

SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 2011

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We lie in postcoital 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 all over me, her cheek against 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 memorize the feel of the woman in my arms, her weight on top of me, the slow 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 my joy erupts in a laugh, as I tighten my arms around her and kiss her hair. "Vegas, tomorrow, it is then." She raises her head, 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 lowers her head and I skim my fingertips across her naked back, enjoying the warmth of her sleek skin.

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

"Not big. 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.*

For once we're in agreement. No arguing.

*Is this a first?*

Gently, I stroke her hair, that's a little mussed from our spent passion.

"So, we've established 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 fingertips and I roll over, taking her with me, and 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 recollection, 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 laces her fingers with 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," with my parents as their audience. I think they're all a little tipsy. Elliot is slumped on the couch, sipping his beer and mouthing the lyrics.

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, making the appropriate admiring noises. 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.

*Has she told him about Elena?*

*Fuck.* I hope not.

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 12:28. 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, removes his glasses, and begins to clean them with the lint cloth he pulls 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.”

*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 such quiet venom that I’m silenced immediately. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or heard him this angry. It’s sobering. “It has everything to do with her. You are about to make 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 prenuptial agreement.”

*What?* I raise my hands to stop him. 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 toward 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. Both of you have been lying to us for all these years. And that’s what hurts the most.” His voice drops. “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 off, 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 in 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 pre-nup. 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. Her frosty glare is directed at him.

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

My mood savage, 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. They’re definitely all inebriated. Ana giggles, looking 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, who 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.”

Muttering an expletive beneath my breath, I keep my temper in check. 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 from 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 and utter 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 my present mood 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 hangs over me 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.” It’s not a request to Ana. I’ve had enough of my family for one night. She nods in agreement and I knit her fingers with mine. “Good night, all. Thanks for the party, Mother.”

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 and trying to put Carrick’s blistering rebuke out of my mind.

“Hey, are you okay?” she murmurs. “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.” I kiss the top of her head and she tilts her face up, focusing on me, compassion and understanding shining in her eyes, and I know neither of us wants to raise the specter of Elena...*Mrs. Robinson*.

I’m reminded of earlier this evening, when Grace, in all her avenging glory, threw Elena out of the house. I wonder what my mother 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 Ana and I snuck up here last weekend 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 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.

WHILE MY FIANCÉE SLUMBERS beside me, I text Taylor and ask him to bring us a change of clothes from Escala in the morning. Scooting down beside Ana, I focus on her profile, marveling that she’s asleep already...and that she’s agreed to be 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'm 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 air. 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'm in the water. I want to be up there. With them. 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 glimmers through the windows and I'm curled around her like a vine. The knot of homesickness and heartache—evoked by a 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, her eyes sparkling and her hair wild and glossy in the morning light. She runs a thumb along my chin, tickling the stubble.

"I was watching you sleep."

"Were you now?"

"And looking at my beautiful engagement ring." She stretches out her hand and wiggles her fingers. The diamond captures the light and throws tiny rainbows across my old movie and kickboxing posters on the walls.

"Ooh!" she coos. "It's a sign."

*A good sign, Grey. Hopefully.*

"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 pushes at my shoulders and my stab of disappointment is real, but she rolls me onto my back and straddles my hips. Sitting up, she sweeps her T-shirt off in one swift move, and throws it to the floor. “I was thinking about giving you a wake-up call.”

“Oh?” My cock and I rejoice.

Before I can steel myself against her touch, she leans down and 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 rib cage as her breasts graze over my lower belly.

*Ah!*

Once, twice, three times.

“Ana!” I clutch 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 waiting and wanting. I think she's going to take me. She's ready.

I'm ready.

*Fuck, I'm so ready.*

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

“Ah!”

“There you are,” she whispers and she stares greedily at my eager dick and then peeps 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 I can enjoy an uninterrupted view of my future wife with her lips around my cock. 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 lengthy 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 on to my wrists.

And I do it again.

And again.

“Christian,” she calls to the ceiling in a quiet plea as she matches my tempo and we move together. In time. As one. 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 disapproval.

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 grimace. “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 practice a faith. But I would like to go to church today. I need to thank...someone for bringing you back alive from the helicopter accident.”

I sigh, visualizing a bolt of lightning burning me to a cinder if I step onto 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.”

THERE’S A SMALL LEATHER duffel outside my bedroom door—Taylor has delivered clean clothes. I scoop up the bag and shut the door. Ana is wrapped in a towel, beads of water glistening on her shoulders. Her attention is focused on my bulletin board, paused at the photograph of the crack whore. She turns her head toward me, a question on her beautiful face...a question I don’t want to answer. “You still have it,” she says.

*Yeah. I still have the photo. What of it?*

As her question hangs in the air between us, her eyes grow luminous in the morning sunshine, drinking me in, begging me to say something. But I can’t. This is not somewhere I want to go. For a moment, I’m reminded of the gut punch I felt when Carrick handed me the photograph so many years ago.

*Hell. Don’t go there, Grey.*

“Taylor brought a change of clothes for us,” I whisper as I sling the duffel onto the bed. There’s an impossibly long silence before she responds.

“Okay,” she says, and she walks toward the bed and unzips the bag.

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 with amusement 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* website about you being engaged, Christian.”

“Already?” Mom says, surprised.

*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 prenup.” Mia starts giggling.

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

She stops and presses her lips together. Ignoring her, and all the anxious looks exchanged at the table, I turn my attention to 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 prenup!” I snap with such vehemence that he closes his mouth.

*Shut up, Carrick!*

Picking up the paper, I find myself rereading 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 exclaim, imploring her to drop this subject.

“It's to protect you.”

“Christian, Ana—I think you should discuss this in private,” Grace chastises us and 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, and 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 only she can hear me, “Stop it. Ignore my dad. 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. “But, 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, 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 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 state. “Thanks, Mom.”

ANA IS QUIET ON the drive back to Seattle. She’s probably thinking about my outburst at Carrick this morning. Our argument from last night still rankles—his disapproval a burr

chafing at my skin. Deep down, I'm worried that he's right; maybe I'm not husband material.

*Damn, I'm going to prove him wrong.*

*I'm not the adolescent he thinks I am.*

I stare at the road ahead, deflated. My girl is beside me, we have a date for our wedding, and I should feel on top of the world, but I'm picking over the remains of 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 parted earlier but his fumbling, inadequate attempt to make amends still smarts.

*Christian, I've always done everything in my power to protect you. And I failed. I should have been there for you.*

But I didn't want to hear him. 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.

PERHAPS MY LUCK IS turning—there's a parking space outside St. James Cathedral. Ana peers through the trees at the majestic building that dominates a whole block on Ninth Avenue, then turns to me, a question in her eyes.

"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 onward into the nave. Out of instinct I reach toward the stoup for Holy Water to bless myself, but I stop just in time, knowing that if a bolt of lightning is going to strike, it will be now. I catch Ana's openmouthed surprise, but look away to admire the impressive ceiling as I wait for God's judgment.

*No. 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 fills the nave, enveloping us in a spiritual calm that's disturbed only by the occasional echoing 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. Grace 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. We were always at odds with each other from the time I hit thirteen. 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, the sound of Ana's heels ringing over the flagstones, until we reach a small chapel. Its golden walls and dark floor are the perfect setting for the exquisite statue of Our Lady, surrounded by flickering candles.

Ana gasps when she sees her.

Without a doubt this is still one of the most beautiful shrines I've ever seen. The Virgin, eyes cast down at the floor in modesty, holds her child aloft. Her gold-and-blue robes shimmer 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 soaks up 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 she peeks 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 briefly in gratitude, then lights the wick from one of the tapers and places her candle in an iron sconce on the wall. It flickers brightly among its companions. "Thank you," she says quietly to Mary, and wraps an arm around my middle, placing her head on my shoulder. Together we stand in quiet contemplation in this most exquisite of sanctuaries in the heart of the city.

The peace, the beauty, and being with Ana restores my good humor. 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 Field. GEH has a suite there.”

“Sure. Sounds like fun. Let’s go.” Ana beams.

Hand in hand, we head back to the R8.