

## CHAPTER ONE

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

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

Kate is huddled on the couch in the living room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The roads are clear as I set off from Vancouver, Washington, toward Interstate 5. It's early, and I don't have to be in Seattle until two this afternoon. Fortunately, Kate has lent me her sporty Mercedes CLK. I'm not sure Wanda, my old VW Beetle, would make the journey in time. Oh, the Merc is a fun drive, and the miles slip away as I hit the pedal to the metal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I sit down, fish the questions from my backpack, and go through them, inwardly cursing Kate for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this

man I'm about to interview. He could be ninety or he could be thirty. The uncertainty is galling, and my nerves resurface, making me fidget. I've never been comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring the anonymity of a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously at the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, curled up in a chair in the campus library. Not sitting twitching nervously in a colossal glass-and-stone edifice.

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

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

"Miss Steele?" the latest blonde asks.

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

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

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

"Have you been offered any refreshment?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Olivia returns with a glass of iced water.

"Here you go, Miss Steele."

"Thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um. Actually—" I mutter. If this guy is over thirty, then I'm a monkey's uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. Must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my heart rate.

"Miss Kavanagh is indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, Mr. Grey."

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

"Anastasia Steele. I'm studying English literature with Kate, um . . . Katherine . . . um . . . Miss Kavanagh, at WSU Vancouver."

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

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

His office is way too big for just one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, there's a modern dark wood desk that six people could comfortably eat around. It matches the coffee table by the couch. Everything else is white—ceiling, floors, and

walls, except for the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small paintings hang, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. They are exquisite—a series of mundane, forgotten objects painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you mind if I record your answers?”

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

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

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

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

*Oh!* This is news to me, and I’m temporarily preoccupied by the thought that someone not much older than me—okay, maybe six years or so, and okay, mega-successful, but still—is going to present me with my degree. I frown, dragging my wayward attention back to the task at hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t you have a board to answer to?” I ask, disgusted.

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

“And do you have any interests outside your work?”

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

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

"Chill out?" He smiles, revealing perfect white teeth. I stop breathing. He really is beautiful. No one should be this good-looking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Possibly. Though there are people who'd say I don't have a heart."

"Why would they say that?"

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

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

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

"Why did you agree to do this one?"

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

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

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

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

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

He shrugs noncommittally.

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

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

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

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

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

“You sound like the ultimate consumer.”

“I am.” He smiles, but the smile doesn’t touch his eyes. Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I can’t help thinking that we’re talking about something else, but I’m mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising, or maybe it’s just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Kate has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

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

“I have no way of knowing.”

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

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

“You’ve had to sacrifice family life for your work.”

“That’s not a question.” He’s terse.

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

“I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I’m not interested in extending my family beyond that.”

“Are you gay, Mr. Grey?”



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

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

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

He cocks his head to one side.

"These aren't your own questions?"

The blood drains from my head.

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

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

"No. She's my roommate."

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

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

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

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

"That explains a great deal."

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

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

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

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

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

"Where were we, Miss Steele?"

*Oh, we're back to "Miss Steele" now.*

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

“I want to know about you. I think that’s only fair.” His eyes are alight with curiosity. *Double crap. Where’s he going with this?* He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very . . . distracting. I swallow.

“There’s not much to know.”

“What are your plans after you graduate?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did you have a coat?” Grey asks.

“A jacket.”

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

“Anastasia,” he says as a farewell.

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