs. “I’ve never seen her like this. I don’t think any of us has. She asked for you.”

“I’ll see her when Elliott is done.”

“Where have you been? I was worried.”

I sigh. “Looking for Ana.”

“You… what?”

I sigh. “It’s a long story. I don’t even know most of it yet. She’s safe and headed home, that’s the important thing. Please don’t make a fuss of it, all right?”

“Okay.” A too-tired-to-push-the-subject Mia is a little unnerving. She lets me press the elevator button for her, another first. We’re silent until we reach the lobby.

“Mia!” Ethan darts out of nowhere and sweeps my sister into his arms. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” he whispers into her hair. Mia sags against him, her weariness evident. I exchange a check-in glance with Sawyer, hovering covertly near the sliding doors.
Ethan releases Mia but keeps an arm around her waist, offering me his hand, and we shake. “I’m glad your mom’s doing better. I hopped on the first flight I could get. Let me know if I can do anything, okay?”

“Just take my sister home. Make sure she eats something.” I’m sure I sound like a broken record, but I don’t give a flying fuck.

“Will do. Come on, baby. We’ll pick something up on the way.”

I watch him escort her through the doors and into a waiting car before I nod Sawyer over.

“Sir.” He follows me into the elevator.

“My mother’s just had surgery. I’m reassigning you here to look after my family for the duration. Whatever they need. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Understood, Sir.” There’s a repentant edge to his reply. It’s unlike him to take action without clearing it. *If he’d heeded my standing instructions instead of succumbing to Ana’s, this might not have happened…* but I’ll deal with could-haves later.

I leave him to work out details with my father and fish out my Blackberry.

“Taylor.”

“Has she eaten?”

“Gail is fixing her something now. Sir, she told me what happened. It wasn’t her fault in the slightest.”

My eyes close in resignation. *Of course it wasn’t.* “Tell me.”

He sighs. “She thinks she had another episode. When she regained awareness, she went to find Ryan, but by that time he’d been alerted to her cell going out of range. They must have missed each other by seconds. By the time he went back, she’d already carved a pretty erratic path but ultimately, when she realized she’d left her things behind, she couldn’t figure out how to get back to the restaurant. She doesn’t have any addresses or phone numbers memorized. No cash for a cab, even if she could remember how to get back to the house. She found a phone book and dug through that, found the number for your father’s practice but that was all. It was pretty smart of her to think of where your mom works, that even if she wasn’t working today, someone there could help her. So she asked directions and started walking.

“Christ. That had to be at least three miles.”

“And in heels. Your wife deserves a medal, Sir. It’s a wonder no one recognized her.”

“The episode… is she all right from that?”

“Her focus and balance seem fine. She’s pretty tired though. Says your brother made her drink a ton of water when she got there.”

I sigh. “Let her know I’ll be home in the next hour or so. And that you filled me in.”

“Will do. And Sir?”

“Hmm?”
“She’s pretty upset. About your mother more than what happened to her.”

Another shard in my gut. “If that’s your way of telling me I was out of line earlier… you’re absolutely right.”

“Just doing my job, Sir.”

“Thank you, Jason.”

I click the phone off, and find Elliott sitting at Mom’s bedside. I lean in the doorway a moment, just observing the pair. It’s fairly dark, only a small fluorescent next to the bed illuminating their faces. Mom’s hand is outstretched, palm pressed to Elliott’s face. It feels a deeply intimate moment and I avert my eyes, turning them to the sterile tile floor. I clear my throat quietly.

“Christian!” Mom’s voice is softly delighted. “Elliott, give your brother a turn, will you?”

Elliott leans down to press a kiss to our mother’s cheek and then rises, releasing her hand with a squeeze. He claps a hand on my shoulder as he passes.

“Come here, darling,” Mom coaxes, her fingers stretched weakly toward me, and I obey, if from a sense of familial duty, as my legs would otherwise refuse to drive me forward. I’ve never seen my mother in such a state. Moving closer, the details of her frailty becoming clearer, and I feel compelled to run, to hide, to deny that she could be anything but the flawless support I’ve always known. It’s as offensive an awakening as I’ve ever had, at the deepest level, grasping for the first time that one’s parents aren’t infallible.

My fingers find hers, and she curls them around mine, a bit more strongly than I’d expected, considering. Gauze bandages wrap her head, tubes loop her arm and attach with tape. The chair still holds some of Elliott’s warmth.

“Hello, sweetheart.” Mom’s breathing is a bit off, and I notice the spidery oxygen tubes cast aside on her pillow. I gesture to them.

“Do you need that?” I ask.

“Not right now, darling, thank you. Sit down and talk to me a while.”

“Mom, how did this happen?” The words fall out of my mouth before I can collect them. Damn it all, I should be comforting her, not breaking down. But something inside me has broken, and I can’t stop.

She pulls in a deep, slightly shaky breath. “Bodies aren’t perfect, Christian. They get old, they break. You’ve seen me at work enough times to understand that.”

“This is you we’re talking about,” I emphasize, and she laughs lightly.

“This is quite a mark on an otherwise un tarnished record, isn’t it?” she offers me a small smile, her eyes slightly unfocused, but sparkling as ever. “I’ll not be ignoring persistent headaches so casually in the future.” She’s obviously on something to manage her pain, and though her comfort is reassuring, an old wound twinges inside me.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Just you. I want to hang onto my sweet boy for a while, all right?”
I nearly jest about bringing Elliott back, but refrain. “Yes, Mom.” Her hand makes to release mine, lifting to cup my cheek as she’d done to my brother. I hold it there, pressing her fingers to my skin. The contact awakens the broken shards within, compelling me to speak. “I messed up again.”

“We do that from time to time,” she reminds me. “What did you do?”

I tell her what happened, and how badly I behaved. She listens calmly, a little too serenely. I chalk it up to her mildly drugged state. When I finish, she brushes the corner of my mouth with her thumb.

“You’ll make it right,” is all she says to me, and I know the matter is closed.

“I love you, Mom. I don’t tell you enough.”

“And you’re so precious to me, darling. I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

“Sleep better at night, I imagine.”

“Oh Christian… don’t you know? You’re my greatest accomplishment. You and your brother and sister. You’re my victory dance.”

I sniffle suddenly. My eyes are dry, emotions ragged from their day-long onslaught, rendered too exhausted for another breakdown. “I couldn’t bear to lose you. Not now. I still need you. I still need my mother.”

The corners of her mouth twitch up. “Not going anywhere but to sleep, for now.” She shifts a bit, her head lolling further to the side. “Be a dear and tuck me in?”

“Of course.” My free hand reaches down the bed to a light blanket, lying tangled over her legs. I pull it up over the printed sheet and tuck it around her, and insistently readjust the oxygen tubes. She doesn’t resist, her eyes fluttering sleepily. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bring my grandson,” she whispers, her eyes closing.

“I will.”

~oOo~

The new norm has become a greeting of gangly, fawn and gray legs, tails and tongues at the front door. Absence of said ritual reminded me again that this day has been anything but normal, and though I crave the routine of a calm evening as a balm for my battered soul, I deserve nothing but the opposite.

I drape my suit jacket over the back of a chair and undo my already-loosened tie. A note on the kitchen counter informs me that leftovers from the evening’s meal are in the fridge. I find the appropriate container beside a bowl of farmers market eggs, but my stomach twists at the sight of food and I shut the door, opting to check on my family instead. I hadn’t realized how much of the evening had gone.

Removing my shoes at the bottom of the stairs I pad softly up to Teddy’s room, finding him sleeping beneath the scattering of projected stars from his night light. I enter only to kiss him good
night, his warm cheek breathing life into me, and then I leave him to his quiet slumber.

Anxiety greets me at the door to our bedroom. Swallowing hard, I suck in a breath and turn the handle. Light from the hall floods across the sitting room rug, casting shadows of my body in its wake. My eyes adjust to the relative darkness and I find Ana, a covered lump in our bed, both dogs curled next to her. Her back is to me and I wait, watching for a moment, as her side rises and falls with even breaths. Unquestionably asleep.

I can’t bear to wake her. Leaving as softly as I came, I pull the door closed with the softest click. The blue bedroom wags its robin’s-egg finger at me.
Chapter 18

~ CHRISTIAN ~

Rapid thrumming in my chest stirs me from unconsciousness. It takes a moment to remember where I am… the blue bedroom. At the moment, it’s the slate gray bedroom, the way the moonlight reflects from the windowsill. I’m not bathed in sweat, so I doubt it was a nightmare that woke me, but it’s alarming nonetheless. The Blackberry reads 4:03. *Good; five hours. Can’t ask for much better.*

The air is crisp and startlingly humid this morning, bringing out the smell of earth and ocean as my trainers crunch along the familiar mulch path. Running is supposed to clear my head, help me work out solutions, stir new ideas… but on this day, I’m irrevocably stuck. I don’t know how to apologize this time. To do better, not re-assert some old expression of regret from a time she can’t remember, but to assure her that I absolutely didn’t intend to frighten her, that I love her, and that I’m so relieved she’s safe. Easily said, poorly received.

Six miles later, I’m no closer to an answer, but I’m fairly near the house. Perhaps a shower will spark something.

There’s an old anecdote that says the Italians will throw spaghetti onto a wall, producing patterns that inspire creative thoughts and other such innovation. I don’t have noodles to throw, nor would I dare waste food in such a manner, but the steam patterns on the guest bath mirror remind me of my late grandfather’s story. They’re not much help either, these steam blurs… and with shaving cream smeared over my jaw I can’t take my reflection seriously.

“Daddy…”

I startle, pulled from deep thought when the towel wrapped about my hips is tugged loose, by insistent little hands, and I react hastily to cover myself.

Teddy’s tearful face looks up at me, unashamed of my nakedness as I drop my razor into the sink, fumbling to get the towel wrapped around again. I drop to a knee. “What’s wrong, Ted-bear?”

“I wa- aaa-” he fails to articulate, his mouth wide and nose running. I grab a hand towel from the rack and, wiping his face, manage to lift him into my arms as well. His head drops to my shoulder and continues to whimper.

“Did you have a bad dream, baby boy?” I rub my hand over his flannel-covered back and rock him side to side, and, taking advantage of his quieting, pick up the razor and swipe it over the remaining unshaven tracks along my cheek. One must multitask or perish when children arrive.

“All better?” I ask once he’s stopped whining. He lifts his head to look at me. I kiss his cheek and sensing the reason for his distress, carry him to his room to change him.

Faint, purple light has appeared along the horizon through the bay window above the sailboat bed. The color and scattered fog looks rather promising, and an idea dawns on me. Grabbing Mr. Leo from Teddy’s bed and a jacket from his closet, I carry my son back into the blue bedroom and plop him onto the bed, ensuring he’s fully engaged with his favorite toy before de-toweling myself and dragging on pants and a shirt. Then, lifting Teddy into my arms, I carry him to the east-facing second-floor patio and we settle into a deck lounge. The only thing I’m missing is an espresso, but
considering the worth of present company, such triviality can wait.

“Teddy, in a minute the sun is going to come up right over there,” I point, directing his gaze. It’s mercifully hazy so the glare won’t be blinding, but the experience should be reflectively spectacular for him. “Do you know what that means?”

He rolls his head back to look at me, and I’m not sure he understands what I’m asking, but devotedly waits for my answer.

“It means a new day will be here. Whatever wrong you’ve done yesterday, you can make right. Because you’re here. You’re being given a second chance to fix it.” Or third, fourth, eleventh… in my case.

He accepts my words as law and settles back against my chest, watching through the wrought-iron railing. The railing Ana insisted we keep, as part of the house’s original charm. I think back to the renovation, to her insistence that the structure be kept, to be nurtured and treated as a home, even as the back wall was torn down and the gardens uprooted. She wanted it as she wanted me, something broken and incomplete, and nursed it back to health. It wouldn’t be a home without her loving touch. It wouldn’t be our home.

And I still have no idea how to apologize. But I hope, through my mistakes, I can instill the spirit of my good intentions into the perfect little boy in my lap, staring wondrously into the orange-hued heavens.

~ ANA ~

He didn’t come home last night.

Taylor said he’d be along in a while, but his side of the bed had been cold, sheets pulled tight, pillows pristine and without scent. His toothbrush, unused; clothes hamper, empty. He must still be so angry with me. I’m angry enough with myself for the both of us.

“Good morning, Mrs. Grey. What would you like for breakfast?”

“Good morning, Gail. Um, scrambled eggs and wheat toast would be wonderful.” I bend to kiss Teddy on top of his head, and he largely ignores me in favor of sliced banana and strawberry and bits of toast, most of which covers his face. Mr. Leo sits stuffed against his left side, begging to be laundered immediately.

“Mr. Grey and Teddy watched the sunrise this morning from the east patio; I’m told it was spectacular,” Gail’s attempt to make conversation isn’t lost on me. She seems to get where my mind is in the morning.

“Oh?” So he did come home after all, despite evidence to the contrary. I should have checked his office on the way to the kitchen.

“He left about fifteen minutes ago; asked me to wish you good morning and to say that he’ll call later,” she answers my unspoken question. I stem the mounting disappointment, choosing instead to focus on Teddy for comfort. Something about his sweet temperance manages to cheer me up, no
matter what. “You were up early, weren’t you?” I press my lips to his cheek, blowing raspberries. He giggles and shoves at my face with sticky fingers.

Little tails whip my legs as a multitude of finely groomed toenails skitter across the hardwood on their way to the back door. Smart little things, they’ve spotted an invader in their backyard, and with rose-shaped ears perked forward both pairs of glassy eyes turn to me. I see their training has been going well. There’s a slight, anxious hesitation when I slide the handle aside to release the hounds, the memory of our little adventure still stinging the back of my mind, but they know better now that they’ve been gently zapped by Christian’s high-tech invisible fence. I’m not sure I agree with such devices, but as intended, they remember instantly where not to cross, and so the correction is a rarity.

And I love to watch them run. It reminds me of Sam.

The doorbell sounds just as Gail sets my eggs at the breakfast table, and to my surprise, it’s Taylor who appears from the hallway to answer it.

My heart leaps into my throat. A police officer and badged suit stand on the threshold. *Oh God… please don’t let someone be hurt…*

“Mrs. Grey, are you all right?” Gail touches my arm, and I startle, nearly making her spill the juice glass she’d been about to place by my plate. I didn’t realize I’d been gripping the table edge so hard.

Taylor seems to be holding an ordinary conversation with them, so it can’t be that bad, whatever it is. *Right?* “I’m… um… fine,” I swallow, then lower my voice, nodding toward the visitors. “Do you know what that’s about?”

“No idea,” she admits, “but I’m sure we’ll find out.”

On cue, Taylor invites the pair inside, and then approaches me. “Mrs. Grey, I’m sorry to interrupt, but these officers would like a minute of your time. They want to make sure you’re all right after yesterday; Mr. Grey had Seattle P.D. alerted to your absence.”

*Thank goodness it isn’t worse,* I tell myself, sucking in a breath. “Of course.” I stand, and on impulse, reach out to grasp Taylor at the elbow. “Stay with me, please?” I whisper conspiratorially. I’m not sure why, but cops kind of freak me out.

“Absolutely, ma’am.”

The uniform regards me passively, the suit, with careful scrutiny. “Yes?”

”Mrs. Grey, I presume?”

”That’s correct, can I help you?”

”We're sorry to intrude on you this morning. I'm Detective Kane. Your husband contacted the police yesterday to report you missing, and then later, that you’d been found. Would it trouble you to show some identification? It’s standard procedure.”

”Oh… um, no. Of course not.” Then I remember… I don’t have it; I’d left my purse behind in the restroom yesterday.

”Mrs. Taylor placed your bag in your closet yesterday evening. We're still waiting for your Blackberry to be returned,” Taylor interrupts, looking pointedly at the suit. I’m secretly glad he
could read my expression so easily.

"Right... I'll just go and get it," I stammer, turning away.

I feel as though I've left my body behind, my legs carry me forward, floating toward the bedroom, and I find the designer monstrosity exactly where Taylor said it would be, on top of an ornate, locked chest in the closet. I keep forgetting to ask Christian what's in the trunk, but considering his probable mood, that's not going to happen anytime soon. I retrieve my driver's license and return to the hallway with as much queen-of-the-castledom as I can muster. Taylor positions himself in such a way that it almost feels he's standing between me and our guests, and it makes me feel a bit better about all this weirdness. *I can't believe Christian called the cops! Oh wait, yes I can.*

The detective examines my card for a long moment, turning it over in his hands while I wait, arms crossed.

"Well that appears to be in order," he hands it back to me. "Are you at liberty to discuss how you became separated from your party? For the official record, of course." He looks at me expectantly, but his brown eyes are piercing.

"Um, I just got lost. It was an unfamiliar part of town, and my security got disoriented when my phone went out of range, they track it for safety reasons," I explain, attempting to excuse the paranoid measures of the security team.

"I see. I imagine it must have been a very trying experience, and that you're glad to be safely home again."

Is he getting at something? "Yes it was, and yes I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

The suit exchanges a look with his partner. "We'll, we're sorry to have interrupted you; we'll let you get back to your morning. The department will be in touch if there's anything further." He presents his hand to me, and I cautiously take it. He shakes it gently, a little longer than is comfortable, all the while searching my expression. He releases me and exchanges a handshake with Taylor as well, and the two men state each other down, a silent contest brewing.

"Did I miss something?" I blurt as Taylor closes the door. "He seemed really suspicious."

"I wouldn't worry, ma'am. Mr. Grey and I will address any future concerns they may have." He offers me a kind half-smile, but there's something behind his passive expression.

"Why didn't you go to work with Christian today?"

"Mr. Grey asked me to handle a few situations here at the house. Again, nothing to worry about. He has Ryan with him, if you're concerned for his safety."

Situations? Like talking to cops, I imagine. Then something dawns on me. "He's... not going to let Ryan go, is he?"

"Not that I'm aware, ma'am."

"Oh." Now I'm stumped, in addition to frazzled. And hungry. And too frazzled to be hungry, but my growling stomach says otherwise.

"Will that be all, ma'am?"

"Right, of course. Thanks, Taylor."
He nods and retreats to the control room, doubtless to call Christian. I have half a mind to follow him and listen in on that conversation.

~oOo~

Before the last couple months happened, I hadn’t put any serious thought into having kids. Now here I sit, watching a two year old, my two year old, kick a latex balloon around the backyard, the fifth one this morning. I have an entire bag of them in my pocket, and the little guy isn’t stopping. Two blurs of lanky canine energy lope after him, nipping at his corduroys.

I’ve brought a laptop from the library and settled on the deck steps, but somehow, the draw of watching my son is delightfully more fulfilling than exchanging emails with my new-old assistant. The me I was previously familiar with would have been immersed in the task at hand after only about a minute, in one of the padded deck chairs, oblivious to the simple pleasure of watching a toddler in action. Instead, I’m sprawled on the hardwood steps, giggling at his antics. This is the new me, a proud if sometimes confused mommy, and so here I sit, waiting for the inevitable.

A clumsy kick and loud, snapping pop, and Teddy squeals with delight, hurrying back to me for a replacement.

"Okay that’s enough," I scold mildly. "We have to pick up the ruined ones first before I give you another, okay?" I take his outstretched hand, leading him back to the various crime scenes, and point out the multicolored shreds. He picks them up and hands them to me, one at a time. A rush of cool air swirls across my skin, and I close my eyes, relishing the beautiful albeit misty morning. When I open them, it’s brighter, greener, the haze carried off by the breeze. I didn’t have my eyes closed that long... how strange. Teddy races ahead, picking through the grass and runs back to me. In his hand is a small, painted egg.

A pair of strong arms circle my waist, making me jump. It’s Christian, and he nuzzles my neck. The relief I feel is palpable.

"I was afraid you were still angry with me," I say.

"Hmm... this is the only Easter egg I want to open," he breathes, hands running over my suddenly rounded belly...

Oh, no.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

"Grey."

"Sir, Ana’s just had another blackout. She seems fine, but she’s pretty upset. She was out for less than a minute."

Dear God. I’m on my feet and out the door in seconds. "Where was she? Did she fall?"
"In the yard. Carter saw her go down, said it was a pretty soft landing. Gail has her settled in the living room with some tea. I was about to rewind the video feed."

"I'm on my way." I click the phone off and shout for Ryan. God, I thought she was getting better. I assumed she'd continue to remain conscious through her lapses, though none of us knows about the one yesterday... but regardless, she was improving. What the fuck? When does her punishment end? What the fuck did she do to deserve this? Is she vicariously bearing the consequences of my actions? Fuck.

Ryan seems to have recovered from this morning's verbal lashing. He probably didn't deserve most of it, as he'd precisely followed the protocols Taylor and I agreed upon years ago, but I don't care. Taking my frustrations out on an impassive being like Garrett Ryan made me feel slightly less reprehensible. He doesn't bat an eye when I demand the car keys, doesn't comment about the excessive speed. I ignore the incessant buzzing in my pocket, knowing that if it's news from home Taylor will route the call to Ryan next.

She's tucked in the corner of the wide sofa, nursing a steaming mug, right where Taylor said she'd be. Her eyes find mine immediately, such sad, fearful eyes, and my heart breaks. I'm kneeling at her side in a second.

"I got here as quickly as I could. Are you all right?" I search her face, my hands moving tentatively, hovering, unsure if she'll accept my touch after yesterday's scene.

She nods quickly, but unbridled despair clouds her eyes. Her bottom lip quivers. Whatever control she's tried to muster swiftly breaks down and her eyes crinkle shut. I whisk the mug out of her grasp and pull her to me.

"Hush, baby. I'm here." The sobs are quiet, silent even... and I realize that in trying desperately not to fall apart, she's holding her breath. My hands run vigorously over her back. “Breathe, Ana. Please breathe.”

She sucks in a broken, staggering breath, and the first real sob breaks through, anguished and soul-battered. God, something is terribly wrong. Whatever happened, whatever she saw, it's destroying her. Over her shoulder, I see the Taylors beat a hasty retreat. I shift her against me, scooping her up so that she rests in my lap, and gently pull her head into my shoulder. She curls in tighter.

“Ana, I’m here. You’re safe,” I tell her, over and over. “I love you. I’m so sorry for yesterday, for everything I’ve put you through. Please, baby… talk to me.”

I’m fearfully desperate to know what she’s seen. Was it the beating, finally? The confrontation with Leila? When I walked out on her? That fucker Hyde? It has to be one of those; nothing else since we met comes close to those events, could compare to the tortured despair gripping the gentle creature in my arms. God... when she returns to her senses, she'll hate me for sure, and I’ll have little recourse... I warned her about the first, but the other two... oh, what I’ve put her through, what I’ve asked her to endure. I hold her to me, knowing that soon, she’ll ask me to release her, never to hold her again.

I think I hear a few words, warped through her tortured cries, but nothing I can discern. I continue to whisper reassurance, to tell her how much she means to me, how much I love her. It’s ages before she begins to calm, but eventually, her sobs turn to shudders, cries to sniffles, and I reach beneath me for my handkerchief to mop her tear-stained cheeks. She barely turns her head to let me.

“Talk to me, love. Please. I’m begging you.”
She closes her eyes, a few more tears dripping from her lashes, and I see that she’s trying to breathe. Deeply, in and out, despite the shudders.

“Ana, love, what’s brought you to this?”

Her lashes flutter, revealing the blue eyes I love so much. Our son shares these beautiful eyes. She gazes at me, her eyes holding a thousand secrets, and in this moment, more burdens than I’ve ever held. It tears my heart from my chest.

“Please baby, tell me…” my voice cracks.

She opens her mouth, as though to speak, but makes no sound. I’ve never needed Flynn’s help so badly, not since the night Ana told me I’d be a father. What I needed then, what I needed most of all was for someone to share my panic, my uncertainty, to lessen it through understanding. It’s the least Ana would do for me, the selfless creature she’s always been.

“My love, please… share it with me. Whatever it is, let me take part of it. I want to help lighten your burden… please, let me take it from you.”

“I… don’t want you to,” her voice is small, shaky, but rich with conviction. Her chest heaves with more unspoken words, bubbling scattered to the surface, and I can see she’s trying to put them together. “I don’t… I don’t want you to take her from me.”

“What? Take who?”

Her face crinkles again, not a precursor to more tears, but to fight off terrible pain. Her hands move to her waist, to her flat, empty belly…

“Oh, dear God. “No, Ana… no, no, no… I won’t take her memory from you. I won’t ever do that. Oh darling, you remember… Ana please breathe…”

She sucks in a ragged breath, holding it again, her face contorted in agony. I remind her over and over again to breathe, and she does, taking short, staggering breaths. I help her to feel mine, feel my chest expand, calmly willing her to follow my lead, all the while burying my own sorrow. It’s unbearable. So much worse than the things I’d imagined, and the one thing I can’t reason, can’t explain, can’t save her from, because I can’t even save myself from the aching soreness in my soul.

The minutes tick slowly by, and I feed her small words, little assurances, promises of my devotion to her, whatever I can say, barely containing myself. So this is a mother’s grief… the outpouring I’d dreaded facing when she woke up, before any of us knew she’d not remember. I’d expected her to mourn, but not like this. Not to this extreme; I’d expected her to internalize, to suffer in silence as she has in the past, much to my despair, but this is so much… a realization of misery so great that it spills over, and over, and over. Ana has become so worked up, so desperately inconsolable, not unlike Teddy in one of his very rare tantrums, and I wish I had something, anything, that might soothe her.

“Gail?” I call, knowing full-well our housekeeper’s fondness for my wife and her likely proximity due to the undeniable distress she and Taylor had earlier hurried from. I have to assume Teddy is being kept far, far away.

She appears in the archway almost instantly, face drawn.

“The frozen towels for my workouts…” I nod toward the kitchen, not needing to say more. She immediately retrieves a handful, and a bottle of water as well, passing them to me over the back of the sofa, and then scurried away as quickly as she came.
I unroll a frozen cloth one-handed, pressing the square gently to Ana’s splotchy cheek. The effect is immediate.

Her eyes fly open, surprised and unfocused, her lungs miraculously heaving clearer breaths. I dab gently over her face, down her neck with enough pressure to keep her present but not to startle her further. Her breaths catch from time to time, but have slowed considerably.

“You’re not alone, baby,” I manage, trying desperately to keep my voice from wavering. “You loved her, wanted her so much. I did too. You carried her, felt her inside you, every day she was with you. She felt how much you loved her. She felt how well you cared for yourself, for her. And I’m sure, wherever she is, that she misses you as well, and doesn’t want you to be sad for her. That’s not an easy thing to do, but know that I’m right here beside you. I know exactly what you’re going through.” I swallow back the overflow of my own fragile emotions. “You’re not alone. I’m with you. And I miss her, too.”

Ana’s blinking, exhausted eyes move to share my gaze. She swallows. When she finally speaks, her voice is tiny, like a child’s. “I’m so sorry,” she murmurs.

“Oh no, baby… don’t be… it wasn’t your fault,” I stammer, my own emotional wall cracking and shifting. “And don’t you dare apologize for not remembering, or for any of the preposterous things that are running wildly through your head right this minute. You’re entitled to grieve. You are. There’s nothing wrong with what you’re feeling.”

Ana turns her head into my shoulder again, not to weep… I’m not sure what she needs, and so I just hold her. I unroll another cloth and hold it gently to her forehead to remove the chill, and then press it to the back of her neck. She emits a small, resigned sigh.

“I’m here, baby. I’m here for you. I’m always here for you. We’ll get through this, together. I promise.”

The sun shifts, we must sit entwined in each other for hours. I have her sip some water. I don’t bother her about food; neither of us is in any state for proper digestion. I break down with her a bit, once or twice when she asks me things, little things. What happened that day, what our baby girl looked like, where she was laid to rest. I answer each query as thoroughly and delicately as I can, and she absorbs everything, leaning against my chest in between. After a time, she drifts mercifully to sleep, and I gently lift her, carrying her to the bedroom, and settle her under the covers. I pray that her dreams will be kind to her.

And then I go to pour myself a drink.

“Sir,” Taylor appears, cautiously.

“Yes.”

“Your father called a while ago. Everything is fine, but he’d like you to return his call when you have a minute.”

I pull out my BlackBerry. Of course, death by vibration setting is a common occurrence in my pocket. I throw back the drink, the burn instantly dulling my nerves, and set the cut-glass tumbler on the counter.

“Thank you, Taylor.”

“Anything I can do, Sir?”
“No, thank you.” I’m peripherally conscious that the man feels for me. I just don’t have anything else to say to him. I find the nearest cordless and speed dial my father’s cell.

“No, thank you.” I’m peripherally conscious that the man feels for me. I just don’t have anything else to say to him. I find the nearest cordless and speed dial my father’s cell.

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“No, thank you.” I’m peripherally conscious that the man feels for me. I just don’t have anything else to say to him. I find the nearest cordless and speed dial my father’s cell.

“No, thank you.” I’m peripherally conscious that the man feels for me. I just don’t have anything else to say to him. I find the nearest cordless and speed dial my father’s cell.

“Christian, glad you called.”

“Hello, Dad. How’s Mom?”

“Resting. She wanted to know if you’d be able to visit this evening, said you spoke about bringing our grandson by.”

“Oh… yes, I did…it’s, um…” I have to fight to ward off a sudden wave of tears. Fucking bourbon.

“Christian, are you all right?”

I suck in a steeling breath. “Did Mom happen to mention what I shared with her last night?”

“A bit, she said Ana got lost. Incidentally, I received a rather frantic voicemail at the office when I forwarded yesterday’s calls; she’d apparently tried reaching me through a listing in a phone book. Is she all right?”

“Yes, well, sort of. Not really. We haven’t talked much about yesterday. It’s been a rough day.”

“Slow down, son. Tell me what happened.”

I explain, reluctantly what caused me to rush from the hospital yesterday afternoon, in slightly more detail than I had revealed to my mother. Dad listened patiently, and I know he wanted to interject when I mentioned potential police involvement, but he remained quiet until I’d finished.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“But she’s all right?”

“Physically, yes.”

“Physically?”

I blow out the breath I’m holding. “As I said, we’re having a bit of a rough day today.”

He waits. “If you’d rather not talk about it…”

I steel myself. Aside from the breakdown late yesterday, my father and I don’t generally… share. “She remembered the baby this morning, Dad.”

“Oh, Christian.”

I sniff. “Yeah. It’s been… difficult. She’s sleeping now.”

“That’s…I can’t imagine.” I envision him shaking his head, at a loss for words, which he quickly rectifies. “I’m here for you, if you need anything.”

“I’ve got it handled, Dad… but thanks. Worry about Mom, all right? Let her know I’ll bring Teddy by this evening if I can get away, or tomorrow. And please, don’t tell her about this conversation. I’d rather tell her myself, when she’s home and feeling better.”
“I understand. Give Ana and Theodore my love.”

We hang up. Ana has turned onto her side facing away when I return. I slide in behind her, draping an arm around her waist and pulling her to me.

“You were gone,” she murmurs.

“Baby, I didn’t know you were awake,” I say. “I’m sorry, I had to return Dad’s call. Mom’s fine, don’t worry.”

She just sighs. I lean in, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

“Would you like some tea?” I ask.

She shakes her head, her hair rustling smoothly against the satin of her pillowcase. “Did you get to see Grace?”

“Mm-hmm. Last night, for a few minutes. I told her how badly I’d behaved toward you.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “I shouldn’t have left,” she murmurs. “I should have stayed put. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t…”

“Tell me what happened,” I interrupt. “I know what you told Jason, but I want to hear it from you. I want to know everything.”

She rolls back toward me, and I scoot over so she has room to lie on her back. I prop my head on my hand, my eyes tracing her face, from the little ‘v’ between her eyebrows, her little nose, reddened from the last few hours’ tears, her pouty pink lips. She returns my gaze a little warily.

“I’m kind of mad at you,” she says, hesitantly.

“You have every right to be,” I say, quietly absorbing the shock of her words. I keep my own ire, miniscule in size but as ever-present as her lack of self-preservation, to myself. It isn’t worth the angst, and I gave up my right to be angry yesterday evening. Besides, whatever self-battering I deserve pales into insignificance, when compared to the monumentally more important issues on our expansive table.

She turns her eyes away, her gaze moving down the bed, toward her toes. It’s an effort to avoid me, but she surprises me again when she continues.

“I had every intention of calling you. I sent Hannah with Luke, he didn’t seem too happy about the arrangement… but I was going to use the restroom and then call you so you wouldn’t worry. I wanted to check out some of the shops, I’m not sure why. I don’t really like shopping. I guess I just wanted to revel in the freedom of being out a little longer.” Her eyes flicker toward mine, and then back down her body to where her fingers clasped over the hollow of her belly.

“The episode was stupid. I was in the restroom, and the ad on the stall door changed. It could have been anywhere, but I think it might have been at a party or something… there was obnoxiously loud music. There was lots of purple… anyway, when I came back, I knew I hadn’t passed out because I was still standing, so I went to find Ryan to tell him what happened. I couldn’t find him anywhere. I went outside and didn’t see him immediately, but further away I saw someone jogging away that might have been him, and I tried to follow. When I turned the corner where I’d last seen
him, he was gone.”

“He was tracking your phone,” I interject.

She nods. “Taylor told me a little about that. I kept going for a while, but it dawned on me that I didn’t have my bag, so I went back, or I thought I was… I couldn’t find the restaurant. I felt so incredibly stupid. I was so afraid you’d fire Ryan and Sawyer for sure…”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” I mutter.

“Please don’t! I… I like them both. They… listen to me.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I listen to you,” I remind her.

She cocks her head to the side, as if to say, ‘Yeah, right.’

I shake my head, eyes closed. “Point taken. I will try to do better. Please, continue.”

She sighs. “There was a little bookstore nearby, and I went in and asked to use the phone… but I didn’t know anyone’s number. When I was a kid, I knew everybody’s number by heart, both my parents, my friends, home and cell phone alike… but now they get stored behind a name and a picture on a smartphone, so no need to memorize them. The guy behind the counter dug up a local phone book. You’re nowhere in there, your company isn’t even listed, by the way. I looked for your parents, your brother, your sister, Kate… even the Taylors, and now in hindsight I should have looked up Dr. Flynn… but I did see a half page ad for a law practice and it had your dad’s picture on it, so I called and left a message. I hope it doesn’t freak him out when he hears it.”

“He already did, and I’ve cleared it up. Why didn’t you call the police, love? They would have been more than willing to collect you.”

“I… didn’t think of that,” she mumbles, worrying her fingers together. “The next thing I thought of was the hospital, and the bookstore guy gave me directions. I just started walking. I figured even if your mom wasn’t on call, someone there would know her and be able to get her a message.” She sighs. “It took forever. I got turned around a couple of times.”

“And you fell, I gather.”

“She nods, her hair rustling the pillow again. Uneven sidewalk meets strappy sandals. They were so comfortable early on… not so much after a hike through downtown.”

“Baby, you literally crossed Seattle. I’m shocked no one recognized you.”

“I think somebody did, once or twice… maybe I looked mean and so they left me alone.”

“I don’t think it’s possible for you to look mean, Anastasia.”

“I can look mean,” she says indignantly, piercing me with her gaze.

“Oh… the horror…” I clutch my chest, falling back onto my own pillow and squeezing my eyes shut. “I can’t look… it’s far too terrifying…” I wait for a reaction to my sudden silliness, but when met with several seconds of silence, I crack an eyelid, only to find Ana staring down at me, her expression mildly amused.

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.” I rearrange myself again, leaning on an elbow this time. “You have my full
attention.”

“Hmph.” She turns her eyes downward again. “I don’t know how long it actually took to get there. The bigger buildings cast pretty long shadows, so I gathered it was getting late. I went in through the emergency entrance; it looked like they were dealing with some kind of car wreck drama, pretty nasty, actually… so I waited a little while at the desk for a nurse to get back. The first one I talked to knew Grace immediately and she asked me if I knew. Of course at that time I had no idea, but she made me sit while she cleaned my knee and then she took me upstairs. That’s when I found Elliott, and he told me. And the rest, you know.”

I sigh. “You’re amazing, Ana.”

“I’m mad, is what I am.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” she says, her volume increasing. “Do you have any idea how confused and horrible I feel, being mad at you after the day you had? How guilty I feel? And now, after this morning…” her voice shakes, eyes crinkling shut. Sobs threaten to bubble forth, as treacherously as before… or more so. “I’m sorry… I’m so, so sorry…”

A relic of the man I used to be, the persona I once maintained with utmost efficacy, nags at me with a fierceness I’d not experienced since… I perish the thought. But I feel what’s happening. She’s begun to spiral, my dear, sweet wife, my best friend, my reason for living… and I realize in that moment that I may hold the key to pulling her back from the edge. “Anastasia Rose, don’t you dare start this again,” I command her, pulling her to me, tightly, almost painfully. “I will not allow you to do this to yourself.” My voice is low… calm as ever, powerful, quiet, Dominant. “You’re not responsible for anything that has happened. Not for my mother. Not for the baby,” my voice cracks. “And certainly not for the way I spoke to you last night. Do you understand?”

She nods, whimpering. The cascade of torment has slowed in her, my body so attuned to hers that I literally feel the demons slipping away, summarily defeated. I press a rough kiss to the top of her head and then rest my cheek over the spot, calling my own to leave me. “I love you. I hate that you went through that yesterday. I hate that my mother ignored her headaches until she collapsed from a damned aneurysm. I hate that a drunk driver took our daughter from us and that you almost went with her…” I grip her tighter when I hear her whimpers break through, “… but what I hate most, the one thing I abhor more than any other, is when the person I love, more than my own life, takes responsibility for others’ wrongdoings. It’s akin to putting your life at risk; only it’s your soul that takes the undue whipping. You’ll have to pardon the term; I know that it troubles you.”

My hold on her prevents movement, but she isn’t fighting me. Her breaths are quick, puffing against my chest. It’s an attempt to regain control, I can feel it… I know the signs well enough from my own struggles. “I love you, Anastasia. You’re part of me. An extension of my life, and I’m yours. I’ll be here for you, with you, no matter what. We’ll always have each other. You need to let it all go… every single thing that has you under siege. All of it, whatever plagues you.” I sigh, heavily. “And then, though I hardly deserve it, I need you to forgive me.”

She whispers something into my chest, curls her fingers to clutch my shirt tightly in her hands.

“I didn’t hear you, baby,” I say, my voice low.

“I do.”

My sudden gasp isn’t lost on her.
Through the remnants of tears brought on by her struggle for control, her eyes shine like sapphires, connecting powerfully with my own. And then, her lips meet mine.

The crash of mouths and tongues, caressing, loving, desperately searching for something lost. Her hands are in my hair, instantly, exactly the way she’d handled me from the beginning and my heart swells, thrashing wildly in my chest. My body stirs powerfully, greedy with hunger. God, I need her.

“Let’s get married,” she pulls away suddenly, sitting up in bed.

“What?” I gasp, my brain catching up to… other areas.

“Today, right now. You wanted to; let’s go, let’s do it. I want to get married to you.”

And she accuses me of mood swings. My breaths fill my chest, but they don’t help me to release sounds that may be construed as words.

“Christian? Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“I… yes, but is it what you want?” I manage.

She shrugs. “I don’t want to wait anymore. For the right time, the right circumstance, anything. This is it. I’m ready. I don’t need some lost memories to tell me how to feel about you. I know how I feel. I want you to be my husband, and I want to be your wife, in every way. So let’s do it right. Let’s get married. Right now.”

“No? Uh…” I grasp at some semblance of a plan. For the first time, I haven’t one. I chuckle, more of a giggle at first, but it blossoms into all-out hysterical laughter.

Ana’s face falls, and I struggle to take back control.

“Baby, don’t look at me that way, I’m not laughing at you, I promise,” I tell her, sitting back onto my heels and gripping her hands in mine. “I haven’t the faintest idea where to begin, and I always have a plan. Oh, you must think I’m ridiculous.” I lean in, pressing my lips to hers. “Give me a minute, I’ll think of something.” Kissing her chastely once more, I pull myself from her, striding purposefully toward the door. Something dawns on me, and I turn back, my hand on the cool brass door handle.

“Is there anything you’d like in particular? Would you like me to call your father to come?”

She shakes her head without hesitation. “Let’s do this just for us. I just want it to be you and me. And Teddy, of course.”

I nod, processing the request. Flashing my thousand-megawatt smile, I break from the room with a “get dressed” on my lips.

Oh, what to do, how to make this perfect… I ponder, my legs carrying me through the house and into my study. It’s a beautiful day, it should be outside. Flowers… no, that would require time, I’ll have Ben gather some from the gardens for her. We’ll do it here… down by the water, yes, that’s perfect. We’ll bring Teddy, say a few vows… perhaps someone to officiate? My thoughts flip through the staff, but none seems quite appropriate, but a figure does dawn on me. I pick up my BlackBerry from the cradle charger… Taylor must have placed it there earlier. I marvel momentarily at how seamlessly our needs are handled. If I was put-off by my staff’s actions of yesterday, I am no longer. I press the speed dial.
“Hello?”

“John? Grey. I need a favor.”

~ ANA ~

“Teddy, guess what?”

My son blinks drowsily at me, waking from what might have been a very long nap. His grumpy little expression tells me that he’s not exactly happy to have been disturbed. “We’re going to do something very special today, Teddy,” I tell him. “I need your help, okay? Then we’ll do something fun, just for you. How does that sound?”

He regards me sleepily, and sighs. I giggle and kiss his chubby cheek. He passively considers my mood as I wrestle him out of his naptime pajamas, helping him out of his overnighers and into pull-ups, a clean, white shirt and elastic khaki pants, finishing with little black leather slip-ons over his already-socked feet. My knee-length cream cocktail dress contrasts nicely… I hope it’s appropriate enough. It’ll have to be. I don’t care at this point; the excitement of sealing my little family together again rushes the particulars from the realm of necessity. No more dwelling. No more processing of adverse emotions today… right now, it’s just my family who matters, who needs me to take my place within it. My family, the one I hadn’t anticipated, but the only one I’ll ever want.

I could skip from the rush of euphoric anticipation, except that I have a sleepy two-year-old leaning into my shoulder, so I grip the handrail as I make my way down the winding stairs.

“How dare you come into my home and make such accusations! No, you do not have my permission to enter… Taylor!”

What’s this?

“Mr. Grey, we do have a warrant. We don’t want any trouble. Where is Mrs. Grey?”

“Christian?” I see the foyer from halfway down, the police, several officers, a female suit… and that detective Kane from this morning. God, that seems so long ago.

“Ana, go back upstairs.”

“Mrs. Grey, we need you to come with us.”

“What?” I gasp, frozen to the spot, heart pounding.

“Ana…”

“Mommy?” Teddy’s alertness tears at me, his little eyes scanning the scene, taking everything in.

“Shh, Teddy, I have you. It’s going to be okay. Christian?”

Two uniforms move to surround him, effectively cutting him off from me. My feet regain their purpose and find the landing in seconds.

“Ana! No, this is illegal! I’ll have all your jobs for this!”
“Mr. Grey, I have a warrant and my orders. Please stand aside.”

“What’s going on?” The female suit and one of the officers approach, their hands out, palms forward.

“Mrs. Grey, we need you to come with us,” the female says, her voice calm and low, pacifying. “We just have some questions.” Their hands come out to me, not touching me but guiding.

“Ask them here, now,” my arms tighten protectively around my son.

“We have our orders, Mrs. Grey. Please.”

“Christian!”

“Ana! No, let go of me!”

Taylor has Christian’s arms in a vise… what the hell? Taylor whispers to him, and then looks swiftly to me. “Go with them for now, Ana. It’ll be all right.”

What?

Christian’s expression is a picture of unbridled fury.

In that second of distraction, the female suit has torn Teddy from my arms, his shocked little face registering the chaos around him, and he lets out a wail. “No! Let me go!” The officer’s hands are at my shoulders, steering me forward. “Why are you doing this? No! Christian!”

I’m ushered into a waiting van, the officer who’d led me sliding the door shut behind us. In the seat beside me, the female suit fastens a wailing Teddy into a car seat.

“Why are you doing this? Get away from my son!” I shout, tearfully, the weight of what just transpired caving in on me.

“Buckle up, Mrs. Grey,” she withdraws, and my fingers fumble automatically with Teddy’s buckles as the vehicle pulls forward. Her face is apologetic, but determined.

“At any rate?” I demand.

“No, Ana. I’m Agent Ballard from Social Services. We’re going to take you someplace you’ll be safe.”

~oOo~

Four walls. No windows, but there’s a recessed mirror. From all the detective shows I used to watch with Ray, I’d bet all of Christian’s money that it’s one-way glass. Christian… he’s probably got every one of his police contacts on the phone, calling in every favor to get me out of here. That’s assuming he has police contacts… but then, according to the cop shows, the rich guy always has a captain or sheriff in his back pocket, pulling their strings whenever he needs something done. That’s it… we’ll be out of here in no time.

I rock Teddy in my lap. He must sense my anxiety, for he hasn’t stopped whimpering since we were summarily whisked away. “Shh, baby boy… Mommy has you. I won’t let you go.” The
ceiling fluorescents are bright; one flickers, irritably asking for replacement. The couch where I sit is like burlap and makes the backs of my legs itch. The room appears to have been set to look comforting, but everything in it is cheap and uncomfortable, betraying the intended ambiance. A stack of children’s books lie on the table next to me, and as much as it may soothe Teddy to be read to, I can’t bring myself to reach for one… I won’t give our captors the satisfaction. I’ve never distrusted the police so much.

I’m not really that afraid, if I’m honest with myself. The uniform that drove us here escorted us through the front door of the downtown headquarters, so I know I’m not going through some ‘front’ of a police station where they take me into the back room and it’s really some Mafia ruse to extract a ransom. That Beckett, Bartlett, wait, that’s not it… Ballard lady keeps coming in, asking if I need anything, telling me they’re just sorting some paperwork and then someone will be in to talk to me. I say I want a phone call, she says soon. I demand legal representation, she says she’ll find someone. At least I’ll have that. Though it’ll probably be some city-appointee who doesn’t know his ass from his elbow. And all the while, that mirror stares right back at me, so I know they’re watching. What did I do to deserve this?

Oh God… bile churns and rises up when it dawns on me. What if it’s Christian? What if he’s done something, something I don’t know about? Anything could have happened in the last three years to lead up to this moment, and I’d have no freaking clue. But that’s ridiculous… he’s not like that. He swore to me that he isn’t into anything illegal. He’s a good person… isn’t he? Oh, God…

The door clicks open, and there’s a scuffling. I can’t see from this angle, but I hear a comment that someone has five minutes… to do what? And then, the last person I expected to see appears in the doorway, and he shuts it behind him, hastily.

“I came as soon as I could. Are you both all right?”

“Carrick?” I stand, stiffly. “What’s going on? No one will tell me anything!”

He strides across the room and takes us both into his arms. Despite his relative unfamiliarity to me, I’m far more than relieved to see him. Teddy practically throws himself at the older man, and Carrick cradles his head into his shoulder, cupping Teddy’s exposed ear with his hand, and whispers into my ear. “I don’t have much time, and I don’t want them to hear. Certain accusations have been made. By whom, I’m not yet aware. I don’t want you to worry. I’m working to have you released into my custody. Don’t tell them anything. You speak only to me, and only to the police under my supervision. Nod if you understand.”

I nod quickly. “Teddy’s thirsty. I don’t feel right accepting anything from them.”

“I’ll have something sent up. Sit tight.” He peels a resistant Teddy from his chest and passes him back to me, plants a kiss on my forehead and strides out, as quickly as he came.

Ten minutes later, an officer delivers a grocery bag with juice boxes, bottled water, and animal crackers.

An hour and ten minutes later, another officer arrives to escort us downstairs, much to the unmistakable chagrin of one Agent Ballard. Carrick shrugs out of his suit jacket and drapes it around my shoulders, glaring at the desk staff as he guides me through a checkpoint and out the side door. And as I descend the steps with Teddy in my arms and my father-in-law’s arm around my shoulders, standing next to the open backseat door to a shiny black SUV is none other than Jason Taylor.

“Mrs. Grey,” he greets me, eyes downturned.
“Taylor?”

“Get in, my dear,” Carrick instructs me. “I’ll explain later.” He nods toward Teddy. Of course; not for the ears of babes. The suspense is killing me.

“Bellevue please, Taylor.”

“Yes, Sir.”

None of us speaks. Carrick checks his phone a number of times, and if it silently rings, he doesn’t answer it. The dull evening sun reflects gloomily off the chrome molding around the tinted windows, and I cast my eyes upon it, if only to loosen the death-grip this situation has on my heart. I can only guess what this is about, and I really, really don’t want to think about it. I hope I’m wrong.

Teddy goes mostly willingly with Gretchen, Grace’s housekeeper. It’s a strange feeling, not having Grace here. Carrick guides me to what can only be his study; lots of old wood, rich colors and heavy fabrics. So different from Christian’s tastes. He urges me to sit and pours two short glasses of amber liquid, and after handing me one, he sits, on the opposite end of the dark leather settee. Taylor settles across from me. He sets his phone on the table between us and pushes a button. “We’re ready,” he says.

“Ana?” Christian’s disembodied voice comes through the speaker.

“Christian? Oh, thank goodness… what’s going on?” I can’t help but sound frantic.

“Everything’s going to be okay, baby. I promise,” he tells me. I hear such pain in his voice, and I can imagine the matching expression he wears. “Dad, what do we know?”

“Not enough, at this point,” Carrick begins. “The best I’ve been able to gather so far, is that an anonymous letter was delivered to the authorities, detailing certain abuses carried out by you against Anastasia. Your Detective Kane has opened an investigation into these allegations. He believes her two recent disappearances were deliberate attempts at escape.”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been able to gather as well. What’s the bad news?”

Carrick sighs. “At the moment, just the restraining order. But if convicted, you’re looking at any number of charges… unlawful confinement, persistent abuse, endangerment of a minor… and those are the only ones I’ve been made aware of.”

“Christ.”

“Indeed. Christian, if there’s anything to be told, I need to know now. From you and from Ana.”

“Fuck!” Christian’s resounding expletive is followed by an enormous crash.

“Christian!” I cry out. “Are you all right? Christian!”

“I’m fine.” His words are short, clipped. “Dad, I need to meet with you. First thing in the morning, here at the house. Just you. Taylor will remain with Ana and Ted. I may send Sawyer over as well.”

“Agreed. I’ll assemble my defense team.”

“No, Dad… just you. And I want you on Ana’s side. I’ll take care of my own representation.”
“Christian…”

“I’ll explain when I see you. Now please, I’d like a private word with my wife.”

Carrick’s lips are pressed into a flat line. Now I see where Christian gets that look from, genetics be damned. “Be quick.”

Taylor clicks off the speaker and hands me his phone. It feels heavy and foreign in my hand. Both men rise and step outside, leaving me alone. I pull my knees up to my chin, and bring the phone to my ear.

“I’m here.”

He sighs. “Oh Ana… dear God… are you and Teddy all right? Did they hurt you?”

“No… I mean, yes, we’re okay. Teddy was a little scared, but I think he picked up on my anxiety. He’s with Gretchen right now.”

“I’m so sorry, for all of this. It seems there’s no end to the drama I’ve asked you to endure… but we’re going to figure it out. You’ll be home before you know it.”

“But a restraining order? How far? They can’t be serious!”

“One hundred feet, and yes, they’re dead serious. I can see how the circumstances might have been construed, but Seattle’s finest has done a bang-up job of investigating before taking action. Whoever is involved will be lucky to find employment anywhere in law enforcement when I’m done with them.”

That leads me to another thought. “You let Taylor hold you back… at the house, when they took us…”

“Oh, baby…” the remorseful devastation in his voice brings tears to my eyes. “Jason was right to hold me back. I wanted to fight for you… God, did I ever. If it were anyone but law enforcement, I would have. I’d fight a war for you, my love. These things are a matter of logistics and protocol… they had a legitimate warrant to take you into protective custody. I had security follow you, so I knew you’d both be safe. If I’d given them reason to arrest me, I’d be no use in getting you out, and Dad would have more work on his hands. I feel badly enough taking him from Mom’s side… oh, God… this will kill her.”

“He wouldn’t say anything to her, would he? At least, not right now. Not till she’s better. Have you talked to her?”

“No.” I hear him swallow. “I was supposed to bring Teddy by, but for obvious reasons…” he lapses into silence for a moment. “Would you go visit her for me? Tomorrow?”

“Oh course. Hey, would your dad mind bringing my purse and a few things for Teddy tomorrow when he’s there? I’ll need to get a new phone if the police won’t give mine back…”

“I’ll send some things with him… but you must know, I’m actually breaking the law in speaking to you now. No one must know we had this conversation. I’m not permitted to contact you. It’s part of the restraining order. And it’s the reason you’re using Taylor’s phone.”

I nod, realizing after that he can’t hear my head rattle. “Christian, that letter your dad talked about… do you know who sent it?”
“I have my suspicions. I don’t want you to worry, though. Dad and I will handle it. Just do as he says.”

I swallow. “Do you think it has anything to do with all that… lifestyle stuff you told me about?”

He sighs again. “It might.” He doesn’t have to say that it would be easier if I remembered whatever I knew from before, but I get the impression.

“Are you going to tell your dad about it?”

There’s a long pause. When he finally speaks, his voice is thick with dread. “I think I may have to.”
Chapter 19

~ CHRISTIAN ~

They stole my family from me.

Came into my home, took my wife and son, ripped them from me, forcibly.

I don't think there's enough room in this world for my wrath.

John insisted upon staying a while. I'd forgotten he was coming, that I'd invited him. I had difficulty articulating an explanation, and when I was done… in the seven or so years I've known the man I don't think I've ever seen true anger as part of his expression. Now that I have, I feel ever more confident in his professional capacity; better to confide in someone who has felt some degree of the injustice I feel. And what I feel, if the words took form… they would drip red.

The scalding water coursing down my back does nothing to dull the resident, sustained fury; burning, stinging, searing my flesh, all the while refusing to distract in the slightest from the tearing strain on my heart. If Taylor hadn't held me back, I might be locked away, useless to bring my family home… and this detective fucker would have all the proof he needed of my capability to keep me there.

I didn't sleep last night. Couldn't. Not while the demons sharpen their talons, plotting the critical elements of their assault on my psyche. One of Flynn's early exercises was to remind myself that for every unfortunate situation I face, someone else is facing something far more unfortunate. But here, now, I don't see how this could get any worse, unless one of us was dying.

And that string of thought wrenches me from the distress over Ana and Teddy to concern for my mother's current state. Dad says she's on the mend. Mia stays with her and reports in regularly… but God… if her prognosis was worse… no, I have to stay focused. I cannot afford to dwell on the things over which I have no control, though all I want to do is curl up inside my mom's warm embrace, for her to make this all go away. I'm such a selfish bastard.

And my dear, sweet Anastasia… my innocent wife. So broadsided by my revelations since her life reset, but for the life of me, I don't see how anyone could have made this out to be a case of abuse. I don't ever, ever mishandle my wife. Never, not since… well, not since. I'd sooner have my limbs severed with a dull blade. How anyone could construe our few public appearances since the accident as abusive is beyond my comprehension. Who the fuck sent that letter?

If I had one guess, I'd likely be correct. And if it is who I think it is… in short, I won't allow my previous lifestyle choices to be held over my head as collateral, not ever again. It's too late to take appropriate legal action against said person, given the statute of limitations… but dear God, my stomach threatens to empty itself, its empty self, upon thought of revealing those many years to my father. He'll know what to do, I have no doubt… but I wonder if he'll hold any love in his heart for me when I'm done.

There must be a way to move past this, without irreparably damaging my family.

Gail lets him in promptly at seven o'clock. Gail… she's worried. What I'm barely holding back, she's pouring out in spades. Her eyes haven't been dry in fifteen hours, and she hasn't. shut. up. If I didn't value her so much… and if she weren't married to my head of security… I'd fire her this minute. As it stands, I may send her to look after Ana…
"Well this is a fine mess." Dad didn't sleep either, I gather.

"My study." I square my shoulders, all for show. I'm already cringing on the inside.

Dad pulls the door shut behind us. It's too early for a drink, and I need my wits about me, but I glance longingly to the crystal decanter and tumbler set Ana and I received as a wedding gift, resting harmlessly on a silver tray atop a Tudor-Era cabinet. I shake off the desire to get piss-drunk, instead dropping into one of the leather chairs. Dad lowers himself across from me. He's thankfully chosen to overlook the upended display cabinet on the far wall. Gail cleared away the broken glass and salvageable sculptures during the night, but the wood framework lies splintered and broken across the floor. Ana's smiling face looks down upon me from the canvas high on the same wall, unaffected by my loss of control. Baby, forgive me.

"How is Mom?" I ask.

"Improving. Mia stayed with her most of the night."

"Yes, she texted earlier. I'm sorry that this whole mess is keeping you from her." My fingers find my hair, pulling distractedly. "And my family?"

"Still sleeping, I hope," he responds. "Ana called Kate last night. It was my idea, before you upset yourself. They went up to your old room and I haven't seen them since. Gretchen stayed over to look after everyone."

I nod. We're silent for a moment. I think my father realizes I have something to tell, because rather than fill the silence as he often does, he waits, patiently. I never imagined it would come to this. And so, I begin the story I thought would remain locked in the past for the rest of my days.

"Were you able to get a copy of that letter?"

"It's highest priority. We'll have it today."

I nod. "I need a favor," I say, then shake my head. "More than that... when I'm finished, I need you to remember that you're my father. Not my attorney." I swallow the hapless emotions welling in my throat. "I'm going to need my Dad." Never before have I contemplated baring myself so entirely to my father. Not only am I asking him to bear the weight of the information, but also that of my need as a son to be absolved of the fucked-upness that follows me. I sigh, rolling my eyes back to stay the unbidden wetness gathering there. "I should have come to you years ago. But you know how I was, as a child, when I got older. I never wanted you to know this part of me. I believed, and still do, that you won't understand. But if I'm ever to see my wife and child again, I need you to try; I need your help. Will you?"

He opens his mouth to speak.

"It's not illegal," I interrupt. "You've already heard that part of the story."

His face turns pale, and he swallows. "Then you have my ear. Though the fact that you connect that... unspeakable liaison... gives me cause for great concern, Christian. You're my son. You'll always be that. And I've told you, how much I regret that we were unable to protect you from... that woman."

I nod, but the reassurance is grim. I doubt he'll ever comprehend why I was the way I was. But as such, he's obliged himself to be my father, and so, I must allow him the chance.

"None of this leaves these four walls," I insist. "Know that I now abhor many of the things I did
during that period of my life, up to as recent as a few years ago." My fingers meet, twining uneasily around each other. "You know of the… relationship. What you don't know… is what it entailed."

Carrick Grey visibly steels himself. "Go on."

I suck in a long breath. "Are you familiar with the concept known as Bondage and Discipline?"

My father's furrowed eyebrows push together further, as if resisting the upward climb and I assume the affirmative.

"John Flynn and I have discussed this at length," I continue, my scalp prickling at the unavoidable 'outing' of a trusted family friend. "I came to the conclusion early on that my affinity for the practice stems from the time before you and Mom brought me home. It was a form of control I hadn't been able to grasp before, and as you noticed in my drastic behavioral improvement at the time, it was a way to find the balance within myself, to stop the spiral of self-destruction. For a long time, I idolized… her… for the control I'd learned to wield. Later, after… my partners were willing, consenting participants. I operated within the bounds of utmost and mutual safety and secrecy, never waveri

Dad blinks serenely. It's the expression he saves for when he has no appropriate reaction.

"I hadn't been with anyone for a while. Her initial demeanor was not unlike the qualities I desired in those that came before her, and so the attraction was there. But as I got to know her, I came to realize that she was nothing like the others… though I tried to convince her otherwise. To sum up what I'm trying to tell you, there was one, albeit most regrettable incident, in which I did hit her." My head drops into my palms. "She asked me… to show her how intense it could get. It was discussed and mutually agreed upon beforehand, and she had a safeword if the scene were to become too intense, but it was… upsetting, to say the least. For both of us."

"Why… are you telling me this," my father's voice is quiet, and hardly interrogative.

"Because even though she can't remember it right now, and even though I've told her about it since, and she's spoken to John at length to prepare her for the day she might remember… It's the only time I've ever hurt her. The only time. And in the context of this… situation… I needed you to know that."

My father leans back, slowly, until his back presses into the chair. His lips form a thin, straight line, a frown marring his brow. He considers me. And rather than reduce myself to a waif of contrition, rather than submitting to his customary, silent study of my expression after hearing my position, I remove all emotion from my face. All semblance of feeling, pushed down until it no longer reflects outward. I wait several minutes for a response, any reaction.

And his first comment has little to do with me.

"I can't believe John Flynn knew, all this time."

"We can trust him, Dad. I do. He's helped me more than you can imagine."

Dad swallows, and sighs. I'm sure he's imagining quite a lot more, now. "You're still my son," he declares, his voice rough. "Who else knows?"

I resist the urge to show any semblance of my relief. "Ana, of course. And Kate, to a small extent, though I wouldn't advise revealing any more to her. And then there are my former partners, each of
whom signed a standard agreement of nondisclosure. And I have... materials... to prevent their reconsideration, if that were ever to become an issue." *It's all or nothing, Grey,* I remind myself, though I'm cringing inwardly at the level of revelation.

"Materials?"

"Photos."

"I see." He sighs. "And you conducted these... relationships..."

"In a safe, sane, contractual and ultimately *private* manner," I interrupt. "All precautions were taken. Nothing was ever left to chance."

Dad swallows. "And yet, Ana... was she injured?"

"Barely. More, it was her lack of experience, of preparedness, in handling certain... sensations. She wasn't damaged, if that's what you're getting at."

"I see."

A silence stretches between us. As with anyone unfamiliar to the lifestyle, the discomfort is typically embodied by a period of quiet absorption.

"I'm not certain why you chose to reveal this to me at all, much less now," he finally speaks.

"Believe me, I'd much rather you never knew," I say, a hint of bitterness in my words. "But my concern is for my wife and son. This detective presumably has information on my wife and I, information whose source is yet unknown. If certain details of my past were to be proven during proceedings and you were to be caught unaware..."

"I see your point," he interrupts. "Better to appear that I've known all along.

"And better that you know, to lay a strategy for Ana's case. To prepare her."

"Now that's something we need to discuss... my legal representation of Ana could be construed as conspiracy to cover up your suspected offenses against her. Misrepresentation is a very serious offense in and of itself."

"I'm well aware. Which is why I'll be representing myself, separately."

My father blinks at me. Outrage appears to have escaped him. "You can't be serious."

"Get everyone on Ana's side of the case. Anyone who could stand as a character witness needs to be on her side, whether they're witnessing for me as well. You, Elliot, Kate, Mia, Ethan, John, Ana's dad, anyone on my home or security staff, get them to stand behind *her*. They'd all choose her side, regardless. Get them behind her. They don't need to know what I've told you, and every member of my staff has signed an NDA. Any one of them will deny the allegations."

My father's hand moves to his mouth, his index finger running slowly across his upper lip. "I see what you're getting at, but we should wait to see what this letter entails." He sighs and shifts in his chair. "I've heard of this Kane fellow. We'll need to do some digging, and I hope I'm wrong in what I know if him."

My ears prickle. *What?*

He shifts again, leaning forward. "We're a little ways off from actual proceedings, though. The
District Attorney isn't happy about the way this played out. Kane was arrogant and sloppy, but the evidence they've been able to collect apparently justifies their warrant to remove Ana and Teddy from the home, though it's strange and upsetting that it came to such extreme action, else I'm certain Ron wouldn't have let it happen. He's assured me access to the body of evidence early next week, but I should have the letter by this afternoon. The next step is that Ana will require a full evaluation. Up until a few minutes ago, I was going to recommend John…"

"Dad, he's still the best man for the job. Trust me," I interrupt.

"Would you allow me to finish?" he barks, albeit tiredly. God, we both need sleep. "By that time, we should have a clearer idea of what to expect from Kane. He may have presumed to provide representation for Ana himself, so we've already unsettled him. All we need to do is stay a step or two ahead. I believe I can bend a few noses and keep this to a private hearing, but I'll need to further research this Kane fellow. This isn't his first high-profile abuse case."

"I've had Welch on Kane's profile since five this morning. I'll share his findings when I have them… but incidentally, what is it you've heard?"

"Just enough to know that we need to be very, very careful in how we handle our side of things. Returning to the initial handling, let's not forget that there's no solid evidence to suggest that Ana has been held against her will; no one made any inquiries of the family, and no one from the outside is aware of Ana's memory loss… Kane's overconfidence and corner-cutting may be the end of this whole thing. He's going to look stupid enough as it is, and I'll bury him."

Something occurs to me. "Do we know for certain that the accusation points toward me harming Ana, specifically?"

"We won't know that until we see the letter, or whatever other evidence is presented. You're right in that this was very oddly handled… generally, if a person is considered dangerous, that person's movements are restricted. I don't desire to speculate, but the fact that Ana and Teddy were removed suggests that they were specified as victims. I say again, we need to see the body of evidence, but if whatever is presented doesn't corroborate or if it does and Ana declines to press charges, we'd need to further prove that you're no danger to your son in order to set this right."

I nod. "I can't say I feel better. But I can see a way forward."

Dad rises, adjusting his jacket, and I follow. "I need to be getting along to the office. Do you have some of Ana's and Teddy's things packed?"

"I sent them over with Sawyer before you arrived, actually. He's switching with Taylor."

He nods. "We'll get this sorted. Soon."

We shake hands, two businessmen, for the moment. I walk him out.

Something dawns on me, and my heart sinks. "Oh, God."

"What?"

I sigh, and my hand goes to my forehead. "Monday is Anastasia's twenty-fifth birthday."

"Hmm. Yes, I suppose it is," he considers. "I'll ask Mia to get with Kate and plan something for her."

I swallow. I suppose it's the best that can be done. Despite my extensive resources, it's unlikely this
situation will sort itself over a weekend. "Thank you. Please let me know if there's anything she or Teddy needs."

"I will. We'll reconvene in a few hours."

I lurch forward as he turns to leave. "Please, Dad… I understand that I'm hardly in a position to make a request of you, but I'd rather you didn't share this with Mom."

"Under the current circumstance, I have to agree. For now."

And I'll have to take it, for now.

~oOo~

"Grey."

"It's Welch, sir. I have that profile on Mark Kane. It's a doozy."

"Summary?"

"You remember back in oh-seven, those women that came out of the woodwork all saying that investment banker Woods kept them under lock and key? That bastard who kept them in the basement and tried to knock them all up, threatened their families of they ever talked. The Broodmares case, the media called it."

"It rings a bell."

"That was Kane. Pinned Woods on every charge. The guy was toast; hung himself in the psych lockup a few weeks after. This Kane, he's a real mind, it was like he just knew. Same idea in a hundred cases, from what I'm seeing."

"Send it to me. All of it."

"Email's on the way. I'm going to check this guy's financials next. Let you know what turns up."

"Keep me informed." I click the end button, already having switched on my laptop. The eight seconds I have to wait for the operating system to kick on is endless. "All right, you bastard. Let's see what you have that I can destroy."

There are three emails, each containing the maximum data allowance worth of attachments. The first contains a history of education and employment. Graduated from Ole Miss, J.D. law degree 1982. Dean's List. So he has a law degree, the fucker… and the credibility that goes with it. Worked in the DA's office in Jackson for a year, and then moved to a small firm… detective credentials from Hinds County Sheriff's Office noted in '87. Seems he's based himself at the previous firm, however. List of associations and accreditations, from all over the States. The latest case was a Hollywood producer who fucked his underage mistress into oblivion and then tried to cover it up… so that's what really happened, not that I care, but Christ, that was him. This Kane fucker's been around…

Forty-five minutes, seventeen newspaper clippings and nine high-profile case reports later, my email dings again. The subject line reads, 'Bingo.'

My eyes widen at what they see.

Speed dial isn't speedy enough. And it rings four fucking times.
"Hold on a moment," I hear my father's disembodied voice come through. There's a muffled conversation and then he returns. "I had to step away from your mother; she's been asking after you. What have you found?"

Of course. Thank you, Dad, for getting to the point quickly, and reminding me what a poor son I am. "What haven't I found… his credentials are clean, but everything else… to say he's shady is like saying it rains in Seattle."

A sigh blows through the speaker. "I'll need to see it All of it."

"Come by later and I'll give you hard copies. I had to go under the radar for some of it."

"I'll be there in an hour. Ana and Kate will be bringing the children shortly to visit with your mother."

Another subtle reminder, to honor the fucking restraining order. "I understand. Security has kept me apprised of the schedule. I'll try to make time to visit… after."

"I'll let her know. I don't have to remind you that she's not to be bothered with any of this."

"No shit." I pause. "Sorry."

"Just…"

"Yes Dad, I know. No hint of this to Mom. No chance encounters with my family. And incidentally, I'll try really hard to keep it together, if it makes you happy."

There's that sigh again. "It's a hard time for you, I know. It's hard on all of us. I don't diminish what you're going through, Christian. None of us saw this coming, but we need to stick together. I'd advise a call to Ray, give him an overview, in case Kane's team decides to reach out to him. Discuss how to best break this to Carla, in the event her interview is solicited. We don't know what kind of strategy they'll have, but the best defense is a solid and unified front. Ana's as much a defendant in this case as you are, from where I'm standing."

"I have a pretty good idea of his strategy, actually. You'll see for yourself when you get here."

"An hour."

I hit the 'end' button and dial Welch again.

~ ANA ~

"I want Daddy."

The knife that stabs my gut every time he asks has grown rusty and dull. Teddy's grumbling hasn't let up all morning. I want to comfort him, to tell him that we'll see Daddy soon, but I can't, and it kills me. I wonder if it's anything like what Christian went through for a month, when Teddy asked for me, and he couldn't oblige our baby's most basic request.

"We're going to see Grandma Grace today, won't that be nice?" I ask, attempting to mask the steady state of anxious uncertainty with enthusiasm. I must not be doing it well.

"No." He crosses his arms over his chest.

"Oh, baby boy, I'm sorry you're not happy. What else can I do?"
"I want Daddy!" The indignant urgency isn't lost on me, and he hugs himself tighter for emphasis. If the situation weren't so depressing, this might be a bit funny. I decide to distract him instead.

"How about a snack? Ava will be up soon from her nap, and then we'll go on a little trip. Okay?"

"Hmph." Teddy scoots off the couch, arms still crossed, and runs away from me and into the kitchen, little dimpled elbows swaying from side to side like a little washing machine agitator. He's really mad. I haven't known him thus far to be extremely spoiled as he's probably expected to be, but he's being a bit bratty now. But unlike other ill-mannered outbursts, he has a legitimate reason to be distraught. If I'd wanted my dad at that age and was denied, I'd have felt betrayed, too.

I find him in the pantry, digging for… something. I keep him in the periphery but leave him alone, vowing to interfere only if he starts climbing Gretchen's perfectly-stocked shelves.

"About ready, Steele?" Kate bounces a still-sleepy Ava on her hip. The little one's pink jumper is a little oversized and she has her middle and ring fingers plugged firmly in her mouth, rockstar style.

"Teddy's finding a snack." I tell her, and then lower my voice. "He keeps asking for D-A-D-D-Y."

Kate sucks a breath through her teeth. "What did you tell him?"

"What can I tell him? I keep trying to distract him, but now he's mad at me. I've never dealt with this… I mean, I don't remember how…"

"It's okay, take a breath," she interrupts. "You always handled him fine, and you've been a natural these last couple months. Don't stress. This is just weird for him."

"Yeah. It's weird for me, too."

Kate rubs her free hand up and down my arm, and together we watch Teddy's pantry antics.

~oOo~

"My babies!" Grace exclaims, her voice a bit gravelly but otherwise, she's more herself than I'd expected. Her head is wrapped in gauze and she has a couple of machines monitoring this and that, but she's propped up in bed, legs crossed. She's even wearing scrubs. Kate gently passes Ava to her. I settle into a chair with Teddy in my lap and hand him his Kurio tablet from my bag. He holds it for a few seconds, but his eyes focus on Grace and Ava.

"G.G. got hurt?" he asks quietly.

"Yes, Teddy, G.G. hurt her head but she's getting better." It's all I have, and thankfully Grace pipes in.

"Teddy, remember when you came to see Mommy in a room like this? A hospital is a place where people who are hurt or sick come to get better," she says matter-of-factly, while making faces at her granddaughter. Ever the multitasker.

"Oh." He doesn't look convinced. "Do you haff a cold?"

Grace laughs lightly. "You have one brilliant boy, Ana," she mumbles to me. "It's something like that. My head was sick, and so I had to take a special kind of medicine to get better," she tells him.

"Why?" he asks.

Grace raises an eyebrow, and then winks at me. "Why what, Teddy?"
"Why your head sick?"

Okay, that parenting book specifically said the "why" stage was still a ways off. We can't be there yet.

Grace looks a little lost, not something I'd expect from a veteran pediatrician like Dr. Grace Trevelyan. It dawns on me that we're probably thinking the same thing. "Well, um… sometimes our bodies get hurt, and we need help fixing them. Do you remember when Mr. Leo's leg ripped, and Auntie Mia fixed him for you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, a tiny little piece of my head, so tiny that you can't see it, ripped too, and the doctors here had to use special medicine to fix it." Thank you, Grandma Grace, for sparing him from what I'm certain are very gory details.

"Oh," he says. "Med-sins yucky."

I giggle. "Teddy, I bet G.G. would love for you to draw her a picture," I say, handing him a chunky kid-grip stylus from my purse.

"No!" Teddy declares, forgetting his line of questioning and busies himself with his tablet, effectively tuning us out.

"He's becoming very intuitive. And contrary, the little darling. You and Christian must have your hands full," Grace tells me.

Christian… the events of the last day force their way to the front of my mind again, though I swore before we arrived that I would keep them under the rug. "Yes, he sure is," I say.

"Ana? Is everything all right?" Grace asks, her face changing to one of concern. Her eyes twitch over to Kate and then back to me, and I know she's wondering if Kate is privy to the most recent developments… Christian did mention that they'd spoken. God, why does this have to be so hard?

"We're fine. Yesterday was just… difficult," I admit, hoping my face isn't betraying too much. "I believe Christian said he'd stop by later on, if his research doesn't keep him." I settle for the half-truth, already twitching inwardly. I hate lying, and I'm terrible at it.

Grace smiles knowingly. Well, as much as there is for her to know… and I'm not about to add to it. "I'm sure he will when he can."

We stay an hour, finally retreating though Grace refused to admit how tired she was; she loves her grandbabies so dearly.

"You did great. Really held it together, I'm proud of you," Kate tells me, matching my slow gait toward the exit doors, Ava nodding off against her shoulder.

"Do you think she suspects?"

Kate's eyebrows go up. "Grace? Suspicious? Steele, her mother-henning knows no bounds. Of course she knows something's up. But she's sensitive enough to know that you'll tell her when you're ready, and tactful enough not to pry into touchy subjects in front of the kids."
"You still call me Steele, why is that?"

"Habit, I suppose. Your hubby calls me Kavanagh, sometimes. Usually in response to me calling you Steele." She rolls her eyes. "It's just friendly banter. I'm surprised you didn't ask me that last night."

"My mind was elsewhere last night."

"It still is, I bet."

I sigh. "Carrick wants to meet with me later, to talk about everything. I'm getting nervous about what he and Christian might have found, and nowhere near ready for another bomb to drop."

"That's what this has been like, huh?" Kate sympathizes. "I wish I could do more."

"Oh Kate, you've done plenty. I'm so glad you're here."

"I'll always be here for you Steele. You know that."

"You too, Kate." And she really is here for me, like last night. It was the first time we'd really been alone since this all began. I knew Kate's talent for investigation was exceptional, but honestly, she blew me away with her up-close-and-brutal evaluation of my husband. It seems my concern over his control-freakery doesn't go unshared, but in the end, Christian has Kate's vote, and that means worlds to me. "I never saw us marrying brothers," I say, attempting to lighten the mood. "Two very different brothers, or so I'm gathering."

"You noticed that, huh?" Kate teases. "Don't worry, Steele. Like I said, Christian is a good guy. I'm sure he's working like crazy to bring you home; you'll be back together before you know it."

"I hope so," I answer her. Sawyer holds the car door open, and I busy myself strapping Teddy into his car seat. My mind wanders again. But... what will happen to us if he can't? ~ CHRISTIAN ~

"Do you have it?"

"Not yet. Close of business, at the latest. Freddy's sitting at the evidence desk until the controller releases it; he'll call when it's in-hand. We're lucky we're getting it today at all, and not next week." Dad sets a file box on my desk and shuffles out of his suit jacket. "Show me what you have."

I set to pacing behind the desk, waving my hand at the mess of paperwork spread to every corner, across several chairs and taped to the back window. "Kane is good," I admit, shaking my head with a hint of disbelief. "Bloody well-educated, all the right connections, full credentials as a detective... and he seems to have a hard-on for the wealthy spousal-abuser." I pick up a thick stack of stuffed manila folders. "These? Just the cases I've been able to peel through and it's only the career highlights. I'd have to massacre a forest to print the rest." I drop the folders onto a chair and thumb through the desk-scatter. "He went from winning a prestigious assistantship at the Jackson D.A.'s office to becoming the golden boy at a private law firm in the same city, but he's all over the place, taking cases out of state... and," I stab my finger into the desk, "he almost. never. loses.

"Now..." I continue around the desk, "I think I've stumbled onto a pattern of sorts. Kane started out with abuse-related cases over two decades ago. It's not clear whether he was involved by chance or if he chose these, but he and his partners were often sought out by abused trophy-wives and sports heroes' battered girlfriends and the like, or by their families. This is where things get interesting."
After a while, he didn't need new clients to come to him, because he'd gone digging for the clients he wanted, and found them in spades. He's based out of the law firm in Jackson, keeps his original partners on-hand, but he's become a lone wolf of sorts. Kane latches onto some rich fucker… sorry… individual, follows him around until he has enough to make a case. He the reports the guy, and in a handful of cases, woman, to the authorities. His notes are shoddy at best, so it's not clear from those how he finds what he does, but he throws some huge evidence-bomb on the table to get their ass hauled in. And," I add, stabbing my finger onto the desk, "since he's already done the legwork, he almost always represents the victim."

"So he's a rogue…" my father begins, his eyebrows climbing. If there's anyone my father abhors more than a criminal, it's a clandestine practitioner of law.

"If only…" I shake my head, "in the definitive sense, yes, but he's not the type you'd expect in a classic rogue. He always consults with local authorities and follows the letter of the law, even if just barely… but he essentially works alone. He's critically deficient in working with family members and witnesses. He largely doesn't consult with the any character references prior to filing for preliminary warrants and injunctions, and he's found some standing federal loophole that permits lawful removal of the victims from the premises without prior notice or consent if the removal of the offender does not alleviate the danger to the victim."

Dad snaps his fingers. "That's what that infuriating social worker was blathering about. I've filed an injunction to stall the restraining order, but your loophole may put a stop to that." He runs his thumb over his bottom lip. I ponder offhand that I've picked up that same habit from him. "Your close protection… Taylor and the rest…"

"I imagine that's the danger they insinuate … Ana and Teddy never leave their sight. My standing orders. I'd like it to remain that way."

"All right. I understand your motivation, but let's not overwhelm Gretchen; keep it to one or two of your men at the house. The restraining order doesn't include your posse… yet. Let's try not to get anyone else's movements restricted if we can help it." He crosses to the end of the room, pensive for a long moment, and then turns back. "You've deduced all of this since last night?"

"Most of it in the last three hours, but yes."

"Under different circumstances, I'd implore you to reconsider a career in law," he tells me.

"Under different circumstances, I'd have no interest. I just want my family back, Dad."

"I know, that, Christian. I do. And I won't stop fighting until they're back home with you, but at least they're safe and sound, with family." My father comes around the desk to examine the paperwork I've taped to the glass wall. "What were you so worked up about when you called?"

"These." I pull my center drawer, palm a handful of papers and throw them onto the desk. They slide to a stop, fanning out. "Kane's notes are incomplete… because he doesn't really need them. He tells the victim's story in pictures."

Dad turns back to the desk, his hand hovering over the printed photos. None were professionally taken, that was certain. Most were probably produced by a cellphone camera or other such inconspicuous device as evident by their borderline-grainy, blurred quality, but the subject cannot be debated… and each scene is more disturbing than the last.

"Christ."
"Indeed," I swallow. Whatever smoking gun Kane has on me, it's likely in full color.

"You mentioned something about photos when we spoke this morning," he approaches the subject delicately. "Could they have anything to do with this?"

"Doubtful. Those photos have never left my possession, and I appear in none of them."

"You're certain." It isn't a question.

"Yes."

"Then what could he possibly have on you?"

"I honestly have no idea. Something taken out of context, perhaps."

He nods. "Think on that a while. We won't have the rest of the evidence until Monday; I'd like to anticipate what we'll be looking at, literally." Dad picks up the stuffed folders and returns to the leather sofa. "In the meantime, I'll comb these for some preliminary strategic details and then I'm meeting with the partners at two. The letter should be released by the time that's done, and then you and I will reconvene."

"Dad, about this morning…"

"Christian," my father sighs. "I've hardly had the opportunity to wrap my head around it. Rest assured, it stays between us. I don't believe for a second that you'd harm your wife or your son, but Mr. Kane obviously has evidence to suggest you have, and by law, it must be stronger than words on a page."

Dad's in full business mode as I'd expected, but a small part of me had hoped he'd be a bit more reassuring. Even for a moment. Damn it all, I feel as though I'm fucking falling apart. I swallow the persistent backwash of stomach acid and beckon the haze of control to settle upon me.

"Give me a task," I insist.

Dad thumbs open the top case folder. "You've laid some impressive groundwork. Download everything you have to a jump drive, I'll need to pass it along to my team. Then give John a call; if you're absolutely confident in him, he may as well be a character witness. Have him coordinate with Ana for a full psychological profile; have him supply an independent for the evaluation… the court may see it as a conflict of interest and not allow John to fill both roles; better to be proactive than for the court to assign one of their diggers. I suggest that you submit to a profile of your own as well." My father hasn't met my eyes once.

That last directive startles me. "Why?"

He looks up, irritatedly. "As a gesture. Show them you're not the monster they're making you out to be." Obviously.

I swallow. He's right, of course; that would be the most prudent course of action. I don't know what's wrong with me. God, anything to do with the company and I have my shit together, always a mile ahead of the competition. But with Ana… reason and decorum escape me.

That part of my subconscious, the part I'd swept away, cast aside with the remains of my old life, pokes at me from within a womb of forgotten things. It's asking to come out. It wants to take over, to become the veil again, that cocooned me from the world, deflected all that could damage me.
Oh, how easy it would be, to let the little bugger out and slip into the old way… to be the bastard I despised, but who never lost, never failed. I swallowed, ill-prepared to take the leap, or the plunge… in this case… right away. My voice frightens me a little when next I speak. "And then?"

Dad sniffs. "Use your talents, Christian. You're a negotiator. It'll do you service as you prepare your defense."

It seems he's made the decision for me.

~oOo~

There was a time, not long enough ago, when I was content to remain satisfied with what little love there was in my life. I loved my parents, of course, and my brother and sister. I accepted that on some level, they loved me as well. If only out of familial obligation… but beyond that, there was a vast abyss, *the veil*, separating me from what soulful things no sum of money could reach. And I was content in this knowledge; that the way things are would have to suffice.

I'm falling toward that equilibrium. The paradigm shift that is Anastasia Rose, my reason for questioning all the deeply-ingrained norms to which I'd been accustomed, keeps that painfully comfortable balance… that dry, cool place where non-perishables are kept… just out of reach. The fates like to remind me that I never deserved her. I suppose it's all well and good that, for the moment, I've decided not to feel.

The yard is empty without my son's laughter. Ludwig and Tess frolic through the tall grass, chasing one another… and once in a while, they return to the back door, looking for their missing friend. My heart splinters a bit more, jabbing holes in the veil. They say that a parent will often hear their child's voice, even when he isn't there… Flynn had a word for it, a phantom- something-or-other, not unlike the remembrance of a severed limb. I swore I heard him call to me earlier, and I tore across the house, daring not to hope… and here I've been ever since, staring through plate-glass toward the setting sun over the water.

"Sir? May I do anything for you?"

"No, thank you." I don't recognize my voice. Gail shuffles away quietly. She'll ask the same question in an hour or so.

My Blackberry buzzes in my pocket, the screen displaying "Ray Steele." The forced breath that enters my lungs tastes like last year's sour milk, displacing the subtle relief that Ana's father has finally deigned to return my call.

"Grey."

"Christian? Ray. My daughter just called me. What the hell is going on over there?"

I suck in a breath. "I'm glad Ana was able to talk to you," I begin. Hopefully Ray won't hate me when this is all said and done, but it's a secondary goal, to be sure. "I'm going to take care of everything. Some rogue lawyer-gone-detective from Mississippi is stirring up trouble. He's made ludicrous accusations against me, and had Ana and Teddy removed from the house yesterday evening. I believe he was hoping that Ana would accept his representation, but my father was able to put a stop to that…"

"Yes, yes, Annie told me that part. What the hell are they basing this on? Did something happen? Did you… tell me the truth, Christian, because she wouldn't tell me… did you…"

"No, Ray, I would never… nothing's happened to cause such drastic overreaction. Be assured I'm
doing everything in my power to get to the bottom of this. My father is trying to stop the restraining
order but as the accusations have been made and some paperwork filed, the court has no choice but
to proceed..."

"Restraining order? What restraining order?" he cuts me off again.

I pause. "What exactly did Ana tell you?"

"Apparently not everything," his tone is exasperated. "She said some social worker took her and
the baby downtown, and Carrick picked them up and took them home. If they had some beef with
you, why didn't they just drag you off?"

That thought had of course occurred to me, several times, and I'm still sitting on speculation.
"There's some loophole in the law that allows an adult to be removed from the home if their safety
is in question, but only if the removal of the accused offender doesn't resolve the issue. I'm still
trying to figure out how that pertains to our home, but it's a threadbare statute open to multiple
interpretations. I'm hoping that'll be the first leg we yank out from under this guy."

"Well he's messing with the wrong family," he snorts. I'm not sure if he means mine, his, or
collectively, but he's absolutely right.

"Ray," I inhale to calm the demons within. "I assure you. Anastasia and Theodore are and have
always been my highest priority. If I were ever a danger to them, I'd remove myself and get as far
away as I can. I'd never allow harm to come to them."

He sighs. "Yeah, I know. Just wanted to hear it from you myself." In man-speak, I suppose this
means I have his vote. "Has Annie called her mother?"

"We're still working out how to tell Carla, but I think she and my father will conference call her this
weekend. Part of the injunction restricts communication between Ana and I, so I have to rely upon
him for details, and with my mother in the hospital..."

"What? What happened to Grace?"

*Fuck, Ana didn't tell him that either.* I sigh. "She collapsed at work a couple days ago; they found a
small brain aneurysm and operated immediately. She's... recovering." I swallow. "She doesn't
know anything about these proceedings yet."

"Wow. I'm glad she's okay; that's a lot to deal with."

"Yeah." It's the only response I have.

"Listen," he says after several seconds of silence, "Off topic... I know you were just trying to help
keep my shop in business, what with all the extra orders. Your brother's buddy is working out well.
I've been meaning to say... thanks."

"Don't mention it. I think Elliot has a couple more Halfway House contacts who might need some
part-time work."

"Consider 'em hired. Gonna need the help. But next time, run it by me or give me a heads up... or
something." I hear something clatter in the background, and Ray stifles a curse. "Darn neighbor's
cat snuck in again, I have to go... I'll get an update from Ana later. Call me immediately if there's
any news, about any of it." Somehow, I know this includes my mother's condition. Ana sure as hell
got her compassionate nature from her father.
"I will."

~oOo~

I've taken to pacing the long hallway. There's just nothing more I can do.

I can't read another word of legalese, pore over case reports or dig any deeper into the financial statements of one Marcus William Kane. And those pictures... *gah.* The more I read, the more I fear that I may never hold my son, never kiss my wife again, never feel them in my arms. Even though it isn't true, whatever this letter holds. I have to prove that I never hurt them, that I'm no danger to anyone, save those who would harm the ones I love. And how does a former sadist with a guilty conscience accomplish that? Because any *normal* person would be screwed.

So naturally, I don't have a prayer.

I'm so fucking angry. No, that's not even an appropriate word. Livid... furious... maddened... such depictions are closer, but don't quite reach the plane of discontent to which I've plummeted... forget the depths of control I'd contemplated earlier. The initial, fresh rage melted to a dull, staggering paralysis, during which I asked myself, over and over... what have we done to deserve this? And forget me... *what have Ana and Teddy done?* They say bad things tend to occur all at once. I'm bracing for a third shoe to drop, and I wonder if I have the capacity for more anger than presently stews inside me. On some level, I'm glad Ana and Teddy aren't here. Neither should see me this way, filled with such horrible temper. If I were to be found guilty of anything, it would be of beating this Kane fucker senseless for what he's unjustly doing to my family.

Instead, I take my insuppressible frustration downstairs to the home gym and light up the rowing machine. It's not even close to the real thing. The angle of resistance feels like pulling through sand, cheapening the experience and adding to my anger, but it's a distraction, albeit just a temporary exchange of one target for another.

When my shoulders and chest burn from muscle failure, I abandon the infernal contraption for one of the treadmills, and switch on the main flatscreen, pleading with the scrolling stock values to lull my brain, while the speed and incline of the machine drain my body.

"Sir?" Gail appears in the doorway.

I stab the *stop* button and slow to a halt, sweat dripping, chest heaving. "Yes?"

"Ms. Carter paged from the control room. Your father is on his way in."

I nod in dismissal. "Thank you."

Gail retreats as timidly as is standard of late. I grab a towel from the stack, not really caring about my appearance, but whatever Dad has, I'd rather not drench it before reading it. Fuck Taylor's longstanding protocol; I wave Carter away and answer the door myself.

"Two things," he says, holding out a manila envelope.

I take it without hesitation, dragging my fingernail along the seal. "My study," I mutter, walking away. I hear the front door bang shut behind me and my father's footsteps echo on the hardwood. "Have you read it yet?"

"I have a copy, yes. The letter is my first point. The second; I have a court date for you."

"Already?" my eyes spring up from the half-torn flap. Little else could divide my attention.
"It's only an informal sit-down on Wednesday morning with the D.A. He's doing me a favor, and it might serve to get all this nonsense overturned, if we play our cards right."

"My cards, Dad. I'm representing myself. End of discussion."

"Christian…"

"No, Dad. You're the best Ana has. You can't represent us both." I rake my finger through to the end and pull out a photocopy.

It's just one page, written in elegant longhand script. It makes me gasp, before I've read a single word.

"I know who wrote this."
"It's good to see you, Ana. How are you holding up?" Flynn's expression is only mildly concerned, but from the lengthy sit-down with Carrick yesterday morning, I get the distinct impression that everyone is putting on brave faces for our benefit... Teddy's more so than mine. It's both comforting and disconcerting at the same time; I want to be kept in the loop, no matter how ragged and stretched-to-snapping that loop gets.

"Holding up," I confirm. "Really baffled and blindsided. Not knowing the whole story yet, not knowing this Kane guy's motivation, is driving me nuts but considering all Christian has told me in the past couple of months, part of me doesn't want to know. I'm kind of tempted to bury my head in the sand, to let Carrick do whatever lawyer stuff he has to, but I think that's the coward's way out... and so is the nagging urge to drop everything and run home to my Dad. But this is my life now, mine and Teddy's, and we just want to go home. My son misses his father. Christian and I were really figuring things out. I'm willing to do what it takes to get back to that."

"That's encouraging to hear, and a very courageous resolution. It couldn't have been easy to reach, but it sounds like you're willing and able to move forward," he reassures me. "I hate to bring this up; I'd rather not make you uncomfortable before we get started with the real reason for our meeting today, but I'm here first and foremost for your well-being," he explains. "Christian let me know that you finally remembered the child you lost. Would you like to talk about it?"

A creeping sourness fills the pit of my stomach.

"Not that. Not now. I shake my head. "Another time. I want to get through all this and then there will be time to focus on... other things."

"As you wish." Flynn adjusts in his chair. "I've asked an acquaintance of mine from the DA's office to meet with you today. She's assured me she'll be brief and as informal as she can be; the goal is to establish that your decisions and behaviors are your own, and not the product of coercion. Keep in mind, she knows nothing of the sensitive subjects that Christian has asked that we keep private. It's your decision whether they remain thus, but due to my agreement with Christian, I'm required not to speak of them. It's also your decision whether to have me stay while you're evaluated. If you'd prefer a one-on-one..."

"I thought you'd be here," I interrupt. The thought of being questioned by a stranger, even a vouched-for stranger, is unsettling. But to go it alone...

"I'll stay, if you'd prefer. But only in support. You'll have to answer the questions. I'm only permitted to clarify."

"I understand," I say, firmly. "I'd rather you stayed, if it's all the same to you."

"It isn't all the same. I'm honored that you'd choose to accept my support." He swallows, obviously touched by the vote of confidence, and the fleeting worry that I appeared needy fades. "Are you ready?"

I nod. "As ever."

Ms. Mattox is a very well-dressed and upright professional. Her handshake is reassuringly tepid. I get the distinct sense that there will be no bias in her report.

"Thank you for taking time out of your weekend, Lara," Flynn gestures toward us to begin, and he
settles off to the side.

"I'm glad to help, John, and I owed you one," she says, and then turns to me. "Ana, I'm going to ask you some questions today. This is a psychological competency evaluation, but if you're uncomfortable responding or if you require an aside with your counsel, please let me know, all right?"

Counsel? I didn't know I was supposed to have Carrick with me. Perhaps he didn't know either, but I'd find that odd.

"She means me, Ana," Flynn interjects. "Your father-in-law asked me to stand in for him, just for the evaluation." He must have read my expression... wow, he's that good.

"Okay."

Ms. Mattox makes a note on her legal pad. "Will you state your full name for me?"

"Anastasia Rose... Grey." Whew, I might have messed that up already.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-five on Monday." Thank goodness I worked that out... I'd hate to sound stupid so early in the process.

"Your son's name?"

"Teddy... Theodore."

"Where did you attend college?"

"Washington State, in Vancouver."

"Where did you live previously?"

"In Montesano, with my father."

"Do you see him often?"

"Whenever I can," I say. "He was here when I got out of the hospital, and we talk a couple times a week."

"Is your mother in the picture?"

"She lives in Georgia with her current husband."

Scribble, scribble. "Are you in contact with her?"

"We talk about once a week, yes."

"Any major childhood illnesses, learning disabilities, or traumatic events?"

"Aside from my parents' divorce, I'd say no."

Her eyes meet mine, clinically, for just a moment. "Can you elaborate?"

I snort. "What child wants to see their parents split up? In any case, I was old enough to realize in the end that they were better apart than together."
"And why did you choose to remain with your father?"

"Well, I lived with my Mom for a while, but her next husband and I didn't get along, so Dad brought me home."

"Is the man you speak of your mother's current husband?"

"No, the one before this one."

"I see. You say you didn't get along with him… did he ever behave inappropriately toward you?"

"Like abuse?" I frown. "No way. He was just a jerk."

She nods. "And where do you live now?"

"Here in Seattle."

"Home address?"

I pause, my eyes shooting toward John. He returns my gaze, considerately.

"It's information I already have, Ana. Baseline questions gauge your responses to neutral, self-identifying queries," she prods.

Great. Here we go. "Oh. Um... I don't have it memorized."

"I see. May I ask why not?"

Flynn and I share another glance, and he nods. God, please don't let the media get ahold of this... Christian will shit a cinderblock.

"Because I'm having trouble remembering things that happened within the last three years."

Her perfectly manicured eyebrows rise proportionately. "That... wasn't listed... in the report I received..." she thumbs disjointedly through her notes.

"Ana has been hesitant to discuss her condition outside the family," Flynn interjects, his expression fixed on me, asking permission, and I give a subtle nod. "She can explain better than I, though."

I wonder just how much I should reveal, and wish desperately that Christian were here. My fingers drum nervously on my knee. "I'm sure you heard about my accident a few months ago, through the media," I begin, and Ms. Mattox nods. I've piqued her interest, her arms now crossed over her notepad, leaning forward over her lap, toward me. "I woke up about a month later, not recognizing my husband or our son, not remembering the child I lost due to my injuries... I'm missing approximately three years, starting before Christian and I met."

"I see." She looks flustered. "All right, well, I suppose I can adjust the rest of my questions a bit. This is definitely good to know. It explains why you hesitated when I asked your full name," She glances toward Flynn. So, she did notice.

For some weird reason, I feel a little better... at least I don't feel as though what I say could be construed as hiding or warping the facts.

John seems to visibly relax as well. "It may be useful to note that Ana's memories have been returning in short bursts, typically the more notable, high-stress events," he offers.
"Yes, that could be helpful," she says, writing distractedly. "All right then, Ana... how have you and your son been coping with your situation?"

"You mean being forcibly removed from my home, with no warning or reason, by the authorities? That situation?" My inner bitch has shoved my subconscious out of the way and occupied her seat.

She blanches a bit. "I actually meant since you woke up after your accident, but I sense that the more recent situation is a point of contention for you. So, all right... the more recent situation."

My subconscious calmly chloroforms the bitch, lightly shoving her limp body from the front row. "The best we can, I suppose. I'm thankful that Christian's family has been so accommodating and supportive."

"Do you feel safer, more comfortable in Mr. and Dr. Grey's home?"

"Not particularly." Oh wow, that sounds completely ungrateful. "That sounded wrong... it's just not where I want to be."

"And where do you want to be?"

"Home." The house on the bay at the address I can't remember.

She scribbles some more. "Has anything happened, anything you can recall, that made you feel uncomfortable in your home?"

"Not outright."

"Can you clarify?"

How best to put this, without swallowing my foot... "When my memories try to surface, I often lose consciousness, and I'm disoriented when I wake up. Christian usually freaks out, he worries a lot." Why the heck did I offer that up?

"That must be a little frightening," she prods.

"It was, in the beginning. I've had a number of brain scans to pinpoint a cause, but my neurologist can't find anything unusual. He says everyone is different in how they recover from a head injury."

"Very true, and you answered my next question. I'd like to consult with your neurologist as well. How are you feeling so far today?"

"Fine, I guess."

She nods, continuing with her notes. I'm offhandedly grateful she isn't using a Quick Quotes Quill*, though I can only imagine what observations she's made about me.

"Are you taking any medication currently?"

"Not for the past two weeks."

"She's been weaned off Paxil for postpartum, it had no interaction potential with the anticoagulants or pain suppressors Ana's taken since the accident," Flynn notes.

"Good to know, thank you. Ana, how would you describe your relationship with Christian Grey?"

I have to stop myself from snorting at the direct, ultimately loaded question. Intense would be my
first response. "Supportive," is the word I settle on. "He's been through the wringer with everything that's happened... my accident, losing the baby..." I force back the years that threaten exposure upon the admission. "He's been wonderful."

Ms. Mattox's eyes are sincere. "Do you trust him?"

I nod, wholeheartedly. "I do."

"Ana, I have only a few more questions, and please be perfectly honest with me. Has your husband ever treated you in a way that made you uncomfortable?"

I can't lie. "We've had our differences. He's understandably frustrated with my memory loss, but he doesn't hold it against me. If we disagree on a matter, we work through it."

"Can you be more specific, give me an example, perhaps?"

"Um..." my brow furrows. I'd rather not give too many details. Thankfully, my brain leads me in a safe direction. "He's been concerned about me venturing out in public. I'm new to all this society stuff, I suppose, and he's very protective. And with my memory episodes as random as they've been, he's uncomfortable with the thought of me being out and about if one were to happen. And with good reason, considering what happened the other day."

"So, he restricts your movements..." Ms. Mattox assumes.

"Not technically... we disagree about it sometimes. Being married is still new to me. I'm learning to compromise."

"Has he ever harmed you? Threatened to harm you?"

Oh God, I can't lie to save my life! What the heck do I say?

"Never, that I'm able to remember."

She's busily writing again. "And Mr. Grey's staff... are you uncomfortable with them?"

"Absolutely not. I'm still getting used to their constant presence, but they're great people."

"They're always with you?"

"Well, not in the bathroom, obviously... but they do the driving, answer the door, provide protection when we do go out," I say. "I'm adjusting to it."

"And your son... how is his relationship with your husband?"

"Wonderful. He's the center of Christian's world. They have an incredible bond."

She smiles, for the first time during the interview. It's slight, but it's there. "Thank you, Ana. I appreciate your cooperation. Do you have anything to add, John?"

"Not at this time. Mr. Grey will be arriving in a half hour for his evaluation, and due to the injunction, I need to make sure Ana departs well in advance of his arrival, but I'd like a word with her before she leaves."

"Of course," Ms. Mattox rises, extending her hand. "Ana, it was a pleasure to meet you. John, I need to make a phone call, but I'll be back in thirty." She nods to Dr. Flynn, turns, and leaves. Flynn gestures for me to rise as well.

"You did very well. How do you feel?"
I shake my head. "Overwhelmed, again. Christian is being evaluated, too? I thought she just wanted to establish whether or not I'm crazy."

"No one thinks that, Ana… at least, no one who matters. Your evaluation was standard procedure. Christian has elected to be evaluated as well, as a good-faith gesture. He feels the need to prove himself when challenged, as I'm sure you've noticed. I'm rather pleasantly surprised that he's chosen to... submit to this assessment, if you'll pardon the word." He chuckles to himself, and then regains utmost sincerity. "Is there anything you'd like me to pass along to Christian? In confidence, of course."

"What about the restraining order?"

He shrugs. "Ana, I'm asking, as a friend. I don't believe one word of the allegations, or that either of you is impaired. So?"

I sigh. What I have to say is awfully private, but what choice do I have? It's not exactly a message I can pass through Carrick or Taylor, either. "Tell him… tell him that I love him. That Teddy is doing okay. That I'll do whatever it takes to come home."

Flynn smiles. "I will. He'll be glad to hear that."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I'm fucking furious. That letter... that fucking letter! My equilibrium has shifted into the darkness, now that I have an object upon which to focus my fury… forget Kane, it seems he's nothing more than an irritating and resourceful pawn in the realm of a grander, more sinister scheme. But Christ… somehow I'd known… I'd suspected only a few, and of that small collection, one has proven me correct, once again.

Oh, how I hate being right, the very few times that it's a feeling to be despised... but it's far better than being caught unprepared.

My gut expels the soundness and logic of my brain like last month's moldy leftovers. Fuck me; I nearly keeled over when I recognized the writing style, and the little squiggle at the end was a dead giveaway, despite the lack of actual signature. I had chills. I'm not sure that's ever happened to me before. And then I literally had the urge, if she'd been present, to lay the author flat on her ass. How the fuck can she do this? What ungodly reason is there? Fucking why? And why now?

Keep it together, Grey. Justice will be served. As it stands, the bitch's life is over. As soon as I can resolve the minor issue of connecting her to the crime, and then there's the little matter of proving she's crazy enough or stupid enough to do this... I'm going to bury her, our history be damned. God, what a waste. What was she thinking? Nothing good could possibly have come to her through such instigation.

Taylor insisted that we leave a bit early, citing traffic concerns. Fine. I brought a load of paperwork along with me, not the least of which is a copy of the damned letter, in all its creased and smudged glory. I've memorized the entire text, demanded confirmation from the county forensics office that there were indeed no prints found on the original paper; Welch even ran it through a military-grade decoder to satisfy his endless paranoia. But none of that matters… I know exactly who wrote it, and the sorry bag of flesh will pay dearly for causing this, for her betrayal to my family, for her blatant disregard for my marriage, but moreover for conspiring to hurt Ana. No one hurts my wife. No one keeps her or my son from me. I've not felt such an urge to inflict permanent damage on another person in almost three years, save one exception.
The SUV rolls to a halt and I look up from the mess scattered across the seat; The wanderings of my twisted mind held me far longer than I realized. I look at my watch, and noting the time, an understanding of why we've arrived here so early blooms into being, and the anger briefly dissipates, only to be replaced by the acrid buzz of anxiety. I unclench my balled fists and my gaze shifts through the tinted window.

Further down the block, a hundred feet I'd wager, stands the entrance to John's practice… and parked out front, an identical SUV waits. My breath catches when I see her.

She's so beautiful. Hair tied back, God, she looks tired, even from here. I desperately hope she's getting enough to eat. Sawyer emerges behind her, they exchange words, and her head turns… in my direction.

So close, and yet, so far. All I want in this moment is to go to her. My legs itch and zing with the urge to bolt from this car and run to her, sweep her into my arms and escape with her; injunction be damned. So lost in my need, I almost miss her brave, fleeting smile and deliberate nod. She knows I'm watching.

The other car pulls away from the curb, taking my love with it. Taylor waits a moment, and then pulls forward again, claiming the vacated space.

"The traffic wasn't as problematic as I'd expected, Sir," he covers.

To acknowledge his involvement in this little setup would require me to prohibit any further, well-meaning but unsanctioned interventions on the part of his team. "Thank you, Taylor," is all I can manage.

And he knows what I mean.

~oOo~

"How did she do?" I insist without preamble.

Flynn ignores my bad manners, as a rule. "Well enough," he sighs, "I just went over the preliminary report. Ms. Mattox seems to agree that Ana is hardly a survival identification victim, but there is some concern that she's perhaps a little on the dependent side, and wholly preoccupied with you. It can be attributed partially to the circumstance of her memory loss, of course… she's leaned on you quite a bit in rediscovering herself since the accident, but even I have to agree that she should be more independent by now, given her mindset and attitudes when you originally met."

"I see." My eyes drift to the wall behind him, and I sink into one of the chairs. I see how anyone might have drawn this conclusion. It's just one more item to add to the list of things that I've fucked up.

Flynn lowers himself into my line of vision. "I didn't tell you this to provoke your tendency toward self-blame," he guesses at my expression. "Ana loves you, misses you. She asked me to pass that along before she left. She wanted you to know that she's willing to do whatever it takes to come home to you. But if that's to happen, there are a few things you're going to have to do."

"Whatever it takes," I mutter, both in acknowledgement of Ana's declaration and as an assertion of my own. "Tell me what I need to know."

He sighs. "You may have to bend the truth a bit."

My gaze sharpens. "I expect I may have to outright lie."
"That may be so, and it's at your discretion to do so; but during the interview I cannot support or elaborate upon fiction. On a good note, Ana deflected the more sensitive questions marvelously, despite her relative inexperience. I was impressed."

This is news to me. "What did she say?"

Flynn explains the line of questioning, and her admission. "Never, that I'm able to remember."

Oh, Ana.

"I don't have to tell you what the outcome will be if you deviate," he tells me.

"No shit."

There's a soft knock at the door. Flynn raises an eyebrow. "Are you prepared?"

I wave my hand in the air. "Let's get this over with."

Lara Mattox is blonde, thank fuck. Not the slightest bit attractive, mid-forties, and her dark eyes linger upon me. Not surprising. Her passive expression is heartening, but caution reigns supreme. She's no less than a human lie detector, and her report will decide whether I have the barest hope of a chance to regain access to my family. The Dominant within me stirs and I strain to keep him in check, for now. He's still a major face in my professional appearance, but in this case, a hostile takeover might upset the delicate house of cards upon which the preferred outcome rests. This step in the process may prove unnecessary considering the most recent revelation, but in the interest of appearing compliant, I'll allow things to proceed.

I cock my head to one side, considering today's enemy.

"I have a number of questions for you, Mr. Grey." She crosses her legs, placing a folded-over legal pad on her knee, her skirt riding up just an inch. "If you're uncomfortable with any of them, be sure to let me know. Are you ready to begin?"

God, she's practiced at looking disinterested, but she wants me. I can work with this. "Yes."

"State your full name."

"Christian Trevelyan-Grey."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-one." My voice is even and soft.

"Home address?"

"That information is a matter of public record, Ms. Mattox," I test.

"Baseline question, Mr. Grey, you understand."

I do. "Forty-seven eleven Perkins Lane West, Seattle."

"Thank you. Your previous address?"

"Escala Tower, Nineteen-twenty Fourth Avenue, Downtown."

She quickly makes a note on her pad. "And your reason for volunteering for this evaluation?"
I suppress the urge to raise an eyebrow. "I should think the matter obvious."

"Humor me."

I lean forward a bit. "As a testimony to my character, but more importantly, in defense of my family."

A trace of mild appreciation crosses her features. "Noted." She takes a moment to write. "You were adopted at an early age… what do you remember about your life before that time?"

*Besides being tortured and starved?* "It was a long time ago. The details are difficult to recall."

"Would you say the first four years of your life held pleasant experiences?"

"Not particularly, no. Thus my adoption."

"Were you abused?"

*Lady, Pandora's got nothing on my box.* "Mishandled."

"Can you elaborate?"

"I'd rather not."

"Mr. Grey's childhood is a long-debated subject," Flynn interjects. "Much of his success can be attributed to his dedication to moving forward. We focus on goal-setting rather than repeated evaluation of the unchangeable."

"I see. Have you been in counseling long, Mr. Grey?"

*All my life.* "Quite a while."

"And would you say that your early years contributed to any feelings of anger or resentment in general?"

"At times."

"And how did you cope with these feelings?"

*By beating the shit out of women. And then fucking them.* "Exercise is the finest form of control, Ms. Mattox."

"So you never lashed out?"

"I didn't say that."

"Have you ever hit anyone, Mr. Grey?" she asks pointedly.

*Yes. I'd think my primary school records would indicate that I have."

She eyes me carefully. "And since?"

I turn my head slightly, eyeing her at an angle. "I spar with Claude Bastille on a weekly basis. He was a former Olympic contender, you know."

She continues to write. "Give me a little background into your relationship with Mrs. Grey."
"What would you like to know?"

"Start with how you met."

"Anastasia interviewed me for her school's newspaper. She resisted my advances at first, but in the end, I convinced her to give me a chance." I smirk a little at the memory. "She's the first woman, my mother and sister aside, who's stood up to me." Humility... humility is good.

"Stood up to you, how?"

I wash my expression with just a touch of rue. "I'm a successful man, Ms. Mattox. I didn't make my way in the world by being a patsy."

"So, you attempted to strong-arm her?"

"Nothing of the sort. I simply found her resistance... refreshing."

"You don't often encounter resistance, I take it?"

"Oh, I encounter it quite often." Just not usually by women.

"You're quite deflective, Mr. Grey. Is that your intention?"

Yes. "Of course not; I prefer directness. 'Fluff' isn't something that comes naturally. I'd be glad to clarify anything, all you have to do is ask," I offer, charitably.

She writes some more. "There is some speculation as to the timing of your engagement and marriage to Mrs. Grey. What were your reasons for committing so quickly?"

Are we really going there? "Ms. Mattox, I'm a very private man. I'm not sure I see how this is relevant to the matter at hand; why do you ask?"

"It's important for me to establish what kind of relationship you have, your reasoning behind life-changing decisions helps me to understand your tendencies and gauge reactions. The information I gather will remain private, but it's significant to this assessment."

"Very well." I cross my legs, casually. "Ana and I knew very early on that we wanted to be together, indefinitely. She continually challenged me. Still does, in fact." God, I miss her. "I admit, to some it may have seemed that we rushed into marriage for another reason, namely the discovery of our son's conception, but that wasn't the case at all. We simply felt that we'd found life partners in one another, and that was that."

Her face falls, ever so slightly, imperceptibly to the untrained eye. No, Blondie, I didn't marry my wife out of paternal obligation. You have no chance with me.

"And how has your relationship developed since?"

"It's been a ride, for sure." My directness catches me off guard. "But Ana shows me every single day that marrying her was the best decision I've ever made." Smooth, Grey. Now you sound like a bleeding romantic. Put a lid on it!

"Was there ever a time you regret marrying in haste?"

"Never."

"Not once?"
"No."

She makes a few more notes. "And since Mrs. Grey's accident, how have you coped with her memory loss?"

"I've… coped. It hasn't been easy."

"To be sure. Could her accident have been avoided?"

A question I ponder frequently. "All evidence points to no, but I always wonder."

"Always wonder what?"

"Ms. Mattox, have you ever had something happen to you, something that you think, 'What if I'd done this differently?'"

"Of course."

"Well, what if I'd picked her up from work that day, myself? What if her driver had collected her a few minutes earlier, or later? A few seconds, even? What if the bastard who hit her car had gone somewhere else that day? Any of these scenarios, and our daughter would in her arms now, not in the cold ground. My wife would know herself." *I'd better not fucking cry. I threaten my subconscious with certain punishment should it allow my body to disobey.*

"My condolences for your loss, Mr. Grey."

"Thank you."

"Are you able to continue?"

"Of course." I swallow the tightness in my throat and blink the threatening tears away.

"Your wife spoke of episodes when her memory returns. What's that like for her?"

*Fucking frightening.* "It's unsettling. She loses consciousness for a short time. She's often confused and disoriented when she wakes, but recovers quickly."

"And how do you react, when this happens?"

"React?"

"What do you do?"

"Obviously, I tend to her well-being, first and foremost."

"Witnessing one of her episodes must be upsetting."

"It is."

"How have you helped Mrs. Grey to cope with them?"

"We talk about them, after. There isn't much more I can do aside from clarifying the details for her."

"That helplessness bothers you."

*It's frustrating as hell.* "It does."
"If you could control them, make them stop, would you?"

"In a heartbeat."

She scribbles something on her notepad.

"So, you'd rather she stopped regaining her memories."

*What the fuck?* "Please refrain from putting words in my mouth, Ms. Mattox. I want nothing more than for my wife to remember our life together. But if a cessation of her episodes were to mean that she'd never entirely regain her memory, I'd live with it. Her health is of the highest priority."

"I understand." She doesn't apologize for her assumption. "You put a premium on Mrs. Grey's safety and well-being, and yet, claims to the contrary have surfaced. Can you…"

"Let me stop you right there," I interrupt. Flynn's gaze is warily directed at his colleague; he isn't happy with this line of questioning either. "I'm not at liberty to discuss certain legal particulars, but I will clarify one thing, and I will say it only once. I do not. hit. my. wife." …*anymore*. "I do not threaten her with bodily harm or keep her against her will, nor would I ever wish to." …*except when we occasionally play a scene*. "The thought of treating her with anything but the utmost respect is abhorrent to me."

"And your son?"

I swallow. The imagery that rises disgusts me. "That goes double for my son."

"You'd do anything to protect them."

"Yes."

"Anything?"

"I've said, yes."

She makes a final note on her pad and clicks her pen to retract the tip. "I think I have everything I need. Mr. Grey, John, it's been a pleasure."

I stand on formality, as does John, and shake hands with Ms. Mattox. Her last question weighs heavily on me.

John closes the door behind her. "She's promised me copies of both reports later this afternoon."

"And… your assessment?"

He frowns. "It could have gone better. You've been working on your *avoid-dance*, I see." He makes air quotes with his fingers. How he loves that particular play on words. It's annoying as fuck.

"Dispense with the puns, Flynn. What do you think she'll say?"

John takes the seat across from me. "From where I was sitting, the only time she truly believed you was when you spoke of your child." He pauses for a moment. "The rest, well… even I could tell you were covering. You were a little too controlled and vague, my friend."

"*Shit.*" Once again, my inner god has kicked me in the kneecaps, the pretentious fucker that he is.

"I told you it wouldn't be easy," he pulls his feet up and tucks them under himself. "If it's any
reassurance, I don't think she outright discounted any of your answers as blatantly false. But Ana
did well, as I said… and her testimony is going to carry far more weight in this case."

"Speaking of the case, I've seen the letter."

Flynn's eyebrows shoot upward. "And?"

The fury and disbelief returns, like a recent death, momentarily forgotten and acutely disarming
upon awakening. I feel my core begin to shake, the tremors spreading to my extremities. "I want to
hurt someone. I want the person that wrote it to hurt."

"That's a very natural reaction," he reminds me.

Yes, natural… for me. It's natural for me to want to lash out, to strike others down. It's what I
should have done so many years ago, when things started. Perhaps if I'd reminded her of her place
at the time, she'd not have done this. Perhaps if I'd taken her in hand, she'd have known better than
to cross me. I thought she'd given up. She ought to have given up. Goddamn it, there must be some
proof in her persistence; there's no way she'll admit what she's done. No way to force her
confession. I have nothing to hold over her head that she can't turn around on me. Of all the people
in my acquaintance, and with the exception of the fifteen, that's a blasted rarity.

"Care to share the monologue?"

*How does he fucking do that? After all these years, I should have some idea, some warning of his
aptitude for mind reading.* I shake my head, but rather than deny, I think out loud. "The person
responsible... I have no proof. There are no prints. Nothing to connect her to that damning letter."

"Do I dare assume whom you imply by 'her'?"

"Would you focus?" I sputter, exasperation getting the better of me. John can be so astute and yet
so obtuse in the same cluster of brain cells. *Fuck it all, if only I had something else she'd written,
even from back then...*

*Oh God.* My blood runs cold.

"Would you like to have a seat?" Flynn extends his hand to the couch from which I'd just risen.
"You don't look well."

"I have to go."

"Christian?"

"Can't explain now." My legs propel me to the door. "I'll be in touch." I'd later chide myself, once
again, for the less-than-appreciative departure. Thank the devil he understands how my mind
works.

The elevator provides a private, steel cocoon. I yank the phone from my pocket and call my father.

"Grey." *Fuck, sometimes he sounds just like me.*

"Dad, I need something from my old room."

~oOo~

"Here's Jason, Sir." Gail hands me her phone.
"Taylor."

"We're ready over here," his voice pulls away from the speaker. There's a slight shuffle as the device changes hands on the other end. "Hello?"

*Heaven has a voice, and it fills the gaping chasm.* "Hello, baby."

"Christian." It's a whisper, a plea on her lips.

"How are you, love?"

I hear a covered sniffle. *God, no please don't cry.* "We're doing okay. Your dad has been wonderful, and Kate and Mia have been keeping me company."

"That's good, baby. How's Teddy?"

She's quiet for a minute. "He's... been asking for you. I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong, he's been hiding from me a lot. Gretchen has been really good with him; I can usually find him with her. He's less than thrilled with me right now, it seems."

"It's just a phase, I'm sure. Teddy loves you more than life itself," I tell her gently, but in my heart, I fear what effect this ordeal has had on my son. If he ends up damaged in the slightest... I don't know what I'll do. *Focus, Grey, before you reduce yourself to a blubering mess. Ana needs you.* I change tack. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can send over from home?"

I hear that sniffle again. "You," she whispers.

"Oh, Ana. I know. I miss you so much." *Oh, rip my heart from my chest and slice it before me, make me feast upon it.* My pulse thrums desperately, the warmth of yearning tugging at my soul. I heave a sigh. "I hesitate to raise your hopes, but I may have a way out of this."

"You do? How?" The thrill in her voice calls forth that happy-sad feeling, that selfish delight that only my wife's hopeful aura can bring, but the sour potential for disappointment lingers, waiting for the right moment. I couldn't bear to disappoint her again. Hell, I can't bear this separation, but this isn't about me. It's about my Ana, my Teddy... my family.

Honesty gets the better of me. "Well, my father told you some about the letter, didn't he?"

"Yes, he said it's what prompted that detective to investigate you, that it accuses you of hurting us; what about it? Do you know who wrote it? What do they want?"

*Yes, she's definitely been spending her days with the Grey women.* "I have a good idea who wrote it. I'm still unsure what their motives are, but part of what they wrote has some truth to it, though in another context. The rest, well... I have to assume it's false, though that can't absolutely be known."

Ana doesn't respond right away. I can't tell if it's because she's processing, waiting for me to continue or if she's holding something back. *Please, please not the intermediate."

"Baby?"

"Hmm?"

"You were somewhere else, weren't you?"

"Um... Not really." She sighs. "You don't have to tell me more if you don't want to."
"I do, baby. I want you to know everything. Some parts of my past... I told you before, there are some things I'd rather not dredge up, but they may have to be. I'm not quite sure how to do that."

"I know. And I respect that... but you did talk to your dad, right?" she asks, timidly.

"I did. He knows, well... everything. I didn't go into much detail, but he has the basic idea. I also told him about what I did to you; I think he was more shaken by that than anything else. He hasn't really given me a verdict on the matter... but he did remind me that I'm still his son." The admission hits me hard, harder than it had when he said it. "I suppose that's what counts, right?"

"Oh Christian, I wish I could have been there for you," she murmurs. "I just want this to be over, I want to come home. I'll do whatever it takes. I believe you, and I trust you. These feelings I have for you, they're so innate, so right... I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'll do anything, tell them anything, if it helps release you from whatever hold they have over you. I mean that."

"Oh, Ana..." the lump in my throat rises, choking me, threatening to dissolve. "You have no idea what that means to me. What you mean to me... baby, you're constantly in my heart. But I won't ever ask you to lie to them for me, and you should never feel that you have to. Just have faith in me, Ana. I'll figure this all out. I love you so much."

"I'm scared." The desperation in her voice is unmistakable, raw and absolute. "What if... what if..."

"Baby, no..." I soothe. "I feel where you're going with this. Please, please don't torture yourself. I'll find a way. I'm coming back to you. We'll work it out; no matter how long it takes, no matter how long we're apart." I swallow. "Please don't worry. I promise, you'll always be taken care of, no matter what happens."

I hear a broken sob from the other end. Christ.

"Oh, Ana..." I swallow the rising lump, my free hand flattening over my heart. "I'm here, baby. I'm going to fight like hell for you. And I'm going to win, I promise you."

And in that moment, I feel it, the depth of my vow, spreading across the earth like a black cloud. I am going to win. Fuck everything. I've had enough. I'm Christian Grey, for fuck's sake, I wave my hand and bigger things than this shrivel into nothingness. My left testicle is bigger than these problems. Heads will roll, and I'll stand idly by. No one will keep me from my family.

*A Quick Quotes Quill is an item from Harry Potter lore, for those of you who haven't read the series. It's a writing implement that inserts embellishment into an interviewee's testimony. Bonus points to those who pointed and snickered when they saw the reference.*
“I have no other choice than to find the defendant, Christian Trevelyan Grey, guilty on one count
of domestic abuse and both counts of unlawful restraint. I hereby extend the established restraining
order indefinitely; further sentencing to be announced within seventy-two hours. Bailiff, please
remove Mr. Grey to a holding cell.”

What? The wood-on-wood bang of the gavel shatters my pulsing eardrums. NO! This can't happen!
This can't be the way it ends… the way my life ends. The words burst from my lips, unchecked.
"This is outrageous!" Meaty hands wrench my arm in a vise behind my back, and it burns. "Don't
touch me!" I pull away, and a second Neanderthal comes to hold my other arm. "Stop touching
me!"

"Christian!" My mother's voice rings out from the gallery, filled with pain and disbelief. "Please
don't hurt my son!"

"Mother, take care of Ana and Teddy! Promise me! I'll appeal this, son, just go quietly for now." My father has moved to my mother's
side, his arm around her shoulders as she sobs, his eyes lowered in defeat. He can't even look at me.

They didn't let her into the courtroom. They wouldn't let her anywhere near me. I didn't get to say
goodbye.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

"Ana!" The scream bubbles from my throat. She can't hear me, she's nowhere near, but I can't rein
it in. "Ana, I'm sorry! I love you! I'm sorry!"

"Mr. Grey!"

Firm hands grasp my shoulders, shoving me forward.

"Mr. Grey! Sir!"

"Gah!"

A very real image of Mrs. Taylor snaps into view, eyebrows raised. "Sir? Your father is on the
phone for you."

Cold air fills my lungs, chilling the spray of droplets across my skin. I feel as though I'm on fire.
Oh, of all the motherfucking nightmares... My heart continues to pound as though it may fail at any
minute, and the residue of acid claws the back of my tongue.

"Tell him I'll call him back."

"He instructed me to wake you. I'm sorry, sir…"
I rip the twisted sheets violently from where they’ve held my body captive, much to the dismay of my housekeeper. She hands me the phone and beats a hasty retreat.

"Dad."

"Christian, I know you have a lot on your mind at the moment, but your mother is asking for you. Again."

Shit.

"What time is it?" I rub my face, glaring toward the heavy drapes pulled over the windows.

"It's after nine. Are you feeling all right?"

_Am I? No, I don't believe I am. _"I'll be there in an hour."

~oOo~

"Excuse me, Dr. Grey… Sir, I have Welch on the line for you," Sawyer nods apologetically toward my mother from the doorway.

_Damn it, Welch… you could have taken the hint when I didn't answer the last two calls. I'm with my sick mother, for Christ's sake. _"Tell him to hold."

"Oh, darling, it's all right," my mother dismisses. "Go take over the world or whatever it is you do on a Sunday. I'll be just fine. I'm glad you stopped by." She squeezes my hand in both of hers.

She didn't press me when I said Ana and Teddy were otherwise occupied. She didn't dig when I apologized for not being back since this all began, but I can see it in her eyes. She knows something is wrong. I wonder if Dad said something to her, not the truth, obviously… else she'd have crawled up my right nostril and self-detonated. This isn't news she can handle at the moment, or ever, if I have a say.

"I love you, Mom. I'll try to come back later." I press a kiss to her forehead, and she strokes my cheek once before releasing me.

My late start and the unscheduled detour to the hospital has suspended my warpath mentality for the moment, which bodes favorably for Sawyer… he looks damned nervous enough as he hands the phone over and follows a step behind.

"What, Welch?"

"I just received confirmation from forensics: the letters are a perfect match."

_Tell me something I didn't already know. _"And the evidence?"

"I've hit a dead end. Whatever this guy knows, there's a tight lid on it. I can't get any of my contacts at the district to talk, and I've called in a dozen favors. I'll keep on it."

Shit. _Well, at least my gag order is doing its job. _If the media hasn't snuck it out of somebody, there's no getting to it except through official channels, and those I can keep plugged up for years, if not indefinitely. _"Keep me posted." _I click the end button and toss it back to Sawyer. _Now what?"

"I arranged the items you asked for, Sir. They'll be delivered tomorrow as instructed."

I let out a resounding sigh and step into the elevator, pinching the bridge of my nose in an effort to
ward off the storm of a migraine brewing on the horizon. I'd very much like to explode, for all the pent-up frustration festering deep within my psyche. The mental tally of checks on the to-do list outnumber the unchecked, but the latter are proving quite obstructive and increasingly worrisome. I just want this fucking done. Over with. I'm certain my army of Grey House lawyers would have Kane's ass seared and served to him on a paper plate by noon tomorrow, with extra sauce and a buttered roll. No… I can't risk involving them, even with NDAs in place. The fewer that know of my past, the quieter this can be dealt with. My reputation isn't all that's at stake.

This entire situation is infuriating; it's so far beyond my comprehension, and the things I comprehend likely exceed the above average person a hundred fold. What the fuck does he have on me? On us? My greater fear is that this lie of a letter has borne further fabrication, the likes of which fit some ambiguous circumstance and aims the arrow directly between my eyes. Unlikelier things have happened before.

Ana would normally try to distract me from this absurdity, at least, the part of her who truly knew me. This reset version of my Ana wouldn't… doesn't… know how to handle me. But she loves me, loves me and agreed to be mine, before all this began. That's what I have to hold onto. I'm going to beat these charges to a bloody pulp, whatever they are, and then I'm going to sweep my girl away and put all this behind us. Ugh, the need for her is maddening… I need to run a marathon, something… any outlet. Unfortunately, the only activity I should pursue at the moment is most women's go-to activity.

Retail therapy. My wife requires a birthday gift. Several, in fact.

Let's see how badly I can screw this up.

Sawyer steps out ahead of me at the parking level and nods the 'all clear.' I jerk my head toward the vehicle. "Come. We have shopping to do."

~ ANA ~

My birthday came and went. It wasn't as uneventful as I'd have liked. I'm trying not to think about it.

The shiny, lacquered wood bench seat is smooth and hard under my fingers, the grooves weathered there leaving the feeling that others, nervous as I am, had also worried over the softening lines. My legs uncross and I tuck them under me. Nope this isn't comfortable either. They re-cross, right bouncing over left, and I smooth my skirt.

Kate helped me dress this morning. I honestly have no idea what I'd do without her; I don't pay attention to things like what people wear to court, other than what I've seen in passing through our living room in the Portland apartment when she has Law and Order streaming on Netflix. Or, rather, had... I have to remind myself sometimes, even now, that most things I remember happened three or more years ago. God, this is frustrating. I ought to be so mad, and I am, but what's getting angry at everyone going to do? How is that going to help Christian or his dad work through this? My subconscious and I had words last night about proper channeling of frustration, and we've decided that my best friend isn't a proper target, especially after all she'd tried to do to make my birthday special. I'll be apologizing to her for a while. Somehow, she sees through my bad mood and picks up my hand, squeezing it in hers. Yes, she came with us today, too, though I told her I could handle it. Things couldn't possibly get any weirder, and honestly, I'm over the drama. Not going to let it get to me, no way.

Nope, not going to do it.
I'm not even sure why I'm here this morning; no one has called me into the room. Carrick indicated that his District Attorney friend had made time to hear new evidence on that letter... which I still have not read and don't really care to. The idea of actually seeing the words, the handwriting, it feels as though it would taint me or worse, make me believe the lie. I won't subject myself to that; there's enough confusion in my life without having distortions of the truth added to it. And hopefully, if everything goes well in there this morning, all this mess will be resolved before lunch. My fingers are crossed, and so are my legs, left bouncing over right.

The door at the end of the hall swings open, and a dark, heavyset man in business attire pushes through ahead of my father-in-law. They stop to shake hands, and the unknown gentleman disappears through another door. Their faces give nothing away.

I stand and smooth my skirt. "What happened?"

Carrick brings up his arm to circle my shoulders, inferring that I should turn and walk with him. Kate's arm comes around my waist. She's been eerily quiet, unlike her and probably the fault of my sour disposition yesterday, but she's steadfastly been my rock and my soft place. God, if only every girl had a best friend like Kate Kavanagh… er, Grey. Still getting used to that.

Something silently calls me to look back, though, and I get a glimpse of Christian, his hands shoved in the pockets of his gray suit pants… oh, how stunning they are on his beautiful body. He stands tall and determined, just beyond the far door, in something of an exchange with Taylor. The pull is tactile. I just barely swallow the urge to duck under Carrick's arm and run to my husband; the need to feel his arms around me far more pressing than the desire to know where everything currently stands, where we stand.

"Come along, my dear. There's still some work to do."

My eyes haven't left their goal, and just as I'm about to be led away, his gaze connects with mine.

His lips part fractionally, and my belly stirs.

"I know, Ana." Carrick grasps my shoulder and gently pulls me to him. "Christian sends his love. We have to go now."

The restraining order, of course. What a bunch of crap that is. Or perhaps it isn't; I couldn't possibly know. Everything boils down to that letter, and some secret evidence this detective-lawyer-whatever guy Kane has on Christian. The small part of me who is curious to know receives a swift kick from the other part, the one who, perhaps irrationally, doesn't care what it says, even if it's true. Any sense of self-preservation seems to go out the window where Christian is concerned, in spite of the entourage of sexy weirdness that surrounds him. I risk another glance backward, and the slate eyes that meet mine are burning. It makes my mouth water. The ding of the elevator. Sawyer ushers us inside, Carrick's arm heavily around me. There's a sudden shift, and the gray eyes rush toward me, his hands reaching out, as the doors close. Then, despair... and darkness.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

District Attorney Ronald Williams is a Dominant personality, to be sure. In the lifestyle, you learn that you don't possess a certain way of being, you either are, or you aren't. As for the individual's display of control, you either do, and are able to give the appearance of a moderate nature, or you don't, and it all hangs out like a badly tucked shirt. I recognized Williams in his true element this morning coming off the elevator. I dialed down my own, reluctantly of course, permitting logic and an even temper to reign. I can only imagine how my father feels, taking in our verbal tennis match. He seems to better understand, now, the restraint it takes to keep myself in check.
I'll need at least twelve rounds with Claude when we're finished.

"Libel is a very serious accusation, considering the nature of the charges, Mr. Grey. Are you absolutely sure?" he tests.

*Of course we're fucking sure.* "The evidence speaks for itself, Mr. Williams. My forensic specialist matched the handwriting, and you see the pictorial signature in the corner of both letters. The author's identity is clear."

He glares at me. Not menacingly, but it is a calculating expression, one I'd spent many of my formative years learning to conceal. That in itself is a small victory, and I mentally log each and every one.

"You won't mind if I have my own specialist run another comparison."

"Not at all. We'd expect as much," my father adds. "Once your results confirm the author's identity, my client would like to file a counter-suit against Mr. Kane, and another to address the matter of the libel against my son."

"We'll have to bring her in for questioning first," Williams adds, "but considering the way the pieces fit together, that course would be my recommendation as well." He sighs. "You will have to contend with the photos, however."

"Photos?" we exclaim at once.

_Fuck._ "What photos?"

"Yes, Mr. Kane's further evidence, I thought you were aware of their form. They depict you in a rather unflattering light with regard to your wife, Mr. Grey. I take your reaction to indicate that you were unaware they'd been taken."

*Of course I didn't fucking know. These days, anyone with a phone can take photos discreetly whenever they like.* "Are they authentic? Who took them?" I demand.

"Mr. Kane took them himself, and there's no indication of tampering thus far. They've been examined at length."

*That fucker was following us? How did I not know? How did Taylor not know?* "Where? When?" I demand, my fingers locked rigid to avoid white-knuckling the arms of the leather chair. I can't give up the appearance of control, though my insides scream with impatience.

"I'm not sure of those details; haven't yet seen them myself. I've convinced Judge Matthews to take a special interest in this case; he's privy to the specifics of all evidence and given me discretion in moving things along. I'll have the graphologist downstairs take a look at the letters immediately. If they check out, I'll issue the warrant for questioning. And if all goes well, we'll have a confession by close of business today. But even if Mr. Kane were to withdraw his photos from the body of evidence, the box has been opened. The court is required by law to investigate the circumstances and ensure, as you maintain, that you pose no danger to your wife or your son."

Irritation bubbles in a viscous mass, like microwaved oatmeal. I tried that once, with disastrous results. And then Ana laughed at me. That made me mad too, but that was surficial; my pride was all that was at stake, and she can have it once in a while, if it brings a smile to her face. No, this is deep, cutting, stinging anger, the bitter reminder that I'm not in control of this situation. I'm sick of feeling like this. I cannot live this way, with this level of uncertainty, in the knowledge that my basic freedoms are threatened. Williams doesn't have to say it. I know that if I don't prove I'm not
the monster they think I am, the monster I occasionally tend to be, that I may lose everything.

I need to see those fucking pictures.

My father reads my mind. "My client and I will need to see the photos. When can that be arranged?"

Williams shifts in his seat. "I'll apply for their limited release, and have a deputy bring them to your office. They'll have to remain in your possession only, as per Mr. Grey's gag order." He gestures to me.

My father raises his eyebrow and peers in my direction. Yes, Dad. NDAs all around. I cannot afford to let this get out; it would ruin my reputation, and the thousands who work for me would inadvertently suffer. It's quite a house of cards I've built. My silent, even expression is all the confirmation he needs.

"Agreed." Dad's eyes shift forward again. "May I assume you've arranged for a closed hearing, per our request?"

"Sealed up tight. Depending on what we find out today, we could be in front of the judge by Friday morning. Will that work for you?"

In the scope of most proceedings, this isn't simply being fast-tracked. It's downright miraculous. But it had better be, considering the favors being pulled and my already generous contributions to the greater community. It's pleasing to see that my longstanding efforts have not gone unnoticed, and that there's the stereotypical fear that such donations may be redistributed should the case not be handled quickly, thoroughly, and, without saying, quietly.

Clearly, Williams understands the immediate economic value of keeping Christian Grey's private life, well… fucking private.

I sit and absorb the legal banter as he and my father discuss more specifics, breathing evenly to generate focus on the proper things to do, rather than what I'd like to be doing at the moment. I'd prefer to deal with the bitch myself. I'd thought she'd finally taken the hint after Ana and I were married. It's… troubling, for lack of a better word… that she couldn't let this go, let me go. And now she stands to lose everything, and so do I, should she be called to testify in my wife's presence. What she may say could wound Ana so deeply, I fear pondering whether she'll want anything to do with me after this is finished. But it's the best chance I have.

And then, there are the photos to deal with. *Fuck me sideways. There had better not be anything else.*

I'm instructed not to contact our dear author, whose name I can't even stomach to think for the wrath it pours into my soul. I thought I knew her, or at least, what she's capable of. *Damn it Grey, stop thinking. Just stop.*

Dad declines to have Ana join us, though the injunction against me does not apply within the grounds of the courthouse so long as she has representation present, stating he'll fill her in. I wonder if that's more for my benefit or Ana's… God I miss her. We stand and Williams offers his hand. Dad mutters that he'll be in touch when he and Ana have reviewed the pictures, and to give him a five minute head start before departing. There's a shuffling of bodies and Taylor is once again at my side. I owe the man a vacation when this is done; Sawyer as well. Sawyer, who is probably within inches of my wife at the moment, while I remain here, restrained once again by words on a document filed in a concrete-and-fluorescent room somewhere downstairs.
My eyes lift to the doorway and beyond, and I steel myself when I see the familiar long brunette tresses. The small group leading Ana away regards me with something between understanding, sympathy and duty. And then Ana's eyes find mine. I'm not sure how long we stare at one another, but her eyes plead to my heart: come to me. A sharp hook in my belly yanks me forward, but I resist, as the pain disembowels me.

"We'll wait a few minutes, Taylor." He knows why.

"Very good, sir."

Dad leads her gently away, her body resistantly compliant. My sister-in-law draws her in close, and I revel gratefully in the support that surrounds my wife in my stead.

And then, just before the elevator doors close, she crumples to the floor.

"No!" the word leaves my lips in a rush of blood to my legs. The whole of my body goes numb, unfeeling, and unreactive to opposition. Arms shoot out to hold me, and I shove them aside, slamming through the stairwell door and throwing myself over the railing, bounding steps five at a time to the garage level, praying that this is the elevator's destination.

She's on the ground in my father's arms when the door opens, Kate frantically patting her hands, Sawyer hovering over them and shouting into his sleeve.

The arms lock around me again, stronger now, hauling me away, a voice calling something to me. I don't hear the words, but it brings a rush of remembrance, and just a sliver of control, and I force myself rigid. Oh God, don't do this, not now. Not when I can't touch her. I fall to my knees, and Taylor follows me to the ground. His arms remain locked at my shoulders, but relax ever so slightly.

"I'm going to release you now, Sir," he tells me, and slowly unbands his arms, but remains within reach. The pull reignites. It takes every ounce of control to remain where I am, just a mere meter away. The words bubble to my lips, strangled and desperate. "Ana? Come back, baby, please try..."

"Mmm..." she whimpers, and her face tightens. "Christian?"

"Yes, baby. I'm here. You're safe."

"Sir, they'll take good care of her. We should go."

I can't, not now. Jesus, why does this keep happening to her? "Dad, take her to the hospital. I'm begging you."

"No..." Ana whispers.

"Baby, please, just let Dad and Kate take care of you."

"Sir."

"Yes, Taylor!" I'll deal with my right hand later. My voice softens considerably. "Talk to me, Ana."

"Mmm... no hospital."

"Did you see something, sweetie?" Kate looks between us. Those two and their talk... I imagine Ms. Kavanagh-Grey knows, quite emphatically, everything.

"The elevator… doors with mirrors. Your face... so sad..." she murmurs between cleansing breaths.
My brain does the math. Recognition is immediate… the Escala elevator.

The day she left me.

Fuck.

"Christian, we'll take care of her. Please go," my father instructs.

I consider ignoring him. "It's all right, baby. Please, go with Dad and Kate and get checked out." I glance to her best friend, and we exchange what could only pass as a silent understanding. I grit my teeth. "Don't leave her." I swallow hard and return my gaze to my poor, ailing wife. "Ana, I love you."

And I tear myself away, leaving my soul behind... what's left of it.

~oOo~

I made Taylor stop and park the vehicle a safe distance away from the garage exit, and waited until the SUV carrying my wife departed before allowing him to take me home. I just couldn't leave her. Dad called shortly after to let me know that they'd arrived, that a doctor was seeing her. I heard her voice in the background, and it nearly broke me.

Taylor took refuge in the control room. We haven't yet exchanged real words. I comprehend why he held me back, and I'm perpetually grateful to him, but officially, it was an act of insubordination. I can't let it go, no matter how professional Jason has been over the years, and no matter how close we've become. It gives me something to dwell on, but it doesn't distract me from thoughts of Ana.

I've spoken with my father twice more and Sawyer once in the hour since Ana's episode. She's resting comfortably, they tell me, they're waiting on test results, and she'll be released shortly after. *I should be with her. I should fucking be at her side.*

"Gah!" My arm swings, connecting with a driftwood sculpture. The resounding crash does nothing to temper me, and I reach for a decorative marble orb, lobbing it into the back window. The crack of glass, and the sounding of the alarm system pierces the air. Another orb, another crack of glass. The alarm rings on. The shout of Taylor's voice. Another orb, the spidering of shatterproof glass. I take the mahogany bowl holding the remaining marble projectiles and hurl it away.

Taylor stands rooted in the doorway when I turn, arms spread and palms forward, a gesture meant to subdue. The rage is hardly pacified, but I snap out of it, and like clockwork, the alarm falls silent.

My phone rings.

"Grey."

"Mr. Grey, Ron Williams. I've been made aware of what happened to your wife as her party left the building this morning."

There goes the neighborhood.

"I imagined you would. My father took her to the hospital; she's been admitted for observation."

"Yes, I've already spoken with him. He mentioned it was one of her memory episodes, and seems a very worrisome event, I must say. My official concern, however, is your disregard for the
restraining injunction. Technically, I should be sending a unit to your home to arrest you for violation of the distance mandate."

I hear the conflict in his voice. "But you aren't going to do that."

There's a slight hesitation. "Not at this time. Judge Matthews and I spoke briefly and reviewed the security tape, and we agree that your concern for Mrs. Grey was a sincere reaction to the situation, and the fact that you didn't touch her indicates a level of self-control I've not seen in many men in your current legal position. We're going to overlook the violation, this time," he warns.

"I appreciate it." I swallow, the tension in my stomach lessening fractionally.

"Out of curiosity, is it always like that? She just drops without warning?" he continues. "I've read the notes on her evaluation, of course. I need to make an entry of this event for the record."

*Of course, should my family decide to sue the courthouse for some obscure safety violation that may have triggered Ana's episode. But I won't do that; it wouldn't make sense to, and could be construed as blackmail on some level to perhaps turn the proceedings in my favor. I smell a test.*

The Dom in me wants to play along, to end this ridiculous legal battle quickly, by whatever means necessary. My ever-successful business sense knocks him flat on his ass with one blow.

"There's no rhyme or reason to her episodes, Mr. Williams. On occasion she's remained conscious, but those times seem to be outliers."

"I see. Well I sincerely hope she makes a full recovery. I'll let you get back to your day. And Grey?"

"Hmm?"

"Mind the restraining order."

"Always my intention," I offer. "Any progress?"

He sighs. "It seems my graphologist agrees with you. I just dispatched a warrant officer to pick her up. I'll give you a call when I have some answers."

~oOo~

"Will that be all, Sir?"

Taylor hovers in the doorway. My office smells of sealant and window cleaner. Replacing the damaged glass took under two hours, but the time away from my office forced me to roam the rest of the house, waiting… waiting… with Ludwig hot on my heels. Tess was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Mrs. Taylor. I presume they're consoling one another over my outburst.

"A moment, Taylor." I wave toward the chairs.

"Sir." He sinks stiffly onto the seat, back rigid.

I blow out a breath. Even I'm not sure how to approach this. "I can't decide whether to thank you or fire you."

"Yes, Sir." He gulps. It's all the emotion I'll see from the man, and I'm grateful.

I swallow as well. "Considering I'm not currently in police custody, I'm leaning toward the
former."

Jason shifts slightly, but remains silent.

I round my desk and sink into the chair across from him. "We've toed a few lines over the years, you and I."

My right hand tilts his head to the affirmative.

"I honestly don't know what I'd do without you. I don't know how to handle this." I run my fingers through my hair, and they come to rest at the back of my neck, rubbing slightly. "Things like this are going to come up, rarely, but they'll happen. I'm not comfortable with it. My head of security should never have to restrain me, and it's happened twice in under as many weeks. The fact that both cases occurred semi-publicly…" It occurs to me that I'm transferring some of the blame for my own lack of self-control. But he shouldn't have touched me… is that what this is really about? God, I'm so confused.

"My apologies, Sir."

"No, Taylor." I shake my head. "You shouldn't have to apologize." It's the best I can offer without admitting my own wrongdoing. The boss doesn't openly admit such things.

"Sir, if I may speak freely…"

"Go ahead."

He swallows again. "It is sometimes… difficult… acting as your head of security."

No shit. "Continue."

"It's been even more difficult since Mrs. Grey's accident."

Again, no shit. "Continue."

He shifts slightly, his discomfort subtle but obvious. "Well, Sir… I've often wondered whether I'm serving you in the best capacity."

What? The chill of abandonment washes through me. I'd as much as threatened to fire him, but the realization that I could never follow through is paralyzing. I blow out a breath, shaking my head. "Don't go there, Jason." Don't leave us.

He gulps again. "Yes, Sir."

"Let's, uh… not speak of this again." I rise, rubbing my damp palms over the legs of my slacks.

Taylor rises as well. "Understood, Sir." He eyes the exit. "Will there be anything else?"

A tugging on the leg of my pants draws my eyes downward. I pick up the lanky gray dog and hold him out. "See if Gail has the other one. They're, uh… bothering me." Make sure Gail and Tess are all right. And keep them away; they remind me of my family.

"Yes, Sir."

~ ANA ~

I'm so mad. And tired. I want to get out of here.
"They were taken out of context, Ana. I admit, they do appear… alarming. Just explain, if they ask, exactly the way you just did for me."

"Will Judge Matthews understand?" I ask.

Carrick blows out a breath. I've seen Christian do this… nurture over nature, I suppose. "He will take your account of things into consideration. And Christian will explain himself as well. The D.A. has informed me that Kane will call a few witnesses. We won't know who some of them are until the hearing on Friday, but we'll call a few of our own. I'll go over everything you need to know before then. I promise you'll be as prepared as possible."

*That's the day after tomorrow. Holy shit.* "So soon? I thought things like this took a while to go through the system…"

"For the average case, this is true. Fortunately for our case, and sadly for others. It's not a perfect system, but in the end, it helps to associate with Christian Grey."

_Huh?_ My brain twists with the tangent of thoughts that sprout from that last statement. "Did he pay someone off?" I blurt, immediately regretting how that came out.

"Of course not, no. That would be illegal," he tells me. "Christian… both you and Christian make a number of contributions to the community. Such generosity breeds a tendency toward recognition and special treatment. It's an unfair advantage, I admit, but not an unwelcome one under the circumstances." He covers my folded hands with one of his own. "If it consoles you, such mindsets will have no real bearing on the outcome of the case. It simply makes the system more efficient."

Oh, now that makes me mad. Special treatment for the rich, while the poor have little hope of adequate representation, and the wrongfully accused can rot in a cell for God knows how long until the system gets around to a trial. When this is over, I make a vow to take my newfound status as a member of this so-called elite community and do… something… anything… to make that right, or at least, better than it is. It's the least I can do.

I sigh. "How's Grace today?"

"She's doing well. I'll have to leave you for a while to accompany her for a few tests, but when I return, your discharge papers should be in order, and I'll take you home. I'm sure Teddy will be glad to see you."

I nod. My poor Teddy. If the last several months haven't screwed him up for good… I can't even think it. He's such a sweet, sensitive little boy. I imagine so much of this has him constantly terrified. I wish he were here right now. I want my baby. My eyes fill with angry tears.

"It's going to be all right, my dear." Carrick cups my cheek and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Don't fret. Get some rest, and I'll be back in a while."

I nod, blinking back the tears. God, I'm tired. So tired, of all of this, of this case, of these ridiculous episodes, of hospitals, of tearing my father-in-law away from his wife who quite frankly needs him far more… of not being who Teddy needs me to be, regardless how attached to him I've become. I'm tired of feeling like I'm not in control of my own destiny. A sudden surge of purpose sweeps away the some of the exhaustion, some of the uncertainty, and all at once, I'm no longer put off by the shortness of time until the hearing. I wish we were there now. I'm going to give the lot of them what-for. Ray used to tell me, "Don't stand in the background and let others dictate who you are. My girl is a fighter. Act like it." That's a lot of words in one string for Ray, and they lasso the scattered pieces of me and pull them together. I'm no weakling. Maybe a little unworthy, but I'm no
pushover, and I won't be labeled as such.

It doesn't matter what I think I deserve. I know what I want, and I won't stop until I have it. All of it.
Chapter 22

~ ANA ~

It's morning… I think. Cloudy, cooler. A squeal alerts me. Throwing off the covers, I fling the window open in a matter of seconds and look down.

Two stories below, Teddy runs through the dewy grass in his little red jacket and pajama bottoms, the puppies nipping at his heels. *Hmm… one of the guys must have brought them over for us.* I rest my elbows on the cold sill and watch them play a moment. A knit-hatted figure appears from under the porch eaves, jogs over to Teddy and scoops him up, swinging him around. Teddy giggles wildly.

The figure looks up toward my window, and gray eyes find mine.

"Christian…" I whisper.

*He's here! He's here?* My brain cries out. I shake off the impending questions and anxiety, and he waves me to join them.

I don't need to be asked twice.

Wooly feet find the landing at warp speed and slide across the hardwood. *Has Gretchen polished the floors this morning?* I yank off my socks by the toes and marvel at the traction rewarded my bare feet as I sprint through to the back door. I throw it open and skid to a halt at the edge of the porch.

*They were here. They were just here.*

"Teddy?" I call. "Christian!"

"Right here," I hear my husband's voice. I spin once, almost missing a wisp of movement down the path to the docks.

"Wait for me!" I call. My feet find squishy soil and leaves, slick with recent rain, and the traction is gone once again, "Christian!"

"I'm here, baby. Come to me."

"I'm trying! A little help, please?"

"You can do it, Ana."

The soil has turned to mud, and I've sunk to the ankles. *Great.*

"Please, Christian! Christian?"

Silence.

I've sunk further… *oh come on, am I dreaming?* I cross my arms, and looking up to the sky, I curse out my subconscious for dangling the thing I want most in my face and then snatching it away, for making me believe, for a second, that this is real.

What a bitch. We're going to have words when I wake up. "Okay, I'd like to wake up now," I say to
no one in particular.

Nothing.

"Come on, I get it, this isn't real. Give me another dream or wake me up. And don't be cute and put me naked in a public place," I instruct the dream fairy.

Still nothing.

I sigh heavily. Not a real sigh, I suppose, but real enough to show my exasperation. *I thought that once a person is aware that they're dreaming, they can make themselves wake up?* Whoever said that might want to add a disclaimer.

It's getting darker. *Wait, did I do that?* Over the water, a fog rolls gently, softly covering the lightly lapping waves. At least it's something. It'd be nice to have some company.

"Oh Aaaaaaana…"

*Cripes!* I nearly jump out of my skin.

I whirl in the dirt, causing my legs to tangle and I fall wrist-deep into the muck. At least it isn't real muck. My eyes draw upward from legs to torso, coming to rest on a face, a face… *have I seen him before?*

He clicks his tongue. "Now look at you. Who'd want you like this?" He grabs my elbow and roughly rights me. Piercing eyes stab mine. A few wisps of greasy hair escape his ponytail, and he sweeps his hand over his head. "Missed me, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know…"

"Yes you do!" He spits. "You ruined my life! You and that fucked-up husband of yours." He gasps. "Oh, I see… he didn't tell you about me. Well, I suppose that's in my favor." He pulls me along the path, having no trouble with footing, but I stumble all the way. *Damn it all, this is supposed to be my dream! What the hell is going on? And who is this asshole?*

"Hurry up, bitch… you're going to give me what you owe me."

"What I owe you? Ahhhh!" He's grabbed me by the hair. Wait, this shouldn't hurt, it's only a dream. I grab his hand and twist, and as he releases me, I shove him hard in the chest. Finally, some control. "I don't know you! Get out of my head!" I yell, more to myself… as of course, the creep isn't really here.

And neither am I.

The fog rolls in, and as my assailant is swallowed by it, he laughs maniacally.

"Enough already!" I yell.

The fog churns, as if digesting its prey, and then settles into its swirling. It hasn't receded.

I narrow my eyes, unable to make out the water that's surely beneath me from the rushing sound of waves under the dock… I'm here, splintered boards under dry feet. My hands are clean as well. It would be nice if my dreams made sense, for once.

"Ana…"
If my ears could swivel toward the sound, they would. It's all around, echoing.

"Ana…"

"Ana…"

"Ana…"

"What? Who's there? Show yourself!"

"Count, Ana…"

"What?"

"I said count!"

And the pain rips through my head, rendering me blind.

~oOo~

More voices. This time, I can't see, and I can't move… I can't even see myself. Darkness, the kind that one only experiences in the void, encompasses everything. But I can hear.

"Anything?" Wait… is that… Ray? Oh, Dad…

There's no response.

"Can I get you anything?"

Again, silence.

"You going to stay the night?"

Stay? Who? I may never know, for his companion doesn't utter a word.

"Okay. You call if anything… changes."

I feel something warm touch my face… and my right hand. What? Oh, this is weird. Where the hell am I? Am I still asleep?

I hear a distinct sigh on the left, and feel something shift at my side.

~oOo~

It's a while before I hear voices again. A while… the concept of time eludes me.

"We found something." The crinkle of bending plastic… or film?

"My God."

"It's very small, but it should be taken care of right away."

"Outside. Now." Is that…

Shuffling. No, wait! I want to hear… what's going on? Help me!

~oOo~
The darkness eases to blurry gray. I'm suddenly very thirsty.

"Mmm…” I groan. Wait a minute… did that come from me? I try again… yes! I will my body to obey, my eyes to open...

It's dark here too. A vertical slit of soft white to the left, and nothing to the right.

I groan again… no response. I can't lick my lips, they're far too dry.

My eyelids feel like iron weights.

~oOo~

"… and that's the difference between a product and market extension merger." Paper rustling. "The market is still down. I think we may wait to acquire that cellular tech company after all." More rustling. There's that shift again! Something warm brushes my arm. "Come on, baby. I'm trying here. Work with me."


"Ana?"

My eyelids won't budge. And my head hurts. My dry tongue nudges my lips.

"Baby, can you hear me?" His desperation is palpable.

"Thir-sty," I whisper.

"Of course. Of course," he babbles, and there's more rustling. I hear liquid pouring. Seconds later, something prods my open lips. A straw. I drink weakly, but greedily. Water has never been so delicious before.

"That's enough, baby, you'll make yourself sick. More in a little while." The straw leaves, and my tongue pushes the new moisture around my mouth.

"Can you open your eyes?"

I try. It's hazy, and my eyelids are heavy.

"Good girl."

Barely in view, and absolutely bedraggled, Christian's eyes are rimmed in red.

"Hi," I whisper.

He chokes a sob. "Hi, baby."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

"But what about…” I can't finish. What do I want to say? I can barely speak, much less articulate complex questions.

"It's fine for now, baby. Don't you worry." He looks past me toward a dark corner far across the
suite. "See him?"

There's a figure in a chair reading a magazine. He glances up for a moment, and then returns to his reading.

"Court-appointed security for you. He's keeping an eye on us... on me, rather. It's the only way the judge would let me see you."

"Oh." My head throbs mercilessly. I close my eyes.

Long fingers brush softly over my forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Head hurts."

"I know, love. I'm sorry." He shifts against the bed, and my eyes open in time to see him press a button attached to a tube and some wires. "Let me know if that helps. Should be quick."

A light wave of relief creeps upward, making my head foggy. Well, foggier. "What..."

"Pain relief, baby. Only once every couple hours. See this light? Red means it's been pushed recently. If you need more, I'll get the nurse, all right?"

"Okay."

He sighs. "Better?"

"Yes." As the pain subsides, I'm reminded that I don't know why I'm here. Actually, I don't remember leaving... wasn't I supposed to go home with Carrick?

"Do you remember what happened?" Christian prods. What a mind-reader.

"No," I say softly.

He draws a long breath. "Sawyer called to report that you'd had a seizure, just before you were set to be discharged. He and Dad were with you at the time, thank God. You wouldn't wake up." His voice is low, quiet. "You scared me to death."

"I... don't remember..."

"It's all right, love," he rubs his hand over my tubed arm, clasping my fingers with his other. "The doctor found a small clot near the original injury site. It wasn't detected in earlier scans due to its proximity to the healing fracture. They operated on you late yesterday, to fix it."

"Am I..."

"You're okay, baby. You'll be just fine." He presses his lips to the back of my hand. "I love you. So much, Anastasia."

"Love you, too." My voice sounds terrible. "Teddy?"

"Kate has him. He's fine."

I swallow. My mouth is dry again. My mind-reader pours more water into the cup and brings the straw to my lips. Again, he doesn't let me drink too much at once. Ever the control freak.

"Tell me," I ask.
He picks up my hand again. "You didn't miss much. When I heard what happened, I called the District Attorney directly. He's friends with my father... and he put me in touch with the judge, and due to the circumstances he lifted the restraining order while you're here, under the condition that an officer of the court is present when I'm with you. It doesn't cover Teddy, but at the time... you needed me more."

I sigh. It feels good to breathe. "Thank you." I'm not sure what I'm thanking him for... for being here, however briefly, for getting the judge to agree, however temporarily, for holding my hand... or all of the above. I return his gentle squeeze.

"You're going to have to stop scaring me like that, Mrs. Grey," he scolds me gently, smirking.

The corners of my mouth twitch. Leave it to Christian to lighten the mood after such angst-ridden conversation. He's so damned mercurial.

But I don't think I've ever loved him more.

"Do you remember anything else?" he asks.

Anything else... anything... oh, like another episode? No, I don't think it was like that, was it? "I don't think so, can't remember," I say, honestly.

He nods. "The doctors think your episodes may stop now, but it's too early to be sure."

"What about the hearing?"

Christian's expression changes, from mild to worried and then back again. "I've conversed with the judge twice more since Wednesday, and he's agreed to a small sit-down next week or the week after, when you're up for it. Apparently Mr. Kane is having second thoughts whether he wants to pursue this. He'll still be involved; what things he's investigated will need to be explained, but Dad and I are both confident that we can resolve this amicably."

And in darkness, there is hope. "What time is it..." I whisper, and realize, slowly as my brain catches up, that I meant 'what day.'

"Nearly midnight on Friday." He strokes my forehead. "You just missed Ray; he'll be back in the morning. He's been beside himself. We all have."

Good grief; I need to stop ending up in hospital beds. The past few months have been enough for a lifetime. "Sorry," I manage.

"No, baby, you have nothing to apologize for," he tells me, bringing my palm to his cheek and holding it there. "This wasn't your fault. None of it is. I should be taking better care of you."

"Stop," I whisper. If I can't blame myself, neither can he. "You didn't do anything wrong." He closes his tired eyes, his brow furrowing. I brush my thumb over his prickly stubble. "Missed you."

His eyes tighten. "You too, baby."

The fog is more insistent, like the one in my dreams, and my eyelids drift closed. "Sleepy."

"Then rest, my love. I'll stay with you."

~oOo~

When my eyes open again, it's brighter. Strands of pinkish light peek through the light gray curtain.
The pain is gone.

But so is Christian. Did I conjure him in a moment of weakness? Ugh, probably. The despair that comes with the realization sets into the pit of my stomach like ice.

"Oh, you're awake," a voice says.

"Dad?" I croak.

"I'm here, honey." He strides over from the doorway and plants a kiss on my cheek. "Feeling better this morning?"

I nod slightly, but it makes my head spin. Verbal communication only, looks like. "Is it Saturday?"

"It is. Are you up to having a visitor?"

I paste on a small smile. "Sure."

He returns to the door for a moment and waves. Carter enters carrying a very worried-looking Teddy, and my heart alights. I reach for him.

"Careful, Theodore," Carter reminds him, placing him in my arms. His warm body snuggles right in, covering my torso like a leggy little frog.

"Mommy sick again?" he whimpers, incredulously.

"Mommy's better now," I murmur to him. "And very glad to see you." His head burrows into my neck, giving me easy access to smell his hair, his delicious baby scent. "I hope you've been a good boy for Miss Ina." He nods into my shoulder. I mouth a "thank you" to Carter, and she nods and slips quietly from the room.

"Christian thought you'd like to see him this morning, asked me to be here when you woke up. You must be hungry."

"Christian was here?" My voice rises in pitch. Teddy holds on tighter.

"You don't remember? He said you guys talked for a while last night."

I take in a cleansing breath, the ice in my stomach melting rapidly. *It was real after all! He was real.* "I remember. Last night was a little fuzzy. I wasn't sure if I dreamed him."

Ray nods, his expression softening. "Glad to see you awake, Annie."

"Glad to see you too, Dad. And yes, I'm starving."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

"Mr. Grey, Bas Matthews. Have a minute?"

*Here we go.* My fingers squeeze the phone a little tighter. "Of course, Judge Matthews. What can I do for you?"

"I understand Mrs. Grey was discharged yesterday. How is she recovering?"

"My father and sister-in-law insist that she's doing much better. I appreciate your discretion and consideration given the circumstances."
"I'm relieved to hear that. Incidentally, per our discussion the other day I've decided against a formal hearing in favor of individual interviews. When would you be available this week?"

**Good news at last.** "I can clear my schedule. I'd prefer sooner, however, my wife may not be up to such things just yet. Have you spoken with my father?"

"Yes, he's been in touch. It seems your wife insists on sooner as well. How's Wednesday for you?"

"Perfect."

"It's settled then. I'll expect you on Wednesday at ten o'clock."

"Very good, Judge Matthews. I'll be there."

I hang up and dial my father.

"Christian."

"She's in no condition to be interrogated, Dad! Are you seriously going to let her jump into this whenever she wants?"

"Christian..."

"She's just had surgery on her brain! What if it were Mom? Would you honestly put her through this if it were Mom instead of Ana?"

"Christian!" my father yells. "If you'll kindly shut up for a moment, someone would like to say hello."

I hate it when he does that. He's probably going to put Ana on to calm me down. I can't visit the house, part of the amended injunction, but we're now permitted to speak over the phone, with supervision of course.

"Hello, darling, what has you all worked up today?"

**Shit, it's my mother.** I plaster on a smile, she can always hear the expression in my voice. "Hello, Mom. How are you feeling today?"

"We'll enough to go home, it seems. Are you going to answer my question?"

"Home? Are you sure you're all right? It's only been a week..."

"It's been nearly two weeks, darling. Linda will look in on me every day on her way to and from the office, and Ana as well. I understand she's staying at the house for the moment."

**Shit. What does she know?** "Listen, Mom, can you put Dad back on for a moment? I'll talk to you when we're done."

"You and Ana aren't having problems, are you? Your father has been so preoccupied..." her tone tells me she's glaring at him, "... and I can't get a word out of him. Please darling, I only want to help."

"I know that, Mother, and it's not what you think," I pull out my go-to preface. "Put Dad on. I'll tell you soon, I promise."

There's a shuffling and muffled words... I think she's telling him off. Yep, Mama Bear is back.
"Hold on, Dear. I'll be back in a few moments." A heavy door clicks. "All right, I've stepped outside."

A brewing storm of panic wells up in my stomach. This has gotten so far out of hand, and it's making an absolute pussy of me. "I'm not ready for her to know everything, Dad. Especially the... other things. About me."

My father sighs heavily. "I'm not sure if it's in me to tell her those things, Christian, but your mother and I don't make practice of keeping secrets from one another. That'll be something for you to reveal, if you choose, though it pains me. As for the legal situation... it's time she knew. And not only in light of the current living arrangements."

"But she was so upset about Ana's surgery, I don't want to burden her further..."

"Son, stop. She's going to be told. And with Ana around as well, things are going to come out. Why don't you come by the hospital, we'll sit down with your mother and give her a general rundown of the situation. Her doctor isn't in until four to discharge her, so we have some time."

I have the overwhelming urge to kick something. Instead, I grip the corner of my glass desk until it cracks. "God damn it!"

"Christian?"

"Yes, Dad, I'll be there. Give me twenty minutes."

I click the phone off and shove it into my pocket, striding out my office and past the PA desk. Taylor follows on my heels. "Andrea, hold my calls, tell Ros to go ahead with the brunch meeting without me, and I need a new desk."

~oOo~

"Oh God, Christian! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Dear, Christian and I discussed it, and we both felt it was better to wait until your health had improved," my father explains to her. "We didn't keep it from you for any other reason. It all happened so suddenly after your scare, there wasn't time to properly and delicately fill you in."

"Screw delicately!" My mother cries, turning on me. "Do you mean to tell me that the reason you and Ana visited separately... but what about Ana's surgery last week? You were able to see her then, weren't you?"

"Yes, but only under the supervision of an officer of the court," I tell her. "We'll likely have this resolved on Wednesday."

"And I'll make sure the Judge sees reason," Dad placates her. "Christian has done nothing wrong. The person responsible has already admitted that the allegations are false. It's just a matter of clearing up some circumstantial evidence. If there's no proof, there's no case. Simple as that."

"I can't believe someone would say that you... you... Oh, I can't think it!" She buries her face in her hands. I lean in and take her softly into my arms.

"My sweet, gentle boy," she murmurs. "Whoever could have said such things?"

Her assumption tears into my gut, and the question rips the tethers of my heart until I fear I'll bleed out. Oh, what she'll think of me. She'll never stop asking until she knows everything.
Everything.

She saved me, time and again. I owe her my life. I can't lie to her forever.

She raises her eyes. "You know who it is, don't you? Don't you?"

I clench my jaw.

"It's that horrible woman, isn't it?" She waits. I swallow. "It is, isn't it? Why is she stirring the pot now? Does she have something on you?"

"Mom, I..."

"Christian Trevelyan Grey, you tell me the truth this minute!"

And in those ten words, I'm reduced to half my stature and a third my age.

Oh, there's so much more to this story. Mom, Dad, please don't hate me.

~oOo~

My father has insisted on accompanying me to the interview. Ana's was this morning. He won't say a word about it.

The truths of the last several days lie like splintered glass, awaiting the tenderest flesh of my feet to pierce. Mother isn't speaking to me. She only knows some... and if she isn't speaking to me now, she'll never want to see me again when the last shard falls.

I can't even see myself in the mirror. My haunted past infects those I love most.

Flynn told me yesterday to focus only on the present. Fucking Flynn. He's here today as well, claps me on the shoulder rather roughly... or it could be that I feel so incredibly weak.

"Mr. Grey, Judge Matthews will see you now."

My pulse takes off like a rabbit. I've left the panic scale, bounding away from the fight-or-flight level, leaving what familiar realms of unpleasantness regularly grace me with their presence.

"You're the master of your universe," Flynn murmurs. Our eyes meet for one, two, three seconds, and I straighten, square, and carry forward.

~oOo~

"Now what?"

"Now we wait for the judge's official ruling." Dad's face is worn, tired. "Son, go home. There's nothing more you can do for the moment."

We robotically shake hands. He stares at me for a moment. I don't think he knows quite what to make of me. I don't know what to make of me, either, but I'm far too exhausted to fret over whether he still loves his youngest son. Too numb. Too thrown from the revelations of the past two hours. Dad turns and heads for the door... the plate glass flashes my reflection over his back, and then he's gone. Probably back to the office for another few hours. That sounds like him. Bury yourself in work to keep the demons at bay. This is where I get it from.

Perhaps, that's what I should do as well. Bury myself in work. The time won't pass any less
unhurriedly, but I may as well be productive.

"Sir." I vaguely acknowledge Taylor's standard greeting with a dip of my head.

"Grey House."

I can't stop my thoughts from drifting. The tangents that take me for a ride, some entertaining, some shocking, others seemingly irrelevant but leading to other forks and paths and things I would otherwise not consider. One in particular takes me back to the beginning, and I wonder what things would be like for us, had I been the one to lose my memory. Would I have been as understanding, as willing and receptive as Ana has been? Or would I have been the same cruel bastard that I was before we met? Would I have fallen in love with her again, or would I have resisted, turning my back on the other half of my soul?

Would I fear her touch? Desire her, just the same?

"Sir, Ms. Bailey would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience, and Mr. Flynn is waiting in your office." Andrea blinks at me expectantly.

"Excuse me?"

"Mr. Flynn… his standing invitation, per your instructions… would you like me to tell Ms. Bailey you're unavailable?"

Thank God for Andrea… she's never irritated me sufficiently to fire her, and usually assumes correctly what I'd prefer. And she's always here. Always. Always fucking here. "Yes. Do that. And then take the rest of the week off."

"Sir?"

"Vacation, Andrea, it's called vacation. I don't want to see you again until the week after next. Go!"

She scurries away. There's a tiny part of me that relishes the ability to strike fear into the hearts of my employees, and it pings gleefully as the scare-counter clicks over a digit. Then the numbness sets in again. My fingers grasp the cold steel of my office door handle, and I pull it open. Let's get this over with.

"Who called you, John?"

He turns from the panoramic window. "How did it go?"

Oh, the deflection. I'm far too tired for this shit. "It went. Who called you?" I insist.

"Doesn't matter." He waves a hand toward the long sofa.

I gesture for him to sit first. It's my office, after all. I sink onto the cushion after him, the weight of the situation pinning me, and though my seat is strategically higher than Flynn's, I could be on the floor. Exhaustion sucks the pretense out of me.

He waits.

"I'm fucking tired," I say.

He nods.

I swallow. "I want this to be fucking over."
He nods again. "It is, almost. Your father seems to think it'll go in your favor."

So, it's Dad who called him. It figures. Flynn blinks at me. I'm too tired to call him on it. Too tired to play my own game, not that it's ever worked on him. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Have you slept?"

I sigh. "No."

"Do you want to sleep?"

"No."

I'm not sure how long I rest my face in my hands, or remember how I even got into that position. When I look up again, he's still watching me, passively. "I'm fine, Flynn. You can go."

He shakes his head, brow furrowing slightly.

"Why are you here. It's almost a whisper, and nothing of a question."

"I'm just… here."

Yeah. He's 'here for me.' How sweet. Too bad I'm too exhausted to care. "You know what I want?" I say, finally, considering the recessed light fixtures around the ceiling. "I want to go back to before the accident. Change things so it wouldn't happen. But then I'd still be in this predicament, so that's no good. So let's go further back. What if I'd cancelled the interview when Ana and I met? I was about to, that day… though I knew, or I thought I knew, that it would just delay the inevitable and supremely irritating clash with one now-sister-in-law. One way or another, current predicament stands. Further back… no, keep the subs, nothing to do with them… ditch Elena, she's guilty, but not of this… ah, yes. Lily Woods. Lily. Fucking. Woods. If I'd not given in. Just. That. One. Time."

My head reels. The numbness has given way to a replay of the stabbing revelation, that little, elusive tidbit that's the cause of all this. It's my fault, after all. I'd harbored so much anger toward her, so much hatred. But in the end, it was All. My. Fault.

I hate those damned lights. If I look at Flynn, I'll hate him too. Flynn already knows I occasionally hate him on some level; the lights don't fucking care either way. I think I'll keep my focus on them.

"Christian," he calls me back from wherever the tangents have taken me.

"What."

"I'm a little lost."

"Yeah? So am I." And I hate myself for it. I haven't hated myself this much since… since…

"Get up and walk," he instructs.

"What?" My eyes meet his.

He waves his hand at me. "Walk. Pace. Just move."

"Fuck you and your fucking ridiculous coping strategy!" I launch myself off the couch, driving through the fatigue and powering over to the opposite wall, running my fingers through my hair. I turn and march toward my desk. "Why the fuck didn't she try harder to tell me? Why didn't I listen?" I swipe some thick, leather binder from a shelf and lob it in no particular direction. It skids
to a stop, open and upended, pages bent. I don't give a shit. "She's going to jail because I didn't listen!"

"Christian, Miss Woods may serve time because she lied. The authorities don't take that kind of thing lightly."

"Yeah? Well I don't take what she did lightly either!" God, I can't believe what she did to me... what she did to herself... and...

"I'm getting the feeling we're thinking about two different wrongdoings," he says calmly. Calmly, because he's trying to keep me calm. Keep me from destroying things. Then why the fuck did he tell me to get up and walk? And why the fuck did I listen?

"Christian?" he prods gently.

I feel like I'm on fire. The anger... it's hot. White hot. God, it hurts. It hurts...

"Christian..."

John stands before me, hands behind his back. It's a very non-threatening stance, one I recognize from hundreds of hours over the last several years. He wants to help. I know he does. I could wrap my fingers around his neck if I wanted to, and he'd not have time to react. But I don't want to hurt him, not really.

I want to hate myself.

I sink to the floor.

"She killed it."

"What?"

I shake my head. The numbness has returned. "I don't understand why it bothers me so much. It was so long ago..." I swallow. "At the time, would I have been this upset about it? I don't know. Would it affect me like this? I don't know. Would I have made a different choice if I'd known? I don't know. I'd like to think I would. But I'm afraid that I wouldn't. I'm afraid I'd have reacted as I'd expect of myself at that age, in the place I was." I inhale slowly, and blow the air through my lips. My head spins a bit.

"You... got her pregnant," he assumes.

I nod. My heart squeezes.

"And she terminated."

I nod again.

"Then you have every reason to feel exactly how you feel."

"I feel... horrible."

"I know." I don't know when he joined me on the floor, but there he sits, John Flynn, cross-legged before me, when I return from my daze.

"I feel responsible."
"I imagine you do."

"I'm so fucking angry."

"At who?"

"At her. At myself. At you. At my parents. At Elena Fucking Lincoln. She beat the shit out of me when she found out about my little indiscretion, did I ever tell you that? You wanted full disclosure, Flynn? You've got it."

"You lost me again. Time frame it for me."

I blow out another breath. It's another one of his distraction exercises, forming a timeline in order to remove myself emotionally from the event. Whatever works, it's actually dulling the pain somewhat. For now.

"I was just out of high school. It was about a week before my eighteenth birthday… I remember because Elena came back from a two week holiday on my birthday, and that's when she… well… Happy Birthday, Christian." I shift uncomfortably. Lily and Mia were always friends. I'm not sure why; Mia's a few years younger. Lily was always over at our house… oh, God…" my heart sputters as it dawns on me.

"What is it?"

"She wasn't there for Mia. She was there for me."

Flynn's brow furrows.

"It makes perfect sense. Why the fuck would a girl four years older want to hang out with Mia? I mean, I love my sister to death, but she's the most annoying person in Washington."

Flynn snorts, covering his mouth. Go ahead and laugh, you fucker.

"What? You've met my sister enough times, you know what she's like. I don't know why anyone Lily's age would have wanted to hang around her. The thing was… and I can't believe I didn't pay attention… Lily spent every opportunity bothering me. Ending up in the same room with me. Sitting next to me when Mom and Dad had her over for dinner. They thought she was grooming Mia for society or some shit… God! She tried to sit at the piano with me once, and I just about lost it."

"Okay, so we've established something of a motive. You believe she was infatuated with you?"


"Whatever floats your boat." Fucking Flynn-ism.

"As I said, Elena had been gone a while, and I was used to having an… outlet… every other day or so. In walks Lily one night while she and Mia had a sleepover, offering herself to me. Practically begging me. And so…” I wave my hand with a flourish.

"She was an outlet for you."

I shake my head. That night comes flooding back. God, I was such a shit. I held her hands down. I didn't kiss her, rather, I kept my eyes closed for most of it. I didn't see her face when I… I shudder at the memory. "I didn't know it was her first time until after… and I saw the blood."
"I see."

I lean back against the side of my desk. "I told Elena immediately that I'd screwed up; thought it would be better if she heard it from me than if she found out I'd hidden it from her. And she made me pay dearly for it. I swore I'd never again be someone's first. It's why I was so shocked and upset when Ana told me she'd never..." my eyes widen as the epiphany blooms. "It was because of that night, because of... her... that I took Ana's experience so seriously. I could have screwed that up so badly."

"So in a way, Lily helped to prepare you for a future with Ana," Flynn rationalizes. 

"Don't go all cause and effect on me," I warn. 

"Fair enough. Then what happened?"

"After Elena beat the shit out of me?"

"You seem pretty focused on that particular event; I'll put a flag on it and we'll delve into it another time."

Shit. He means it, too. His recognition of my return to that point is a trick he uses to keep me from anchoring myself to particularly bad memories, but it also gives him tidbits to talk about. I pay him well enough, might as well throw him a bone now and then.

"In the meantime, move forward to your next encounter with Miss Woods."

This is the part that hurts. The part where my chest begins to ache. My pulse pounds. "She tried to tell me. She sent me at least a dozen letters over the next month. I threw them away, as I did with all of them. Well, all but that one... but we've been over that." I swallow. "She even came by the house a few times. I was good at disappearing. I thought it was an attempt at a repeat performance. I avoided her at all cost." I sigh as my mind travels. "So I went off to Boston. Came back at Christmas, saw her once... she was so bitter. I thought nothing of it. Never did. Until now." I fist my hair in my hands. "I didn't know. I didn't fucking know. I should have known. I should have listened!"

Flynn is quiet for a while. "Did anyone else know? Mia, perhaps?"

I shake my head. 

"Her parents must have known. They would have had to give consent for the... procedure. Do you think she would have told them about your involvement?"

A laugh bubbles forth from my lips. "Oh, if they knew, they knew better than to breathe about it. Lily was the perfect debutante. The elite of the society girls. She was the ringleader, and they knew it. Their shining star would fall into obscurity and ridicule in an instant if anyone were to find out." And an innocent life never came to be. Another child of mine who never knew life. My heart shatters.

"Do you think anyone else knew?"

"Why does it matter who knew?" I snap.

Flynn holds his hands up in surrender. "I just know where your mind usually goes. Saving face is your usual modus operandi. I suppose what I ought to ask is, who should know, now?"
Ana. Anastasia should know. My mother... though Dad's probably telling her as we speak, or rather, as I cringe here on the floor of my executive suite. Oh, if my contemporaries could see me now, a fucking blubbering mess, curled into myself on the floor, spilling my guts to the only man who will listen without flinching much. I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks. Oh, but I do. Stop lying to yourself, Grey. Your livelihood would go swirling down the toilet if anyone knew just how weak you really are.

"My mother isn't speaking to me," I blurt.

"I'm aware."

"You spoke to her."

"Yes."

I snort. "She talks to you, but not to her son."

"She asked me to be here for you today."

This grabs my attention. "She did?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

Flynn re-crosses his legs the other way. "Just that she felt you might need someone to help you sort things out. She knew your father wouldn't be up to the task, no offense intended... Carrick can handle quite a lot..."

"But he could never handle my shit."

"To put it mildly."

"I see."

He sighs. "Back to the point. You say you should have known. But you didn't, and we're here now. Things are the way they are, they've ended this way and only this way. Where do you want to go from here?"

I shake my head. "I don't know."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I retrieve it with trembling fingers. Dad's name flashes on the screen. Oh God, please. I'm not sure what I'm asking for... just don't let it be bad.

I clear my throat and push the answer button.

"Grey."

"It's over."

I swallow. "Define over."

"The case is closed, Christian. Come get your family and take them home."

Every cell in my body collapses. The high anxiety of the past two weeks rushes out like air from a balloon.
"What about..."

"Her sentence is negotiable, depending on the extent to which we want to press charges. It would also be prudent to open a counter suit against Kane. We can talk about that tomorrow. Just enjoy your family tonight."

A sigh shudders in my chest. "Thank you, Dad."

"You're welcome." He hangs up.

"Good news?"

I nod. "The case has been closed. I can take Ana and Teddy home."

I suspect he wants to be happy for me. Hell, I want to be happy for myself. But as the relief ebbs, the numbness has returned full-force. I don't know what to feel.

"I suspect they'll keep a little while longer. Why don't we chat a bit more?"

Another wave of relief, but this has the bitter aftertaste of regret. "Just a little longer," I agree.

~ ANA ~

"It's done, my dear."

My knees wobble a bit. I grab hold of a kitchen chair for stability. Teddy continues shoving animal crackers into his mouth, oblivious.

"Are you sure?" I dare not hope.

"Pending the charges against Miss Woods and our potential countersuit, yes. The injunction has been lifted. You and Teddy may return home whenever you choose."

I ignore my legs' threat to give way and rush at Carrick, my father-in-law and our hero in all this, wrapping my arms around his waist. This affectionate side of me is rather new, but I've welcomed it.

Carrick returns my embrace with gentleness, cupping the back of my neck. It hurts just a little, when his fingers brush my hair over the place where they inserted the probe. I don't complain.

"Thank you," I murmur.

"You're welcome, my dear. I'll call Christian and give him the news. Would you run along and let Grace know?"

"Yes, of course."

Grace and I have done some considerable bonding over the last couple days. I wish her surgery had been as uncomplicated as mine, though the ailments were similar. I tap lightly on the library door, the threshold to her refuge.

"Grace?" I call softly.

"Come in, Ana," Grace smiles, setting down her book. "Sit with me a while. Is my grandson through with his snack?"

"Almost; Gretchen is cleaning him up now."
"What is it, darling?" Goodness, if only my own mother could read me this well. Grace is the most perceptive person I've ever met. It's likely what makes her such an excellent physician. I'd like to think it's also something she'd passed through raising Christian; he's so damned observant. I perch next to her on the sofa.

"Carrick just got off the phone... he says it's all over. We can go home."

"Oh Ana, that's wonderful news!" Grace wraps me in her arms. She's surprisingly strong, but ever so soft. "Is Christian on his way?"

"I think so. Carrick was about to call him. He asked me to come tell you."

Grace smirks knowingly. "I suspect the men in my life are a little afraid of me at the moment."

I'm puzzled. Christian is in the dog house, quite naturally, by the looks of things. *But Carrick? Why would you say that?*

Grace laughs. "It's the complexity of a gentle warrior. Yes, I'm upset with Carrick and Christian both, but more specifically, I'm hurt that they believed I wasn't able to handle certain things about Christian's life, the things you and I cleared up the other day," she reminds me. "It affects my family deeply when I'm upset with them. I'm well aware of this, and it's so fulfilling to know that I mean so much to each of them, to each of you," she squeezes my hands. "But Carrick and Christian, especially... When they fall out of line, often the way to keep them from repeating a mistake is to stay mad just a little longer."

I'm floored by this. *Sweet, selfless Grace plays mind games?*

She smirks. "You'll see what I mean when Teddy does something that throws you for a loop. It'll happen. You'll forgive him, of course. You won't be able to help it. And you'll love him, no matter what. But you'll hold the strings that straighten him on his path. Once in a while, you have to tug that string just a little longer, to remind him what he ought to do, even if you aren't really mad anymore."

I sit on that for a moment. "That strangely makes sense," I admit. I'd never thought about it before. Teddy doesn't really need discipline yet. It sounds a little unorthodox, but I tuck it away for future perusal. This whole mommy thing is still fresh.

"It's actually a little something I picked up from one of Christian's first therapists," Grace continues. "She was a little too subtle for Christian, and female therapists just didn't jive well with him... it didn't work out between them, but the advice sure has helped. With Elliot as well... though don't tell Kate I said so."

I smile at this. "I guess I should go pack..."

"Nonsense, darling. Gretchen can do that, when you're ready. I'm not ready to let go of my first daughter in law yet." She hugs me again.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Ana."

I work the courage around my head. "Do you think Christian and I will make it if I never remember?" My voice choking on the last word, surprising me. It wasn't clear just how worried I've been about the subject until I said it out loud.
"Oh, sweetheart... Christian will love you with all his heart until the day he leaves this earth, and with any luck, even after. I've never, ever seen him as dedicated or as passionate as he is when he's with you. He'll never give up on you." Grace pulls me in close, and a rush of emotion blubber to the surface... all the pent up anxiety, worry, frustration and anger pouring from my soul in racking sobs.

"Shh, darling. It's all right now."

"I'm... sorry..." I murmur between heaving breaths. Grace clicks her tongue and shushes me.

I'm not entirely sure how long I cry, but Grace has managed to wedge me in next to her, my head resting on her shoulder. My own mother never really soothed me this way. The feeling is foreign, but so welcome.

I don't realize I've fallen asleep until I feel warm fingers at my face.

"Mmm..."

"Wake up, beautiful."

My eyes crack, and staring down at me is the man I love. He looks as tired and worn as I feel. Still, my heart blooms at the sight of him.

"Hi."

"Hi, baby. Ready to go home now?"

I nod. Christian shifts to kiss his mother's cheek, and whispers, "Thank you," before helping me up. Grace just nods. She isn't ready to let go of the string yet. In a few days, perhaps, I think.

Christian carries a napping Teddy to the SUV and straps him into his car seat. We ride in silence. If it weren't for his hand gently holding mine as he drives, I'd wonder if I'd caused him ire somehow.

"Welcome home," Gail pulls me in for a hug. She has tears in her eyes. "Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. Teddy has woken, and he and Christian share a father and son moment on their way to the great room sofa... that sofa. Christian sinks into it with his miniature in his lap and waves for me to join them. Gail offers us a smile and disappears.

As I sink into my husband's side and curl an arm around Teddy's back, Christian pulls me fiercely but gently against him. I can feel him trembling.

*Oh, sweetheart, I know.* His cheek comes to rest on the top of my head. So many words we should exchange, but not in front of our son. Christian just holds us as though he'll never let go. Teddy clings to Christian without a word, not fussing or fighting. He knows something is amiss. I think he understands that, right now, his Daddy just needs to hold him and Mommy. And we're okay with that.

It's dark outside when I wake again. Long fingers stroke my hair, careful not to brush the back of my neck. Somehow, he just knows. I tighten my arm around... the emptiness is startling.

Teddy is gone.

"It's all right, love. Gail fed him and put him to bed. I didn't have the heart to wake you."
Christian's eyes are soft but alert.

I sigh as the adrenaline seeps out. My throat hurts. It does that sometimes when I fall asleep during the day.

"Hungry?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He shrugs. "Me either."

I stretch, registering the stiffness accumulated from my curled position. "So, what do we do now?"

He smirks, his eyes not focused on anything in particular. He shrugs. "So many things, I don't even know where to begin."

I have no idea if the apathetic tone is relieved, a sign of burnout or some level of anger that I haven't yet seen from him, and I'm not sure whether he knows either. "What would you like to do?" I ask tentatively.

He shakes his head. "I haven't a clue."

"Maybe we should talk," I suggest.

He nods, still dazed. "Maybe."

"But you don't really want to," I supply.

"Not really," he admits, his eyes darkening. "But we should clear the air."

He straightens. "It's a beautiful night. Get some blankets and go out onto the deck. I'll dig up a bottle of wine and join you." He helps me to my feet, pressing a lingering kiss to my temple before trudging off toward the kitchen. That's the best word I have to describe his gait... trudging. It's as though he carries the weight of the world on his back, and it's taken its toll on him.

He passes me a glass of something deep red. The first sip miraculously takes the edge off, leading me to believe his choice of vintage may have been intentional. He passes me a square of dark chocolate a well. How appropriate... the sweet to counteract our collective mood.

"Where do we even begin," he muses after a few sips.

"I want to go first," I say. The wine is making me brave.

Christian shifts so he's facing me on the lounge, tucking a wool blanket around our twined legs. "By all means. You have the floor, Mrs. Grey."
"They grilled me for over an hour."

"They?"

"Judge Matthews. That shrink lady from the evaluation. Some neutral observer from another district. Don't worry, your dad made him sign an NDA." I see his expression pass from something like panic to relief.

"Go on."

"Carrick and Sawyer had to wait outside. They got to watch everything on the monitor, but the judge didn't want me influenced, something about Stockholm Syndrome, as though they'd already decided that I wasn't in control of my own mind." I take a breath. Christian's face is already the picture of rage. He sees where this is going. Keep going, Steele... uh... Grey.

"They took turns asking me the same questions, over and over, trying to screw me up. Make me slip and say something they could use against you. But there was nothing. As far as I'm concerned, you've never hurt me. Never hurt Teddy. Those pictures came up, the ones from the hospital that day... I told them over and over that I didn't feel threatened, that I didn't believe for a second that you'd hurt me. They asked about the two times I got lost. Suggested that I did it on purpose, like I was trying to escape."

Christian's face is a mottled mix of fury and remorse.

"They wanted to know about our personal life, all the intimate details. Whether you'd ever touched me inappropriately. It was so uncomfortable, so humiliating." I feel the tears gathering. "I felt violated. Tainted. What we do, or don't do, rather... behind closed doors is none of their concern, but they made it their business."

Christian's fists have tightened. I'm glad he set down his glass, else it would be shattered and we'd likely be on our way to the hospital for stitches.

"Then they asked me about the memory loss. That neutral guy went as far as to suggest that I was faking it, and the episodes. I know it was just a tactic in the questioning, but it still hurt. I've never been deceptive, but they don't know that. They don't know me. I doubt they were the least bit interested in what I thought. And when they were done, they thanked me, with these fake smiles. I haven’t seen your dad look so angry as when I met him in the hallway after, not even the day he rescued us at the police station. I think Sawyer wanted to punch someone."

Christian is about to blast off.

But I'm not quite done. "I know it was all necessary to convince them, but I don't remember ever being treated so disrespectfully in my life."

"Don't you dare defend their actions." His voice is deadly quiet.

"Hey, it's still my turn," I remind, gently. "Just before I left the room, I let them have it."

Christian turns pale.
"To quote you, it's not what you think. I didn't give them anything to use against you," I tell him. I mean that I got mad, and I told them exactly how I felt about this whole thing. It was off the record, the camera was already off... but I told them that they ought to be ashamed for treating a supposed victim so badly. If they'd really been concerned for my well-being, it was a concept lost on me. I said I have little confidence in their justice system, and that my votes in the next election would reflect this." The corners of my mouth turn up, just a little. "Judge Matthews had the good manners to look a little scared."

I'd have expected Christian to climb into orbit by now, but instead, he bursts into laughter. "You... threatened him... with losing your vote?"

"Don't make fun, what else could I do?"

"No, no baby... You misunderstand," he calms. "I can picture you stomping your little foot, I've seen it, and it's quite empowering," his eyes are bright, with reverence, I think? "That was actually a very powerful threat, coming from you. All you'd have to do is say in casual conversation at a benefit or dinner or somewhere that you'll be supporting another candidate, and he's toast. Finished." He leans in and kisses me, softly, but with a fire that curls my toes. It's brief, and when he pulls away, I'm left wanting. "I'm so damn proud of you." His face turns a little darker, and he takes a long breath. "But I'm... appalled... so fucking angry at the way you say they spoke to you."

"That makes two of us," I say, a touch of bitterness on my lips. "You really think they took my threat seriously?"

"Oh, yes. But the election will be the least of their worries. My father and I will be suing the county and Mr. Kane for a number of things."

"What about she-who-shall-not-be-named? If it weren't for her..."

"I'd like to deal with Miss Woods personally."

I frown. "Meaning what? Carrick mentioned that we should decide whether to press charges, and that it'll resolve how harsh her punishment is. I mean, she did this to us. Sure, Kane is a dickhead, and the police and courts should never have let things go this far, common sense should have prevailed way before this..."

"Damn right," he interrupts.

"But she did this to us. To you and me. I feel personally victimized by her. She and Mia are friends, right? Does Mia know about any of this?"

"Not yet. I'll need to sit down with her as well and explain."

"What about explaining this to me?" I say, hurt. He's avoided talking to me about any of it, the few times we were actually able to talk, he turned the conversation away from the woman’s motives. "I deserve to know why she did this, Christian. You know, and you don't want to tell me, I can see that. But I deserve to know."

Christian's lips are a flat line. To say he looks conflicted is an understatement. He looks as though he's halfway along a tightrope, and it's about to be cut. I bring my hand to his cheek.

"Talk to me."

His Adam's apple sinks and rises with a deep swallow, and his expression melts from one of anger to deep sadness. "You're right," he says finally. "You deserve to know everything. But I need your
promise first, that you'll stay. I only just discovered some details myself. I haven't had time to fully process them yet. I need to know you won't run when you know everything. I need your help. I'm not even sure how I feel about it all yet."

He wants my reassurance that I won't leave him. I don't know if I could, even if I wanted to, but this sounds bad, whatever it is.

I take a long swig of the wine, draining my glass, and set it aside. Taking his balled fist in my hands, I stare him deep in the eyes. "I promise."

He nods. "I don't know where to start. I should probably come out and say it, but doing that won't give you an accurate idea of where I was mentally back then." He shifts a bit under the blanket, and pulls me in, tucking me under his arm. "I told you my early life was unpleasant, and that reflected in my behavior throughout my teenage years. I had little regard for others." I feel him swallow. "Lily and Mia were friends for as long as I can remember. I've only just come to realize that perhaps the only reason Lily hung around Mia, who is, incidentally, several years her junior, was because she was... infatuated with me."

He pauses, and I wonder if it's because he's working things out in his head, or because he's waiting for my reaction. When I have none, he continues.

"She practically threw herself at me one night when she was at the house for a sleepover with my sister. I'd been... frustrated, to put it lightly, and we, um..."

"You slept with her," I throw in. It's obvious, and it doesn't really affect me at all. I've accepted what he'd told me about how he used to be.

He nods. "There was no sleeping involved, but you get the idea. Afterward, she wrote me more of her silly letters. I threw them out without reading them. I knew I'd made a mistake in giving in to her, and so I made a point of avoiding her. I didn't want to encourage her to continue bothering me. I went off to college a month later and never really saw her again, except on rare holidays when I went home or at an event here and there."

He's quiet for a minute.

"I take it there's more," I prod.

"In her interrogation, she gave the real reason she'd tried to pursue me. I... it seems, I got her pregnant that night."

I can't stop the gasp that rushes through me.

"She terminated it. Or her parents made her, I don't know the specifics. I imagine it was the latter, she was a deb after all. They kept it quiet. Her parents and my parents were friends back then, not so much after. Lily apparently thought I knew all along, and that I was being an asshole. I honestly never knew."

I can't move, he's holding onto me so hard. I don't think I'd be able to move even if I could; the revelation has me paralyzed.

"I don't mean to say that her actions were warranted, they absolutely were not, especially where you're concerned. She never should have lied about you. But I'm having a hard time with the idea that she'll serve hard time for the ultimate reason that I hurt her all those years ago."

_So that's what this is about._ I knew full well about his previous tendencies, but this throws my head
to spinning. *He could have had another child, another life entirely. And we might never have met.* I really need my memory right now. I don't know how to cope with this, what to say, how to react.

"Don't hate me, Ana, I beg you."

I shake my head, as much as I can for how tight his grip is. "Don't hate yourself," I say. He only holds me tighter. "Christian, I can't breathe."

His hold loosens, and he draws his arms back ever so slightly. He's peering down at me. His eyes are red and wary.

"I don't hate you," I tell him when he says nothing. "I'm shocked at how irresponsible that was, granted you were young, but surely you should have known to take precautions."

His breaths are harsh, as though he's receiving a thorough lashing. "You really didn't know?" I ask.

He shakes his head. His eyes turn upward, and I see tears glisten. He's trying so hard to hold back. I hate this. Not him, surely not... but I hate this whole thing. From everything I've learned about this deeply troubled, private, industrious, and downright brilliant man, such a thing is out of character for him. Perhaps this is why he's become such a perfectionist; if he's done something so irresponsible as a young man, there must have been a number of other things he's used as a basis for improvement in his life, and especially with his current high profile status. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer number of gaps, the chasm where all my answers lie. And I'm exhausted again.

"I think I want to get some sleep now," I say.

Christian's look in any other situation might be comical; I could have grown another eyeball and wouldn't otherwise know but for his expression. I hold up my hand to stop whatever protest or demand for reassurance he's about to make. I know that I love him. On that, there can be no debate. But I just don't get him right now, and despite the two unscheduled naps, I'm exhausted. "I'll see you in the morning."

His arms tentatively release me, and I'm left feeling both freed and deprived. He stands as I do, setting the blanket aside. I rise on my tiptoes and press my lips to his, softly, but briefly. He brushes my cheek with his fingers. I think he gets the message that I'd rather sleep alone, because he doesn't follow me.

I peek into Teddy's room. The sweet boy that he is, he's sleeping soundly, lightly snoring, his limbs flung out from under the twisted sheet at odd angles, his cheek mashed into the pillow and forcing his lips into a sleepy pucker. Poor little guy is so tired. Oh, to be that young, with no worry of aching joins or puffy eyes come morning.

Everything in the master suite is just as I left it two weeks ago, including all the things that followed me to Bellevue. I don't know how Gail does it; making our lives so seamless. She's wonderful. I suppose that she and Jason have the dogs tonight; I imagine they didn't want to overwhelm us upon our arrival. They likely took better care of Christian lately than he's taken of himself. I'll need to think of some way to thank them.

I brush my teeth, the Sonicare buzzing happily around my mouth, when I hear a soft tap at the door. Christian peeks his head in.

"I'm sorry, I just came for a change of clothes... May I?"
as he crosses to the dresser and gathers what look like pajama bottoms and a set of workout clothes. I'm marginally curious which he'll don first, but glad that he'll have options to keep him busy awhile, and take the gesture that he'll respect my need for space at least the rest of the night.

"I'll be in the blue bedroom if you need me... or perhaps the office or the gym. I'll try not to wake you."

I nod again. The toothbrush has finished its cycle, but I'm holding the bristles and foam captive behind my lips.

"We'll, good night," he says, attempting to mask the hurt in his eyes.

*Why have we become strangers in the last two weeks?* We've let those idiots downtown dictate boundaries for us, and the former restrictions play a role in my current feelings. I realize suddenly that I'd like nothing more than to ask him to stay, but I'm so confused and thrown by all the head junk that I stand there like an idiot with an idle toothbrush in my mouth. His face softens into a small, resigned smile. "I love you, Ana. Sleep well."

And then he's gone.

I stare at the dark ceiling for the next few hours. The minty flavor has gone, however long that takes, that's how long I've lain here, alone, pondering. Just pondering. I come to the conclusion that I'm not upset with Christian at all, I'm just upset in general. Ultimately, I feel violated from the interview. I want to hurt the people who put us through this, and that's a new one for me... I've never felt the urge to hurt anyone before. I don't think I've been so angry in my life. It's not a welcome feeling. I think I'd like to talk with John Flynn tomorrow, perhaps he can help me sort through some of this. Maybe Christian should come along as well. I have the sudden urge to find him, to make sure he's all right, that he's still nearby.

The lights are low in the hallway, and the open doors hold darkness. He's not in the gym downstairs or his office, though the *Grey Enterprises* screensaver glows and glides from the computer monitor. The blue bedroom is empty as well. *Did he go somewhere?* I'm tempted to panic, but the rational side of my brain, or what's left of it, decides that perhaps he just needed to get out. Maybe he went for a run.

I peek in on Teddy on my way back to the master suite.

His night light swirls peacefully, throwing dim stars and comets over the walls... and over the two occupants of the sailboat bed. Christian is curled behind our little boy, holding him to his bare chest. My throat tightens. They breathe in turns, identical faces serene, untroubled. I take in the sight for another minute and then back out of the room, clicking the door softly when I hear my name, muffled through the door.

"Anastasia?"

I step back, hoping my ears have tricked me and that if he did wake, he'll think he’d imagined me and settle back down. I'm gratefully wrong. The door opens, and he steps into the hallway, looking over his shoulder as he pulls the door closed behind him.

"Teddy?" I ask.

"He's fine. Didn't budge. Are you okay?"

I nod. "Couldn't sleep."
"What's wrong, baby?" he asks, his sleepy eyes filled with concern.

I shrug. "Missed you, I guess."

"You guess?"

I scowl tiredly at the light teasing. Christian steps forward and folds me gently into his arms. He's warm and comfortable. "What can I do?" he asks.

I shake my head against his chest. He fingers my hair softly, careful again with the back of my neck. It's just a little Band-Aid there now.

"You have a doctor's appointment in the morning, correct?" he asks. He shocks me when we think the same thing at the same time. He's just so… attuned.

I nod. "Ten thirty, a head CT. I've felt a lot more clear-headed, actually."

"That's wonderful, sweetheart, I'm so glad." He presses a kiss to the top of my head, and rocks me side to side, squeezing me a little. "Are you hungry at all?"

"Not really."

He sighs. "Promise me you'll have a decent breakfast in the morning."

I nod against him. "I love you," I murmur, my palms coming around to rest over his spine.

He gasps slightly. "I love you too, Ana. So very much. I'm so sorry for this entire mess, for giving you reason to question your faith in me. I'm a changed man for having you in my life. I swear, if I'd known, if I'd even suspected, I'd have made things right long ago. I pray that you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

It both melts and tears at my heart when he says things like this, when he pours his heart out to me. That such a man exists, that he's mine, and so filled with love and concern, it blows me away. I tilt my head back and look up at him. "There's nothing to forgive, Christian. You haven't wronged me. I know we should have talked through more last night. I'm just numb and overwhelmed, and that isn't your fault at all. Give me some time to process, okay?"

He nods, pressing his lips to my forehead. "I'm aware that the hallway outside our son's bedroom at three in the morning isn't a proper place to delve, but I have to get this out," he says, his voice low and serious. "I have to impart on you... and then I'll leave it be until tomorrow," he sighs. "I want to try to make things right with Lily. It may be too little too late, but I am going to apologize to her. I spoke with John. He took point in her evaluation, and believes she could benefit from regular counseling. I'm not softening what she did. At the same time, I fail to see how condemning her to incarceration will make any of this right, though in the short term, it would satisfy a need for reciprocity. I want to know your feelings, of course, always... but I'd like to ask that her sentence be reduced to community service, with regular counseling for the foreseeable. It's the least I feel I should do. What do you think?"

For as angry as he's been these past weeks, or so I've ascertained from everyone working between us, these are the motives of a saint. Or perhaps, if not a saint, a person with a moral compass that steadfastly points true north. He's such a walking contradiction. It sets my mind to spinning again, and I realize how tired I am.

"Can we talk about it tomorrow? I want to go back to bed."
"Of course," he kisses my hair again. "I'll walk you."

"Will you lie down with me?" I ask, timidly. My belly twitches, but not in such a way that would stir me to give myself over to him, sexy though he is at any hour.

"Few things would make me happier, baby."

I nod, a yawn interrupting me, and before I know what’s happening, Christian sweeps me into his arms. I stifle a surprised squeal. "I can walk," I slur.

“I enjoy taking care of what’s mine, Ana. Please let me,” he insists, carrying me to our bedroom. He settles me carefully onto my side of the bed, pulling the covers up, and then slips into his side. I turn toward him, our knees touching. He brushes his fingers over my cheek, our eyes connecting. “Sleep, baby.”

My eyelids droop. He doesn’t need to tell me twice.

~oOo~

“Everything looks normal, Mrs. Grey. You’re healing just fine, no sign of abnormalities.”

“You said that a dozen times before, and she had to have a seizure for you to find something. How are you sure this time?” Christian masks his fear with intimidation.

“That was tremendously unfortunate,” Dr. Sluder admits. “As I explained, the scar tissue around the original skull fracture masked what slight vascular damage there was, even though I’ve been monitoring that area closely since July. The minimally-invasive nature of the procedure had the added benefit of reducing a bit of the scar tissue that would hide any future problems. I suspect we won’t run into any more trouble, but in the slight chance we do, I’ll be able to see it. Have you had any further episodes?”

“None yet,” I say. “My head seems clearer, though. Well, compared to before last week. Everything seems sharper. But I’m still missing most of the three years. Is there still a chance I’ll remember?”

“There’s always a chance. Perhaps it’ll take time, or something familiar may trigger memories as your episodes have led you to experience. It’s early to speculate, but you may not have them anymore. We’ll keep checking you regularly. I’ll want to see you again in two weeks, and we’ll go from there.”

“Can she resume normal activity?” Christian’s hand grips mine. It isn’t too tight, but he’s still not completely reassured.

“I cannot clear you to drive, Mrs. Grey, but barring extreme sports, I don’t see anything wrong with business as usual. Just ease into things.”

Christian looks like he wants to say something else, but holds back. Probably for my benefit. He resigns to a moody quiet.

I watch him fumble with his seatbelt. He inserts the key and presses the ignition button, and the engine and displays come to life. It isn’t until he powers onto the I-5 onramp that he notices me
observing him.

“What?”

“Is something wrong?”

He sighs, reaching over the console to squeeze my hand. “It’s nothing, baby. Please don’t worry.”

“It is something, Christian. I wish you’d talk to me.”

He’s quiet a moment, pensive. “I don’t like that neurologist. If she weren’t my mother’s first choice, I’d insist we find someone else for you. She’s left you with a clot in your head for months. Anything could have happened.”

Oh, boy. We had this same conversation this morning at breakfast, and on the ride to my appointment with his mother on speakerphone. No, they aren’t talking yet, so the conversation was really between Grace and I. Christian’s been a nervous wreck all day so far, and it’s hardly lunchtime.

“I wish I knew what to say, so that you wouldn’t have to worry,” I tell him.

He’s quiet again, and then I see the corner of his mouth twitch up, and his brow relax a bit. “I know. I’m sorry for beating a dead horse. I’ll worry about you every day for the rest of my life, and there isn’t anything you can do to prevent that.”

It’s just his nature. I wish I had a better idea why.

“Baby, you’re overthinking,” he interrupts my thoughts. “I want to show you something.”

~oOo~

I’d awoke that morning, wrapped in Christian Grey. He was warm and heavy, very heavy, a little too heavy... and close enough that if we were any closer, our skin would have no other choice but to meld together. His breath in my face was sweet, and stunningly familiar, to the point that I feared the beginnings of an episode that never came. And then there was the stick of dynamite pressed firmly into my belly.

He excused himself with some haste, but not before kissing me softly, sweetly... at least, that's how it began... before my pulse took off and I about tackled him. I'm glad he didn't let things continue, mumbling something about "later" and "special," and knowing this man as I think I do, whatever he has planned could prove unforgettable, but for now, we’re still pretty raw from all the drama.

And there’s still plenty more to sort out. He pulls the car to a stop at a marina, the cool, salty air blowing my face through the half-open tinted window. Christian walks around to my side, holds the door and takes my hand, ever the gentleman. His mood has lightened significantly in the last sixty seconds.

"Mama! Daddy!" Teddy calls, and Sawyer releases him to run the last few yards, and we scoop him up between us.

Christian presents his boat, his boat… a monstrosity of a bi-hull catamaran with stowed but
unmistakable red and white sails. Nearly-invisible plexiglass rims every inch of the railing, I notice, and when Christian sets Teddy down and Teddy scurries off to peer down at the water, I don't worry as much as I might have otherwise.

"I had them installed once Teddy started crawling. He went from tortoise to hare in a matter of hours," he explains, steering us out of the bay and onto open water, with Teddy in his lap at the helm. *I would like to remember things like that.*

Teddy "helps" to steer and Christian points out landmarks and other points of interest to him. They press buttons to deploy and adjust the enormous, towering sails, and we're off and flying; both of my men loving every minute. *Oh, boys and their toys.*

I find myself enjoying the surprise trip and stretch out on a lounge chair in one of the only modest bathing suits I could find in the dresser this morning. All he said was, "pack a swimsuit." It's a blue and white striped number with silver accents at the hips and between the bra cups. How appropriately nautical. There was a maternity suit in there also, and unfortunately, Christian walked into the bedroom while I had it gripped in my fingers, lost in thought. And then we spent a half hour on the floor in front of the dresser, crying in each other's arms again.

The momentary sadness has ebbed, but I'm sure it'll return now and again throughout our lives.

Christian produces a picnic basket and we share an incredible family lunch on deck, while *The Grace* rocks idly, anchored just offshore somewhere. I'm so touched that he'd name it after his mother. *They'll make up soon, I hope… won't they?*

"I have Ms. Bailey on the line for you, Sir," Taylor appears from down below, phone in hand. Christian rolls his eyes, his expression darkening just a touch. "Do you mind?" he asks.

"Of course not," I wave him away.

He returns twenty or so minutes later, just as I'm about to go look for him. He's definitely stressed again, and obviously trying to hide it. Teddy has conked out on a lounge chair in the shade.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Nothing you need to worry about, baby."

I roll my eyes. Christian's expression darkens, and conflict rings in his eyes. "I don't like it when you do that," he says, casually.

"Do what?"

He stares at me for a moment, and then shakes his head. "Never mind."

"No, seriously, what?" I really want to know.

His breaths intensify. "Can't we just have a nice day? No questions? No interruptions?"

"Christian?" I step closer to him. "What's going on?" I ask softly. He seems to respond better with gentleness. If he sees through the tactic, I can't tell.

He grasps my hand when I reach for him, placing my palm flat against his chest. This touch must be deeply meaningful to him, something related to the cure from his tactile phobia. His breathing softens slightly.
"I don't want to burden you," he tells me. It doesn't feel like a preface to an explanation, rather, it feels like the explanation.

"I'm more burdened by not knowing," I say. "I can't help you if I don't know what to do."

He shakes his head. "There isn't anything for you to do, baby. I appreciate that you'd want to do something, but honestly, there's nothing."

"Then just let me be here for you," I prod. "I may not actually be able to do anything, but whatever it is, you shouldn't be alone in it. I understand your need to be the protector and provider, and I can't begin to tell you how reassuring that feels. But just the same, you and I are a team. I want to pull my weight. Please let me."

He sighs, closing his eyes briefly. "You're right. God, I love and I hate and I love when you're right." The sentiment seems familiar. Hmm...

"Last night, you reminded me more than once that you're overwhelmed by all this drama, but I unloaded on you anyway. I'm dealing with several feelings I don't often have and usually work very hard to avoid. That's one."

"And two, Ros and I need to be in New York for a meeting tomorrow morning."

My heart leaps at the first revelation and sinks at the second. I cling to the spirit of the first. "I'm glad you told me," I reassure him. "I'm not upset; I hope that's not why it was so hard for you to talk to me."

He shrugs. "A little, I suppose. I'd rather not leave you on your own. We've spent enough time apart as it is."

"Just for instance, if things were what you'd think of as normal, would you be so reluctant to go to this meeting?"

He looks conflicted, as though this hadn't occurred to him. "I'm always reluctant to leave you, Ana. I want your face to be the first and last thing I see every day."

My whole being brightens. "And this is why we have Skype."

He shakes his head, but his lips twitch. "Not the same."

I flex my fingers at his chest. "I know. But you should go. I'll be here when you get home."

"With any luck, I'll be home for dinner tomorrow night."

"And if it runs long?"

"No later than Saturday."

I smile bravely. "Then I'll hope for tomorrow and plan for Saturday."

Christian pulls me in for a hug, resting his chin on my head. "How do you always see the silver lining in everything?"

I shrug. "Maybe you bring it out in me."

He chuckles. "Maybe."

I hear and feel the engine hum to life. I assume he's already given the order to take us back; if he
has a business trip to attend, surely he needs to get packed and out the door.

"So what's this meeting about?"

"I just need to appease some suits, and light fires under a few others. It's a relatively small merger that's been in the works for some time, but the products they hold have far-reaching potential in a number of projects. I actually explained it in detail to you while you were sleeping."

I laugh. "Did it occur to you that it might have been better to wait until I was awake?"

He looks hurt. "I was trying to wake you, baby. It was when you were in the hospital... I'm sorry, I should have been specific."

My heart both bursts and breaks for him. "You talked to me?"

He nods. "Of course. I'll never know if it helped, but it was better than doing nothing."

"Christian... that's so incredibly sweet, I don't know what to say."

"You could promise never to wind up in a hospital ever again," he suggests.

"Scouts honor," I give a two-fingered salute. "Although there are a couple of good reasons to be there."

"Such as?" he demands, incredulous that I should suggest such a thing.

"We'll, you could bring your mom lunch occasionally once she goes back to work and the two of you could finally talk," I suppose. "Or... when we have more children?"

He blinks. Perhaps he didn't hear me, or maybe he's processing. His brain could also be stuck. He blinks again.

"Christian?"

I have no warning. In an instant, his mouth seals over mine, lips moving reverently with my own. His tongue flicks into my mouth, stroking fire over mine, sucking and biting my bottom lip. His breaths are fierce against my cheek, his palms planted firmly over my spine, pressing me to him. My hands are trapped against his chest, and they snake their way up to tug his hair.

The spark in my belly has ignited, flames licking from my core to my extremities. There's a hint of his hardness pressing into me. Christian's groan is barely audible. Oh, I want him.


"I'll hold you to that," I say breathlessly.

"Were you serious?"

"About what?"

He pulls back just slightly, enough to meet my gaze. "The part about children."

Was I? I suppose I was. It just feels natural that we'd have more one day. Teddy deserves a sibling. Or two. Or five...

"Why not?" I shrug.
Christian’s lips softly brush mine again. “Mrs. Grey, it would be an honor to have more children with you.” He sighs. “You constantly surprise me. I’d never have expected such a thing to be on your mind.”

“Well, it wasn’t, until you brought up hospitals. Which brings up the other suggestion; you do need to talk to your mother,” I remind him.

He sighs. “My mother decides when it’s time for us to talk. Believe me, I’ve already tried.”

“Does she know about Lily? The whole story?”

He nods. “Dad told her after we left yesterday. I imagine the revelations of the past week aren’t settling well with her. At least I’m out of bombs to drop on them.” He squeezes me, hard. “Do you think she’ll still love me?”

*Oh, Christian.* His voice is so desolate. I run my hands up and down his spine. “She’s your mom.”

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I find myself easily distracted from the projection reports laid out before me, and instead, I take in the transition of the sky from sunset to starry blackness out the window. My fingers reach up to touch the layered glass, and it’s cold, as I suspect the exterior of the plane has dropped below freezing. Such is autumn in the northern sky.

I can’t get over what Ana said to me this afternoon. *More children. She’s willing, as ever she was. After everything that’s happened, after all she’s been through, she wants more children with me.* My heart flutters at the thought, of Ana round and ripe with my child… and then sobers a bit when my thoughts turn to Phoebe. I’m not naturally a praying man, but there are some things I’ll leave to the heavens. My sweet angel, she’ll keep an eye on things. She’ll help me keep our family safe, watch over them the times I can’t.

Ana’s just getting into bed when I Skype her from the Fifth Avenue apartment. Her sleepy, smiling face is comforting, even at this distance. I don’t keep her long.

I’m overprepared for tomorrow's meeting as it is, so I call my father.

"Christian," is his standard greeting of late. Always formal, and to my advantage now but to my dismay and detriment as a youngster, he's in his home office late nearly every evening.

"Has the Jackson firm been in touch?"

I put a few things in play immediately after the ruling, not the least of which is a countersuit against one Mark Kane. I intend to take the bastard down for what undue suffering he's caused my family, and I couldn't very well do that and appear to be a saintly family man in the last round of proceedings. I now have an intimate understanding of why some revenge is best served cold. I can't say I'll take a great deal of pleasure in it, but at the very least, due process and common sense might be properly observed in the future.

"They have. I suspect we'll have little trouble getting him disbarred. His partners aren't happy with the way this played out. It seems they've given Mr. Kane far too much latitude with little oversight in the past, probably due to his overwhelming success up to this point. As for having his detective
credentials revoked, that's a different matter. Unless we can prove that he's broken the law, and neither you nor I were able to gather anything to suggest that he has, the best we can hope is to call his methods into question."

"Whatever we have to do. I appreciate this, Dad." And I mean it, wholeheartedly. My father has graciously undertaken this legal clusterfuck as a favor to me, to keep the thundercloud of weirdness that hangs overhead from raining my secrets all over Seattle and beyond. I am thankful that the trouble wasn't what I'd originally thought, and it made telling Mom and Dad about much of my past unnecessary, but I'm oddly comforted it's out. I'm grateful that I no longer have to hide it from them. I'm relieved that they have the understanding of me that they've always needed, but I hope it doesn't have a lasting effect on their affection for my wife and son. If they want to write me off, I'll... understand. But I hope they won't write Ana off for staying by my side. Only time will tell.

"Did you talk to Mom?" I ask.

"I did."

"And?" Does she hate me?

"And... I doubt there's anything else about you that could surprise her at this point."

I fight to keep from audibly blowing out a breath. A poker face is just as valuable over the phone. "There's nothing else of consequence hiding under any mattresses. I promise you both."

"Hmm," he grumbles. "Your mother always wondered why Beth Woods froze her out. And Carl was a good golf buddy of mine. You understand that we've only just come to the realization that you made us look like fools."

"I know, Dad. I truly am sorry. If I'd known, I'd have handled things differently."

"She tried to tell you, son. Don't forget that."

"I know."

"What's the likelihood there are other little Greys running around that none of us know about?"

"Whoa, Dad!"

"It's a legitimate question."

I suppose it is... but I'm still reeling from the borderline accusation. "Honestly? You want to know?" If we're going there, we're going there.

"I do, in fact. Your reputation not to mention your bottom line could one day be at stake."

I finally blow out the monstrous sigh I've been holding. "All right, Dad, I warned you." This is humiliating. I fist my hair with my free hand and flop back on the meticulously arranged decorative pillows. "I was still in a relationship with Mrs. Lincoln at the time of Lily’s and my... coupling. I came clean to her about the indiscretion. She... disciplined me. Foremost, for disrespecting her and our relationship. I won't beat around that particular bush; however wrong our liaison was, it was immoral of me to flout my commitment to her. And rest assured, I never thought twice about using protection again. Both were hard lessons, and I learned them well the first time."

"Glad to hear it." My father's voice oozes sarcasm. "Which brings me to my next point. Judge Matthews requires our input on how to proceed, else he'll make his own ruling on Miss Woods'
sentence." I've never heard my father address her so formally, even during proceedings. I suppose he's chosen to distance himself. She's always been 'Mia's friend, Lily' to him.

"I've made my intention clear to Ana; we'll speak on it again tomorrow and I'll let you know what we decide."

"By three o'clock, if you please. And Christian, when you do decide, call your sister. She deserves to hear about her best friend's fate from you."

Shit. "I will."

"I'll give your mother your regards."

And he ends the call. Yeah, Dad. Make me feel like the errant teenager and then hang up on me. Love you too.

It's too late to call Ana back. It's well past midnight here, as it is. I really want an answer from her; I can't fathom how to even approach an apology to Lily. Sure, I could try to come up with something in the meantime either way, but Ana's indecision hangs over me. She doesn't have a vindictive bone in her body. Jealous, yes, but never vengeful. Even during Hyde's trial, she wanted to be as far as possible from all that shit. As long as he was no longer a danger to anyone, she didn't care what happened. And she was pregnant at the time, so it could partly have been that she just didn't want to pile added stress on the baby. Completely understandable.

But this is different. This has more to do with me than it does her. And Lily's not a danger to anyone. Not in the sense of bodily harm, anyway. I don't have to be a shrink to see that.

I dial Flynn, and bask in the marvel that is Caller ID when he skips the formal greeting, as usual.

"Evening, Christian. What can I do for you?"

"Hope I didn't wake you." I'm not sorry if I did, for what I pay him, but I at least acknowledge that I'm aware of the inconvenience.

"Never an issue. What's up?"

"In short, Ana knows everything. My intention is the same as when we spoke on Wednesday." It seems a lot longer ago, already. "I want Ana's direction on how to proceed, but the judge needs a decision by tomorrow afternoon."

"And you don't want to press Ana, but you need an answer. Why don't you just tell her that?"

"Just like that?"

"She understands that the legal system has deadlines. Give her a little credit."

"But she doesn't know that she has any experience with this sort of thing, I mean, she doesn't remember the Hyde mess, and I'm not about to open that box."

"Christian, just tell it to her straight. When do you talk to her next?"

"In the morning."

"You're sure she's not awake now?"

"We chatted on Skype for a few minutes, she was getting ready for bed. I spent about twenty
talking to my father. She’s probably fast asleep now.”

“Try this… send her a text, if she’s up, she’ll call you back. If not, catch her in the morning. Just give her as much time as you can, be calm and patient, but make her aware of the deadline. And then leave the decision up to her.”

Wait… what? “Leave it up to her? All of it?”

“That’s right.”

“But…”

“Christian, she’s never disappointed you, has she?”

He’s got me there. Ana and I have always been like-minded where it really counts. It astounds me sometimes. “No. She’s hasn’t.”

“So trust her now. And get some sleep.”

“Thanks, John.”

“Anytime.”

I text Ana.

If you’re still awake, I’d like to talk to you.
If not, don’t worry. I’ll catch you in the morning.
I love you.

My phone rings not thirty seconds later.

“Did I wake you?” I ask.

“Not really. I was mapping the swirls in the ceiling. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine, baby.” Well, sort of.

She waits. “So… you wanted to talk.”

“I did. I do.”

“Should I brace myself?” she asks, trying to mask the apprehension in her voice. Good job, Grey. You’ve scared her.

“No, baby, it’s nothing like that,” I promise. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Rather, I'm trying to think of a way not to sound like a pushy asshole." Which you are, but you want Ana to think you're God in human form, the way she used to.

"Noted. Mind wide open.”

Here goes. "I just spoke with my father. He gave us a deadline on determining Lily’s punishment. Tomorrow at three... Well, today, I suppose, now. I'd like it if you decided what we should do.”

“You want me to decide?” she balks. “I thought you already did?”

“I said I wanted your thoughts, if you recall. And then I realized that stance isn't entirely fair... you
and Teddy were most affected by all this, so it stands to reason that you should decide." As the words pour from my lips, I realize how true they are. “And whatever you decide, I’ll stand behind you.”

"Um… okay,” she stutters. “I think we should do what you originally wanted to do.”

"You do?” Flynn, you bastard, how do you always know?

"Yes. I thought about it a bit more, and you're right. She shouldn't have done what she did. At the same time, she’s been hurting too, for a long time it seems. She should be made to pay the community back for the county’s time and tax dollars wasted, at the very least. Since she apparently comes from money, her payment ought to be in the form of service, right? So long as she goes to counseling as well."

I don't think you'd be so generous if you really knew her, baby. "That's very charitable of you, Ana. Yes, I’ll insist on the service and counseling as mandatory. My father and Dr. Flynn can calculate just how much of each is warranted, and make their recommendation."

"You're still planning to speak with her, aren't you?"

''"I am. So long as you’re comfortable with it."''

"Then we're good."

"Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Anastasia…” I run my free hand through my hair. “You're amazing." She truly is. I can't imagine anyone better in this world. And she's mine.

"Why?"

"You just are."

"You're pretty incredible yourself."

"Is that so?"

I know she’s rolling her eyes. "Christian, you've taken so much upon yourself for me, for Teddy, for our family, and you're running your company and who knows what else on top of it. You're always eight steps ahead. I don't know how you do it."

If I were home instead of here, I would take her this minute... ’special’ be damned. Carpe diem, baby. That's the way to go."

"Christian?"

"Hmm?" I break from my reverie.

"What are you thinking about?"

"You."

"Me?"
"Yes."

"What are you thinking about me?"

*Oh, baby...* "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes." I hear her smile.

"Hmm... I was thinking," I begin, "about all the lovely things I’m going to do to you when I get home."

"Is that so?" she teases.

"It is." *And we'll leave it at that. Else my dick may explode.*

"I don't get a hint?" she pouts.

"Nope. You'll just have to wait and be surprised." *Fuck. I may give the suits an undeserved reprieve tomorrow.*

I hear a frustrated sigh. "You're impossible."

I chuckle. "I know. Get some sleep now, all right?"

"If I must."

*Oh, how the anticipation will drive her wild.* "I'll take care of you tomorrow, baby. I promise."

"Okay. Until then."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

There's a silence.

"Still there?" I ask.

"Mm-hmm."

"You can hang up now."

"So can you."

I gasp. *How does she know our game?* "You first."

She ponders a minute. "On three?"

*My God.* "All right."

"One."

"Two."

"Three."
I'm awoken a little after dawn by six enormous, blinking eyes, two gray and four brown. It's only a second before I'm pounced. Much giggling and face-licking ensues. Oh, if every morning can be like this one for a while, it might be easier to get past the last few weeks.

Breakfast consists of banana oatmeal and some kind of organic, locally produced kibble. I don't think the 'twins' much care what it is, but it must be good because it's gone faster than Teddy's bowl of mashed... well, at this point, it's unidentifiable and all over his face. I think we're going to focus heavily on the concept of proper utensil usage for the foreseeable; these messes of his are just outrageous. Thirty minutes later, Teddy's clean. Another twenty and I've managed to wipe what sticky residue was transferred from Little Spiderman's hands to my clothes, and then I grab my laptop, child, and two furballs, and we're headed out back.

Our conversation last night... or should I say this morning... was surreal. It might be possible to trick me into believing it didn't happen. But then, it also felt like déjà vu. My head is spinning, but if I want to be quite honest with myself, the mild confusion is the last thing on my mind, when I recall the end of our chat.

"...all the lovely things I'm going to do to you..." he said. How stunningly, deliciously promising. And frightening... and overwhelmingly... oh, I don't have a sufficiently vivid word, my brain is swishing and zapping with all the potentially 'lovely things'... like what? I couldn't tell you. I have no idea. I've never had sex before. Let me rephrase... I don't remember ever having sex before. I don't know the first thing about it, aside from the technicality of 'insert tab A into outlet B.' Sounds simple, right? And he said he’d take care of me. It sounds so sweet, but is it code for something else? Oh, I can't think. Focus, Ana. It's just sex. No big deal right? Right? Oh, I need help. Kate raves about her experiences... or, she did in college, which I (again) remind myself was years ago. I set my laptop aside and, making sure Teddy is still conscious and the dogs haven't buried him in the herb garden and that the lone suit is out of earshot, I dial my BFF.

"Hey, sweetie. I've been a bad friend for not calling. How are you feeling?"

"Really good, actually. Are you busy?"

"I always have time for my bestie. What's up?"

I give her a general synopsis of the situation.

"First time jitters. Oh, I remember this. You'll be fine, Steele, don't worry. He'll take good care of you."

_There's that line again. Sounds harmless when Kate says it, guess I'll let it go._ I scoff. "Yeah, he's good at taking care of everything, and that's reassuring, don't get me wrong," I tell her. "But I'm more concerned with disappointing him. I don't know how to do a-ny-thing..."

"Ana, stop," Kate interrupts. "Honestly, I'm surprised the two of you haven't re-christened every surface of your entire house by now, the way you guys are, but I hear you." She shifts, and I hear a babbling in the background; she must be with Ava today. "Think about it," she continues. "The circumstances are the same as they were for your actual first time: he has experience, and you don't. Well, you do... but... anyway. You told me a little about it, and I got the notion that it was pretty extraordinary. So don't worry. Just get yourself clean and pretty, and let him do the rest."
"Are you sure?"

"You're going to get wrinkles if you don't stop making that face. I know you're doing it."

I immediately relax my forehead. Oh good granny, how does everyone know me better than I know myself? I sigh. Right, they aren't missing three years. "How do you suggest I get pretty?"

Ava squeals. "Give me a bit to settle my little chickadee and I'll be over to help. Is Christian at work?"

"He's in New York until dinnertime."

"Then we have plenty of time. Do you still have my plum dress?"

I shake my head. "I have no idea, why?"

Kate snickers. "You'll find out."

I guess these manuscripts will have to wait.

~oOo~

Kate is magic with a makeup brush. She orders me into a sweet-smelling bubble bath and hangs around while I shave my legs. We haven't had a date-prep-day in forever, and our positions were always reversed. The last one I can remember was after her breakup with the guy I secretly called Bill Nye. I swear, minus the bowtie, the guy looked just like Mr. Science, if a few decades younger, and Jose agreed with me. Not exactly my idea of hotness, but Kate said he was decent in bed. Whatever.

Teddy is a spectator in all this. He giggles as I yelp at having my eyebrows tweezed, and looks on longingly as Kate paints my toenails a rich berry. I hope Christian isn't the type to get upset about boys wearing polish, because Teddy insisted on a nice clearcoat after we talked him out of the pastel pink he noticed on little Ava's fingers.

I digress.

We enjoy a refreshing spa lunch, the five of us, including Gail. After some reassurance from Kate and some gushing over what a hot mama I am, she's off to get ready for some event with Elliot.

Gail insists on babysit this evening. She doesn't miss a trick.

And so now, at four pm, I'm in the plum dress that Kate tore my closet apart to find, and some heels by a designer whose name I can't pronounce. She also dug up some sparkly earrings and sprayed me with jasmine before declaring me fuckable.

Her word, not mine.

I decide to cook dinner to keep me occupied. Kate told me I should order in from a place around the corner that Christian raves about, but I need to keep my hands and brain busy, in which order of importance I still can't decide. Gail gave me some menu ideas and then disappeared with Teddy. No dogs, no toddler, no staff. Just a big, empty house that smells like the tenderloin roast and parmesan potatoes quietly hissing in the oven. I set myself to snapping the ends off fresh string
beans before steaming them… a habit I picked up from my mother… when I hear the front door.

"Let him come find you," Kate had said. It doesn't help in preparing vegetables that my fingers have set to trembling.

I feel two arms wrap my waist from behind and settle over my apron, and warm lips press against my neck.

"Mmm, you smell so good, baby."

I giggle, turning in his arms and linking my hands behind his neck. "Hi," I murmur, lifting up onto my toes.

He meets my mouth reverently, pulling me in close, his hands splaying over my back, one traveling down... down...

"Hi yourself," he murmurs against my lips, his traveling hand finding my backside and rewarding me with a gentle squeeze. Oh my.

"Hungry?"

He just nods.

"I made a roast," I tell him. I don't exactly mean for the words to come out seductively, but they do. And I end up feeling like a clumsy little girl.

He smiles, rubbing his nose over mine. "Oh, that's not what I'm hungry for, Mrs. Grey."

I feel the blush travel up from my neck and down over my back, awakening and igniting nerves I never thought I had. I have to actually think about staying on my feet else they might have curled and landed me on my ass. Thank God Christian's arms are around me.

"No witty retort?" he teases. "Perhaps you do need sustenance. He pats my bottom, and then rubs it seductively. "Let's eat."

It's another ten minutes before the beans are steamed, and in that time the roast has rested, the potatoes buttered and seasoned, and Christian has brushed up against me as many times as he can get away with as he asks me about my day. He's either genuinely interested in female grooming rituals, or just in listening to me babble on about them. The way his eyes follow my every move, every gesture... and then the way he carves the roast... am I swooning? And he's enjoying it!

"So... is everything... settled?" I say, sipping my glass of Cabernet.

His face darkens just a touch, but he covers quickly, reaching across to grasp my hand. "It is. Nothing more to think about."

I nod, not wanting to press and ruin the mood, but curious nonetheless.

"We can talk about it tomorrow. For now, all I need is my wife's good company while I eat this phenomenal dinner she's worked so hard to make for me."

"Phenomenal, huh? She must love you a lot, to go to all this trouble," I tease.

"I pray every minute that she does. My wife is a profoundly special person; the most indescribably special." His expression sobers. "She's put up with quite a lot from me over the years. I know exactly where I'd be without her, and it's the last place on earth I desire to be."
His words are heavy and heartfelt. He closes his eyes briefly, and when they open, they're soft gray again. "Sorry about that. You have an enduring effect on me, Mrs. Grey. It catches me by surprise at times."

And acts as truth serum, methinks.

Christian turns the conversation to weekend plans, a few events to which we've been invited, having my mother and Bob for Thanksgiving at our Aspen home... rewinding to explain that we have a ranch house in Aspen, and a penthouse in New York... where he stayed last night, incidentally... and others in Chicago and on Miami Beach. And then he asks about Teddy. The man worships that little boy. His eyes shine with reverence as I describe the breakfast messes, clothing malfunctions, verbal outbursts and loving Mommy moments over the weeks he's missed. We hadn't gotten to talk about that. I think we'll be delving into those things once in a while for some time to come.

Christian insists that I leave our dishes at the table. Taking my hand, he leads me from the candlelit dining room. And that's when I remember the dessert I made.

"Leave it, he says. "You're all the dessert I need."

My knees give out.

He sweeps me into his arms, effortlessly. "I love this dress, Mrs. Grey," he murmurs, running the tip of his nose over mine. The gesture has so much promise; every time he does it I want to melt into him. I brush his softly stubbled jaw with my fingers, and he closes his eyes. When they open again, they've nearly burned black with desire... for clumsy little bookworm Ana? Surely not... I feel suddenly and overwhelmingly inadequate in the presence of such perfection.

"You're overthinking, aren't you, my little scholar?"

_How does he fucking know?_

"Um... I..."

"Shh... He soothes. "Don't think. Only feel, Ana."

"Feel..."

"Yes."

"Feel what?"

He smiles. "Everything."

I hadn't noticed that he'd moved until the subtle lift of his strong legs carrying us up the stairs pulled me from stupefaction, that and the sound of my heels falling one at a time to land on the steps. I blink inwardly, as if to reset my brain and set it on course. Christian carefully sets me on my feet, and rather than release me as I expect, he pulls me in close, his face inches from mine.

"Promise me something," he whispers.

"Anything."

He takes two deep breaths. "If anything is uncomfortable, or if you want to stop, you'll tell me."

I nod, imagining my expression to be not unlike that of a woodland creature in the forelight of an
oncoming train. "I promise."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

She’s so beautiful. So perfect, so innocent, her large blue eyes tracking me through dinner... oh, that meal was superb... and now that it's over, I’m nervous. I’m rarely nervous, but when I am, it’s always to do with Ana. Always for the simple reason that I'd die rather than disappoint her, or let harm come to her. Rather than cause her one ounce of sadness. Of pain. I'll never willingly hurt her, but sadly, on occasion, it's happened. And if there's one thing she's always struggled with, it's communicating when she's reached a limit. Such a little rule-breaker, she is. But she doesn't remember... she doesn't know that. And so I ask her to promise to tell me.

And she agrees, without hesitation.

I plan to exploit every one of her special places tonight, all those points that make her eyes roll back and her toes curl. Oh, my dick strains to be close to her. *Be still, my friend. Our lady needs much attention first.*

Her breaths come quicker, and I've not really touched her yet. I step back slightly, breaking the frontal contact, and slowly drag my fingernails up her arms from her wrists with a feather light touch.

"Are you going to make love to me?" She whispers. *Oh, the innocence of her lips. What a gift, the coveted chance to relive her first time, to get it right. To make it... More.*

"I am," I smile down at her, softly. "Is that what you'd like?"

Her nod is stunned, subtle. The hitch in her breaths is my only clue of her willingness, her malleability. She wants to let me touch her... to feel her... to take her.

My fingers have reached her shoulders, traveling behind her neck to the clasp of her dress. Impulsively, I step in again, claiming her mouth with mine.

"My shirt, Ana," I whisper against her lips. "The buttons, please."

Her hands tremble, but rise immediately, brushing my belly and chest on their way up. In darkness, she shouldn't see much of my scars, if any at all. Surely she’s seen them, she’s had plenty of opportunity… but she’s not asked. This shouldn't be about me.

It's all about her. Her fingers release the top two buttons. I let my hands fall down her body and pull my shirt from the waistband. Ana stills.

"It's all right, baby. Don't be afraid." I take the rest of the buttons myself, steadily, efficiently, and then, clasping her fingers, bring her palms to splay over my chest. The sensation is... Wow. I close my eyes. She’s touched me, my bare skin, since she woke up… but never like this. Never with this intensity, this purpose. Our collective lifeblood flows through the points where our skin connects. No one has ever been this close to anyone else, this linked, with this level of belonging. And I’ll show her just what it means to feel this way.

Her fingers flex, bringing be back to the present. I guide her hands to my trousers. With trembling fingers, she pops the button, my hands hovering over hers, to give her confidence. I love guiding
her. I love watching her fumble; it’s so endearing. She looks up at me, expectantly.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, shifting just enough to toe-heel out of my shoes and scooting them behind me. “Help me out of them.”

She hesitates only a moment before working the zipper down with care, as though my package would leap from its place of restraint if she weren’t careful. Yes, she’s waking the tiger. I’ve struggled to keep him in check until this moment, and I simply can’t any longer. She pushes the waistband down over my hips, and they fall to the floor. I step out of them, raising one foot and then the other to pull off my socks. A lady should never have to remove a man’s socks.

Her gaze is fixated southward. I enjoy her marveling, and then bring my fingers under her chin so that she looks at me.

“Like what you see, Ana?”

She blushing, her long eyelashes brushing her cheeks as she looks bashfully away. I pull her gaze back to mine. “I’m all yours. I’ve only ever been for you.”

My hands travel down her body, gathering the hem of her plum dress, the dress. She and Kate must have discussed its significance long ago. And the earrings… my second chance earrings. I nearly keeled over in the kitchen when I noticed them. How perfectly appropriate that she should wear them tonight, even if she doesn’t know why. I should tell her.

“Arms up, my love.” She complies, and I lift the fabric over her head and let it drop to the floor. I want to save her from her past shyness regarding nudity, and step immediately into her arms, our warmth radiating between and around us. “Did Kate help you pick out the dress?”

Ana nods. “She mentioned that you’d like it.”

“Did she tell you why?” My hands run a slow, sensual course over her arms, back, shoulders, waist… even the lace covering her bottom, my fingertips dipping just inside the elastic.

She emits a tiny gasp, and shakes her head.

My lips form a smile. “You wore it to your graduation. Remember the first photo I showed you of us?” I murmur, bringing my lips to hover over hers, and they brush mine when she nods. My smile widens. “That was the day you agreed to take a chance on me.” I sigh at the memory. Oh, how it took me by surprise. I bring my lips to her ear. “And these earrings…” I plant a soft kiss on that special spot behind her earlobe, “… they were my gift to you, after you granted me a second chance.”

Her breathing quickens, eyes closed. She’s weakening. Thank God my arms are around her. I scoop her up, causing her to emit a tiny squeal. It’s so adorable, I nearly laugh, if not for the straining in my boxers.

Before I lay her on our bed, our eyes connect. Something similar passed between us on our first night in the new house… this house… our home. It was as though we knew we belonged here, as though our respective lives had prepared us, set the course that led to that exact moment, and we didn’t know it until we were there. It was just another exquisite night of lovemaking, but the connection reminded us how far we’d come, and how grand the journey before us could be.

“You’re everything to me, Anastasia. I’m going to show you just how much I love you.”
Chapter 24

~ ANA ~

He pulls the dress over my head, and when my sight returns, his eyes are blazing.

“Did Kate help you pick out the dress?” he asks.

I manage a nod, pinned by his gaze. No one has ever looked at me this way before. “She mentioned that you’d like it,” I mumble.

“Did she tell you why?” His hands trace my arms to my shoulders, and then plunge down my back, leaving fire in their wake. He settles at my waist, his fingertips skimming the lace band of my panties. I suck in a breath and shake my head. I may just crumble right here.

He produces that beautiful smile again, the one borne of sunshine and all that’s good in the world. “It was the first dress I ever saw you wear,” he tells me. “It still takes my breath away. You wear it whenever you desire to have my full attention.”

His voice is so damned seductive. I gasp. It’s all I can do. His lips brush mine, shooting sparks all the way to my fingertips and toes. A thousand questions come to mind, but are interrupted when he continues.

“And these earrings…” his lips shift to a soft spot behind my earlobe, and my legs start to tremble. “…they were my gift to you, after you granted me a second chance.”

Oh, God. If intimacy is this overwhelming, how does anyone function? How is Christian still functioning? He’s so controlled… so is it me? My eyes close of their own will, and less than a second later, I’m in his arms. My eyes fly open, and I do believe I squeak.

Our gazes connect. A moment suspended in time… that’s what such a concept must feel like. And it’s more than that… in the warmth of his arms, I’m… home. I know it, I feel it. I belong here. As a fish speared by hook, to tear myself away would call upon unimaginable pain, this much I know. His eyes tell me that he feels the same.

He places me on the bed, and the words run like wine from his lips; “You’re everything to me, Anastasia. I’m going to show you just how much I love you.”

What air rests in my lungs leaves me in a rush. I may expire from his words alone. He perches on the edge of the bed, his torso twisted to face me, and the muscles across his chest and abdomen ripple delightfully. He’s. So. Hot. My hand lifts, unbidden, and stretches toward him, and I stop mid-reach. I’m not sure how any of this is supposed to work. All I know is that my body screams with need for him. Christian senses my inner conflict and reaches out for my hand, guiding it forward until it makes contact with warm skin. He turns forward into my touch, my immobile hand brushing over his abdomen, as he leans in to stretch over me. His lips descend to hover over mine, his hot, sweet breath in my face, and his nose brushes mine. “Touch me, Anastasia,” he whispers. “Please, touch me.”

And then his lips crush mine. He moves reverently, passionately, licking into my mouth. Good God, this man can kiss. My hands abruptly find their purpose, stroking his magnificent body from his waist, over his stomach, running up his chest, over his shoulders and back to the beginning
again, and then around his back, and I pull him closer. He complies eagerly with my insistence, his abdomen pressed to mine, and then, with no warning, he takes my bottom lip between his teeth. I gasp, arching my back, and my breasts thrust forward into his chest. He moans, a starving man led to a feast and told to take all he wants.

His back muscles coil beneath my hands as he resumes his delectable worship of my mouth. Oh, I could spend an eternity touching every inch of him, memorizing how he feels, every ridge, every peak and vale, every spot that makes him gasp or sigh. My fingers glide down the subtle valley over his spine, brushing the elastic of his boxers. Oh, his skin is even warmer here. I take the lesson from his squeezing of my ass and give his a nice, firm grab.

Christian’s hips thrust forward into my belly, and he groans into my mouth. He remembers himself and chuckles, peppering my lips with fluttering kisses. “My girl wants to play…” he murmurs, his mouth traveling the line of my jaw. “Perhaps we’ll explore that later, but for now…” his lips trace my neck, my collarbone, down to the valley between my breasts. Oh my… we’re really going to do this. “I want to kiss every inch of you.” His determined hands lift me gently so that I rest on my elbows as he releases the clasp of my bra. My skin is a live wire, and as such I should have passed out long ago. I feel the subtle shift of my breasts as they bask in the release from their bonds.

“So beautiful,” he breathes, straddling me, and his mouth descends to kiss the swell of one breast, teasing a circle around the nipple. I’m lightheaded from watching him. His eyes are closed, his brow furrowed with concentrated lust. His tongue emerges to lick the path he’s just kissed, and then he sneaks one hand to the other breast, while the other slides up my back to support me.

My brain is torn asunder at all the sensations, but none more than the subtle acts of care. He touches me so carefully, pays so much attention to drawing out my pleasure while at the same time supporting my back, taking some of the weight off my elbows… I hadn’t realized the position was growing uncomfortable until he took the ache away. He must grow an extra arm, because there’s a pillow beneath my shoulders and he’s lowering me onto it.

“Comfortable?” he rasps, his eyes both caring and demanding.

“Yes,” I breathe.

His lips twist into an impish grin. And then he takes my nipple in his mouth. My eyes cross… or I think they do. I don’t know. I don’t know anything… except for the silken suction of his mouth, the pinch and twist of his capable fingers, the warmth of breath and tickle of hair and clench of muscle as the stars burst forth from nowhere and my body betrays me, lifting supernaturally from the bed and shattering into a thousand shards of bliss, and then dissolves away into the darkness.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

God, it’s been an eternity since I made my wife come. The heaving little sighs, curling of her delectable toes, the bucking of her precious hips, fisting the sheets in her delicate fingers… my dick throbs for her.

But it can’t have her yet. I can’t have her yet. Not quite.

She’s still panting, chest rising and falling, eyes closed, and just the barest sheen of perspiration over her perfect skin. I ache to taste her. My lips fall upon the valley between her breasts. My
tongue emerges, trailing south a line of wet, sucking kisses, my hands moving ahead, to the line of lace. My lady hasn’t quite returned from the land of oblivion as I begin the slow slide of elastic down, down.

She’s let her hair grow, down there. Naughty man that I am, I cannot resist dipping my nose into the soft, dark fluff, and revel in a deep, luxurious inhale.

*Oh, she smells glorious.*

I open my eyes and raise them to take her in, and she’s staring back at me. “Your scent is so sweet, Anastasia. I’m going to taste you now.”

Her eyebrows rise, and she whimpers.

“Hush, baby.” I press a kiss to her mound, and her whole body shivers. “Give me your hands.” I kneel up, and as she hesitantly extends both arms toward me as though she isn’t quite sure where my mind is. I take advantage of the distraction of movement to part her knees, pushing them gently back toward her. “Hold your legs there,” I instruct softly, releasing her briefly enough to catch her hands and place them exactly where mine were. I want to give her ownership in her next orgasm, control of her fate. I smile coyly, her gaze tracking me as I lower myself to the promised land. Oh, her cleft is just as I remember. Soft, pink, puckered, and unfailingly glistening. She wants this, without a shred of doubt. My tongue descends.

Sweet mother of fuck… her bud trembles upon my first lick. Oh, this is going to be fast, I can feel it. *Must do everything possible to extend this… to pull her back from the edge.* Her chest heaves once again, and I break the delicious contact with her part, only to blow sensually over the trembling nub. Her legs spasm under her hands.

*Oh, fuck it… she needs to come. To take the edge off, to make the next one… and the one after that… last longer. I’ll make this last all night, baby.* My mouth descends again, my lips surrounding her clit, and I suckle gently.

Ana explodes with a riled scream, a battle cry of literary proportions. *So responsive, Mrs. Grey.* I release her nub, but only for a moment as she descends back to earth… and then I lower my tongue tentatively to stroke her slit. Her whole body spasms as though I’ve just electrocuted her.

“Hold on, baby,” I breathe, pressing my palms to her thighs to pin her hips to the bed. My tongue dances over the swelling flesh, tapping her sensitive nub ever so gently. She calls out incoherently, fingers digging into her legs where she holds them. I test her further, sliding a finger along the path run by my tongue and then plunging it into her. I’m rewarded with another shriek from my lady. She’s quivering on the edge of orgasm, and rather than ask her to hold off, I press on… sliding my finger in and out, massaging her swollen tissues, my mouth doing the work of angels. She stiffens only a few seconds later, and I draw out her pleasure, running a teasing ring around her clit with my tongue.

“Chris-tian…” she mumbles.

I chuckle. “Can’t you speak, baby?” I tease, rising onto my knees again and peeling her fingers from her legs. She’s left pink marks where she gripped her skin. *Thank goodness for her short fingernails.*

“Uh-uh,” she rolls her head from side to side, eyes closed again. I massage her palms, carefully manipulating her fingers with my expert hands. Her cheeks are flushed, a blush of pink rising to her chest and belly as well. God, she’s beautiful when we make love.
“That… was…” she whispers. *Why, yes, it was.*

*Thank you, dear Lord, for making her mine.*

I lean up over her, pressing gentle kisses to her mouth. When her lips resume their dance with mine, I know she’s returned enough to continue. Her hands wrap tentatively about my neck, pulling me closer. My loins catch fire. She wants me. I need to hear it.

“Tell me you want me, Anastasia,” I breathe to her lips. “Tell me.”

Her hot breaths puff at my mouth. “I want you. I need you, Christian. Please.”

*Yes, my love. And you shall have me. All of me.*

I press a final kiss to her lips and kneel up, shuffling out of my boxers. When I catch her gaze again, her eyes are saucers.

*Shit… right, I remember this part.* “It’s okay, baby. We’re a perfect fit.” Then it dawns on me.

She isn’t on birth control. She hasn’t been since she conceived Phoebe. I didn’t think… *oh, shit.* She *mentioned babies not long ago, but she can’t want this now, for fuck’s sake. She can’t possibly be ready for me to make her a mother again. Christ, I’m screwing up. Again.*

She looks worried. My moment of dazed realization must have taken longer than a few seconds. *Perhaps she thinks now I’m having doubts.* I swallow hard. There are a few condoms in the drawer, if I recall correctly. They’ve been there a while, just as a backup, but they shouldn’t be expired. I relax my expression. “Shall I fetch a condom?”

She frowns, sobered. “Why?”

I shrug. “I didn’t ask you before, and I should have. I’d love more children with you… but I want you to be ready. It’s your call, baby.”

Her voice largely returns to her, and sounds remarkably clearheaded for the current state of affairs. “I want you,” she tells me. “Let it happen… please.”

My head whirls at her request. I lean over her again, my lips pressing to hers, feverishly. “I love you, Ana,” I say between kisses. “I’d give it all to make a baby with you.” Her tongue comes to meet mine, swirling together. She fists my hair in her fingers. “Are you sure?” I whisper.

She nods, her nose brushing mine.

As you wish, my lady. I slide back against the sheets, lowering my hips so that I hover at her entrance. The swollen tip brushes her wetness, and just like coming home, I push into her.

*My favorite place in the world.*

Ana gasps at the rush of fullness, eyes wild with unnamed emotion, mouth a perfect. ‘o’. Her hands come to my sides, fingers brushing the sensitive skin over my ribs, leaving gooseflesh in their wake. I know what she’s doing… she’s done it before. Before. Unconscious memory is an extraordinary thing; and I thank heaven and earth that she has its guidance. She’s adjusting to me, the tactile exploration distracting her just enough from the overwhelming presence inside her, to keep her from coming instantly. Her palms finally settle at my back, and she pulls me closer.

And that’s my cue.
“Tell me you want me, Anastasia,” I breathe to her lips. “Tell me.”

His breath is intoxicating, it makes my head swim. He’s so beautiful, asking me, begging me. I don’t make him wait. “I want you. I need you, Christian. Please.”

His lips ignite against mine, and then he removes himself from me, sitting up between my legs and dragging his thumbs into the hem of his boxers, pulling them down… and releasing himself.

Sweet Jesus.

His manhood points to me, like a compass to his true north. My throat goes dry. It’s huge. Oh, God… how?

“It’s okay, baby.” The corners of his mouth twitch knowingly. “We’re a perfect fit.” His gaze is hungry, drawing down to the place he’d just moments before placed his mouth. There aren’t words for that. I had no idea it could be like that. No idea that my body was capable. And he knew exactly how to touch me… and where. I had… no idea.

The anticipation-driven daze snaps, and his face comes into focus… he’s gone white.

Oh no… what did I do? Is he having second thoughts? Is there something wrong with me?

My expression must compute on some level, because his expression relaxes. “Shall I fetch a condom?” he asks calmly.

My brows knit. So that’s it. I drag myself out of the moment in order to think rationally, but it’s unnecessary… I don’t see a problem. We’re married, we have a child already, he’s expressed an interest in having more, it doesn’t always happen on the first try, I have no idea where I am in my cycle… it just doesn’t matter to me. All I want is to be close to him. Nothing matters but us. “Why?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I didn’t ask you before, and I should have. I’d love more children with you… but I want you to be ready. It’s your call, baby.” His soft gray eyes are sincere, and behind them, I can see a hint of wanting the unknown, just as I do.

“I want you,” I say. “Let it happen… please.”

His barely-there smile returns, and he leans over me again, his lips capturing and dancing heatedly with mine. “I love you, Ana,” he whispers. “I’d give it all to make a baby with you.”

Oh. Fucking. My.

My tongue dives into his mouth, pulling, with his, stroking and swirling, my hands fisting his hair. I taste a hint of myself on him. It’s strange, and hot… and so, so sweet.

“Are you sure?” he whispers.

I nod, bumping his nose with mine.

He lifts slightly and I feel the sheets pull as he straightens his legs… and then he’s there, pressing,
sliding. His eyes lock with mine, and without preamble, he fills me.

Oh… God…

I’ve found the kingdom of heaven. It’s inside me, at the place where our bodies join, where we become one person. No beginning, and no end. My muscles clench deliciously around him, pulsing and trembling, uncontrolled. My hands find his skin, wanting to be even closer, discovering that the sensation keeps me on the precipice, if only just. He waits patiently, watching my face.

My hands find their goal at his back. I’m ready for more. I think.

“Wrap your legs around me, baby,” he instructs softly.

I lift my legs, my hips tilting up, and the point of contact shifts. Oh, he slides deeper. I throw my head back as my ankles lock around his waist.

I sigh audibly. “Christian…”

“I love you, Anastasia,” he breathes.

And he begins to move. Sliding slowly, deliberately… out, and in. His hips drive forward with power and gentleness. His arms come around me, holding me to him, resting his weight on his elbows as not to crush me, but even if he did, I’d revel in that too. He’s just so. Fucking. Beautiful.

And he’s mine.

And I, his.

I see a shift on the horizon, a blinding noise… a pause during a rainstorm, where the droplets hang in midair. A shiny, opalescent bubble, colors swirling, an inverted reflection of someone I know, just out of reach. A grainy movie. A smile. The flutter of sleeping eyelashes. Warmth of sand at my feet. A whiff of jasmine and soap, the swish of silver satin, the rush of air between lips…

“Ana?”

Hmm… Christian…

“Ana!”

What?

“Oh, God… baby, please!”

Christian? He’s worried…

“Don’t do this… baby, please don’t do this to me…”

I haven’t heard him this worried since Teddy was born. It’s okay, Christian, I’m here…

“Wake up, baby, please wake up…”

“Hmm…”

“Ana?”

I’m born into darkness, except for the silvery moonlight. Christian’s silhouette is above me. I
swallow. “What’s wrong?” I say groggily.

“Oh thank God.” His body slumps at my side… his naked body… arms clutching me. The nudity of Christian Grey does things to me. I curl toward him, his arms tightening around me. Why is he so upset?

“Christian? Was it a nightmare?”

He shifts a bit to look at me. “What?”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Baby… you blacked out again.”

“Blacked out…”

“Yes.”

Again? Again… again…

Oh God.

I remember.

“I remember…”

“You remember?”

“Yes…”

“What do you remember?”

My breaths aren’t enough to stop the sparks in my brain. “Everything,” I whisper.

And then, as the flood of everything regained washes through, the tears rip sharply from me.

His arms band around me, dragging me to him, into his lap as a high, keening wail dribbles up from my soul and spills over. I remember… oh, I remember…

…

“Mrs. Grey! Mrs. Grey, hold on, help is coming!” A hand grasps mine… cold, wet… “No… don’t go to sleep! Mrs. Grey, Ana!”

…

His face… so sad…

No, Christian, don’t be sad, I’m here…

His fingers are warm. I’m so tired. What happened, Christian?

My voice echoes, as though from another body… “Who’s… Mrs. Grey?”

Christian turns white. No… Christian, don’t be scared. Don’t leave… please don’t leave me…

…
"We have a son, Ana."

"A son?"

"Yes."

"I have a son?"

"Yes."

"I’m a mother?"

"Yes."

How could I not know him? How could I forget my precious Teddy? Oh, I feel sick…

…

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For humoring me."

He gasps, shocked. "Is that what you think I’m doing?"

I shrug. "I don’t know."

"Why the hostility, baby?"

I don’t know… I don’t know… I don’t fucking know… but I want to cry. And cry. And cry…

"Oh, baby, no." He pulls me into his arms. "Shh… Ana, it’s all right. I’m sorry, so sorry, baby. Tell me what I can do. I’ll do anything. Please, baby. I need you to tell me."

"Make… me… remember…"

…

"Theodore, no!"

My son is crying, and I missed it. "What happened?"

"He tried to swallow a pebble, Ma’am."

"Maamaamaaaa…"

He could have choked… he could have died… God, I’m unfit…

…

"You don’t want me…"

"Oh, but I do… it’s just not the right time."

"You mean, it’s not the right time… for you."
“Baby, it’s not what you think… I’m afraid.”

“You’re afraid of me?”

“I’m afraid I’ll hurt you.”

“So you won’t touch me.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Just go away. Go! Get out! I don’t want you near me!”

The knife twists.

...

“Say it. Hurt me.”

“I’d rather hurt him.” Oh why have I returned to this?

“Well I’m him right now. Hurt me.”

“I can’t!” He’s been through so much. I’ve never wanted to hurt him before, ever. How could I have felt such malice?

“Perhaps not. Perhaps you’re no good for him.”

“How can you say that?” Because it’s true. Admit it.

“Is it true?” Yes. I’ve never felt like I was good enough. But … he tells me I am, every day.

“No, I…”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know!”

“Yes you do. Stop hiding behind your excuses and say it.”

“I don’t want to remember him!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m afraid!” Damn right. And never more than right now, watching this unfold again, from the other side.

“Why?”

“Because I love him!”

...

“Ana, go back upstairs.”

“Mrs. Grey, we need you to come with us.”

“What?”
“Ana…”
No… don’t take me from my family… don’t take me from my Christian…

“Mommy?”

“Shh, Teddy, I have you. It’s going to be okay. Christian?”

Two uniforms move to surround him, effectively cutting him off from me. My feet regain their purpose and find the landing in seconds.

“Ana! No, this is illegal! I’ll have all your jobs for this!”

“Mr. Grey, I have a warrant and my orders. Please stand aside.”

“What’s going on?”

“Mrs. Grey, we need you to come with us. We just have some questions.”

“Ask them here, now.”

“We have our orders, Mrs. Grey. Please.”

“Christian!”

“Ana! No, let go of me!”

…

Christian’s softly sobbing plea pulls me back to reality. “Christ, Ana… my Ana… I thought I’d lost you forever.”

~ CHRISTIAN ~

She sighs my name, and my heart bursts. “I love you, Anastasia.”

Wrapped in each other, moving inside her… inside my wife… nothing compares. Nothing in life is as precious as the bond between us. Oh, she feels so good… it’s going to be over far sooner than I’d like, but her panting, little breaths and the grip of her fingers assure me that she needs me as desperately.

I drive her to the precipice, and as she falls, I go with her.

A feathery memory brushes by, a connection, a recollection of the first time we were joined so intimately. I suppress a chuckle. Our first time couldn’t hold a candle to what we’ve just shared. I only worshipped her then. Now, and forever since, I’ve loved her, with every last whisper of my soul; the soul my precious girl gave back to me.

Ana’s gone limp beneath me, as she so often does, her soft breaths against my cheek. I press soft kisses to her cheeks, her nose, her lips. “I love you, Ana,” I whisper.

A tiny, familiar pinprick jabs me in the gut… uncertainty.

“You okay, baby?” I call gently, as not to frighten her. Her breaths remain even, eyelids
unflinching. The pinprick spreads rapidly. “Ana?” I push away from her, if only to give her room to breathe… my dick protesting the sudden withdrawal. *Fuck him, he’s done this to her. I’ve done this… I’ve hurt her, somehow. Again. Oh, God… “Ana!”* My hands are at her forehead, her cheeks, trembling fingers without purpose or plan, worrying over her still body. “Oh, God… baby, please!”

*What the fuck have I done? What the fuck have I… oh, Christ… I came so long and hard, it’s difficult to say how long she’d actually been out before I bothered to notice. I’m such a selfish, sorry excuse for a husband… “Don’t do this… baby, please don’t do this to me…” I cry. “Wake up, baby, please wake up…”*

I reach for the phone.

“What’s wrong?” a small groan rumbles from her throat.

*Oh, thank God… “Ana?”*

Her eyes open slowly, slightly unfocused, and she looks up at me? “What’s wrong?” she murmurs.

“Oh thank God.” As though I’d just finished an ultramarathon, the adrenaline leaves me and my body gives out, relief spiraling through me. I gather her into my arms, and my heart gives a small leap when I feel her curl into me.

“Christian? Was it a nightmare?” her voice pulls.

I shift a bit to look at her. “What?”

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Baby… you blacked out again.”

“Blacked out…”

“Yes.”

Something passes over her features. A thought… a memory, perhaps? I’d prayed her episodes were over. It isn’t fair… she doesn’t deserve this.

“I remember…”

“You remember?” I parrot. I’m still stuck on what to do… she’ll obviously need more tests. More time with her doctor… *oh, Christ…*

“Yes…”

“What do you remember?” I ask, gently.

She pauses again, her features awash with… realization? She turns to me.

*“Everything.”*
I wake in darkness to the sensation of fingers softly caressing my face.

"Christian?"

"I'm sorry, baby." The caressed move to my shoulder and down my arm. "I didn't mean to wake you."

The glow of predawn light reflected in his expression holds me. "How long have you been awake?"

He swallows. Blinking, he opens his mouth to speak, and then closes it again.

Ah. "You didn't go to sleep."

He shakes his head.

Oh, somehow I expected this. I rise onto my elbow and turn until I loom over him instead, resting my hand over his heart. He blinks up at me. "I'm still here. I know that's what you were afraid of. I didn't go anywhere."

"But what if..."

I bring my fingers to his mouth. "Don't do that. I'm here, I'm back, and I love you." Our eyes connect for a long moment, and then I settle over him, resting my ear over his chest. His heart thuds steadily. Just like always, he's my rock. My mind starts to wander as his fingers comb through my hair.

And as the significance of everything that's happened comes crashing down on me, I begin to cry.

Christian doesn't shush me as he often might; he hates to see me cry. Instead, he shifts me gently up his chest so that my head tucks into his shoulder, my legs straddling his thin-shirted torso... he wants to hold me without trapping me. The gesture makes me cry harder.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here," he whispers over and over, his fingers gliding and rubbing over my back, my shoulders and arms, moving my hair out of my face. He's such a good man. I have with me now the clarity of all he's been through these past months, all he's had to bear on his own, and it breaks my heart. And to think I almost left him and Teddy in the beginning... how could I have even considered it? I'm a terrible wife.

I think the last thought may have slipped out in verbal form, because his arms tighten around me, and I hear his soft words in my ear.

"No, Ana, never. You've been remarkable."

I don't feel remarkable. I feel railroaded, and ashamed, and... sore. My muscles clench, and I wince. We didn't use protection last night. I don't know how I feel about that, with everything else crashing down around me. I didn't seem to mind the idea last night, in fact, I welcomed it. I wonder... Suddenly, I have the urge to see my son, to make sure he's safe in his bed, and offhandedly wonder if this is how Christian feels sometimes, whether it’s the sudden shift of
thought that sets him on an opposing course. I push up off of his warm body and roll out of bed.

"Baby?"

I'm a bit wobbly, but I stumble forward toward the door, dashing the tears from my cheeks with my fingers.

"Ana, what is it?"

"I need to see Teddy," I mutter.

He's between me and the door in a second. "You might want to put on some clothes first."

I look down at myself. Clothes. Of course. My underwear lie in a heap of discarded things on the floor. I yank them up my legs, and when I stand again, Christian is behind me in his boxers, holding my robe open. I allow him to dress me. I'm not sure about anything at this point, but I can let him do this, at least.

He grasps my hand, preventing me from walking away, and reaches for the landline.

"Taylor... Sorry to wake you, we'd like Teddy home with us. Yes. Fine, I'll meet you at the side door."

I'd forgotten that Teddy wasn't in his room tonight; this is how jumbled I am. And now I've deprived some of our best people a good night's sleep. I burst into tears again.

"Shh, baby... Taylor's bringing him," Christian soothes, pulling me into his chest. Thinking better of it, he swings me gently into his arms and carries me from our suite and down the stairs. He nudges the living room light panel with his elbow and moves to deposit me in my favorite spot on the couch. That couch. I don't think I can get up, and the need to see my son grows desperate.

Christian reads my thoughts, as usual. "Stay here. I'll bring him to you."

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I don't know what's wrong with her. Last night was... there aren't words. My love had returned to me, by all the blessings of this earth, the powers that be deemed fit to give me back my wife, to give Anastasia her life back. I don't think we've ever been so connected, in body and soul.

And now I look at this woman, crying inconsolably, and it's the beginning all over again. I don't know what to do. I just hold her; it's all I know.

And now she has the sudden desire to see our son. Completely understandable. Something I expect, I can work with. I redirect Ana from roaming the house unclothed and dial the Taylors.

"Sir?"

"Taylor... Sorry to wake you, we'd like Teddy home with us."

"Of course. Is everything all right?"

"Yes."
"Very good, Sir. I'll bring him right over."

"Fine, I'll meet you at the side door."

I hang up, and Ana's crying again. "Shh, baby... Taylor's bringing him," I tell her. Oh, this isn't going well. I scoop her into my arms and carry her downstairs, nudging the lights to their dimmest setting and depositing her on the couch.

"Stay here. I'll bring him to you," I instruct. I have no idea if she'll listen. I pull a chenille blanket from the arm of the couch and throw it across her lap. She blinks up at me. "Be right back."

Taylor is coming up the walkway, my sleeping son chimpanzeed in his arms, when I disable the alarm to let him through. He carefully transfers Teddy's warm, limp body to me.

"Thank you, Jason. You and Gail take the weekend off."

"Is anything the matter, Sir?" he asks, his voice low.

My expression must be giving me away. *You're slipping Grey, get it together. But on the other hand, part of Taylor's job is to detect my state of mind and anticipate my actions...* Teddy shifts in his sleep and I rub his back to soothe him. "Ana's memory returned a few hours ago," I say softly, as though I'm admitting it to myself as well. "She's having a rough time of it."

"I see," he sighs heavily, but there's relief behind his eyes. "Let us know if we can do anything, Sir."

"Thank you. Until Monday."

I reactivate the alarm and carry Teddy down the darkened hallway to Ana. She's curled into herself, but lifts her head when I enter the room.

"Here's your son, Mrs. Grey," I murmur. It strikes me suddenly that those were my exact words as I lay our newborn son in his mother's arms on the day he was born. While quite accidental, it seems fitting now, as I transfer his sleeping form to her lap. She cuddles him close.

He stirs. "Mommy?"

"I'm here, baby. I have you."

~ ANA ~

I wake to a comfortable, all-encompassing warmth. My eyes feel puffy and tired, and it's hard to open them. Somehow I manage slits, and blink to adjust to the brightness. Before me lies my sleeping baby boy. He breathes deeply, his chest against mine. Morning sunbeams shine on his auburn curls... they've darkened a bit since summer. *Hmm... the warmth at my back completes our circle. Christian's arm lies draped over both of us. I've never felt so comfortably entrapped.*

Teddy stirs, stretching, and nearly takes out my right eye with his fist. I capture the rogue hand and kiss his fingers.

"Morning, sunshine," my voice gravels.
His little face crumples to finish out the stretch, and he brightens. "Bafoom, Mommy."

YES! Progress, finally. We'd been working on potty training all week in Bellevue. "Well, we should get up, then," I tell him. He scoots off the bed, and Christian retracts his arm; he must have heard us. And without warning, everything comes flooding back to me again.

The accident.

The baby.

Our baby.

Oh God...

I run past Teddy into our bathroom and make it just in time to retch into the toilet.

Gentle little hands are at my back. "Mommy?"

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Teddy looks at me with concern. Christian hovers in the doorway.

"You okay?" He mouths, frowning. I nod.

"I'm just sick today, Teddy. Go along and potty for Daddy, okay?" I croak.

"Come on, buddy," Christian holds his hand out. Teddy takes it hesitantly and Christian leads him away, leaving me to rest my forehead against the cool porcelain. I feel his eyes on me for a few more seconds, and then he's gone. How could I forget everyone? My own son, my children... one here and one gone. I haven't mourned her. Not in the way I should, not in the way she deserves. I didn't even bother to see her, where they buried her... what kind of mother does that? I heave again, but my stomach is empty.

A cool cloth presses the back of my neck.

"What can I do?" Christian asks softly.

I shake my head. "Where's Teddy?"

"Carter has him. He's eating breakfast. He instructed me to tell you that he, and I quote, did it all by himself."

The declaration unsettles my funk a bit. "He did?"

"I don't know how you trained him so quickly. Mom said it could take a while."

"I bribed him," I mutter.

"You... what?"

I hold up my hands in surrender, my confession not really fazing me. Nothing really could at this point. "Get mad if you want, but it worked. No more diapers."

Christian presses a glass of ice water into my hands and I sip it slowly. "What sort of bribe are we talking about?" he asks, one eyebrow raised.

I cringe. Okay, so maybe he has the power to stir me, but only a little. "Don't be mad."
His face brightens a bit, I'm not sure why. "Ana..." he warns, but he sounds more amused. 

I don't have it in me to fight the rising admission. He's going to find out the next time he walks into the kitchen pantry. Or the deep freezer. "I'm sure there's a way to get more..."

Christian goes pale with realization. "Not my cookies. Tell me you didn't."

"Well..." Wow, he's really upset about this. Christian found these delectable hazelnut cookies when we visited Sicily last month, at a small local bakery. I assume he paid the owner handsomely because we returned home with a dozen or so packages and I was instructed to forget they even existed.

He sighs. "The freezer as well?"

"Oh, there might be a box left in there. And don't be mad at Luke for snatching them for us. He was following orders."

"One box? Might be left?" He's still stuck on the remaining quantity.

"Oh, stow your twitchy palm, Grey. Put some of your billions to work and send someone for more if they're so important to you."

I'm in his lap in an instant, his arms tight around me, face buried in my neck. It's a long moment before I feel his tears. "I missed your smart mouth... so very, very much," he whispers.

~ CHRISTIAN ~

I peeled Ana off the floor and got some breakfast into her. She's showered and dressed... she wanted to be alone for that... and went out back with Ted and the dogs. That's been the norm for them of late, spending mornings in the yard. I can't blame her for wanting to keep some kind of routine to ground her in all this. Teddy is blessedly oblivious to such things. He has his mother, and that's all that matters.

I stand looking out over the sound, separated from my wife by only the glass wall, and I dial my brother.

"Morning, bro. I thought we weren't all meeting till eleven?"

"That's why I'm calling; we'll have to take a rain check, actually."

"Oh? Everything okay?"

"Fine." Sort of. "Ana's memories came back last night. She's just a bit tired and overwhelmed at the moment."

There's a sigh of relief from the other end, and I hear my sister in law in the background. "Yeah babe, it's my brother. Ana got her memory back," I hear him tell her. There's a shuffle, and then I hear Kate's voice.

"Oh, Christian, that's such good news. How is she?"

My ears can scarcely tolerate her shrill at this early hour. "She's all right, just processing. We're
going to have to reschedule the outing for another weekend.”

"Don't give me that, Grey. How is she?"

I sigh. Leave it to Kavanagh to read between the lines. "She's very emotional. We're just helping her adjust. Teddy has been a good distraction."

I hear a sniff. Girls and their tears. It's unusual for Kate to cry; it reminds me that this entire ordeal has been rough on everyone in Ana's life, not just Teddy and I. "You tell us if there's anything you or she needs, okay?"

"I will. Perhaps Ana will call you later, I'll suggest it to her."

"You do that, Grey. Take care of my girl."

"Always."

I dial Ray next. He doesn't answer, so I text him the news, and that all is well. That's about all the information a man needs.

My parents are next.

"Christian?" my father answers sleepily.

Shit, I forgot about the dinner. Dad and Mom attended some sort of awards function yesterday evening, Mom's first since she's been home, and they must have decided to sleep in. "I'm sorry for waking you. Everything's fine. Ana's memory returned last night, and I thought you'd want to know."

"Oh, son... What a relief to hear. What? Oh... hold on... your mother would like a word."

There's a shuffle, probably my father getting out of bed. "Christian? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Mom. Ana's memory came back to her last night, all of it." The declaration didn't faze me much the last few times, but it knocks me about the head now. I press my hand over my mouth to hold back a sob.

"Oh, Christian, that's wonderful... darling? What's wrong?"

She can't see me shake my head, I have to remind myself. I gulp back the lump in my throat and swipe at my eyes. "I'm all right, she's all right, everything's fine," I blather. I swear to God, if I don't stop crying I'll... I'll...


"She's just... overwhelmed. And sad... so upset and confused, and..." I gulp again. "It isn't the way I'd imagined at all."

"You thought she'd remember, and you'd live happily ever after," my mother concludes the thought for me.

"Well... it sounds idiotic when you put it that way, but yes."

"Darling, I'm positively elated that she's found herself. You should focus on what she's regained, and just help her through the rest." She pauses. "Would you like me to stop by later and give her a look-over?"
"Would you? I'd appreciate it." I'm surprised and anxious with how comforting the offer is.

"We'll come by around lunchtime, then. Did you need your father or I for anything else?"

*Is this a trick question?* "Of course, Mom. You're always needed. Both of you are."

I hear her click her tongue. "I'm still upset with you, Christian. But no matter what you've done, I'll always love you. Remember that."

*Oh, thank God.* "I love you too, Mom."

"We'll see you soon."

I end the call and wander into the kitchen to calm down. Through the glass wall, I see that Teddy has convinced Ana to play tag with him. To see her frolicking in the yard warms my heart. I've gone soft, and I don't fucking care who knows it.

Next, I dial my sister. This one may prove harder than talking to our mother. A male voice answers.

"Mia's phone."

*Shit. They've probably recently done... something I'd rather not think about my sister doing.* I swallow. "Ethan, it's Christian. Is my sister available?"

"She's just gone to the, uh, kitchen... what's up?"

Now I know for certain they've just fucked. My stomach turns. *Down, Grey. They're consenting adults, and they'll be married... eventually.*

"Ana's memory returned yesterday evening, and I wanted you both to know."

"Oh, Chris, that's great news. Yeah, Mia, it's your brother... What? Oh, here..."

*What is it with this female preoccupation of controlling the damned phone?*

"Christian? What's the great news? Are you guys having another baby or something?"

*Oh, for fuck sake, Mia.* "Nothing like that, sorry to disappoint... if you'd shut up for more than a second I could tell you that Ana got all three years back."

"Ooooo that's so awesome!" she squeaks. "When? What triggered it this time? Tell me everything!"

I sigh, rubbing my forehead. "Mia, she's having a hard time processing it all. I just wanted to let you know that she remembers. I'm calling all the family."

"Oh, is she okay? Do you need anything? I could make something and bring it over..."

"That's not necessary, Mia, but thank you." I swallow. I need to tell her. *But how?*

"Oh. I'm glad she's okay, we both are... Can I say hi?" Which in the language of Mia, means: *Can I pester for information until people want to take my life?*

"She's not really in the mood, right now. But I do need to talk to you, later on today or perhaps tomorrow. Do you have an hour you can spare?"
"Sure, is something wrong?"

"I just have something I need to discuss with you. When would be good for you?"

"Anytime. Ethan and I don't have any plans, for once."

Oh, how that fills my head with images I do not need. "All right, this evening, say, six o'clock? Let me say goodbye to Ethan."

"Okay big brother. See you later. Love you bunches. Hey Ethan!"

I have to hold the phone away. *Yeah, sis, love you too. That's why what I have to tell you is so hard.*

"Chris?"

"Ethan, I need a favor."

~oOo~

The drizzle fits my mood well. I downshift for better traction, directing my thoughts toward getting home safely. Ana will kill me if I get into an accident, especially if it happened because I was driving upset.

My sister hates me. I told her, well... not everything, but enough. Everything to do with Lily, she knows. She always wondered about things between us, and I imagine she feels betrayed on both sides. Lily never told her about what we did, either. I sort of wonder why. Perhaps I'll discover the truth Monday... the circle of damage will close when I meet with Lily.

Mom looked Ana over and deemed her fit. Ana rolled her eyes when I mentioned they were coming for lunch, she knew it was mostly for her. She and Mom talked a while. Dad and I did the same. Teddy climbed all over my father, oblivious as usual to our discussion. I marvel at how well he's able to occupy himself, and my mind wanders.

…

The soft knock at the threshold to my office startled me.

"Gamma!" Teddy exclaims, dropping his cars and running to my mother. I rise automatically.

"Mother," I nod.

"Christian," she nods back, swinging her grandson into her arms. She's recovered from her illness quite well, it seems. "Have a minute?"

"Of course," Anything for you, Mom. I wish you knew that. I gesture to the seating area. She plops down with Ted in her lap, and Ted scrambles to get back to his cars. She releases him with a loving swat on the behind.

"How was your talk with Ana?"

Mom pats the seat next to her. I freeze momentarily. Is this where forgiveness begins? I round the sofa and sink carefully next to her, as though unsettling her cushion may trigger the bomb.
"Ana is going to be fine. She's all kinds of upset, and understandably so. It's been a rough few months for her, and much more than she should have had to handle. I think she should talk to someone."

"She can talk to me," I say quietly.

"Of course she can. And she will... but I meant a professional, Christian. Someone familiar in coping with the loss of a child. You both ought to go."

"Of course, Mother. I'll see to it straight away." My posture is like that of a child in the midst of a lecture for some wrongdoing. One leg tucked behind the other, hands folded in my lap, eyes down. Not quite submissive, but remorseful. I lean sideways into the back of the couch.

"Are we speaking?" I tentatively ask.

She raises an eyebrow. "Aren't we speaking now?"

I shift a bit. "That's not what I meant." My eyes fly to Teddy. I'm not sure we should have this conversation with him present, but he's migrated his collection under my desk and out of obvious earshot. He wouldn't understand the context anyway, and so I vow to keep my tone quiet.

When my mother speaks again, her voice is low, but quivering. "I'm still angry with you, Christian. So blown away, I hardly know what to say to you."

I wish I knew specifically which part hurt her the most, so that I may address her concerns. It's a go-to business tactic, but the only means I have that feels even remotely comfortable in this grandly uncomfortable conversation. "I'm sorry, Mother. Sorrier than you can imagine. At the heart of the matter, I'm most devastated that any of this touched Anastasia. I wish I knew what to say to you, to assure you that I'm not the person I once was. All those things, those mistakes... they're part of my past. A past I'm not proud of." My hand lifts of its own will, an attempt I realize meant to reach out, but I don't know if she'll recoil from my touch. It wouldn't surprise me, and I'd deserve it. "I imagine you're beyond ashamed of me."

Mom states at me, perhaps through me. She shakes her head. "Do you even understand at all?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure. Some, perhaps. I never wanted you to know that side of me, Mom. I was ashamed, even then, of what you'd think of my lifestyle. It gave me an outlet, a sense of control over my life. I can explain any part of it to you, should you desire that. But it was something I needed; I still believe that, to this day. I'd be in a very dark place at present had I not chosen to pursue it as long as I did."

My mother shakes her head again. "And what of your relationship with Lily? Was she a part of that?"

"No, no... never," I explain quickly. "Lily was... a mistake, made in haste. I regretted it then, and certainly now, but for different reasons. I didn't let you know the real me back then. You wouldn't have wanted to know that... person." I stop myself from using another descriptive word... monster. There are enough proverbial worms sliming across the space-time continuum at the moment. "I was constantly angry. At everyone, you saw that every day while I was a teenager."

Mom shudders. She's thinking about what she feels she allowed to happen. It kills me that she still blames herself. She's known about that almost as long as Ana has been a part of our lives, and when she thought she knew everything, there was still more. More poison leaching out, and touching everyone around me. I hate that it now touches the purest force in my life.
My voice remains even. "After... her... I didn't endeavor to use anyone, but, well... it was a far better alternative to choosing random targets. I still had so much unfocused anger within me. Those I liaised with were consenting adults, familiar and comfortable with the methods. I'm sure Dad explained that. No one was unwilling. Not even Lily. And I didn't bring her into all that... it was just once. It was a mistake, and it was before I'd taken the lifestyle as my own. I regret avoiding her afterward, but it was the only way I knew to discourage her from pursuing me again. I didn't do it to hurt her directly, or to ignore her condition... I simply didn't know."

Candid chats between my mother and I are few and far between, but when they occur, the opposite of what I envision usually happens: my mouth opens, and words fall out. She listens. I'm berated for something, I apologize, and she tells me how much she loves me. This time, I see that last part fluttering away like a tissue in a windstorm. I wait for her reaction. And wait.

And wait.

"I know I've disappointed you terribly," I continue. "Perhaps beyond a point of no return... but please, I beg you not to see Anastasia in any but the purest light, despite my past choices and behavior."

My mother continues to stare at me. After a moment she shakes her head. "Oh, Christian, what will it take to make you understand? If one day, heaven forbid... T-E-D-D-Y..." she spells, and we both look in his direction. He's still playing obliviously by the floor to ceiling window. "If he were to engage in something so... forbidden," she continues, "and you were to find out about it much, much later, especially after all the laundry had supposedly been long since aired..."

"Yes, Mom. I have thought about it that way. It's been at the forefront of my mind so many times since I became a father. I'm going to do everything I can to ensure that he knows he can always come to us. If I'm any indication, I realize that it may not work, and there may be things he'll keep to himself. But I'm going to try my hardest. As you did, for me." The weight of my words rests heavily over me, and I lower my head to my hands. "I can only hope to be half as good a parent to him as you've been to the three of us."

Thin, gentle fingers run through my shaggy locks. I know I need a cut, badly. My regular stylist has been out of commission. I lift my head, and my mother's eyes have softened. Her touch continues, stroking my scalp. I want to close my eyes at the contact, but I couldn't stand to break her gaze. I fear her next words. I also fear what further damage I could cause what's left of our relationship by speaking again.

"I'm overwhelmed by it all. And hurt. And so angry, though not only at you."

"Please don't be mad at Ana," I beg.

"Christian, for heaven's sake. I'm not upset with Ana. I'm upset for Ana. I find it ridiculous that you'd suggest I could harbor any ill will toward the woman who quite literally saved my son from a lifetime in the darkness." She goes quiet again, and her fingers drop to her lap.

I swallow. "I'm no longer your victory dance."

My mother then does something she's never done to me before. She pulls back and swats me on the shoulder... hard. Her face is incredulous. "Christian Grey, have you not learned anything? Everything you chose to reveal to us, all those things you'd kept private so long out of fear of what we'd think... It shows how far you've come, to trust us to do right by you. It was the very first thing I'd hoped I'd earn from you, your trust. And it's taken longer than all the other hopes and dreams I've had for you, but aside from my children's love, it's what I've wanted most. It's the holy grail of
Christian Trevelyan Grey. And I finally have that. You're more my victory dance now than you ever were.

~oOo~

I find Ana and Kate surrounded by junk food in the home theater. As I lean over the back of the loveseat to press a kiss to the top of her head, I inhale deeply. Her hair smells so good... Like freshly cut jasmine petals. It soothes my weary soul. Ana's hand reaches up to cup my cheek, and I hold it there for a moment, pressing a kiss to her palm before releasing her.

"How is Girl's Night?" I ask.

I cashed in Kate's favor earlier than expected, and of course she came running when I said I had something to take care of, and didn't want to leave Ana on her own. Well, she's never truly on her own, but it's not like she really wants to spend quality time with the staff, and Ted's just not one for conversation unless it revolves around fictional characters or my coveted hazelnut cookies. I'm still a tad steamy about that one.

Kate throws me a look of one part hostility and at least seven parts sympathy. That's the usual ratio these days. My odds are looking up. I should have asked instead how the Kavanagh Inquisition was progressing... as that's what this likely is... which might have elicited a feistier response.

"Much needed," Ana answers. "Might we have a few more minutes?"

There's my cue to get the hell out. "Of course, baby. Teddy asleep?"

"He's probably milking another story out of Ina."

"I'll go check. Take your time, I'll be in the gym." I kiss her head again as I leave.

As expected, my son is on his fourth story, noting the stack of books discarded on the side table. Carter does all the voices to near perfection, probably part of the allure for his thirty-month-old mind. I observe for a moment and back out of the doorway unnoticed only by Teddy.

I still have the need to hit something, so the workout of choice is kickboxing. I don some athletic shorts and set up the heavy bag. No gloves tonight. I need to feel this.

Knuckles and shins bruised and abraded but not yet bleeding, I deem my body sufficiently punished and mind marginally settled, or at least, within acceptable parameters for sleep. I slip into the downstairs shower, taking longer than usual, turning the temperature down a notch at a time. Examining my hands, I chide myself for going so far. These are going to hurt tomorrow. I smear cream over my knuckles and wrap them lightly in gauze.

I find Ana asleep in our bed. I drop my towel and pull on boxers, and then slip under the sheets behind her, drawing her gently to my chest. She flinches.

"Just me, baby," I whisper.

"Your hands," she murmurs sleepily, her voice filled with concern.

"I'm all right," I adjust so the gauze no longer makes contact with her skin. Her hands find mine in
the darkness, lightly brushing the loose fabric. "What happened?"

"Disagreement with the heavy bag," I say, pressing my lips to her hair. "Don't worry, I won."

"Was it that bad?"

I sigh. She knows only part of the reason I went so far. It's going to take some getting used to; having her know me so well again. "About what I expected. Mia feels betrayed, and so angry. I expected as much. I imagine we won't speak for a while. My sister can outlast our mother in administering the silent treatment." Ana stiffens in my arms.

"What?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"Ana?" I prod. When she doesn't answer, I turn her around in my arms. "What is it, baby?"

"It's not really anything, Christian."

"Not really anything is still something, Anastasia. Out with it." I kiss the tip of her precious little nose to offset the use of her full name. I'm serious, but no longer angry. For now.

She shrugs against my bandaged hands, and I resist the urge to wince. "Are you and Grace okay?"

Oh, I see… she's caught onto my mother’s ways. "We're getting there. Our talk this afternoon was a first step. Given time we'll take another, but we'll never get back to the way things were. She'll never unlearn what she now knows of me. And there may be some things she'll never quite trust me with again" I sigh. "I suppose I can live with that, so long as she still loves me."

Ana snuggles into my chest. "Grace will always love you, Christian," she tells me softly.

I chuckle. "I know, baby. I think I finally understand. I was just pointing out that I can handle whatever else changes, so long as that remains constant. I can't imagine a better mother in this world, except of course for you."

She sighs. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's the honest truth."

"You're going to make me cry. I'm so tired of crying."

Shit. Three years of marriage, several before that spent intimately with women, and much of my childhood spent with Doctor Mom and a younger sister... and I still don't get why women cry all the fucking time. But this time, I think I know. She still blames herself in some part for what happened to Phoebe, and then some for her limited reaction to her memory of our daughter over the last few months. I need to set the record straight for her; it's the very least she deserves.

"Ana, I know what it's like to feel inadequate. I can also understand why you might feel that way right now, but I want you to know that no one has ever, ever believed the things you're thinking of yourself. You're every kind of mother you should be. You're not at fault for anything that's happened, though I know exactly how it tears at your soul. It does the same to mine every day. It's so hard to focus all that anger, all that pain... when there's nowhere for it to go. I know how that feels." I stroke her hair. The silent sobs come, making her shoulders tremble. "She's still a part of you. She'll always be a part of our family. We won't forget her. She wouldn't blame you. She knew you loved her. I want to believe she knew I loved her as well. You did nothing to cause this, Ana.
Please, I beg you not to blame yourself.

Ana squirms, her face buried in my chest, and I feel the wetness there. I want to give her a reprieve, to stop all this and just soothe her, to gloss over the pain and deal with it another day but she has to know the truth, and I'm not done telling it to her. "You go ahead and feel however it is you need to feel about everything that's happened, and know that I'm right here beside you, ready to hear whatever you need to say, to reassure you, or just to hold you. It's going to be hard..." I close my eyes on the word, the crack of my voice lending emphasis. "But we're going to make it through. Together."

I hold her silently for a while, I'm not sure how long, but until she calms a bit, before I begin again. "I've made weekly appointments for you and I, separately and together, with John, starting Monday evening. Just know that I'm here with you, that our families are behind you wholeheartedly, and that you're dearly loved." I press a kiss to her forehead. "You're the best mother in the world. Teddy as much as told me every day while you slept. I'm going to keep telling you until you believe it. And then I'm going to tell you some more."

Her lips capture mine suddenly, catching me off guard. She pushes me onto my back and slides on top of me. It's the very last thing I expected her to do after a conversation like that... but fuck, is it hot.

"I want you, Mr. Grey," she whispers. "I want to get lost with you."

Oh. Fucking. My. "I'm yours, Mrs. Grey. Always."
It’s taken time to adjust. To everything that’s happened, to what I remember, and more painfully, the things I don’t, from the time I was asleep, I missed so much. And I’ve come to realize that no matter how much time passes, two years at last count, some things are still hard.

A little at a time, Christian and I packed away Phoebe’s room, saving this and that, and letting go of the rest. It was a slow, broken, arduous process, but when the last of it was away, I breathed a sigh of relief.

And then I went to visit her.

Christian’s come with me sometimes. We’ve brought Teddy. We’ve picnicked with her, watched the sunset. I’ve cried over her. Teddy asks why, and he’s still too little to understand that “it just hurts.” Grace and Carrick joined us the last time. My mother-in-law has been instrumental in recovering from the loss… having experienced something similar early in their marriage. Christian hadn’t told me that… because until this, he hadn’t known.

Grace dropped by while I was having a particularly horrible day. That’s what life was for us after my memory returned… a series of alternating good and bad days. After a time the bad ones dwindled, but this particular bad day was the first that held any real good as well. Curled in the corner of the black-hole sofa was a place of frequent escape, mug of tea in tow. That’s where she found me, and placed a black-and-white photograph in my fingers.

“Carrick took this, on the day of your accident,” she’d carefully explained. “Christian hasn’t seen it yet… I thought you deserved to see it first.”

It’s slightly grainy, muted, likely taken by a camera on a phone. I know what it is almost before I’ve fully absorbed it. A side shot, looking over Christian’s shoulder… at our beautiful baby girl. She’s tiny… her little face partially obscured by the blanket, but I see her… I see her.

Grace and I cried together until Christian came home. And then he and I cried some more. And then Christian carried me into his office to sit with him while he scanned the photo, cleaned it up with all manner of high-end software and reprinted it, replacing the sonogram in the silver frame that had graced his desk all those months. It’s the only picture we’ll ever have of her. And it’s the only one we’ll ever need.

And then our healing began anew.

It’s biting cold out, but we’re here with purpose, standing on the sidewalk near the front of the crowd. My eyes trail downward to the knit-hooded bundle, snugly strapped at my chest. The arrival of our third child was as unexpected and unplanned as I’ve come to accept so many things in our lives. Oh, what a day that was…

…

“Christian…” I gasp, my eyes widening, body frozen, gripping the damp bath towel around me, fearing the unwelcome swelling of sensation… oh no… it’s too early…

“Ana?” he calls from the bedroom. “Baby? What’s wrong?” His eyes draw down to the puddle beneath me, and I see a flash of fear in his features, but it’s gone in an instant, and I’m in his arms,
and then on our bed. I’d felt this before… with Teddy… and remember what the nurse had said as she artificially broke my water… after that, there’s no going back. “It’s too soon,” I gasp breathlessly.


At the time, I didn’t connect his cryptic order, too distracted by the wash of sudden and insistent pressure down below, but I discovered later what it meant. Mortal danger.

“Calm breaths, baby,” he soothes, throwing away my damp towel and pulling the bedsheet over me instead. I reach out, catching him by his t-shirt, and he stills, taking my hand in one of his, the other reaching for my abdomen. “I’ve got you.”

The waves stack upon one another. So hurriedly, directly… I’m lost in the sensation. A fleeting memory of a similar situation from one of my mother’s soap operas crosses my mind. God, I can’t think… this shouldn’t be happening. Seven weeks… I still have seven more weeks… our currently genderless baby can’t possibly survive long without help. I’m overcome not only by sensation but by fear. My hand tightens around Christian’s, and he speaks softly to me, and then over his shoulder… Taylor must be here. He hasn’t said everything’s going to be okay, and he would never lie to me. This is bad. This is so bad. The blood pounds in my ears, and I see stars, shimmering lights…

“Ana? Ana!” His voice pulls me back from the edge. “I need you to look at me, baby,” he commands.

“It hurts,” I breathe.

“I know, sweetheart, I know it does. Help is en route.” His free hand roams deliberately over my belly. I hadn’t noticed the Bluetooth earpiece until now. “Mom wants you to take slow, even breaths, as best you can, and tell us what you feel.” His expression is expectant, patient but anxious.

“It’s fast… no warning… different than before, urgent… oh, God…” I cry out, the wave has become a steamroller, and my sides clench painfully. My heart pounds with fright.

“What am I looking for?” Christian’s astral voice breaks through, gathering the bottom of the sheet and gently parting my knees. He goes a little pale. “I think I see the head, Mom.”

No. Fucking. Way. This can’t be happening… not to us, not again. My belly tenses, my head swirls, and I feel it. I feel everything. Christian kneels between my knees, his eyes bouncing between my face and the action below.

I grip the sheets in my fingers, all control slipping away as my body betrays me. I haven’t pushed, not once… but the compulsion builds and I can’t stop it.

“What do you mean she can’t help it?” Christian shouts. “Ana, baby, I’m so sorry… you’re fine… you’re doing just fine… Mom, talk to me.” He pauses, and then his eyes are on me, and he’s regained his purpose. “Ana, I need you to push.”

“Are you serious?” I screech. He said help was on the way, help meant medical professionals… surely they should be here, they should handle this… I want Christian next to me. Another contraction threatens, and suddenly, I feel the direness hidden in his eyes.

And I can’t help it. I really can’t. I don’t recall the next minute or so in great detail, except that I
felt as though my insides were tearing.

The tiny cry that pierces the bedroom is the most welcome sound in the world.

“Pink, he’s pink, Mom. No, no blood. Nothing yet. Oh, thank God.” Christian accepts the white towel he’s handed… was Taylor here the whole freaking time? I reach toward my husband.

“A son, Ana. Another son.” He carefully passes the bundle into my arms.

Oh, goodness, he’s tiny.

...

He spent the next five weeks under close observation, and then they finally let us bring him home, to the place where his life began. I still shudder when I think how badly his entrance into the world could have ended. But we have him, we have our two boys, Teddy and Quinn. Both perfectly healthy, and the spitting image of Christian.

Teddy’s taken to big-brotherhood with great intent, gentleness and a protective nature that rivals their father’s. Christian is mesmerized by their relationship; he sees all the closeness that he never really had with his own brother, and rather than tormenting him, it’s given him reason to solidify that relationship as well.

“I think I see them!” Kate squeals.

My eyes fly toward the stream of sleek, powerful runners pounding across the finish line.

“Go, Dad! Go!” Teddy squeals, bouncing on Sawyer’s shoulders. Gail whoops beside me. It’s an all-out, extended-family affair, what can I say. The only absentees are Mia, who’s chasing her ninth month of pregnancy, and Grace and Carrick, who are busily preparing the after-party in Bellevue.

My eyes lock with Christian’s as he powers toward us, toward his goal, shoulder to shoulder with Elliot. We’re later to find that they finished one-hundred seventy-fourth and seventy-fifth overall, respectively. I’m too flabbergasted though, through the deafening cheers when they cross the finish and move off to the side, Taylor close behind as always, that the brothers share quite an uncharacteristic, not to mention public embrace.

And then Elliot throws up on the sidewalk.

And Christian laughs at him, patting him on the back, and leading him to a bench.

“He’ll be fine,” I tell Kate. She doesn’t do well with her own child’s emissions either.

My husband is soaking, despite the chill, but I accept a long, wet kiss from him regardless, and hand him a dry jacket.

“How do you feel?” I ask as he plants a kiss on Quinn’s covered head.

He laughs. “Better than my brother, I imagine,” he jerks his head over to Elliot, who is now receiving water and attention from his wife and daughter. “He was pretty incredible, actually, having only trained the last six months. Fucking incredible.”

“Aww, Dad!” Teddy swats at him sassily, and Sawyer lifts our four-year-old from his perch, handing him to Christian.

“I’m sorry! Again!” Christian emphasizes, bumping noses with his older miniature. “How many is
“Um… twenty!” Teddy decides. I have no idea what the actual expletive tally is, but Christian has been conscientiously trying to stop swearing around the kids. He drops an extra mil into each one’s trust fund for every swear word uttered within earshot, and doubles it when Teddy corrects him. So I guess we’re up to forty million apiece, according to the four-year-old. I think Teddy would settle for forty dollars and a trip to the toy store.

…

“Tired?” I ask, joining Christian on the patio, wine glass in hand.

“Fucking exhausted,” he admits, quickly looking around to assure that no little ears have heard him. “But fantastic. The turnout was phenomenal. We may be in the poorhouse come Christmas… might have to scale back your gifts this year, Mrs. Grey,” he jibes. When he finally returned to serious training and set his sights on the Seattle Marathon, I suggested that he might sponsor the race this year, to further incentivize him to stay motivated. And in true Christian Grey style, he went further. Any employee under the Grey House umbrella was treated to a bonus for finishing any of the weekend’s races, and he stayed to the very end, to ensure that each of his people came away from the event without issue. Hundreds participated in some way or another.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say.

“You are?” he sounds surprised. To this day, he still struggles with the depth of my affection for him.

“I am. Endlessly.” I lean over, my hands running up his chest and he brings his warm lips down to mine. Just shy of touching them, he whispers against my mouth. “Run with me next year?”

I gasp. “I don’t know about that,” I say.

He smiles. “And why not?”

I giggle. “I don’t know what regulations say about running with a four-month-old strapped to your back…”

His eyes widen. Under my hand, his heart picks up to a gallop. “You’re… already?”

I shrug shyly. “Surprise?”

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