



Fifty  
Shades  
of Grey

E L James

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller

E L James

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FIFTY SHADES  
*of* GREY

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E L James is a former TV executive, wife, and mother of two based in West London. Since early childhood, she dreamed of writing stories that readers would fall in love with but put those dreams on hold to focus on her family and her career. She finally plucked up the courage to put pen to paper with her first novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. She is also the author of *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*.

*Fifty Shades of Grey*

*Fifty Shades Darker*

*Fifty Shades Freed*

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# FIFTY SHADES *of* GREY

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E L James



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

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

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

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## CHAPTER ONE

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

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

Kate is huddled on the couch in the living room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will. Good luck. And thanks, Ana—as usual, you're my lifesaver."

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

THE ROADS ARE CLEAR as I set off from Vancouver, Washington, toward Interstate 5. It's early, and I don't have to be in Seattle until two this afternoon. Fortunately, Kate has lent me her

sporty Mercedes CLK. I'm not sure Wanda, my old VW Beetle, would make the journey in time. Oh, the Merc is a fun drive, and the miles slip away as I hit the pedal to the metal.

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

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

"I'm here to see Mr. Grey. Anastasia Steele for Katherine Kavanagh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Miss Steele?" the latest blonde asks.

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

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

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

"Have you been offered any refreshment?"

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

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

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

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

"Olivia, please fetch Miss Steele a glass of water." Her voice is stern. Olivia scoots up and scurries to a door on the other side of the foyer.

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

Olivia returns with a glass of iced water.

"Here you go, Miss Steele."

"Thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um. Actually—" I mutter. If this guy is over thirty, then I'm a monkey's uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run

through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. Must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my heart rate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you mind if I record your answers?”

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

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

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

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

*Oh!* This is news to me, and I’m temporarily preoccupied by the thought that someone much older than me—okay, maybe six years or so, and okay, mega-successful, but still—going to present me with my degree. I frown, dragging my wayward attention back to the task at hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me? His overwhelming good looks maybe? The way his eyes blaze at me? The way he strokes his index finger against his lower lip? I wish he'd stop doing that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Chill out?" He smiles, revealing perfect white teeth. I stop breathing. He really

beautiful. No one should be this good-looking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Possibly. Though there are people who’d say I don’t have a heart.”

“Why would they say that?”

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

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

“I’m a very private person, Miss Steele. I go a long way to protect my privacy. I don’t often give interviews ...”

“Why did you agree to do this one?”

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

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

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

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

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

He shrugs noncommittally.

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

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

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

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

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

“You sound like the ultimate consumer.”

“I am.” He smiles, but the smile doesn’t touch his eyes. Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I can’t help thinking that we’re talking about something else, but I’m mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising, and

maybe it's just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Kate has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

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

"I have no way of knowing."

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

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

"You've had to sacrifice family life for your work."

"That's not a question." He's terse.

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

"I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that."

"Are you gay, Mr. Grey?"

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

"No, Anastasia, I'm not." He raises his eyebrows, a cool gleam in his eyes. He does not look pleased.

"I apologize. It's, um ... written here." It's the first time he's said my name. My heartbeats has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again. Nervously, I tuck my loosened hair behind my ear.

He cocks his head to one side.

"These aren't your own questions?"

The blood drains from my head.

"Er ... no. Kate—Miss Kavanagh—she compiled the questions."

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

"No. She's my roommate."

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

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

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

"I was drafted. She's not well." My voice is weak and apologetic.

"That explains a great deal."

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

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

"We're not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting."

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

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

“Where were we, Miss Steele?”

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

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

“I want to know about you. I think that’s only fair.” His eyes are alight with curiosity.

*Double crap. Where’s he going with this?* He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeples his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very ... distracting. I swallow.

“There’s not much to know.”

“What are your plans after you graduate?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did you have a coat?” Grey asks.

“A jacket.”

Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which Grey takes from her before she can hand



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

“Anastasia,” he says as a farewell.

“Christian,” I reply. And mercifully, the doors close.

## CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I was beginning to worry. I expected you back sooner.”

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

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

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

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

Kate gazes innocently at me. I frown.

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

Kate clamps a hand to her mouth. “Jeez, Ana, I’m sorry—I didn’t think.”

I huff.

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

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

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

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

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

“Ana, you’ll be exhausted.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll see you later.”

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

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

“Ana! I thought you weren’t going to make it today.”

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

“I’m real pleased to see you.”

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

WHEN I ARRIVE HOME later, Katherine is wearing headphones and working on her laptop. Her nose is still pink, but she has her teeth into a story, so she’s concentrating and typing furiously. I’m thoroughly drained, exhausted by the long drive, by the grueling interview, and

by being swamped at Clayton's. I slump on to the couch, thinking about the essay I have finish and all the studying I haven't done today because I was holed up with ... *him*.

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

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

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

"Um ... no, I didn't."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Would you like a sandwich?"

"Please."

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

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

FOR THE REST OF the week, I throw myself into my studies and my job at Clayton's. Kate is busy, too, compiling her last edition of the student newspaper before she has to relinquish to the new editor while also cramming for her finals. By Wednesday, she's much better, and no longer have to endure the sight of her pink-flannel-with-too-many-rabbits PJs. I call my mom in Georgia to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck on my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into candlemaking—my mother is all about new business ventures. Fundamentally, she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It'll be something new next week. She worries me. I hope she hasn't mortgaged the house to finance this latest scheme. And I hope Bob—her relatively new but much older husband—is keeping an eye on her now that I'm no longer there. He does seem a lot more grounded than Husband Number Three.

"How are things with you, Ana?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's amazing—congratulations!" Delighted for him, I hug him again. Kate beams at him, too.

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

"Let's celebrate. I want you to come to the opening." José looks intently at me and I flush.

“Both of you, of course,” he adds, glancing nervously at Kate.

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

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

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

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

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

*Heart failure.*

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

Holy crap. What the hell is *he* doing here, looking all outdoorsy with his tousled hair and his cream chunky-knit sweater, jeans, and walking boots? I think my mouth has popped open and I can't locate my brain or my voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Cable ties?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is there anything else?”

“I’d like some masking tape.”

*Masking tape?*

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

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

*Am I that funny? Funny looking?*

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

I glance behind me as he follows.

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

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

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

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

“Some rope, I think.” His voice mirrors mine, husky.

“This way.” I duck my head down to hide my recurring blush and move toward the aisle.

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

“I’ll take five yards of the natural filament rope, please.”

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

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

“Organized group activities aren’t really my thing, Mr. Grey.”

He arches a brow.

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

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

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

“Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mainly.”

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

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

“I don’t know. What else would you recommend?”

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

“For a do-it-yourselfer?”

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

“Coveralls,” I reply, and I know I’m no longer screening what’s coming out of my mouth.

He raises an eyebrow, amused yet again.

“You wouldn’t want to ruin your clothing.” I gesture vaguely in the direction of his jeans.

“I could always take them off.” He smirks.

“Um.” I feel the color in my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of *The Communist Manifesto*. *Stop talking. Stop talking NOW.*

“I’ll take some coveralls. Heaven forbid I should ruin any clothing,” he says dryly.

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

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



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