

THURSDAY, JUNE 9, 2011

I sit. Waiting. My heart is thumping. It's 5:36 and I stare through the privacy glass of my Audi at the front door of her building. I know I'm early, but I've been looking forward to this moment all day.

I'm going to see her.

I shift in my seat in the rear of the car. The atmosphere feels stifling, and though I'm trying to remain calm, the anticipation and anxiety are knotting my stomach and pressing down on my chest. Taylor sits in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead, wordless, looking his usual composed self, while I can barely breathe. It's irritating.

Damn it. Where is she?

She's inside—inside Seattle Independent Publishing. Set back beyond a wide, open sidewalk, the building is shabby and in need of renovation; the company's name is etched haphazardly in the glass, and the frosted effect on the window is peeling. The business behind those closed doors could be an insurance company or an accounting firm—they're not displaying their wares. Well, that's something I can rectify when I take control. SIP is mine. Almost. I've signed the revised heads of agreement.

Taylor clears his throat and his eyes dart to mine in the rearview mirror. "I'll wait outside, sir," he says, surprising me, and he climbs out of the car before I can stop him.

Maybe he's more affected by my tension than I thought. Am I that obvious? Maybe *he's* tense. But why? Maybe it's because he's had to deal with my ever-changing moods this past week, and I know I've not been easy.

But today has been different. Hopeful. It's the first productive day I've had since she left me, or so it feels. My optimism has driven me through my meetings with enthusiasm. Ten hours until I see her. Nine. Eight. Seven... My patience has been tested by the clock as it ticks closer to my reunion with Miss Anastasia Steele.

And now that I'm sitting here, alone and waiting, the determination and confidence I've enjoyed all day are evaporating.

Perhaps she's changed her mind.

Will it be a reunion? Or am I just the free ride to Portland?

I check my watch again.

5:38.

Shit. Why does time move so slowly?

I contemplate sending her an e-mail to let her know I'm outside, but as I fumble for my phone, I realize I don't want to take my eyes off the front door. Leaning back, I run through her recent e-mails in my mind. I know them by heart, all of them friendly and concise but without a hint that she's been missing me.

Maybe I *am* the free ride.

I dismiss the thought and stare at the doorway, willing her to appear.

Anastasia Steele, I'm waiting.

The door opens and my heart soars into overdrive but then quickly stutters with disappointment. It's not her.

Damn.

She has always kept me waiting. A humorless smile tugs at my lips: waiting at Clayton's, at The Heathman after the photo shoot, and again when I sent her the Thomas Hardy books.

Tess...

I wonder if she still has them. She wanted to give them back to me; she wanted to give them to a charity.

I don't want anything that will remind me of you.

The image of Ana leaving surfaces in my mind's eye: her sad, ashen face stricken with hurt and confusion. The memory is unwelcome. Painful.

I made her that miserable. I took everything too far, too quickly. And it fills me with a despair that has become all too familiar since she left. Closing my eyes, I try to center myself, but I'm confronted by my deepest, darkest fear: she's met someone else. She's sharing her little white bed and her beautiful body with some fucking stranger.

Damn it, Grey. Stay positive.

Don't go there. All is not lost. You'll be seeing her shortly. Your plans are in place. You are going to win her back. Opening my eyes, I stare at the front door through the window, my mood now as dark as the Audi's tinted glass. More people leave the building, but still no Ana.

Where is she?

Taylor is pacing outside and glancing toward the front door. Christ, he looks as nervous as I feel. *What the hell is it to him?*

My watch says 5:43. She'll be out in a moment. I take a deep breath and tug at my cuffs, then try to straighten my tie, only to find I'm not wearing one. *Hell.* Raking my hand through my hair, I try to dismiss my doubts, but they continue to plague me. *Am I just a free ride to her? Will she have missed me? Will she want me back? Is there someone else?* I have no idea. This is worse than waiting for her in the Marble Bar, and the irony is not lost on me. I thought that was the biggest deal I'd ever negotiate with her and that didn't turn out the way I expected. Nothing turns out as I expect with Miss Anastasia Steele. Panic knots my stomach once more. Today, I have to negotiate a bigger deal.

I want her back.

She said she loved me...

My heart rate spikes in response to the adrenaline that floods my body.

No. No. Don't think about that. She can't feel that way about me.

Calm down, Grey. Focus.

I glance once more at the entrance to Seattle Independent Publishing and she's there, walking toward me.

Fuck.

Ana.

Shock sucks the breath from my body like a kick to the solar plexus. Beneath a black jacket she's wearing one of my favorite dresses, the purple one, and black high-heeled boots. Her hair, burnished by the early-evening sun, sways in the breeze as she moves. But it's not her clothing or her hair that holds my attention. Her face is pale, almost translucent. There are dark circles beneath her eyes, and she's thinner.

Thinner.

Guilt lances through me.

Christ.

She's suffered, too.

My concern at her appearance turns to anger.

No. Fury.

She hasn't been eating. She's lost, what, five or six pounds in the last few days? She glances at some random guy behind her and he gives her a broad smile. He's a good-looking son

of a bitch, full of himself. *Asshole*. Their carefree exchange only fuels my rage. He watches her with blatant male appreciation as she walks toward the car, and my wrath increases with each of her steps.

Taylor opens the door and offers her his hand to help her climb inside. And suddenly she is sitting beside me.

“When did you last eat?” I snap, struggling to keep my composure. Her blue eyes peer up at me, stripping me bare and leaving me as raw as they did the first time I met her.

“Hello, Christian. Yes, it’s nice to see you, too,” she says.

What. The. Fuck.

“I don’t want your smart mouth now. Answer me.”

She stares at her hands in her lap, so that I’ve no idea what she’s thinking, then trots out some lame excuse about eating a yogurt and a banana.

That’s not eating!

I try, really try, to keep a rein on my temper.

“When did you last have a real meal?” I press her, but she ignores me, looking out the window. Taylor pulls away from the curb, and Ana waves to the prick who followed her out of the building.

“Who’s that?”

“My boss.”

So that’s Jack Hyde. I recall the employee details I flipped through this morning: from Detroit, scholarship to Princeton, worked his way up at a publishing firm in New York but has moved on every few years, working his way across the country. He never retains an assistant—they don’t last more than three months. He’s on my watch list, and I’ll have my security adviser Welch find out more.

Focus on the matter at hand, Grey.

“Well? Your last meal?”

“Christian, that really is none of your concern,” she whispers.

“Whatever you do concerns me. Tell me.” Don’t write me off, Anastasia. *Please.*

I’m the free ride.

She sighs in frustration and rolls her eyes to piss me off. And I see it—a soft smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. She’s trying not to laugh. She’s trying not to laugh *at me*. After all the heartache I’ve suffered, it’s so refreshing that it cracks through my anger. It’s so Ana. I find myself mirroring her, and I try to mask my smile.

“Well?” My tone is much gentler.

“Pasta alla Vongole, last Friday,” she answers, her voice subdued.

Jesus H. Christ, she’s not eaten since our last meal together! I want to pull her across my knee, right now, here in the back of the SUV—but I know I can’t ever touch her like that again.

What do I do with her?

She looks down, examining her hands, her face paler and sadder than it was before. And I drink her in, trying to fathom what to do. An unwelcome emotion blooms in my chest, threatening to overwhelm me but I push it aside. As I study her it becomes achingly clear that my biggest fear is unfounded. I know she didn’t get drunk and meet someone. Looking at how she is now, I know she’s been on her own, tucked up in her bed, weeping her heart out. The thought is at once comforting and distressing. I’m responsible for her misery.

Me.

I’m the monster. I did this to her. How can I ever win her back?

“I see.” The words feel inadequate. My task suddenly feels too daunting. She will never want me back.

Get a grip, Grey.

I damp down my fear and make a plea. “You look like you’ve lost at least five pounds, possibly more since then. Please eat, Anastasia.” I’m helpless. What else can I say?

She sits still, lost in her own thoughts, staring straight ahead, and I have time to study her profile. She’s as elfin and sweet and as beautiful as I remember. I want to reach out and stroke her cheek. Feel how soft her skin is...check that she’s real. I turn my body toward her, itching to touch her.

“How are you?” I ask, because I want to hear her voice.

“If I told you I was fine, I’d be lying.”

Damn. I’m right. She’s been suffering—and it’s all my fault. But her words give me a modicum of hope. Perhaps she’s missed me. Maybe? Encouraged, I cling to that thought. “Me, too. I miss you.” I reach for her hand because I can’t live another minute without touching her. Her hand feels small and ice-cold engulfed in the warmth of mine.

“Christian. I—” She stops, her voice cracking, but she doesn’t pull her hand from mine.

“Ana, please. We need to talk.”

“Christian. I...please. I’ve cried so much,” she whispers, and her words, and the sight of her fighting back tears, pierce what’s left of my heart.

“Oh, baby, no.” I tug her hand and before she can protest I lift her into my lap, circling her with my arms.

Oh, the feel of her.

“I’ve missed you so much, Anastasia.” She’s too light, too fragile, and I want to shout in frustration, but instead I bury my nose in her hair, overwhelmed by her intoxicating scent. It’s reminiscent of happier times: An orchard in the fall. Laughter at home. Bright eyes, full of humor and mischief...and desire. My sweet, sweet Ana.

Mine.

At first, she’s stiff with resistance, but after a beat she relaxes against me, her head resting on my shoulder. Emboldened, I take a risk and, closing my eyes, I kiss her hair. She doesn’t struggle out of my hold, and it’s a relief. I’ve yearned for this woman. But I must be careful. I don’t want her to bolt again. I hold her, enjoying the feel of her in my arms and this simple moment of tranquility.

But it’s a brief interlude—Taylor reaches the Seattle downtown helipad in record time.

“Come.” With reluctance, I lift her off my lap. “We’re here.”

Perplexed eyes search mine.

“Helipad—on the top of this building.” How did she think we were getting to Portland? It would take at least three hours to drive. Taylor opens her door and I climb out on my side.

“I should give you back your handkerchief,” she says to Taylor with a coy smile.

“Keep it, Miss Steele, with my best wishes.”

What the hell is going on between them?

“Nine?” I interrupt, not just to remind him what time he’ll pick us up in Portland, but to stop him from talking to Ana.

“Yes, sir,” he says quietly.

Damn right. She’s my girl. Handkerchiefs are my business, not his.

Flashes of her vomiting on the ground, me holding back her hair, run through my head. I gave her my handkerchief then. I never got it back. And later that night I watched her sleep beside me. Perhaps she still has it. Perhaps she still uses it.

Stop. Now. Grey.

Taking her hand—the chill has gone, but her hand is still cool—I lead her into the building. As we reach the elevator, I recall our encounter at The Heathman. That first kiss.

Yeah. That first kiss.

The thought wakes my body.

But the doors open, distracting me, and reluctantly I release her to usher her inside.

The elevator is small, and we're no longer touching. But I sense her.

All of her.

Here. Now.

Shit. I swallow.

Is it because she's so near? Darkening eyes look up at mine.

Oh, Ana.

Her proximity is arousing. She inhales sharply and looks at the floor.

"I feel it, too." I reach for her hand again and caress her knuckles with my thumb. She looks up at me, her fathomless eyes clouding with desire.

Fuck. I want her.

She bites her lip.

"Please don't bite your lip, Anastasia." My voice is low, full of longing. Will I always want her like this? I want to kiss her, press her into the elevator wall like I did during our first kiss. I want to fuck her here, and make her mine again. She blinks, her lips gently parted, and I suppress a groan. How does she do this? Derail me with a look? I am used to control—and I'm practically drooling over her because her teeth are pressing into her lip. "You know what it does to me." And right now, baby, I want to take you in this elevator, but I don't think you'll let me.

The doors slide open and the rush of cold air brings me back to the now. We're on the roof, and although the day has been warm, the wind has picked up. Anastasia shivers beside me. I wrap my arm around her and she huddles in to my side. She feels too slight, but her petite frame fits perfectly under my arm.

See? We fit together so well, Ana.

We head out onto the helipad toward *Charlie Tango*. The rotors are slowly spinning—she's ready for liftoff. Stephan, my pilot, runs toward us. We shake hands, and I keep Anastasia tucked under my arm.

"Ready to go, sir. She's all yours!" he roars above the sound of the helicopter engines.

"All checks done?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll collect her around eight thirty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Taylor's waiting for you out front."

"Thank you, Mr. Grey. Safe flight to Portland. Ma'am." He salutes Anastasia and heads to the waiting elevator. We duck down under the rotors and I open the door, taking her hand to help her climb aboard.

As I strap her into the seat, her breath hitches. The sound travels straight to my groin. I cinch the straps extra-tight, trying to ignore my body's reaction to her.

“This should keep you in your place.” The thought runs through my head, and I realize I’ve said it out loud. “I must say, I like this harness on you. Don’t touch anything.”

She flushes. Finally, some color stains her face—and I can’t resist. I run the back of my index finger down her cheek, tracing the line of her blush.

Lord, I want this woman.

She scowls, and I know it’s because she can’t move. I hand her some headphones, take my seat, and buckle up.

I run through my preflight checks. All instruments are in the green with no advisory lights. I roll the throttles to “fly,” set the transponder code, and confirm that the anticollision light is on. It all looks good. I don my headphones, switch on the radios, and check the rotor rpm.

When I turn to Ana, she’s watching me intently. “Ready, baby?”

“Yes.” She’s wide-eyed and excited. I can’t help my wolfish grin as I radio the tower to make sure that they’re awake and listening.

Once I have permission to take off, I check the oil temperature and the rest of the gauges. They’re all in normal operating range, so I increase the collective, and *Charlie Tango*, elegant bird that she is, rises smoothly into the sky.

Oh, I love this.

Feeling a little more confident as we gain altitude, I glance at Miss Steele beside me.

Time to dazzle her.

Showtime, Grey.

“We’ve chased the dawn, Anastasia. Now the dusk.” I smile, and I’m rewarded with a shy smile that illuminates her face. Hope stirs in my chest. I have her here when I thought all was lost and she seems happier now than when she walked out of her office. I might just be the free ride, but I’m going to try and enjoy every damn minute of this flight with her.

Dr. Flynn would be proud.

I’m in the moment. And I’m optimistic.

I can do this. I can win her back.

Baby steps, Grey. Don’t get ahead of yourself.

“As well as the evening sun, there’s more to see this time,” I say, interrupting the silence. “Escala’s over there. Boeing there—and you can just see the Space Needle.”

Curious as ever, she cranes her slim neck to look. “I’ve never been,” she says.

“I’ll take you. We can eat there.”

“Christian, we broke up.” I hear the dismay in her voice.

That is not what I want to hear, but I try not to overreact. “I know. I can still take you there. And feed you.” I give her a pointed look and she blushes a lovely pale rose.

“It’s very beautiful up here. Thank you.” She changes the subject.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” I play along—and she’s right, I never get tired of the view from up here.

“Impressive that you can do this.”

Her compliment surprises me. “Flattery from you, Miss Steele? But I’m a man of many talents.”

“I’m fully aware of that, Mr. Grey,” she responds tartly, and I suppress a smirk imagining what she’s referring to. This is what I’ve missed: her impertinence, disarming me at every turn.

Keep her talking, Grey. “How’s the new job?”

“Good, thank you. Interesting.”

“What’s your boss like?”

“Oh. He’s okay.” She sounds less than enthusiastic about Jack Hyde. Has he tried anything with her?

“What’s wrong?” I want to know—has that prick done anything inappropriate? I will fire his ass if he has.

“Aside from the obvious, nothing.”

“The obvious?”

“Oh, Christian, you really are very obtuse sometimes,” she says with playful disdain.

“Obtuse? Me? I’m not sure I appreciate your tone, Miss Steele.”

“Well, don’t, then,” she quips, pleased with herself. I like that she mocks and teases me. She has the ability to make me feel two feet tall or ten feet tall with just a look or a smile—it’s refreshing, and unlike anything I’ve known before.

“I’ve missed your smart mouth, Anastasia.” An image of her on her knees in front of me pops into my mind and I shift in my seat.

Shit. Concentrate, Grey. She looks away, concealing her smile, and stares down at the suburbs passing beneath us while I check the heading. All is well; we’re on track for Portland.

She’s quiet, and I steal the occasional glance at her. Her face is lit with curiosity and wonder as she gazes out at the landscape below and the opal sky. Her cheeks are soft and glowing in the evening light. And in spite of her pallor and the dark circles beneath her eyes—evidence of the suffering I’ve caused her—she’s stunning. How could I have let her walk out of my life?

What was I thinking?

While we race above the clouds in our bubble, high in the sky, my optimism grows and the turmoil of the last week recedes. Slowly, I begin to relax, enjoying a serenity I’ve not felt since she left. I could get used to this. I’d forgotten how content I feel in her company. And it’s refreshing to see my world through her eyes.

But as we near our destination my confidence falters. I hope to God that my plan works. I need to take her somewhere private. To dinner, maybe. *Damn it.* I should have booked a table somewhere. She needs feeding. If I get her to dinner, I’ll just need to find the right words. These last few days have shown me that I need someone—I need her. I want her, but will she have me? Can I convince her to give me a second chance?

Time will tell, Grey—just take it easy. Don’t frighten her off again.

WE LAND ON PORTLAND’S downtown helipad fifteen minutes later. As I bring *Charlie Tango*’s engines to idle and switch off the transponder, fuel, and radios, the uncertainty I’ve felt since I resolved to win her back resurfaces. I need to tell her how I feel, and that’s going to be hard—because I don’t understand my feelings toward her. I know that I’ve missed her, that I’ve been miserable without her, and that I’m willing to try a relationship her way. But will it be enough for her? Will it be enough for me?

Talk to her, Grey.

Once I’ve unbuckled my harness I lean across to undo hers and catch a trace of her sweet fragrance. As ever, she smells good. Her eyes meet mine in a furtive glance—revealing an inappropriate thought? What exactly is she thinking? As usual I’d love to know, but have no idea.

“Good trip, Miss Steele?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Grey.”

“Well, let’s go see the boy’s photos.” I open the door, jump down, and hold my hand out for her.

Joe, the manager of the helipad, is waiting to greet us. He’s an antique: a veteran of the Korean War, but still as spry and acute as a man in his fifties. Nothing escapes his notice. His eyes light up as he gives me a craggy smile.

“Joe, keep her safe for Stephan. He’ll be along around eight or nine.”

“Will do, Mr. Grey. Ma’am. Your car’s waiting downstairs, sir. Oh, and the elevator’s out of order. You’ll need to use the stairs.”

“Thank you, Joe.”

As we head for the emergency stairwell, I eye Anastasia’s high-heeled boots and remember her less-than-dignified fall into my office.

“Good thing for you this is only three floors—in those heels.” I hide my smile.

“Don’t you like the boots?” she asks, looking down at her feet. A pleasing vision of them hooked over my shoulders springs to mind.

“I like them very much, Anastasia.” I hope my expression doesn’t betray my lascivious thoughts. “Come. We’ll take it slow. I don’t want you falling and breaking your neck.” I’m thankful that the elevator is out of order—it gives me a plausible excuse to hold her. Putting my arm around her waist, I pull her to my side and we descend the stairs.

In the car on the way to the gallery my anxiety doubles; we’re attending the opening of an exhibition by her so-called friend. The man who, last time I saw him, was trying to push his tongue into her mouth. Perhaps over the last few days they’ve talked. Perhaps this is a long-anticipated rendezvous between them.

Hell, I hadn’t considered that before. I sure hope it’s not.

“José is just a friend,” Ana explains.

What? She knows what I’m thinking? Am I that obvious? Since when?

Since she stripped me of all my armor and I discovered that I needed her.

She stares at me and my stomach tightens. “Those beautiful eyes look too large in your face, Anastasia. Please tell me you’ll eat.”

“Yes, Christian, I’ll eat.” She sounds less than sincere.

“I mean it.”

“Do you, now?” Her voice is laced with sarcasm, and I almost have to sit on my hands.

Fuck this.

It’s time to declare myself.

“I don’t want to fight with you, Anastasia. I want you back, and I want you healthy.” I’m honored with her shocked, all-eyes look.

“But nothing’s changed.” Her expression shifts to a frown.

Oh, Ana, it has—there’s been a seismic shift in me.

We pull up at the gallery and I have no time to explain before the show. “Let’s talk on the way back. We’re here.”

Before she can say she’s not interested, I exit the car, walk around to her side, and open the door. She looks mad as she climbs out.

“Why do you do that?” she exclaims, exasperated.

“Do what?” *Shit—what’s this?*

“Say something like that and then just stop.”

That’s it—that’s why you’re mad?

“Anastasia, we’re here. Where you want to be. Let’s do this and then talk. I don’t particularly want a scene in the street.”

She presses her lips together in a petulant pout, then gives me a begrudging “Okay.”

Taking her hand, I move swiftly into the gallery, and she scrambles behind me.

The space is brightly lit and airy. It’s one of those converted warehouses that are fashionable at the moment—all wood floors and brick walls. Portland’s cognoscenti sip cheap wine and chat in hushed tones while they admire the exhibition.

A young woman greets us. “Good evening, and welcome to José Rodriguez’s show.” She stares at me.

It’s only skin deep, sweetheart. Look elsewhere.

She’s flustered but seems to recover when she spies Anastasia. “Oh, it’s you, Ana. We’ll want your take on all this, too.” She hands her a brochure and points us toward the makeshift bar. Ana’s brow furrows, and that little *v* that I love forms above her nose. I want to kiss it, like I’ve done before.

“You know her?” I ask. She shakes her head and her frown deepens. I shrug. *Well, this is Portland.* “What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have a glass of white wine, thank you.”

As I head for the bar I hear an exuberant shout. “Ana!”

Turning, I see that *that boy* has his arms wrapped around my girl.

Hell.

I can’t hear what they’re saying, but Ana closes her eyes, and for one horrible moment I think she’s going to burst into tears. But she remains composed as he holds her at arm’s length, appraising her.

Yeah, she’s that thin because of me.

I fight back my guilt—though it seems she’s trying to reassure him. For his part, he looks really fucking interested in her. Too interested. Anger flares in my chest. She says he’s just a friend, but it’s obvious he doesn’t feel that way. He wants more.

Back off, buddy, she’s mine.

“The work here is impressive, don’t you think?” A balding young man in a loud shirt sidetracks me.

“I’ve not looked around yet,” I answer, and turn to the barman. “Is this all you have?”

“Yep. Red or white?” he says, sounding disinterested.

“Two glasses of white wine,” I grunt.

“I think you’ll be impressed. Rodriguez has a unique eye,” the irritating prick with the irritating shirt tells me. Tuning him out, I glance at Ana. She’s staring at me, her eyes large and luminous. My blood thickens and it’s impossible to look away. She’s a beacon in the crowd and I’m lost in her gaze. She looks sensational. Her hair frames her face and falls in a lush cascade to curl at her breasts. Her dress, looser than I remember, still hugs her curves. She might have worn it deliberately. She knows it’s my favorite. Doesn’t she? Hot dress, hot boots...

Fuck—control yourself, Grey.

Rodriguez asks Ana a question and she’s forced to break eye contact with me. I sense she’s reluctant to do so, which is pleasing. But damn it, that boy’s all perfect teeth, broad shoulders, and sharp suit. He’s a good-looking son of a bitch, for a dope smoker, I’ll give him that. She nods at something he says and gives him a warm, carefree smile.

I’d like her to smile like that at me. He leans down and kisses her cheek. *Fucker.*

I glare at the bartender.

Hurry up, man. He's taking an eternity to pour the wine, incompetent fool.

Finally, he's finished. I grab the glasses, cold-shoulder the young man beside me who's talking about another photographer or some such crap, and head back to Ana.

At least Rodriguez has left her alone. She's lost in thought, contemplating one of his photographs. It's a landscape, a lake, and not without merit, I suppose. She glances up at me with a guarded expression as I hand her a glass. I take a quick sip from mine. Christ, it's disgusting, a warm over-oaked chardonnay.

"Does it come up to scratch?" She sounds amused, but I have no idea what she's referring to—the exhibition, the building? "The wine," she clarifies.

"No. Rarely does at these kinds of events." I change the subject. "The boy's quite talented, isn't he?"

"Why else do you think I asked him to take your portrait?" Her pride in his work is obvious. It irks me. She admires him and takes an interest in his success because she cares about him. She cares about him too much. An ugly emotion with a bitter sting rises in my chest. It's jealousy, a new feeling, one that I've only ever felt around her—and I don't like it.

"Christian Grey?" A guy dressed like a vagrant thrusts a camera in my face, interrupting my dark thoughts. "Can I have a picture, sir?"

Damned paparazzi. I want to tell him to fuck off but decide to be polite. I don't want Sam, my publicity guy, dealing with a press complaint.

"Sure." I reach out and pull Ana to my side. I want everyone to know she's mine; if she'll have me.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Grey.

The photographer takes a few snaps. "Mr. Grey, thank you." At least he sounds appreciative. "Miss...?" he asks, wanting to know her name.

"Ana Steele," she answers, shyly.

"Thank you, Miss Steele." He slithers off and Anastasia steps out of my grasp. I'm disappointed to let her go and fist my hands to resist the urge to touch her again.

She peers at me. "I looked for pictures of you with dates on the Internet. There aren't any. That's why Kate thought you were gay."

"That explains your inappropriate question." I can't help smiling as I remember her awkwardness at our first meeting: her lack of interview skills, her questions. *Are you gay, Mr. Grey?* And my annoyance.

That seems so long ago. I shake my head and continue. "No—I don't do dates, Anastasia, only with you. But you know that."

And I'd like many, many more.

"So you never took your"—she lowers her voice and glances over her shoulder to check that no one's listening—"subs out?" She blanches at the word, embarrassed.

"Sometimes. Not on dates. Shopping, you know." Those occasional trips were just a distraction, maybe a reward for good submissive behavior. The one woman I've wanted to share more with...is Ana. "Just you, Anastasia," I whisper, and I want to plead my case, ask her about my proposition, see how she feels, and if she'll take me back.

However, the gallery is too public a setting. Her cheeks turn that delicious pink that I love, and she stares down at her hands. I hope it's because she likes what I'm saying, but I can't be sure. I need to get her out of here and on her own. Then we can talk seriously and eat. The sooner we've seen the boy's work, the sooner we can leave.

“Your friend here seems more of a landscape man, not portraits. Let’s look around.” I hold out my hand, and to my delight, she takes it.

We stroll through the gallery, stopping briefly at each photograph. Though I resent the boy and the feelings he inspires in Ana, I have to admit he’s quite good. We turn the corner—and stop.

There she is. Seven full-blown portraits of Anastasia Steele. She looks jaw-droppingly beautiful, natural, and relaxed—laughing, scowling, pouting, pensive, amused, and in one of them, wistful and sad. As I scrutinize the detail in each photograph, I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that *he* wants to be much more than her friend. “Seems I’m not the only one,” I mutter. The photographs are his homage to her—his love letters—and they’re all over the gallery walls for any random asshole to ogle.

Ana is staring at them in stunned silence, as surprised as I am to see them. Well, there’s no way anyone else is having these. I want the pictures. I hope they’re for sale.

“Excuse me.” I abandon Ana for a moment and head to the reception desk.

“May I help you?” the woman who greeted us when we arrived asks.

Ignoring her fluttering eyelashes and provocative, overly red smile, I inquire, “The seven portraits you have hanging at the back, are they for sale?”

A look of disappointment flits across her face but resolves into a broad smile. “The Anastasia collection? Stunning work.”

Stunning model.

“Of course they’re for sale. Let me check the prices,” she gushes.

“I want them all.” And I reach for my wallet.

“All of them?” She sounds surprised.

“Yes.” *Irritating woman.*

“The collection is fourteen thousand dollars.”

“I’d like them delivered as soon as possible.”

“But they’re due to hang for the duration of the exhibition,” she says.

Unacceptable.

I give her my full-kilowatt smile, and she adds, flustered, “But I’m sure we can arrange something.” She fumbles with my credit card as she swipes it.

When I return to Ana, I find a blond dude chatting with her, trying his luck. “These photographs are terrific,” he says. I place a territorial hand on her elbow and give him my best fuck-off-now glare. “You’re a lucky guy,” he adds, taking a step back.

“That I am,” I answer, dismissing him as I usher Ana over to the wall.

“Did you just buy one of these?” Ana nods toward the portraits.

“One of these?” I scoff. *One? Are you serious?*

“You bought more than one?”

“I bought them all, Anastasia.” And I know I sound condescending, but the thought of someone else owning and enjoying these photographs is out of the question. Her lips part in astonishment, and I try not to let it distract me. “I don’t want some stranger ogling you in the privacy of their home.”

“You’d rather it was you?” she counters.

Her response, though unexpected, is entertaining; she’s admonishing me. “Frankly, yes,” I respond in kind.

“Pervert,” she mouths, and bites her lip, I suspect to suppress a laugh.

Lord, she's challenging and funny and right. "Can't argue with that assessment, Anastasia."