Love Without Limits

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**Summary:**
Christian can’t believe his luck when the smart, sexy journalist who interviewed him turns out to be a submissive. But Anastasia is unlike any sub he’s ever known, and she’s not interested in his version of power exchange. Having her in his life will mean breaking old habits, and the lengths he’ll go to win her submission will change him forever.


Original Story Posting: [bit.ly/LoveWithoutLimitsFF](bit.ly/LoveWithoutLimitsFF)

Other Stories by This Author: [bit.ly/ChristiWhitsonFanfiction](bit.ly/ChristiWhitsonFanfiction)
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The rhythmic clicking of my high heels seemed to echo at a volume disproportionate to my stature as I walked through the lobby of Grey House. The sound effectively announced my arrival to the blonde, hawk-eyed receptionist, and I gave her a polite smile as I handed over my press credentials.

“Good morning. I have an appointment to interview Mr. Grey.”

The woman glanced at my name on the press badge and back up at my face, suspicion etched in her features. With a sigh, she tapped a few keys on her computer, presumably double-checking the CEO’s schedule. Her eyes flickered back to me occasionally, assessing my face and what she could see of my outfit. I shifted uncomfortably beneath her scrutiny and repressed the urge to smooth imaginary wrinkles out of my navy sheath dress.

I couldn’t really blame her for being surprised. Grey was big on privacy and almost never gave interviews. Still, it was no reason to give me the stink-eye. I wrote for Seattle Business Magazine, not National Enquirer.

She handed me a visitor’s pass and directed me toward a row of elevators, and I felt my confidence return as I got further away from her. I didn’t often do face-to-face interviews, but I had enough experience to feel relatively comfortable in this sort of environment. I’d grown accustomed to this world of three-piece suits and polished granite interiors. It was a business professional’s habitat, designed to impress and intimidate. But while I understood it, I’d never truly been a part of it. I was always on the fringes, an outsider who was granted the occasional visitor pass and permission to share carefully crafted statements with the rest of the ninety-nine percent.

My eyes automatically scanned each floor when the door opened to let people on and off the elevator. A close friend of mine worked at GEH, but since I’d never visited him at work, I had no idea what floor he might be on. If it weren’t a Monday, I would’ve tried to plan a lunch with him after my interview.

When the doors finally opened to the executive lobby, I stepped out onto yet another expensive floor. The lobby was more or less what I’d been expecting. Cold, clinical, and white. Everything was white. I had to wonder if the people who worked here went home with migraines every night. Good thing the sun was somewhat rare in Seattle. The gleam of sunlight off those floors would’ve singed my retinas.

I was once again conscious of my appearance as I introduced myself to the pair of Officewear Barbies stationed behind the long receptionist desk. My outfit might not have had designer labels, but at least I didn’t look out of place. I gave my name to Barbie Number One, and she greeted me warmly, introducing herself as Andrea.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Steele. Mr. Grey is finishing up a meeting and will see you momentarily. Can I get you anything to drink while you wait?”

“No, thank you,” I replied politely, taking a seat in the lounge area.
Although I’d never met Christian Grey, I had a pretty good idea what to expect. I’d read a lot about him and admired his business acumen, but what really interested me were his charitable projects. Giving to charity was a common practice among the uber wealthy. In most cases, it seemed driven by tax deductions more than anything else, but Grey chose his beneficiaries personally and was exceedingly generous, even for a billionaire. I’d always wondered if there was more to his choices than he usually let on, and I hoped he would be willing to discuss it today.

His global hunger initiative was particularly impressive, receiving over seventy-five percent of his charitable donations. Hunger was an issue everywhere, and I liked that Grey focused on domestic as well as foreign needs. A lot of the funds went to third world countries, but more than half of it stayed right here in the US. And a third of that was concentrated in our own state.

Thoughts of food naturally evolved to possible dinner solutions for tonight, and I began a mental inventory of the contents of my pantry, eventually settling on homemade pizzas. Amelia had liked that meal last time, since it was something she could help prepare. I smiled at the memory of my daughter grinning up at me from beneath her riot of dark curls, meticulously arranging slices of pepperoni. More than one had gone into her mouth instead of onto the pizza.

My thoughts were interrupted by the hurried footsteps of a small group of people as they passed through the lobby toward the elevator. They were led by two men who shared a familial resemblance, both dark-haired, lean, and tall. One had a bit of gray in his hair, but the other looked a little closer to my age. Brothers, probably. They both appeared frustrated and perhaps a bit angry, and I wondered if they had just come out of their own meeting with Grey. If so, it didn’t bode well for Grey’s mood.

The younger of the two men did a double-take in my direction as they passed, but before I could give it more than a moment’s thought, Andrea was calling my name and escorting me to Grey’s office. As I followed her down the long hallway, I gave myself a once-over, both physically and mentally. Game face, Steele. No matter what mood he’s in.

Grey was facing away from the door when I entered the room, but once again, my shoes on the noisy polished floor announced my presence. He turned around and greeted me with a nod and a reserved smile.

“Good morning. It’s Ms. Steele, yes? Seattle Business Magazine?” he asked, reaching out to shake my hand. His hand was large, and his palm enveloped mine completely.

“Yes, Mr. Grey. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise. Please, have a seat.” I followed his gesture to one of the chairs in front of his desk, and he took up the traditional post on the other side.

He was hotter in person, if such a thing were even possible. Of course, I’d known he was good-looking, and I would’ve had to be gay or blind not to notice. But looks alone weren’t enough to make it in the business world. Grey had brains too, and that was what made him truly attractive to me.

“Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I know it’s not your usual way of doing things.”
“It’s not. But I’ve heard nothing but good things about you from my COO and my head of PR. It seems I chose the right person to break tradition for,” he replied with a speculative grin, his gray eyes piercing my composure.

I smiled back but couldn’t hold his gaze, ducking my head a little as I felt my cheeks grow warm. For fuck’s sake, I was blushing. I mentally kicked my own ass and forced myself to focus.

“That’s very kind of you, sir. I know you’re a busy man, so I’ll try to keep it brief.”

Since I couldn’t quite meet his eyes, I definitely noticed when his grip tightened on the arm of his chair. It was odd, but I forged ahead with my usual warm-up routine. It was designed to put the interviewee at ease. A word of thanks for the interview, maybe a bit of relevant news that might have hit the wire within the last few days... But while Grey exchanged pleasantries as readily as anyone else, he never seemed to relax.

He was wound tight, and there was definitely something off about his expression as he gazed across his desk at me. He wasn’t leering or staring at my chest, but he still managed to make me feel exposed. Naked. I ignored another surge of warmth in my cheeks and pushed onward.

“Would you be willing to discuss the research grant you recently started at the University of Washington?”

“Certainly. It’s one of several such programs, actually. GEH is always pushing for advancements in various fields, and funding innovators is the most direct way to accomplish that.”

“May I ask what made you choose that particular school over, say... a more well-known university? An Ivy League school perhaps?”

Grey smirked in a way that made it clear he’d recognized my subtle nod to his status as an Ivy League dropout, but he didn’t take the bait. I kept my smile sweet and genuine, choosing not to press the issue when he answered that he’d merely wanted to keep the programs local.

“Easier to stay on top of things personally if it’s nearby.”

Personally? Was he a micromanager, then? I’d heard he was a control freak, though, so I supposed it wasn’t all that surprising.

I went down the list of questions I’d prepared ahead of time and chose a few that were pertinent to the topic. We spent a few minutes conversing back and forth on the role of secondary education institutions in workforce development, moving on to how his grant programs were designed not only to fund the research but to mold future professionals. I was gratified to see him lean forward in his seat, finally becoming engaged in the discussion.

“I have to say, I’m pleasantly surprised by your knowledge on the subject. You’ve clearly done your research. I was afraid I’d be stuck with the usual humdrum questions that seem to serve as the basis for all interviews, which is why I do them so rarely. To what do I owe my success, and so on.”

I canted my head slightly and didn’t bother to contain my grin.
“Ah, yes. ‘Business is about people, and I’ve always been good at people. What motivates them, what incentivizes them, what inspires them...’” His smile widened, and I added, “No offense, but it sounds like you’ve given a lot of interviews to school newspapers.”

“Touché, Ms. Steele,” he replied softly, still pinning me with his gaze.

The gleam in his eyes was even brighter now and much easier to decipher. He was interested. And not in a way that had anything to do with the article I’d be writing. It had been a while since the last time a man had looked at me like that. Like his head was full of dirty thoughts, and he wanted to whisper them all over my skin.

I knew it would be the height of stupidity to respond to that sort of attention. This was a professional interview, and I had one chance to do it right. But my body had other ideas, and I found myself flirting back. Just a little.

I uncrossed and recrossed my legs, my nerves tingling as his eyes followed the movement. When they returned to my face, I held his gaze for just a little too long before dropping my own eyes to my lap. Once again, his hand gripped the arm of his chair.

What the hell am I doing? This is an interview. Not a date!

“I hoped you might also be willing to talk a little about your charitable contributions. Specifically your global hunger initiative,” I said, doing my damndest to use my professional voice and not the breathy, seductive version that wanted to come out of my mouth. “Is that particular cause something you feel passionate about? Feeding the world’s poor?”

As soon as I asked the question, something shifted in his expression. I watched as a metaphorical wall went up, like a sheet of ice in his gray eyes. His smile reverted back to the cool reserve he’d shown when I first walked into the room.

“It’s smart business,” he said simply. Apparently, I wasn’t able to hide my skepticism. “You don’t agree?”

“I don’t necessarily disagree. It looks good for your company, of course. But it seems like a lot of money for the sake of a little good PR. That money could be distributed over dozens of causes, increasing your visibility as well as the likelihood of good press on more than just the one topic. So, I guess I can’t help but wonder if maybe your heart might be a bit bigger than you want to let on.”

He stared at me with an odd expression for a long moment, and I shuddered beneath his assessment.

“I’m sure you’re well aware that there are many who would say I don’t have a heart at all.”

“And why would they say that?”

“Because they know me well.”

I scrutinized his guarded gray eyes but found no trace of irony or sarcasm.
Well, all right, then. Not many men could put so much meaning into five little words, but I had no trouble getting the hint. He might want my body, but that was where his interest ended. Figures. A tiny part of me was disappointed, but I shook it off quickly, forcing the professionalism back into my tone and expression.

He’s a billionaire. It’s not like it would’ve worked out anyway.
If I’d had any idea who Seattle Business Magazine would send for this interview, I sure as hell wouldn’t have wasted time trying to push it off to Ros. They’d told me her name and praised her professional achievements, but I’d barely been listening at the time. I rarely gave direct interviews, preferring to let my PR department handle the media as much as possible. But I was infinitely grateful I’d listened to my COO on this one.

Anastasia Steele was exquisite.

I wanted to lift her dress and bury my face between those sexy legs. To see those beautiful blue eyes roll back in her head as she came. To tame that long, silky hair into a thick plait and wrap it around my fist while I fucked her...

The longing to touch her, to taste her, was straining the limits of my self-control, and every time she lowered her eyes at my mild flirting, my pants got a little tighter. And Christ, when she called me sir, I wanted to bend her right over my desk that instant. I knew she hadn’t meant Sir, with that capital S, but my dick didn’t seem to care. I spotted the hint of a blush in her pale cheeks and watched in satisfaction as her breathing accelerated. At least I wasn’t alone in my discomfort.

Our loaded glances and furtive smiles quickly turned into a sort of game, like a challenge to see who was better at keeping up the charade of professionalism. But just when I thought I’d won, something I said brought about a change. Her eyes narrowed in confusion, and her face fell a little. Now, her smile was just a shade cooler than before, and her tone was all business as she switched the focus of the interview to my most recent acquisition.

What did I say? The bit about not having a heart?

Anastasia seemed to have taken issue with that, but I wasn’t sure why. My reputation as a cold, calculating businessman was both well-established and well-deserved. Hell, it had been her own colleagues in the press who had labeled me as such, and I’d done very little to challenge that perception. Having started my company at such a young age, garnering a reputation like that was the only way anyone in the corporate world would take me seriously. Even after eight years of success and billions in profit.

The brief shadow of disappointment Anastasia had let slip was gone now, replaced by an aura of perfect professionalism. She was no longer playing our game, and for some reason, that only made me want her more. When I sensed she was wrapping up her interview, I grappled for an excuse to delay her.

“Perhaps we can continue our discussion over lunch. I was planning to order in, if you’d care to join me. Or we could go out somewhere if you prefer.”

I offered her the same smile that had made her squirm in her seat a few minutes ago, and I was pleased to see her repeat the movement. But her response wasn’t the eager yes I was hoping to hear.
“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Grey, but I’m afraid I need to head back to my office,” she replied apologetically, rising to her feet.

I rounded the desk to escort her out, boldly placing my hand at the small of her back as we left my office and walked to the elevators. She pushed the button and looked up at me with a hesitant smile.

“Thank you again for agreeing to speak with me. I hope it wasn’t too uncomfortable.”

_If you only knew._

“On the contrary, Anastasia. I can’t remember ever having enjoyed an interview so much,” I said truthfully, leaning toward her as I let the tone and volume of my voice drop to a more intimate level.

She was inches away from me now, her sweet scent filling my mind with thoughts of gasping breaths and twisted sheets. Her gaze caught on my lips, and she swallowed thickly, shifting on her four-inch heels.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she murmured distractedly.

The chime of the elevator’s arrival came all too soon, and I stifled the urge to demand she stay. She stepped away from me and into the empty elevator, giving me a parting smile that was half seductive and half rueful. A smile I knew would stay with me until I saw her again.

Because this wasn’t goodbye. I would make sure of that.

When I returned to my office, I went immediately to my computer and emailed Welch for a more detailed background check on Ms. Anastasia Steele. She’d had to pass a standard security check to gain access to me, but now I needed more personal information. Was she single? And more to the point... Had I read her tells correctly?

I’d been a long time without a submissive, though there was really no one to blame for that but myself. It had been two years since my last contract had ended and nearly as long since the last time I’d had sex. Maybe that was the problem here. I was almost certain Anastasia was a submissive, but maybe I’d read her wrong. No sub I’d ever met would’ve been put off by my comment about being heartless.

I sighed and reached down to adjust the erection I’d been sporting since the moment Anastasia had walked into my office. I was due in Ros’s office shortly to discuss this morning’s meeting with the Brockton brothers, so I shot a quick text to Taylor with instructions to email me the security cam footage of the interview with Anastasia. That was sure to raise a few eyebrows in the security offices.

It was a miracle I’d had the presence of mind to turn on the camera when she arrived. Granted, that wasn’t really its intended purpose, and I’d never used it like that before. I could only imagine what Taylor had been thinking as he watched it, but I had no doubt my CPO _did_ watch. Protocol indicated that the recording devices in my office were only to be used under certain circumstances. Since I rarely used them, the activation of the system would have triggered an immediate alert with my security team.
But whatever Taylor’s thoughts on the matter might be, he kept them to himself and texted back promptly that the video would be in my inbox within the hour.

Ros looked at me expectantly as I walked into her office, and for a moment, I forgot why I was there.

“Well? How did it go?”

“It went great.”

“You got them to take the deal?” she asked, her eyes widening with surprise.

“What? Oh... No, I thought you were talking about the interview you talked me into doing. The other meeting was a waste of time. I’m ninety-nine percent sure these guys don’t want to sell at all.”

“Fucking idiots,” she grumbled, popping a piece of nicotine gum from its blister pack. “They’ve run that company too far into the red to ever pull themselves out again, but they have the nerve to dick us around on negotiations. I’m slightly less pissed that they pulled the same shit with you, though. I was beginning to think they just didn’t want to cooperate because I don’t have a dick.”

I shook my head, sparing a brief glance at the blank screen of my phone. I was just as frustrated with the situation. Bill and Sam Brockton had inherited a small tech company that had been losing profits for way too long. The company was toast, whether I bought them out or not. What I actually wanted were the patents they held, but they refused to sell them on their own. Instead, they were holding the patents hostage and forcing me to buy the whole company. We’d been back and forth on negotiations for weeks now, and it was really starting to piss me off.

But even as Ros continued to rant about what our next tactic should be, I was watching my phone. How long did it really take to upload a video and press the send button?

“Christian?”

My head snapped up as Ros reclaimed my attention, frowning at me as though I’d sprouted a second head. *Fuck.* What had she just said?

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I told Barney to do some digging and find out who else the Brocktons have been talking to about the sale. Maybe we need to approach this from a different angle.”

“Hostile takeover?” she asked with a gleam in her eye.

“Maybe. Keep on it.” I stood to leave, but she stopped me before I made it to the door.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting weird, and you’re glued to your phone even more than usual. Is something going on?”

“No, just waiting on an email. Nothing important.”
“Okay...” she said dubiously. “So, the interview with SBM went well? I told you that writer was the perfect choice. Not every member of the press is a viper.”

My cock stiffened again at the mere thought of Anastasia Steele, and my voice was a little gruff when I replied, already halfway out the door.

“It was fine.”
Three
Anastasia

Despite what I’d told Mr. Grey when I’d refused his lunch invitation, I’d gone straight home after the interview rather than back to my office. I’d been in dire need of a dry pair of panties, and I was often more productive when working from home anyway. I’d spent the afternoon getting a good start on the article before heading back out to pick Amelia up from daycare. As I drove the familiar route to the center, my thoughts circled yet again around the enigmatic man I’d interviewed that morning.

It was a shame Grey had himself so locked down. Did he actually believe what he’d said about not having a heart? *If he didn’t, he probably wouldn’t have said it*, I thought wryly.

I was well aware of his reputation, but his charitable efforts told a different story. There had to be more to him than he was willing to show the world, although I could certainly understand why he might prefer to keep it to himself. A man in his position would feel the need to command the respect of his peers, and most of the people on his level had been playing the corporate game for much longer. But something just didn’t quite fit.

He’d been the one to initiate the flirtation and blurring of lines in that interview, and I was pretty sure he’d been able to read more in my responses than most men could have. He had the kind of personality that drew me in, and I had enough experience with dominant men to know why.

I’d heard the rumors that Grey wasn’t into women. Or men either, for that matter, since he’d never really been seen with anyone in public. But after this morning, I knew better. He’d been more subtle than some about his appreciation of my body, but I’d caught him staring more than once. Surely, a man as inherently magnetic as Christian Grey could’ve had his choice of lovers.

Yet, as much as he pulled people in, he pushed them away at the same time. Did he expect them to pursue him? *Probably*, I scoffed inwardly. No doubt many people did, what with a face and a bank account like his. But that had never been my style, and it never would be.

The prospect of Grey being a Dom was intriguing, though. *Kate or Garrett might know.* I pursed my lips in chagrin as I recalled that even if Garrett knew, he wouldn’t be able to tell me. Grey was intensely private in his business affairs and would likely be the same about his personal life as well. Hell, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he made his dates sign non-disclosure agreements like his employees did. Not that I didn’t understand the need for privacy. Society had a lot of misconceptions about BDSM, and in the corporate world, reputation was almost as important as intelligence.

I sighed ruefully. It had been a while since I’d had a scene. Too long, really. But my last attempt at finding a Dom had ended with us deciding we were better off as friends *without* the benefits. Lately, I’d grown tired of the ‘no strings attached’ thing. Casual relationships had their merits, but I was ready for something more solid.

Finally.
At one point not so very long ago, I hadn’t been sure I would ever be open to love again, but I was relieved to have been wrong. I wanted the freedom to let myself develop feelings for someone rather than have to walk a tightrope of carefully chosen words and ‘healthy’ distances. I’d had enough of that.

My thoughts shifted back to the present as I reached Amelia’s daycare and parked the car. On my way into the building, I exchanged perfunctory greetings with a couple of the other moms but managed to dodge an invite to their Saturday Sanctimommy Playgroup.

Okay, they didn’t really call it that, but that’s what it was. A bunch of married, power mom types who got together at the country club playground and talked shit about any style of parenting that didn’t match their own.

I’d once made the mistake of joining them and had been forced to sit for thirty minutes, listening to them badmouth a single mother from the daycare who was using ‘their taxpayer money’ for Headstart services once a week instead of just taking her son to a specialist. The conversation had rapidly gone downhill from there, sinking so far as to openly criticize a young mother who had been formula-feeding her infant on the other side of the playground. I was almost certain the woman had heard them, and I’d been embarrassed to even be sitting amongst that group of vapid harpies. That had been the first and last time I’d subjected myself to their company, and I had no doubt my absence had made me a frequent object of their vitriol.

As usual, Amelia was happy to see me when I reached her classroom and even more excited that her Auntie Kate was coming over for dinner this evening. I’d extended the invitation last week, but she’d only just texted this afternoon to say she was free. It would be a pit stop on her way to the club, most likely, but I appreciated that Kate made time for us when she could. Amelia adored her, and it was always nice to be able to have an adult conversation at home.

Once we got back to our apartment, I sent Amelia to play while I cooked dinner, switching my meal plan to pasta and opting to save the homemade pizza for later that week. I peeked occasionally into the living room to check on my daughter, smiling at her trademark pose in front of the television.

*Thank you, My Little Pony.*

For a three-year-old, Amelia was surprisingly good at entertaining herself. She had her moments, of course, as all children did. But for the most part, she seemed content to be left to her own devices, which was helpful for an only child. On the other hand, she didn’t seem to have much trouble getting along with kids her own age, so she usually enjoyed daycare as well.

My cell buzzed against the kitchen counter, and I answered the call with a smile, stirring the noodles a bit.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, Sweet Pea. How are my girls?”

“We’re good. Decent day for a Monday. How’s your cold?”

“Oh, it’s fine. Barely a sniffle now. You worry too much.”
“Wonder where I got that from,” I teased, pausing to empty a jar of spaghetti sauce over the browned hamburger. Dad snorted on the other end of the line.

“Beats the hell out of me.”

We chatted for a few minutes about Amelia and put a Grandpa Weekend on the calendar for next month so they could go fishing. The phone was still wedged against my shoulder when the doorbell sounded, followed by the rapid pattering of tiny, bare feet on the hardwood.

“Amelia Ray, don’t you open that door!”

“I know!”

“Dad, I gotta go. Kate’s here for dinner.”

We said a hasty goodbye as I moved to the front door, giving Amelia the thumbs-up when I saw her waiting obediently, albeit impatiently, next to the door. I opened it to reveal the smiling face of Kate Kavanagh, and my daughter squealed with glee as Kate picked her up and spun her around.

“There’s my munchkin!” She gave Amelia a squeeze and kissed her cheek. “I brought super special princess cookies for dessert, but they’re only for little girls who eat all of their dinner.”

“Cookies?!?” Amelia beamed, practically vibrating in Kate’s arms.

“Yup. Are you going to eat a good dinner?”

“Yup!”

Kate patted her bottom and set her down, watching her scamper back to the living room. I shook my head with a chuckle as I took the proffered princess cookies off her hands.

“You spoil her.”

“I’m Auntie Kate. That’s my job.” She followed me into the kitchen and perched on a bar stool while I went back to the stove. “So?! How’d it go? Was he a jerk?”

“Who?” I feigned ignorance, but she rolled her eyes, undeceived.

“You know who. Christian Grey. Everyone I know who’s spent more than a few minutes with him seems to think he’s brilliant but a colossal asshole.”

Kate worked as a journalist for Kavanagh Media, her family’s business, and she’d been relegated to the political side of the news lately. But she knew Grey’s reputation, and his demeanor on the handful of occasions she’d crossed paths with him had done nothing to contradict public opinion.

“Intelligent, yes. Asshole, no.”

“Really? I thought jerk was his default setting. He actually cooperated?” Her mouth was agape, and I shrugged noncommittally.
“He answered my questions politely and gave me a lot to work with. It was... It was good.”

I avoided her gaze as I began to ladle spaghetti onto three plates. Once Amelia was strapped into her booster seat, I took a seat on the opposite side, shamelessly using her as a buffer against the heat of Kate’s scrutiny.

“You’re leaving something out. What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. It just... It went well. Nothing more to it. Maybe he was just having a good day.”

Kate let the subject drop while we ate dinner, focusing instead on entertaining Amelia with funny stories and indulging my daughter in a lengthy discussion on her current obsession, *My Little Pony*. Amelia chattered on about the Equestria gang, and Kate eventually stopped trying to keep up.

“That sounds way more complicated than when we were kids. Now, there are human-pony hybrids and mermaid ponies? How do you keep it all straight?”

“She’s been hooked on it for months now,” I shrugged. “It’s pretty much all she talks about these days.”

I wiped Amelia down with a wet washcloth to rid her of the spaghetti mess and sent her back to the living room. Kate stood to help me with the dishes, glancing over her shoulder to check that the coast was clear before returning to her previous line of questioning.

“Seriously, Ana. What’s going on with you? You’re flustered and distracted, and you can barely sit still.”

“I’m fine. I just had a long day,” I shrugged, not meeting her eye.

“Hmm. You sure you can’t get your neighbor to stay with Amelia for a few hours and come to the club with me?”

“It’s Monday. *One of us* has to be a responsible adult.”

“Oh, hush. I worked all weekend, so I have tomorrow off. Besides, it’s been a while since you’ve had a scene, right? Not since Garrett?”

“Yeah, but I’m not in the mood to go out. It’s just me and my hand tonight,” I joked. Kate huffed a laugh but gave me a commiserating smile.

“I get it. I’ve had dry spells too. But you shouldn’t let it go on too long. It’s been... what, four or five months?”

*Six. But who’s counting*?

“I know. I’ve been planning to get back online. I just keep putting it off.”

“You need to be careful with that,” she frowned. “Online dating can be shady under the best of circumstances, and adding power exchange to that equation makes it even more so.”
“Not everyone online is a creep,” I said defensively. “That’s how I met Garrett, and he’s a good guy.”

“True. But if you guys were compatible, you’d still be together.”

I jerked my head slightly, unable to deny the truth of her words. Kate apparently took my silence as her cue to back off, and she disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes to change into her clubwear. She emerged with a black trenchcoat wrapped around her slender frame, but I knew just how skimpily she was dressed beneath it. A tiny part of me sighed with longing.

“I need to get going, sweetie. Unless you’d like me to stick around until after the munchkin’s in bed and lend a hand?” Her brow was arched in a teasing manner, and I laughed.

“Thanks, but no.”

Not that we hadn’t been there and done that in the past. Kate was a Domme, and since we were both bisexual, we’d once made the mistake of doing a scene together. The scene itself had been nice, but things had been awkward between us for a good month afterward. We’d both agreed that repeating it would be a bad idea.

After Kate left, our evening progressed as it usually did. Bath, story, bedtime... Once I’d tucked Amelia in for the night, I finished tidying up the apartment and went to bed too. As I lay in the dark, I thought back to everything Kate had said.

Garrett was indeed a good guy, and if he hadn’t been so adamantly opposed to monogamy, it might have worked out between us. I was sure my feelings for him could have progressed beyond placid affection eventually. He was a single parent too, and we both had jobs that involved interacting with high-powered executives.

He’d been a good Dom too. Discrete, respectful, and trustworthy. He’d seen to my needs adequately enough, though we’d only gotten together a handful of times over the course of a few months. Neither of us had had enough kid-free time for more than that.

I stretched in bed and allowed my hand to slip beneath my panties, trying to recall one of the better memories of my time with Garrett. But my brain refused to cooperate. Instead of Garrett’s face hovering over me, it was the model-like perfection of Christian Grey I saw.

Okay, so the guy had zero potential in reality, but he could be whatever I wanted in my fantasies. Maybe he’d put me over his knee and hold my wrists while he spanked me... Or wrap those long fingers around my throat as he fucked me...

There it is.

I went limp, slick and panting as the tremors eased, and I tried in vain to shake off my disappointment. No matter how creative I might get with my fantasies of Christian Grey, I knew I’d never experience the real thing.
“What the hell?” I muttered out loud, my voice breaking the silence of my empty home office. I scowled in irritation as I continued to stare down at the joke of a background check Welch had provided on Ms. Steele.

It was nowhere near as detailed as I’d expected, and I’d just finished emailing Welch with a demand for more information. Less than five minutes later, my computer chimed with his response, and my frown deepened as I read it.

*Unfortunately, there was nothing else to be found on Ms. Steele through electronic means. She is, apparently, a very private person. Let me know if you’d like me to pursue other avenues of obtaining information.*

*Other avenues,* I thought with a huff of amusement. He meant having her followed. It wouldn’t have been the first time I’d gone to such lengths for information I wanted, but something held me back from giving that order.

Welch had found nothing more than what I would’ve expected to come up in a well-funded internet search. Work and education history, known family members, current and past addresses, and of course anything she’d published as a journalist.

I gave the articles a cursory glance, but I’d already read most of them this afternoon while I’d been waiting for Welch’s report. Anastasia was a hell of a writer, and at age twenty-five, she was currently the youngest salaried journalist at SBM. But while that information was helpful, I was more interested in the details that were missing.

There was absolutely nothing in the file about her medical history or past relationships. Surely, she had something on Facebook or Twitter about who she’d dated. It seemed just about everyone documented their lives on social media these days. However, Welch had apparently looked there too, and all of her public posts were over three years old.

Since Welch had always exceeded my expectations in these matters, I could only assume Ms. Steele was hiding something. Call it a hunch, but I’m a ‘very private person’ too. And for good reason. The lack of intel was irritating, but it wasn’t enough to dissuade me from pursuing her. I just hoped the absence of a ring on her finger meant she might be open to my plans for her.

I switched my laptop screen back to the security footage from my office and watched the video for the umpteenth time, memorizing every inch of Anastasia’s lithe figure as she settled into the chair and crossed her legs. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had such an intense reaction to a woman. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I *ever* had.

*Withdrawal, Grey. Pure and simple. This is what comes of self-imposed celibacy.*

But she was beautiful. Anastasia had more curves than the emaciated waifs Elena used to throw at me, and I was surprised at how much I liked that. She didn’t look underfed or overly exposed to ridiculous ‘beauty’ treatments. She was real. Healthy. Stunning.
As I looped the video to the beginning yet again, my eyes lingered on the little hints I’d picked up on earlier today, and I knew I hadn’t simply imagined it. This woman was a submissive if ever I’d seen one. But did she know that? And how could I go about finding out one way or the other if Welch’s usual methods of recon hadn’t revealed it?

I’d been out of touch with the local kink community for years, and it really wasn’t safe to get involved again. I’d had Elena to guard my identity and privacy back then, but that wasn’t the case anymore. Not that I wished otherwise...

Even before her death last year, I hadn’t spoken to Elena Lincoln in a long time, but I couldn’t help but wonder what she would have thought of Anastasia. Probably nothing good, since we hadn’t met through her. She always did like to have a hand in my sex life, and she’d been a fool for thinking me oblivious to her manipulation. I’d known she was using my submissives as a means of continuing to dominate me, but I’d been able to ignore that irritation so long as her role in my life had served a purpose.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, sending me a mentally ill submissive had been the last straw. My gut still churned at the thought of Leila Williams. She hadn’t had a standard case of depression and anxiety. The woman had been bipolar with Dissociative Identity Disorder, and neither condition had been treated. She’d had a psychotic break and was hospitalized briefly, but she’d talked her way out of it after the initial lockdown period.

Then, she’d gone straight home and committed suicide.

That had been two years ago, but I still felt a twinge of guilt every time Leila crossed my mind. Someone like her should never have been in my playroom or anyone else’s. I was the last person to be judging anyone’s mental health, but she’d clearly been too unstable for power exchange. Her lack of sound mind and judgment had made it impossible for her to truly consent, and that thought still made me sick to my stomach. That was the last time I’d ever let Elena recommend a submissive.

Of course, she hadn’t taken that rejection lying down. Both times I’d tried to find a submissive in a local club, she had managed to put one of her girls under my nose. When that tactic had failed miserably, she’d moved on to what she’d perceived as my only other weakness. Money. After learning she’d been cooking the books of our joint venture, I had retaliated by selling my shares of her salons to her top competitor and putting her name at the top of my security’s proscribed list.

I’d preferred celibacy to allowing that woman any further influence in my life.

Elena had been furious that I’d cut off her access to me, and she’d fought to claw her way back in, right up until the car accident that had claimed her life. It had been a freak thing, really. A semi-truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and plowed right into her. It was a random yet common death that had almost felt anticlimactic. In the blink of an eye, Elena Lincoln had vanished from my life for good.

I sighed in disgust and glanced down at my lap, realizing that thoughts of the women from my past had completely deflated my erection. It was just as well. That wasn’t the head I needed to be thinking with anyway.
I wanted to pursue Anastasia, but I was more than a little unsure of my footing. While her phone number had been easy enough to obtain, I couldn’t remember ever having called a woman under these circumstances. I’d never asked anyone on a date, and to be honest, I didn’t really want to do so now. I didn’t know how to be someone’s boyfriend. But maybe she wouldn’t be opposed to exploring something casual, with a good helping of kinky fuckery thrown in...

And just like that, I was hard again.

After one more loop of the security video, I headed for my shower. The hot water felt good, but my hand on my cock felt better. I pictured Anastasia draped over my knees, moaning as I spanked her and explored her wetness with my hand. I’d bring her right to the edge, but I wouldn’t let her come until I’d cuffed her wrists and knees to a spreader bar with her face in the mattress and her ass in the air. I’d pull that long brown hair and fuck her until she begged for mercy...

I came hard with her name on my lips, the four syllables echoing off the tiled shower walls.

Tomorrow. I’ll call her tomorrow. But even that idea made me oddly nervous. Maybe email is better...
The midday sun warmed my back through the window of the cafe, and the bustle of the other patrons was a steady hum in my ears. My lunch sat in front of me, waiting to be eaten, but I couldn’t seem to pull my attention from my phone.

Christian Grey wanted to see me again. For dinner, this time.

The notion of being asked out by a billionaire was utterly confounding. Sure, we’d had a connection, and I was glad I hadn’t been imagining it. But still... I hadn’t expected to hear from him. I read his email again, trying to guess at his motives.

Part of me wanted more than anything to say yes, if for no other reason than to appease my own curiosity. To see if his lips tasted as good as they looked. But my rational brain was screaming at me to decline.

Regardless of my attraction to him, getting involved would be sheer stupidity on my part. If Grey were the relationship type, there would have been pictures of him with women somewhere on the internet. The fact that there were none to be found led me to believe he only pursued women casually. Was that what he wanted from me?

But then, why would he ask me out? I mused, eyes still locked on my phone. Presumably to a restaurant where we could easily be photographed together? What’s he playing at? And how the hell should I reply?

A shadow blocked the sunlight from the window, bringing me back to awareness, and I looked up to see Christian Grey himself smiling down at me. I felt my jaw slacken.

Fuck. Was he that hot yesterday?

“I thought it was you. I saw you from outside,” he explained, nodding toward the sidewalk on the other side of the cafe windows. He took the seat across from me without asking and added, “You looked troubled.”

I smiled in spite of myself and took the bait.

“Yeah. I got a strange email earlier this morning, and I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Is that so?” Despite the spark of flirtation in his eyes, he seemed a little uncomfortable. If I didn’t know better, I’d have said he was actually nervous.

“Yeah. It was from this guy I met yesterday,” I grinned, pleased when he gave me his sexy smile in return.

“Nice guy?”

“Seems so,” I shrugged, taking a slow sip of my water and deciding to throw caution to the wind. I didn’t want to play games with him. He wanted something from me, and I couldn’t walk
away without knowing what it was. “But I have to admit, I’m not quite sure if he wants to take me
to dinner or have me for dinner.”

Grey’s eyes grew wider and darker at my words, and I couldn’t help but smile at his reaction.
He seemed momentarily speechless, which made me feel a little powerful. To render a man like
that incapable of coherent speech was probably something few people had managed to do.

“Why not both?” he asked, recovering quickly.

I grinned again and lowered my eyes involuntarily. But when I heard him suck in a breath,
my gaze snapped back to his, and I belatedly realized what I’d done. We stared at one another,
communicating wordlessly. The tilt of his head had altered slightly, making him look more
authoritative, and there was a glimmer of approval in his eyes.

Oh, yeah. He’s a Dom. And he’d apparently figured out I was a submissive. Good. Simplifies
things, at least a little. I still doubted the wisdom of spending time alone with him, but I just
wasn’t strong enough to ignore the chemistry I could feel between us. I chose my next words
carefully, keeping my eyes down.

“Maybe we could start with food and... talk.”

“Sounds perfect. Would you mind if we had dinner at my place? For the sake of keeping that
kind of conversation private?”

Ah. There it is. Dinner at his place. No witnesses, no photographers. But I had to agree that I
also preferred not to discuss sexual matters in public. Or at least, not at the kind of place he’d
probably take me for dinner if I declined the invitation to his home.

“That sounds fine, Mr. Grey.”

“Christian,” he corrected smoothly.

“In that case, you should call me Ana. ‘Anastasia’ makes me feel like I’m in trouble.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The implication in his words made me shudder. He smirked playfully as his hand moved to
cress the back of mine where it rested on the table, and I felt a tingling sort of warmth travel from
my hand to my center. I’m so fucking screwed...

“I’ll email you my address. Are you free tomorrow evening?”

“Uh...” I faltered, considering my childcare options. “I need to check with a friend first, but
I’ll let you know by tonight.” I knew that as soon as I asked Kate, I’d have a guaranteed sitter, but
the slight delay left me the option of chickening out. Christian looked mildly confused by my
answer, but he didn’t pry.

“Then, I look forward to hearing from you... Anastasia.”

He pronounced my full name in a tone so heavy it seemed to sink right through me, stoking
the heat between my legs. My mouth fell open as he rose without another word and left the cafe.
Fuck.

I tried to collect my scattered wits well enough to compose a text to Kate. Preferably one that wouldn’t have her scenting the air like a bloodhound after information I wasn’t ready to share. After last night’s conversation, I could easily imagine Kate’s shock at discovering the mysterious Mr. Grey was a Dominant.

Not that I planned on telling her...
Six

Christian

I left the little restaurant with a reasonable degree of confidence, and I watched Ana through the tinted window of my SUV as she rose from the table to toss her leftover food. The sight made me frown, realizing our conversation had used up the time she should’ve spent eating. I hated food waste, but I hated the idea of her being hungry even more. That wouldn’t do. If she agreed to be my submissive, I’d make sure she always ate properly.

Once I saw Ana leave the cafe as well, I told Taylor to head back to GEH, adding a thanks for the heads up on Ana’s location. By a lucky coincidence, another member of my security staff had spotted her entering the cafe and reported it to Taylor. I’d been considering assigning someone to keep an eye on her covertly but decided to hold off on that for the time being. If all went as planned, I wouldn’t need to resort to such measures to get information about her.

The rest of the day passed with surprising speed, and I was pleased to see Ana’s reply hit my inbox shortly after dinner, confirming our plans for the following evening. I responded with my address and the codes for the garage and elevator before printing a fresh copy of my old contract.

I spent the majority of Wednesday willing the hands on the clock to move faster. My meetings seemed to drag on even longer than usual, and the only real break in the monotony was a call from my mother.

“Are you planning to show up for our dinner party this coming Sunday? We’re celebrating Mia’s return from Europe,” she announced, as though she didn’t throw these little soirees once a month.

“I don’t know…”

“Christian, you haven’t been here in months, and this is a special occasion. What will people think if you don’t show up?”

Fuck if I care.

Mia’s homecoming was really nothing to be celebrated, and I highly doubted my sister would be all that interested in attending the dinner either. She’d gone to Paris to pursue a culinary degree, but she’d dropped out upon realizing it actually involved work. She’d then spent the remainder of the semester racking up credit card debt and, from what I’d heard, sleeping with nearly every heterosexual man who’d crossed her path at the fashion shows. My sister could be sweet, but she was ridiculously spoiled and naive. She had no concept of the real world whatsoever and still behaved like a teenager in many ways.

Still, I deliberated a bit about Sunday dinner. I’d skipped the last few. All right, the last few dozen. I felt obligated to say yes, because I knew I should want to spend time with my family. That’s what normal people did, right? But of course, I wasn’t normal and neither was my family. We’d never fit that picket fence stereotype, and I was pretty sure we never would.

“I’ll take a look at my weekend calendar and get back to you tomorrow,” I told my mother, interrupting her monologue about the menu her cook was preparing. She sighed testily, no doubt
assuming I would be a no-show yet again, but she didn’t argue when I made an excuse to end the call.

If my evening with Ana went well tonight, I could have something much more interesting to do this weekend. If not... Well, at least my parents would be serving good liquor.

Anastasia looked more incredible than ever when she stepped out of my elevator that evening. She’d opted for a simple little black dress, forgoing jewelry and letting her own beauty be the focal point. I liked it. No need to gild the lily.

She had been smiling when she’d first arrived, but as we began to eat dinner, I noticed she was looking a little uncomfortable. We chatted politely about the article she was writing and similar pieces she’d done on other local entrepreneurs. I was pleased to see her eating well, especially since I’d interrupted her lunch the other day. But as her gaze darted around the dining area and great room for the fifth time, I felt the need to address her obvious discomfort.

“Is everything okay?” I asked in concern. Her eyes snapped back to mine, and she nodded quickly.

“Yes, of course. This place is just... a bit of a trip,” she chuckled nervously. “You really live here?”

“Yes. Why would you ask that?” Now, I was chuckling a bit too.

“Because it doesn’t look like anyone lives here. I’ve seen real estate properties like this. You know, staged to be appealing to prospective buyers. You don’t really have any personal touches other than the piano. Assuming it’s not for decoration. It just feels a bit odd, I guess. Most people have pieces of themselves visible in their homes. Family portraits, things they’ve collected... But even after seeing your home, I don’t feel I know you any better than I did yesterday.”

She was rambling a bit, but I listened intently and considered her assessment. She wasn’t wrong, and I wasn’t offended by her observation.

“I did choose most of the art, and I have a few odds and ends like that in my home office, which is where I spend most of my time.” I paused, leaning into her personal space a little and grinning when I saw the pulse in her throat flutter. “But my personality is very much on display in one room in particular. Would you like to see it?”

Ana nodded silently and took my hand, allowing me to guide her up the stairs to the first door on the right. Once inside, I touched the light panel with my free hand and watched the rich red tones of my playroom come into focus.

She gasped quietly and let go of my hand, beginning a slow, silent walk around the room. Her eyes scanned every piece of furniture, every skein of rope, and every implement mounted on the walls. But she said nothing. The suspense grew painful.

Fuck. Had I read her wrong? Was she offended or disgusted by what she was seeing? Ana turned slightly, giving me a better view of her face, and I was relieved to see that her expression showed no sign of revulsion. Actually, if I had to guess, I would’ve said she was... aroused. I felt
my lips curve upward in satisfaction. She paused next to a built-in chest of drawers and looked at me inquiringly.

“May I?”

“Please do.”

I stepped toward her, getting close enough to enjoy another lungful of her intoxicating scent as I watched her open a few of the drawers. She brushed her fingers against a clear case that held a pair of silver balls.

“Those are Ben Wa balls,” I told her, feeling the need to fill the silence.

“I know. I have a set in purple,” she replied with a smirk, sending my imagination to very dark places. Ana glanced around the room again. “This is pretty impressive. There isn’t much I’d add to it.” Before I could ask what she thought was missing, she added, “I guess if I had your kind of money, I’d probably set some aside for a dungeon too.”

“Playroom,” I corrected. She quirked a sassy brow at me and jerked her head toward a rack of coiled whips and studded paddles.

“Those are some pretty intense implements you’ve got hanging on that wall.”

“To be honest, I’ve never used them much. Only on subs who were really into pain, and it’s been years since I’ve been with anyone like that. Some have never been used at all. Everything here now has been replaced since my last contract.”

Ana took a moment to process that before asking, “How long have you been in the lifestyle?”

For a brief moment, I deliberated on whether or not to be honest, but I was strongly opposed to telling a lie in this room. Maybe it was my old submissive training kicking in, or maybe it was just the fact that power exchange hinged on total and complete honesty. Whatever the reason, I couldn’t bring myself to deceive her.

“About fourteen years.”

Her brows lifted a bit as she did the mental math, but to my surprise, she didn’t look appalled by the information.

“Fifteen seems so young, but I suppose that’s not much younger than I was when my interests began to veer in this direction.”

“How long for you?”

“Seven years.”

Which meant she’d started at eighteen. It also meant that there was, in fact, a relationship history Welch had been unable to find. Who had trained her? And why did the thought of someone else dominating her make me flinch?
“Is it safe to assume you don’t have a sub right now?” Ana asked quietly, her blue eyes wary but full of longing. I moved toward her slowly, closing the distance between us.

“Correct.”

“And I’m here now because...”

“Because I want you to be mine.”

I tilted her chin upward for a better view of her face. Her breathing had accelerated, and she lowered her eyes again. But as much as I liked that, especially in this room, I wanted to see her properly. I nudged her chin again, but her gaze was fleeting, settling on my mouth instead. And without another thought, I seized her lips with mine.

I’d never made a habit of kissing my submissives. Although I had always viewed it as an act of possession and domination, another way to stake my claim, a kiss seemed to hold more romantic connotations for women than for men. For the latter reason, I generally preferred to avoid it.

Kissing Ana was all of those things, but the effect went much deeper than I’d anticipated. I was devouring her, but she was consuming me as well. Every nerve ending tingled and pulsed with electricity, and my body seemed to be moving of its own accord. Before I even realized what I was doing, I had lifted her off the ground slightly and walked her backward to the padded spanking bench. My hands were gripping her ass and pressing her firmly against my erection when she managed to tear her mouth from mine.

“I can’t. Not like this,” she panted heavily. “Not yet.”

I gave a reluctant nod and moved away from her, practically aching at the loss of her touch. I took a deep breath and tried to regain my composure.

“You’re right. We still have some things to discuss first. But we need to get out of this room, because if we spend even one more minute in here, I’ll have you naked and cuffed to that bench.”

Ana shuddered visibly and gave me a sultry smile.

“Put a pin in that one... For now.”
Seven
Anastasia

_Sweet Baby Jesus, this man can kiss._

I felt hot all over as we made our way back downstairs, and I was still trembling slightly when I reclaimed my seat at his dining room table. His hand shook a little as he slid a manila folder toward me. At least I wasn’t the only one reeling from the unexpected makeout session.

And that room... It was beautifully decorated and amazingly well-stocked. But then, it would be. The man had more money than God. It wasn’t like I hadn’t known how rich he was. Hell, I knew exactly where he fell on Forbes’ list this year. But knowing it and seeing it were two different things. The pristine opulence of Grey House had been expected, since his headquarters was the face of his empire.

But this place...

My eyes roamed the expansive ‘great room’ again, and I shook my head a little. I probably should have expected something like this when I’d seen the row of high-end vehicles filling the spaces reserved for the penthouse. His apartment felt more like a museum than a home. It didn’t seem real at all, and I almost felt sorry for him. There was no personality and very little comfort to be found. It told me nothing about who he really was.

“I’d like to know your opinion on that,” Christian said, nodding toward the file he’d given me before heading into the kitchen.

I watched him uncork what was undoubtedly an expensive bottle of wine and fill two stemmed glasses. He hadn’t asked if I wanted a drink, but I accepted it with a half-smile of thanks. I turned my attention back to the folder in front of me and opened it to reveal a sheaf of papers. A contract.

“What sort of arrangement do you have in mind?” I asked, feeling a bit wary as I skimmed the first few lines. He leaned forward in his seat and hit me with the full force of his eyes.

“I think you’ll find my contract fairly straightforward. I don’t have girlfriends. I don’t do the whole romance thing.”

“Because you don’t have a heart?” I supplied with a wry smile. He nodded as though pleased I’d caught on quickly.

“Precisely.”

I frowned in disagreement but didn’t contradict him. Just when I’d decided I was ready to step away from casual sex, I met a sexy man who set my blood boiling. A man who only wanted casual arrangements. _Just my luck._

I knew I probably should’ve ended the discussion right then, but something--morbid curiosity, perhaps--kept me silent as he went on to explain how his contracts had worked in the past. A businessman to the core, he followed his contracts to the letter, even going so far as to
outline a process for making changes and addressing concerns. Christian fell silent and gave me a few minutes to read.

All eleven pages. Good grief. It was couched in so much legal jargon, one might think it was actually a legal document. Except that it wasn’t, of course. But it was depressing.

An expectation that a submissive accept any order without query or hesitation... Corporal punishment without any obligation to explain his reasoning... Forbidden to call him by his given name or even touch him without his express permission, not just during a scene but all the time...

When I finally looked up from the last page, I didn’t bother trying to hide my disappointment.

“I’m sorry. This would never work for me.”

“Why not?” he demanded, his expression transforming abruptly into genuine surprise and dismay.

Did he really expect me to just fall at his feet?

“Many reasons, but first and foremost... I have a three-year-old daughter. Amelia.” I ignored the dumbfounded look on his face and nodded toward the contract. “This sort of arrangement might work for someone who has no obligations other than you, but there’s a lot here that just wouldn’t be logistically feasible for me.”

He began to sputter a little, but I held up a hand to stall his protest.

“But to be honest, that’s not even the biggest reason. I want an equitable relationship. I deserve that. So do you, for that matter. I wasn’t surprised to figure out you’re a Dom, and I’m sure you wouldn’t have too much trouble finding a sub who would agree to something so...” Cold. “...formal. Assuming you at least permit yourself to bond during aftercare. But that’s not for me. I need that sort of devotion all the time, not just during a scene.”

“But I would be devoted to you,” Christian argued, still visibly shocked.

“On weekends and only within the four walls of that room,” I countered.

“That’s not true.”

“You said yourself that you don’t date or ‘do romance.’ If the only contact I would have with you outside of your playroom is your rules, gift giving, and occasional discipline, then that’s exactly what it is. Your rules aren’t so bad on their own. I’ve followed stricter ones in the past, but I was getting something just as fulfilling in return.”

“What do you mean?” The man looked utterly perplexed, and I felt a twinge of empathy for him.

“Just... Okay, for a sub to follow all of your rules all the time, she’d basically have to structure her life around your expectations and desires. You would be in her mind every time she ate from your prescribed list of foods or went to bed at nine p.m. That’s a big reason Doms set daily rules and tasks in the first place, and it works.
“And I’m not saying I don’t enjoy that sort of thing, because I do. I like the structure outside of the bedroom as much as in it, but any time I’ve done that in the past, I did so knowing that I had as much of my Dom’s attention as he had of mine. This cold, restrictive arrangement you’re looking for doesn’t allow for that. It doesn’t leave room for that connection. You expect full-time submission without offering full-time domination in return. Power exchange should be equitable.”

“But I make sure the sub is compensated for her service,” he insisted, his brows still knitted in confusion. I winced inwardly at his phrasing.

Compensated? For fuck’s sake... I scanned the contract again.

“You’re talking about the clothing allowance, the vehicle...”

“Anything you might need.”

I shook my head, fairly certain how I’d feel in that sort of situation. Picking up the dinner check or giving the occasional thoughtful gift was one thing, but what he was talking about sounded like something else. Hell, he’d even called it ‘compensation’ for ‘service.’ It smacked of prostitution, and I wanted none of it. He was offering money and sex instead of intimacy, and that simply wouldn’t work for me.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, holding his gaze. “There’s just no way I could be what you want. I’m a good sub, and I’m proud of that. But I can’t give that much of myself to someone who isn’t willing to do the same in return.

“And more to the point... My daughter has to come first. Always and forever. I need someone who understands and respects that. It’s pretty clear by the demands of your contract that your world revolves around you. But mine can’t. It already revolves around my child. Amelia will always come first, and that’s how it should be. That’s not to say I don’t have room for love in my life, but... You said you don’t want that. And I can’t settle for anything less.”

Christian was silent for a few seconds, staring at me like I was a puzzle he was trying to solve.

“Then... Does that mean you’re leaving the lifestyle?”

“Of course not,” I replied in bewilderment. Why would I have come here at all if that were the case? “I need submission as much as I need my therapy sessions. It’s practically a mental health requirement for me at this point.”

“But you just said you want love.”

“Yes. Why can’t I have both? Why can’t the person I end up with be my lover, my partner, and my Dom?”

He was gazing at me as though I were speaking a foreign language. It was frustrating, but I also felt sorry for him.

“‘To be honest, after seeing your playroom, I’m surprised you have so little experience as a Dom.”
His confusion vanished, replaced immediately by irritation.

“I have plenty of experience,” he argued, seemingly offended by my implication that I might know more about it than he did.

“Obviously not if you truly don’t believe a relationship can involve power exchange and also be built around love. That makes me sad for you,” I told him honestly, hoping my genuine empathy was plain in my tone and expression. “You’re using BDSM to avoid intimacy, when the reality is that the intimacy is the best part. You’re missing out, Mr. Grey.”

Christian appeared at a loss for words again, but at that point, it didn’t really matter. He didn’t look at me as I stood up, abandoning the printed contract and the still-full wine glass. His gray eyes were distant and unfocused, and his features may as well have been carved from stone. I hesitated on my way to the elevator and looked back at him.

“I really am sorry it didn’t work out. I hope you find what you’re looking for. And I hope it makes you happy when you do.”
Eight
Anastasia

My body jerked almost violently as I woke to a tiny hand patting my cheek. Amelia’s big blue eyes were peeking at me from beside the bed, and I gave her a smile that contradicted my disappointment at being pulled out of a very good dream.

“Morning cuddles?” I offered with a yawn.

She nodded eagerly and let me pick her up, humming with content as she lay her head on my pillow. I leaned in to kiss her cheek, still warm with sleep, and I wondered how long she’d been standing there watching me. I also hoped I hadn’t been making any odd noises, though if I had, at least I was fortunate that she was young enough not to understand them.

It had been three weeks since I’d turned Christian down, but the man was still plaguing my thoughts as well as my dreams. My article had been published and well received, and I’d kept myself busy with work and Amelia. But I couldn’t seem to stop reliving the feel of his lips on mine, his hands in my hair...

I shook off the thoughts with a quiet sigh, telling myself for the thousandth time that I’d done the right thing by walking away before I got in too deep.

Then, why do I feel so wretched about it? ...Fuck.

“Mommy, we see Donah today?” Amelia asked, reclaiming my attention. I smiled and patted her back.

“Yup, we’ll see Jonah and his daddy at the park.” I paused, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. “Actually, we’d better go eat some breakfast and get ready to leave, huh?”

As though my words had activated an internal motor, she promptly sat up and scooted off the bed, landing with a light thud on the floor before running off toward the kitchen. I got up and followed her, quickly getting her set up with her breakfast and putting on a pot of coffee. My phone was buzzing on the nightstand when I returned to the bedroom to find something to wear for the day.

It was an incoming message from a dating app.

I’d thrown myself back into online dating over the past few weeks, but I hadn’t had much luck yet. There was really only one app that was kink-friendly, popular in my area, and not overrun with horny men posing as Doms. I frowned as I scrolled through the messages I’d received since my last login.

Hey, princess. Ur sexy as fuck. Got any pictures that show more of that body?

What do you mean by ‘submissive?’ Is that like roleplay and shit?

Loving your pics. My wife and I are kinky too and looking for a third. Are you DTF?
I deleted all three without replying. I just didn’t have the time or patience to entertain people who didn’t care about anything but my cup size and my kinks. Not to mention the ones who clearly only wanted to initiate a conversation about sex. I didn’t mind discussing that part of my life, but most of those people weren’t interested in talking about anything else.

I’d been on two dates since I’d last seen Christian. One with a guy who turned out to have lied about nearly all of the things I’d liked about his profile, and another with a woman who might have been a good match were it not for her irritating personality.

Kate had once again suggested a trip to the club, and I was almost desperate enough to consider taking her up on it. But I’d never been a fan of places like that. No matter how much the proprietors tried to make them classy, they always fell short of that goal. True, there was no full nudity or intercourse permitted in the common areas, but there was still no mistaking what the place was. Maybe if I had a Dom to take me and keep me safe, it might have felt different, but going on my own just made me nervous. Kate would’ve been happy to help, but that would have prevented her from seeking her own entertainment, which really wasn’t fair to her.

I was beginning to worry that no one, no matter how or where I met them, would be able to hold my interest like Christian Grey.

Once Amelia was dressed for the day, I turned on her cartoons and went to take a shower. We had a playdate scheduled with Garrett and his son, Jonah. It was the first time in weeks that we’d been able to get our schedules and the weather to cooperate, so the kids were really excited.

I also had a few questions for Garrett about his boss. Better judgment be damned.

Spring weather in Seattle was notoriously rainy, but we were enjoying a rare lack of precipitation today. The air was fresh and invigorating as we got out of the car and waved to Garrett and Jonah, who were waiting for us near the park entrance.

“Donah!” Amelia ran ahead to hug the little boy, and I shared a smile with Garrett. We found a vacant bench and sat down, watching the kids as they trotted off toward the playground equipment.

Jonah was four and had appointed himself Amelia’s guardian from their very first meeting. He hovered protectively behind her now as she climbed the stairs for the slide, preventing another child from cutting in front of her. When Amelia stumbled over the woodchip ground covering a few minutes later, Jonah was right there to help her back to her feet.

“He says he wants to marry her when they’re ‘growed up,’ Garrett told me with a grin. I laughed.

“She could certainly do worse. He’s already more chivalrous than half the men I’ve dated.”

“That’s because you’re using the internet to meet them.”

“I met you on the internet.”

“I’m special.”
“That’s one way of putting it.”

Garrett scoffed in mock offense, and I found myself relaxing into the playful banter. It lacked the tone of flirtation we’d once used with each other, and I was more comfortable around him now. Our brief stint as play partners had been enjoyable, but even if I’d had deeper feelings for him, Garrett wasn’t one for monogamy.

Not in a bad way, of course. Garrett was a good guy, and his style of polyamory was completely ethical. He was never deceptive or careless with his partners’ feelings. But poly wasn’t for everyone, and I preferred monogamy. I didn’t judge him for his lifestyle, though. To each their own and all that. And it made him happy, which was all that really mattered.

“So, Ms. Steele... What dating app are you using this time?” Garrett asked teasingly.

“It doesn’t seem to matter,” I sighed.

“I take it things didn’t pan out with Grey, then?”

“Why are you asking me that like you don’t already know the answer? You’re his head of security. Aren’t you paid to know everything that goes on in his life?” I challenged. He smirked a little.

“Pretty much.”

“Speaking of your job... How is it that I managed to shock him when I brought up Amelia? Shouldn’t she have shown up in that background check you warned me about?”

“I may have left a couple things out,” he shrugged, keeping his eyes on the kids instead of meeting my gaze. I frowned in dismay.

“Garrett Welch, tell me you didn’t risk your job to protect my privacy.”

The look on his face was answer enough, and it was pretty clear he harbored no regrets about it. I cursed under my breath, shaking my head.

“I didn’t withhold anything that would’ve presented a security risk, Ana. It’s not like his safety was in jeopardy because he didn’t have your medical history,” he retorted with a roll of his eyes. My own eyes widened with surprise.

“He wanted my medical history?”

“Not for the initial check. The one we do on anyone who meets him in person. But when he emailed me for a more detailed check after your interview, it wasn’t hard to guess why. I’ve run them on every prospective submissive he’s had. It’s been a couple years since the last one, but I haven’t forgotten the drill.”

“I have nothing to hide, Garrett. I told him about Amelia.”

“Of course. But did you tell him how you got pregnant?” he asked, already knowing the answer. I conceded with a tiny shrug. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. I just didn’t think it was his business. He’s pretty hypocritical on the subject of privacy, and I usually don’t care, but... I guess I feel more
loyalty to you than to him. I wouldn’t have tried to stop him from approaching you, but I wasn’t about to help him stalk you or violate your privacy in other ways. I figured if you wanted him to know those details, you’d tell him yourself. You deserved the chance to make that decision either way.”

“I’m guessing that wasn’t a courtesy you ever extended to any of the others?”

“I didn’t care about any of the others.”

“Well... Thank you,” I smiled begrudgingly. “Did you get in trouble over it?”

“He wasn’t happy that something that big wasn’t in the report, but he assumed I’d just missed it somehow. And I didn’t correct him.”

“Hmm. I take it he doesn’t know you’re a Dom too?”

“That would be correct. Like I said... Not everything is Christian Grey’s business.”

My reply was interrupted by the appearance of our kids, who had found a fuzzy brown caterpillar to show us. We took turns gently petting the tiny creature, and I smiled at how careful they were both being.

“Why don’t you and I take him back to his home? His family might be missing him,” I suggested.

Amelia nodded seriously and lifted her arms to be picked up. We returned to the tree where she and Jonah had found the caterpillar and let it inch its way from her hand to the moss-covered bark.

“Good job.” I kissed her cheek and began to head back to our friends, but a familiar voice had me turning in surprise.

“Anastasia?”
Nine
Christian

After Ana left my apartment, I must have spent days replaying her words on a mental loop.

The biggest shock, of course, was the fact that she had a child. That alone should have been enough to end my interest in her, since a kid was a much bigger complication than I’d ever tolerated in a submissive’s private life. Combined with all of her talk about wanting ‘equitable power exchange’ and round-the-clock devotion... It was all just too much.

And yet, I still couldn’t get her out of my head. I was desperate to know more about the situation with her daughter. Amelia. The name was as beautiful as her mother’s, and I couldn’t help but wonder if the little girl looked like her too. But where was the girl’s father? Was he involved, or had he simply abandoned them?

And why the hell hadn’t Welch been able to find that information? That sort of thing would have left a trail. It should have been one of the first things to come up in a background check, so why hadn’t he found it? Even now, I wanted to call him in and demand an explanation, but at this point, it didn’t really matter. Ana had made it pretty clear that she didn’t want anything to do with me.

Three weeks had passed since that night, and regardless of her constant presence in my thoughts, I’d decided not to pursue her. As much as I desired her, I knew I couldn’t give her what she wanted. She’d been right when she’d said she deserved better than anything I could offer her.

I’d spent a lot of time thinking about my own experience in the lifestyle too. The experience she’d apparently thought was sorely lacking. My first instinct was to shrug off that criticism, but after hearing her speak so passionately about power exchange, I was forced to concede that maybe I didn’t know as much as I thought.

That admission alone made me feel insecure and self-conscious. Being a Dom was a big part of my identity. But for the first time in my adult life, I was questioning whether or not it should be. Did I really understand BDSM? Not the way she does, I thought with a sigh. But was a different interpretation wrong in this case?

I had to admit that her points were logical, and her parting words had really stuck with me. She’d said she hoped I would be happy when I found what I was looking for... Would I be? Had I ever been truly happy with any of my subs?

I’d always kept my arrangements formal because that was what I’d been taught. I hadn’t really needed to be told that I was incapable of love, but Elena had sure as hell beaten it into me anyway. I’d been conditioned to withhold any feelings of affection I might have toward my partners, and now I’d begun to wonder why. After hearing Ana’s perspective on the matter, it didn’t seem fair to my past submissives.

Was it possible for love to be part of a power exchange dynamic? Not only did Anastasia seem to think so, but she found the idea of power exchange without love to be depressing. But I just couldn’t seem to wrap my head around it.
I groaned, feeling disgusted with myself, and went to my closet to pull on my running shoes. I needed to exercise this angst out of my system and move on. I would run off the last of my frustration and let Anastasia go. She’d been absolutely right. She deserved better than me.

Taylor and I were halfway through our Saturday running route when I spotted her.

I usually preferred to run in the early morning hours. Better weather, fewer people. But an impromptu conference call on the Brockton deal, or lack thereof, had delayed me. Not to mention the time I’d spent brooding over Ms. Steele.

For just a moment, the sight of Anastasia was enough to lift my mood and make me forget the decision I’d made to let her go. She was beautiful and relaxed, beaming at the little girl she held in her arms. Her daughter had a chaotic mass of chestnut curls, chubby cheeks, and a brilliant smile. She was Ana in miniature, adorable and lovely. Anastasia pressed her lips to the girl’s cheek and began to turn away from me.

I called out to her before I could think twice about it.

“Anastasia?”

She spun toward me in surprise, and I couldn’t deny the swooping sensation in my stomach when she greeted me with a shy smile. She’d somehow grown more beautiful since I’d last seen her. My footsteps slowed to a stop in front of her, and I vaguely registered Taylor taking up an unobtrusive post about ten feet away.

“Hi, Christian.”

“Hello. I...” Fuck. What do I even say to her?

“It’s nice to see you again,” she offered, glancing with visible discomfort in the direction of a nearby park bench.

“Yes, I--” My words faltered as I followed her gaze and recognized a familiar figure sitting with a small boy perched on his knee.

*Welch? What the fuck?*

“We’re just out enjoying the decent weather.” Her tone and posture were stiff, and I was sure I heard her sigh as Welch strode over to join us. “Um. Garrett is a friend of mine, and his son is just a little older than Amelia.”

I watched as the two of them exchanged a loaded glance that sent my mind reeling.

*Just a ‘friend?’ For how long? Had there been more to that shoddy background check than I’d realized, or had Welch moved in on Ana sometime in the past three weeks? Son of a bitch.*
I gave Welch a jerky nod of acknowledgment, trying and no doubt failing to keep my anger hidden. To his credit, Welch met my glare with complete stoicism and a polite greeting, refusing to look away or even flinch in response. He didn’t even look apologetic.

Oh, yeah. You’ll be hearing from me later, asshole. I had half a mind to pull him aside that very minute, but the presence of two small children kept me contained. Barely.

“It’s nice running into you,” I said with false diplomacy. “Both of you. Or all of you, I should say. Do you come to this park often?”

“When we can get our schedules to line up. And when the weather cooperates,” Ana replied. “How about you?”

“Yes, but usually in the early mornings.”

There was another awkward silence, and I watched uneasily as Ana and Welch communicated with raised eyebrows and small shrugs. There was clearly more to this situation than they wanted me to think, and it didn’t take me long to feel like a spare wheel on this little outing. I wanted more than anything to mark my territory and fire Welch on the spot, but I’d lost enough of my dignity in the last few minutes.

I would leave them be. For now.

“Well, if you’ll both excuse me, I need to get back to my run.” I gestured toward Taylor, who promptly appeared at my side and offered his own well-mannered acknowledgment.

“Of course. Have a good day,” Ana replied with a nervous smile, shifting her daughter on her hip. Her blue eyes were apologetic, but it was impossible to know the reason.

Taylor let me lead as we recommenced our run, not commenting when I cut it short and headed back to Escala. I appreciated his professional silence, but once we were alone in the elevator, I didn’t bother to contain my anger.

“Did you know?” I demanded, keeping my voice low. He met my gaze with an innocent expression.

“That Welch was acquainted with Ms. Steele? No, sir. Is there a problem?”

“Acquainted,” I scoffed, not giving a fuck how petulant I sounded.

It took nearly all of my self-control not to call Welch to Escala that very second and give him his marching orders. I was now almost certain he’d intentionally withheld information about Ana, but I didn’t yet know why. Making assumptions and acting irrationally could have catastrophic consequences. I’d trusted Welch with too much to simply fire him. A move like that required planning and forethought. I needed more information.

“I want him in my office first thing Monday morning.”

Let him sweat it out over the rest of the weekend. I thought I caught a smirk from Taylor in my periphery, but when I turned to look at him, his features were neutral. When the elevator doors
opened, we exited in opposite directions. I headed to the shower immediately, unable to stop the thoughts that assailed me.

Though it had only been a few weeks since I’d last seen Anastasia, my memory had somehow failed to do her justice. Or else she’d looked even more stunning today, with the hazy sunlight warming her long, silky hair and brightening her pale blue eyes. She’d been dressed for comfort, exchanging her dresses for a hoodie and a pair of leggings and her high heels for a pair of sneakers.

I cursed aloud as the hot water scalded my chilled flesh, and I gave in to the urge to touch myself, determinedly not thinking of how many times I’d done that in the past twenty-four days. No matter how hard I’d tried to put Anastasia out of my mind, she was forever creeping into my thoughts. At work, at home, in the car, during my workouts, my showers, my meals, even in my sleep... But as I towel-dried my body a few minutes later and got dressed, a new idea crossed my mind. Maybe the problem was that we’d left things unresolved.

With a sigh, I pulled up her background check on my phone again, still irritated at the gaping holes in the information. Fucking Welch. I stared at her address for a long moment before making my decision.

Enough was enough. I wanted answers, and I was going to get them.
Ten
Christian

I gazed up at Ana’s apartment building and quickly checked the time on my phone. What time do three-year-olds go to bed? Surely before ten, right?

“She’s probably been in bed for a couple of hours by now, sir,” Taylor responded from the front seat. My head snapped toward him as I realized I’d actually muttered the question out loud.

“Right. Well... Wait here for now, Taylor.”

“Yes, sir.”

I climbed out of the SUV and headed into the building. To my displeasure, there was no security to speak of in the lobby, and I was able to walk right up to her door without anyone stopping me. I was only slightly mollified to see the light through the peephole disappear for a moment before the lock disengaged and the door opened.

Ana stared back at me, both surprised and wary, and she flushed slightly as my eyes raked the length of her body. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, her makeup had been removed, and she was wearing a pair of printed pajama pants and a snug little tank top. She looked downright edible, and I felt myself harden as though I hadn’t just come with her name on my lips only a few hours ago.

“What are you doing here, Christian?” she asked quietly. I took a fortifying breath.

“I have some questions, and... It seems I’m incapable of staying away from you.”

I could hear her breath catch in her throat and noticed the faint smile she was trying to hide as she let me in. Her apartment was well-furnished and clean, if a bit on the small side, but I didn’t spare it more than a glance before I rounded on her.

“I want to know what’s going on between you and Garrett Welch,” I stated firmly. Ana raised her brows a little and offered me a teasing smile.

“Are you jealous?”

Every cell in my body ached to deny it, but I was well past that now. Instead, I moved toward her, closing the distance between us in two long strides.

“Fuck, yes, I’m jealous.”

Her eyes widened as I backed her against the door and captured her lips with ferocity. Somehow, it was even hotter than our first kiss, a distinction I could make easily since I’d replayed it in my fantasies so many times since. She’d been cautious then, determined to keep her wits about her at least to some degree. But this time, I’d managed to catch her with her guard down. The modicum of restraint she’d had before was absent now, and she whimpered slightly as she brought her hands up to my neck, weaving her fingers into my hair.
I’d never kissed anyone like this. My hands explored her body as though it already belonged to me, one eventually coming to rest at her lower back while the other slipped into her pajama pants. I let out a groan of appreciation when my fingers found her wetness.

“Is this for me?”

“Yes,” she whispered shakily, clinging to my shoulders. Her blue eyes were dark with lust as she gazed up at me, and I pressed my middle finger to her clit, relishing the shudder that rocked through her body.

“Mommy?”

We sprang apart like teenagers caught in a parked car as the little voice from down the hall reached our ears. Shit. Ana steadied herself and frantically readjusted her clothing.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t leave.”

She disappeared down the hallway and into what I assumed was her daughter’s room, and I tried in vain to slow my racing pulse. I didn’t bother trying to talk my erection down, however. It was pointless when Ana was around.

My eyes swept over the small living space while I waited. Her reaction to my penthouse now made a lot more sense. Ana’s home was precisely that: a home. It was warm and inviting, decorated with comfortable fabrics in soothing tones. The aroma of a home-cooked meal lingered in the air, but the kitchen was as tidy as the rest of the living space.

Although the place didn’t feel cluttered, there were small keepsakes on many of the surfaces and framed photographs on the walls. Most of the pictures featured Amelia at various stages of life. I couldn’t help but notice the distinct absence of anyone who could be the girl’s father, and I didn’t know if that made me feel better or worse.

I’d never been with anyone who had a child, nor even spent much time around kids in general. I didn’t know the first thing about them, and the thought of getting involved with a single mother was unnerving. But I couldn’t deny Amelia was a beautiful little girl. Her smile was infectious, just like her mother’s, and from what little I observed at the park, she seemed to be a well-behaved child.

“I’m sorry for the interruption,” Anastasia said quietly, interrupting my casual perusal of her family portraits. Her cheeks were still flushed, and her hair had that mussed quality that made me want to see it spread out over my pillow.

“Nothing to apologize for,” I replied, waving off her words. May as well get straight to the point. “What’s going on between you and Welch?”

Ana seemed to deliberate for a moment, as though choosing her words with care. I didn’t blame her. Welch’s employment status was already on very thin ice.

“We had a friends-with-benefits arrangement for a while but called it off. Or at least, we called off the benefits part.”
Fuck. It was worse than I’d thought. A fresh spark of anger kindled in my gut, igniting the jealousy that had been roiling there since the moment I’d first seen them together.

“Was he your Dom?” I pressed, my voice low and dangerous.

“Sort of,” she hedged, keeping her expression neutral. My eyes narrowed.

“How can someone sort of be...”

“We kept it casual, and that part of it was just in the bedroom. For me to think of someone as my Dominant and not just a play partner, I need a little more from them.”

“But you submitted to him?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“A handful of times over a few months. The last time was more than six months ago.”

I cursed under my breath and shifted my weight in agitation, trying to hold it together as I processed the information. Ana watched me warily, her arms crossed over her torso.

“So, you’re not together anymore,” I stated, needing reassurance.

“No. We’re just friends. We get our kids together to play sometimes.”

I nodded, taking a few more calming breaths and feeling embarrassed by my own ignorance. I paid my staff a lot of money and entrusted them with a lot of responsibility and confidential information. I should have known something like this about someone in such a high position of trust in my company.

“I didn’t even know Welch was a Dom,” I muttered mutinously. Ana nodded.

“That’s how he wanted it.”

“But you just outed him.”

“He gave me the okay after you left the park earlier. He had a feeling you’d come asking about it. He trusts you’ll return the same courtesy of discretion he gives you in regards to your... personal life.”

I bit back a retort that Garrett Welch could take his discretion and go fuck himself. The intensity of my own emotions caught me by surprise. I hated knowing he’d touched her... been inside her... The thought of it was almost painful. I’d never felt true jealousy like this, and it was threatening to overwhelm me. None of my subs had ever meant enough to me to elicit such a primal response.

“What’s your problem?”
I realized I’d been pacing and spun to face her. Judging by the wary confusion on her face, my anger was quite plain, despite my best efforts to stay calm. I took another deep breath but felt no better.

“I’ll be fine.”

“You look like you want to throw something.”

“You’re not wrong. But I’d rather not have to call my assistant at this hour to order another new phone.” I clenched and unclenched my fists, unable to stay still.

“Do you break things often when you’re upset?”

“No, but… I have certain expectations of my employees, and Welch deliberately failed to meet them.”

“But that’s not what’s really bothering you,” she replied shrewdly.

“I don’t like to think of you and him together,” I admitted quietly. Ana huffed in irritation.

“Okay, first of all, if you really have so much trouble managing your temper that you actually **throw things**, then you have no business being a Dominant.”

I froze and stared at her in bewilderment.

“What are you talking about?”

“How can you expect to take control of another person if you can’t even control yourself? It’s hypocritical and illogical.”

*Well, fuck.*

“You’re right,” I conceded softly, feeling a wave of chagrin and shame. “I don’t lose my composure often, but... It’s different during a scene. The self-control comes much easier. I feel centered and...”

“Whole,” she supplied with a faint smile, and I nodded. “I get it. Submission gives me the same feeling. But when you lose control of yourself, it makes anyone less powerful than you feel nervous. Even afraid. And you’re the most powerful person in just about any room you walk into. You need to come up with a healthier outlet than throwing things. Use your words.”

“You sound like you’re talking to a toddler,” I said, chuckling ruefully. She grinned back at me.

“If the tantrum fits.”

I let out a long sigh and concentrated my energy on keeping a level head. Anastasia didn’t deserve my anger or my judgment.

“I’m sorry if I made you feel nervous. I’ll do better.” *For you.*
“Thank you,” she replied quietly.

“You said ‘first of all.’ I take it you have more to say?”

“Yes… Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“No,” I laughed sardonically. “But you may as well say it anyway.”

“Well... I’m sorry, but your reaction to my past is incredibly immature. For one thing, I don’t belong to you. But even if I did... Do you only get involved with virgins? Women who have no past and no experience?”

“No.” The very idea was laughable. I’d never been with a virgin.

“Then why are you acting like this? Tearing at your hair and wearing a hole in my floor?”

I sighed again and closed the distance between us more slowly this time, my eyes locked on hers. The closer I came, the more Ana seemed to be struggling to maintain eye contact. When our bodies were mere inches apart, I lifted her chin gently and watched her pupils dilate.

“Because I can’t stand the thought of anyone else’s hands on you. Not in the past and certainly not now. Not ever.”

I lowered my mouth to hers, keeping the contact light but unyielding. Within seconds, I felt her resolve begin to crumble. She was so close to surrender but still resisted. What would it take to make her mine? My tongue sought entrance and swept through her mouth, ready to take whatever she was willing to give.

For a moment she seemed to respond, but then she stiffened abruptly in my arms and wrenched herself away. I didn’t loosen my hold on her waist, and she leaned back to look me in the eye again, her features softer with open longing.

“You can’t say things like that, Christian. And you really can’t kiss me like that. We want different things.”

“I don’t know what I want anymore,” I replied, and my honesty startled us both. “But I know I want you. Any way I can have you.”

Ana stopped trying to pull away from me and cocked her head slightly. Her thoughts were practically written on her face, and I could tell she wanted very much to believe me. It was only self-preservation making her hesitate now.

“You’re willing to try things a different way? To step out of your comfort zone?”

I swallowed nervously but refused to back down now, nodding slowly. I must be insane.

“I’m willing to try. Maybe we can just take it slow? I can’t promise I’ll be any good at it, but... I can’t walk away, Anastasia. I tried that and failed miserably, so... Let’s try something else.”
Eleven

Christian

It had taken an extraordinary amount of willpower to leave Ana’s apartment last night. We’d spent a good half hour making out on her sofa, and I’d wanted so badly to carry her to her room and have my way with her. But we both agreed that we didn’t want our first time together to be inhibited by anything, particularly the nearby presence of her daughter. I wanted to hear Ana moan and scream when I made her come. To learn the exact tone of her voice when she begged me to fuck her harder. When I finally got Anastasia all to myself, she wouldn’t know what hit her.

But it would have to wait. Aside from the matter of privacy, Ana had pointed out that we still had some things to discuss before we took the next step, and I agreed with her. We were headed into uncharted territory, but I did at least have confidence in my ability to negotiate.

I glanced at the desk clock in my home office and then at my phone. Welch should be here any minute. After my conversation with Ana last night, I’d decided not to wait until Monday to address the matter with him.

My instincts, or perhaps my wounded pride, were still screaming at me to fire him, but Ros had cautioned against it. Welch was the best at what he did. We would have a very hard time replacing him, and Ros felt termination would be a disproportionate response anyway, pointing out that nothing Welch had done had jeopardized our safety or the company.

Of course, I’d jumped in to argue that it was more the principle of the thing. If Welch couldn’t be trusted to obey orders on something relatively inconsequential, how could we trust him to do his job when it truly mattered? But Ros had encouraged me to hear him out, to consider his merits, and to take some time to think things through. I’d agreed to do those things, but I’d also told her to start the recruitment process. Just in case.

A knock on the heavy wooden door of the study pulled me from my thoughts, and I invited the person on the other side to enter. As Welch let himself in and crossed the room to my desk, I took the opportunity to study him. His expression was guarded and impassive. At best, one might say he looked a bit wary, but otherwise, he showed no more than polite interest in what I might have to say.

No fear, no anxiety, no guilt... No apology.

“You’ve worked for me long enough to know that most people in your situation would no longer have a job after doing what you did.”

Welch merely nodded, his features still relatively blank. I felt my face twitch. It was usually a bit easier to unnervc an employee due for a dressing-down, but Welch showed no signs of cracking.

“Your position and history at GEH grant you at least the opportunity to explain yourself,” I continued. “But only one opportunity. Use it well.”

“Mr. Grey, I don’t generally have an issue supplying whatever information you request in a background check, but I remember enough about the women you were associated with a few years
ago to know that you have a type. Ana fits that type perfectly, at least in terms of physical attributes. I knew why you wanted the information. And I knew Ana wouldn’t appreciate you having those details without her consent.”

Welch allowed the emphasized word to hang in the air between us for a moment, and the significance was not lost on me. A hint of guilt twisted in my chest at his implication, but I kept silent as he continued.

“I wouldn’t have done it for anyone else. But Ana is a good friend, and I respect her need for privacy. Nothing I withheld presented any sort of security risk.”

“You couldn’t have been certain of that,” I disagreed.

“In the event that something connected did arise, I would have either handed over the information myself or encouraged Ana to do so. But I wouldn’t have had to push her on the matter. Ana is the most honest, direct, and authentic person I know. She’s not one to flinch from the truth.”

“Nor one to sugarcoat it,” I muttered to myself, remembering her frank assessment of my behavior last night.

“Also true.”

“You seem to know her well. Ana says you’re just friends, and she seems happy with that arrangement, but I need to hear from your own mouth that you feel the same. Is there anything at all between you now?”

“You’ve already asked Ana that question, apparently,” Welch frowned. “Do you not trust her to tell you the truth?”

“I’m asking you, one Dom to another, if there’s anything I need to know about your friendship with Anastasia.”

“We’re just friends,” he replied coolly. “We were never really involved emotionally, and even if that weren’t the case, it never would have worked out in the long run.”

I held his gaze for a long while, searching for any indication he might simply be placating me. But I saw none. I allowed myself to relax a little and took a moment to consider what he’d said. In truth, it wasn’t hard to see his perspective. Ana seemed to be the kind of person who inspired others to be good, to do better. I’d certainly felt that way in her presence, even in the limited time we’d spent together. I felt protective of her as well, so much so that I could sympathize with Welch’s motives in withholding her personal information. I might even have gone so far as to say I would’ve done the same thing in his position.

But what kind of precedent am I setting if I just let it go?

“I understand if you feel the need to fire me,” Welch said, interpreting my thoughtful silence accurately. “I knew that was a potential consequence when I did it, and I’ll accept it with grace. But for what it’s worth... I don’t want to leave GEH. I like the work, and I respect you. As a person, not just the guy who signs my checks. But I do understand the need to earn back your complete trust, and I’m more than willing to do so.”
I stared him down from across the desk, considering my options. The tension seemed to grow the longer I remained silent, and I waited for some show of anxiety from him. But it never came. *Smug fucker knows he’s indispensable.*

“One thing. How is it that I didn’t know you were in the lifestyle? I know for a fact the security checks we did on you were extensive.”

“Like you, I’m very good at keeping my personal and professional lives separate. I know how to find information like that, which means I also know how to hide it,” he shrugged deprecatingly. “I don’t mind you knowing, of course, but since it had nothing to do with my job, I didn’t feel obligated to volunteer the information.”

I turned that one over in my head for a few moments, admitting reluctantly that he had a fair point. I couldn’t have cared less what my employees did with consenting partners behind closed doors, and I probably wouldn’t have done more than shrug in apathy if Welch had told me himself. I only cared now because his path had intersected with Ana’s, however briefly. With a sigh of resignation, I settled upon the only course of action that made sense.

“Consider yourself on probation. *For as long as I see fit.*” I declared. Welch nodded in acknowledgment but once again displayed no contrition or remorse. “You can go.”

“Thank you, Mr. Grey.”

I shook my head in disbelief as I watched him stride purposefully from the room, his natural dominance practically radiating off of him despite the circumstances. How the hell had I missed that all these years? It wasn’t that he was arrogant. I would have picked up on that long ago. But Welch had the quiet energy of someone who knew how to be confident without conceit. He didn’t flaunt his authority because he didn’t feel the need to.

*And he never did apologize.*
Twelve
Anastasia

“You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“We’re just seeing where it goes. I’m trying to keep an open mind. So, can you keep Amelia overnight next Saturday? I’d rather not disturb her after she falls asleep.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem,” Garrett assured me. “She’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you right now. You need to be careful.”

My spine straightened in response to his warning tone.

“Careful how? This isn’t the time to be cryptic. Are you telling me Christian is the type to cross the line? Because that wasn’t the impression I got at all.”

“No, I don’t mean ‘careful’ in terms of safety. I mean emotionally. I don’t know enough about his preferences to know whether or not you’re a good match in the kink department, but… I’ve never known Grey to have anything other than sexual contracts with his subs. He didn’t date them. Didn’t introduce them to his family, didn’t even allow them to be seen in public with him. That doesn’t sound at all like what you said you wanted the last time we talked about it.”

I slumped back against my sofa and sighed, ruefully eyeing the place Christian and I had made out the night before. Hard to think rationally when just kissing the guy made me want to come in my pants.

“You’re not wrong. And I was one hundred percent honest with him about what I’m looking for. Brutally so. I flat out told him his standard contract would never work for me.”

“So, he knows what you want and is still pursuing you?” Garrett asked, his tone surprised and rather dubious.

“Apparently.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe he’s changed. I hear the right woman can do that for a guy.”

*Here’s hoping,* I thought wryly.

After Garrett and I got off the phone, I began to consider the wisdom of my decision yet again. I liked to think of myself as a realist, though I supposed some might call me a cynic. In the matter of Christian Grey, however, I felt like I’d thrown nearly all of my pragmatism out the window.

Christian had hesitantly explained to me that he’d never had a real relationship. Nevermind that I was still confused as to how a man could come to be twenty-nine years old and never have had a girlfriend, but… Did I really want to be his first? That objective, rational part of my brain was certain his lack of experience in this area could only lead me to ruin and a broken heart.

Of course, his past wasn’t even the half of it. He was a single billionaire whose work was his life, and the stark difference in our financial circumstances was a concern I was trying like hell to
ignore. I wasn’t impoverished by any means, but just about everyone was poor compared to Christian. I’d been trying not to judge him for his wealth. After all, I would hate to be judged for my lack of it. But the disparity in our situations only added to my lingering doubt.

Worst of all was that he seemed to be a lone wolf type, determined not to let anyone get too close. He put himself first and, judging by his contract, tended to expect those around him to do the same. But Amelia was my life. She would always come first, no matter who stole my heart or shared my bed.

Would Christian be able to truly comprehend that? Would he end up resenting me for choosing my daughter’s needs over his if necessary? Or worse... Would he come to resent Amelia?

All of my doubts felt like blocks of concrete, heavy in the pit of my stomach and ready to be used to wall myself off from potential heartbreak. It would be the smart thing to do. The realistic approach to take.

But every time I picked up the phone to tell him so, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. My fingers refused to type the words, and I knew my voice would fail me if I actually tried to speak them aloud.

The memory of Christian’s smile floated to the surface of my mind, and I couldn’t help but smile in return. Every time I recalled the heat of his touch, the weight of my doubts seemed to ease, and my sense of determination grew stronger.

My head acknowledged the risk, but my heart simply refused to run.

Over the following week, Christian and I communicated daily, either by email or phone. We traded anecdotes about our days and slowly got to know each other. Discussion of our favorite foods, hobbies, and music flowed like conversations between old friends. Even talk of the heavier topics like religion and politics went smoothly, and I was pleased to find we shared similar views in both areas.

We had a mutual agreement not to discuss sex over the phone. Not yet, at least. Those conversations needed to be had in person first. However, that certainly didn’t put a stop to the flirting. He was a smooth talker, and he could render me speechless so easily it was almost embarrassing.

“You know, I feel like I know plenty about your professional background, but I know almost nothing about your family,” I mused, lying on my bed with the phone to my ear one evening after Amelia had gone to bed. “I remember hearing something about your mother’s charity foundation, but other than that, I don’t pay much attention to the society pages.”

“Yes... I’m very private about my personal life, but in the case of my family, it’s a necessity for safety’s sake.”

“Do they all have their own personal G-man too?” I teased. He snickered quietly.
“I assume you’re referring to Taylor, and the answer is no. At least not all the time. They might ask to borrow some of my security staff for large events and such... And I do assign them a detail if there’s been some kind of threat.”

“Does that happen often? The threats?”

“Not toward my family, no. The public assumption seems to be that we’re estranged, which isn’t all that far from the truth.”

I was torn between wanting to know more about the security threats and wanting to ask why he didn’t get along with his family. *Offer up something of yourself first and work up to the serious stuff, Steele.*

“I do remember that you’re adopted, which is a nice coincidence. I am too. My biological father died when I was a baby, so my stepdad raised me. I don’t call him that, though. He’s just Dad. Other than Amelia, he’s the only family member I’m really close to.”

“Not your mother?”

“No, not since I was little. She lives in Georgia, and I haven’t heard from her in a long time. We used to talk on the phone about once a month or so, but that stopped when I had Amelia. She... tried to convince me to terminate,” I explained with a grimace. “Then, when it was too late for that, she tried to push me toward adoption. After a while, I just couldn’t handle the sound of her voice anymore.”

“I can’t say I blame you.”

I could hear something odd in the tone of his voice and sensed that he wanted to know more about Amelia, but I was pretty sure I knew what question was on his mind. And that was not a conversation for a phone call.

“You have siblings, right?” I diverted. “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t an only child.”

“Yeah. Elliot is a couple years older. My sister’s name, ironically enough, is also Amelia. But she goes by Mia. She’s a little younger than you.” He paused a moment before adding, “Well... A little younger in *years.* A lot younger in *behavior.*”

I chuckled and took the high road.

“To be fair, parenthood pretty much forces you to grow up whether you’re ready for it or not.”

“For most, I suppose,” he answered a bit vaguely. “Mia can be sweet, but she’s ridiculously spoiled. She’s twenty-four, but she still acts like a teenager most of the time. No concept of the real world at all.”

“Hmm,” I frowned. His sister didn’t sound like someone I’d get along with. “And your brother?”

“Eh... Elliot runs a construction business by day and sleeps his way through Seattle by night.”

I snorted a laugh at his turn of phrase.
“Isn’t that a bit harsh considering your… proclivities?”

“Not really. I’ve always been exceedingly selective and discrete. Elliot is neither.”

“Fair enough. Do you get along with your parents?” My question was met with a quiet grunt, and I envisioned him shrugging in disinterest.

“We were mostly raised by staff. Nannies and tutors. The only reason I know how to cook and do laundry is because I asked our housekeeper to teach me. I’ve always wondered why our parents bothered adopting us at all. They’ve never seemed particularly interested in being parents. I guess they just did what was expected of them.”

“You’re all adopted?”

“Yeah. Elliot and Mia were infants, but I was four.”

I picked up on the increasing note of discomfort in his voice and decided to redirect.

“What do your parents do?”

“Carrick is a founding partner at Grey and Thompson Law. Grace is on the board at Northwest. She was a trauma surgeon when we were kids, but she hasn’t practiced medicine in ten years or so. She runs a couple of charities on the side, which is usually what motivates her to call me.”

He sounded so blasé about it, and I pursed my lips in sympathy.

“And you’ve never been close to any of them? Even when you were young?”

“Not really. I think Grace must’ve had a soft spot for me at first, since she was the one who pushed for my adoption. But she probably lost that when I didn’t turn out to be normal,” he replied flatly.

“That’s…” Awful.

“Yeah. It’s not a pretty story.”

“You don’t have to tell it if you don’t want to. But… if you do, I’ll listen.”

Christian sighed and fell silent for so long I thought he was going to take the out I’d given him, but he surprised me. I felt my heart clench at the image his words painted.

“I had a rough start in life. My birth mother was a prostitute and a crack addict. She was mostly just negligent, but her pimp was… abusive. After she died, the police took me to the ER, and Grace was there.

“I had issues being touched when I first came home with them, and I didn’t even speak to anyone until I was six. I went to a few different therapists, at least until I could fake normal well enough not to embarrass my parents. They let me be after that.”
“Our mothers sound a little alike, at least in some ways. Same hands-off approach.” I couldn’t imagine ever treating Amelia like that, and it made me sad to learn that both of Christian’s mothers had neglected him. “I’m sorry those things happened to you. But thank you for telling me,” I added softly.

“It’s in the past. I don’t like to talk about it, but I guess it’s a little easier over the phone.”

I wanted to ask more questions, but he’d already given me more than I ever expected to learn from him at such an early stage in our relationship. So, I tactfully changed the subject.

“I can understand that. I think our time this weekend would be better spent on other matters, anyway.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, the timbre of his voice changing in a way that made my thighs clench. “This time, I hope I can persuade you to stay a bit longer.”

I grinned and let out a sigh that probably sounded like a sex noise.

“We do have some more details to discuss, but... I wouldn’t mind a tour of your bedroom this time.”
Saturday evening found us seated in the large, open living space of Christian’s penthouse, facing each other as we relaxed on one of the plush sofas. This time, as I flipped through his old contract, I was better prepared for my own reactions. And this time, he had something to read too. My list of limits. We wouldn’t be doing a scene tonight, but we were both more than ready to stop avoiding the subject of sex.

I took a deep breath and braced myself to lay another dose of reality on him. The sooner we got our differences worked out, the better off we would be.

“So, aside from what I mentioned last time, there are a number of things in this that won’t work,” I told him, trying to keep my tone respectful as I held up the contract for emphasis. To my relief, he merely smirked and nodded.

“I gathered as much. Such as?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m not sleeping in that white bedroom. If you’re not willing to share a bed with me, I’ll just go home to sleep.”

“It’s just a guest room,” he tried to reason.

“You’re lying to yourself if you really believe that. Would you let your sister sleep in that room?” I challenged. Christian was silent, but his face was all the answer I needed. “Exactly. That room is full of ghosts I have no desire to be haunted by. It’ll be hard to relax enough to submit in your red room too, but that’s a little different.”

“I replaced everything but the furniture each time I ended a contract. And even then, the furniture has been redone more than once. Until the other night, I hadn’t stepped foot in that room in two years.”

I felt a bit better upon hearing that, but it struck me as odd.

“Why the break?”

“Um... It’s kind of a long story. Not one I mind telling, but I’m more interested in discussing other things tonight. Suffice to say... The woman who introduced me to the lifestyle was a friend of my mother’s. Her name was Elena Lincoln. She was a Domme, and I actually started out as her submissive. She helped me train when I wanted to switch roles, and after that, she was the one who set me up with my subs.

“I knew it was a power play for her, though, and I got tired of her manipulation. I ended my association with her two years ago, and she died in a car accident last year. There’s more to it, but... Those are the basics.”

My head was spinning, and I was thankful when he turned back to my list and gave me a moment to process. I hadn’t forgotten that he’d said he’d been in the lifestyle since he was fifteen, but I had naïvely assumed he’d begun his exploration with someone his own age. If this woman
had been his mother’s friend, she had to have been an adult. His Domme--no, his abuser--had taken advantage of a hormonal teenage boy. How long had it gone on? And this bitch had been a major part of his life even after their sexual relationship had ended...

I would have loved to ask for more details, but I quelled the urge to do so, not sure I could stomach hearing them at the moment. Christian had given me enough information to connect the dots, and I understood--perhaps a little better than he did--that his playroom was as full of ghosts for him as it was for me. The fact that he hadn’t entered it in two years spoke volumes.

*If he can work through it, so can I.*

“Have you ever thought about redoing the room completely? Your playroom?” I asked gently. Christian shrugged a little, looking both intrigued by the prospect and relieved at the change of subject.

“Redoing it how?”

“Redecorating, choosing implements and toys based on your preferences rather than Elena’s...” I let the sentence hang, and my assumption that the pedophile had helped design the room proved to be well-founded when he failed to deny it. “You could find a sub you value enough to make decisions like that with you.”

“Sounds like fun,” he smiled. “How would you redo it?”

“Maybe a little less... red,” I chuckled. “And some of the things I saw on the walls could draw blood quite easily. If blood is a hard limit for you, why do you even own things like that?”

“The visual can be a deterrent for misbehavior.”

“But your established limits make them an empty threat, and empty threats aren’t effective. Actually, they’re counterproductive. They undermine your authority,” I pointed out. Christian appeared to be momentarily flummoxed, and I bit back a smile before moving on. “Speaking of limits, I’m clear on yours. Do you have any questions about mine?”

“You’re fine with the first one on my list?” he asked, confusion etched in his furrowed brow.

“No touching your chest or back? Of course.” When his expression shifted to one of surprise, I added, “A hard limit is a hard limit. The fact that you put it at the very top tells me all I need to know, and I’d never push you on it.”

“You don’t even want to ask why?”

I tilted my head in sympathy, guessing he’d been harassed more than once about it in the past.

“Generally speaking, the reason behind someone’s limits aren’t really my business, but since you mentioned issues with touch when you were little... I’m assuming it has something to do with that,” I replied kindly. He nodded, still looking bewildered by my words. “I can respect your boundaries without prying.”
“However... This won’t really work if we’re not completely honest with each other. I don’t need the gritty details, but knowing the basics would help me avoid inadvertently doing something that crosses a line or causes you pain.”

Christian seemed to finally shake himself out of his confused state.

“I told you about my birth mother’s pimp.”

“You said he was abusive,” I nodded.

“Yes. He put out his cigarettes on my chest and back. Even now, being touched there is painful, and I don’t react well.”

I couldn’t hide my reaction that time and knew he read it in my face. I was appalled and heartbroken for him, but I managed to withhold the words of pity and condolence I knew he didn’t want to hear. His eyes softened in gratitude.

“Okay. No touching your chest or back. Moving on...” I paused, glancing back down at his list. Most of it was pretty standard for someone who wasn’t into taking major safety risks during a scene, and I was glad we wouldn’t have to broach some topics at all. However... “Do you mind if I ask why you don’t care for breathplay? Is it related to the touch thing?”

“No, it just always felt a little too... intimate,” he hedged.

“I guess I can understand that,” I nodded. “It requires close quarters and extraordinary control on the part of the Dom.”

“Not to mention the ability to read the submissive and know exactly when to stop, since they may not be able to safeword or even snap their fingers. It’s a risk I’ve just never felt comfortable taking with anyone.”

“That makes sense from your perspective. It’s a soft limit for me, but I haven’t done it in years. It’s been a long time since I’ve trusted anyone that much. But if you ever change your mind, I may not be opposed to it... someday.”

We shared a smile and continued down the lists.

“Hitting or slapping faces has never appealed to me, and I’ve never cared much for hoods,” Christian mused aloud before looking up at me again. “But no blindfolds?”

“Yes. They’re a trigger,” I replied levelly, bracing myself for what I knew would come next. His eyes narrowed in confusion and concern.

“And no alcohol before a scene?”

His eyes flickered to where our wine glasses sat on the coffee table, no doubt noticing I’d barely touched mine. I could see the questions burning in his throat and gave him a tense but compassionate smile.

“You can ask.”
“Why no alcohol?”

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy the occasional drink. Just not before I really get to know the other person, and never before a scene. My tolerance is pretty low, and I don’t like the feeling of being drunk. Being around others who are drunk has always made me nervous. They’re unpredictable. I don’t trust their actions, and when it comes to power exchange…”

“Trust is everything.”

“Exactly.”

We gazed at one another in silent communication for a few moments before he stood abruptly and took our glasses to the kitchen, dumping them in the sink and returning with two glasses of water instead.

“Thank you,” I murmured, taken aback by the gesture.

Judging by his extensive and proudly displayed wine collection, he was quite the connoisseur. He didn’t strike me as a man prone to overindulgence, so I hadn’t intended to make a big deal of it. But he seemed to understand, without my having to spell it out, that for the time being, I was more comfortable this way. A pleasant warmth spread in my chest, but it faded when he asked his next question.

“And the blindfolds?”

“That’s... a bit more complicated,” I said reluctantly, weighing each word with care. “I wouldn’t normally get into that so early on, but... I want this to work out. And I’m afraid if we’re not completely honest with each other, we’re doomed before we even begin.”

“I agree,” Christian nodded.

I saw the anxiety behind his serious expression, and despite what I’d just said, I hesitated to speak again. Would it change how he felt about me? Would it scare him off? It wouldn’t be the first time someone told me it was too much for them to deal with. Fuck. I took a few deep breaths and drew strength from the mental peace I’d worked so hard to attain in therapy.

“I was raped. And the assailant put something over my head so I couldn’t see his face.”

Christian exhaled loudly, as though he’d been punched in the gut, and his expression was one of utter heartbreak. No one who can show so much empathy could possibly be heartless. The thought brought a tiny, sad smile on my face. I decided to give him a few moments to process in silence, and I could see the shock was quickly giving way to anger. When he finally spoke again, his voice was low and deadly.

“When did it happen?”

“About four years ago,” I replied softly, making his eyes widen in comprehension.

“So, your daughter is...?”
“Yes. I have no idea who the man was, and I doubt I ever will. But Amelia is part of me too. She didn’t have a say in how she got here, but I know without a doubt that she’s meant to be here. And we’re both better off without that man in our lives, so I’m content not knowing. I hate that he’s probably done the same thing to others, but…”

“Did you report it?”

“Yes. I was still in college, and I was walking home from a study group that ran late. He used something like a canvas bag to cover my head and forced me into his car. Afterward, he shoved me out and drove off. I had a concussion and couldn’t focus my eyes enough to tell anything about the car, and I never saw his face.

“Someone eventually found me on the sidewalk and helped me to the ER. The evidence is still in backlogged storage with thousands of others just like it. Most people don’t realize how few reported cases actually end with any justice for the victim.”

Christian shook his head in apparent disgust, shifting in his seat as though he were fighting the urge to get up and pace. I smiled a little at that, recalling the sheepish look on his face last weekend when I’d pointed out his lack of self-control. He was angrier now by far, but he was doing a good job of mastering it. It helped center me as well.

“I’m surprised you would want to submit to someone else’s control after going through something like that,” he said quietly, still scowling. “Isn’t that a trigger in itself?”

“It probably is for some people, but not for me. I know it’s a paradox, but it’s actually a fairly common way to cope with that kind of trauma. Didn’t you have some sense of that when you were a submissive?” He looked baffled and shook his head, so I continued, “For me... It helps me take back what was stolen from me. That man--whoever he was--took away my free will.

“But when I submit willingly, I can get it back. I can reclaim my body as a source of pleasure rather than trauma. He broke my trust in others by taking what wasn’t given, but when I find the strength to put my trust in another person despite that, I heal just a little more. There’s power in that. I still have my triggers, but they’re easily avoided. And I trust you to respect my boundaries just as I’ll respect yours.”

“I will,” Christian said fervently. “I promise you that. And you have to tell me right away if I ever do anything that makes you feel...” There was a pleading note in his voice, and he seemed unable to finish his sentence. But I understood, touched by his empathy once again.

How could he possibly have believed himself to be without love or compassion? If I can convince him he’s wrong about that, we just might have a future.

“I promise to always be honest with you about what I’m feeling,” I vowed with a gentle smile. He responded with a nod, and I went back to his contract, ready to be done with the heavy stuff. “Next is...”

“Rules,” he supplied, relaxing visibly and even smirking a little. “My favorite part.”
Fourteen
Christian

My mind was still reeling from the bombshell Ana had just dropped on me, and in that moment, I made my peace with Welch’s decision to withhold the information. I didn’t plan on revoking his probationary status, but I had to admit, at least to myself, that I completely agreed with his protection of Ana. I would have done the same thing in his position.

I had to give myself a mental slap to refocus on our next topic of discussion, more than ready to shake off my residual anger over what had happened to her. There would be time to brood over it later.

“Next is...”

“Rules. My favorite part,” I said with a grin that felt only a little forced.

“If that’s true, you’re about to be a bit disappointed,” she quipped. I laughed in resignation, having expected some roadblocks here.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Okay, well... I do enjoy having a few rules and tasks, but realistically, some of this just isn’t possible for me to follow. Like the sleep and diet stuff... There are just some things a single mother doesn’t get a lot of. Sleep and healthy food are right at the top of that list. And regular mani-pedis and spa treatments?” she chuckled, shaking her head. “As much as I’d enjoy that, it’s just not something I could maintain on a regular basis. I’d only be setting myself up for failure.”

I observed her quietly as she spoke, considering everything I knew about her so far. Ana was so different from every woman I’d ever known, and I was beginning to realize that was what I liked about her most.

“I think I understand,” I replied with a nod. “You put your daughter first and yourself second.”

“As any good mother should.”

“I agree. But as your Dom, I want to put you first. I want to take care of you in ways you don’t or can’t take care of yourself. Isn’t that what you meant about wanting your Dom to be devoted to you?”

Ana blinked in surprise at having her own words turned around on her, and I tried not to look smug.

“You have a point,” she admitted with a tiny, rueful smile. “How about a compromise? I’ll agree to follow this to the best of my ability and let you take care of things like that when necessary and logistically feasible. Not to excess. And it can’t be a rule that comes with a punishment. Sometimes things will come up that are out of my control.”

“Agreed.”
We shared a smile before she looked back down at the list of rules.

“The drugs and alcohol rule won’t be a problem, of course. Happy to follow that one. Same for the monogamy, so long as it goes both ways. I have an IUD and no major health concerns, so that’s not an issue. As for working out... I do try to jog once or twice a week, but chasing a three-year-old around can be a better workout than anything a personal trainer could design. And if I’m going to be working up a sweat in any other way, I’d prefer bedroom aerobics,” she added playfully.

“I can handle that,” I grinned, imagining the ways most likely to get her heart pumping. Her blue eyes darkened with longing, and my cock twitched in my pants.

“Um...” She was momentarily flustered but managed to articulate her next point. “There’s nothing here about contact, but I want us to at least be in touch once a day. Even if it’s just a good morning or goodnight text. I understand you’re not used to that, but--”

“No, it’s fine. I’d like that too.” *Like I’m ever going to turn down the chance to talk to her,* I scoffed inwardly.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you. Also in the realm of things not in the contract...” I hesitated, once again sailing into completely uncharted waters. “It wasn’t really necessary with my other arrangements, but this is different. Since we’ll undoubtedly be seen together in public, you’re bound to get some unwanted attention. Not just from the press, but from people who might think to use you to get to me. You’ll be a public part of my life, and I need to keep you safe.”

“Okay...?”

“I want to assign CPOs for both you and Amelia.”

I watched a myriad of thoughts and emotions animate her features as she considered it. Surprise, discomfort, concern, and eventually... acceptance. I could barely contain my own surprise when she answered.

“Okay. But we’ll have a little time before that becomes a necessity, right?”

“Probably just enough time for my staff to find someone suitable for you.” The concern in her expression cleared a little at that, and I realized she was probably making the connection that Welch would have a hand in the recruitment process. She was remarkably easy to read. “To be honest, I expected you to fight me on that one.”

“I don’t really *like* it,” she shrugged, “but if they can keep a respectful distance unless they’re needed, it’s fine. I’ve worked with the press for long enough to know how tenacious reporters can be. And as for the rest...” Ana sighed and shook her head in resignation. “Once upon a time, I might have thrown a fit about it, but having someone around to watch our backs might actually be a comfort. They’ll be keeping Amelia safe too, so what kind of mother would I be if I turned that down?”

*Very true,* I thought. She’d been the victim of a stranger’s malevolence before, and I knew full well how that could change one’s perspective. Still, her easy acceptance of my plans to keep her
safe took me by surprise. I’d thought her stubbornness would interfere, but she was apparently more level-headed than I’d given her credit for.

“All right, so... new rule. Once we’ve worked out who will be on your detail, you’re not to go anywhere without them.”

I kept my voice low but let my dominance seep into the words just enough to make her breathing accelerate. Ana lowered her eyes slightly and gave a slow nod.

“Yes, Sir.”

Fuck, yes. The sound of those two words on her lips made me want to pin her to the couch and have my way with her. My pants were once again uncomfortably snug, and the urge to reach down and soothe the ache in my cock was almost irresistible. *Patience, Grey.* The next item on the list was scheduling.

“You said the weekend arrangement wouldn’t be feasible for you,” I forged ahead. “I’m very busy with work most of the time, but... I can make time for this. For you.” Ana graced me with another beautiful smile.

“Well, I may not be able to escape with you for whole weekends at a time, but I do have friends and family willing to babysit for a night here and there. And assuming all goes well, we’d eventually be ready for you to meet Amelia officially and spend time with us both. She goes to bed by eight.” My doubt must have shown in my expression, because she gently added, “We can work around it. Plenty of parents have active sex lives. If they didn’t, there would be no siblings.”

“Fair point. I have to say, the idea of spending time around a kid makes me nervous, but...”

“Not enough to scare you away?” she grinned.

“Not even close. It’s new territory for me, though, so I’d appreciate your patience.”

“You’ll have it,” she promised. “And until we both decide everyone is ready for that step, we’ll continue to take it slowly and just play by ear.”

“Deal.”

We fell silent for a moment, and I took the opportunity to appreciate the way the light from the fireplace warmed her pale skin. She was perfect. Lovely and sensual and sweet all at the same time. Strong and wise, intelligent and funny... How the hell was this woman still single?

Suddenly, her brows drew inward, and I realized she was staring down at the contract without really seeing it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just... Going over all of this has been good, but my instincts are telling me a signed contract probably isn’t right for us.”

My eyes widened in alarm and confusion.
“Why not? I thought you wanted--”

“Oh, I do. I didn’t mean it like that,” she reassured me. I relaxed minutely. “I’ve done contracts before, and I’ve also had other relationships that didn’t involve anything formal like this. I’ll do my part regardless of whether or not I sign something.

“But you’ve already admitted that you pretty much lived by your contracts in the past, and... I just think maybe it would be a healthier start for us if we skip this part. I’m afraid you might end up thinking of me like one of the other women you were with, and I don’t ever want to feel like that.

“Not to mention that sometimes, when there’s a physical contract, people can forget to talk things out. Communication and respect are what makes these relationships work, and... I want us to work. If we can.”

“I want that too,” I replied thoughtfully, contemplating the prospect of moving forward without having her signed consent. It wasn’t as daunting as it would have been with anyone other than Ana. She was smiling at me encouragingly as though she could read my thoughts.

“I will respect your limits and put your needs before my own. Can I trust you to do the same?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. Her smile widened, and she tossed the contract onto the coffee table before carefully straddling my lap.

“Then, we don’t need that. I trust you.”
Fifteen

Christian

My hands moved to her hips without a second thought and rocked them over the bulge in my pants. Ana let out a quiet gasp, and I took the opportunity to steal another taste of her perfect lips. I suddenly realized why the thought of abstaining from alcohol hadn’t bothered me when I’d dumped our glasses earlier. She was intoxicating enough all on her own.

I turned my attention to her neck, breathing her in as I nibbled the soft skin there. She trembled slightly, and I watched as the tiny hairs on her arm stood up to catch the warm light from the fireplace. As I pulled back, I ran my hands up and down the length of her arms, left bare by her sleeveless dress.

“I love that I can do this to you with just a kiss,” I whispered, feeling the rippled flesh beneath my palms.

“You can do that with just a look. It happens all the time when you’re around.”

I groaned and wrapped one hand around the back of her neck, kissing her more fiercely as she ground herself against me. I could feel the warmth of her through my pants, and my resolve to take it slow wavered. It would’ve been so easy to free myself and bring her right down on my cock, to pound into her until she begged for reprieve.

But I felt like I’d waited a lifetime for Anastasia Steele. Now that I had her, I was damned well going to do it right.

My mind set, I slid my hands beneath her ass and stood up. She squeaked in surprise, her hands gripping my shoulders for balance. I stopped kissing her just long enough to check that the path out of the living room was clear, pausing only briefly at the foot of the stairs.

The instinct to haul her up to my playroom and have my way with her was strong, but I forced myself to keep walking until I reached my bedroom. There would be time for the playroom another night. I wasn’t sure we were quite ready for that, and I wanted time to really plan our first scene. To decide which of my Ana-centric fantasies I would play out first. Though, to be fair, I wasn’t sure what made me more nervous and excited--the idea of taking Ana to my playroom after such a long dry spell or what we were doing now.

Vanilla.

The word reverberated in my mind as we hurriedly shed our clothes and fell onto my bed in a heap of tangled limbs and urgent kisses. Vanilla sure as hell didn’t feel anything like the scathing description Elena had given me. Perhaps because Ana could never be boring or disappointing. She was breathtaking in every sense of the word.

Her skin was like satin beneath me, deliciously soft and glowing slightly in the moonbeams that poured in from the windows. I drew back to look at her, sighing at the way her gorgeous hair pooled around her head as she gazed up at me with eyes full of desire.
Anastasia had the kind of beauty that made my chest ache just to look at her. And she was mine.

The thought awakened the possessive beast within me, and I caught her wrists deftly, pinning them above her head with one hand. Ana gasped, her back arching hungrily as I ran my free hand down the length of her body from her jaw to her hip.

“So responsive,” I murmured against the swell of her breast. “One day very soon, I’m going to test that responsiveness, Anastasia. I’ll touch you everywhere but where you need it most and tease you until you’re begging for release.”

My lips closed around her nipple, sucking greedily as she cried out.

“Promise?” she panted.

“Oh, yes. I’ve had a month to fantasize about what I’d do with this body if I had you all to myself. And I plan to make good on every... single... fantasy.” I punctuated the last three words with nibbling kisses to her breasts, letting my free hand continue its downward exploration. Her hips bucked in longing, and I smirked. “I wonder if I can make you come without even touching you there.”

“Please, Christian.”

The sound of my name leaving her lips in that breathy little plea was my undoing. I released her wrists and moved to settle between her legs, studying the treasure between them for only a moment before dipping my head to taste her.

She was exquisite. Soft, clean, and so unbelievably wet. Ana writhed harder against me as her shaking thighs began to draw inward. I latched onto her clit, pulling it into my mouth and flicking my tongue against it in quick, firm strokes.

“Oh, God...” she whimpered.

Every muscle in her body tensed as she reached her peak, and I held her hips tightly against the bed, refusing to lift my mouth until I’d consumed every drop of her orgasm. I slowed my ministrations to long, almost lazy strokes of my tongue as her shudders eased and her legs fell open again.

“Holy fuck,” Ana gasped. My eyes found hers in the darkness, and I gave her a smile that was downright devious.

“No. That’s next. On your stomach, Ana.”

Her grin widened as she rolled over, groaning in appreciation when I pulled her hips up and positioned myself behind her on my knees. I briefly considered grabbing a condom from my closet, but I knew she was clean and on birth control. I’d attached my own clean bill of sexual health to the end of the contract, so she knew I was safe too.

I wanted to feel her. I wanted nothing between us now that we were finally here.
“I need to fuck you now. Hard and fast until you’re a quivering mess and screaming my name. And then, I’m going to flip you back over and do it again.”

“Yes. Please...” Her words came out on a groan of desperation, and I felt her hips push back against mine.

My cock found her wet heat with remarkable ease, plunging into her warmth until I was buried to the hilt within her. It was an almost uncomfortably tight fit, but with a few shallow strokes, I felt her open up to me. The pleasure of her sweet pussy surrounding me was exquisite, and the tenuous hold I’d been keeping on my self-control slipped.

“Ah... Jesus, Ana. So... fucking... good...”

“Fuck me. Please, Christian,” she pled, the words half muffled in the mattress. *God, yes...*

“Hold on, baby.”

I gripped her hips tighter and began to pound into her, driven by the erotic sounds that escaped her each time I filled her completely. Her hands fist the blanket beneath her, providing just enough resistance to keep me from plowing her right into the headboard. The sound of our sweat-dampened skin making contact was the perfect percussion amidst our cries of pleasure. The moment I felt her walls clamp down around me, I erupted within her, unable to hold back another second longer.

I poured every ounce of my desire into her. Every dirty thought, every wicked fantasy, every delicious dream... I would never think of *vanilla* the same way again.

We collapsed side-by-side on the bed, sprawled on our backs and gasping. I turned my head to look at her, drinking in the sight of her parted lips and heaving breasts. Her lashes were dark smudges beneath her eyes, but they fluttered open after a few moments. She glanced at me and smiled.

“What?” I asked, unable to keep the grin off my own face.

“I’ve just never seen you look more relaxed. I like it.”

“It looks good on you too. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll relax you some more.”

Ana laughed, and my heart skipped a beat at the beautiful sound. I hadn’t been kidding, though. While at one time, I might have thought fucking her would get my obsession with her out of my system, I now knew better. I already wanted her again, in every way I could have her.

“We can get to that in a bit,” she smirked, her eyes twinkling deviously. “Right now, I think I’d like a taste of you.”

“Seems fair.”

I watched her through heavy-lidded eyes as she moved down to hover over my quickly recovering erection, gasping when she pressed her lips to the tip. I sprang to life at the simple contact, and she caught me in her mouth expertly.
“Fuck,” I cursed, groaning out the word as she began to worship me with her tongue.

I was still sensitive from my previous orgasm, and Ana had me at the brink again so quickly it was almost embarrassing. She felt me teetering on the edge and locked eyes with me as she swallowed every inch. I cursed again and shot my release at the back of her throat.

“Shit,” I muttered apologetically once I’d managed to catch my breath. “I meant to warn you.”

“No need,” Ana smiled, crawling back up to lay next to me. She stretched lazily, and I glanced over at her.

“Don’t fall asleep. I’m not through with you yet, Ms. Steele.”

Two hours later, I’d had two more orgasms and had lost count of Ana’s. Somewhere after her fourth climax, I’d had the presence of mind to get a wet cloth from the bathroom to help her clean up. Good thing too, because I sure as hell wouldn’t have trusted my legs to walk that far once we finally collapsed in exhaustion. My limbs felt limp as overcooked pasta, and I was a bit dizzy.

As our panting gave way to an uneasy silence, I began to feel a little awkward. Ana seemed to sense the change as well and turned to me with an uncertain smile.

“Should I leave?” she asked softly, her eyes warm and completely devoid of judgment or expectations.

“No... Stay.” The words were out of my mouth before my brain could truly weigh in.

“Are you sure?”

No.

“Yes. I don’t want you to go, but... I should warn you that I’m prone to nightmares. Sometimes violent ones. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I looked away guiltily, ashamed of my own weakness, but my eyes flew back to her face when I felt her fingers entwine with mine. She was still smiling gently.

“I understand. I’ve had my share of those too. All part of the package, I guess.”

“The package?”

“PTSD. It’s normal. I promise not to hold it against you if you wake me up.”

“And if I accidentally give you a bloody nose or a split lip?” I frowned.

“That too. I’ll understand.”

Reluctant but determined, I nodded and reached down to straighten the mess of blankets, pulling the layers over us. Her eyes had already drifted shut, and the sight made me smile despite my anxiety. I pressed my lips softly to hers, and Ana responded promptly, though I was fairly
certain she had already dozed off. I lay awake long after her breathing had settled into a deep, steady rhythm. I watched her sleep peacefully, memorizing every detail of her even as my thoughts wandered back to our conversation from earlier that evening.

I was still struggling to wrap my head around a lot of what she’d told me, and I knew it would take time to manage my anger over the pain she’d suffered in the past. I couldn’t remember ever having felt so protective of anyone, and the instinct felt stronger than anything I’d ever felt toward my ex-sub.

Perhaps the most interesting thing Ana had shared were her views on trauma and BDSM. She’d seemed surprised that I’d never made that connection, and from her perspective, I supposed that reaction made sense. I’d certainly seen my fair share of trauma in the past. I’d thought that learning power exchange had been what fixed me, but it hadn’t quite been in the way she’d described. Submitting to Elena had felt more like a purging of my wayward teenage behavior rather than a means of coping with the abuse I’d suffered at the pimp’s hands.

I’d been entranced by the tone of Ana’s voice when she’d spoken about how submission made her feel. Liberated, powerful, peaceful… I’d thought I understood that concept, but the reverence I’d witnessed in her voice and expression made me question whether I’d ever really felt those things at all.

Had my other submissives shared Ana’s feelings about it? I’d rarely spoken to them on such profound matters, but my thoughts immediately gravitated to Leila. She’d been damaged too. Not from trauma, perhaps, but certainly from mental illness. Had she been using power exchange as a treatment for her depression? If so, it had been a colossal failure. Or perhaps she simply hadn’t approached it in a healthy way. BDSM wasn’t a substitute for therapy and medication.

Ana seems to have a better understanding of that, I thought, recalling her mention of therapy sessions. Whatever she was doing seemed to be working for her, and I found myself wishing my own therapy had worked as well as hers.

I’d grown tired of paying John Flynn for therapy that never seemed to produce any positive results, and I’d never gotten around to finding someone better suited. Maybe I should ask Ana to recommend someone new. That would certainly be out of character for me. But then… This whole thing was out of character for me.

Uncharted territory.

I’d never imagined foregoing a signed contract or letting a sub dictate which rules she was willing to follow. I’d never had to. The women Elena had sent me had already agreed to my contract before I ever met them. The ‘negotiation’ part of the process was little more than perfunctory, and it had never included me. Anyone not willing to follow my contract as stated never got through Elena’s screening process.

I was absolutely certain Ana would never have passed her test. Not only would a single mother have been an immediate no, but Elena would never have let someone as strong-willed as Anastasia get as far as a face-to-face meeting. She would’ve immediately recognized her as a threat to her own status, and that would have been the end of it.

So, yes… Uncharted territory, indeed. But to my surprise, I found it enthralling. Intimidating too, of course, but in a way that excited me. There had been no real challenge with the others, and
I’d thought that was how I liked it. Now, I was wondering if I’d only convinced myself of that because Elena had manipulated me so well.

I looked over at Ana’s peaceful form again and wondered, not for the first time, if I was strong enough to be what she needed. The only thing I knew for certain was that I was strong enough to try.

When at last I’d drifted off last night, I had expected to wake up screaming. But I didn’t. Instead, I found myself wrapped around Ana’s body like a vine, our limbs entwined as tightly as possible. It was warm and incredibly pleasant. The gentle touch of her hand in my hair made me pull back just enough to look into her eyes, and her smile was even more beautiful in the morning light.

“If this is your idea of being a dangerous bedmate, you should really rethink that description.”

“I can’t believe I slept straight through,” I replied, shock evident in my voice and undoubtedly my face as well. “I’ve never slept next to anyone. Not since I was a kid, and my older brother had more than one busted lip thanks to me.”

Ana’s expression softened in empathy, her lips pursing slightly as she considered the matter.

“Maybe it has to do with the person you’re sharing a bed with. Did your brother know as much about you as I do?”

“Most definitely not.”

“Then, maybe it’s just that you trust me more than you trusted him.”

“But how would I be conscious of that when I’m asleep?”

“Some things are instinctual,” she said with a little shrug, smiling once more. “You should give your brain more credit. There’s no guarantee every time will go this well, but... It’s a promising start.”

I nodded dazedly, feeling, for the first time in my life, a surge of true hope that maybe I wasn’t as fucked up as I’d always believed. Maybe I could be normal.

Maybe I could be happy.
Sixteen

My pulse was racing before we’d even reached the upper level of his penthouse. Christian and I had been talking and texting every day, and he’d been using some pretty creative tasks and other Dom tactics to build the anticipation of our first scene. Not that I needed the extra help. I’d been fantasizing about this since the moment I’d realized he was a Dom. Maybe even before that.

Our encounter last weekend had been mostly vanilla, but it had definitely been rough. And amazing. He’d taken me possessively and completely, and I’d still felt like a submissive despite the lack of props and bondage. He’d been able to dominate me easily even without those things, which had reassured me. With his background, I had wondered how much he would need to rely on them, but using sex toys wasn’t what made someone a Dom.

I knew without a doubt that the sex between us would never be truly vanilla. It just wasn’t possible. Our power exchange identities were too much a part of who we were, and I couldn’t have been happier about it.

As I followed Christian into the playroom, I noticed the distinct absence of the harsher implements I’d asked about, and I felt my mouth tug upward in a smile.

“Someone seems to have absconded with quite a bit of your toy collection, Sir.”

Christian gave me a shrug and a teasing smile.

“It turns out they were kind of pointless to have around in the first place. A very wise woman made me realize that empty threats are counterproductive. I didn’t see much point in hanging onto them. The blindfolds and anything else meant to cover your eyes are gone now too.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly, my smile softening in appreciation. “I guess that might challenge your creativity a bit.”

He circled me slowly, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind and pulling me flush against his bare chest. His breath ghosted over the shell of my ear as he spoke, sending a shudder through my body.

“It’s a good thing I like a challenge.”

“You won’t miss them?” I asked, closing my eyes to savor the feel of his lips when they found the hollow of my neck.

“No. Sensory deprivation can be a useful tool, but knowing the reason you object to them... It turns my stomach. I have no desire to use them on you. Ever.”

I turned my head to look up at him, and his mouth slanted down on mine. I was held captive by his arms as well as his lips, and I moaned appreciatively into the kiss. Fuck, I wanted him so badly. I was already clenching in anticipation, and I wasn’t even naked yet. As though I’d spoken the thought aloud, his hands went to the satin robe that covered my nakedness and deftly untied the sash, slipping it over my shoulders and letting it fall to the floor.
His long fingers explored the newly exposed flesh, cupping my breasts and dipping lower to the apex of my thighs. He tested my wetness almost casually, and the slight contact of his fingers against my clit made me jerk in his arms.

“Easy, now, beautiful.” He dropped a single kiss to the tip of my nose and removed his hands, steadying me when I swayed a little on my feet. “Go to the spanking bench and kneel.”

I nodded shakily and did as I was told, welcoming the first soothing waves of the inner peace that came with the act of submission. I knelt on the floor next to the padded apparatus and spread my legs at a comfortable angle, letting my hands rest palms-up on my thighs. I kept my chin parallel to the floor and lowered my eyes. I could hear Christian crossing the room to retrieve a few items, his footsteps muted on the padded floor. When his bare feet appeared next to me, I felt his hand rest on the top of my head before moving down to finger my plaited hair.

Kneeling was an act of submission in itself. It made me embrace my own vulnerability and willingly offer it up to my Dominant, trusting him with everything I had and everything I was. I shivered at the profound sensation of it and felt myself grow a little wetter.

“Are you cold?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. I think I could stare at you like this for hours. Maybe days. So beautiful...” The mixture of longing and appreciation in his voice had me glowing with pride, but I kept my eyes on the floor and waited for instruction. “Come,” he said, holding his hand out to help me to my feet.

I stood and let him lead me to the spanking bench, settling my knees onto the plush padding. Christian’s hands moved reverently over my skin, exploring every inch between my shoulders and thighs, before he finally began to loop a soft cord around my wrists. He secured each length of rope through the metal hooks built into the bench and moved to do the same with my ankles. By the time he’d finished, my pulse was thundering in my ears, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to find my wetness dripping onto my thighs.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous, Anastasia. I wish you could see yourself right now. That perfect pussy is glistening already, and I’ve barely touched you. But you’re not to come until I’ve given you permission. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” I breathed. Orgasm control was something I’d mastered years ago, but I knew without a doubt that Christian would challenge my abilities. And I couldn’t wait.

“What are your safewords?”

“Red and yellow.”

“Don’t be afraid to use them.”

“Yes, Sir.” I shivered again as he gently squeezed my ass with both hands.

“Your skin is exquisite. Clear and soft... But a bit too pale here.”
He brought his palm down firmly on my ass, and I squeaked in surprise, relishing the tingle left in its wake. He repeated the motion on the other side, alternating back and forth a few times before his fingers brushed tentatively against my folds. I hissed in satisfaction, and Christian seemed to echo the sound.

“So wet...”

He continued his ministrations until the skin was warm beneath his touch, and I was so wrapped in bliss that I barely noticed him stepping away to pick up a flogger. I recognized it as one I’d caught myself staring at covetously on my first tour of the room, and I realized he must have caught me too. It was a midsize implement with maybe twenty suede leather falls. In comparison to the others that had hung around it, this one was in the mid-range for both sting and thud. It suited my preferences perfectly, and my nerves tingled in expectation.

The first strike had me struggling to hold onto the reins of my orgasm, determined not to disobey him. I clamped my mouth shut in concentration as the flogger fell once, twice, three more times.

“Don’t hold back on me, Anastasia. I want to hear you.”

I let out a groan and stopped trying to silence myself, realizing he was learning my cues as we went. That, too, was a pleasant surprise. I’d been a little concerned he might be overly confident and make assumptions about what I’d enjoy, but that didn’t seem to be the case at all.

Each time he brought the flogger down on my ass or the backs of my thighs, I couldn’t help but moan and twitch. I felt like I might orgasm on the spot if he touched me now, so when he dropped the flogger abruptly, I braced myself to stay in control of my body.

“You’re doing so well,” he praised, quickly releasing my wrists and ankles and helping me to my feet. I couldn’t summon the coherency to thank him.

He guided me to the king-size bed and eased me down onto my stomach. His hands felt cool as they soothed the tender skin of my ass, and I whimpered a bit at the sensitivity.

“I love seeing my marks on you. Even if I know they won’t last more than a few hours.”

If that, I thought ruefully. Any mark that lingered much longer than an hour or so would require considerably more force than he’d used tonight. I arced my neck futilely, slightly disappointed that I was unable to see the marks for myself. The thought of having those traces of him on my skin, of taking them home with me and admiring them later... It turned me on even more. As though Christian could read my mind, he gently turned me onto my back and smiled down at me.

“There’s more than one way to achieve a goal,” he grinned salaciously.

Before I could ask what he meant, he dropped his head and proceeded to suckle the skin on the underside of one breast, then my stomach, and finally the inside of my thigh. He paused there to breathe in the scent of my arousal, and I gazed down at the marks he’d left on my body. Nothing would show once I was dressed, but I would know they were there. And so would he.
“Sir,” I whispered, almost pleading as my hips rose toward him of their own accord. I was so close that even the tickle of his breath against my core might set me off.

“Almost, Anastasia.”

I wanted to beg for my release at that point, especially when he rose from the bed and moved away. But he returned quickly with two sets of padded cuffs. With remarkable speed, he hooked my ankles and wrists to the iron bed frame, and I was completely exposed to him. My legs were spread so that my knees were level with my face on either side, and he sat back to admire the view.

“I fucking love how flexible you are.”

So did I, especially when he lowered his mouth to my pussy. I cried out in pleasure, and he lifted his head only long enough to say, “Come for me.”

_Holy fuck._

It took less than five seconds before I was shouting my orgasm to the heavens, shuddering so violently I probably would have injured him if he hadn’t tied me down.

My walls were still spasming when I felt him drive his full length into me, and our eyes locked on one another. I couldn’t seem to stop coming, and I felt lightheaded as he continued to fuck me senseless. His face drifted in and out of focus, but his shout of ecstasy brought me back to full awareness as he exploded within me.

His expression alone was almost enough to send me careening over the edge again. _God, he’s so beautiful…_ His handsome face was glistening with sweat, and his jaw was so tense it looked chiseled from marble.

To my shock, he withdrew almost as soon as he’d finished and went right back down to lick me clean. For a moment, I thought I’d gone blind from the lack of blood flow to my brain. I was so overstimulated that my body writhed and wriggled almost frantically beneath him. The cuffs were digging into my wrists and ankles, but I barely noticed. Christian lifted his head slightly and practically growled his next words.

“One more, Anastasia. Give me one more. I want to know how we taste together.”

His explicit words and the raw need I could hear in his voice was all it took, and the next touch of his tongue made white lights erupt behind my eyelids as I came yet again. I vaguely registered the release of my wrists and ankles from the cuffs and Christian’s soft, crooning words of praise. My body was limp, and my brain seemed to have short-circuited.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move,” he instructed gently.

I managed to nod in acknowledgment. Not like I would’ve been able to stand up anyway. He returned a few seconds later with a cool cloth, bathing my sensitive areas as he took stock of my bedraggled state.

“You look fantastically well fucked.”
“I couldn’t have put it better,” I chuckled, gasping as the cloth brushed my swollen clit a second later. “That was incredible.”

“I agree. Was the pain too much? Not enough?”

“I could have taken more, but I didn’t need it. You were able to tell when I was ready to move on to something else.”

“You’re very easy to read, thank God.”

“You’re also very good at it. Trust me,” I smiled, mildly amused at being the one to reassure him in this room, of all places. “Was it what you expected?”

“No… It was better.” We shared a grin, and he stretched out next to me, gathering me into his arms. “And I already want to do it again.”

I laughed again and shook my head.

“I’m afraid I don’t have another round in me tonight. That was… intense. And I can’t stay the night anyway. My neighbor is watching Amelia and expects me back in a little while.”

Christian nodded against the side of my neck but still sighed as though disappointed.

“I know. It’s after ten. Think you can walk yet?” he teased.

I stuck my tongue out playfully, and he retaliated by swooping his head down to kiss me, making me laugh and moan at the same time. I would never get tired of kissing him.

We managed to wobble our way out of the playroom and downstairs a few minutes later. I dressed and gathered my things, and we parted reluctantly with many more kisses before the elevator doors finally closed between us.

The drive home was brief and bittersweet. As much as I loved the feeling of being safe at home with my daughter tucked into her bed, I was already missing Christian.

My neighbor, Sherry, gave me a knowing look when I entered my apartment, and I immediately ran a self-conscious hand through my hair. I’d brushed it, hadn’t I? Were the hickies showing somehow?

“I see someone had a nice date,” she smirked.

I shrugged sheepishly and couldn’t keep the smile from my face. Sherry lived next door and was usually up for babysitting duties when I gave her enough warning ahead of time. She was in her sixties and had an active social life, but she loved spending time with Amelia. She craved grandchildren of her own, but none of her kids were in a hurry to provide her with any.

“How was your night?” I redirected. “Did she behave?”

“Oh, of course. She always does. She fussed a bit when it was time to turn off the Ponies and go to bed, but she fell asleep pretty quickly.”
I nodded before digging a twenty out of my purse, which Sherry promptly refused. I huffed a sigh and vowed to sneak it into her purse next time. Once she was gone, I changed into my pajamas and went back out to turn off the lights. Just as my hand reached for the deadbolt, there was a knock from the other side of the door, and I peered cautiously through the peephole.

Christian stood on the other side, wearing a nervous expression that transformed into a crooked grin when I opened the door.

“What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah...” He ran a hand over the back of his neck. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... It feels wrong not to sleep next to you after... everything.”

I couldn’t fight my own smile as I let him in and locked the door behind him, relishing the unexpected giddiness that bubbled in my chest. I’d been missing him too and certainly hadn’t wanted to leave.

“You’ll need to be gone by seven,” I warned, still grinning. “I’m not ready to explain you to Amelia just yet.”

“Deal.” He sealed it with a long kiss and added, “Thank you.”

Once Christian had stripped to his boxers, we crawled into my bed and settled into a spooning position. The warm weight of his arm around my waist was the anchor I hadn’t realized I needed, and I smiled contentedly in the darkness.

“It feels strange to share a woman’s bed,” he murmured into my hair.

“In a good way?”

His arms tightened around me before he answered, his voice soft and almost reverent.

“In a wonderful way.”
Seventeen
Christian

Why the hell did I let Andrea schedule a conference call with these fuckers right before lunch?

I glared at the clock on my desk for what must have been the tenth time in the last five minutes. Ana would be stopping by with lunch any minute now, and I was more than ready. The last few weeks had been incredible. Every minute I spent with her only made me crave her more. It didn’t matter what we were doing or where we were doing it, whether I was fucking the hell out of her in the playroom or just talking about our day on the phone. There hadn’t been a second of her company I hadn’t enjoyed.

We’d only been together a little over a month, but that short span of time had already brought me more happiness than I’d ever experienced in the cumulative years I’d spent with others. Everything about her was just... more. And I couldn’t imagine ever having my fill of her.

I was a man of action, both in business and my personal life, and I found myself wanting to move forward with Ana. I just couldn’t quite determine the best way to approach it. As if mixing romance into a relationship weren’t enough of a new experience for me, Ana was also a single mother. I had absolutely no relevant experience to guide me, but that didn’t seem to make me want it any less. That, in itself, was extraordinary.

I should’ve been more wary of letting her push my long-established boundaries. And I certainly should have been anxious or even intimidated at the mere notion of pursuing something permanent. But logical or not, those feelings were notably absent, and that had to mean something.

Someone coughed loudly on the other end of my conference call, drawing my attention back to the conversation, and I frowned in disgust. If either of the Brockton brothers were actually in my office at that moment, I’d have been resisting the urge to shove them out the nearest window. They’d been late for the call and had waffled back and forth on every topic we’d discussed. At this point, I was ready to simply walk away from the deal.

It might take a little longer, but I’d still get the patents I wanted. I’d just have to put their company out of business first. I’d use their competitors to drive them further into the red and make them beg me for the generous deal they were currently refusing to take. Then, and only then, would I buy them out for a fraction of the original offer.

“We have a better offer from Mattsen Industries on the east coast, Mr. Grey. The only reason we haven’t taken it is because we’d prefer to keep things local,” Sam Brockton announced.

I snorted in derision. This guy was so full of shit it must have been coming out his nostrils. I’d done my due diligence with that particular CEO and knew for a fact that Tim Mattsen wouldn’t touch Brockton with a ten-foot pole, patents or no.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, preparing to tell him to take his ‘better offer’ and fuck off, when the door to my office finally opened to reveal Anastasia. She smiled and held up a bag of takeout, and I grinned back at her, holding a finger to my lips and pointing at the phone. She
noded quickly and headed to the sofa to start setting our food out on the coffee table, and I watched her cross the room with hungry eyes.

_Fuck, she looks amazing._

Her hair was up today, revealing her slender, graceful neck, and the pencil skirt and blouse ensemble she wore had me adjusting myself beneath my desk. _Maybe I'll bend her over it after we finish eating,_ I mused. I'd never fucked a woman in my office, and at the moment, it felt like a waste of expert sound-proofing.

I’d scarcely taken my eyes off of Ana, so I noticed immediately when she stiffened and went deathly pale. Her head turned toward me, but her glazed eyes were vacant. She looked like she’d seen a ghost. Needing to go to her, I snapped my attention back to the call and realized I’d lost track of the conversation again. One of the men was prattling on about what he and his brother thought they _deserved._

“The company’s worth has been grossly underestimated, Mr. Grey, and if you would just take the time to look over our latest proj—”

“I’ve seen your projections, and I’m not convinced,” I interrupted him. “Gentlemen, I’ve got to cut this short. I’ll be in touch.”

I disconnected the call without waiting for a response and stood up, quickly moving to Ana’s side. Her eyes were still unfocused and narrowed in confusion.

“What’s wrong? Ana?”

She was taking long, heavy breaths with her lips pinched tight as though resisting the urge to vomit. I briefly debated whether to grab a trash can or just carry her to my private bathroom, but neither option was likely to prevent a mess entirely.

“Look at me, Anastasia. Right here,” I tried again, using the tone that commanded her compliance. After a moment, she met my gaze, and she nodded shakily in acknowledgment. “Come on, sit down. That’s it.”

She let me guide her gently onto the sofa, and I gave her a bottle of water from the minibar. Her hand trembled as she lifted it to her lips, so I steadied her and rubbed her back soothingly as I took a seat next to her.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. What just happened?”

“I don’t know. I just felt... Off.”

My frown deepened as I took note of the wispy quality of Ana’s voice. It wasn’t like her at all.

“Are you coming down with something?”
“No, nothing like that. I’m already starting to feel better.” I didn’t quite buy that, and my skepticism must’ve shown on my face because she shook her head before taking a deep breath. “I’ll be fine. It’s okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Really, don’t worry. Let’s have lunch.” She sounded a bit more like herself, so I backed off. But as I watched her poke listlessly at her food, my concern lingered. When she caught my raised eyebrow, she responded with a weak smile. “I’m really fine.”

I was sure there had to be something Ana wasn’t telling me, but it felt wrong to push her to talk about it when she was so frazzled. I’d never seen her lose her composure like that. Still, she seemed to be rallying right before my eyes, and she clearly wanted me to let it go. She was making a show of digging into her lunch, probably trying to pacify me by displaying a healthy appetite.

Maybe it was just a hormonal thing. Women were always blaming things on hormones, right? I chewed my sandwich in silence for a few seconds before deciding to change the subject.

“I hope you’re still looking forward to our weekend,” I cajoled her, giving her what she called my panty-dropping smile. She grinned back and took another drink of water. Her hand was steadier this time.

“Dare I ask if you’re even planning to let me out of your playroom between tonight and Sunday afternoon?”

“You can ask,” I chuckled. “Actually, though, the weather is supposed to be perfect for soaring tomorrow. Or sailing, if you prefer.”

“Soaring? Like in a glider?”

“Yeah. You’re not afraid of heights, right?”

“Not usually, but the thought of being that high in something with no engine is...”

“I’d keep you safe,” I promised, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Do you trust me?”

“You know I do,” she smiled softly.

“It’s a date, then. I would like to take you sailing too, though it may be a bit much for one day. Maybe...” I hesitated, hoping my next suggestion wouldn’t put her off. “Maybe we could take Amelia out on my boat sometime.”

To my relief, Ana smiled brilliantly, and I released the breath I’d been holding.

“She’d like that. She loves the water. My dad likes to take her fishing when she spends weekends with him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

A pleasant warmth settled in my chest as I mentally compiled a list of things I’d need to do or acquire to make sure my catamaran was safe for a three-year-old. I would definitely need to do a
little more research on children before I met Ana’s daughter officially. The mere idea made me instantly nervous. If the kid didn’t like me, it could cause problems between Ana and me, and that was the last thing I wanted.

We finished our meals and kissed each other goodbye when it was time for Ana to head back to work. I walked her to the elevator, blatantly ignoring the looks of speculation we were getting from some of my staff. I kissed her again at the elevator and heard a gasp from the receptionist desk behind me. Ana gave me a knowing smile, chuckling at my PDA before leaning up on her toes to whisper into my ear.

“See you tonight, Sir.”

“Damn,” Ana said from her perch on my kitchen counter. She was watching my meal preparations with a bemused expression. “I have to admit, I’m impressed with your skill. You said your parents’ housekeeper taught you how to cook?”

“Yeah. I asked her to when I was about twelve. I’m not sure my parents even knew about it.”

“Seems like kind of an odd thing for a twelve-year-old boy to request.”

“Probably,” I shrugged, frowning slightly. “Having a memory of what it feels like to be perpetually hungry was more than enough motivation to learn to cook. I didn’t use the skill much until college, when the only other options were junk food or something from the dining hall.”

Ana’s eyes had softened perceptibly at my explanation, but I was pleased to see no trace of pity in them. Though we’d shared more than a few dinners together, this was the first time I’d been able to cook for her. Our time together was usually limited to a babysitter’s availability, so we’d preferred to use it for other activities.

We spent the majority of dinner discussing our respective work weeks, both of us steering clear of Ana’s upset in my office earlier that day. The conversation gradually drifted to college experiences, and she regaled me with a few stories involving her former roommate.

I’d met Kate Kavanagh a handful of times, each occasion as unremarkable as the last. She’d been a bit too assertive for my taste, and I hadn’t encouraged further interactions. It wasn’t at all surprising to hear from Ana that Kate was a Domme. It suited her personality perfectly, at least from what little I knew of her.

What did surprise me was Ana’s revelation that the two of them had once been intimate. Ana laughed a bit sheepishly at my stunned expression and gave a little shrug.

“It was just the one time.”

“Okay, but... I didn’t realize you were into women,” I replied awkwardly, still trying to wrap my head around this new piece of information. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wasn’t intentionally keeping it from you or anything. It just never came up.” She paused to swallow a bite of asparagus. “And it’s not really that I’m ‘into women.’ I’m into whomever I feel a connection with. What attracts me is what’s in a person’s head, not what’s between their legs.”
“Right...”

Ana tilted her head speculatively as she watched me. I had no idea what expression was on my face, but she smiled gently and reached across the table to take my hand.

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. I’m with you. When I’m in a relationship, I rarely so much as glance at anyone outside of it, male, female, or otherwise. And even when I’m single, I don’t sleep around. Okay?”

“Of course, yeah, I wasn’t thinking anything like that. But you’ve... You’ve had relationships with people who weren’t men, then? Or was it just a sexual exploration sort of thing?”

“A bit of both, I suppose, but my serious relationships have been with men. Not that there have been very many. I’m picky about a lot of things when it comes to partners. Gender just isn’t one of those things. Do you have some... objection to dating a woman who isn’t straight?”

“Not at all,” I shook my head quickly. Nevermind that I’d never dated anyone before her. “I’m sure you’re well aware there’s been plenty of speculation about my sexuality.”

“True. You’ve never commented on the record about it, though. Either to confirm or deny.”

“Well, there’s really no easy way to do that. I’m straight, but if I say that on the record, there will still be people who think I’m in denial or, at the very least, in the closet. Either way, the story becomes more about that than what it should be about, which is my company. No one needs to know anything about my personal life. Those details are irrelevant and no one’s business.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Ana replied, taking a sip of her water. “So, then... You’re good? No issues you need to vent or questions I need to answer?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m sorry if I reacted poorly. It was just unexpected, I guess. It’s a lot to process.”

She nodded and focused on her food for a while, allowing me time to think it over in silence. I had to admit, it really wasn’t that odd in this day and age, particularly in the BDSM community. Those who were open-minded enough to explore their sexuality in unconventional ways rarely balked at crossing lines in other areas as well. That was probably why the kink, LGBT, and polyamorous communities intersected so frequently.

But knowing that and discovering it was a factor in your relationship were two different things. Or was it a factor at all? Ana didn’t seem to think so. I was man enough to admit that the thought of her with Kate, even just the one time, did make me a bit jealous. But the thought of her with anyone who wasn’t me had that effect, so I didn’t think that was what had tripped me up.

I’ve never had a problem with anyone’s sexuality, and I certainly wasn’t small-minded enough to think any less of Ana for not being straight. But if she was physically attracted to other genders, did that mean there were things I’d be unable to give her? I had already been thinking of how best to move forward with her... Would I be able to keep her happy and satisfied?

“Don’t let it intimidate you.”
I looked up from my plate, only a little surprised at Ana’s ability to read me. I gave her a reluctant smile and stood to help her clear the table. We carried the dishes into the kitchen, and Ana set to cleaning up the mess I’d made cooking. I started loading the dishwasher, still searching for the words to articulate my thoughts without offending her.

“It’s not that I’m intimidated,” I said quietly. “Nearly all of this with you is new for me. I guess I just worry that at some point I’ll screw it up, and I really don’t want that. I want to make you happy.”

“You do. I wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

“Yes, but if there are things I can’t give y—” Ana put her finger to my lips with an affectionate smile.

“There’s nothing I need that you can’t give me. I promise. I’ve never had a problem being satisfied with one person, no matter what parts they had. It’s just not about that for me. Please, trust me,” she implored, cupping my cheek and leaning up to kiss me softly. “You keep me very satisfied.”

I sighed and pressed my lips more firmly to hers, quickly taking charge of the kiss. Ana moaned and wrapped her arms around my neck, and I managed to turn off the faucet before taking hold of her waist, wet hands and all. I slid them down to her ass and lifted her onto the nearest countertop.

“Ana,” I groaned, removing her shirt in a way that sent the buttons flying in every direction. She giggled against my lips. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

Twenty minutes later, the kitchen was a bigger mess than when we’d begun, but we were both exceptionally satisfied.

After we’d cleaned up and gone another round in the shower, Ana and I fell into bed and stayed up talking long into the night. I would never get tired of hearing her talk. She was so passionate on so many subjects, and while we didn’t always agree, we’d yet to have a problem respecting each other’s opinions.

I smiled when I noticed Ana had dozed off, and I adjusted the blankets around her before closing my eyes too, happily anticipating a night of blissful sleep. As was quickly becoming the norm, my nightmares didn’t plague me thanks to Ana’s presence, but I was awakened only a few hours later by a rather solid smack to the forehead. I let out a groan and touched the spot in confusion, belatedly realizing where the impact had come from.

Anastasia was all but sobbing as she thrashed about, tangled in the sheet and her own fear. Her limbs were moving rapidly, kicking and swinging against some invisible foe, and I instinctively reached out to calm her.

“Ana! Anastasia, wake up!” I winced as her palm connected with my cheek. “Ana! Come on, now. You’re safe. It’s all right. You’re safe, Anastasia.”
The sound of her broken sobs felt like a knife in my chest and had me in a state of near-panic. I’d never been on the other side of this situation, and it was utterly terrifying. Her eyes sprang open, but she was staring blindly into the darkness, as though she were seeing something other than me or my bedroom.

“ANA! Wake up! It’s okay. You’re okay!”

Her desperate movements stopped abruptly, but she was still breathing heavily. Her swollen eyes found mine, and this time, I knew she could see me. She began to cry again, and I gathered her carefully in my arms, feeling utterly helpless. My chest burned with the familiar pain of another’s touch, but I pushed it aside, clutching her even tighter. After a few moments, it faded, and her tears ebbed as well.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I offered quietly.

Ana sniffled a bit but didn’t move or reply, and her silence lasted so long I assumed the answer was no. When she finally did speak, it was to apologize.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Shhh. Nothing to be sorry for.” I pressed a kiss to forehead and rubbed her back gently. “Does that happen often?”

“Not in a really long time. Sometimes odd little things can trigger them. Sometimes nothing at all. I need to write it down before I forget it, though.”

She pulled away from me just enough to reach her phone on the nightstand, not bothering to turn the screen away from my view. Mystified, I watched her open a journal app and type a few snippets of text into a document with today’s date.

Everything was dark. Rough hands hurting me. Something big hit my face. Hard to breathe. Couldn’t move or get away. Felt like being smothered by a giant.

Ana sighed and returned her phone to its charging station before curling up in my arms again. This time, she assumed the ‘little spoon’ position we’d grown accustomed to, and I marveled that, even now, she was conscious of my limits. My chest had stopped hurting, but this wasn’t the time to examine that phenomena.

“Do you always write them down?” I asked cautiously, settling myself around her tiny form and feeling her tension ease a little.

“I try to. It’s something my therapist suggested.”

“So, the dreams are about... what happened to you?”

“Sort of,” she answered, her voice still a bit hoarse from crying. “Trauma dreams aren’t usually re-enactments. They have more to do with feelings. Mine are usually about darkness and pain. Feeling powerless or trapped. The... man... wasn’t actually all that big. Tall, maybe, but not bulky. But he always is in my dreams. Huge and strong and impossible to escape.”
My arms tightened around her involuntarily, and I wished I could see her face. Her description of how trauma dreams worked made sense, and it made me wonder about my own nightmares. Were they truly memories or simply the leftover traces of a child’s fear? I knew what had happened because of my scars, but I couldn’t recall the pimp’s face. Had my subconscious mind simply filled in the blanks with a scenario that fit the evidence? If not for those scars, would my dreams have looked any different? Would I have been able to forget the abuse?

“I’m sorry,” Ana whispered again, reclaiming my attention. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m more worried about you.”

“I’ll be okay. I’m just afraid to go back to sleep.”

“I completely understand. I don’t usually bother,” I admitted.

She turned her head a little to meet my gaze, and she looked so much like a frightened little girl that it almost brought me to tears.

“What do you do instead?”

“Work. Or play my piano.”

My words brought out a tiny smile, and I was relieved to see it.

“Will you play for me?”

“Of course.”

I kissed her gently and helped her out of bed. We walked hand-in-hand to the living room, and she reclined against the chaise nearest to the piano. My fingers found the keys easily even in the dim light from the half moon. After so many years of playing in the dark, I was fairly certain I could play most of my favorites blindfolded.

I deliberated only a moment before choosing one of the more soothing nocturnes in my repertoire. I knew a ton of melancholy pieces, but the last thing Ana needed was more gloom. I kept my foot on the far left pedal and allowed my fingers to move by instinct, quickly becoming absorbed in the music.

While my introduction to the piano hadn’t come about for therapeutic reasons, the act of playing music had always calmed me. As a child, I’d often spent more of my day practicing than interacting with my family. It was an arrangement that seemed to suit everyone well enough, with the occasional exception of Elliot, who had enjoyed provoking me when he was bored.

My mother had instituted the same rule for all three of us: a sport, an instrument, and a foreign language. The privately tutored piano and French lessons had been chosen for me, but I’d been allowed to choose martial arts for the sport. As was usually the case with my parents, the extracurriculars had been mandated for the sake of appearances. It had been the household staff who’d enforced them, getting us to our lessons on time and pushing us to practice after our schoolwork was done.
Like most children, I’d whined and complained about it, but my resentment for the rule had vanished the night I’d realized that music could ease my mind after a night terror. It hadn’t taken long for my parents to grow tired of being woken by the piano at night, however, but no threat of punishment had been able to curb the habit. Eventually, they’d given up and bought an electric keyboard and a set of headphones for my room.

Being an adult had many perks, one of which being that I no longer had to worry about keeping anyone awake. My Fazioli grand was my favorite possession, though some of the items in my playroom might have run a close second.

As I came to the end of the piece, I glanced at Ana and smiled, realizing she’d fallen asleep at some point. I stopped playing and carried her carefully back to the bedroom. She really was a tiny thing, and the memory of her nightmare made her feel even smaller and more fragile in my arms.

I tucked her back in and slid into bed beside her, deciding not to go back to sleep. I wanted to stay up and just watch her. To count her breaths and fight off any demons that might return to torment her.

And as the night gave way to the dawn, I vowed to keep her safe from everything, always. Even her dreams.
Eighteen

Anastasia

Despite the interruptions to our sleep the night before, Christian seemed oddly energized when he woke me to go soaring on Saturday morning. It was still early when we reached the airfield and met up with the tow pilot, a genial older gentleman who introduced himself as Joe.

Christian’s glider was a thing of beauty. Its cabin was built for only two people, but its wings spanned over sixty feet. I was still a bit nervous about going up, but the more he went on about the science behind it and how he’d learned to fly, the better I felt. I’d trusted Christian with a great deal in a fairly small amount of time, and he’d yet to let me down. I knew I could trust him with this too.

When we were finally in the air, my anxiety faded completely, replaced by an exhilaration akin to that of riding a roller coaster. But this was so much better. The sky was a brilliant blue, stretching over our heads from one horizon to the other. I could hear the wind as we rode its currents, but it was so much quieter than I’d expected. There were no engines roaring, no grinding of roller coaster wheels on a steel or wooden track… it was just us. Free as birds and light as air.

My heart was still pounding when we skidded to a stop in an empty field. As soon as Christian had helped me out, I clasped my arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

“Thank you! That was incredible!” I gushed. He smiled down at me, kissing me again before guiding me toward a familiar SUV parked at the end of the field.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“That’s an understatement. It was just… I felt so free. And small, but also powerful at the same time. And it’s so quiet. I thought it would be louder, I guess because I’m used to planes, but it wasn’t…”

We talked about our experience and planned future soaring excursions all the way to the restaurant we’d chosen for lunch. Taylor dropped us off in front and went to find somewhere to park. Christian held the door open for me and followed behind with his hand at the small of my back. I leaned toward him instinctively as we approached the hostess stand, and the woman greeted us with a polite smile, showing us to a comfortable booth near the windows.

Paulo’s was a small but thriving restaurant. They focused primarily on Mediterranean food with a few American dishes tossed in to round out the menu, and I was able to find something that appealed to me pretty quickly. Christian nodded in approval, no doubt pleased I’d chosen a decently sized entree, and relayed both our orders to the server. The young man looked slightly taken aback for a moment and glanced at me as though expecting me to object to being spoken for. I gave him a little smile and silently handed over my menu.

As we waited for our food, Christian held my hand in his on top of the table, idly stroking my fingers as we talked. The conversation had gradually moved to other possible outings we might pursue, including some that Amelia would enjoy as well. Sailing was a definite yes, and I was pretty sure my daughter would be over the moon to ride in his helicopter. He even floated the idea of a ski trip to Aspen sometime next winter.
“Maybe,” I hedged. “That’s kind of a long flight for a kid, and trying to keep her from disturbing the other passengers could be difficult.”

“Well, we’d take my jet, so no other passengers to worry about. Plenty of room for her to play, watch TV, take a nap…” He shrugged, apparently not seeing my raised eyebrows.

“You have a private jet?”

Christian nodded as though it was to be expected, and I supposed it really should have been. It was so easy to be myself around him that I sometimes forgot how different our lives really were. He owned residential property in multiple states, a glider, a catamaran, a helicopter... Why not a jet? He probably traveled often enough for work that it would make sense, both financially and logistically. I shook off the awkwardness I felt and went on.

“I’ve never been skiing, but Kate used to go all the time. You must go fairly often if you keep a house in Aspen.”

“Not as much as you might think. Ros and her wife have been there more often than I have. It can be hard for me to get time away from work, but if you want to go, I’ll make it happen.”

I smiled and promised to consider it. I wasn’t sure if that was the sort of trip I wanted to attempt with a three-year-old, private plane or no, but an adult weekend away with him sounded heavenly.

Our server appeared a few minutes later with our meals, and we continued to talk as we ate. By the time we were ready to head back to Christian’s apartment, we’d been at the restaurant for nearly two hours, and I’d noticed a few members of the staff whispering to one another as they watched us covertly. I’d done my share of waitressing in college, so I knew they were probably wanting us to leave and free up the table for someone else. Low turnover rates meant lower tips.

Christian and I stood to leave, but I’d only taken a few steps when he stopped me.

“You’re shoe has come undone.”

I glanced down at the tennis shoes I’d chosen for comfort today and spotted the problem, but before I could correct it, Christian dropped to one knee and retied the knot. I let one hand rest on his shoulder as I smiled down at the top of his curly head. Anyone watching would probably never have guessed him to be a Dominant. They wouldn’t have understood the significance of his action or the motivation behind it.

But I did.

It was another reassurance I hadn’t realized I needed. It told me that his first instinct was to take care of me. And regardless of who he was and how much power he held, Christian wasn’t too proud or arrogant to kneel at my feet for all the world to see if that’s what it took.

Devotion, he’d once called it. With what I’d known about his past in those early stages, I’d doubted his capacity for it. We’d spent a lot of time talking since then, and I now knew a lot more about the women who had shaped his experiences. That knowledge made the current state of things even more remarkable. True, he still had some things to learn and make his peace with, but
the way he treated me was so different from anything I’d imagined was possible when I’d first read
that contract of his.

And never had I been so happy to be proven wrong.

After another incredible evening in the playroom and a light dinner, Christian and I relaxed
on the sofa in front of his fireplace. He was reclined against the back cushions with my head in his
lap, casually stroking my hair with one hand. I watched him through heavy eyes, mesmerized by
the way the firelight both revealed and concealed different aspects of his face. But after a little
while, I realized he was staring into space without really seeing anything. He looked distracted
and perhaps even a bit troubled.

“Is something wrong?” I asked softly. He looked down at me immediately and smiled slightly.

“No. Just thinking.”

“Just thinking about something that’s bothering you.”

“And just how do you know that, Ms. Steele?” he asked, his smile looking a little more
genuine. In answer, I reached up to smooth the crease that lingered between his brows, and he
chuckled. “Observant as ever.”

“Yes. Now, tell me what’s on your mind, Mr. Grey. Maybe I can help.”

“Maybe. It does involve you.”

I narrowed my own eyes and sat up slowly, turning to face him.

“What is it?”

“Well... I stayed awake for a while after you fell asleep again last night. Just thinking, mostly.”

“You didn’t go back to sleep?” I frowned, feeling guilty for apparently having upset him even
more than I’d realized. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Anastasia. No more apologies.” He spoke the words in a firm tone I knew better than to
contradict. “What I was going to say was... I had an idea I’d like to run by you. If you’re in
agreement, I’d like to make use of my connections with city officials and law enforcement to have
someone do a real investigation into what happened to you.”

I felt momentarily speechless. He wanted to... What? Pressure the Chief of Police to track
down my rapist? My mouth moved silently as I grappled with the prospect.

“I’m willing to do that if it’s what you want, Ana. Or even hire a private investigator to handle
it,” he added, watching me with a cautious expression.

“I...”
Words failed me as my mind sped ahead, considering the reality of what he was offering. Christian had witnessed a rather nasty nightmare last night. Of course he wanted to fix it. But was such a thing even possible?

There were so many women just like me, left to pick themselves up and move on while the authorities did little or nothing to help. I wasn’t sure I was willing to take advantage of Christian’s wealth and position that way. Why should I get special treatment? How was that fair?

But even if I could reconcile that guilt somehow... I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know the truth. I’d found a way to cope, and it worked well for me ninety percent of the time. I’d moved on with my life, and for the first time in years, I was truly happy. The idea of rocking that boat was terrifying.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, finally meeting Christian’s gaze again. “But no.”

“No?” he echoed. Apparently that wasn’t the answer he’d anticipated.

“It’s just... I really appreciate the thought, but I just can’t go backward like that. I’ve managed to heal and find happiness. Finding out who hurt me, who Amelia’s father is, not to mention all that comes with that in terms of pursuing any kind of justice... It’s just more than I can handle.”

“I guess I can understand that, but...” He trailed off with a frown, clearly wishing I’d given a different answer.

“I know you want to fix it. You want to see someone pay for what they did to me, but it isn’t always that simple. Even tracking him down and getting him locked up wouldn’t fix me. The trauma would still be there. And it would take a toll on Amelia too. I think maybe some things are just better left alone.”

He sighed in resignation, and I could tell he was still disappointed as he considered my words.

“Why did you have the evidence collected if you didn’t plan to go after the guy?”

“Because that night, I hadn’t had time to think about any of it. The doctors were advising me to have the rape kit done while the evidence was still there. That way, I could always decide not to use it, but if I never had it done at all, I might regret it someday. I was just coherent enough to follow that logic, so I gave consent. They called the cops, and I filed the report, turned in the evidence... And other than a few cops apologizing about the lack of progress on my case, I really didn’t hear much about it after that.”

“And now you’ve decided you don’t want to find the guy,” he nodded, making it sound like a statement rather than a question.

“Would you hunt down the pimp if you could?”

Christian’s head snapped toward me in alarm.

“This isn’t the same thing.”

“It’s not all that different. You don’t remember what he looks like and probably never knew his name. He hurt you in a way that had lasting consequences, and you carry scars inside and out.
But despite all of that, you’ve made something good out of your life. Maybe it’s not perfect, but… You survived. Would you really want to dredge it all up again even if it meant seeing justice done?”

He was silent for a long time, and I waited patiently for him to work through it, though I was fairly sure I already knew the answer. My suspicions were confirmed when he let out another long, tired sigh and the tension seemed to drain from his large frame. He met my gaze and gave me a weary smile.

“You’re right. I’m sorry for pushing.”

“Not pushing,” I disagreed. “It’s okay to ask questions. And I love that you want to help me, to make things right. But I think maybe you don’t realize how much you’ve already helped.”

“I guess so. I feel that way too,” Christian agreed, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Just being with you seems to make everything right.”

Sunday morning brought an unexpected volley of texts and phone calls, and my first thought was that my dad might have had some sort of emergency with Amelia. But most of the messages seemed to be from Kate. There was one from Dad too, another from Garrett, and several from people at work. I turned to look for Christian only to find him sitting up in bed and frowning at his own phone.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Nothing’s wrong, per se. But we made the news,” he answered wryly.

“The news? Why?”

“Seems someone took a few photos of us yesterday and wanted to make a quick buck.”

“Oh...”

My brain wasn’t quite awake yet, but I skimmed through my messages to find a link Kate had sent me. No… Multiple links. I sighed dejectedly.

And so it begins.

“Are you reading the articles?” I asked him.

“I read a couple. Nothing too bad. My family is… surprised.”

That explained the frown on his face, then. Not sure I was ready to have that particular discussion yet, I sat up next to him and opened the first article, quickly discovering that Christian’s assessment had been accurate. It really wasn’t negative at all.

Since he’d never been seen in public with anyone this way, there had always been speculation about his sexuality. Apparently, the confirmation that he was straight was almost as interesting as the fact that he looked to be head over heels for me.
The writer of this particular article had identified me by name and gone on to list my professional achievements, my college alma mater, and even the high school I’d attended. They had to have been digging for information on me ever since the original source had turned over the art.

There were multiple photos and... I clicked another link. Yes, video footage. They’d recorded us holding hands and talking at lunch, Christian tying my shoe, and a kiss we’d shared on the sidewalk while we’d waited for Taylor to bring the car around.

As much as I bristled at the invasion of our privacy, I couldn’t help but smile at the open adoration on Christian’s face as he looked down at me in the photo. *He might as well have cartoon hearts where his eyes should be.* I glowed a little at the thought but turned my attention to a more pressing matter, typing my daughter’s name into a Google search.

Nothing.

“They haven’t mentioned Amelia, at least not by name. But people at work know I have a daughter. It probably wouldn’t take much to get them to spill. Shit.”

“That won’t be the worst of it. I wouldn’t be surprised if reporters show up at your apartment building. It’ll die down as the interest fades, but... The CPOs I hired for you and Amelia will need to start today,” he said apologetically.

I nodded and gave him a rueful smile. We couldn’t simply stop living our lives.

Thanks to my press background, I knew full well how crazy people could get, especially when there was money involved. It wouldn’t be reporters so much as strangers with smartphones wanting a piece of the pie. A couple of Men in Black shadowing us in public might at least discourage the real nutjobs.

“Should we maybe put out a statement and ask for privacy?”

“Maybe. I can talk to my PR director later today.”

“Ohkay.”

I quickly sorted through the rest of my messages. There were only a few who warranted a quick reply, and even then, I needed a little time to think about what I wanted to say. Kate was just thirsty for the juicy details and no doubt wanted to complain that I hadn’t shared the news of my relationship with her yet. Garrett’s message was a simple check-in. No real drama there.

Dad might be a bit trickier to handle, but I knew he’d be happy for me in the long run. He was understandably overprotective, so I knew he would want to meet Christian and make up his own mind about him.

“I’m going to go hop in the shower,” I announced, tossing my phone onto the bed and noticing Christian was still answering emails. He looked up and smiled, though, the twinkle in his eyes making it clear he was picturing me naked. I chuckled and left the room without further comment.
My mind wandered as I bathed, thinking about how much our lives were about to change. It wasn’t like I hadn’t expected it. We’d had over a month of privacy, and with someone like Christian Grey, I knew we’d been lucky to have even that.

I also knew public interest would die down. With nothing new to hold their attention, Christian and I would become old news quickly enough. I just needed to be patient and keep my priorities in check. Making sure Amelia was safe and as unaffected as possible by the whole thing was at the top of that list. I also had to make sure it didn’t interfere with my work or with my friends and family.

It would be an inconvenience, but it wouldn’t last forever. And Christian was worth it.

I knew both Dad and Kate would probably ask how serious things were between us, and I wasn’t sure how I’d answer that question. This turn of events would force me and Christian to address that sooner than we might have otherwise. I didn’t want to rush him, but I also didn’t want to avoid the conversation out of fear.

I was falling for him. I knew that much for certain.

Whether or not that was a wise move on my part remained to be seen, but trying to hide any measure of my affection for him felt wrong. He’d had so little of it in his life. How could I even consider depriving him of mine?

But was he ready to hear it? To know how I felt? I was fairly sure he felt the same, but what if I was wrong? It was his first real relationship, and hesitation would be a natural reaction. What if the mere acknowledgment of progress ended up scaring him off?

There were no answers to be found in Christian’s massive shower, so I finished up quickly and returned to the bedroom to get dressed.

When I joined him in the kitchen, I noticed he’d started making our breakfast. Unfortunately, he’d been distracted by a phone call, and after a few seconds, I gathered it was his mother. Grace’s voice was faint coming through his cell phone, but I could still hear the annoyance in her tone. Oh, dear.

I tried like hell not to eavesdrop, focusing instead on taking over the breakfast preparations. Every so often, I snuck a glance at Christian’s face, only to see a stony expression as his mother berated him. Sheesh. Was she that mad that he was dating someone? Or was she just pissed she’d had to hear about it from someone other than him?

I heard the word ‘father’ thrown in and began to feel even more uncomfortable. I had long since realized that Christian didn’t value his parents’ opinions very highly, if at all. But the idea that both of his parents might take issue with our relationship was unnerving. Would his siblings share those feelings as well?

“Ana?” His voice pulled me out of my woolgathering, and I spun to face him. He was off the phone and watching me with a worried expression. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, wondering what my face looked like. He rounded the breakfast bar and pulled me into his arms from behind. “Is everything okay with your family?”
“It’s fine. Nothing for either of us to worry about.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing.”

“Apparently, my mother was embarrassed to hear about us from one of her friends, so calling to yell at me about it made her feel better,” Christian shrugged. “I’m not sure why she thought I’d tell her anything about my personal life. I never have in the past, and she’s never bothered to ask.”

“Hmm. Is your dad that way too?”

He grunted a little, stepping away to lean against the counter as he watched me scramble the eggs.

“Pretty much, except he wants to make sure I’m taking legal precautions.”

“Legal precautions against what?” I asked in bewilderment. He let out a sardonic sort of snort.

“Gold diggers. What else?”

For fuck’s sake. My irritation must have shown on my face, because Christian was quick to reassure me.

“Ignore it. He doesn’t know you. Or even me, for that matter. I think he just regrets passing on the opportunity to help me start GEH, so now he gives unsolicited advice to make himself feel better.”

“So, it’s a guilt thing?”

“No, it’s a money thing. It always is with him. He could’ve made a lot as an investor, but at the time, he was too pissed at me for dropping out of Harvard. That was humiliating for him and my mother, so refusing to invest was his punishment.”

I now had even more questions, but this didn’t feel like the right time to ask. Instead, I opted to serve our breakfast and take a seat next to him at the bar. We ate in silence for a couple of minutes until I glanced over to find him watching me with a wary expression.

“What?”

“Nothing, really. Just... Are you sure you’re okay with our relationship going public? I don’t want you to feel pressured into moving too quickly or be worried about your safety or Amelia’s...”

He was adorably flustered, and I couldn’t contain my smile. He was rambling and talking more to his scrambled eggs than to me, so I put my fork down and gently spun his chair toward mine, making our knees touch.

“I’m fine. I promise. I knew what I was getting into,” I reminded him. “You were very honest about your expectations. We both were. I’ve trusted you to hire good people who can keep us safe, and I don’t think we’re moving too quickly. Or at least... It doesn’t feel that way.”

Christian relaxed in apparent relief and leaned in to kiss me softly.
“I don’t think it’s too fast either. I know some people might disagree, but the only opinion I care about is yours.”

My smile widened at that, and I kissed him again.

“I couldn’t have said it better.”
The following Wednesday evening found me in my office at GEH, going over the financials for a company I was on the fence about buying. It had been a ridiculously long day, and I was exhausted. I wanted nothing more than to go home and fall into bed.

Actually, I would’ve preferred to go to Ana’s and fall into her bed.

Ros had caught me staring at Ana’s picture on my phone more than once today. Although she had taken full advantage of the opportunity to tease me about it, she was still one of the few women in my life who seemed to be happy for me. Andrea and Gail were both very supportive as well, but the rest of the women who worked for me had been giving me odd looks all week, ranging from speculative to disappointed to blatantly flirtatious.

“What the hell is wrong with these women? I’m their boss,” I’d asked Ros earlier today. She’d replied with her usual raspy laughter.

“There’s more than one woman working here who’d give their left tit for a chance with you.”

The memory of the conversation made me roll my eyes and want to stare at Ana’s picture again. Of course, I’d expected some negative reactions. There would always be those who passed judgment whether it was their business or not. My parents certainly didn’t approve, not that I cared about their opinions. I’d spoken with them briefly when the first stories had broken, but I’d ignored multiple calls every day since.

My mother was convinced that Ana wasn’t good enough for me, since she hadn’t come from money. Some nobody, Grace had called her. Carrick’s concerns were in the same vein, though far more pragmatic. He was worried about that ‘nobody’ getting her hands on my money. I’d laughingly told him that Anastasia would probably have been more comfortable if I’d had nothing.

My siblings were fairly neutral. Elliot was passively happy for me, and Mia hadn’t cared enough to show more than polite interest. They were both so absorbed in their own lives that they paid little attention to mine.

I sat up in my office chair and blinked spastically, realizing I’d been staring at the same column of figures for the past five minutes. Fuck this, I thought with a sigh, shoving the files in my briefcase. I’ll finish them at home.

As I stood up and began to put my jacket back on, the door to my office opened to reveal Taylor.

“Good timing. I’m ready to go home.”

“I’m sorry, sir. We have a situation.”

It was only then that I noticed Welch standing behind him, and I frowned at them both as they entered the room with grave expressions.
“What is it?”

“What will be joining us shortly as w--” The words hadn’t completely left Taylor’s mouth before Luke Sawyer appeared in the doorway and stepped inside.

His presence could only mean one thing, and my entire body suddenly felt cold.

“What happened? Are they okay?” I demanded, not needing to specify who I meant. Sawyer had been on my security team for a couple of years, and Taylor had recommended him for the task of heading Ana and Amelia’s detail.

“Ms. Steele and her daughter are fine, sir,” Sawyer quickly assured me. “They had dinner at the home of Ms. Steele’s father in Edmonds and are now home for the evening. Reynolds and Lawrence are on duty.”

My pulse began to slow at his words. A little.

“What’s wrong, then?”

The three of them exchanged glances of silent communication, apparently electing Sawyer to be the bearer of bad news.

“In the course of our duties, my team and I have become aware of a man loitering around Ms. Steele’s apartment building. He’s been spotted in the parking lot and on the sidewalk outside, a few times in the lobby, and once in the elevator. At first, we assumed he was merely a resident, but after we noticed him in a couple of other places, I spoke with the building management. They had no record or recognition of him.”

“She has a stalker?” I practically spat the last word, but my body and expression felt frozen in place, despite the fear and fury that was burning inside.

“It would appear so. He’s been seen outside of the girl’s daycare and in a grocery store while Ms. Steele was shopping.”

I clenched my jaw and fought to stay calm, my stomach in knots.

“Does she know?”

“We showed her his picture this evening, but she didn’t recognize him,” Sawyer replied evenly, handing me a file with a black-and-white photo pinned inside.

It looked to be taken from a security cam feed, but the image was clear enough. I stared at it for nearly ten seconds before shaking my head in agitation.

“I don’t know him.”

“I’m running a facial recognition search now, Mr. Grey,” Welch spoke up. “I’ll let you know as soon as I get a hit.”
My eyes snapped to his face, and for a brief moment, it felt as though I could have been looking in a mirror. We shared virtually no physical characteristics, but Welch’s features had hardened into the same mask of control I knew I was wearing. He was pissed about this too.

A few weeks ago, that would’ve infuriated me, but Ana had given me no reason not to trust her. She’d insisted there was nothing more than friendship between them now. While a small, petulant part of me was jealous even of that, I’d been doing my best to override it in favor of tolerance.

“How close has he gotten?” I asked, turning my attention back to Sawyer.

“Ten or fifteen feet,” he replied in clear discomfort.

Fuck! I forced my muscles to unlock and headed for the door, phone in hand but briefcase forgotten.

“I want security checks on everyone who’s been in contact with either of us on a regular basis,” I ordered as the four of us moved toward the elevator. “Through work, socializing, Amelia’s daycare, family connections, everything. Send what you have so far to my email, and I want updates every hour.”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

Sawyer and Welch got off the elevator and disappeared toward the security office, but Taylor matched pace with me down to the parking garage and into the SUV. He steered us in the direction of Ana’s apartment without bothering to ask our destination.

I fidgeted anxiously in my seat as the walls of self-control I’d erected began to crack. My thoughts were full of terrifying possibilities, and I needed her in my arms right fucking now. I found our message log on my phone and tapped out a quick text.

Are you still awake?

Her simple reply of ‘Yes’ was almost instant, and I texted back to tell her I was on my way.

Taylor shadowed me as far as Ana’s hallway but hung back to confer with Reynolds. When I reached her door, it opened before I could even raise my hand to knock.

“Hey,” she greeted me with a tense smile, letting me in and closing the door behind me.

My reply was trapped in my throat as I pulled her into a tight embrace, finally allowing my stiff muscles to unclench a little. Anastasia’s arms slid around my waist, but she kept her touch light. I’d pressed her right to my chest, and I knew she was trying to be careful about it. I merely squeezed her tighter. The pain was there but muted somehow. It was nothing to the thought of losing her.

“Shhh,” she soothed quietly, relaxing in my embrace and letting her fingers stroke my lower back gingerly. “You’re shaking, and your heart is pounding. It’s okay.”

“It is most definitely not ‘okay.’” My voice sounded hollow, and I could hear the evidence of my body’s trembling.
“Don’t let your imagination get the better of you. It’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

What? I pulled back from her abruptly and gave her a look of warning.

“Don’t be dismissive about this. There are plenty of nutjobs out there who might think there’s something to be gained by hurting you. Or taking you, or--”

“Or taking pictures. Christian, we were all over the news a few days ago. I’ve caught more than one person snapping pictures with camera phones. I’m pretty sure they got me at Starbucks, the gas station on the corner, the grocery store...”

Her tone made it clear she thought this was no big deal at all, but her mention of the store had me shaking my head rapidly.

“We can’t know for sure that this guy is harmless. An opportunist taking a quick photo if they happen to recognize you is one thing. Someone following you around for days is something else. Stalking is illegal, and this guy seems pretty fucking close to crossing that line.”

Ana sighed quietly and looked as though she were searching for the right words to convince me this was a non-issue. She didn’t understand just how dangerous the situation could be. There was a reason I kept so much security personnel on staff around the clock. Being wealthy, successful, and in the public eye made me a target, and I’d long since learned the potential danger involved. But Ana wasn’t used to thinking that way.

“Look,” I began cautiously. “I was thinking about it on my way over here, and... I think you and Amelia should move into one of my guest condos at Escala.” Her eyes grew wide, and I spoke quickly before she could object. “I own them, so there’s no rent to pay. The building has state-of-the-art security, and it would be easier for my security staff to cover things there. You could park in one of my reserved spaces where there are extra cameras, or you could even drive one of my vehicles for a while just in case--”

“Okay, stop,” she interrupted, looking like she wanted to slam her hand over my mouth. Ana was shaking her head incredulously, but I didn’t miss the way her eyes had softened a little. “That’s... very sweet of you. And very generous. But this really isn’t that big of a deal, and--”

“You don’t know how big of a deal this is,” I argued, all traces of my calm facade completely evaporating. “This sort of thing is exactly why I employ so much security. We can’t just wait for this guy to pull something.”

“I’m not suggesting that,” she replied evenly. “I’m all for being proactive, but moving into your building is... a bit much. If it were just me, I’d consider it, but that kind of thing is hard on a toddler. Changes in routines, in environments, going back and forth...”

I sighed in consternation and took a few deep breaths, hoping to absorb the cool level-headedness I could hear in Ana’s voice. I might know more about security matters, but she knew more about raising a child. I didn’t want to make her life as a single parent harder than it needed to be, but I had to keep her safe. Keep both of them safe. Where was the middle ground?

“What does ‘proactive’ look like in your opinion, then?”
“Hire a few more people. Two guards with each of us at all times when we’re apart, one each when we’re together... You already have someone in the building all night.”

I shook my head. That wasn’t enough.

“One each when you’re together, plus a spare. And the night shift guy will sit outside your door instead of in the lobby.”

“Oh, we’re negotiating now?” she asked with a small, teasing grin. I shrugged and let myself smile back a little. It felt stiff on my face.

“It’s what we do.”

“Fair enough,” she chuckled.

“You agree to those terms?”

“As long as it doesn’t involve uprooting my toddler for a situation that’s temporary and probably not even dangerous.”

I let out a long sigh, feeling simultaneously relieved at the compromise and frustrated that she still wasn’t taking this seriously. I took her into my arms again and put one hand beneath her chin, encouraging her to meet my stern gaze.

“Please don’t take this lightly, Anastasia. I need you safe. Both of you.” I watched her blue eyes soften, and the humor gave way to a more serious expression. She nodded obediently.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Promise?”

“Of course.”

I gathered her back to my chest, not altogether surprised at the absence of the burning sensation that usually came with physical contact. *Everything is different with Ana. Why not this too?*

“Will you stay tonight?” she asked quietly, her voice slightly muffled against my shirt. Like she needed to ask?

“I don’t think I could bring myself to leave even if I wanted to.”

I texted both Taylor and Sawyer that I would be spending the night here and followed Ana to her room, stripping down to my underwear before laying down on what had become ‘my side’ of her bed. I’d spent only a few nights at her apartment so far, but the odds of it becoming a habit were high. At what point did couples start keeping some of their belongings at each other’s homes? We’d been together officially for about six weeks now. Was that too soon?

Still mulling over the idea, I set an early alarm on my phone for the following morning, knowing I’d need to leave before Amelia woke up. Just as I prepared to put the phone on the nightstand, an email from Welch came in, and I opened the message quickly.
He’d used the security footage of the stalker--for I refused to think of him as anything less--and found a match through the DMV database. So far, he’d found no connection to GEH in a search of our own records. I turned onto my back and held the phone out to Ana so she could read the email as well.

“José Rodríguez?”

“Does that name mean anything to you?”

“No. They showed me a picture earlier, and I didn’t recognize him. He looks a little different in his license photo, but I don’t know him. Still... knowing who he is a good thing, right? Garrett’s doing a background check, I assume?”

“Among other things,” I sighed, putting my phone away for the night. “He’ll probably have that information in the morning. If nothing else, we’ll send a couple of guys to knock on the creep’s door.” Or pick the lock.

Ana merely nodded in assent and curled up against me, humming like a contented cat. She was asleep in minutes. I closed my eyes and relished the warm weight of her against me, listening to her steady breaths and feeling my own eyes drift shut.

I’d expected to lie awake for hours with nothing but my anxious imagination for company, but to my surprise, I slept straight through. Something about being in her bed, surrounded by her scent and warmth soothed me like nothing else could. When my alarm went off at five, I slipped quietly out of Ana’s bed and located my discarded clothes from the evening before.

As I dressed, I watched Ana sleep. Her arms were raised so that her biceps rested on the pillow, framing her head. It struck me as an odd way to sleep, and I wondered if Amelia shared the same habit. I hadn’t seen her in person since that day at the park, and I’d only heard her voice in the background of my phone calls with Ana. Did she make the same little sigh her mother made when someone brushed her hair away from her face? Did her nose scrunch up the same way when she laughed?

Ana didn’t stir when I bent to place a light kiss on her forehead before leaving the room. As I passed Amelia’s door, I noticed it was partially open, and I couldn’t resist the urge to peek inside. The low morning light was too dim to reveal much, but I could see her riot of curls as a dark spot on her pillow. Amelia wasn’t sleeping with her arms thrown over her head like her mother’s, however. Instead, she was face-down on the mattress with her knees pulled up beneath her, curling her tiny body into a ball.

Something about the sight made me grin, and the smile stayed in place long after I’d left the apartment and headed home to get ready for the day.
Much to Christian’s frustration, José Rodriguez apparently realized he’d been made and seemed to vanish into thin air. Garrett’s investigation had turned up nothing more than a name and a set of outdated DMV records. There was a new tenant at the address listed, and Garrett theorized that the guy must have been living on cash alone, because there was absolutely nothing in his name. He was a ghost, and now that he was in the wind, there was really no way to track him down.

The lack of resolution to the situation had only served to make Christian more paranoid, so although three weeks had passed without further incident, Amelia and I still had extra security at all times. I didn’t have a problem with the extra protection. I knew it made Christian feel like he was doing something, and it was a small price to pay if it gave him even a little peace of mind. There was no harm in taking precautions, after all, even if it was a little irritating to have so many people around all the time. He was still under the impression I wasn’t taking the whole situation seriously enough, but I had good reason not to let myself get worked up about it.

For months after the assault, I’d been terrified to even set foot outside my apartment alone. It had taken more than a year for me to stop looking for danger lurking around every corner, especially after Amelia had been born. The need to protect my child had been a visceral thing. But slowly, very slowly, I’d learned to relax. To be cautious without letting it escalate to full-on paranoia. This situation was no different. I knew I had to manage my anxiety or other parts of my life would start to fall apart, and I couldn’t afford that.

One silver lining to this whole ‘stalker’ mess was that the press had completely backed off, and neither of us had been in the news for personal reasons since the first week after our relationship had been made public. It hadn’t taken the reporters long to realize there was nothing new to print, and faced with our added security measures, they’d opted to move on. I still caught the occasional stranger watching me with open curiosity and speculation, but my bodyguards dissuaded anyone from actually approaching me.

Of course, the fact that our relationship was now public knowledge had come with other consequences too. I’d endured an intensely uncomfortable evening in Christian’s childhood home, and while I hated that he lacked a loving and supportive family, I was pleased to know I would not have to be subjected to their company on a regular basis.

It wasn’t difficult to understand why Christian preferred to keep to himself, both as a child and as an adult. Nothing seemed to satisfy them but the misery of others. Between snide comments about my being a single mother or the shortage of zeros in my net worth, it was a wonder I managed to remember my manners at all.

Thankfully, Christian’s first encounter with my dad had gone much better. They’d bonded over Seattle’s pro sports teams and a mutual appreciation of the outdoors. I knew my father well enough to know he was reserving judgment for the time being, but at least he’d been welcoming and polite.

Other than the inconvenience of the publicity and the brief upset of the supposed stalker, life had been utter bliss. Christian had surprised me in more ways than one in the two months we’d
been together, particularly in our daily interactions. For someone who’d never had a girlfriend, he sure as hell knew how to sweep one off her feet. But he’d surprised me in the way he handled the power exchange part of our relationship too.

Knowing what I knew of his past, I’d expected his sexual technique to be damn near perfect, and he’d exceeded expectations on that front. However, in the beginning, I’d thought it likely that his aftercare skills would need some patience and encouragement. But that hadn’t been the case at all. In fact, I’d been having a hard time understanding how he hadn’t bonded with any of his previous partners. He was so attentive and diligent, and every time I looked into his eyes, I felt the connection I’d been looking for. No matter where we were or what we were doing, he was my lover and my Dom. Always.

Tonight, we’d had a particularly long scene, spending hours in his playroom before finally moving to his enormous jetted tub for aftercare. It had been a very good scene. He’d brought so many orgasms out of me in such rapid succession that he’d pushed me right into an emotional release. I’d felt it only once before, and it hadn’t been nearly as intense. But with Christian, everything was just... more.

As I finally began to drift out of subspace, I looked up to see him smiling down at me. I wasn’t altogether sure I remembered him bringing me downstairs. Wow.

“Are you back with me?” he asked softly. I laughed a little and nodded. “Good. Because I want to talk to you about something.”

“Okay...?”

I adjusted my position a little to make it clear I was now coherent enough to pay attention. His expression was both hesitant and hopeful, and he took a deep breath as though preparing to deliver a well-rehearsed speech.

“I want to meet Amelia. Officially.” I felt my smile brighten and my heart grow lighter. “I know you said you don’t make a habit of introducing her to the men you date. Because you were afraid they wouldn’t stick around, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been that serious with anyone since before she was born. I didn’t want her getting attached to someone who would eventually disappear. It wouldn’t be healthy for her.”

“And that proves what a good mother you are. But you don’t have to worry about that with me. The last thing I want is to disappear from your life. I know it’s still kind of early, but I feel like trying to live without you might actually kill me,” he admitted with a hesitant smile.

I beamed and took a deep breath of my own. In for a penny, in for a pound...

“I know exactly what you mean. This is so much more than I ever expected. I wasn’t sure if you were ready to hear it, but I’ve been biting the words back for weeks... I’m in love with you. I know it with every fiber of my being, and not saying it out loud is almost pain--”

The rest of my sentence was lost in a fierce kiss as his mouth swooped down upon mine, and our tongues tangled with unrestrained passion. He was pressing me tightly against his bare chest, not flinching or shrinking away, not hissing in pain... My love and pride for him swelled within
me until I thought my heart might burst. When we finally came up for air, Christian gazed down at me as though I were the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“I love you, Ana. I’ve never said those words to anyone. I’m not even sure I’ve ever said them to my family. We just... don’t talk like that. For the longest time, I didn’t think I was capable of feeling something so... profound.

“I was wrong. You proved me wrong. On that and many other things,” he laughed, squeezing me even tighter as he said the words again. “I love you. I think I might’ve fallen in love with you that first day. From that very first moment.”

“I love you too,” I said fervently, leaning up to kiss him again.

And again. And again...
Twenty-One

Christian

“Twilight Sparkle and Rarity are unicorns. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy are pegasuses. And Applejack and Pinkie Pie are regular ponies. But my favorite is Twilight Sparkle ‘cause she has a baby dragon named Spike and she’s really smart and she knows how to do magic and...”

I blinked and tried to look like I was following Amelia’s nonstop chatter about her favorite cartoon. We were in the back of the SUV on our way to the marina with plans to spend our Saturday afternoon on my boat. Taylor and Sawyer were up front, and I wondered if either of them could make heads or tails of Amelia’s long-winded speech. Ana had managed to get a word in here and there to translate, but the conversation, if one could really call it that, was dominated by Amelia. Her curly hair bounced as she talked, excitement practically radiating from every part of her tiny body.

“You shouldn’t be afraid to interrupt her,” Ana whispered across the car seat that was strapped in between us. “If you wait for your turn to talk, you may not get to until she’s asleep.”

I laughed and continued to watch Amelia’s animated expressions as she delved into the intricate plotlines and characters of My Little Pony, mesmerized by the hints of Ana I could see in her face and hear in her words. She was truly a wonder, and I couldn’t help but be smitten.

Amelia’s focus was diverted only by our arrival at the marina and her excitement over going sailing. Once we were underway, however, it was right back to the ponies. Her Rs and Ls sounded like Ws, and her THs came out as Fs. But otherwise, her speech was easy enough to follow, even if I didn’t know jack shit about unicorns, dragons, or magic. From what I could gather, there was a television show and a few movies revolving around a bookish unicorn and her troublemaking sidekick. There were a multitude of other characters too, but I quickly lost track of the names.

The more she went on about it, the more I realized I was going to need some sort of lexicon if I’d ever have a prayer of keeping up. With that thought, I pulled my cell from my pocket and texted Taylor. There had to be a handbook or something, right?

Eventually, Ana managed to distract her with some of the sights we were passing, and the pony talk was forgotten for a little while.

“Can we go faster?” Amelia asked hopefully, staring up at me with a familiar set of blue eyes.

“Maybe just a little,” I grinned. “Hold your mommy’s hand so you don’t lose your balance, okay?”

I waited for her to nod and let Ana get a good grip on her before adjusting the sails. I’d purchased a toddler-sized life jacket for her ahead of time, but the added bulk had made her a bit unsteady even before we’d gotten underway.

“How you do that?!” she shouted over the roar of the wind, giggling with glee as a bit of water sprayed the railing next to her.
I began to explain the different parts of the boat and how they worked, doing my best to keep it simple enough for her to understand. How to go faster or slower, how to steer, and so on. Amelia followed it all with rapt attention, and she grew even more excited when I let her help me steer. I held her in one arm while we each had a hand on the helm, her infectious laughter making it impossible to wipe the grin off my face.

I caught Ana watching us with a warm smile and slightly misty eyes, and I gave her a nod. No matter how little time I’d spent around kids in the past, being around Amelia was easier than I’d ever dared to hope. This was a new chapter in our story, the start of something I knew would change me forever. It felt natural and right.

Once we finished our excursion, it was close enough to dinner time that we decided to eat at a nearby family-friendly restaurant. I’d never been there, but the reviews and menu I found online were encouraging.

Eating out with a three-year-old was... an experience. As well-behaved as Amelia was, she still had a hard time sitting still after such a stimulating day. She colored on the kids’ menu with the crayons the waiter had provided, though I was pretty sure she had more fun watching her mother pick them up off the floor. Ana was endlessly patient with her, with just the right balance of authority and affection. And although Amelia did make quite a mess in the process, I was very pleased to see her eat nearly everything on her plate.

After a while, Amelia climbed onto her mother’s lap and promptly fell asleep against her shoulder while Ana finished her own meal.

“I wish I’d thought to bring the stroller,” Ana said quietly as we walked the moderate distance back to the car. “She gets heavy after a while.”

I held out my arms with a smile, and Ana looked pleasantly surprised as she carefully handed her over. Once Amelia had sleepily nestled her face against my neck, we continued on our way. The sun had set, but its glow still warmed the western horizon in shades of red. The gentle breeze stirred Amelia’s curls, tickling my chin. Something about the little girl’s weight in my arms felt so utterly right and perfect that I had to shake my head in wonder.

I’d worried I might have trouble connecting with her, not only because of the way I was, but also because of the way she’d been conceived. But there was no negativity whatsoever. How had something so beautiful come out of such a horrible event?

When I looked at Amelia’s adorable little face, all I saw was Anastasia. Her brilliant blue eyes, her rosy cheeks, her little rosebud lips, her sweetness... How could I not love her? How could I not want to move heaven and earth to make sure she was always happy and safe?

“Do you want to stay?” Ana asked as we rode back to her apartment. “No need to sneak out in the morning.”

I nodded, grinning at the idea of watching an episode or two of My Little Pony with Amelia while Ana made breakfast for everyone. Maybe I should flip through the book Taylor picked up before I go to sleep...

Once we reached her apartment, Ana went to put Amelia to bed, and I checked in with the CPO on duty for the night. Lawrence assured me he didn’t expect any trouble and bid me
goodnight. I locked up and turned the lights off, heading to Ana’s room with my ‘Ultimate Guide’ to My Little Pony.

Damn, this shit was complicated. Apparently, every character had a tattoo on their ass that they didn’t get to choose. It symbolized their personality or, in some cases, their occupation. The dragon sidekick Amelia had waxed poetic on sounded like a misguided but lovable punk, and the ‘mane six’ ponies got sucked into more drama than a soap opera headliner.

I skipped ahead a little, and my eyes narrowed further. Not only were there several species of mythical creatures involved in the main series, but there was also a spinoff featuring humanized versions of the main characters... I flipped back to the beginning of the book, determined to take it one step at a time. If I could master the world of mergers and acquisitions, Equestria should be a piece of cake.

“Oh, my God,” Ana groaned from the doorway, apparently awestruck as she stared at the book in my hands. “You have to stop. My ovaries are going to burst.”

I laughed at that but felt my face heat up a little as I put the book aside. Before I could deliver some kind of witty remark, she was across the room, straddling my lap and kissing the hell out of me.

I usually took the lead when we had sex, whether we were in a scene or not, but for once, we were both content to let her set the pace. Pausing only long enough to remove our clothing, Ana sank onto my cock and rode me through two orgasms. The sight of her coming undone with her head thrown back in the moonlight was all it took to push me over the edge as well, and we collapsed on her bed in a pile of tangled, sweaty limbs and tousled hair.

We lay in silence for a little while, catching our breath and trading gentle caresses as I replayed the day in my mind. It really couldn’t have gone better. It had been ‘uncharted territory’ in just about every imaginable way, but I’d enjoyed myself more than I’d thought possible. As my thoughts circled around Amelia again, I glanced at Ana’s peaceful expression.

“Can I ask a delicate question?”

Ana met my eyes with raised brows but merely nodded, and I hoped I wasn’t about to ruin our perfect day. But there was just something I’d been wondering ever since I’d found out how Amelia had come to be.

“You said your mother was pushing you to terminate your pregnancy or give Amelia up for adoption,” I began hesitantly. She nodded again, her features solemn. “Since you’re estranged from your mother now, I assume the mere suggestion of it upset you, but… Did you ever consider it? Either option?”

“Oh, of course,” Ana replied softly, looking a bit chagrined as her eyes grew distant with the memory. “I took an emergency contraceptive the next day and hoped it would be enough. When I found out it wasn’t... I did think about terminating. The idea of carrying a constant reminder of what had happened made me sick. But I just couldn’t do it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m as pro-choice as they come, but... It wasn’t the right choice for me.”

I nodded, my heart full of admiration for her strength.
“And adoption?”

“I did think about that more seriously. I mean, I’m adopted. I never knew my biological father, but I couldn’t have asked for a better dad than the one who raised me. It stood to reason that my baby might be better off with a family that was choosing to have a child.”

Not necessarily, I thought with a frown, considering my own childhood. But I held my tongue as Ana continued.

“I went back and forth on it for months, and I was almost sold on the idea. But then, I felt her move. There really aren’t words to describe what it feels like to someone who’s never experienced it. Physically, sure, but mentally? Emotionally? There just aren’t words to do it justice. It was profound. Like my whole existence had shifted in a single moment.

“I’d been afraid I wouldn’t be able to love the baby, but I knew right then that I’d been wrong. My therapist had warned me that I might have trouble bonding after the birth. That I might look at her and see a stranger’s face or might even feel the same fear and helplessness I felt that night...”

“But it wasn’t like that?”

“But at all. When I finally got to hold her and look at her... I only felt love. I only saw my child. My child. It doesn’t matter how she came to me. And I’ll never regret the choice to keep her.”

I tightened my arms around Anastasia and pressed my lips into her hair, my reply little more than a whisper in the darkness.

“I’m glad you did.”
I was awakened by a persistent buzzing from the nightstand on Christian’s side, and I scowled at his phone. He was apparently sleeping too soundly to be disturbed by it, but after five minutes of trying to tune it out, I gave up with a sigh. It was still very early, but there must have been some sort of emergency that just couldn’t wait. I prodded Christian awake as gently as my mood would allow and handed him his phone.

“Someone wants your attention pretty badly.”

He took with the phone with a grunt, and I closed my eyes again, only to open them a second later when I heard him curse under his breath.

“What is it?” I sighed, turning to look at his unhappy face. He let out a low growl as he got out of bed and began to look for the previous evening’s clothes.

“Seems we made the news again, but that’s a lesser concern right now. I need to go talk to Taylor.”

“He’s here?”

“Yeah. I’ll go let him in.” His face was impassive as he left the room, and I felt a chill of apprehension sweep over me.

I deliberated only another five seconds before pulling myself out of bed and finding something comfortable to slip into. Coffee would be first on the agenda. Well... second. I picked up my phone and sighed at the notifications stacked one after another, going straight to the Google alert I’d set for my own name and finding the article easily.

Just one this time, so far. But it was still early. The headline read, ‘Single Mom Snags Billionaire?’ and was complemented by a photo of the three of us leaving the restaurant last night. Amelia was fast asleep on Christian’s shoulder as he and I smiled at one another. I was relieved to see they’d at least blurred Amelia’s face in the picture, but the fact that they’d published it at all was frustrating.

Despite the slightly provocative headline, the article itself wasn’t too bad, since the story of our relationship had broken weeks ago. The only thing new to report was that the relationship appeared to be getting serious. There was a snidely worded speculation that a billionaire must look pretty good to a struggling single mom, but that was nothing I hadn’t expected. Hell, it was nothing Christian’s own father hadn’t said right to my face.

I peeked in at Amelia on my way to the living room, happy for once to be up so early on a Sunday. Hopefully, we could handle whatever calamity had arisen before she woke up. To my surprise, Christian and Taylor weren’t alone in my living room. Sawyer, Lawrence, and a visibly exhausted Garrett were there too. The first two made sense, but why Garrett? They all turned to look at me with a variety of expressions as I entered the room.

“What happened?”
“Rodriguez was spotted again last night,” Christian answered grimly, reaching out to take my hand. I let him tug me down onto the sofa next to him.

“Where?”

“Here.”

“Lawrence was stationed outside the door and saw him,” Sawyer added before Lawrence took over.

“I gave chase, but he had a good lead on me. I didn’t want to get too far from the apartment in case he wasn’t working alone.”

“What time was this?” I asked.

“A little after one.”

“There’s more,” Garret spoke up, his expression anxious and weary. “The property manager gave us the security footage from yesterday, and he showed up on that too.”

Christian looked at him sharply, and I assumed they hadn’t gotten around to that part before I’d come into the room. His grip on my hand tightened a little.

“Where was he? And how the hell did he get into the building?”

“None of our guys were here since Ms. Steele and her daughter were out at the time,” Sawyer admitted in chagrin. “He rode the elevator directly to this floor, and... It appears he was attempting to break into the apartment.”

Christian clenched my hand only briefly before he was on his feet like a shot, pacing and fuming. I tensed, waiting for him to start shouting, but when he spoke, his voice was deadly calm.

“He didn’t get in?”

“No, sir.”

“I sent the footage to the cops with his name and everything I had on him,” Garrett added. “They’ll book him for trespassing and attempted B and E if they can find him.” Christian scoffed angrily, his composure cracking further.

“That’ll get him a slap on the wrist at most. Who the fuck is this guy?!”

“I’ve been digging for weeks, and there just isn’t much to be found. No priors, not even a speeding ticket. No associations with known criminals, so far as I can tell. The address in the DMV database was out of date, as you know, and there are no utilities, credit cards, or bills of any sort in his name. What little documented work history I found was years old, and he has no living relations. He’s off the grid and unremarkable in most respects.”

“Except that he’s stalking my family and trying to break into their home,” Christian growled. “He has to have a reason.”
My chest ached with love at his words, and I noticed the flicker of surprise they brought to Garrett’s face. We exchanged a quick but loaded glance before I finally decided to add my two cents.

“He showed up after our relationship went public,” I reminded them. “Maybe he’s just looking for something else he can sell to the press. We were photographed yesterday too. Hell, maybe he was the one who took the pictures.”

Christian looked a little hopeful, but Garrett burst the bubble without hesitation.

“We have no way of knowing whether or not he’d been following you before you got a CPO. It might have nothing to do with the publicity.”

Thanks a lot, I sighed inwardly, giving him a scowl. After so many years, one would think he’d have learned how to calm his boss down. Before I could redouble my efforts, however, I heard Amelia’s door open. She appeared in the entryway, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

I held my arms out to her, and she hurried across the room to climb into my lap, looking at our guests in confusion. She knew everyone by now, but she rarely saw them all in the same room at once.

“We have a pancake party?” she asked hopefully, and all five men in the room smiled at her. I chuckled and swept her insanely messy hair out of her face.

“We’ll see. You want pancakes for breakfast? With blueberries or chocolate chips?”

“Boo-berries!”

She scooted off my lap and ran to Christian instead, lifting her arms toward him. He bent to pick her up and settled her against his chest, patting her little back. He seemed to calm almost instantly, swaying on his feet with her in that unconscious way parents moved when holding their babies. There go my ovaries again... 

“Is Donah here?” Amelia asked, turning to look at Garrett with hopeful eyes.

“Not today, sweetie, but I’ll tell him you said hi. Maybe we can have another sleepover soon.”

“Kay.”

“Gentleman, we’ll discuss the situation in more detail shortly. Meet at Escala in an hour,” Christian instructed them. “Taylor, I’ll be ready to leave in a few minutes. And Sawyer, from now on, I want someone here at all times, whether they’re home or not. Right outside the door in case this guy isn’t coming in through the lobby.”

“Yes, sir.”

The rest of them said their farewells and filed out, and I gave Christian a weak smile.

“Amelia, why don’t you go turn on Ponies while I get started on the pancakes, okay?”
“Okay. Don’t forget the boo-berries!”

“I won’t,” I chuckled, watching Christian set her on her feet so she could scamper toward the television.

He met my gaze with still-anxious eyes and gestured toward the kitchen. I followed him from the living room with a sigh.

“You’re not staying for breakfast?”

“I’d love to, but I need to stay on top of this. No one can be that off the grid in this day and age. We need to find this guy, and I don’t expect the cops to make it a priority.”

“I still think you may be overreacting.”

Christian frowned, his posture changing so quickly I doubted he even realized it, and his voice had dropped a half octave when he spoke again.

“Don’t. Don’t make light of this. This asshole tried to break into your home.”

“He didn’t try very hard,” I argued, fighting the urge to avert my eyes. “No damage to the door or the locks—”

He silenced my words with a stern look and a finger to my lips. This time, I couldn’t help but lower my eyes. Best to just let him do whatever he thinks he can. It’ll make him feel better.

The sound of the My Little Pony theme song drew both our gazes to the living room where Amelia was on the floor in front of the TV. I glanced back at Christian just as a shadow of regret fell over his face.

“I’d hoped to spend a little more time with you both today, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. Is it okay if I come back later tonight? There are some things we need to discuss privately.”

Some things?

“Sure. She’ll be in bed by eight.”

“Then, I’ll be here at one minute past.”

We shared a smile, but I could see the tension still lingering in his features. He pursed his lips and went back to the living room, and I watched from the entryway as he knelt to talk to my daughter.

“Hey, Princess. I have to go, but I didn’t want to leave without saying bye.”

Amelia sat up and gave him her full attention, her blue eyes wide with confusion.

“But we having pancakes,” she reasoned, as though no one could ever consider leaving early under such circumstances.
“I know, and they sound delicious. Can you make sure to eat an extra one for me?”

“No, you stay,” she pled, her bottom lip quivering slightly. “We can have cimanon rolls instead if you want.”

“I really wish I could, Sweetheart, but I promise I’ll come back. Maybe next weekend, we can even make a special breakfast for Mommy?”

“Okay.”

Placated but still pouting, Amelia gave him a hug and went back to her show with a little less enthusiasm, and Christian stood with a sigh, looking guilty.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “She’ll get over it.”

He looked doubtful but nodded, bending to kiss me goodbye. His arms locked around my waist, and he rested his forehead against mine for a long moment before finally pulling away.

“See you tonight.”

As the door closed behind him, I let out a long breath.

*Coffee first.*
The only thing that got me through my shitfest of a day was the knowledge that I’d be seeing Ana again at the end of it.

I’d been riding the asses of my security staff from the moment I’d left her apartment that morning, determined to find a lead—aany lead—on José Rodriguez. Welch had explained that the asshole was probably living on cash and using a burner phone, but that didn’t make the guy invisible. If we couldn’t track him through his purchases or phone calls, we had to move on to surveillance tracking.

I knew that getting our hands on the footage or images would be a matter of greasing the right palms, but that was no quick fix. That sort of thing had to go through channels, disguised as political or charitable donations, both of which took time. Of course, the police had assured me they were pursuing the case, but there was a reason people called me a control freak. No way in hell was I going to just sit on my hands and hope for the best. My team could investigate on their own without getting in the way.

As if the Rodriguez mess weren’t bad enough, I was also forced to dodge phone calls from both of my parents throughout the day. I flat out refused to spend time on the phone with either of them, but their text and voicemail messages had still gotten through.

They’d known Anastasia was a single mother since the uncomfortable dinner we’d attended weeks ago, but the story in the news this morning had inspired them to open the floodgates of criticism yet again. My mother alternated between accusing me of intentionally humiliating her in front of her friends and trying to set me up with several ‘respectable young women.’ My father had taken to asking questions about Amelia’s father and making the assumption that Ana was a slut who probably didn’t even know the paternity of her child.

Eventually, I told Barney to do whatever the hell he had to do to my phone so that their numbers were blocked. Any contact from now on would have to come through Andrea, and she’d been given explicit instructions on how to handle them. Until their messages included some manner of apology, I didn’t want to hear from them. I had neither the time nor the energy for their bullshit.

After deleting the last of my father’s vitriol from my voicemail, I sat back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. The clock on the desk of my home office read six p.m. Two more hours. There was a gentle knock on the door, and I called out an invitation to enter.

“Can I get you something for dinner, sir?” Gail asked with a polite smile.

“Uh… Sure. It’s Sunday, though. You’re not on duty.”

“Yes, sir. But Taylor told me a little of what’s been going on when we had lunch earlier, and I thought you might not feel like cooking tonight. I have some vegetable soup I can heat up, if you like.”

“That sounds great, Gail. Thank you.”
She gave me another smile and a nod before disappearing off to the kitchen, leaving me alone with my thoughts. As it usually did on such occasions, my mind wandered to Anastasia, and I wondered what she and Amelia were having for dinner this evening. Why hadn’t I just made plans to go there for dinner? I still felt guilty for skipping out on breakfast, especially when I remembered the crestfallen look on Amelia’s sweet face. There had to be a way to make it up to her...

Gail reentered the room a few minutes later. She set a tray of food on my desk, and the aroma of the soup made my stomach growl.

“Thank you. Do you know where any toy stores are? Within a reasonable driving distance, I mean?”

“Um…” She looked mystified but answered, “There’s a Walmart and a Target not far from here. Both have toy departments. Are you looking for something specific?”

*Ponies.*

“I’m not entirely sure. Maybe I’ll try the internet first.”

She nodded, still visibly confused, and left the room.

Shopping online was more convenient anyway. It had been a long time since I’d done my own shopping in a store like the ones she’d mentioned, and I didn’t really want to pull my security team away from the task at hand just to accompany me on an outing like that.

The internet search proved to be the right approach, and I quickly found an extensive line of *My Little Pony* merchandise. It didn’t stop at toys. Hasbro had slapped their cartoon ponies onto just about every sort of object a child might come into contact with. School supplies, clothing, bedding, even hygiene products... I scrolled through the listings for what felt like an eternity before finally settling on one of the larger playsets. I double checked the recommended age and ordered it with expedited shipping. It would be here by Tuesday, which would give me an excuse to visit my girls during the week. *Always a plus.*

As the clock inched closer to eight p.m., I took a few more calls from Escala’s residential coordinator and an interior designer. I wanted the larger of my two guest units set up so Ana and Amelia could move in as quickly as possible. I would insist on it. Hell, I’d make it a fucking *rule* if that was what it took.

I needed to know they were safe, and the best way to do that was to have full control over their environment. Security in my building was much better than in hers. And when they weren’t at home, I had no problem assigning a battalion of bodyguards for each of them.

Overreaction? Maybe. But nothing had ever meant more to me than my girls.

True to my word, I entered Ana’s building at exactly eight o’clock, nodding at the familiar faces of my employees stationed in the lobby and outside Ana’s front door. The latter was a relatively new hire named Jacobs, and he practically snapped to attention as though I were a four-star general.
“Has there been any more trouble?”

“No, sir. All quiet.”

I nodded my thanks and knocked on the door, smiling at Ana when she opened it to let me in. She was in my arms as soon as the door was shut, and I squeezed her tightly against me, feeling the stress of the day ease in slow increments.

“I missed you,” I admitted, too embarrassed to tell her just how much. She’d been on my mind all day. Ana giggled and kissed me tenderly.

“I missed you too. So did Amelia. She colored a picture for you, but she wants to give it to you herself the next time she sees you.”

“I can’t wait,” I grinned, kissing her once more before leading her to the sofa. I gave her a brief rundown of my day, leaving out the one-sided drama with my parents and the online toy shopping.

“Sounds like you were busy. We spent the day cleaning and baking cookies. And then cleaning again, because baking with a three-year-old is always messy.”

“I can imagine.” We shared another long kiss, but I pulled back before it could escalate. She pouted adorably, and I chuckled. “I’d love nothing more than to take you to bed and spend the rest of the night showing you how much I missed you, but we need to discuss our next move now that there’s a more credible security threat.”

“Our next move?” she echoed, suddenly wary.

“Yes. Getting you and Amelia set up at Escala. I have a two-bedroom unit three floors down from my penthouse, and it’ll be ready for you by the end of the day tomorrow.”

Ana closed her eyes and exhaled loudly. It didn’t take a mind reader to know what was coming next, and my spine stiffened in response.

“Christian, we talked about this.”

“That was before this creep tried to break in. He’s escalated, and I’m not about to give him the chance to do something worse.”

“What makes you think we’d be any better off in your building?” she challenged. “You can hire just as many people for this one, so what’s the difference? You can’t control everything.”

“Ana...” I shook my head, tapping into my easiest method of anger management. “I’m not going to argue about this. It’s not up for discussion. If I need to make it official and give you a command, then that’s what I’ll do. But I’ll warn you, I enjoy getting creative with my punishments.”

Her eyes sparked, and she scoffed loudly. Scoffed. Right in my face. My palms itched to warm her backside properly. My self-control had been hanging by a thread all day, and if it were any other night, I’d have had her bound and gagged in my playroom right now.
“That’s not how it works,” Ana snapped. “Being your submissive doesn’t obligate me to obey you—”

“Funny, because I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what it means.”

“Not without question. I have a brain, and I’m allowed to use it. And you can’t just throw a new rule at me and then punish me for not consenting to it.”

Our faces were now mere inches apart, and she was looking me square in the eye. I gritted my teeth, not sure which I wanted to do more. Kiss her senseless or spank the hell out of her. The silent staring contest persisted even as a spark of humor flickered in her eyes. I shook my head, not willing to back down.

“You know... When we met, I had you pegged as a natural submissive,” I said quietly. Her eyes narrowed. “Now, I’m not sure. You’ve got quite a smart mouth.”

Ana’s lips twitched, and she let out a sigh, relaxing her posture a bit as she finally looked away.

“I guess I do have my brat moments. But you should keep in mind, Sir… Submission that isn’t earned is meaningless.”

“I think we both know I’ve earned yours by now.”

“Yes,” she conceded. “I guess it’s just odd to hear you say you thought I was a natural sub when we first met. From everything you’ve told me about your past, you probably weren’t the best person to make that call at the time.”

I couldn’t make sense of her words, and the fact that she’d said them in a mildly teasing tone rankled a bit. I was not in the mood to be teased. I’d been completely honest with her about my past, and I couldn’t think of anything I’d said that would’ve made her doubt my level of experience. Sure, my understanding of power exchange had deepened since we’d gotten together, but I’d been a Dom long before we’d met. I’d been able to pick up on her submissive traits without difficulty.

“What are you talking about? I’ve had plenty of experience with submissives.”

Her ‘if you say so’ expression made my frown deepen, and she shrugged as though choosing to bite her tongue on the matter. Reluctant as I was to change the subject from our prior argument, I just wasn’t in the mood to let this go.

“You can’t say something like that without an explanation, Anastasia. Out with it.”

She stiffened at my use of her full name, and I was gratified to see her expression shift to one of uncomfortable chagrin. She seemed to grapple for the right words, no doubt wishing she’d just kept her smart mouth shut. Too late for that, little girl.

“I just meant that... Everything you’ve told me about your previous partners makes me ninety-nine percent positive none of them were true submissives. You may have had something they wanted, but I highly doubt that something was domination.”

What?
“You’re implying they were _faking_ it? You don’t think I could tell the difference?”

“Unfortunately, no,” she answered, sounding sad and even apologetic now. All traces of her previous ire seemed to have vanished, at least for the moment. “The fact that you believe _you_ were once a submissive proves it.”

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? I was utterly bewildered by the strange direction our conversation had taken, and my defenses went up instinctively. My nerves were tensed to spring at the slightest provocation.

“Look,” Ana continued before I could speak. “Now isn’t the time for this. You’ve had a long, stressful day. You’re not ready for this conversation, and that’s okay. I didn’t mean to insult you-”

“No, I need to know what you meant by that,” I interrupted, not bothering to hide my irritation. “You’ve clearly got something to say on the matter, so let’s hear it.”

She winced and remained silent for a few seconds, her eyes averted as though she were rehearsing a speech in her mind. I didn’t know what ‘conversation’ she thought I wasn’t ready for, but it was too late to turn back now.

“When you first told me about your past partners, the way you described the relationships caught me off guard,” Ana began hesitantly, her tone gentle and kind. “Well, actually, you made them sound more like _transactions_ than relationships. You said you always made sure they were ‘compensated’ for their ‘service.’ That statement alone told me more than enough about your history and about those women.”

“Why?”

I frowned, not seeing anything amiss with the phrase she’d emphasized. It was true that I hadn’t held any real affection for my previous subs, but I don’t know that I would’ve gone so far as to liken our engagements to transactions.

“Because a true submissive doesn’t need or want that kind of compensation. They submit because they get fulfillment out of doing so.”

“It’s not like they didn’t enjoy themselves,” I argued, not liking the direction this was going.

“I’m not just talking about the orgasms. It goes much deeper than that. Dominance and submission go together like puzzle pieces. They have equal value and equal purpose. One is given in exchange for the other, and it should _never_ need to be more than that.

“A Dom shouldn’t feel the need to _compensate_ a sub by doing anything more than meeting her needs, which really shouldn’t include money or expensive gifts. And the fact that _you_ didn’t _know that_ tells me you’ve never known what true submission really feels like.

“You may have played that role for Elena, but you never truly submitted. The fact that you were underage just makes it worse.”
I huffed in irritation. She has no idea what she’s talking about. We’d discussed our pasts in detail more than once over the last two months, and I knew that the age difference between me and Elena had bothered her. But she’d never said anything like this. She’d apparently taken the information and twisted the situation into something it wasn’t.

“If I wasn’t a sub, what was I?” I challenged. Her eyes grew sadder still.

“A child.”

“Fifteen is hardly a child,” I scoffed.

“You were a boy who was so desperate for attention and human connection that you would’ve given anything that woman demanded. You were a teenager full of hormones who couldn’t make sound decisions because your brain was still developing.”

I shook my head in vehement denial, finally giving in to the urge to get up and pace. I had to move. Her eyes tracked me with an empathy that was too much like pity. And I hated it.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I can see how it might look that way from your perspective, but—”

“No, Christian.” Now, she was standing up too, but she didn’t try to move closer. “You wanted to hear my opinion, so don’t chicken out on it now.” I scowled, but she went on before I could say anything in my own defense. “Please, just try to listen.”

It took a few moments, but I managed to arrange my features into a more passive expression. I stopped pacing but couldn’t bring myself to sit down again, sighing heavily as I gave her a stiff nod.

“This isn’t me judging you or being soft-hearted because I’m a woman and a mother. This is science and psychology and the law. Elena knew better. And deep down, so did you. You still do.

“It’s been over for years, and she’s dead. But you still don’t want anyone to know about it. You’re not even close to your parents, but you still protect them from finding out what happened. Or maybe you’re just protecting yourself. But either way...

“Can you honestly tell me that if you were single, you’d have no qualms about taking up with a willing, fifteen-year-old submissive right now?” I recoiled at her words, but she didn’t stop. “The age difference would be less than the one between you and Elena.”

“Of course not,” I spat, disgusted. And she pounced on my admission, inching closer.

“Why ‘of course not?’ You say that like it should be obvious, but you’re still ignoring the truth. You know it would be wrong. Just like you know it was wrong that someone did it to you.”

Jesus Fucking Christ...

Ana was actually starting to make sense. I’d spent so many years reassuring myself that I had nothing to be ashamed of, but my own actions had made a liar out of me. I’d gone to extraordinary lengths to keep that part of my life a secret.
I suddenly felt cornered and began to pace again, wanting nothing more than to escape now. My eyes darted toward the door, and she caught me.

“Don’t,” she said again, moving to block my exit. “Don’t run from this. Stay and talk it out. You need this.”

I sighed, trying to settle myself. My head ached, and my stomach was in knots. Every muscle in my body was tense and trying to make the choice between fight and flight. *Fuck. Get it together, Grey...*

“Look, I understand your logic, okay? When you put it like that... It does make sense,” I admitted with a grimace. “But to think of myself as a victim... I’ve based a big part of my life on what Elena taught me, so if it was all just bullshit and manipulation... Then what did I do to those...”

My blood pressure climbed, and I began to hyperventilate a little. I couldn’t even verbalize a complete thought, couldn’t articulate the realizations that were crashing over me. Ana moved cautiously in front of me and put her hands on my upper arms, looking me straight in the eye.

“No, what you were doing was different. Those women were *adults*. They were fully informed as to what they were getting into, and they gave their consent. If they were manipulated in any way, it wasn’t by you.”

“How does that make it okay?” I sputtered.

“I didn’t say you were completely blameless,” she sighed. “You let Elena treat you like a john while she played the pimp, and you paid... or *compensated*... those women for their services. But Christian, they *allowed* themselves to be used like that. They weren’t victims. You told me yourself that you weren’t affectionate toward them, that you didn’t play with their emotions or offer intimacy... They were just providing a service.”

“You’re saying they were prostitutes. High-end call girls with a specialty,” I muttered.

“Yes.”

I digested that, once again feeling the urge to flee the room, either out the front door or to the bathroom to throw up.

“I didn’t see it that way,” I insisted, defensive. Ana nodded patiently.

“I know that. Paying for sex doesn’t make you a bad person, just like accepting money for it doesn’t make those women bad people.”

“But if I let myself be manipulated into playing the whore for Elena...” Once again, I couldn’t finish the thought, and her face softened again.

“That doesn’t make you a bad person either, and you have *nothing* to be ashamed of. You were a victim of a sex crime, Christian. The same can be said for me. Do you look down on me for that?”

“Of course not. But you didn’t consent.”
“And you couldn’t consent.”

I took a ragged breath and felt myself deflate, feeling utterly exhausted and shaken. To think of Elena as nothing more than another pimp who had abused me... It rocked the very foundation of my self-identity, of my life. If it was true that I’d never been a submissive, then I didn’t know if I could rightly call myself a Dominant either. She’d trained me, after all.

It wasn’t the first time Ana had made me question Elena’s teachings, and now I was having a hard time seeing them as anything more than lies. It was beyond infuriating to realize that, after all this time, I was still being haunted by the ghost of Elena Fucking Lincoln.

I moved back to the sofa, almost numb as I sank back onto the cushions. Ana joined me, waiting patiently for me to pull myself together. If she were anyone else, I’d have expected to see gloating or judgment in her expression, but when I looked at her, there was nothing but love and acceptance. God, I really don’t deserve her.

I took her hand tentatively in mine, meeting her gaze.

“I’ve never thought of you as a prostitute,” I said firmly. “Even in the beginning, when I wanted you to sign my contract, I never saw you that way.”

Her reply was soft and warm, making me feel just a little less pathetic.

“I know.”

“But that’s... I can’t say for sure that I wouldn’t have treated you like that. I’m glad you didn’t let me.”

“You’re not that person anymore. I’ve rarely even seen a glimpse of that man, even when you’re being stern with me. High-handedness notwithstanding,” she added with a smile. I was surprised to feel my own mouth curving upward. “Maybe all it took was finding the right person at the right time, but... You’ve moved on. And you just took a huge step toward making peace with all of it. I’m proud of you.”

Those four little words fell strangely on my ears, and I couldn’t recall the last time I’d heard them directed at me. Had anyone ever said they were proud of me? My parents had only been angered and disappointed by my failures. They’d never praised my successes, other than to boast of their parenting skills to other people. Until now, I hadn’t realized how much I needed to hear it.

I pulled Ana to my chest and registered, once again, the complete absence of pain in her touch. I hadn’t forgotten the argument we’d left unresolved, and I wanted to ask her again to move into my building. To beg her, if need be.

But I was just too mentally and emotionally exhausted to argue about it anymore tonight. Right now, I just wanted to be with her.

“Promise me something,” I whispered into her hair.

“Anything.”
“Don’t ever leave me.”

Ana’s arms tightened around me, and she burrowed her face against the side of my neck, leaving a kiss that made my insides tremble.

“I’m not going anywhere.”
Twenty-Four
Christian

Making peace. That’s what Ana had called it. I wasn’t sure how much of that I’d really done in the past week, but if nothing else, I’d made a good start on it. I’d actually taken Monday off to regroup after our conversation last Sunday night. I’d needed time to clear my head and get a handle on my emotions, and Ana’s support had been unwavering.

Not only had she and I discussed just about every facet of my past and present, but I’d also hesitantly agreed to consider going back to therapy. It had never worked for me in the past, but I hadn’t been compelled to make an effort back then. I had more than enough motivation now.

I’d also needed a little time to do some objective, and rather extensive, research into power exchange. My efforts were mostly fed by the fear that I’d been doing something wrong, despite Ana’s reassurances that she’d found me to be a good Dominant. While I trusted her to tell me if I screwed up, I still hated feeling ignorant about anything. Especially when it came to something like this.

After spending the better part of two days perusing informative websites and lurking in kinky web communities, I was relieved to have Ana’s assurance confirmed. But while I hadn’t been a bad Dom to her, I realized now that I’d been no Dom at all to the women who had come before her. At most, I’d been a fetishist with a tendency to micromanage my sex life to the point of obsessive compulsion.

Of course, there were a lot of people who did limit their dynamics to the physical aspects of power exchange, but from what I could tell, those weren’t usually the ones who’d found true happiness with their partners. True fulfillment came from intimacy, but I would never have been able to comprehend that before Ana.

No wonder I’d never been happy with any of the others. Ana had said I’d moved on, that I was no longer that man, and I was determined to prove her right.

I paused in the act of binding her to my St. Andrews cross, watching as her heavy-lidded eyes met mine. They’d been following my movements as I snapped each cuff into place, but now our gazes were locked in a moment of silent communication. We were more than an hour into the scene, and her skin was already decorated with rope imprints from the time she’d spent suspended from the ceiling.

I’d made her come three times so far, using techniques I’d used many times before. But this scene was vastly different from any I’d had in the past, and I’d told her so from the very beginning.

“If your hands are free to touch me, you may do so. You don’t need to keep your eyes lowered unless it’s more comfortable for you. And you’re to call me whatever you want. Sir, Master, just my first name... I don’t care. But I want to hear you. Your sighs, your moans, your screams. All of it.

“If you want more of something, tell me. Or better yet, beg me. If you want me to change tactics or adjust something, I want you to say so. And of course, if you want me to stop, you need
only say the word. Don’t hold *anything* back. I want you uninhibited and vocal. I want you to trust me so completely that even if I have you bound, you still feel free.”

Ana had closed her eyes and shuddered visibly at my words, and I was determined to see her react that way again and again before our playtime was finished. I was making an effort to break free of my own habits, to do things differently than I had with any of my past subs.

*Partners,* I corrected myself inwardly.

I’d foregone my usual faded jeans in favor of a pair of soft khakis, and I’d left her hair unbraided, giving her the option to either leave it loose or put it in a ponytail. She’d chosen the latter, and while I appreciated that for safety reasons, I was almost sad to be deprived of the ability to run my fingers through it. I’d removed her clothing myself and had skipped the instruction to kneel at the beginning of the scene.

What I had with Anastasia was different, and I wanted to do everything in my power to show her that.

I lifted a hand to caress the side of her face before leaning in to press my lips to hers. I kept the kiss light but lingered long enough to have Ana stretching toward me when I pulled away. I took two paces backward and just drank in the sight of her.

Her beautiful body was on display for me, arms cuffed above her head and legs spread wide enough to grant access to the sweet spot between them. She was *mine.* From the tips of her elegant fingers to the ends of her adorable toes.

I moved forward again, reaching up to run my hands hungrily over the length of her arms and torso. Ana moaned and arched her back toward me. I sank to my knees and took a deep breath, inhaling the heady mixture of our combined scents. I’d had her twice already, and still her sweet pussy wept for more. My cock strained with longing as well, but I ignored it, determined to get her off at least once more with my tongue first.

Ana whimpered and pushed her hips toward me, and I grinned up at her, letting my breath tickle the inside of her thigh.

“Tell me what you want, Anastasia.”

“You, Sir. Your mouth.” She was practically pouting down at me, and I teased her again by leaning in just enough to savor the scent of her.

“What do you say?”

“Please,” she groaned. “Please, Sir. Taste me.”

“Good girl.”

She trembled again, and I held her gaze from below as I granted her request. The perfect nectar of our last orgasms hit my tongue like the most delectable vintage. My tongue thrummed against her clit and swept through her folds, repeating the pattern again and again until her thighs were shaking on either side of my head.
“Fuck... Oh, fuck... Sir, I’m...”

Her words dissolved into a sob of pleasure, and she came hard as I sucked her clit into my mouth. *Fuck, I will never get tired of that.* The sound, the *taste,* of her as she rocketed over that precipice was nearly enough to unman me, and it was always a fight to hold off my own release.

I stood, wiping my mouth with one hand and exploring her wetness with the other. Eventually, her dazed blue eyes opened, and I grinned in satisfaction before stealing another kiss.

“I love hearing that dirty mouth of yours. Even if that sort of language in here does make me want to put you over my knee.”

“Oh God, yes. Please, Sir,” she breathed, her eyes so full of longing that my breath caught in my throat.

“You want that, beautiful? Mmm... And what should I use on that sweet backside of yours? My hand? A belt?”

“Belt,” she answered predictably, and my smile widened. Ana loved the sting of the leather almost as much as I loved hearing it against her skin.

But instead of retrieving one of the many belts I had hanging on the wall hooks, my hands went to the waistband of my pants. Ana watched with hungry eyes as I unfastened my belt buckle with tantalizingly slow movements. I knew the sight and sound of a belt snicking its way free of the loops turned her on, and by the time the leather was coiled in my hand, she was practically licking her lips.

I released her wrists and ankles from the cuffs and guided her to the sofa, positioning her over my lap with her pert little ass beckoning for my attention. Her breasts were pressed against the cushion next to me, and her head was turned toward the back of the couch, presenting me with a perfect view of her profile.

“Such a good girl,” I murmured, stroking her head with my free hand while I gripped the folded belt in the other. “But even good girls need discipline sometimes.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I grinned again and brought the belt down squarely on her ass, making her twitch in surprise. Her lips parted in a moan as I did it again. And again. I kept the strikes light and well-dispersed, warming her up and slowly increasing the force until she was writhing on my lap. I could feel a damp spot on my pants beneath her hips, and she was breathing in quick, gasping whimpers.

“I love that I can do this to you. That I can bring you to the point of absolute frenzy just before...”

I tossed the belt away and slipped my hand between her thighs, going right for her swollen clit. It took less than three seconds before her shouts of ecstasy filled the room, and I felt an overwhelming surge of pride. Her backside was covered with faint red welts, and the skin was warm and tender beneath my touch. I smiled down at her, but her eyes were closed in utter bliss as the aftershocks rolled through her body.
“You’re so strong, Anastasia. And so brave,” I crooned, stroking her hair and waiting patiently for her to recover. “My perfect match in every way.”

I carefully repositioned her so that I could pick her up and carry her to the large bed, shedding my pants before I stretched out over her. The sensation of our naked bodies pressed against one another made me painfully hard.

“Christian,” Ana sighed, speaking my name for the first time since we’d entered the room. I bent to taste her lips briefly and nodded to acknowledge the change she was communicating.

“Tell me, Ana. Tell me what you want.”

“Make love to me. Take me. Hard.”

I cursed under my breath and seized her lips again, angling my hips to fit between her thighs. Her cry of relief broke against my lips as I filled her with one stroke, and I couldn’t help but echo it. I thrust into her slowly for a few moments, until her intense gaze begged me to move faster.

“Yes... Harder,” she pled. “Fuck me. Use me. Love me...”

“Oh, fuck...”

Her words alone were almost enough to have me bursting within her, but holding back became infinitely harder when she slowly brought my hand to her throat. My eyes widened in understanding, and she nodded, her own eyes simultaneously encouraging and begging.

I pounded into her harder and faster as my fingers gripped her neck, carefully positioned to restrict the flow of blood to her head without blocking her airway. Her pussy clamped down almost painfully on my cock as she came again. She was silent this time, however, as though she had lost the coherency to make noise at all. Her eyes rolled back in her head as wave after wave of pleasure made her whole body jerk rhythmically beneath me.

I loosened my hold on her throat just as I reached the breaking point, coming so hard within her that I felt lightheaded. No doubt she did too. As soon as I was recovered enough to check in with her, I found her beautiful eyes gazing up at me, shimmering with satisfaction and love.

“God, you’re amazing. I’m so proud of you, baby,” I whispered against her lips, kissing her until the need for oxygen pulled me away.

Ana smiled up at me, running her hands up the length of my back, from my ass to my shoulders. The tremor that courséd through me as her fingers danced over my scars was one of pleasure.

“I’m proud of you too. That was... different.”

“I’d ask if you mean that in a good way, but the six orgasms pretty much answered that already.”

“Yes,” she chuckled, blushing sweetly. “It was perfect. I love you so much.”
“I love you too.” I dipped my head to kiss her again, but briefly this time. “Come on. Let’s go downstairs so I can take care of you.”

We showered together in my bathroom, and I relished the opportunity to wash every inch of her. Twice. As we were getting dressed, there was a knock at the bedroom door, and Ana looked at me curiously.

“Probably Taylor,” I explained, frowning at his timing.

I’d had a bit more in mind for her aftercare, but I knew he wouldn’t interrupt unless it was an emergency. I waited until Ana was decent before opening the door. Taylor’s expression was apologetic, and I inclined my head in question.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, sir. You wanted to be notified immediately when we had any updates on Rodriguez.”

I straightened my spine in interest and glanced at Ana, whose brows were raised as she gestured for me to let Taylor in.

“We found him?” I asked.

“The police did. I just got off the phone with our contact there. Rodriguez was arrested and questioned this morning. He’s being held for trespassing and attempted breaking and entering,” Taylor explained. Ana looked relieved, but I wasn’t celebrating just yet.

“Have they gotten anything out of him?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid. He said it was a paid job. He doesn’t know the name of the guy who hired him and never saw his face. It was a cash job, and he was paid extra not to ask questions. Five grand up front with another five when the job was done.”

“Fuck. So, this guy doesn’t even know them?” I demanded, gesturing toward Ana.

“That would appear to be correct. Rodriguez said the guy wanted photographs of both Ms. Steele and her daughter, but he also wanted information. Daily routines, financial status, medical records... Rodriguez was hoping to find some paperwork when he tried to break in. Bank statements, bills, health records, and so on.”

“Daily routines and personal information? Who the fuck is this guy?!”

I was pissed and even more disturbed by Rodriguez’s behavior than I’d been before. Whoever had paid him had to be someone of fairly significant means with a motive that, contrary to Ana’s theory, probably didn’t involve making money off of her recent local fame. That made it a much bigger problem. Someone like that wouldn’t just give up because his stooge was locked up.

I turned to Ana with a tense frown and noticed she had paled considerably. I sighed, swallowing what I could of my anger and held my arm out toward her. She tucked herself into my side and took a shaky breath, looking up to address Taylor.
“So... I’m guessing it wasn’t someone from the media who hired him.” I glanced at her to see a hesitant and somewhat guilty expression on her face.

Told you.

“I think that’s a safe assumption at this point, ma’am. The detective advised that a protective order be put in place immediately.”

“Can you think of anyone at all who would have a reason to want that sort of information?” I asked, still working to stay calm.

I’d asked the question before, but she hadn’t taken it seriously. She appeared to be doing so now, however, and I felt her tremble against my side. I tightened my arm around her.

“I can’t think of anyone who would care where I go or what I do every day. Much less anyone who would be willing to pay money for that information. I don’t have enemies. The media can be a cutthroat business sometimes, but I’ve never had any major problems with anyone. Or even minor ones, really. My job isn’t the competitive kind. The work is steady, and I get my assignments based on project needs and staff availability. I don’t have to fight anyone for the story.”

“What about outside of work? Anyone from your past or from... the community... who might have had an issue with you at some point? Maybe you being in the news just put you back on someone’s radar,” I suggested. Ana looked thoughtful for a few moments but eventually shook her head.

“I can’t think of anyone. When all of this started happening, I gave Garrett a list of the people I’ve dated in the past. He said none of them brought up any red flags. I’m really not active enough in the local scene to have made any enemies there.”

“What about your family? Maybe your mother?”

Ana shook her head again and moved away to sit on the edge of the bed, her eyes distant.

“My mother wouldn’t have the resources or the motivation to do something like this. I haven’t heard from her in over three years. If she wanted to talk to me, she could just call. Or email. Even if she thought she might have something to gain from making amends, it doesn’t make sense for her to go about it this way.”

“What about her current husband?”

“I don’t even know the guy. I’ve never met him. As for the rest of my family, it’s really just my dad and Amelia. I don’t know anyone through my dad or through the daycare who would have a reason to do this.”

Taylor cleared his throat politely, and we both looked at him.

“It may not be a connection of Ms. Steele’s at all, sir.”

“We do background checks on everyone I come into contact with, Taylor. And Welch ran more extensive checks on possible suspects when this whole thing started. He didn’t find anything.”
“There has to be something we’re missing,” Ana sighed.

I watched her stand and walk to the window, gazing out at the Seattle cityscape. We were all silent for a few moments before I pursed my lips and turned back to Taylor.

“We’ll be ready to go back to Ana’s in a couple of hours. Tell Welch to get updated information on all of the women from my past and... my family.” Taylor’s brows drew together at that, but I merely shook my head in dismissal. “Just do it.”

I didn’t really think any of my family members would do something like this. They were all much more direct. They had the sort of confidence that came with the belief that they were superior to anyone less fortunate than themselves.

As Taylor closed the door, my eyes swiveled back to Ana, seeing her troubled reflection in the window. I crossed the room quietly and came to stand behind her, slipping my arms around her waist. She leaned back into my chest, and we both relaxed a bit.

“It seems you’re going to get what you wanted,” she remarked a short while later, her tone a bit sardonic. I stiffened in alarm and confusion.

“Why would you ever think I wanted this?”

Ana twisted in my arms and gave me a rueful smile that didn’t quite erase the worry in her features.

“Not this. I mean... the moving thing.” I felt my eyes widen, and she continued, “Taylor just told us that someone out there was willing to pay ten thousand dollars for intimate details about our lives. Maybe even to break into our home. If it’s not some media outlet looking for exclusive information, then... The other possibilities are just disturbing.”

“Then, you’ve changed your mind about moving here? You’re willing to stay in the guest apartment downstairs?” I was afraid to believe it, and I felt a rush of excitement when she nodded and wound her arms loosely around my waist.

“At this point, it would be pretty stupid not to take you up on it. I didn’t want to let myself jump to the worst possible conclusion. I spent a long time learning not to do that. But this... I can’t pretend it doesn’t scare me.”

I pulled her close again and kissed the top of her head, swaying a little to soothe her. We’d been back and forth on the issue a lot this week, and part of me was thrilled to have won the argument. But I hated that she was frightened, even if it was a healthy sort of fear.

“I swear to you that I will not let anyone hurt you or Amelia. Ever,” I vowed. Ana’s arms tightened around me.

“I know.”
“The condo has been ready for days now, so you can move in right away,” Christian said excitedly as he pulled on his shoes.

Right away. God, I hate moving...

“I have so much to do that I don’t even know where to start,” I sighed, typing out a To Do list on my phone.

“I’ll help. I can stay with you tonight and tomorrow and help you get started on the packing. If I hire movers, I bet we could have you guys in the new place within a few days.”

Movers would be a must, since I doubted any of my friends would be available to help with the heavy lifting on such short notice. Today was Saturday, so at least we had all of tomorrow to pack up. We could get the essentials moved first and worry about the rest when we had more time.

“I’m well past the one-year mark on my lease, but they’re probably still going to penalize me for not giving more notice,” I fretted aloud.

“Let me handle that.”

I gave him a knowing look, and he raised his brows as though daring me to challenge him. I huffed a laugh and shook my head, opting to let it go.

“Okay.”

“Ah, see? Now, was that so difficult? Letting someone else take care of things?”

“No, Sir,” I sassed, leaning up on my toes for a quick kiss. Christian growled and pulled me in for a longer one.

Many minutes later, we finally emerged from his bedroom and headed for the elevator. We needed to get back to relieve Kate of her babysitting duties. Thanks to everyone’s busy schedules, it would be the first time they met ‘officially’ since Christian and I had gotten together. I knew he was mildly uncomfortable at the prospect, mostly because Kate was a reporter and now knew he was a Dom, but I’d assured him she could be trusted with the secret. She was a Dominant as well, after all.

“Oh, just a second,” he said, interrupting my thoughts and our progress out of the apartment as he vanished into his home office. He emerged holding a very large box with familiar packaging.

Holy shit...

“Whoa, there. What’s that?” I asked, my hand on his arm to stop him. He gave me a look that made it clear he thought the answer was obvious.

“It’s for Amelia.”
“I can see that, but... Why?”

My eyes were wide as I studied the picture on the box. It was the biggest *My Little Pony* playset I’d ever seen, and I had a pretty good idea how much it had cost.

“Well... I felt really guilty for not being able to stay for breakfast last weekend. I was going to come over and give it to her sometime this week, but you know how my work week went.”

I did. Since Christian had taken a mental health day on Monday, he’d had to stay late in the office almost every evening this week. He’d come over after Amelia had gone to bed on Thursday evening, and I’d expected him to resume his persistent demands that we move into his guest condo. But to my surprise, he’d been too exhausted to do more than collapse into my bed. He’d said he hadn’t been sleeping well away from me, but he’d slept like the dead that night with his body draped over mine. He’d had to leave early the next morning to make it to his first meeting on time, so he hadn’t seen Amelia then either.

“You spent three hundred dollars on a toy for her because you had to skip out on breakfast?” My tone was a mixture of incredulity and affection, but the latter won out when his brows lifted in concern.

“Did you see the look on her face when I told her?”

I pressed my lips together against the laughter that bubbled in my chest, my eyes prickling with emotion. My poor ovaries really were in danger of spontaneous combustion.

“Um, yes... I did. She was a little disappointed, but she got over it. And I’m sure she’ll really love this, but today isn’t a good day for it.”

“Why not?” he frowned.

“I’ll explain on the way. Kate’s expecting us, so we should get going.”

Christian looked at the toy and sighed, but he returned it to his office. I smiled at the glum expression on his face and held his hand as we boarded the elevator. *Could he be more adorable?*

“So, explain.”

“It’s just... That kind of gift is more like a Christmas or birthday sort of thing. Not a... Because it’s Saturday thing.”

“It’s just a toy,” he disagreed, looking confused. “I wanted to give her something to make up for disappointing her.”

“And that’s very sweet of you, but it’s not ‘just a toy’ for her. It’s the toy. It’s one of the best treats you could give her, so you should save it for a special occasion,” I explained patiently.

“But if you know she’ll love it, why not just give it to her now? Christmas is months away.”

I nodded and tried to think of a way to put it in his terms. I wasn’t at all surprised to run into this issue. If anything, I was surprised it had taken this long. Christian and I had different
perceptions of reality when it came to money, and if things were going to work out for us in the long run, we would have to find a way to blend those realities into one we could both accept.

Taylor and Sawyer were waiting for us in the parking garage, and I briefly wondered how they’d known they were needed. We climbed into the back of the SUV with our bodyguards riding in front, and I held Christian’s hand on the seat between us.

“Okay, so try to think of it this way,” I began carefully, “When you’re negotiating a deal at work, you start low, right? You save the higher numbers for later in the game when the timing is right.”

“Yes, but... She’s a child, not an acquisition.”

“True,” I chuckled. “But some of the same tactics apply. There’s a fair amount of strategy involved in parenting.”

He fell silent and seemed to be digesting that as he gazed out the window at the passing scenery. His forehead was creased with worry.

“I guess I have a lot to learn,” he said quietly. I squeezed his hand and smiled when he looked back at me.

“I’ll help you. And don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re doing great so far, especially considering how you were raised.”

“By nannies instead of parents, you mean?”

“Yes. And just in general... Your background is obviously a lot different than mine when it comes to money. I mean, your own parents have pointed that out more than once,” I reminded him. He shrugged apathetically on that point but gave me a shrewd look.

“You think I’m out of touch.”

It was more of a statement than a question, and I winced slightly.

“Maybe a little.” Or a lot. “To be honest, it wasn’t just your attitude about power exchange that made me hesitate to get involved with you in the beginning. The money thing was an issue too. I’m doing well enough for myself and for Amelia now, but I do know what it’s like to struggle. To have to stagger my bills and choose which ones get paid on time, to prioritize food for her over food for myself...”

“Dad helped me as much as he could, but it was important to me that I stand on my own feet. I know the value of what we have because I count every penny and know exactly what I can and can’t do with it. I’m practical with my spending, and I place more value on experiences than on possessions.

“Now, I’ve never been wealthy, but it seems like there’s a certain amount of that practicality that gets lost somewhere when a person has more money than they can ever spend in a lifetime. I imagine it’s easy to lose sight of what’s important when everything can be easily acquired.”
Christian was listening intently, and I could almost see his thoughts racing behind his gray eyes. Had I offended him? I hadn’t meant to ramble on like that, but finding some middle ground on this issue was important. To my relief, he didn’t sound offended or upset when he finally spoke again.

“So... You don’t want Amelia to take things for granted.”

“Exactly,” I smiled. “I don’t want her to grow up thinking she’s entitled to anything she wants just because she wants it. That’s not how the world works. It’s my responsibility to raise her to be productive, empathetic... and realistic.”

“I get it,” he nodded, returning my smile ruefully. “And you’re right--my parents didn’t do me or my siblings any favors on that score. My sister in particular is exceptionally materialistic and self-absorbed. My brother isn’t much better, though his entitlement has more to do with people than money. If it weren’t for the vague memories I have of my life before I was adopted, I’d probably have no work ethic at all.”

“I’m glad you’re self-aware enough to realize that. And mature enough to admit it. There’s hope for you yet,” I added proudly, teasing him just a little.

He laughed goodnaturedly but was silent until we reached my apartment building and were alone again in the elevator.

“Be patient with me,” he sighed, meeting my gaze with a hopeful expression. I want to be in your lives permanently, and I want to make you both happy. You’re such a good mom, Ana. I think I can learn to be a good... dad.”

I beamed at his words and felt my eyes stinging with happy tears.

“I have complete faith in you. In everything.”
By Friday evening of the next week, I had a new appreciation for just how exhausting parenthood could be. Not that Ana had let me help her as much as I would’ve liked.

On top of the sudden move to Escala, she’d been burdened with a difficult project at work. She’d been assigned an article on a new but rapidly-growing company, and her editor had unexpectedly pushed her deadline up by a week. While Ana had assured me she could have handled that kind of schedule change under normal circumstances, the timing of this one couldn’t have been worse. She’d been a ball of stress this week, working overtime to finish the story, take care of Amelia, and get things settled in their new place.

She’d done it, though. The work week was over, and her deadline had been met. But now, she was practically dead on her feet with fatigue. The condo was still a mess of half-unpacked boxes and neglected chores, and I knew she planned to spend a few hours working on it after Amelia went to bed.

I’d cooked dinner for all of us and was now waiting patiently for Ana to finish tucking Amelia in for the night. I also had a better understanding of Ana’s wariness of introducing big changes to her daughter’s environment and routines. Amelia had had a difficult week as well. She’d been clingy and cranky more often than not, and bedtime had been taking a lot more time than usual as she struggled to adjust to new surroundings.

Ana finally emerged from Amelia’s bedroom some time later, her shoulders slumped as she gave the couch a look of longing. I shook my head and moved to stand in front of her, putting my hands on her shoulders. She met my gaze with bleary eyes.

“You should go get some rest.”

“It’s not even nine,” she pouted. I frowned at her protruding lower lip, not sure if I wanted to bite it or admonish her for talking back. Amelia hadn’t been the only cranky one around here this week.

“I’m well aware. And you’re exhausted.”

“Christian, this place is a mess, and I can’t get anything done when she’s awake. There’s a sinkful of dishes, at least two loads of laundry to do, and the living room looks like a hurricane came through.”

I suppressed a growl at her obstinance. I’d offered to have Gail come lend a hand throughout the week, but Ana had refused, stating that as much as she would’ve appreciated a little help, she just wasn’t comfortable using my staff like that. She’d barely accepted the things I’d been trying to do to help out.

I had let it go for the past few days, but enough was enough.
“Look at me, Anastasia,” I demanded with quiet authority. Her eyes snapped back to mine in surprise. “You’re going to go take a hot shower, and then you’re going straight to bed. I don’t care what time it is. You’ve earned an early night.”

“But--”

“No arguments,” I cut her off. “We can work on more unpacking and organizing tomorrow, but tonight, you need to rest. This is the sort of thing I was talking about that first night. Remember? I want to take care of you. It’s my responsibility. So, let me.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, and I ignored the way the blood rushed to my dick at the sight of it. This wasn’t the time. I watched her deliberate for a moment, and it looked like she might try to argue again. I lowered my chin and frowned in warning. Eventually, she let out a sigh of defeat.

“Okay. Thank you... I’m sorry I’m being difficult.”

“You’re forgiven,” I replied, kissing her forehead. “Now, go. I’ll find a clean pair of pajamas for you.”

Ana leaned up for a soft but brief kiss and did as she was told.

Once I heard the shower in the master bathroom turn on, I went to her room and sifted through the sleepwear she’d unpacked so far. Most of the clothes bound for her dresser were still in boxes, but I managed to locate one of her favorite pajama sets. The fabric was slightly faded but incredibly soft. I tracked down a bottle of her usual scented lotion as well and then went to sit on the bed, waiting patiently for her to finish her shower.

When Ana emerged from the bathroom, she looked better but still very tired. She’d wrapped a towel around her, hiding some parts of her body while emphasizing others. Her long hair had been brushed but was still wet. I crooked my finger for her to join me, and she gave me a lazy smile as she complied.

“Oh, dear. Has my stubbornness earned me a spanking, Sir?”

I grinned at her sleepy attempt at flirtation and shook my head.

“Not tonight, baby,” I murmured, gently removing her towel and letting it fall to the floor.

Christ, she was beautiful. Whether she was dressed fashionably for the public eye or completely nude for mine, I felt like I was always staring at her. I loved her in sweats and pajamas, in skirts and blouses, in ropes and leather, and in nothing at all.

I placed a tender kiss over her heart and stood up, guiding her to lie face-down on the bed. The lotion she preferred wasn’t really intended for massage purposes, but I didn’t have the patience to go digging through boxes for the scented oil I usually used. I squeezed some lotion onto my hand and let my body heat warm it for a moment before I smoothed it over her back.

Ana groaned in appreciation, and I smiled happily, continuing my ministrations over every inch of her perfect skin. Her muscles were tense beneath my fingers, but I’d expected as much. She’d needed this kind of attention for days. Unfortunately, she’d been resisting my efforts to help
her, and I hadn’t wanted to push her boundaries when her stress level was so high. I wasn’t sure I’d ever been so happy to see the end of the work week.

She sighed contentedly into the mattress as my hands moved lower, working the muscles of her lower back.

“You’re exceptionally good at that,” she mumbled drowsily, and I smiled.

“You should let me do this more often. I could probably get even better at it.”

Ana let out a husky chuckle and fell silent, but her hand reached blindly toward my waist... and a bit lower.

“Anastasia,” I chastised lightly, moving my hips just out of her reach. She giggled almost drunkenly and redoubled her efforts. I hissed when her fingers pressed against the stiffening bulge in my pants. “You need sleep.”

The stern tone of my voice had given way to one of longing, and I inwardly cursed my weakness for her touch. Ana turned her head toward me and rolled onto her side, luring me in with a view of her perfect breasts and taut nipples.

“I know what’ll help me fall asleep.”

“I highly doubt you need help.”

“Can’t hurt.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” I disagreed, letting her unbutton my pants anyway. “My ego would most assuredly be hurt if you fell asleep during sex.”

“I won’t. I promise. Please,” she said, drawing out the word. “I need you.”

I moaned and hesitated only a second longer before I gave in, moving to hover over her as she parted her legs to accommodate me. The fatigue in her features was lessened slightly by the gleam of victory in her eyes.

“You look rather satisfied with yourself,” I chuckled, bending to taste the soft skin at her neck. She shivered, and goosebumps rippled the flesh of her arms and chest.

“You look even more satisfied in a few minutes.”

Under different circumstances, I would’ve pointed out that we’d never managed to finish in so little time, but I was pretty sure her ability to stay conscious wouldn’t hold out much longer than that tonight. I caught her lips in a searing kiss, and her tongue darted playfully into my mouth. She pushed her hips against me, as though instinctively searching for my cock.

And it didn’t take her long to find it. I moved to check her wetness, but she was faster, gripping my length and guiding me home.

“Oh, fuck,” she gasped as I thrust into her.
Her legs encircled my hips, pulling me closer while her heels dug into my ass. I cursed and began to move faster, harder. My fingers twisted in her damp hair, making her back arch and her breasts press against my chest. Her blue eyes were almost feverish as she gazed up at me, silently pleading for the release she needed.

I crashed my lips upon hers once more and carefully slipped my hand between our bodies, finding her clit with ease. Ana trembled beneath me as I rubbed the slick, tender flesh, and she broke the kiss with a cry. Her walls contracted around me, gripping my cock so hard I nearly went blind with the pleasure of it.

“Oh, God... Ana...”

To my shock, I flew over the edge right along with her, clutching her tightly against my chest as the tremors shook me. Ana let out a soft moan of relief, and her legs fell limply to the bed. For a few moments, there were no sounds but those of our own heavy breathing and the kisses she pressed to my collar bone.

“Wow... I don’t think I’ve come that quickly since I was fourteen.”

Her dreamy giggle gave way to a low whimper as I withdrew and retrieved her towel to clean up.

“Thank you,” she sighed.

Her eyes were closed when I glanced up at her face again, and her beautiful, kiss-swollen lips were parted in slumber. I smiled and took a moment to watch her, wishing I could curl up right next to her and hold her while she dreamed.

*Not quite yet.*

Getting her into her underwear and pajamas was tricky, but I managed to accomplish it without waking her. I tucked her in and kissed her forehead, turning off the light on my way out of the room.

The dishes didn’t take long, thanks to the condo’s brand new dishwasher. I picked up the toys Amelia had left out and swept the areas of the apartment not obscured by boxes. There were a few boxes I felt comfortable enough to unpack, having learned a bit about Ana’s organization habits, but the real issue was laundry.

I hadn’t done much of my own laundry in the past few years, but I did at least remember how. For the most part. Ana’s more delicate items gave me a moment’s pause, as did the load of Amelia’s clothes. I deliberated between Googling and just calling Gail with my questions, eventually choosing the latter. I was paying her well, after all.

“Her machine has a delicate cycle, but is that all I need to worry about?” I asked my housekeeper, ignoring the light chuckle I could hear from the other end. Probably Taylor, having a laugh at my ignorance. “None of it says 'dry clean' on the tags, but what if I ruin something she really likes?” Not everything was replaceable...

“The delicate cycle with cold water should be safe for everything, Mr. Grey. Just make sure there’s nothing red in the load. The method of drying is more important, because some fabrics
shrink easily. The tags should give instructions on whether the items should be dried on low heat, laid out flat, or hung up.”

“Okay... And the kid stuff? Should that be dried on low too?”

“I’m sure medium heat is fine for those. But you might see if any of the items need to be treated for stains before you wash them. I’m sure Ms. Steele has a stain treatment product of some sort. It'll be a stick or a spray,” Gail explained.

I scanned the box of laundry products and located a bottle of Spray and Wash.

“Got it. And cold water to wash?”

“Yes, sir. If you need help, I could come down and--”

“No, it’s fine. I’ve got it. Thank you for your help, Gail. Have a good night.”

“You too, sir.”

I ended the call with a sigh and began the process of checking Amelia’s clothing for stains one article at a time before tossing them into the washer. I was glad I’d called Gail for help, because I probably wouldn’t have thought to pre-treat for stains. And apparently, three-year-olds attracted a lot of them.

I did wonder what Gail had thought about my refusing her offer to help. In the past, I would’ve had my staff handle any and all manner of household chore, but I knew Ana wouldn’t like it. And as I’d said earlier, taking care of her was my responsibility. Not something to delegate.

For some bizarre reason, folding smaller items neatly was a bit difficult. By the time I finished with Amelia’s clothes, I was pretty sure they looked like she had folded them herself, but hopefully Ana wouldn’t mind that too much. I’d at least gotten the stains out.

It took a few hours to get everything done, and when I was finally ready to join Ana in bed, I checked in briefly with her CPO outside and locked up for the night. Amelia was sleeping soundly when I passed her room, and I chuckled under my breath to see her curled up yet again with her little bottom in the air.

Ana was snoring in faint, girly little noises as I entered the master bedroom, and that made me smile too. I stripped down to my underwear and checked my phone for anything important I had missed. The dozens of work-related emails I’d received throughout the evening could wait, though. I wanted to hold my girl and watch her dream.

The warm weight of her in my arms calmed me in a way nothing else ever had. It was an overwhelming sensation of peace and contentment, as though no problem could ever be too big to handle, so long as I faced it with her at my side. Because that’s where she belonged.

*Forever.*

The thought surprised me, but only a little. I couldn’t imagine ever living without Ana now that I’d had a taste of the happiness she’d brought into my life. I wanted to give her everything, starting with my name. And not just her, but Amelia too. I wanted to adopt her, to be her dad...
To be a family. I’d never thought I was cut out for that sort of life, but as with so many other things, Ana had proven me wrong.

But would she accept? Was it too soon to ask? I knew my feelings for her wouldn’t change, except perhaps to grow stronger, if that were even possible. But did that mean I was ready?

Was she?
Twenty-Seven

Anastasia

I sighed contentedly as I watched the passing scenery from the backseat of one of Christian’s SUVs. Sawyer and Prescott were up front, but neither were prone to small talk. It was an awkwardness that had taken me a little time to get used to, but I knew their silence came from a desire to do their jobs well rather than a dislike of my company.

Our lives had seen some major changes in the past two and a half weeks. Not only had Amelia and I moved from our apartment to a very spacious two-bedroom condo at Escala, but we were now using one of Christian’s security-enhanced vehicles and being chauffeured everywhere by our CPOs. Not being able to drive myself anywhere felt bizarre, but it was a discomfort I could bear if it lessened our mutual anxiety.

Christian had been nagging me to move Amelia to a more secure daycare center as well, but I wanted to hold off on that if at all possible. She’d handled the upheaval of moving remarkably well for a three-year-old, but she’d still had nearly two weeks of mood swings and clinginess. Now that she was back to her usual sunny self, the last thing I wanted to do was force another big change on her so soon after the last.

In retrospect, I had to admit that while my concerns for Amelia had been valid, my own fears and stubbornness had played an equal role in my initial refusal to relocate. I’d grown so accustomed to my independence that the idea of depending so heavily on Christian had intimidated me. It had been a natural reaction, perhaps, but now that the situation was resolved, I felt much better about everything.

Amelia and I weren’t the only ones who had taken the move well. Dad had been a bit skeptical of Christian’s intentions when they’d first met, but ever since he’d gotten wind of our stalker situation, he couldn’t speak highly enough of Christian and his security team.

“You have no idea how much weight it takes off my shoulders, Annie,” he’d told me, his voice practically radiating relief. “I worry about you girls every single day, and this security team you’ve got with you all the time is a godsend. I talked to them the last time you two were here. Did you know they’re all combat veterans? Christian obviously puts your safety at the top of his priority list, and I couldn’t ask for more from him. Of course, it helps that the guy is head over heels for you. That much was obvious within five minutes of meeting him...”

He’d gushed about Christian and his staff for a good ten minutes over the phone, and it was a relief to know we had his approval. It had gone a long way to ease my qualms about how quickly this relationship was moving. Dad was a good judge of character, and he’d never been one to mince words. Having his support had reassured me that I could trust my feelings and my intuition when it came to Christian Grey.

I was pulled from my thoughts when Sawyer brought the car to a stop in the garage at GEH, parking right next to a matching Audi. When we got out, I laughed under my breath and shook my head at the sight of the two vehicles together. Christian and his Audi fetish.

As we rode the elevator up to the executive floor, my mind wandered back to this morning when he’d woken me up early to make love. He’d been sleeping over more often than not since
we’d moved into his building. So often, in fact, that Amelia had been more confused by his absence than his presence lately.

It was incredible to watch the two of them interact. I’d never realized my daughter might have been craving a father figure all along. Not that she was unhappy when it was just the two of us, but the bond she was forming with Christian seemed to bring out the best in her. And vice versa.

To compare the man I’d met in this very building four months ago with the one who had served Amelia her breakfast this morning was nothing short of amazing. Hearing him say he wanted to be a good dad had made me melt, but watching it happen right before my eyes threatened to make my heart burst. I had no doubt that he loved her, and he had more than risen to the challenge of parenthood.

When we stepped off the elevator, I was surprised to see the reception desk in the executive lobby was empty, lacking its usual crew of stylish blondes.

“We’ll wait in Taylor’s office until you’re ready to leave,” Sawyer advised.

I nodded in acknowledgment and headed for the heavy double doors of Christian’s office. He wasn’t expecting me, but I’d checked his schedule with Andrea before dropping by. I was hoping he would be up to going out for lunch somewhere.

I knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for a response, but my steps faltered at the threshold. His last morning meeting should have ended fifteen minutes ago, but it had apparently run a bit late, because the conference table was full of strangers and one visibly impatient CEO. My entrance drew everyone’s attention, and they all sat up a little straighter. Christian’s face brightened at my appearance.

“Come in,” he said with a smile. “We’re just finishing up.”

“I can wait outside…”

“No need. Mr. Brockton and his brother have finally seen fit to accept my offer, and we’ve just finished the final paperwork.”

I followed his gaze to two dark-haired men at the opposite end of the long table, my attention immediately drawn to the younger of the two. He was staring at me with a strange expression, a mixture of surprise, anxiety, and… longing? A chill swept over me, though I wasn’t sure why. There was just something off about him. Something that made my pulse tick faster, like a primal response to a predator.

Then, he spoke.

He was looking at Christian now, speaking hurried words of farewell. He said something about his brother too, but I couldn’t make sense of the words. My head seemed to fill with cotton, muffling all sound save for a high-pitched ringing in my ears. My skin felt chilled and flushed at the same time, and the room spun dangerously.

I’d heard that voice twice before. Once recently, distorted through a speakerphone, and once many years ago. Some part of my brain had recognized it that day in Christian’s office, though I
hadn’t been able to piece it together at the time. But hearing him in person, standing just ten feet away from me in a room that was suddenly closing in around me, I knew it for sure.

It was the same voice that had threatened and belittled me from the other side of the black hood he’d tied over my head. The same voice that had told me I’d deserved his assault on my body. That I’d liked it. That he’d kill me if I didn’t keep quiet.

I hadn’t seen his face that night, and now I was seeing things I wished I could unsee. The angle of Amelia’s jaw, the way her forehead wrinkled when she was upset, the tiny indentation in her chin... All of it was echoed in the face of this stranger.

The air grew thinner, and black spots clouded my vision. I could feel his hands on me. Groping, scratching, bruising... I could feel him move inside me, scarring my body and my soul.

A face appeared in front of me, blurry through my tears and adrenaline but definitely Christian. He was clutching my arms and speaking words I couldn’t hear. But I could read his lips.

_Breathe, Ana._ He was telling me to breathe. _I’m trying_, I tried to say. Where was the air?

My eyes struggled to focus as I scanned the room behind him for the face of the predator I needed to escape, but he was gone. Everyone else was staring at me with concerned expressions, but my attention was drawn back to Christian. I forced myself to focus only on his face and tried to match my breathing to his. The deafening rush of panic in my ears slowly faded and was replaced by the strong, measured tones of Christian’s reassurances.

“‘It’s all right, baby. Deep breaths, now. That’s it...” His words were soothing, but I could hear the confusion and concern in his voice.

I glanced again at my surroundings and belatedly realized he’d moved me to the couch at some point. There was something warm around my shoulders, and I recognized it by its scent. Christian’s jacket. My body was trembling almost violently, and he must have thought I was cold. I couldn’t recall him actually putting it on me, but I appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

Christian meant safety. And love. I leaned into him, practically clinging to his large frame and wishing we were alone.

“What the hell just happened? Talk to me, baby,” he begged. My eyes darted to our audience, and he understood immediately, turning to address them. “Everyone out!”

They filed out of the room quickly, some still gaping in astonishment at my obvious breakdown. I hadn’t had an anxiety attack like this in years, but I recognized it for what it was now that it had begun to pass. My aching lungs were still working overtime, and I was still dizzy with panic. But the steady stream of encouragement and comfort coming from Christian was helping. His arms were tight around me, and he didn’t speak again until we were alone.

“Anastasia, please. What was that?”

Somehow comforted by his use of my full name, I took a shuddering breath and managed to stutter a reply.
“Th-That was... him.”

“Who?”

I shuddered at the thought that I now had a name and a face to fuel my nightmares. Christian drew back to get a better look at me, his eyes bright with worry.

“Brockton. Th-the younger one. He... I didn’t recognize him because I never s-saw his face. But I knew his v-voice.” I spoke haltingly, my words interrupted by short gasps.


“He... He’s the man who... r-raped me.”

Christian’s eyes widened, and his whole body went rigid. Now, he was the one having trouble breathing, but he managed to push through it much quicker than I had. His features were hardened with rage, and he exhaled so sharply through his nose that he reminded me of an angry bull. He squeezed me hard for a moment before he sprang up from the couch and ran for the doors, stopping short when he encountered Taylor standing just outside.

“Don’t let Sam Brockton leave the building! Get him back up here right now!”

Taylor’s brow furrowed in bewilderment, but he sprinted off toward the elevator with his phone to his ear. Sawyer appeared in the doorway and stepped inside, looking just as baffled at the strange turn of events. Christian ignored him and returned to my side.

“I don’t want to see him!” I all but shouted, shaking my head in panic.

“You won’t have to. We’ll hold him until the cops can get here to arrest him. He won’t come anywhere near you. I promise. But Ana... You’re sure?” he asked, visibly struggling to contain his fury.

“Yes. I’ll never forget that voice. I overheard him on one of your conference calls. Weeks ago. But I couldn’t place it.”

Christian nodded, no doubt recalling the nightmare I’d had that very evening. I shuddered again, fighting back a surge of nausea. My body felt brittle, as though I might shatter to pieces at any moment, and I suddenly wanted the warmth of my child in my arms more than I wanted my next breath.

“Amelia. I need Amelia,” I sobbed. “I need to know she’s safe.”

“Ma’am,” Sawyer spoke up from across the room, his fingers touching his wireless earpiece. “I just checked in with Lawrence. He’s on her detail today. She’s at daycare and is eating lunch right now. She’s safe.”

Safe. Was she? Were either of us truly safe when monsters like that existed?

“Thank you,” I replied shakily. But I knew I wouldn’t truly be able to relax until I could hold my baby again. I looked at Christian with pleading eyes. “I want to go pick her up.”
“We will. But right now we need to make sure Brockton is--”

“Sir,” Taylor interrupted, standing in the open doorway. He was slightly out of breath and looked grim. “I'm sorry, sir. Brockton's gone.”
It was all I could do not to scream at Taylor. I wanted to throw something. To hit something. No... to hit him. Brockton. If I ever saw the man again, I’d beat the living hell out of him without a shred of remorse.

But Ana needed me in control. She had every right to lose it right now, but I didn’t. Not when she needed me to keep a level head. She was drawing on my strength, and I refused to let her down. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to center myself despite my overwhelming anger.

“Send someone to tail him,” I ordered, barely managing not to growl the words. “Check his home and office first. And get Welch and Barney up here right now.”

“Yes, sir,” Taylor and Sawyer replied in unison. They didn’t leave the room to handle the instructions I’d given but merely began tapping away on their cell phones and murmuring into their earpieces.

I turned my full attention back to Ana and gathered her in my arms again, holding her to my chest as I stroked her hair. She was still breathing heavily and shaking with silent tears. The absolute terror I’d seen in her eyes during her panic attack would probably haunt me for the rest of my life. I had to fix this.

It took less than five minutes for Welch and Barney to arrive, and I nodded in approval when Taylor shut the door behind them, giving us all some much needed privacy. Barney seemed to pick up on the general mood of the room and merely waited to be told why he was here, but Welch made for Ana the moment he saw her face. He perched on the edge of the chair a few feet away, his brows contracted with worry as he addressed her.

“Ana? What happened?”

I waited a moment to see if she’d answer him, but her hiccupping sobs made it difficult for her to speak. I quietly explained to him, as well as the others in the room, that she’d had a panic attack and gave them a quick run-down of the situation. Ana shuddered again in my arms and buried her face harder against my chest, and I felt a wave of guilt for having to share her trauma with them. I kept the details as light as possible, but there was simply no way to sugarcoat it. If they were going to help keep my girls safe, they needed to know.

Their expressions were a mixture of anger, disgust, and empathy. And everyone apart from Welch looked shocked.

“I want him arrested. Right now,” I demanded. Taylor held up a cell phone.

“I’m waiting for a call from our contact at the Seattle PD. When you ordered the tail, I assumed it had something to do with Rodriguez.”

Fuck. I hadn’t even thought of that, but I was glad Taylor had taken that initiative.
“It may not be that simple,” Welch said quietly. “With no evidence to hand, Brockton would probably be released on bail, pending further investigation or a trial. That’s if they think there’s just cause to arrest him at all.”

To my surprise, it was Ana who spoke up next, her voice a little stronger now. She moved to sit up, and I relinquished my hold on her with a sigh of mingled disappointment and relief. I was happy to see her coming back to herself, but the physical contact had been soothing to us both.

“They can do a DNA test. I had a rape kit done when it happened. The evidence should still be in storage.”

“Yes, but tracking it down and actually testing the samples may take time,” Welch pointed out. “There are thousands of untested kits in county storage. Assuming the sample hasn’t been degraded by bad storage conditions, which could easily happen, a judge would have to order him to submit a DNA sample. Then, both samples would have to be crossmatched.”

“They could compare with Amelia’s DNA, but that only proves intercourse. Not rape,” I added with a scowl.

“Right. And in the meantime, he’ll probably be granted bail. If he has half a brain, he’ll skip town.”

Taylor was typing furiously on his phone but was apparently also keeping up with the conversation.

“Jensen and Morris have eyes on him now, sir. If he runs, they’ll follow him.”

I acknowledged him with a nod.

“There has to be a way to keep him from making bail,” I argued. “I just bought his company, and they’re in the red. We signed the papers this morning. Finally. If we delay the initial payment, he’ll have no funds for bail unless he’s got hidden resources somewhere.

“We’ve been monitoring Brockton’s finances ever since he started doing things to slow negotiations,” Barney reminded me, speaking for the first time since he’d entered the room. “He’s been making large cash withdrawals over the past few months, and he’s pretty much tapped out. I can work a bit of magic and trigger a lockdown on his accounts. I’m not sure how much that would help, though. It would freeze his assets, but it wouldn’t stop him from taking out a loan or getting someone else to post bail for him.”

We all fell into silence for a moment as we digested his words, but Welch was the first to break it. He appeared to be deep in thought, almost as though he were speaking aloud to himself.

“Large cash withdrawals...” He looked at Ana with wide eyes. “Did he recognize you? Just now?”

_Holy shit._ My skin prickled uncomfortably as I followed his logic. Hadn’t we all been pulling our hair out for weeks trying to figure out what we were missing?

“I’d assume so, since he pretty much sprinted out of the building,” Taylor said.
“He did. He was looking at me, and...” Ana shuddered, and I squeezed her hand encouragingly, my eyes going back to Welch.

“You think Brockton was paying Rodriguez?”

“What?” Ana was visibly stunned by the notion and looked like she wanted to throw up. “But why? If he knew who I was all this time, why wait four years? And that would mean he knows about Amelia...”

I could see her starting to panic again, and took hold of her chin gently to keep her focused.

“He’ll never get anywhere near her. We’ll keep her safe, Anastasia. Both of you,” I vowed, lowering my hand to clasp hers. “As for why... Maybe our relationship put you back on his radar? Or maybe he didn’t know who you were until recently? He could’ve recognized you from pictures in the media.”

_He also could have seen us in person somewhere_, I thought. But I didn’t say it out loud. She was disturbed enough as it was. Ana sighed, attempting to refocus as she turned back to Welch.

“What happens if he’s arrested but contests the charge?”

“That’s a question for a lawyer, but... Maybe the key is exposure. If he’s accused and stands trial, his picture would be all over the news. More women might come forward, and that would strengthen the case. That might be necessary if the samples in evidence are no longer viable. And I doubt you were his only victim.”

“No,” Ana said in a hollow tone, shaking her head slightly. “We can’t do that. A trial would mean I’m exposed too. The assault would become public knowledge, and... Amelia would find out.”

“She’s only three. She wouldn’t understand,” I tried to comfort her.

“Maybe not now, but she’d still hear about it much too soon. Once the truth is out there, it can’t be taken back. I can’t put that on a child, and that’s not how I want her to find out as an adult, either. When she’s old enough to know the truth, I need to be able to control the message a little bit. It’s important that she hears it from me instead of reading it in some news article.

“Plus, with a trial, the press wouldn’t just be taking my picture. They’d put her in the spotlight too, and that’s unacceptable. It would be different if it were just me, but I won’t do that to my child.”

I sighed and was forced to agree with her assessment, but I hated the defeat I could hear in her voice. There was no way in hell we could just let this guy go. I couldn’t stand for it.

Ever since Ana had helped me see the reality of my situation with Elena Lincoln, I’d been sick with guilt that I’d done nothing to expose her. She’d been a predator, and I’d let her walk free. How many others had she abused after she’d finished with me? The answer to that question had died with her, along with my ability to correct my mistakes. I would carry the weight of that failure for the rest of my life, and I’d be damned if I let Ana suffer in the same way.

“We have to do something, Ana. For the sake of his future victims, he has to be stopped.”
She met my gaze with watery eyes, her lips pursed in chagrin. I could tell she agreed with me, but her fears were stronger than her desire for justice at the moment. Welch cleared his throat significantly.

“There are less legal ways to go about that.”

A heavy silence filled the room as everyone exchanged wary glances, and an understanding of sorts passed between us. I eyed Ana cautiously.

“If I told you to leave the room for a few minutes...”

“I think you know the odds of that actually happening,” Ana replied, with a look that questioned my sanity.

It was a slight relief to see her looking more like her usual self. Were it not for the seriousness of the situation, I might have cracked a smile at her response. Her defiance was one of my favorite things about her. I glanced back at Welch and inclined my head minutely.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well...” He paused, his eyes scanning each face in the room. “If any of you are uncomfortable with knowledge that could land you in jail, you should leave now.” No one moved, but Ana sat up a little straighter, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“You’re not actually going to suggest having him killed. You can’t do that.”

“No, that’s not what I had in mind. As satisfying as that would be, I’m not suggesting anyone commit murder. But Brockton can’t rape anyone ever again if he’s missing certain... parts.”

The other men in the room cringed slightly, but I didn’t. As far as I was concerned, it wasn’t nearly enough. If anything, castration was the very least this man deserved.

“Are you saying you know how to do that without killing him?” I asked skeptically.

“Not personally, but I know someone who does. I believe it can be done chemically, but that’s reversible. Surgically would be better. Losing his balls would probably do wonders for his personality, not to mention his behavior. It can be done without necessitating further medical treatment. For the right price, of course.”

“Money isn’t an issue. But this can’t be linked back to me or anyone else in this room. Especially Ana.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem.”

The room was silent again for a few moments, as though everyone was afraid to even breathe too loudly. I weighed the potential consequences and frowned skeptically at Welch. His anger toward Ana’s rapist was still etched in his features, but that maddeningly quiet confidence of his was there too.
“Why should I trust you with this?” I asked bluntly. “You’ve proven your loyalty to Ana, but how do I know you’re not just going to throw me under the bus? A mere rumor of my involvement in something like this would destroy my business and lead to the loss of thousands of jobs. So, why should I trust you?”

Welch opened his mouth to reply, but Ana beat him to it.

“Because I do. And to trust me is to trust him.” My eyes darted to her face, and she was frowning in determination. Her voice continued to gain strength as she went on, “When I first got a security detail, you said the same words to me about your CPOs. I didn’t know any of them, but you put them in charge of my safety and my privacy. Amelia’s too. And I trusted them because I trusted you.

“You know Garrett did what he did with good intentions, that he did it out of respect for my privacy. Nothing he withheld put you or anyone else at risk, and you’ve had him on probation for months. It’s time to let it go.”

“If you’d like to avoid incrimination by firing me first, I’m fine with that,” Welch said calmly. Ana started to argue, but I held up a hand to silence them both.

“No. Ana’s right.” I sighed, looking Welch in the eye. “She finds you trustworthy, and... That will have to be enough for me. I’d be a hypocrite to argue otherwise. I do understand why you did it, and I’m man enough to let it go. So, you’re officially off probation, and I think a clean slate is the best option here. Don’t make me regret it.”

Welch gave me a solemn nod and reached across the space to shake my hand. I accepted the handshake with resignation, but I was more than pleased to see a small smile of approval on Ana’s face. Anything that could make her smile in the middle of all this was worth a little discomfort on my end.

“All right,” Welch began, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Here’s how this would go down...”
“Can I have the biggest piece?”

I chuckled at Amelia’s question as she peered at the chocolate cake we’d just put in the oven. Her little face and hands were smeared with cake batter, and her blue eyes were bright with excitement.

“Only if you eat all of your vegetables at dinner,” I replied, pleased when she nodded in agreement.

“She’s a mess,” Ana observed with an indulgent smile.

“Yeah. I’ve got it.”

Ana went back to her dinner preparations as I lifted Amelia into my arms, carefully avoiding her messy hands and heading to the bathroom to clean her up. She was surprisingly cooperative with the process, allowing me to put her in a new outfit with remarkably little fuss. Dressing Amelia sometimes felt like wrestling an octopus, but the promise of chocolate cake was effective.

When I picked her up to return to the living room, she surprised me again. Her little arms squeezed my neck in a hug, and she rested her head on my shoulder. She let out a contented sigh and leaned up just enough to kiss my cheek. She didn’t say a word, but she didn’t need to. Her head fell back onto my shoulder, and my arms tightened around her reflexively, making her mass of curls tickle my jaw.

The love that surged through me nearly made me stumble, and there was a new sort of ache in my chest. Not the pain or burning I was used to, but something else entirely. It was an ache of utter fullness, as though my heart might actually burst with love for her.

I spotted Ana watching us from the kitchen, and we shared a look of silent understanding. Her smile was brilliant, and I could see that same love shining from her eyes. I patted Amelia’s little back and swayed unconsciously as I held Ana’s gaze. Sometimes, words just weren’t necessary between us.

“Can I watch Ponies?” Amelia asked, popping her head up and unwittingly interrupting our moment. I grinned at her hopeful expression.

“That’s a great idea. Let’s go put it on, and you can watch it while I help Mommy make dinner.”

“Yay!”

Amelia wriggled in my arms, which was her usual signal for wanting to be put down, and I obliged her with a chuckle. I quickly found the most recent episode of her show on the DVR list and settled her favorite throw blanket around her shoulders.
When I joined Ana in the kitchen, she leaned up for a quick kiss. Too quick for my liking, but there was a child present. At least bedtime was only a few hours away.

“Thank you for helping with her.”

“My pleasure,” I said with sincerity. “What can I do in here?”

“Um… Maybe just set the table? Not much else to be done, really.”

I finished that task quickly and came back to sit on one of the barstools, watching Ana stir the contents of a large stock pot on the stove. The stew had been slowly cooking all day, filling the apartment with a delicious aroma. Between that and the cake that was now in the oven, the place had never smelled more comforting. It was the scent of home.

We were both quiet for a few minutes, periodically glancing at my phone where it lay silently on the countertop next to me. I could feel the undercurrent of Ana’s anxiety nearly as much as my own, and I quelled the urge to check in with Welch again.

It had been a week since we’d discovered the identity of Ana’s rapist and given the green light on Welch’s plan. It had taken a little time to set up and ensure a flawless execution, but our patience had paid off. Or at least, I hoped it had. Tonight was the night, and now we were just waiting for confirmation.

The first few days after the big revelation had been the most difficult for Ana. Once the initial shock had begun to pass, she’d wavered a bit in her resolve that we were doing the right thing. But she knew as well as I that we couldn’t live in fear for the rest of our lives.

Her sleep had been plagued by nightmares, and she’d come close to having another full-blown anxiety attack that first night. She’d worked from home every day this week, preferring to keep Amelia close to her at all times. Since I knew they were safe here, I couldn’t have been happier with that arrangement. I’d taken time off work to be with them too, which had given me a lot of time to ponder the state of things.

“You know, I’ve been thinking... Seems like I’m here more often than I’m at my place these days. We really only go there to use the playroom at this point.”

“I noticed,” Ana replied with a smirk. “I’d suggest we split the time, but Amelia really likes having you here. And your apartment is about as far from child-proofed as it could possibly be.”

“I don’t mind staying here instead. I like being here too. But I was thinking it might be more convenient for everyone if we all just... lived together all the time.”

I held my breath in anticipation as Ana looked up from the stove in surprise. For the space of one heartbeat, I thought I might have misjudged the moment, but then her face lit up with an absolutely breathtaking smile.

“Seriously?! You want to move in together?”

I shrugged playfully and mirrored her smile as I moved to slip my arms around her waist.

“We pretty much already have. May as well make it official.”
“Makes sense,” Ana grinned, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her lips to mine again. “You already have some things here. I know you’re attached to your piano, though, and I’m not sure we have room for that. Among... other things.”

I chuckled at her reference to the sex toy collection that had only grown larger in the three months we’d been together. I took a deep breath, studying her beautiful face and hoping like hell I wasn’t about to ruin anything.

“Well, I had some thoughts about that too, and... I don’t just want to live together. I want to marry you, Anastasia. I want to adopt Amelia and give her younger siblings someday. I want the house, the family, the white picket fence... I want it all. And I want it with you.”

Ana’s eyes were wide, and I had apparently rendered her speechless. I was afraid to breathe, staring into her eyes as though I might be able to read her mind. Fuck... Did I scare her? Is it too soon?

“Please, say something,” I whispered. She opened her mouth but seemed to flounder for a second before her smile finally reappeared. My muscles relaxed slightly.

“You really want to adopt her?”

“If you’ll let me. If you think it’s right. But whether it’s legal or not... I feel like her daddy. I can’t imagine loving her more, even if she were my own.”

Ana nodded, and a single happy tear spilled over her cheek. I smiled back at her, wiping it away as I waited for her to speak again.

“Can we have that picket fence and a playroom in the basement?”

I laughed out loud, and relief flooded my body as I hugged her against my chest.

“Baby, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Then, yes,” she answered, and I raised my brows in excitement.

“Yes to...?”

“All of it.”

Thank God. My lips crashed down on hers, and she kissed me back with equal fervor. Her fingers wove through my hair as my tongue slipped into her mouth. She squeaked slightly when I pressed her harder against me, effectively pushing the air out of her lungs. I chuckled at the adorable sound and drew back.

“Wait,” I said, slightly breathless. “I need to do this right.”

Without another word, I hurried into her bedroom where I’d left my briefcase and removed a small red box. I’d bought it a few days ago but hadn’t yet come up with a proposal plan that felt amazing enough for my Ana. Kneeling at her feet in the middle of her kitchen while Twilight Sparkle sang in the background wouldn’t have been my first choice, but here I was...
“Anastasia Steele... Before I met you, I thought I knew who I was and what I wanted. But you’ve opened my eyes to so much more than I ever dreamed was possible for me. You and Amelia are everything I never knew I needed, and I’ll never lose sight of that. I’m asking you to be my wife. My family. My home. Will you marry me?”

Tears of joy and love filled her eyes as she beamed down at me, and her voice was tight with emotion.

“Yes!”

Five hours later, we lay sated and spent in each other’s arms, and my mind was still reeling at the unexpected turn the evening had taken. Part of me wished I’d taken more time to come up with an elaborate proposal, but the idea of waiting another second to see my ring on Ana’s finger had been unbearable.

As it was, I couldn’t have imagined a more perfect night. We’d eaten dinner as a family, and Amelia had finished off an impressively large slice of cake before falling into a sugar coma. Once we’d gotten her tucked into bed, we’d celebrated our engagement with a quick scene followed by multiple rounds of lovemaking. We were now blissfully exhausted, and Ana was curled up against my side, playing with the hair on my chest.

“How do you feel about a destination wedding? Combine it with a honeymoon, keep it small, private...”

“Sounds perfect. Much easier to keep private if it’s not in Seattle. Are you sure small is what you want, though? I thought most women wanted big weddings.”

“I’m not most women,” she shrugged. I laughed lightly.

“Don’t I know it. Hmm... Where would you like to live? I can get a real estate agent to start looking tomorrow. It might take a little time to find the right property.”

“I suppose your idea of the ‘right property’ involves something with a lot of land, an absurd number of square feet, and state-of-the-art security?” She met my gaze with a twinkle in her eye, and I smiled wryly.

“Well, I don’t know what you mean by ‘absurd,’ but the rest sounds correct. No matter where we end up, I’ll make sure it’s safe.”

“I know, and I agree with that. But security is one thing. Unnecessary extravagance is another. I think what I’d like most is just... a normal house. Or as close to it as we can reasonably get. Big enough for a family and with a great security system, but I don’t need thousands upon thousands of square feet. I wouldn’t even know what to do with that much space. Much less how to take care of it.”

“We’d fill it with children, Mrs. Grey,” I grinned salaciously, turning onto my side so we faced each other. “As for taking care of it, that’s what a staff is for.” She gave me a look that was somewhere between a challenge and a plea.
“You have enough staff. As much as I like Gail, I’d rather not have a full-time housekeeper. Occasional help is great, but we don’t need someone there all the time.”

I pursed my lips and considered her point for a moment, trying to envision the life she was describing. It was difficult but not impossible. I shrugged a bit self-consciously.

“It’s just what I’m used to. It’s how I was raised.”

“I know. But even you agreed that being so pampered did you and your siblings a disservice,” she reminded me. I sighed.

“Yes, I remember the discussion. Are you saying you don’t want any staff?”

“No, I understand that we’re both busy and that security is an issue. I’m not saying you have to fire anyone. And I obviously have no objection to daytime childcare while we’re working. I just think... It’s our job as parents to prepare our children to survive out in the world. Not just in their own insulated corner of it.”

I grinned at the mention of parenting and children in the plural sense. That was one part I couldn’t wait to get started on.

“I suppose you’re right,” I conceded. “We’ll figure it out as we go, baby. I’m sure we’ll find a middle ground. Honestly, I don’t care what kind of house we end up in so long as we’re together. And so long as it has space for that playroom you mentioned.”

Her smile matched mine, and we leaned in for another kiss, quickly getting lost in each other again. I was about to ask whether she had the energy for another round when my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Ana broke the kiss reluctantly and reached for it, handing it to me with an expression that was suddenly wary and anxious. In all of the excitement, I’d nearly forgotten the update we were expecting. I accepted the call and held the phone so that Ana could hear too. Welch skipped the traditional greeting and spoke only two words.

“It’s done.”
Epilogue

Anastasia

I held my breath as I waited for the next swat of the crop. My skin was warm and tingling from the repetitive strikes, and I knew I wasn’t far from subspace. The numbness of complete and total submission would take over soon, and the pain wouldn’t be able to reach me. Only the pleasure.

**Swat.**

My body flinched only a little, and a whimper escaped my lips. I was standing in the middle of our playroom, my hands cuffed to the suspension grid above my head as my husband brought me closer and closer to oblivion.

**Swat.**

**Fuck... So close...**

The next strike hurt less, and the one that followed brought no pain at all. I let out a long sigh and felt my body relax as much as my position would allow. I might have been weightless, floating in mid-air as I lost myself to the ocean of peace that awaited me. I expected another swat, but the next touch I felt wasn’t the crop.

It was his hand.

“So beautiful. And you don’t even realize it,” he murmured from behind me, caressing my hips, my ass, my breasts, and finally my stomach. His favorite parts, he loved to tell me, other than my eyes and smile. “It amazes me that you can feel even remotely self-conscious about your body. Especially when I can’t get enough of you.”

Christian pressed an open kiss to the side of my neck, and I shuddered with pleasure.

“You were gorgeous when we met,” he crooned against my skin. “Breathtaking during your pregnancies...” His hand swooped over my belly. “And every bit as stunning now. I can’t imagine ever looking at you and not wanting you.”

I managed a moan in response, and he chuckled, probably knowing I was well beyond the powers of coherent speech. He continued to talk as he brought me to yet another climax, worshiping me as much with his words as with his hands.

By the time I was fully aware of my surroundings again, Christian had moved me to the bed and was gently massaging my tender skin, crooning soft words of praise and love. It had been our first scene since the birth of our second daughter, and I marveled over how well it had gone. Not only had he managed to make me feel sexy less than two months after giving birth, but he’d gotten me out of my own head long enough to reach subspace. I turned my head to smile at him lazily.

“You’re very good at that.”
“At pampering you?” he smirked. “I should be. I’m pretty sure it’s the only thing that kept me alive through both pregnancies.”

“Yes, but I didn’t just mean that. You’re good at all of it. Being a lover, a husband, a Dominant…” I trailed off when he sighed and came to lay next to me, brushing the hair back from my face.

“That’s all because of you, love. When I met you, I didn’t know the first thing about being a lover, much less someone’s husband. As for the other… Fuck, I had it so twisted up that I never should have called myself a Dom. I had no idea what it truly meant back then.”

I frowned a little at his wistful expression, reaching up to smooth the crease between his brows. I knew he still had some regrets about his past, but he’d done a very good job of making peace with it. There had been no real way to get closure, since his abuser had been dead for years. But I’d helped him find a good therapist, and he’d done the work. It hadn’t been an easy road for either of us, but we were better off for having traveled it.

“You’ve come a long way, Christian. But please don’t talk like you were some kind of heartless monster before you met me. You know that’s not true.”

He gave me a rueful smile and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I know.”

I relaxed into his embrace and breathed him in, loving the way his arms felt around me. He was the only person who had the power to make me feel so perfectly happy, cherished, and safe. Especially safe. Christian had helped me fight my demons in every sense of the word, carrying the burden of my fears and, more than once, being strong when I could not.

The weight of that burden had lightened considerably when Sam Brockton had died.

The man Garrett hired had managed to get quite a bit of information out of Brockton before he’d knocked him out for the procedure. Brockton had seen me at GEH the day I’d interviewed Christian and had recognized me right away, though he hadn’t known my name. He’d waited outside the building and followed me home that day, but he’d been careful not to get too close. Brockton had watched me long enough to realize I had a child that was most likely his, and it had compelled him to keep tabs on me. Cue José Rodriguez. Brockton hadn’t yet decided what to do with the information Rodriguez had provided, but seeing me in the press with Christian had pissed him off. It had motivated him to drag his feet even more on the sale of his company, if only to keep Christian from getting something he wanted.

Garrett’s friend had coaxed Brockton to admit to quite a lot, including the fact that I hadn’t been his only victim. Forcing women had turned him on, but only when it was real. Roleplay hadn’t been enough. Of course, he’d made promises to turn himself into the cops and plead guilty to the charges, but that option had never been in the cards for him. He’d been neutered like the animal he was, no doubt leaving a hormonal imbalance for which he’d been too humiliated to seek treatment.
Or at least, that was my assumption, since the incident had never been reported to the police. Christian’s security had kept a close watch on Brockton for months, right up to the moment the man had committed suicide.

Knowing my rapist was dead was the nearest thing to closure I would ever get, and like my husband, I’d made peace with the rest.

“What time is Ray dropping the kids off?” Christian asked, drawing me out of my memories.

“Six. He’s bringing dinner, but they’re eating here.”

“Perfect. We have time for a bath. I’m not ready to let you get dressed yet, Mrs. Grey.”

I smiled and shook my head, letting him guide me from our playroom to the master bathroom.

We’d moved out of Escala not long after Christian had proposed, compromising on a house that was large but not outlandishly so. It was in a very secure gated community, and although our security staff was around on a regular basis, they didn’t live on the premises. Christian was reasonably satisfied with the arrangement, and so far, we hadn’t had any security threats that necessitated a change.

Our hidden playroom was one of my favorite things about our home, and the same could be said for the master bathroom. Christian and I fit easily in the tub together, and we’d made good use of the jacuzzi feature on more than one occasion.

Christian sat behind me and pulled me to his chest, letting the hot water swirl around us. His hands were caressing every part of me he could reach, and for once, I didn’t cringe when they drifted over my still-recovering stomach. I knew he’d been telling the truth about not being able to keep his hands off of me. These days, if he didn’t have an armful of one kid or the other, he had an armful of me instead.

Despite having so little contact with children before meeting Amelia, Christian had taken to fatherhood with incredible ease. I’d gotten pregnant just before the wedding, and by the time our son arrived, Amelia’s adoption had been finalized. Christian had begun dropping hints about wanting another baby before Maddox was even a year old, but I’d managed to hold him off for a little while. This last pregnancy had been quite a bit harder on me than the others, but our little Hadley was well worth the trouble.

As the clock ticked closer to six, we got dressed and enjoyed our last few minutes of peace and quiet before Dad arrived with the kids. We flirted and kissed, taking much longer than necessary to get the table set for dinner. I sighed happily as I handed Christian the plates and silverware, and he carried them to the dining room with a satisfied grin.

“You know... I really do like this table,” he said casually. Well, almost casually. I quirked a brow in suspicion.

“I’m glad. Is there a reason you’re particularly taken with it right now?”

“I just think it’s a great size. Room for one or two more people.”
Oh, Lord.

“One or two?” I echoed incredulously, fighting a smile of my own. “Christian, we have three kids under seven, and two of them are still in diapers.”

“It doesn’t have to be soon. We could wait a couple of years before the next one. I’m just not sure if I’m ready to say we’re done, you know?”

I smirked and shook my head in wonder.

“This from the man who thought he wasn’t cut out to be a father.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been proven wrong about quite a few things, Mrs. Grey.”

He crossed the room to kiss me again, and I melted into him, already feeling my resolve start to weaken. He knew just how to get to me. The very idea of expanding our family again made me feel instantly tired, but on the other hand, I could appreciate Christian’s reluctance to close the door on it. The kids brought us so much joy, and it was hard to say ‘never again.’ Still, it was way too soon to be talking about this.

“I won’t say no, but I’m really not ready to think about doing it all over again. Hadley isn’t even eight weeks old.”

“That’s fair. Maybe we can revisit the subject in… a year?” he offered cheekily.

“Two years.”

“Deal,” he grinned.

And we sealed it with another perfect kiss.

A Word from the Author

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