

Sunday, June 19, 2011

We lie in post-coital bliss beneath pink paper lanterns, meadow flowers and fairy lights that twinkle in the rafters. As my breathing slows, I hold Anastasia close. She's sprawled over me, her cheek on my chest, her hand resting on my racing heart. The darkness is absent, driven out by my dream-catcher... my fiancée. My love. My light.

*Could I be happier than I am right now?*

I commit the scene to memory: the boathouse, the soothing rhythm of the lapping waters, the flora, the lights. Closing my eyes, I feel the woman in my arms, her weight on top of me, the rise and fall of her back as she breathes, her legs entwined with mine. The scent of her hair fills my nostrils soothing all my corners and jagged edges. This is my happy place. Dr. Flynn would be proud. This beautiful woman has consented to be mine. In every way. Again.

"Can we marry tomorrow?" I whisper near her ear.

"Hmm." The sound in her throat reverberates with a soft strum across my skin.

"Is that a yes?"

"Hmm."

"A no?"

"Hmm."

I grin. She's spent. "Miss Steele, are you incoherent?" I sense her answering smile and I laugh, hugging her and kissing her hair. "Vegas, tomorrow, it is then."

She raises her head, her eyes half-closed. In the soft light from the lanterns, she looks sleepy yet sated. "I don't think my parents would be very happy with that." She rests her head on me once more and I skim my fingertips across her naked back enjoying, as ever, the feel of her skin.

"What do you want, Anastasia? Vegas? A big wedding with all the trimmings? Tell me."

"Not big." She glances up at me. "Just friends and family."

"Okay. Where?"

She shrugs and I'm guessing she hasn't thought about it.

"Could we do it here?" I ask.

"Your folks' place? Would they mind?"

I laugh. Grace would leap at the chance. “My mother would be in seventh heaven.”

“Okay, here. I’m sure my mom and dad would prefer that.”

*So would I.*

We are of one accord. No arguing.

*Is this a first?*

Gently, I stroke her hair that’s a little mussed from our passionate tryst. “So, we’ve established the where, now the when.”

“Surely, you should ask your mother?”

“Hmm. She can have a month, that’s it. I want you too much to wait any longer.”

“Christian, you have me. You’ve had me for a while. But okay, a month it is.” She plants a tender kiss on my chest and I’m grateful that the darkness remains quiet. Her presence is keeping it at bay.

“We’d better head back. I don’t want Mia interrupting us like she did that time.”

Ana laughs. “Ah, yes. That was close. My first punishment fuck.” She grazes my jaw with her fingers and I roll over, taking her with me, pressing her into the deep-pile rug on the floor.

“Don’t remind me. Not one of my finest moments.”

Her lips lift in a coy smile, her eyes sparkling with humor. “As punishment fucks go... it was okay. And I won back my panties.”

“You did. Fair and square.” Chuckling at the memory, I kiss her quickly and rise. “Come, put your panties on and let’s get back to what’s left of the party.”

I zip up her emerald dress and drape my jacket over her shoulders. “Ready?” She places her hand in mine and we walk to the top of the stairs of the boathouse. Pausing, she looks back at our floral haven as if *she’s* memorizing the setting.

“What about all the lights and these flowers?”

“It’s okay. The florist is returning tomorrow to dismantle this bower. They’ve done a great job. And the flowers will go to a local seniors’ home.”

She squeezes my hand. “You’re a good man, Christian Grey.”

*I hope I’m good enough for you.*

My family is in the den abusing the karaoke machine. Kate and Mia are up, dancing and singing *We Are Family* while my parents look on. I think they're both a little tipsy. Elliot is slumped on the couch sipping his beer and mouthing the lyrics.

I want to kick him. *Dude. Wake up! Kavanagh, your girlfriend is sending you a message.*

Kate spots Ana and beckons her toward the mic. "OMG!" squeals Mia drowning out the song. "Look at that rock!" she grabs Ana's hand and whistles. "Christian Grey, you delivered."

Ana gives her a shy smile while Kate and my mother gather round to inspect her ring. I roll my eyes but inside I feel ten feet tall.

*Yeah. She likes it. They like it.*

*You did good, Grey.*

"Christian, could I talk to you?" Carrick asks as he stands up, his expression grim.

*Now?*

His stare is unwavering as he directs me out of the room.

"Um. Sure." I glance at Grace but she's studiously avoiding my gaze.

*Fuck. Has she told him about Elena?* I follow him to his study and he ushers me in, closing the door behind him.

"Your mother told me," he says with no preamble whatsoever.

I glance at the clock - it's 12:35. It's too late in the day for this talk... in every sense. "Dad, I'm tired—"

"No. You are not avoiding this conversation." His voice is stern and his eyes narrow to pinpricks as he peers at me over his glasses. He's mad. Really mad.

"Dad..."

"Quiet, son. You need to listen." He sits on the edge of his desk and removes his glasses and begins to clean them with a lint cloth from his pocket. I stand before him, as I often have, feeling like I did when I was fourteen years old and I'd just been expelled from school—again. Resigned, I take a deep breath, and sighing as loudly as I can, place my hands on my hips, and wait for the onslaught.

"To say I'm disappointed is an understatement. What Elena did was criminal—"

"Dad—"

“No, Christian. You don’t get to speak right now.” He glares at me. “She deserves to be locked up.”

*Fuck! Dad!*

He pauses and slides his glasses back into place. “But I think it’s your deception that disappoints me the most. Every time you left this house with some lie that you were studying with your friends —friends we never got to meet—you were fucking that woman.”

*Christ!*

“How am I to believe anything you’ve ever said to us?” he continues.

*Oh, for fuck’s sake.* This is a complete overreaction. “Can I speak now?”

“No. You can’t. Of course, I blame myself. I thought I’d given you some semblance of a moral compass. And now I’m wondering if I’ve taught you anything at all.”

“Are you asking a rhetorical question?”

He ignores me. “She was a married woman and you had no respect for that, and you’re shortly to become a married man—”

“This has nothing to do with Anastasia!”

“Don’t you dare shout at me,” he says with quiet venom. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or heard him this angry. It’s sobering and it silences me.

“It has everything to do with her. You are about to embark on a huge commitment to a young woman.” His tone softens. “It’s a surprise to all of us. And I’m happy for you. But we are talking about the sanctity of marriage. And if you have no respect for that, then you have no business being married.”

“Dad—”

“And if you’re that cavalier about the sacred vows that you will soon be affirming, you seriously need to consider a pre-nuptial agreement.”

*What?*

I raise my hands. He’s gone too far. I’m an adult, for heaven’s sake. “Don’t bring Ana into this. She’s not some grubby gold-digger.”

“This is not about her.” He stands and steps towards me. “It’s about you. You living up to your responsibilities. You being a trustworthy and decent human being. You being husband material!”

“For fuck’s sake, dad, I was fifteen years old!” I shout and we’re nose to nose, glowering at each other.

Why is he reacting so badly to this? I know I've always been a huge disappointment to him but he's never spelled it out so plainly.

He shuts his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose and I realize that in my moments of stress I do the same. This habit comes from him, but in my case the apple has fallen far, far from the tree.

"You're right. You were a vulnerable child. But what you fail to see is that what she did was wrong, and clearly you still can't see it because you've continued to associate with her—not only as a family friend—but in business. For all these years, both of you have been lying to us. And that's what hurts the most," he says quietly. "She was your mother's friend. We thought she was a good friend. She's the opposite. You *will* cut all financial ties with her."

*Fuck. Carrick.*

I want to tell him that Elena was a force for good, and that I wouldn't have continued my association with her if I thought anything else. But I know this will fall on deaf ears. He didn't want to listen when I was fourteen and struggling at school, and it appears he doesn't want to listen now.

"Have you quite finished?" The words hiss with bitterness through my gritted teeth.

"Think about what I've said."

I turn to go. I've heard enough.

"Think about the prenup. It will save you a great deal of grief in the future."

Ignoring him I stalk out of his office and slam the door.

*Fuck him!*

Grace is standing in the hallway.

"Why did you tell him?" I spit at her but Carrick has followed me out of the study so she doesn't answer. She glares at him.

I'm going to fetch Ana. We're going home.

I follow the sound of caterwauling into the den and find Elliot and Ana at the mic strangling *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*. If I wasn't so angry I'd laugh. Elliot's tuneless rumbling can't really be classed as singing and he's drowning out Ana's sweet voice. Fortunately, the song is nearly over so I'm spared the worst of it.

"I think Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell are spinning in their graves," I observe dryly when they finish.

“I thought that was a pretty good rendition.” Elliot bows theatrically to Mia and Kate who are laughing and applauding with exaggerated gusto. I think they’re all inebriated. Ana giggles. She looks flushed and lovely.

“We’re going home,” I tell her.

Her face falls. “I told your mother we’d stay.”

“You did? Just now?”

“Yes. She brought down a change of clothes for us. I was looking forward to sleeping in your bedroom.”

“Darling, I was really hoping you’d stay.” It’s a plea from my mother; she stands in the doorway, Carrick behind her. “Kate and Elliot are, too. I like having all my chicks under one roof.” She reaches out and clasps my hand. “And we thought we’d lost you this week.”

I roll my eyes.

My siblings seem to be completely oblivious to the drama that is unfolding in front of them. I expect this cluelessness from Elliot... but not Mia.

“Stay, son. Please.” My father’s eyes bore into me but he appears genial enough. It’s not like he’s just told me that I’m a complete disappointment.

*Again.*

I ignore him and respond to my mother. “Okay.” But it’s only because Ana’s giving me such an imploring look, and I know that if I leave in a huff it will be a blight on what has been a wonderful day.

Ana wraps her arms around me. “Thank you,” she whispers. I smile down at her and the dark cloud that is my mood begins to dissipate.

“Come on, Dad.” Mia thrusts the mic into his hand and drags him in front of the screen. “Last song!” she says.

“Bed?” I ask Ana, ignoring them. I have had enough of my family for one night. She nods and I knit her fingers with mine. “Good night, all. Thanks for the party, Mom.”

Grace hugs me. “You know we love you. We only want the best for you. I am so happy with your news. And so happy that you’re here.”

“Yeah. Mom. Thanks.” I give her a swift peck on the cheek. “We’re tired. We’re going to bed. Good night.”

“Good night, Ana. Thank you,” she says and gives her a swift hug. I tug Ana’s hand to leave as Mia puts on *Wild Thing* for Carrick to sing.

That I do not want to see.

Switching on the light, I close my bedroom door and pull Ana into my arms seeking her warmth.

“Hey, are you okay?” she murmurs. “I can tell you’re brooding.”

“I’m just mad at my dad. But that’s nothing new. He still treats me like I’m an adolescent.”

Ana hugs me tighter. “Your father loves you.”

“Well, tonight he’s very disappointed in me. Again. But I don’t want to discuss that right now.”

Ana blinks up at me with compassion and understanding writ large on her face, and I know neither of us wants to raise the specter of Elena...*Mrs. Robinson*.

I’m reminded of earlier this evening, and Grace in all her avenging glory, throwing Elena out of the house. I wonder what she would have said, back in the day, if she’d caught me with a girl in my room. Suddenly I’m energized by the same teenage thrill I had when we snuck up here last week during the masquerade ball.

“I’ve got a girl in my room.” I grin.

“What are you going to do with her?” Ana’s answering teasing smile is seductive.

“Hmm. All the things I wanted to do with girls when I was an adolescent.” But couldn’t. Because I couldn’t bear to be touched. “Unless you’re too tired.” I trace the soft curve of her cheek with my knuckle.

“Christian. I’m exhausted. But thrilled too...”

*Oh baby*. I kiss her quickly and take pity on her. “Maybe we should just sleep. It’s been a long day. Come. I’ll put you to bed. Turn around.”

She complies and I reach for the zipper on her dress.

Ana slumbers beside me, her face serene. I lie staring at her profile, marveling that she’s mine.

Will I ever be good enough for her?

*Am I husband material?*

My father seems to doubt it.

I sigh and lie on my back staring up at the ceiling.

I am going to prove him wrong.

He’s always been strict with me. More so than with Elliot or Mia.

*Fucker.* He knows I'm a bad seed. As I replay his earlier tirade in my head, I drift until sleep claims me.

*Arms up, Christian. Daddy has a serious face. He is teaching diving into the pool.*

*That's right. Now curl your toes around the edge of the pool. Good. Arch your back. That's right. Now push off.*

*I fall. And fall. And fall. Splash. Into the cool clear water.*

*Into the blue. Into the calm. Into the quiet.*

*But my water wings push me back to the top. And I look for Daddy.*

*Look, Daddy, look.*

*But Elliot jumps on him. And they fall on the ground.*

*Daddy tickles Elliot.*

*Elliot laughs. And laughs. And laughs.*

*And Daddy kisses his tummy.*

*Daddy doesn't do that to me.*

*I don't like it.*

*I am in the water.*

*I want to be up there.*

*I want to be up there. With Daddy.*

*And I'm standing in the trees. Watching Daddy and Mia.*

*She shrieks with joy as he tickles her.*

*And he laughs. And she wriggles free and jumps on him.*

*He swings her around and catches her.*

*And I stand in the trees alone. Watching. Wanting.*

*The air smells good.*

*Of apples.*

“Good morning, Mr. Grey,” Ana whispers as I open my eyes. The morning sun streams through the windows and I'm curled around her like a vine. The knot of homesickness and heartache – evoked by my dream, surely – unravels at the sight of her. I'm smitten and aroused; my body rising to greet her.

“Good morning, Miss Steele.” She looks impossibly beautiful in spite of the fact that she's wearing Mia's I♥Paris T-shirt. She cups my face, eyes sparkling



and her hair wild and glossy in the morning light. She runs her thumb along my chin tickling the stubble.

“I was watching you sleep.”

“Were you now?”

“And looking at my beautiful ring.” She stretches out her hand and waggles her fingers. The diamond in her engagement ring captures the light and throws tiny rainbows across my old movie and kick-boxing posters on the walls.

“Ooh...!” she coos.

“It’s a sign,” I murmur.

*A good sign, Grey.*

“I’m never going to take it off.”

“Good!” I move so that I’m covering her. “Watching me for how long?” I run my nose down hers and press my lips to hers.

“Oh, no,” she says and she pushes at my shoulders. My stab of disappointment is real, but she rolls me on to my back and crawls on top of me. Astride me, she sits up and sweeps the T-shirt over and off her body, and throws it to the floor. “I was thinking about giving you a wake-up call.”

“Oh?” My dick and I rejoice.

Before I can steel myself against her touch, she places a soft kiss on my chest, her hair tumbling around us both, creating a chestnut haven. Bright blue eyes peek at me.

“Starting here.” She kisses me again.

I inhale sharply.

“Then moving down to here.” She runs her tongue in a wayward line down my sternum.

*Yes.*

The darkness stays quiet, subdued by the goddess on top of me or by my bursting libido. I don’t know which.

“You taste mighty fine, Mr. Grey,” she breathes against my skin.

“I’m glad to hear it.” The words are hoarse in my throat.

She licks and nips me along the base of my ribcage as her breasts graze over my lower belly.

*Ah!*

Once, twice, three times.

“Ana!” I grab her knees as my breathing accelerates and squeeze. But she squirms on top of my groin, so I let go and she rises up leaving me wanting and ready. I think she’s going to take me. She’s ready.

I’m ready.

*Fuck, I’m ready.*

But she moves down my body, kissing my stomach, my belly, her tongue slipping into my navel, then grazing through my happy trail. She nips me once more and I feel it right through my cock.

“Ah!”

“There you are,” she whispers and she stares greedily at my eager dick and then peers up at me with a coquettish grin. Slowly, her eyes on mine, she takes me in her mouth.

*Sweet Jesus.*

Her head bobs up and down, her teeth sheathed behind her lips, as she pulls me farther into her mouth each time. My fingers find her hair and sweep it out of the way so that the view of my future wife with her lips around my cock is uninterrupted. I tighten my buttocks, pushing up my hips, seeking more depth and she takes it, clamping her mouth around me.

Harder.

Harder still.

*Ah.* Ana. You fucking goddess.

She picks up the rhythm. And closing my eyes, I fist my hand in her hair.

She is so good at this.

“Yes,” I hiss through my teeth and I lose myself in the rise and fall of her exquisite mouth. I’m going to come.

All of a sudden, she stops.

*Damn. No!* I open my eyes and watch her move above me, then sink oh-so-slowly onto my bursting dick. I groan relishing every precious inch. Her hair tumbles to her naked breasts and reaching up I caress each one, running my thumbs across her hardening nipples, over and over and over.

She lets out a loud moan, thrusting her tits into my hands.

*Oh, baby.*

Then she pitches forward, kissing me, her tongue invading my mouth and I taste and savor my saltiness in her sweet mouth.

*Ana.*

I move my hands to her hips and ease her up off me and then pull her down, thrusting up at the same time.

She cries out grabbing onto my wrists.

And I do it again.

And again.

“Christian,” she calls to the ceiling in a loud plea as she matches my tempo and we move together. Over and over. Until she falls apart on top of me, taking me with her and triggering my own release.

I nuzzle her hair and thrum my fingers down her back.

She takes my breath away.

This is still new. Ana in charge. Ana initiating. I like it.

“Now that’s my idea of Sunday worship,” I whisper.

“Christian!” She whips her head to mine, eyes round with reproach.

I laugh out loud.

Will this ever get old? Shocking Miss Steele?

I hug her hard and roll us both over so she’s beneath me.

“Good morning, Miss Steele. It’s always a treat to wake up to you.”

She strokes my cheek. “And you, Mr. Grey.” Her tone is soft. “Do we have to get up? I like being here in your room.”

“No.” I glance at my watch on the nightstand. It’s 9:15. “My parents will be at Mass.” I shift to her side.

“I didn’t know they were churchgoers.”

I snort. “Yes. They are. Catholic.”

“Are you?”

“No, Anastasia.”

*God and I went our separate ways a long time ago.*

“Are you?” I ask, recalling that Welch could find no religious affiliations during her background check.

She shakes her head. “No, neither of my parents have a faith. But I would like to go to church today. I need to thank... someone for bringing you back alive from the accident.”

I sigh visualizing a bolt of lightning burning me to a cinder if I step into the hallowed grounds of a church... but for her, I’ll go.

“Okay. I’ll see what we can do.” I kiss her quickly. “Come, shower with me.”

I’ve eaten my fill. My parents have returned from Mass and my mother has cooked her traditional brunch; a delicious, coronary-inducing, plate of bacon, sausage, hash browns, eggs and English muffins. Grace is a little quiet and I suspect that she might have a hangover.

Throughout the morning I have avoided my father.

I haven’t forgiven him for last night.

Ana, Elliot and Kate are in a heated debate about bacon of all things and arguing over who should have the last sausage. I half-listen, amused, while I read an article about the failure rate of local banks in the Sunday edition of the Seattle Times.

Mia shrieks and reclaims her place at the table, holding her laptop. “Look at this. There’s a gossip item on the Seattle Nooz Web site about you being engaged, Christian.”

“Already?” Mom says, surprised.

I roll my eyes. Don’t these assholes have anything better to do?

Mia reads the column out loud. “Word has reached us here at the Nooz that Seattle’s most eligible bachelor, *the* Christian Grey, has finally been snapped up and wedding bells are in the air.” I glance at Ana, who pales as she stares doe-eyed from Mia to me.

“But who is the lucky, lucky lady?” Mia continues, “The Nooz is on the hunt. Bet she’s reading one helluva pre-nup.” Mia starts giggling.

I glare at her. *Shut the fuck up, Mia.*

She stops and purses her lips. Ignoring her, and all of the anxious looks exchanged at the table, I stare at Ana who blanches even more.

“No…” I mouth trying to reassure her.

“Christian,” Dad says.

“I’m not discussing this again,” I snarl at him. He opens his mouth to say something. “No pre-nup!” I shout with such vehemence that he closes his mouth.

*Shut up, Carrick!*

Picking up the paper I find myself re-reading the same sentence in the banking article over and over while I fume.

“Christian,” Ana murmurs. “I’ll sign anything you and Mr. Grey want.”

I look up and she's beseeching me, a sheen of unshed tears reflecting in her eyes.

*Ana. Stop.*

"No!" I protest.

"It's to protect you."

"Christian, Ana—I think you should discuss this in private," Grace chastises us. She scowls at Carrick and Mia.

"Ana, this is not about you," Dad mumbles. "And please call me Carrick."

*Don't try and make it up to her now, I seethe, inwardly.*

Suddenly there's a burst of activity. Kate and Mia get up to clear the table and Elliot quickly stabs the last remaining sausage with his fork. "I definitely prefer sausage," he roars with forced levity.

Ana is staring at her hands. She looks crestfallen.

*Jesus. Dad. Look what you've done.*

I reach over and grasp both her hands in mine and whisper so that only she can hear me, "Stop it. Ignore my dad."

*I'm trying to.*

"He's really pissed about Elena. That stuff was all aimed at me. I wish my mom had kept her mouth shut."

"He has a point, Christian. You're very wealthy, and I'm bringing nothing to our marriage but my student loans."

*Baby, I'll have you any way I can get you. You know this!*

"Anastasia, if you leave me, you might as well take everything. You left me once before. I know how that feels."

"That was different," she mumbles. And she frowns once more. "You might want to leave me."

Now, she's being ridiculous.

"Christian, you know I might do something exceptionally stupid—and you..." she stops.

*Ana, baby. I think that's highly unlikely.* "Stop. Stop now. This subject is closed. We're not discussing it anymore. No prenup. Not now—not ever."

I scramble through my thoughts trying to find safer ground and change this awful subject. Inspiration hits me. Turning to Grace, who's wringing her hands and looking anxiously at me, I ask, "Mom, can we have the wedding here?"

Her expression shifts from alarm to joy and gratitude. “Darling. That would be wonderful.” And she adds as an afterthought, “You don’t want a church wedding?”

I give her a sideways look and she capitulates immediately.

“We’d love to host your wedding. Wouldn’t we Cary?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” My father smiles benignly at both Ana and me, but I can’t look at him.

“Have you a date in mind?” Grace asks.

“Four weeks.”

“Christian. That’s not enough time!”

“It’s plenty of time.”

“I need at least eight!”

“Mom. Please.”

“Six?” she pleads.

“That would be wonderful. Thank you, Mrs. Grey,” Ana pipes up and shoots a warning glance at me, daring me to contradict her.

“Six it is,” I mutter. “Thanks, Mom.”

Ana is quiet on the drive back to Seattle. She’s probably thinking about my outburst at my father this morning. I know it’s his censure that’s bothering me. I sigh. Maybe I’m behaving like the teenager Dad thinks I am. I should be on top of the world; my girl is beside me, we have a date for our wedding, but I feel strangely deflated after my father’s angry tirade about Elena and the prenup. On the plus side, I think he knows he fucked up. He tried to make it up to me when we left.

*Christian, I’m sorry.*

*I’ve always done everything in my power to protect you.*

*And I failed.*

He should have said this last night. He did not.

I shake my head. I want out of this funk.

“Hey, I have an idea.” I reach over and squeeze Ana’s knee.

It must be my lucky day because there’s a space outside St. James Cathedral. Ana looks up through the trees at the majestic building that dominates a whole block on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. She gives me a quizzical look.

“Church,” I offer by way of explanation.

“This is big for a church, Christian.”

“True.”

She smiles. “It’s perfect.”

Hand in hand, we head through one of the front doors into the antechamber, then proceed beyond into the nave. Out of instinct I reach towards the stoup for Holy Water to cross myself, but I stop myself just in time, knowing that if a bolt of lightning is going to strike — it will be now. I glance at Ana whose mouth has dropped open in surprise but I look away, to admire the impressive ceiling of the majestic cathedral as I wait for God’s judgement.

*Nothing. No thunderbolt today.*

“Old habits,” I mutter, feeling a little embarrassed, but relieved that I’ve not been rendered into a pile of ashes on the grand threshold. Ana turns her attention to the magnificent interior; the lofty ornate ceilings, the rust-colored marble columns, the intricate stained glass. Sunlight streams in a steady beam through the oculus in the transept’s dome, as if God were smiling down on the place. There’s a whispered hush that echoes through the nave, enveloping us in an ethereal calm that’s only disturbed by the occasional cough from one of the few visitors. It’s quiet; a refuge from the hustle and bustle of Seattle. I’d forgotten just how tranquil and beautiful it is in here, but then I’ve not been inside for years. I’d always loved the pomp and ceremony of a Catholic Mass. The ritual. The responses. The smell of burning incense. My mother made sure her three children were well versed in all things Catholic and there was a time when I would have done anything to please my new mother.

But puberty arrived and all that went to shit. My relationship with God never recovered and it changed the relationship with my family, especially my father.

I brush off the memory. It’s painful.

Now standing in the hushed splendor of the nave I’m overwhelmed by a familiar sense of peace. “Come. I want to show you something.”

We walk down the side aisle to the sound of Ana’s heels ringing over the flagstones until we reach a small side chapel. The golden walls and the dark floor are the perfect setting for the exquisite statue of Our Lady, surrounded by flickering candles.

Ana gasps when she sees her.

Without doubt it's still one of the most beautiful shrines I've ever seen. The Virgin looking down at the floor in modesty while she holds her child aloft. Her robes are gold and blue and shimmering in the light from the burning candles.

It's stunning.

"My mother used to bring us here sometimes for Mass. This was my favorite place. The shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary," I whisper.

Ana stands and takes in the scene, the statue, the walls, the dark ceiling covered in gold stars.

"Is this what inspired your collection? Your Madonnas?" she asks and there's wonder in her voice.

"Yes."

"Motherhood," she murmurs and looks up at me.

I shrug. "I've seen it done well and done badly."

"Your birth mom?" she asks.

I nod, and her eyes grow impossibly large, revealing some deep emotion that I don't want to acknowledge.

I look away. It's too raw.

I place a fifty-dollar bill in the offertory box and hand her a candle. Ana clasps my hand and squeezes it, then lights the wick from one of the tapers on the wall and places her candle in an iron sconce on the wall. It flickers brightly amongst its companions.

"Thank you," she mutters to Mary and wraps an arm around my middle, placing her head on my shoulder. And together we stand in quiet contemplation in this most beautiful of sanctuaries in the heart of the city.

The peace, the beauty, and being with Ana restores my good mood.

To hell with work this afternoon. It's Sunday. I want some fun with my girl. "Shall we go to the game?" I ask.

"Game?"

"The Phillies are playing the M's at Safeco Park. GEH has a suite there."

"Do I have time to get changed?"

"Sure. Let's go."

Hand in hand we head back to the R8.