

50 Shades of

Crazy

A Novel by E.B. Archer

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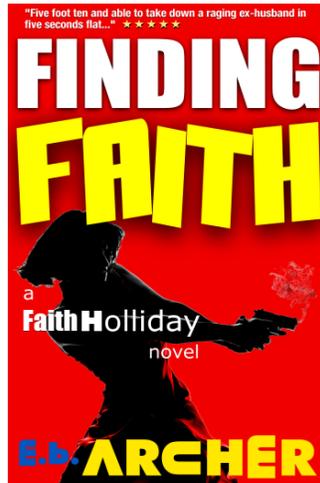
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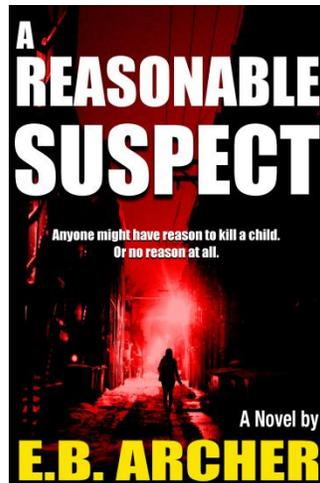
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FINDING FAITH, A Faith Holliday Novel



A REASONABLE SUSPECT



GENESIS

"Here she comes, running out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman."

–Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The office of Dr Beatrix Trotter, doctor of Clinical and Counseling Psychology and AASECT* Certified Sex Therapist, 658 Madison Avenue, New York City, New York

Client File NO: SD/60493**

Client Name: *(Client name redacted for reasons of privacy)*

Session Number: 1

Transcript Number: 1

Client: After all, until *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it never occurred to me that it was every woman's fantasy to be taken by a man *against* her will. It's not what we're brought up to believe, is it?

Dr Trotter: Think of it in terms of *BC* and *AD*, the time *before* Christian and the *Year of* Christian: in the battle between the sexes, we've all been reborn.

Client: So maybe I've been going about it all wrong?

Dr Trotter: When it comes to sex, a hundred million women are now telling us there is no such thing as *wrong*.

Client: I don't consider myself repressed, but there are certain things I just can't think about during sex.

Dr Trotter: Not consciously, perhaps, but when it comes to sex, you might be tempted to think just about

anything. Have you never engaged in fantasy role play with a partner?

Client: I've never asked; never *been* asked.

Dr Trotter: You must indulge in sexual fantasies of your own?

Client: (Shrugs, non-committal, without offering a response.)

Dr Trotter: Do you masturbate?

Client: Everyone does.

Dr Trotter: There you have it, ipso facto. If you masturbate, (Client name redacted), you fantasize. It's not like you're thinking about the weather or the war on terror with your hand between your legs, is it?

Client: If I do fantasize, I don't fantasize about *rape*.

Dr Trotter: It's a *ravishment* fantasy, not a *rape* fantasy.

Client: Is *that* what they're calling it these days?

Dr Trotter: Just because a woman is dominated or restrained, doesn't mean she isn't in control. To be lusted over by a man, unapologetically *and* unconditionally, *is* a form of control; control exercised by a woman *over* a man. It's what everyone seems to misunderstand about *Fifty Shades*. By becoming the

exclusive object of a man's desire, freeing him from the false Judeo-Christian moral conventions that prohibit him from truly giving her pleasure, giving her what she *wants*, what she *needs* and what she *deserves* in both body *and* mind; by being able to achieve *that?* *That* is the ultimate expression of true domination: of a woman *over* a man.

Client: But isn't that *objectification*?

Dr Trotter: No; in the real world it's completely natural. It's time to stop demonizing female desire; *desire* is part of the primal urge, (Client name redacted), not an *Original Sin*. It has been since the first caveman dragged his woman by her hair into his cave, since *Adam* was seduced by *Eve*.

Client: I'm still not sure I understand your point.

Dr Trotter: My point is this: sometimes a woman just needs to be *f***ed*.

Client: Well, then, seems as if I really do need to make up for lost time.

* American Association of Sexuality Educators Counselors and Therapists

** Sexual Dysfunction

ONE



It had rained through most of the morning. What had started overnight as a light drizzle by noon had turned into an inconvenient downpour. A layer of low-lying fog had settled in over the city like a fuzzy blanket of gray wool, further complicating the chaos of Manhattan's already unruly streets. Pedestrians criss-crossed blindly through traffic, against the light and against all common sense, moving with a singularity of purpose unique to America's Greatest City. Undeterred by the cacophony of blaring horns and epithets exclaimed in a half dozen languages they didn't understand—or would ever care to—they flashed the universally recognizable New York City raised middle finger in salute.

Looking south to the tip of Manhattan island from her midtown office on the sixty seventh floor of the City Spire Center, Christina Blanco prayed for a break in the weather. On a good day, she could see to where the East River side-swipes the fresh water current of the Hudson before it becomes fully diluted by the salty brine of the Upper Bay. On a good day, her view included the defining man-made achievements of the New York City skyline: Rockefeller Center, the Condé Nast Building, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Flatiron and Woolworth Buildings and, rising like a Phoenix from the wreckage of its predecessor, the newly constructed World Trade Center Towers. Today, from this vantage point, the buildings appeared to her as a series of jagged mountain peaks punching their way through the mantle of overhanging cloud, as if Christina was viewing the world from atop Mount Everest.

On a *good* day, with a clear view to the foot-traffic passing like a herd of cattle along West 56th Street below, Christina was tempted to throw herself at the floor to ceiling picture window and to shout, *I'm the King of the Fucking World!*, just like Leo DeCaprio in the movie *Titanic*. And, just like Leo before he drowned in the icy water of the North Atlantic, Christina could almost believe it.

On the best of days, Christina imagined herself single-handing the unpredictable current of the Upper Bay in her *Rustler 24*, trimming sail and

allowing the wind to pull her south from the Hudson River to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. On the *best* of days, she would pass beneath the bridge to the waters of the Lower Bay, close-haul east to Breezy Point and, if the wind were just right, broad-reach back to Great Kills Park before returning to home port well after dark, exhausted by a mix of exhilaration and fear.

And in her dreams Christina imagined she would just say *fuck it all*, kick caution to the wind and navigate the *Rustler* beyond the *Bight* and into the Atlantic Ocean hoping to make landfall in Bermuda, or to not make landfall at all.

But today was *not* a good day. If she had nothing to look forward to, Christina held out hope for the start of a planned four day escape from the *City* over the long Easter weekend, to a small rental cabin in the Poconos situated on the north shore of Lake Wallenpaupack. A generous supply of junk food—*Snickers*, *M&M's* and *Sweet Chili Heat Doritos*—a half dozen illegal downloads for her tablet—tops among them being *Cruel Intentions* and *Disturbia* because who can get enough of Ryan Phillippe or Shia LaBeouf?—her *Kindle* and, of course, her laptop, because what was a long weekend, or any weekend at all for that matter, without *work*?

As if reading her thoughts, the intercom on Christina's desk-top phone buzzed.

“Yes, Danni,” she said, rather too abruptly.

“Don’t take it out on me, darlin’, *I’m* only the messenger.”

Danni Paxton-Rose: Chief Operating Officer, Gal Friday, Gal Pal, confidante, consigliere, lately *BFF* and lifeline to the good ship Christina when it floundered and *the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspired to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore*. (With acknowledgements to Herman Melville and *Moby Dick*, which of course she had downloaded free to her *Kindle*.) Danni was Christina’s first investor. If anyone could be said to have *discovered* Christina, it was Danni. For a twenty per cent share of Christina’s overactive imagination, Danni had invested one hundred thousand dollars. With an Initial Public Offering pending, Danni stood to make millions.

“Sorry, Danni, I’m off my meds.”

“Not even funny.”

“Can’t you deal with it?”

“He’s had his pound of *my* flesh; now he wants *yours*.”

Christina moaned. “*Jesus*. Can this day could get any worse?”

“I think you’re about to find out.”

“Do I even want to know,” Christina said, “or should I just throw myself out the window now?”

“With your luck, you’d land on your feet.”

“Which is to say without bad luck, I’d have no luck at all. Put him through, then.”

“He’s a bear; you sure you’re up to it?”

“I’m not sure of anything, Danni, except that somehow I’ve managed to go from hero to zero in a span of six months flat all because some British chick likes to get fucked up the butt with her hands tied behind her back.”

TWO



“I wouldn’t know how to begin, Herschel.”

“Don’t ask me, Christina; I’m fat, bald and turning sixty next month. I’ve been sleeping with the same woman for over thirty years. What do I know from sex?”

“I mean, how would I go about describing it? Is it a *member*? A *member* of what? A *prick*? Well, that’s the concierge at the *Plaza Hotel*, isn’t it? A *cock*? Too crude. *Penis*? Too clinical.”

“I don’t care what you call *it*, Christina. Millions of copies sold and a seven figure opening weekend gross. Do you know a woman was actually arrested in a

theatre for masturbating while watching this movie? True story, I read it on *TMZ*.”

“And do you know, Herschel, a famous Canadian radio personality faces criminal charges for doing to women the exact same things that are described in the book? True story, I read it in the *New York Times*.”

As if Christina hadn't spoken, Herschel continued. “And all this from a middle-age, overweight mother of two; surely, with your background, you can do better.”

Christina sighed. No need to remind Herschel Silverstein that prior to hitting it big with her blog and the serialization of her imaginary life on *Wattpad*, Christina, herself, was an overweight twenty seven year old high school dropout living in a second floor bedroom of her parent's home in Bridgeton, New Jersey.

“I've read the book, Herschel. It reads like tween porn, written for twelve year old girls and for thirty year old women who *think* like twelve year old girls. God forbid I should be able to think like that.”

“Then I suggest you dig down deep and channel your inner child, Christina. Find out what turns on a twelve year old girl and write about it. Find out what turns on a thirty year old woman and write about it.”

“I am a thirty year old woman, Herschel.”

“Let’s not kid ourselves, Christina. Who you *are* is a figment of someone you never *were*. Your entire life is a fiction. *You* are a fiction. So what I’m asking shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“Listen, Herschel—”

“No, *you* listen. If it weren’t for me, you’d still be living in that shithole across the river, sitting on your fat ass, blowing the bandwidth on Netflix and stuffing your gob with corn chips and diet soda, generally being a burden to your parents and making yourself a nuisance. Aventura Media didn’t invest fifty million dollars into *My Wonderful Life* because they wanted *you*; they wanted the person you *imagined* yourself to *be*.”

Imagine *this*, Herschel: *Me bending you over and screwing you from behind with your hands tied behind your back*. But since it was Herschel—on the recommendation of Danni Paxton-Rose—who’d talked Aventura into the investment in the first place and with the planned IPO not three months out, perhaps he already could.

“Have you seen the numbers, Christina?”

She had.

Herschel went on to remind her yet again that detailed analytics showed the majority of *fremium* registrations for the *My Wonderful Life* web site—those users

registered with a valid email but who as yet had chosen to not upgrade to a paid subscription—were clustered in tight knots about the major urban centres of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Seattle. Fine, as far as it went. But *My Wonderful Life* had failed to expand its reach into Miami, Dallas, San Diego, Phoenix and a string of mid-size metro markets throughout the Sunbelt and Southwest, the states with America's fastest growing populations. This, Herschel attributed to demographics: *Too many Latinos*, he concluded, probably correctly. Audience skewed ninety per cent Caucasian female twenty six to thirty five years of age, the balance consisting of white males twenty to twenty five and, according to Herschel, probably gay. "Where are the teens, Christina; the twenty to twenty five year old women? Hell, where are the over-the-hill housewives, or the fifty-something grannies whose husbands are either impotent or have left them for a younger woman?" he'd asked, a challenge to which she could offer no credible response.

Since Christmas, mobile usage had climbed to over sixty five per cent—*Good*, said Herschel. Concurrently, time on site over a mobile device had dropped to just under five minutes per session—*Bad*, said Herschel. This meant users were logging on, thumbing through the main storylines, and logging off almost as

quickly before moving on to the next diversion. (Probably *Fifty Shades of fucking Grey*, Christina thought ruefully.)

Though engagement was higher in the ‘burbs than in the boonies, conversion rates from *fremium* registrations to paid subscriptions was at less than ten per cent and declining. Conversion rates were higher in select neighborhoods of the major metros—with the cost of a monthly subscription less than a *Starbucks* Mocha Caramel Frappuccino, why *shouldn’t* they be, observed Herschel—but despite a multi-million dollar counter-programming ad blitz aired during the Super Bowl, conversion rates remained stubbornly low.

“I know all this, Herschel.”

“End of the week, Christina.”

“Herschel, *please*—”

“Tell me what you’re going to do to save our company. Tell me what you’re going to do to save your job. We have a meeting of the full board next week so it better be convincing.”

“Herschel, *please*, it’s Easter next week. Give me at least until the week after. Surely, we can stall the board until then. I need time—not a lot—away, on my own. This place is a crazy house. I haven’t had an original thought since you

plonked me up here. I'm a writer, not an administrator; the distractions are killing me."

Silence; for a moment Christina thought Herschel had disconnected without saying goodbye.

Then, sounding like the ghost of Jacob Marley forewarning *Scrooge* of a visit from the three spirits on Christmas Eve, he said, "Aiden Quartermaine arrives tomorrow, to keep an eye on us until we go public. Don't be fooled by his good looks, Christina; he is not a stupid man. Graduated Harvard—*two times*—MBA *and* law. Take him to the Poconos with you, if you must. Buy yourself a see-through negligee and some crotch-less panties. Lay down a bear-skin rug. I've seen this guy in the shower-room, Christina. If he can't melt the ice between your legs, maybe it's time I ditch you and hire myself a twelve year old girl."

THREE



Christina sat, elbows propped on desk, head in hands, thick chestnut hair falling forward about her face like a shroud.

Danni entered, crossing the floor to Christina's desk in a half dozen easy strides. She was six foot tall in flats, broad of shoulder and narrow of hip with a face as sharp as an axe blade. At forty three years of age Danni Paxton-Rose could hardly be described as pretty and, if asked, most men would be able to say only that, to them, Danni was *provocative*, that she possessed a certain *je ne sais quoi* that somehow made their blood spontaneously boil. Though Danni had more than once been mistaken for a transvestite, or transgender or—much to her dismay—a run-of-the-mill *cross-dresser*, she was anything but run-of-the mill. And five minutes in bed with

Danni was enough to prove otherwise, to have any man screaming for his mother or God or whoever it was he screamed to while clamped between a woman's thighs, or a woman's lips.

Five minutes with Danni? It was *amazing* what she could make a man do.

Danni kneeled beside Christina, parting her hair like a veil. She cradled her by the chin in a hand that was as large as a man's. Gently prodding, she encouraged her to make eye contact.

"*Spill,*" Danni said.

"What's to spill, Danni? I am *so* fucked."

"It's not such a bad way to be."

"Don't joke; this is serious."

Standing, Danni dropped herself ostentatiously into a leather wing chair across the desk from Christina. Gravely, she said, "Serious as in you've been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour and have been given six months to live, or serious as in *Christian Louboutin* is out of stock on the pair of *Saluno* high-heels in just your size that you've so desperately had your heart set on?"

Christina feigned a pout.

Danni said, "Because in six months you could live a lifetime in those shoes. So pray, darlin', it's the brain tumour and *not* the shoes."

Despite her misery, Christina ventured a smile. Danni was right, of course. The work being done by *Wanderful Life Media* would not save any lives. They would not cure cancer or the

common cold. They would not find a solution to world hunger or the scourge of AIDS in Africa. They *might* improve a relationship, but only if the partners were already so inclined. Mostly, the stories they told were a pleasant and temporary diversion for millions of bored commuters travelling from one urban stop to another, or disenchanted middle-American housewives who had married too young and bore children too early and too thoughtlessly.

And therein lie Christina's problem, didn't it?; a *pleasant* and *temporary* diversion with her challenge being to make it something more, to spice it up without crossing over the line into outright porn.

With forty five million from the proceeds of the initial fifty million dollar Aventura investment already gone toward ramping up staffing levels, product upgrades, the release of a mobile application and marketing expenditures sufficient to accommodate a company with five times the traffic, twice the paid subscriptions and five times the advertising sales, the business was now operating on *thin gruel*—as who else but Herschel could describe it. Without a successful IPO—which was looking less and less likely by the day—for most of the staffers at *Wanderful Life Media* the Fourth of July holiday would undoubtedly become a permanent and unpaid vacation, to say nothing of the fate of Christina, herself.

“I'd offer a penny if I thought it would make a difference,” Danni said.

“It would be a foolish investment, Danni; my thoughts aren't worth a penny.”

“Two years ago a lot of people thought otherwise, including me. Aventura thought so to the tune of fifty million dollars otherwise. What’s changed in the meantime?”

Christina threw back her head theatrically. She laughed; it came out more like a bark. With the fingers of both hands she ruffled her long hair. Standing, she returned to her view by the window. She said, “I need a joint is what’s changed.”

“Bad idea,” Danni said.

“So there’s your answer, then, because I haven’t had a good idea in over a year.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m bipolar, your doctor told me so; I’m entitled.”

Danni thumped the arms of her chair in frustration. She crossed behind Christina’s desk, a twenty thousand dollar eighteenth century Sheraton rosewood lady’s writing table with a pierced brass gallery to three sides, a leather top with tooled edges and a working center drawer with stencilled brass pulls flanked by a dummy drawer each side. Christina’s personal chair was also expensive, though more office-functional.

The office was two thousand square feet of open space perched six hundred feet above some of the most expensive dirt in the world. It resembled a studio condominium; sitting area, eating area and a well stocked wet bar with a private ensuite bathroom off to one side. Scattered about the hardwood floor were a half dozen intricately woven and colorful Persian carpets imported directly from Iraq, adding a sense of intimacy to a space that might otherwise lack warmth. A

selection of Cubist renderings adorned the walls; Braque, Picasso, Fauconnier. The twelve foot floor-to-ceiling picture-window allowing Christina an unobstructed view of Lower Manhattan also provided an abundance of natural light.

Including design, the suite had cost the company just shy of two million dollars. “Make it nice,” Herschel Silverstein had advised Danni, “let her know what’s at stake if she fails.”

Now, on Christina’s desk, her laptop sat idle, lid open, cursor blinking on a blank page.

Danni sighed. Standing with Christina she, too, lamented the gloomy weather. After getting to know Christina, Danni learned that for her the transition from winter to spring was especially difficult. Christina’s pretty heart-shaped face seemed to light-up only on the arrival of summer, with a warm Atlantic breeze skipping her across the water of the Upper Bay like a flat stone, Christina’s thick chestnut hair flying loose and unfettered behind her.

Today the pretty face was slack, the deep set almond-shape eyes smudged with fatigue and red from lack of sleep. And, Danni observed, Christina had put on weight, not so anyone but Danni would notice, but enough to add heft to an already voluptuous frame, one that boasted breasts the size of pillow-cushions, a narrow waist, broad hips and an ample posterior. This was not a judgement, only a concern that Christina might be backsliding, returning to a familiar routine of overeating, drinking and smoking weed. Danni couldn’t afford to let that self-destructive behaviour reassert itself now.

“You’re not serious about the medication, are you? You *are* taking your pills?”

Christina dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. Changing the subject, she said,

“Herschel has given me till next Monday to come up with a plan.”

“A plan to do *what*, exactly?”

“A plan to save *our* company and to save *my* job.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, Christina. We go public in ninety days. The market needs to know we have a plan, that *you* have a plan. You really do need to turn around the numbers.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then Herschel will need to bring on someone who can.”

“You?”

Danni gave the question barely a thought before replying. “I don’t want it, Christina. I’d much rather work *with* you. I couldn’t write a recipe if you listed the ingredients on a piece of paper for me. I don’t want it, but if asked, I’ll take it.”

“You would do that to me?”

“Don’t make it personal, Christina.”

“How can I not make it personal? It’s *my* company.”

Exasperated, Danni said, “For *now*; we’re a private company, but only for now. Soon, our underwriters will begin sifting through our dirty laundry like perverts. And what will they find?”

A pair of smelly panties. Our numbers are terrible and not as advertised. If they catch us out, *Solomon Goldberg* may decide to reduce the offering, lower the issue price, pull it altogether or, just maybe, have us all sent to jail.” Danni turned from Christina to stare out the window; at the cloud, the drizzle, the skyscrapers shrouded in fog. She said, “If I’m to be completely honest, Christina, I’d take the job to protect my investment and to save my ass. I love you like a little sister, but I’m not the one who received a seven figure cash-up-front payment when *we* sold your idea to Aventura. My money was first in and it’s last out. Anything I make will be made when we go public or from the stock options I receive as part of my compensation package. I’m not gettin’ any younger, darlin’. Twelve year olds are receiving start-up funding from Silicon Valley venture capitalists; I could be their fucking grandmother, for Christ sake. No, I’m afraid my best before date is long past due.”

Suitably chastened, Christina said, “Let’s sit. This shitty weather is killing me.”

They crossed the floor to the small sitting area while Danni texted a request for coffee using her mobile phone. They settled across from each other on twin satin love seats embroidered with a peacock pattern set against a cream color background. Within five minutes a young female assistant dressed casually in blue jeans and tie-neck blouse entered, pushing a trolley with two cups, sugar, cream, a French press and a carafe of boiled water.

“Let’s ask Emma,” Danni said.

The assistant shifted her gaze warily from Danni to Christina and back.

To Emma, Christina said, “What’s the last book you read?”

Emma blushed. “*Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“The last movie you watched?” Christina said.

“*Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“*And?*” Danni said as she poured the steaming water into the press and over the coffee grounds.

Emma shrugged. “Not exactly high art—either the writing *or* the sex—are they? I mean, the writing is actually dreadful and as for erotica, well, it’s hard to imagine it turning on anyone past the age of puberty.”

Christina said, “You’re young, educated and intelligent, Emma; so tell me, what’s the appeal? Aren’t women your age getting enough sex? Is it so bad that you need to resort to masturbating in theaters?” she said, recalling Herschel’s words.

Danni said, “Sit, Emma, let me fetch you a cup.”

A moment later, coffee sugared and milked, Emma sitting with Danni on the love seat opposite Christina, she offered her response.

“The easy answer is: *because*, because everyone else has read it, seen it and is talking about it. On one level, the novel suggests a woman is incapable—or, more likely, unwilling—to take responsibility for her own pleasure, that to make a woman cum she must be taken by a man against her own will, leaving him to set the ground rules, do the heavy lifting, which personally I

find offensive though it didn't stop me reading the book or watching the movie, did it? And, notwithstanding a hundred years of progress to the contrary, it also implies a woman wants to be *kept*, that we need—or *desire*—to be taken care of by a man with superior intelligence, financial resources and sexual skills. To be honest, and maybe it's because the author is English, it all seems very Victorian to me.”

“But that's not what *we're* all about,” Christina said, referring to *My Wonderful Life*. “So, how do we compete?”

“I don't think you do.” Then, fearing they'd misunderstood, Emma said quickly, “What I mean, is, I don't think you *want* to.”

“We don't?” Danni said.

“Well, the fantasy isn't sustainable, is it? And it's not realistic. It's a one shot deal. Okay, the writer has made a boatload of money and I'm just out of college with a degree in creative writing, sharing a walk up with three other girls and living off Raman noodles and steamed rice, so what do I know? But, I mean, silly cat videos get the most views on *You Tube*, don't they? How long can that last? And do you really want to be known as the guy with the most *stupid-cat-video-You-Tube-views*? I think you want to be very careful about competing at that level, becoming *that* guy.”

At the door, as Emma was leaving, Christina asked, “Okay, Emma, tell me: what turns you on?”

Emma smiled a sly grin. “Well, with the lights out and all by myself, I sometimes fantasize about tying a *man* to a four-poster bed and shoving a butt-plug up *his* bum till he cries out for *his* mommy.”

At this, they all laughed.

“Smart girl,” Danni said when Emma was gone. “We should think about giving her more responsibility.”

“A pay-raise, maybe,” Christina said. “We already have too many cooks in the kitchen, Danni.”

Sipping the last of her coffee, Danni said, “This will keep me up ‘till morning.”

“I’ll be up all night anyway,” Christina said. “Emma *is* a smart girl but I don’t see how her opinion helps.”

Danni shrugged. “Never hurts to know what other women are thinking.”

They were quiet and after a moment Christina said, “Aiden Quartermaine arrives tomorrow. Is that a threat?”

“It could be.”

“Should I be worried?”

Danni shrugged. “If you need to worry about anyone, Christina, it would be Aiden.”

Christina groaned. She’d met Quartermaine twice before, a year ago on a tour of the *Wanderful Media* facility with his father, when the news was all good, and more recently at a

reception in the office of *Solomon Goldberg*, the underwriter managing the *Wanderful Media* public offering. At the time, traffic was up and revenue rising on an upward trajectory, suggesting the sky was the limit. A mobile application was in the works. While the father had been gracious and attentive, almost flirtatious, his son had looked at her as if she was trying to pull a con.

Danni set down her cup, leaning in to Christina, elbows on knees. “Neither the Quartermaine’s or Herschel are the problem, here, Christina. Only you can find a way to reconnect with your audience. I can hold off the dogs for now, but it’s up to you give me ammunition. Okay, you—*we*—missed it. Who could have imagined *Fifty Shades* becoming so bloody popular, that mature, intelligent, independent women could be turned on by this sort of stuff, or by this quality of writing? Doesn’t matter that the author seems to have enlisted her son’s grade school classroom to write the dialogue or how many school-age girls she’s corrupted in the process. You’re the superstar here. We’re looking to you for a solution.”

Christina pinched her brow, kneading her forehead with a forefinger and thumb. *Superstar my ass*. With E L James and her naughty little movie and book hogging the headlines, it had been months since Christina had been invited to appear as a guest speaker on daytime talk TV: no *View*, no *Talk*, no *GMA*, and—even after offering a substantial inducement—no *Live with Kelly and Michael* either. Christina felt like a leper.

While writing from behind a cloak of anonymity and identified only by her screen name (and a sexy young dark-haired avatar look-alike she'd lifted from a photo she had seen on Facebook), her fans had begged for her to reveal herself, to declare who it was that was the owner of this *Wonderful Life*, this amazing woman who, while still in her twenties, could experience pain and love and desire so deeply and completely. (All in real time and without the use of restraints or *ever* having had to utter the words *pussy, cock or clit*.)

At her coming out, on *Oprah*, she'd been greeted with hoots and hollers of adoration complete with a standing ovation from the studio audience. Most of it had been stage-managed, of course, but wasn't it true she herself was also a fraud? That she had never experienced, even vicariously, those things about who and what she wrote so eloquently and so passionately? No Rome? No Budapest? No Paris? No Shanghai? No Laos? No Rio? No Buenos Aires? No Mexico City? No Maurice? No Trevor? No Julio? No Boris? No Vladimir? No Trev? No Chip? No Dax? No Julian? No Benedict? No Tremain? No super yachts? No exotic automobiles? No romantic hotels, secluded cabins, laying rough in a pup tent for two on a remote hillside in the outer reaches of Patagonia? No making love on the back of a camel, or the back of a bus with a complete stranger while travelling cross-country from Nagpur to Mumbai? No narrow escape from the clutches of a barroom-full of drunken Australians or almost getting drop-kicked by a wandering kangaroo that seemed almost as afraid of her as she was of it?

All of it the fantasy of a hyperactive imagination from an overweight, track-pants wearing, pot-smoking, manically depressed high school dropout who'd never in her life ventured beyond the New Jersey state line but was, nevertheless, an expert at using Google Maps, Google Search and making shit up.

But the writing was good and believable and *My Wonderful Life* had struck a chord with readers, luring over ten million *engaged* followers each day. So with the help, first, of Danni Paxton-Rose and the subsequent involvement of Herschel Silverstein and the follow-up fifty million dollar Aventura donation—because more and more, to Christina, it was beginning to look a lot more like charity on their part—they'd cleaned her up, slimmed her down, secured a proper diagnosis and treatment for whatever demons they said tormented her and, like Henry Higgins had done for Eliza Doolittle, they'd re-created *Christina Blanco*.

Problem was, no matter how she looked at it, Christina still saw herself as Eliza, cheeks smudged dirty, a figment of her own addled brain pretending at someone she never was and—if things didn't somehow change and change drastically—someone she could never be.

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