



STEALING
the **BILLIONAIRE**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
S . M . WEST

STEALING THE BILLIONAIRE

6IX LOVES, BOOK 4

S.M. WEST

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Also by S.M. West

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Stealing the Billionaire

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“Some of us aren’t meant to belong. Some of us have to turn the world upside down and shake the hell out of it until we make our own place in it.” — Elizabeth Lowell, Remember Summer

PLAYLIST

Listen On Spotify

“Sleep Tight” – Holly Humberstone

“Those Eyes” – New West

“Call Out My Name” – The Weeknd

“Here to Forever” – Death Cab for Cutie

“Somewhere Only We Know” – Keane

“Love the Way You Are” – Yukon Blonde

EDEN

Only yesterday we were friends—I'd gotten him one of those caramel chai lattes he loves so much—and today, he's manhandling me and threatening to call the cops. How is this real?

I try to pull from his grasp, and while I'm not a small woman and I've got some muscles, he's easily a foot taller and his muscles go on for days.

Groaning in frustration, I yank once more on his hold. Useless. "Abe, give me a break. I'm only going in to get what's mine. I'll be ten minutes, tops."

"Eden, you aren't supposed to be anywhere near here." Abraham, the daytime security guard at Ivation, where I worked until less than twenty-four hours ago, forces me several steps away from the entrance to the office.

On the other side of the glass doors, a small group of employees, my former colleagues, toddle from their desks to get a better look at this messy—and unfortunately public—altercation.

They gawk, and my insides churn and boil. As if yesterday's termination and escort from the building wasn't enough humiliation.

"Abe, please. You're my only hope. I won't cause any problems or talk to anyone." I bite my bottom lip and internally beg my tears not to fall. "I promise."

If I cry now, I'll lose all semblance of control and might as well kiss goodbye any chance of getting my business proposal back from my thieving ex-boss.

“What’s going on, Abe?” A young, nervous voice, Howie, the newbie security guard, crackles through the walkie-talkie hanging from Abe’s belt. “All the employees are getting up from their desks. You need help?”

Abe groans and rolls his eyes at me in that way he would when griping about the new security guard, less than a month on the job and overeager to please. I frown, not giving an inch of empathy.

You’re the one scorching our friendship, Abe. I’m not bonding with you over this.

He raises the device to his mouth. “Nah, Howie, it’s fine. Stay put.”

Abe had deliberately stationed him at the rear of the floor where there’s less action and also the farthest point away from him. I’m almost tempted to holler at Howie to join us, just to see the man in front of me squirm. It would serve him right.

He tucks the walkie-talkie back on his belt and sighs. “Eden, if Billie finds out you’re here, I could lose my job for not getting rid of you. Call her and get permission to come get your stuff.”

“Call Billie?” Incredulous, my voice climbs, shrill and piercing even to my own ears, and we both flinch. “You and I both know that there’s no way in hell she’s letting me back in there.”

I stab the air in the direction of the office and the group—now doubled in size—on the other side of the glass. Head shaking, his mouth coils into a thin, gnarly line as if he’s more than disappointed to find out I’m not as smart as he thought I was.

Incensed and rejecting of his disapproval, I fling at him what I hope is a scathing gaze. Not even a week ago, we both railed on about how Billie rules like a dictator and if she

doesn't like you, forget any chances of a thriving career, you'll wish you were dead.

Billie Ivers, owner and creator of Ivation, her third lucrative tech start-up in the past decade, isn't going to allow me into her workplace ever again.

"Then get a lawyer and do it the right way." His irritated voice cuts through my glum thoughts.

"I can't afford a lawyer." Tears well in my eyes and I furiously wipe them away, angry with my body for betraying me just like everyone else has. "And even if I could, we both know she would come after me with a battalion of her own. I wouldn't stand a chance."

That's it, isn't it?

I don't stand a chance against the likes of Billie, a successful and well-respected businesswoman. So much so, she was recently named to a prestigious ranking of transformative Canadian business leaders for her work with entrepreneurs and how she's changing the business landscape.

I want to barf.

And me? At twenty-seven, I'm only a few years out of my starving student days, and even with an MBA, I'm nowhere near making it. Some weeks, I barely scrape by.

My business idea is *my* one shot and she stole it. And the worst part is, it's my word against hers.

My shoulders fall in defeat, and sensing my surrender, Abe releases my wrist. Even he knows I'm not a threat. Coming here today is turning into an epic fail, but it's my last chance to get back what belongs to me.

Last night, I spent hours strategizing how best to do this. Billie would have stashed my satchel somewhere in the office, and next to getting inside, my biggest challenge would be finding it quickly.

I came up with a list of places to look and how best to slip in and out of Ivation unnoticed. And this morning, I felt good, even hopeful.

But I made a fatal mistake.

I never imagined Abe would block my entry into the office. We're on the same side, or we were up until yesterday.

Now here I am on the outside looking in.

Walking away would be easiest, but there's a lot on the line. My reputation is all I have, and if Billie decides to make an example out of me and calls the cops, I'll be the laughingstock of the tech industry and branded a troublemaker before I even get started.

I'm not a quitter.

Behind the glass wall, the enthralled crowd refuses to make eye contact with me. They don't want any part of this, and I can't blame them, but they don't mind feasting on my heartache like it's entertainment, even better than a Raptors game.

Then like Moses parting the Red Sea, Billie prances through the crowd at barely five and a half feet tall with her pathetic goon and second-in-command, Greene Schwartz, at her heels. To hide the slight buckle to my knees, I fortify my glare and jut out my chin.

"Eden, you're trespassing and creating quite a scene." Her icy stare lands on Abe. "And why didn't you call the police?"

"Um, er, I...I..." he stammers, searching for the words, and once upon a time, I would've felt sorry for him, maybe even come to his rescue.

The witch glares at me. "I'm within my right to call the police."

"You do that, and I'll tell them that you stole from me." Out of the corner of my eye, Abe winces and shakes his head while Greene utters a wry snort as if enjoying what he believes is my funeral. I'm on a roll and couldn't care less what either man thinks. "And I won't stop there. I'll go to the media. I'm sure the CBC would be very interested in what I have to say."

Yesterday, it was this very warning that cost me my job, and while I should regret it, I can't. Even if I'd kept my mouth

shut, she has stolen my business proposal, and the risk of scandal is the only weapon I have in this fight.

Billie claims my threat led to my dismissal because I posed a risk to the safety of the business and her employees. Yeah, right. It's more like she can't have me around when she makes my brainchild into a reality, now can she?

Just imagine the chaos and potential damage I could cause.

Going to the media rankles her as something shifts in her expression, and this only serves to stoke the fires of my hunch. She's done this before and that's the real story. The real reason is she doesn't want me picking through the skeletons in her closet.

"Abe, give us five minutes, then get her out of here." She motions for me to follow, and I'm part shocked and part elated as she steers the way through the crowd toward her office.

As I pass him, Greene lingers and leers, only to step in behind me. He's so close, his hot menacing breath causes a queasy prickle down my spine.

Expression stern, Billie stands at her office door, waiting for us. "Get back to work, everyone. I'm not paying you to stand around and stare."

Her minions scatter like mice. We enter the room, and she swiftly closes the door. We may be within the privacy of her inner sanctum, but we might as well be in a fishbowl for all the structural surfaces are made of glass.

Ivation's office space is open concept, supposedly to signify that there's no hierarchy here—we're all equals. *Bullshit.*

While the masses have no assigned seats, no individual desks, all under the guise of a collaborative space, both Billie and Greene have swanky corner offices. Yeah, so much for equality.

The dark-haired woman slides behind her desk, reminding me of a general slipping into her tank—armor in place. "Eden, why are you here?"

“You know why. You took what’s mine.” I scan the office in search of my satchel and the business proposal safely inside. It’s wishful thinking, but she may have left it out in plain sight. “Give me my proposal and I’ll leave quietly. You’ll never have to see or speak to me again.”

Her blood-red lips slither up at the ends like the twist of a snake. “Anything produced within the walls of this office belongs to me.” She pokes a finger at the center of her chest. “Nothing here is yours.”

“I didn’t work on my idea or the proposal at work. All of it was done on my own time, and you know it.”

“And you expect us to believe you? You’re delusional.” Greene, the rest of the metaphorical snake in the grass, was the one to suggest I take my business idea to Billie.

Foolishly, I’d thought she would help me, offer guidance. If only I’d kept my mouth shut, they’d be none the wiser about my business plan and my dream to be my own boss.

Lesson learned. Trust no one.

Billie crosses her arms over her chest. “You were terminated and no longer have the right to waltz in here whenever you want. As a courtesy to you and our working relationship—you *were* a good employee—I wanted to give you one final chance. To make this clear to you so there’s no room for any misunderstanding.” She pauses to share a look with Greene. “If you come back, Abe will be instructed to call the police. You will be arrested. Is that clear?”

I snort and roll my eyes, unfazed by her bully tactics and how easily she could have me in police custody within the hour. “When I started working here, I had such high expectations...I admired you and aspired to be you.”

My hands shake at my wistful tone and I ball them into fists, not willing to let her see how much this hurts, just how much she stole from me. Not only my proposal but also the belief that business doesn’t have to be vicious and ugly. For all that the world believes she stands for, she’s actually nothing but a thief and a fraud.

“Before working for you, I’d heard such great things about Billie Ivers. How you supported young entrepreneurs, women, and people of color.” I ring every word in scorn and glower at her blank, almost bored expression.

Her apathy causes something inside me to snap, and I unleash the growing desire to pick at what I’m almost certain is a truth. “I’m not the first person you’ve done this to, am I? Stolen their idea.”

It’s imperceptible but she reacts, flexing her biceps and clenching her jaw. Her discomfort spurs me on.

“Is that how Ivation was built? On the back of another poor, unsuspecting entrepreneur, so eager to please you that they shared their idea with you, only to have you steal it?”

Her gaze flicks to Greene. “We’re done here.”

He inches closer, his bitter stare telegraphing his intent to grab me, and my hand flies out to stop him.

“Don’t touch me.” Sheer disdain causes my voice to quake, and I tear my gaze from the goon to stare at Billie. “I’ll find them. I’ll share their stories.” I press my trembling fingers to my heart. “I’ll share my story with the media.”

“Stop with the empty threats. It’s pathetic.” She picks up the phone and hits a button. “Abe, come get Ms. Carpenter, and the next time she steps inside this office”—she jabs me with a steely glare—“have her arrested.”

I don’t react. I’m not scared, only angry. Maybe an arrest would work in my favor. The media would certainly lap that up.

Greene wordlessly shadows me to the door and nods to Abe who’s at the threshold. I take the lead—not sparing anyone a word or glance—and head for the door. My ex-friend sighs from behind me but makes no attempt to talk.

I scour the office, searching for my satchel, and rage boils in my chest at the memory of Greene’s nerve just yesterday. Under Billie’s command, no doubt, he grabbed my bag from the back of my chair as if he had every right to it.

Only hours earlier, I'd presented my proposal to both of them, and Billie had feigned massive disappointment. She'd even gone so far as to say I had a long way to go.

Dejected, I'd left her office with my tail between my legs, struggling to respect her feedback even as my gut screamed otherwise. I spent years honing the most innovative idea I could come up with, countless hours of research, interviews, and this idea... I believe it's the one.

I should have left the office then and there as was my first impulse. I growl at all the things I wish I could change, and Abe mumbles something. My angry thoughts scatter, and that's when I spot it on the top of Greene's desk. My satchel lies there, out in the open.

My heart flips, and I steal a glance toward Billie's office where she and Greene face the window, their backs to me, talking. Good. Abe's only a few inches away, but my chances aren't going to get any better than this.

Internally, I scramble for a way to stall when my clumsiness does the trick and I falter on the leg of a chair. My high heels offer no stability or support, and my hands shoot out in front of me to break my fall. My knee whacks a table, and my forearm scrapes the sharp metal edge as I tumble and crash onto my backside.

Abe crouches beside me. "Are you okay?"

Breathless, I brush my hair out of my eyes, and a few people attempt to come to my aid, but Abe's quick to shoo them away.

"I got it. Back to work." His dark, concerned eyes scan my body, and I'm dazed and stumped as to how I will get from the carpet to Greene's office. "Eden?"

"Yes, I'm okay. Uh, just a little stunned."

"Oh, shit. You're bleeding." He holds up my arm where many tiny pinpricks of blood pop like polka dots along my grated flesh. "Let me get antiseptic and a bandage."

I'm about to say "I'm okay" but stop. This is what I need. Distance from Abe.

Thank you, universe. Thank you.

“Okay. I’ll stay here...catch my breath.” I play up the injury and grimace.

Abraded and bleeding, my arm looks worse than it feels. High on adrenaline and consumed with thoughts of the insane heist I’m about to undertake, I hardly register any pain or discomfort.

Abe lumbers toward the kitchenette, although one look over his shoulder and I’ll be in his sights. Nothing can be done about that. I’ll just have to be quick.

I get to my knees and keep low. If I do this, I will destroy whatever is left of our friendship. Abe will be blamed even if it isn’t his fault. But are we really going to be friends after this?

Work brought us together, and I no longer work here, and worst case, if Billie fires him, he’ll find another job. As for me, this was my first job, and she isn’t going to give me a glowing reference. Once again, I’m starting from scratch, and if she decides to bad-mouth me within the industry, I’m done for.

It’s now or never.

The satchel is on the desk.

It’s my intellectual property.

My future.

Before I can second-guess or talk myself out of it, I sprint to the only other office on the floor and grab my bag off the desk. There isn’t time to check if my proposal’s inside the bag—inquisitive gazes track my every move—and I can only hope, or more like pray, it is.

I sprint to the double glass doors, ignoring the tightness in my knee. Something causes me to pause and glance over my shoulder.

Abe’s gaze latches onto mine and he stumbles, arms laden with first aid supplies. The big guy throws them aside, and his once-concerned expression morphs into a mixture of fury and

hurt. He fumbles for the walkie-talkie at his waist, and this is followed by the machine's squawk and his gruff voice uttering Howie's name.

I twirl around, eyes on the exit, and run.

WALKER

“*Y*ou’re selfish.” Marlowe’s high-pitched whine grates on my nerves. “I’ve always been there for you, and all we’re asking for is an hour of your goddamn precious time. If you’d shown up as promised, you’d already be on your way home.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as music filters through the phone. “It’s not just an hour and you know it. These things are tiresome and pointless. Extricating myself will be an ordeal.”

“You’re ruthless when you want to be. Leaving shouldn’t be a problem. Put your own needs aside for just one minute, dear brother.” Her mocking term of endearment prickles at the back of my neck like the spines of a cactus, as is her intention, I’m sure. “This is for Alan. You know just being here would go a long way in showing others you support him.”

“I’ve already invested and given my support in more ways than one,” I growl, losing my patience. “Missing one party isn’t a big deal.”

Through the limo’s tinted window, a flash of red grabs my attention. A woman sprints along the sidewalk, which in and of itself isn’t unusual, but she isn’t dressed for a run.

Barefoot, she dodges the oblivious shoppers with her high heels in one hand, and in the other, she grips the black leather strap of a messenger bag slung across her body.

What’s even more bizarre is how her long red dress is hiked up at the sides, tucked into her...underwear? Muscled legs flex and strain as she zig-zags around the pedestrians

crowding her way, and every few feet, she slows to glance behind her.

Marlowe's incessant voice is a sharp blade slicing through my curiosity. "Walker? Walker!"

"I'm here. Relax." Tearing my gaze from the street, I focus on how best to end this call. "I can't make any promises. I might show up, I might not."

"You're goddamn unbelievable. The next time you need help, don't call me." She hangs up before I can remind her that I've never asked for her help.

Marlowe foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog springs to mind as the welcomed peace and silence of the car surrounds me. My relief doesn't last long though as a wave of guilt washes over me.

Obligation is the bane of my existence and the price of my business success. Just my presence at a function carries a lot of weight, and I'm not bragging. I'd prefer to spend my time the way I want—not at parties, events, and fundraisers to be seen, ensuring my media empire and name are the first to come to mind when they've got a story.

Alan, my brother-in-law, could use my backing in his attempt to drum up investors for his new business. I understand his drive to build a new venture, and it's something I want to do.

My head throbs with the promise of a headache. "Dammit."

Against my wishes, I'm now going to their party. At thirty-nine, CEO of a highly successful media broadcast corporation, and once again single, everyone wants a piece of me.

Sadly, giving Alan my support isn't the problem. No. It's Marlowe's friends—a pack of divorcées who will descend upon me like a murder of crows eager to pick at my flesh and bones.

I shudder and glance out the window once more. There's no sign of the curvy redhead, or who or what was chasing her.

“Sorry, boss,” Tony, my driver, interrupts my musings. “I thought cutting across Cumberland to Bay Street would spare us the construction and traffic on Avenue Road.”

“Bay won’t be much better.” I rub at my pulsing temples and shut my eyes.

It’s bumper-to-bumper on this one-way street through Bloor-Yorkville, a swanky high-rent neighborhood and shopping district in the heart of Toronto.

“Yeah, but I thought we’d at least be moving.” His fingers dance across the steering wheel. “Once this van in front of us makes his turn, we should be clear.”

“There’s a change in plans.” I look into the rearview mirror and his dark eyes meet mine. “Take me to Marlowe’s. I’ll stay for an hour. Tops.”

He nods, showing no sign that he’s aware that I’ve caved to my sister’s demands. “All right, boss.”

Without warning, the passenger door across from me whips open, and a flurry of red dives into the limo.

Tensing, I growl at the woman sprawled at my feet. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

It’s the redhead from the street, the one running as if her life depended on it. Huge, haunted green eyes stare up at me, just as alarmed and confused as I am.

Tony throws the vehicle into park. “Hey, you can’t—” He’s out of the car, and before I can so much as blink, he throws open the same door she just did.

Every muscle in his big frame winds tight as he leans in to grip the invader’s ankle, dragging her out. Her dress, no longer bunched and secured, flows freely around her kicking limbs.

“No, wait!” She clings to my leg, and her imploring eyes well with tears. “Please let me stay. Just for a minute or two.”

Undeterred, my driver continues to tug her body from the car. “Look, lady, I don’t know what you’re playing at—”

She shrieks, and I reach for her, swallowing past the sudden lump in my throat. Her fear is genuine, and I'm not immune to her panic.

My fingers curl around her shoulder. "Tony, it's okay."

She gasps at my touch but doesn't move, and grudgingly, Tony nods, jaw set, and releases her. He steps from the vehicle and waits for the woman to pull her lower half into the limo before he shuts the door, knowing better than to question me.

It's unclear if my decision is wise, but I can't bring myself to toss her out. She clearly lunged into my car to hide from someone.

"Thank you." She scrambles onto the seat across from me. "I'm really sorry to do this. It's just—" Her words catch in her throat at the sight of something outside the limo.

Through the window, I see two security guards, their generic uniforms molded to their brawny frames, race by the car, only to stop and backtrack.

One of them says something to Tony, who is still standing outside the car, and she ducks onto the floor again. "Oh no."

"The windows are tinted." I watch her body bend onto itself.

"What?" She looks at me through her tousled red hair.

"Tinted." I point to the window. "They can't see or hear us. It's safe."

"Oh, thank goodness." Relief relaxes her body, limbs unfurling and loosening, before she clambers onto the seat once more.

Transfixed, she stares at the two dark figures lumbering back onto the sidewalk.

My driver slips into the car. "They asked if I'd seen her. I said only when she ran by earlier."

"Good." I capture his gaze in the rearview mirror and tip my chin in approval. "Give us some privacy."

His mouth opens, a protest likely burning his tongue, but he must think better of it because he wordlessly raises the privacy divider.

“I’m sor—” the woman says, and I raise a hand to stop her, not interested in whatever story she’s about to spin.

“Explain yourself before I have my driver call those men back.”

“You wouldn’t.” Outrage colors her cheeks as if she has the right to be angry with me.

This woman. I shake my head, not amused. She invaded my car without an invitation, clearly running from someone or something.

I can do whatever I please.

Her spine straightens, eyes blazing, itching for a battle, but it’s the slight tremble in her hand that gives her away. She’s unnerved by all of this.

Lowering my voice and relaxing my posture, I try again. “Tell me what happened, and start with your name.”

She flattens her hands on her thighs and brushes them down the length of her dress as if trying to stop herself from shaking my hand or making any kind of contact.

“I’m Eden Carpenter.” Her fingers now work to tame her unruly hair framing a heart-shaped face. “I work—no, *used* to work at a small start-up down the street and...”

I’m familiar with a few of the small firms thriving in the area, some I even contemplated investing in, but I say nothing, wanting her to go on. Her attention fixes on something beyond the dark window, and I use the time to study her alabaster skin, high cheekbones, and the dotting of freckles on the bridge of her pert nose.

Eden drops her gaze to her lap before steeling her spine and jutting out her chin, clearly refusing to be ashamed but of what?

“I was fired yesterday.” She watches me, expecting something.

While I'm even more intrigued, I need more details. "Okay. Why?"

"My former boss is a nightmare." Her full, bow-shaped lips are red and swollen from gnawing on them. "I was going to quit...I only wish I had. Then I would've left on my own terms. To add insult to injury, she refused to let me get all my things."

"She can't do that."

"Well, she let me get everything but this." She holds up the satchel still slung over her body. "It's a business proposal for an idea I came up with. I foolishly pitched it to her and her right-hand man, and I fell for it when they said they might be interested in investing."

Her eyes fall to her lap once more, and so does her hair like a curtain between us. My fingers itch to touch the silky fire, draw it back and see her face once more.

"I presented my entire proposal to my boss, and she said it was stupid when in reality, she planned to steal it." Her lips wind into an awkward frown. "I didn't figure it out until my proposal was missing and my boss had it. She refused to give it back and claims my idea is company property."

I rest my elbow on the window ledge and lean my jaw against the palm of my hand, not surprised by any of this.

That isn't true. This woman has balls to steal the satchel. No wonder she's being chased.

"Well, is it company property?" I challenge.

Righteousness flares in her sea-green eyes. "No."

"Are you sure?" I shift forward, catching a whiff of citrus and something earthy, spicy, and somewhat sweet. "If you came up with the idea while doing work for the firm, then they may have a right to it."

"My idea wasn't for anything work-related. I want to be my own boss, and I spend my free time researching and brainstorming. At home, not in the office. When I came up

with an idea that I thought had huge potential, I put everything into making a viable business plan.”

She leans forward, resting her elbows on her thighs and clasping her fingers together in front of her. “It’s my intellectual property. The only thing I did wrong was tell them about it.”

“So, you returned to the office today and what? Took it?”

She pushes her back into the seat and nods sheepishly. “Once they realized what I’d done, I had to make a run for it. I was desperate and out of my mind when I got into your car. I headed for the subway but they followed. The train just left the station...I had nowhere to hide, and I realized they were going to catch me.”

Her cheeks heat, and a warm glow eclipses her features. “I really am sorry. I don’t normally do things like this. Thank you for letting me hide in here. I’ll get out once we’re off Cumberland.”

I should let the few remaining minutes we’re together pass in silence, but I can’t help myself. “What will you do if they show up at your house?”

“What?” Her expressive eyes widen. “You think they would?”

“Possibly.”

“Shit.” She nibbles on her bottom lip. “My roommate. I suppose we could stay with a friend.”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call the police and turn you over.”

She juts out her chin. “Because I did nothing wrong.”

“Did you or did you not take something from someone else’s establishment?”

“I only took back what was mine.” Her defiant gaze bores into me, never wavering. “What *they* stole.”

“But you took it from a place of business where you weren’t welcome.” I pause, waiting for her to relent, which she

does with a small chin dip. “Some would say that’s stealing.”

Eden slams her hands onto the leather seat on either side of her legs. “I did nothing wrong.”

“Was the danger of getting caught or potentially having to answer to the police worth getting that back?” I nod to the bag resting on her hip.

“Yes. Without it, I’m stuck in a nowhere job until I come up with another idea. And who knows how long that would take or if it would ever happen?”

I try to keep skepticism from my tone. “And you really think your idea is that unique?”

She’s no different from so many others, and I’ve had my share of people pitching an idea as if it’s the *one* when there’s nothing different or even creative about it.

Her fingers wrap around the edges of the bag. “Yes.”

I hadn’t expected this when I started asking questions, and while I’m jaded by the countless aspiring inventors and entrepreneurs I’ve met, I’m still interested in knowing more about her idea.

My company’s a well-oiled machine, and while thriving, it no longer holds the challenge it once did. Seeking new business opportunities and investments, and more importantly, carving out the time to do so, are where my interests now lie.

If her former boss wanted to steal it, her business proposal might be a diamond in the rough.

Tony makes a left and the car picks up speed. Our sudden movement causes her to peer out the window.

“I can get out at the next set of lights.” She unbuckles her seat belt and slides onto the bench where I’m sitting, then down toward the door. “If you could please tell your driver.”

“You know, the night doesn’t have to be over.” An insane idea hits me like a bolt of lightning, and even with doubts, I barrel ahead. “I’m glad I could help you, and I think you could help me too. I mean, it’s the least you could do given I spared you from being captured by those men.” My voice is deep and

husky, way more seductive than I intend, and I pull back, not wanting to scare her or give her the wrong impression.

It's too late.

She arches one auburn brow, tenses, and wraps her fingers around the door handle as she inches away from me. The doors are now locked, controlled by Tony. Come to think of it, if the doors had been locked earlier, she'd never have gotten into my car. Then what would have happened to her?

Her hard glare and bold words fly at me like nails. "I'm not sleeping with you."

EDEN

*H*e belts out a deep rumble of laughter, causing a wild flutter in my stomach. I should be annoyed with his amusement but I'm too overwhelmed. I just told Walker Drummond, the irritatingly hot and disgustingly wealthy media magnate, I won't sleep with him.

How many times have I fantasized about that very thing when ogling the founder of Canada's largest global news empire, Zenith Point Corporation, on a business news site?

He may not know it, but I recognized him the second I looked up from my less-than-flattering position on the car floor. Talk about bringing me to my knees, or more like flat on my ass. How embarrassing.

My back presses against the car door to put as much distance between us as possible, though I'm also comforted by the proximity to a getaway. "I'm not joking."

From this angle, could I kick him in the balls if I have to? Not once in our brief exchange was I scared or had I gotten any kind of psycho vibe. In fact, the exact opposite. He's been a gentleman, although questioning and challenging my crazy.

"I'm not asking you to sleep with me." His easy grin and the twinkle in his eye causes my pulse to quicken. "That's why I find it amusing."

With a quick swipe of my tongue, I wet my lips, and his gaze burns a trail over my mouth.

“Well, I don’t find any of this amusing,” I huff, not sure if he meant to insult me with his quip of not wanting to sleep with me.

Thick jet-black lashes frame his intense blue eyes, which have been nothing but kind and attentive even if a little intimidating.

“Ms. Carpenter, my apologies for giving you the wrong impression.” He straightens his suit jacket and battles to get his lopsided smile under control. “What I was trying to say is, I have to attend my sister and brother-in-law’s party for an hour, and you’d be doing me a favor if you’d be my date.”

My heart stutters. “What?”

Did he say what I think he did? Today is a strange one, but maybe I bumped my head at some point because there’s no way he just asked me out.

No way.

He’s a freaking billionaire and insanely handsome.

“I’d like to hear more about your idea.” He holds up a hand when I stiffen. “Only out of interest. I promise I won’t be stealing anything. And since you’re here, why not now? The thing is, I have to drop in at this party, otherwise I’d offer to buy you a drink and talk. But if you came with me to the party, you could tell me all about your idea and you’d also be helping me.”

The pieces don’t fit, and I feel a little slow and a lot dazed by him. “Why?”

“Going alone to these events invites a certain kind of... attention.”

I snort, as a picture suddenly materializes, and clamp my hand over my mouth at the unattractive noise. *Oh my God, kill me now.* “Sorry. You mean other women, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’d rather not have...well, if you were with me—”

I cut him off, feeling the need to rescue him. “I could be a buffer, right? Protect you from the *big, bad single ladies.*”

He smirks, but his gaze never veers from mine. “When you put it that way, I sound like a pussy.”

His ink-black hair is short on the sides and longer on top, styled in a mess of waves that makes him adorable and sexy at the same time.

“Why do people say that like it’s a bad thing?” My head shifts to one side in contemplation, and he arches a brow. “You said...” *Shit, what am I doing?*

He stares, waiting for me to go on, and I swallow past the boulder in my throat. “Pussy and that refers to women like we’re weak or pathetic. In reality, we’re the opposite, and many people, regardless of gender, would agree.”

His eyes twinkle with amusement. “Very good point. I happen to like pussy, respect pussy very much, and agree that women aren’t weak or pathetic. My bad.”

A blush creeps up my neck, and the way he said “pussy” wreaks havoc on my nether regions. *Great, I must look like a tomato.*

Any minute now, he’ll rethink this silly notion of a date and take back the offer. I don’t want that. I may not want to go to this party, but I’d like the chance to spend more time with him, even if his interest is only in my idea.

While being in a room full of millionaires sounds like a dream come true, in reality, I’d be a fish out of water. But who knows where this could lead?

“So, what do you say? Will you be my date?” His voice drips with cool confidence, and there isn’t a chance in hell I’ll say no.

“Well, I’m not sure. I don’t usually accept invitations like this without knowing my date’s name.”

“Oh, right.” He shakes his head, smiling guiltily. “I’m doing this all wrong.” He takes my hand, and a wave of electricity sizzles through my body. “Ms. Carpenter, I’m Walker Drummond, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

His warm lips press against the back of my hand, and fireworks shatter inside my chest and my voice sounds breathy and dazed. “Hi, Walker.”

“Hi, Eden.” His darkening gaze dips to my mouth then back to my eyes. “I’m looking forward to tonight.”

“But wait, I can’t go to a party in this.” I wave at my dress—one of my better ones, but nowhere near acceptable for what he has in mind.

Waltzing into Ivation in frayed jeans and a hoodie wasn’t going to cut it. I needed and wanted to feel confident for what I planned to do, and it worked. Well, at least for the first few minutes.

“No worries. I’ll take care of that.”

He directs his driver to a private boutique I’ve heard of but never dared enter, and places a call to the owner, Celine Delacroix. In no time, I’m ushered into the exclusive store that should be closed for the day but is now open because all Walker Drummond had to do was ask. I want to pinch myself to make sure this is real.

Walker returns to the car and leaves me with the thin, sophisticated French boutique owner. Celine, with her understated elegance I could only pull off in my dreams, studies me in silence.

Platinum hair in a classic chignon, tasteful diamonds, and chic, designer navy dress. Her scrutinizing gaze strips me from front to back and head to toe.

I’m proud of my curves—what most would call an hourglass figure—but I feel exposed and near sick to my stomach at her inspection.

At last, her face brightens. “Wait right here, chérie.” Then she vanishes into the back of the store.

Alone, my eyes gobble up the walls lined with haute couture, some brands so exclusive I’ve never heard of them.

Celine appears from the shadows. “This will look sublime on you with your figure.” She thrusts an olive dress at me—a

color I don't like.

A stone wedges in my throat. The dress looks too small. There's no way I'm getting into that and can't find the words to say so. *Great, I'll look like a stuffed pickle.*

Tongue glued to the roof of my mouth, I slip into the dressing room and change, gritting my teeth at the inevitable mortification when the dress doesn't fit.

Surprisingly, the rich, soft fabric glides easily over my wide hips and ample chest. Speechless, I stare at myself in the mirror.

With my pale complexion and fiery hair, the dress looks different on my body. Vibrant and oh so flattering. Celine knew what she was doing.

From the other side of the dressing room curtain, she coaxes in her French accent, "Let's see, chérie."

I feel like a million bucks and step out of the dressing room.

She claps her hands and laughs, the joyful chime like a sprinkling of fairy dust. "Parfait."

"I love it." I don't recognize my own voice, ringed with awe and wonder, and there aren't any words to express the emotion welling within me.

I can't pronounce the name of the designer who fashioned the dress, but I feel like a princess.

Saved from becoming a bumbling mess of joyful tears, she takes my hand. "Okay. Now shoes, jewelry, and makeup."

What follows is a whirlwind reminiscent of turning a pumpkin and mice into a golden carriage adorned with noble attendants, and when I cast my eyes upon the mirror, I'm once again without words.

Fortunately, I've never struggled to like myself or how I look—brief moments of doubt aside—and with a little effort, I can be hot, even beautiful, when I want to be, but this, how I look right now...

This is something magical.

So magical, I worry I'm dreaming.

And if I am, I don't care. I'm going to enjoy it for what it is, and if I lose the glass slipper at midnight, who gives a damn. All I have is right now and what I'm feeling in this moment, and that's enough.

While the owner slips outside to speak with Walker, I gather my things and place them into a boutique bag. On my way out, I pause next to Celine at the door.

"Thank you for everything." Somehow my gratitude doesn't feel like enough.

She cups my cheek, and I bask in the warmth of her smile. "It was my pleasure. Have a wonderful night."

Outside in the evening's twilight, Walker stands at the open car door. Our eyes lock briefly before his travel down the length of my body. My hair falls in loose curls down my back, the dress accentuates my curves in the best way, and once he reaches my toes, his eyes, now smoldering, make their way back up to my face.

He lingers on my lips. "Celine didn't lie, but she also didn't do you justice. Eden, you're stunning."

A wave of want rushes through me. A want for things a girl like me shouldn't dream of because there isn't a chance in hell they'll come true. Still, I won't allow myself to go there right now.

Walker's sister, Marlowe, lives on the Bridle Path, an upscale neighborhood of multimillion-dollar homes and a popular celebrity enclave. The party is at the back of the mansion and the setup is magnificent, elaborately decorated with the finest white linen, crystal, and twinkling lights adorning pergolas and trellises.

A bar is at one end of the finely manicured lawn, with high-top tables sprinkled throughout. Fifty or sixty people mingle, talking and laughing, as servers effortlessly coast among the guests carrying hors d'oeuvres and champagne-laden trays.

A slender, dark-haired woman, obviously in charge, looks familiar though I've never met her before, and she stalls when she spies us or more accurately, Walker.

She approaches, quick to beam up at him. "Oh my, Walker. When Clarice swore she spotted you, I didn't believe her." She spares me a cursory glance, barely registering my existence, before leaning into her brother. "Thank you for coming. This means a lot."

Grinning, he pulls her in for a quick, one-armed hug, his other hand still pressing into the small of my back. "No need to thank me. This is my date, Eden Carpenter. Eden, this is my sister and our hostess, Marlowe Thompson."

Her eyebrows climb. "Date? I never thought I'd see the day when you'd move on from Sybil at your side."

A chill races up my spine. Who's Sybil? Is he seeing someone and if so, why isn't she here? I don't need that kind of trouble.

His jaw tightens and he sharpens his tone. "Marlowe."

Her name sounds like a warning, and her blunt tone turns sheepish as she looks to me. "Apologies. Eden, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Like Celine, she studies all of me, but unlike the fashion expert, her gaze isn't as warm or inviting. I force a smile and offer a hand. "Nice to meet you. Thanks for having me."

She gives a perfunctory nod but doesn't take my outstretched hand, her attention once more on Walker. "Have you seen Alan?"

I'm both relieved and annoyed. She clearly isn't impressed nor does she care who I am, and this is why I hesitated to come tonight. I don't fit with these people, and maybe if Walker and I get to know each other better, I'll end up feeling the same way about him.

He scans the crowd, unfazed by his sister's quick dismissal of me. "Not yet."

She fidgets with her tennis bracelet like she has some place to be. “Zach and Paige are here. Did you invite them?”

“Yes. Zach and Alan should talk. You never know where it might lead.”

Marlowe practically crows, “You’re so clever. Thank you.” She rubs his arm. “Seriously, Walker, I can’t—”

“Enough with that. I’m here.” He pauses his continual glance of the crowd when an alarmingly beautiful couple approaches us. “Zach.” Walker shakes the man’s hand and then he leans in to kiss the woman on the cheek. “Paige, you’re as lovely as ever.”

Marlowe slides in beside her brother and gives her back to me, which effectively bars me from the group. The four of them talk and I quietly observe, a little miffed at his rude sister but not eager to enter the fray. It’s as if I’m at the zoo, and I’m intrigued to watch Walker with his ‘kind.’

Only seconds pass until he reaches for my hand to bring me into the gathering. “Zach, Paige, I want you to meet Eden Carpenter.”

The handsome couple stare, their smiles subdued but clearly tickled at Walker’s new friend, and now I’m the one caged—a rare species, for others to gawk at.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Zach is the first to shake my hand, then his wife.

Like Walker, Zachary Rothwell is richer than God, CEO of a real estate management company, and I’ve seen him equally as much as Walker in the business media. If my memory serves me right, his wife runs his family’s foundation.

Paige releases my hand as her gaze flits from me to Walker and back again. “And Eden, you’re Walker’s...um, date?”

Not sure what to say, I’m saved from fumbling through a response when Marlowe excuses herself and Walker gets back to business. “Zach, have you talked to Alan?”

“No, not yet.”

“Okay, let’s do that now.”

Walker doesn't leave my side while he chats with his brother-in-law and others. I recognize almost all of those I'm introduced to and try to hide my awe at the wealth and power gathered in one place.

Paige surprises me and sidles up to my side and asks, "How do you and Walker know each other?"

How to be vague without lying or backing myself into a corner? I'd rather not divulge the ugly details of being fired, stealing back my property, and then being chased.

"Ah, we've only just met. We have business to discuss, but he had committed to attend this." My hand sweeps across the party. "So he invited me, and hopefully, at some point, we'll talk business."

Her fingers toy with the base of her champagne flute. "Interesting."

"Hmm. How so?"

"Well..." She leads us farther from the men. "Walker usually comes to these things with—"

"Paige, excuse me." Her husband possessively places a hand on her hip. "Alan wants to show us some figures. Eden, it was nice to meet you. Maybe we'll see you again?"

He means it as a question yet it's more a doubtful statement, just something you say to be polite. My guess is he highly doubts our paths will ever cross again.

Paige rests her palm on my forearm. "It was lovely to meet you, and I hope we do see you again."

For the first time since we arrived, I'm alone and flounder with indecision, only steps from Walker and his gaggle of men. They're talking business, and I'm interested, even tempted to join them, but I'd be the only woman.

When I glance around, most clusters of what appear to be serious, perhaps even money-making, conversations consist of men. It may mean nothing or it may be the usual misogynistic crap.

There's something about this crowd, the entitlement or immense power at their fingertips, that leaves me feeling on the outside. Give me enraged youth, debt-riddled students, or impassioned entrepreneurs any day of the week. With them, I can hold my own. I've never cowered from joining any conversation before, but with the wealthy...I hesitate.

Walker ends my turbulent musings and hands me a glass of champagne. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, though this isn't really my kind of party." Several women stab me with cold, hard stares—it isn't only the men that give off *I'm better than you* vibes.

He chuckles. "I'm sure. I'd much prefer your idea of a party."

"I doubt it."

"Are you insinuating that I don't know how to have a good time?"

"No. I said no such thing."

The twinkle in his eye sharpens. "I want to talk about your proposal, but there's someone I must talk to, and I see him over there." His chin jerks to somewhere behind me. "Rather than listen to me drone on and only prove to you how much of a bore I am and this party, go get something to eat and I'll find you when I'm done."

I could protest because I could never find him boring. In fact, it's the opposite when he talks about the current business landscape, the challenges and opportunities, and his passion for doing more. The man is smart and commanding, and I could learn a lot from him.

Even still, I don't want to awkwardly hang off him like a ball and chain. "Okay."

My stomach rumbles in agreement and he laughs, squeezing my waist. "Go eat and grab me something. I'll see you soon."

Hardly a second passes when I do a double take, not believing my eyes. My stomach roils and I plunk down my

barely touched champagne flute on a nearby table.

Tall and broad. And that laugh. *Ugh*. So nauseatingly obnoxious and fake. The kind of forced belly chuckle that makes your ears bleed.

He spots me midguffaw and our eyes lock. His laughter fizzles out—thank goodness—but he motions for the two men with him to follow and lopes toward me as if he's doing me a favor.

Oh, no.

I'd hoped to never see him again, let alone speak to him. A wicked smirk skates across the average features of Brent Wallace, and I wish I could run, but it's too late. Besides, there's nowhere to hide.

EDEN

Three men cross the congested lawn, eating the less than ten feet between us in not nearly half as many strides. My stomach curdles at Brent's pompous swagger. He's flanked by an almost platinum blond-haired guy and the other, a burnished brown-haired man. Both look like they've sprung from the pages of GQ. What on earth are they doing with Brent?

"Eden Carpenter." He slaps the chest of the attractive blond and dons a conspiratorial expression as if they've chatted about me.

Or that's what he wants me to believe, and while possible, I've never seen these men before. And all the same, his intimation unnerves me.

Brent settles a foot or two away from me and his wolfish grin grows, eclipsing his less-than-average features. "Pinch me. I must be dreaming."

My fingers bend at my sides to stop myself from doing more than pinching him. "Brent."

I shuffle my feet, and the soft fabric of the dress brushes against the tops of my thighs. The sensation grounds me and reminds me that Brent can only bother me if I let him. It also doesn't hurt that I look fabulous.

My hip juts out to one side and I perch a hand at my waist. I can do this. Be polite and get rid of him.

He furrows his dark brow. "What are you doing here?"

I detect a hint of surprise in his tone, and it isn't because we've run into each other—we both live and work in the same city—but it's *where* we've met that shocks him. At this glamorous garden party. He believes I don't belong here.

And there's no way I'll give him the satisfaction of glimpsing my uncertainty. "I'm a guest. And you?"

"We're, ah..."—he looks from one guy to the other before returning his shifty gaze to me—"potential investors." Nervously chuckling, he brushes his thumb along one side of his long, narrow nose.

His tell. I spotted it early on in business school and grew to both hate and appreciate it. The gesture usually means he's lying or uncomfortably in over his head. Which one is it now? Or is it both?

The blond frowns at Brent before casting his clear blue eyes on me. "Hi, Eden, I'm Tom Raine." He shakes my hand. "Unfortunately, Brent's my roommate and doesn't know how to speak for himself. I'm here for the food."

Tom unleashes a high-wattage grin, and my knees wobble from its sheer brightness as a giddy laugh erupts from within me. "Well, you've come to the right place. The canapés look great."

Despite the well-fitted suit, the shaggy hair and golden tan make Tom look more like a sexy surfer than anything else. "Canapés? What kind of word is that? I much prefer appies. Or is that too childish?"

This guy's a born flirt, though I have the feeling he isn't making a move, only trying to put me at ease as if sensing just how little I think of Brent.

I smile and try to curb my amusement. "Let's go with appetizer. It's nice to meet you, Tom."

The man with wavy brown hair, looking like a true businessman, extends his hand. "Hi, Eden. I'm the other roommate, August Bradshaw. Forget what Brent said. We're business partners and here to *look* for potential investors."

Intrigued to learn more about their business, I open my mouth to speak, but Brent beats me to it. “I was kidding. Eden knew I was joking. We go way back.”

This guy can’t help but lie. He hasn’t changed even in the slightest.

“Way back? Um, no. We went to the Smith at Queen’s University at the same time, and I haven’t seen him since graduation.” I smile, softening him up for my sarcastic blow. “We’re real tight.”

His roommates crack up with laughter, and Tom holds up a fist for me to bump. “I like you.”

“Carpenter, you haven’t changed. Always putting people in their place.” Brent means it as a barb, but I shrug it off.

We’d never been friends although we hung out in the same crowd, went to the same parties, and even worked on a few group assignments. In my second year of business school, among others, I ran for class president, as did Brent, and when it looked like I might win, he tried to sabotage my chances with a salacious rumor.

Fortunately, our classmates saw through his underhandedness, and he was forced to drop out of the running. But for me, the damage was done even if no one believed the lies, and I lost. No one wanted a president embroiled in drama.

After that, I kept my distance and avoided anything at school where we might wind up working together. Brent’s one of those people who doesn’t show up for the work but steals all the credit. Come to think of it, he and Billie might get along well.

“Looks like you haven’t changed either.” My tone is stiff, and I loosen my shoulders and pivot to face August. “Tell me more about your business.”

“We’ve only just launched ACE, a private car service for the affluent.”

“Hmm, like Uber for the wealthy?” I try to school my features and not let any skepticism slip through as I push for

more information. “And there’s a market for that?”

August wrinkles his brow and Brent narrows his gaze. “What the hell does that mean?” He tries to inch closer to me, but August pushes at his chest to keep him where he stands.

I nervously play with a curl. “Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. All I mean is you’re targeting a market where they’ve likely got a fleet of cars, private drivers, car services...I wouldn’t think there would be a need.”

Brent barrels toward me before his friends can do anything, only stopping when the tips of our toes touch. “That’s your problem. You don’t think.”

My stomach lurches at the way he glowers, and it takes everything in me to not back away. I inhale my indignation at his insult, giving it breath and me courage.

Tom pulls him away from me. “Brent, what the hell are you doing?”

As if choreographed or a routine they’ve done many times before, Tom and August slide in front of Brent, shoulder to shoulder, blocking him from me. It’s plain to see they have Brent’s number, and this pleases me and puts me somewhat at ease.

“Sorry, Eden.” August clenches his jaw and swivels to stab his business partner with a contemptuous look.

“What?” Brent shoots out a hand angrily. “She’s the one who has it all wrong. Just goes to show how much she knows.”

“Like I said, I truly didn’t mean anything by it. I’m passionate about start-ups and how some thrive and others don’t.” I temper my heightened hackles, not wanting to sound defensive. “And in your case, I don’t know much about the market, only curious.”

August nods, expression open and kind and not in the least bit offended by my comments. “It’s cool and I get it. And your question and observations are all valid, but our business model is unique.”

His gaze shines as he settles in to tell me more. “ACE is doing well, off to a good start, but we need more capital to scale up. Like you pointed out, there are already preexisting services and structures in place, especially on the client’s home turf, but we’re targeting the service staff...” August pauses and holds a finger up to build on his point.

I smile at this unique twist, now appreciating how this is their differentiator and may possibly be the key to their future success.

“And the younger generation, those who live on their phone and use an app for everything.” A triumphant grin overtakes his face. “Now that’s a different story, but we need capital to expand both the concept and geographical reach outside of Toronto and Canada.”

“You’re looking for an accelerator, aren’t you? Someone to invest, but are you prepared to give up some equity for funding?” I’m enjoying the conversation and totally intrigued.

“Yes. That’s why we’re here today, hoping to make our pitch to Alan Thompson.” He rakes a hand through his wavy head of hair and keenly surveys the party. “If only we could get an introduction.”

“Alan Thompson?” The name is out of my mouth before I recall he’s Walker’s brother-in-law.

“Yeah, it’s his house.” Brent snags a glass of champagne from a server and downs it in a gulp. “I thought you said you were invited.”

Tom jabs an elbow in his gut as a means of silencing him before glancing to me. “Alan’s just started an accelerator, and this party is about networking and hopefully, for some to pitch their nascent businesses to him. That’s why my friends are here; they already have a service and preliminary team, but to expand, they need funding.” He claps August’s shoulder and squeezes. “And as you can see, I’m here for moral support.”

I can’t help but smile and wonder what Walker Drummond has to do with all of this, if anything, outside of the family ties.

Paige appears from behind me and looks from the men to me. “Eden, I hope these boys aren’t harassing you.” Her tone’s playful. “Although I’m not surprised to find you three with the most interesting woman here.”

“Hey, we aren’t harassing anybody.” Tom grimaces, but there isn’t any fire behind it. “And certainly not Eden.”

“No, they aren’t bothering me...for the most part.” I try not to look at the men because Paige strikes me as a smart woman and could easily figure out I’m not a Brent fan with just a glimpse his way. “August was just telling me about ACE.”

“Yes, that’s why Zach invited them.” She encourages the conversation about August and Brent’s new start-up.

True to form, Brent doesn’t offer any insight, happy to let August do all the talking. No surprise—I have a strong sense that August also does all the work, and I can’t help but wonder what exactly Brent brings to this partnership.

At some point, the conversation drifts to Alan Thompson and the reason they’re at this party, and Paige offers to make the introduction. August releases an appreciative smile and rubs his hands together. That’s when my stomach chooses to growl again, reminding me I never did snag any of the delicious food.

Tom chuckles, nodding empathetically. “If it’s all right with you guys, I’m going to stay with Eden.”

The three of them murmur agreement and advance on the thick of the crowd.

“I’m also starving.” Tom watches me scan the grounds for servers with trays filled with food. “Are you craving anything in particular?”

“Before running into Brent, I was on the hunt for a slider.”

“Oh, those are delicious, and you have to try the mushroom caps.” He leads the way, and my stomach angrily gurgles—envious, ravenous, and out of patience.

Soon we strike gold and spend an inordinate amount of time sampling a wide array of appetizers. In between bouts of conversation, Tom shares how he has known Paige his entire life. She's his older sister's best friend, and it's because of her, or more specifically, her billionaire husband, Zach, that his friends have access to a crowd like this.

"Oh, I'm so stuffed." I glance down at the napkin overloaded with the hors d'oeuvres for Walker on the tabletop.

He eyes the nibbles. "Are you going to eat those?"

"No, I'm not." Before I finish speaking, he reaches for a smoked salmon puff, and I slap his hand. "But they're for someone else."

A blond brow arches. "Who?"

"My date, thank you very much."

He peers to the left and right of me. "And where is he? Or her?"

"He. And that's a good question." I've long since given up on glimpsing Walker in the crowd. "It isn't really a date."

I don't know why—other than Tom's easy to talk to—but I spill all the sordid details of the past day, including my bizarre run-in with Walker, and strangely, there's something cathartic about it.

"Walker Drummond. Wow, it's like a fairy tale," he mocks playfully, and I roll my eyes, still not believing the day's events. "Seriously, he's a big deal."

"Yes, and I can't figure out why I'm here."

"Maybe he knows someone like Alan who can help you with your business proposal."

"Whoa, as good as that sounds, he'd have to hear my idea first, and that would mean sticking around for more than a minute." I cringe at my cynicism, clearly exhausted and long past hopeful.

Someone calls for Tom, and we turn to where Brent's waving him over, a scowl permanently etched on his face.

“I better go. Good luck with Walker.” He pats his jacket pocket where his phone is and winks before sauntering away. “I’ll talk to you soon. *Madden*, baby.”

Earlier in the evening as we tried out a variety of appetizers, we discovered our mutual love of the Toronto Blue Jays and the *Madden* video games and exchanged numbers.

I pop a shrimp into my mouth, and three women by the bar rake their gazes over my body unapologetically as their snide comments reach me. None are discreet and likely that’s the point.

“Who is she?” the peroxide blonde asks. “She’s his date? I don’t believe it.”

Another asks, “What happened to Sybil?” There’s that name again. Knots form in my stomach, and I wonder if I’ve caused more trouble by being here.

“Maybe she’s a pity date. You know, like a pity fuck.” A woman snickers and the others join her, grouping together like a roost of vultures.

The shorter woman says, “She’s fat. Nothing like his usual companion. This has to be some kind of joke.”

The shrimp cocktail lodges in my throat, and I spit what’s left of it into my napkin. I’ve lost my appetite and want to tell them to go to hell, but the smart move is to walk away. I don’t want to cause a scene and embarrass Walker or myself.

“She’s ugly and so beneath him,” the bleached blonde says.

Spikes of heat prick at the corners of my eyes and I turn on my heel, only to come face-to-face with the deep ocean hue of Walker’s eyes. His gaze flicks over my shoulder toward the bar, and the muscle in his jaw tics. *Shit, he heard them.*

My cheeks flame, and I wish the ground would open up and swallow me. It’s one thing to bear these insults but an entirely different ordeal to have a hot billionaire overhear them too.

“There you are.” His voice is tender, and his incensed gaze softens as he dips his head to mine.

His fingers intertwine with those of my free hand, and my trembling stops at his touch as does the sickly coil of my insides. Before I can even register what he’s doing, his lips cover my mouth.

Firm and hot.

He’s kissing me.

I gasp, and the tip of his tongue swipes at the inside of my upper lip. I’m warm and shivery, and his arm bands around my waist just when I fear my knees will give out.

The kiss is absolute dominance and control.

My mind is too muddled to figure out if he’s interested in me or proving a point to those women, or maybe both. And right now, it doesn’t matter. I surrender to the kiss.

WALKER

Our lips meld and tongues tangle. Eden tastes of champagne, something tangy, and pure sweetness that is all her. She moans, and I deepen our kiss and dig my fingers into her waist.

I hadn't planned on kissing her even though I'd thought about it several times tonight, and thought about her when I should have focused on the discussions at hand. Then I spotted her with a group of men. One I'd recognized, Paige's friend Tom, and later on, they were still together, laughing and what looked like trading phone numbers.

They were having far too great a time.

An urgency rushed through me like the intense flinty spark that sets a matchstick ablaze. I wanted to break up their little tête-à-tête, if only to figure out if I had competition.

The sensation struck me hard.

So what if Tom was interested in Eden? I definitely wasn't looking for a relationship. Since the divorce, I haven't lived like a monk—there have been a few flings—but there wasn't a woman on earth I'd ever settle down with. Get serious about. Not ever again.

And while I've had fleeting urges about various women—what I'd like to do with them—my thoughts were never *consumed* by a woman.

When I saw Eden with Tom...

Fuck, I felt consumed by her, and that pissed me off. I was quick to dismiss it as part of this strange afternoon.

Eden and I had met in a more than peculiar way and naturally, my interest was piqued. I wanted to know more about her and her business idea. She's also a beautiful woman, and I wondered if there was an opportunity for us to have some fun together.

Then overhearing those women and their vile comments clouded my judgement, or more like destroyed my control. It was either kiss Eden or unleash my wrath on them.

Gasps of disgust and shock come from the hags at the bar, and I don't give a fuck. They got off easy.

"Walker." She sways back, fingers squeezing mine for support. "What...what was that for?"

"Because I wanted to. It's a little too late to ask, but I hope it's okay." My knuckles brush her cheek, feeling the silk and heat of her.

She quivers, and long, ginger eyelashes flutter closed. "Sure."

"Hey, ignore them." I steer her to a more secluded spot, but before she goes willingly, she scoops up a napkin loaded with food.

Once in a quieter place, I tip her chin up to look at me, and there's a fierce tug low in my belly at her refusal to do so. Her gaze fixes on the grass.

The napkin with food rests in the palm of her hand and I change the subject, wanting to put her at ease. "Are those for me?"

I dip my head toward the two sliders, a smoked salmon puff, and a crostini. She nods, blushes, and hands them to me.

"Thank you, I am hungry." I don't even chew the first appetizer—more like inhale it—and moan in appreciation. "I saw you talking to Tom. You know him?" My voice brooks no subtlety and my direct approach shows in the way her eyes widen and lips part.

“What? No. I just met him tonight.”

“Really? You seemed so...comfortable with each other.”

She wrinkles her brow. “He’s easy to talk to, and I was grateful for his company.” Her eyes cut in the direction of the witches who insulted her, and her inference isn’t lost on me.

“I’m glad you weren’t alone. Now tell me about your idea. I’m all yours.” I’ve talked to every one of Alan’s potential investors, more than fulfilling my obligations for the night.

“Really?” She perks up and takes a deep breath as if preparing to deliver her spiel. “Okay, what do you know about XR?”

It’s amazing and a relief to see how quickly she shakes off the pettiness of those women. She comes alive, eyes glittering and face beaming at the prospect of talking about her proposal.

“Extended reality? Like virtual or augmented?” I toss the last slider into my mouth.

She nods, pressing her full pink lips together, and waits for more from me.

“I’m no expert, but I’m aware of its uses, mainly in entertainment.”

“Yes. It’s largely used for gaming and filters on our smartphones.” She brushes an errant curl away from her face. “My idea takes that technology and applies it to marketing and advertising. Oh...”—her eyes widen—“it may even work for your industry, media.”

“Tell me more.” I lean against a pillar, and she explains her idea with the enthusiasm of a child at Disney World.

It doesn’t take long to realize her concept isn’t run of the mill. Not at all. It’s different and smart. She’s taken a growing technology and put her own mark on it.

I’d hazard a guess others may think of something similar given the booming interest in XR and exploration of its uses in healthcare and other industries, but if she were to get to market first, or build on this with a unique feature that would set hers apart... The possibilities are all there.

“Eden, you’ve got something here. If you were to get this into the hands of the right tech experts and investors, it could be big.”

Her smile blinds me like I’m looking into the sun. “I told you.”

“You did, and I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She waves her hand dismissively. “You see, this is why I *had* to get my bag back. There was no way I was letting them have it. This is my chance to go out on my own.”

“I could help with that.” For a brief moment, I contemplate how much of a role I want to play.

This could be the business venture I’m looking for, the next thing to sink my teeth into, but Eden may not be looking for a partner. And there’s the little problem of how much I’m attracted to her. I don’t mix business and pleasure, and I like her a little too much to be business partners.

“What? You could?”

“I know some venture capital firms that would jump at the chance to bring your vision to fruition. You’d have to have a solid business plan, of course, and—”

“I do.” She starts to walk away. “I’ll show it to you.”

“Whoa, slow down.” I tug at her arm. “Where are you going?”

“It’s in my bag in the car. I can show you now.”

“Hey, I want to see it, but not now. There’s plenty of time for that. I’m done here; let’s enjoy the night.”

She finally relaxes, leaning into my arm and following my gaze up to the dark sky. The stars aren’t vivid or abundant given we’re in the city, but the sky is cloudless and night is balmy even if only early May. The heaters Marlowe strategically placed all over her backyard certainly help.

“It is nice, isn’t it?” Her neck arches backward, granting me unfettered access to the lovely column of her sweet flesh.

As if she means it as an invitation, I tip my head down and brush my nose along the curve of her jaw. Her breath catches, and my hand wraps around her pounding pulse point at the base of her neck. I lower my head until my lips are only inches from her skin and tingling in anticipation.

“Walker,” a man says from behind me.

Eden jumps, and I growl and turn to see Marlowe and Alan approaching us, oblivious to their interruption.

“We thought that was you,” Alan says over the din of the music. “Sorry to bother you.”

I must make a face because Eden snickers at my side and muffles her laughter behind a hand that now covers her mouth.

“What’s up?” I slide my hands into my pockets to hide my arousal.

“We were wondering if you’d speak with Sheffield before he goes.” Marlowe isn’t asking, and I emit a low rumble, now fully regretting the decision to attend this party.

The only good thing about tonight has been Eden. I gauge her reaction to the intrusion, and she smiles. “Go. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to the restroom.”

Not waiting for a response, she saunters away while Alan rambles on about his request. His voice is a mere noise as I watch my date in her bewitching green dress slip through the crowd.

Shaking off my growing desire for the wildly interesting redhead, I prepare to fulfill my promise to Marlowe. The sooner I do, the sooner I can get back to Eden. But I don’t hide my displeasure at being pulled away from my date while I waste the next several minutes chatting up Sheffield.

He’s a seventy-year-old blowhard who finally agrees to invest in Alan’s company after I promise him a round of golf. I’m abrupt and some might think rude—who cares—when I leave the group without so much as a goodbye.

I’m a man on a mission. Eden is my target, and our escape is the plan.

The washrooms are in a small cottage-like structure at the side and separate from the house. Eden exits the ladies' room and gingerly skips over the cobblestone walkway, unaware of my presence. I hold back a chuckle at how cute she looks, deeply focused on staying upright in her heels.

Somewhat secluded with an arch above us, it feels like we're in an alleyway, lit with sconces on either side of the entrance. A tiny squeal escapes her mouth when I grip her waist and pin her against the wall.

Her chest heaves, cheeks flush, and pupils dilate. "Walker, what are you doing?"

I dip my head toward her mouth, and her eyes fall closed upon contact. Slow and teasing, my lips sweep across hers, seeking the kiss I yearn for. Eden's lips stay together, and she tenses in my arms. Is she worried we could be interrupted at any moment?

"Relax." My lips make another pass, this time catching her lower lip with my teeth.

She gasps, sending an explosion of heat down my spine, and I take full advantage and slip my tongue into her mouth. Her hand travels to the nape of my neck, fingers threading into my hair to hold me to her.

I push my thigh between hers and nestle it against her sex. Another moan passes her lips as she sinks her heat onto my leg and rubs shamelessly against me. Near losing all control, both my tongue and thigh are demanding as I chase her delightful sounds. All of which shoot straight to my dick.

She pants in pleasure, and this pleases me in a way I can't describe. I chuckle into her mouth, dig my fingers into her hips, and summon all my willpower to not slip my hand under her dress.

I so want to.

Though I'd be unable to stop there.

I'd caress her silky thigh to the edge of her panties and slip a finger or two under the material to feel just how wet she is for me.

But our privacy is tenuous, and I won't cause her any embarrassment. And with this thought, I force myself to draw away from her mouth and check that we don't have an audience. We're still alone. For now.

My forehead rests against hers. "You're a very skilled thief."

WALKER

Eden cocks her head to one side, frowning. “Thief?”

Unable to stop, my mouth latches on to the soft and sensitive flesh of her neck, and I lick and taste her sweetness, not able to quench my desire.

I gotta stop.

We’re in public, and I should pull away before someone finds us and I end up embarrassing Eden.

I rest my forehead on hers and close my eyes until my strong sense of control slips back into place. “Yes. Was today the first time you’ve ever stolen something?”

Straightening, she covers my mouth with her hand and slyly studies our surroundings as if she half expects an audience.

“Walker, shhh. I stole nothing.” Her chest presses into mine, and a near animalistic noise rips from my throat.

My teeth nip at her palm until she pulls it away with a stifled giggle. I can’t stop touching her, tasting her. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What?”

“You’re a professional thief.” My lips trail tiny roguish kisses down her neck to match my tone. “Very skilled.”

“No...I’m...not.” Her protest is weak and more pleasure-filled than appalled.

“I beg to differ.”

“What on earth are you talking about? You weren’t even there, and in case you forgot, I got caught.”

“Nah. You got away.” I wink and sober my tone. “If you need an alibi, if your former boss decides to press charges, I’ll say you were with me.”

She stiffens as if only now realizing the police could have been called after what she did earlier today. “You will?”

“Yup, and who’s not going to believe me?” It’s arrogant to say, but it’s a fact and a perk of having money and power, of being who I am. I try to use my position and what I have for good most times, and helping Eden is as good a cause as it gets. “Besides, I have no problem lying for you since I’m forever grateful you got into my car.”

“Seriously?” Her heated gaze bores into me. “Why would you do this for me?”

“Without you here, these people would torture me and leave me to die.” I nip at her neck and she jerks, releasing a moan. “And you’d be in jail.”

“That’s a bit dramatic. But I get your point.”

“I don’t think you do.” I lean in for another kiss, and she surprises me when she slips from my reach and causes me to stumble. “Eden?”

“Walker, I don’t...” She takes a few more steps away from me, and something strange and sharp pinches the center of my chest. “I thought we had an agreement.”

“Yes, we do, and you’ve done your part coming here with me. Thank you. And I’ve done my part and plan to do more.” I rub the back of my neck and cautiously inch closer. “Why do you ask?”

“Kissing me has nothing to do with the agreement, and I don’t think it’s appropriate.” Her eyes dart all over the place but keep coming back to me.

She struggles to face me, and clearly this conversation makes her uncomfortable.

“Why?” I close the distance. “You didn’t like kissing me?”

“Yes...no...it isn’t that.” Her cheeks bloom crimson. “You’re muddling my mind.” Frustration carries her voice. “I just don’t understand how this fits with what we agreed upon. I mean, I get the kiss at the bar...”

Once more, she averts her gaze and nibbles her bottom lip. I can’t help but want to sink my teeth into the plump, sweet flesh of her mouth.

“Thank you for putting those women in their place without so much as a word. It was quite chivalrous, and I loved it.” Eden beams, tone playful and buoyed with that intoxicating confidence of hers that first drew me to her.

“What would you say if I told you I kissed you because I wanted to?” One more step and we’re a mere inch apart. My finger slides under her chin to tip her head up to look at me, and she shivers at my touch. “I’d planned to kiss you tonight. Shutting up those women was an added bonus.”

Her swallow is long and hard, and when her tongue darts out to lick her bottom lip, my dick twitches against the zipper of my pants. Painfully hard and straining to be free. To be inside her. It’s been a long time since a woman’s made me feel like this, like I might combust if I don’t have her.

We still as a small group of women approach the restrooms, and the moment is broken when she mutters something about needing to get home. Without pushing things, not here with all these people, I text Tony to bring the car around and we leave the party.

At this time of night, the drive to her place doesn’t take long, and neither of us talks. I use the time to go through emails, texts, and voicemails while she clutches both bags—the one from Celine’s shop and her satchel—to her torso.

Eden lives on the ground floor of a three-story building, and as soon as Tony pulls up to the front, she’s out of the car.

I chase her up the walkway. “Eden, wait.”

She pauses at the front door to look at me, her expression confused and maybe even a little concerned.

Tony calls from behind me, “Sir,” only needing the one word to ask if I need him.

“Go back to the car and wait.”

She slumps against the brick wall, and while she’s partially hidden from view, I’m somewhat comforted by her relaxed posture. “Walker, I’m tired.”

“I won’t be long. Promise.” My smile isn’t forced nor arrogant. In a rare moment of humility, it’s pleading, and I hope she sees it for what it is. “I’d like to see you again.”

“I thought that was the plan.” She holds up the hand clutching her bags to remind me of her business proposal.

“Yes, but I’m not talking about business. I want another date and this time, no strings.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just a date. No quid pro quo.” I’m now only a couple of feet from where she’s nestled against the building as if she needs the solid structure for protection. “You and I getting to know each other.”

“You’d want that? With me?” She cringes as the last words leave her mouth.

Riled by her doubt and not liking that she questions my attraction, I force as much conviction as I can into my next words. “Of course. Why would you say that?”

“Don’t get me wrong.” Straightening her spine, she steps from the shadow, and now we’re in the same breathing space. “I don’t have confidence issues when it comes to the opposite sex.”

First I smirk, loving her response, but when I think of other men with her, a flare of resentment burns low in my gut.

Before the dark emotions can get the better of me, Eden’s sweet voice quells any simmering jealousy. “It’s just that I’m not like all those people at the party tonight. I don’t understand your world or—”

I don’t give a damn about any of that.

“And that’s one of the many things I like about you. Go on a date with me.” Usually I’d stress that I don’t do relationships and have nothing to offer, but she’s too skittish to hear that or even talk about it right now. It’ll keep for later. Now, I need her to say yes.

“Really?”

“Yeah, let’s make it happen.” Phone in hand, I pull up my calendar though I don’t generally book my time.

This is different. I want to see her sooner rather than later. If I leave it to my assistants to find time, I won’t see her until Christmas.

“Tomorrow night and the next are busy.” Business dinners, both of which I already have confirmed my usual plus-one, although I could take Eden.

No, those aren’t fun, and we won’t get to talk or be alone.

“I can’t do either of those anyway.”

My head pops up and snags her beguiling gaze. I’m not used to being turned down so readily, even if it’s understandable that she has plans too.

“How about Sunday? Zach and Paige have a monthly dinner for family and friends—”

She tenses. “But I’m not family. Isn’t that the sort of thing you bring someone you’re serious about to?”

My gut tightens at the root of her question. I don’t want to give her the wrong impression. We aren’t serious or anything really.

“True, but they’ve met you, and this wouldn’t be like that. They’d understand, and I wouldn’t be the first person to bring a friend to one of these things. If we don’t see each other on Sunday, it won’t be until...” I flick through the days, irritation growing with the countless demands on my time.

Normally, I like it that way, but lately...the work for Zenith Point feels monotonous. I’m trying to move more responsibility onto my leadership team and free up my time for other pursuits.

I growl, and Eden's hand wraps around mine, holding the phone. "Hey, it's okay. Sunday works. What time?"

The warmth at her acceptance and the prospect of seeing her again loosens the pressure in my body. "I'll pick you up at five."

"Sounds good."

She reaches for the door, but my hands cup her cheeks. "I've never been so glad to have someone crash into my life the way you did. This is going to be fun. I look forward to Sunday."

My lips latch on to hers, and my hands itch to bring her closer, to roam down her sensuous neck and explore every one of her curves.

I would glide my palm over the swell of her gorgeous, heart-shaped ass, and my other hand would weave its way into her long silky locks, and—like a brick crashing through a windowpane, a woman's high-pitched voice shatters my desire. "Where the hell have you been?"

EDEN

No matter how slight or small, Suki Ikeda's a force to be reckoned with, and because of this, I should quake in my shoes at the way she glares at me from the doorway to our home.

But she's my best friend and housemate, and while I'm not sure what has her all fired up, I can handle her.

"Answer me." She taps her bare foot against the wooden floor and slices her sharp gaze to the man holding me. "And who the hell is this?"

Walker doesn't move, tightening his grip on my waist as he straightens to his full height. He opens his mouth to speak and before he can, I disentangle myself from his grasp, needing the room to shake off my growing lust for this man, and to save us from Suki's impending outburst.

"Suk, relax. I'm fine. This is Walker, and Walker, this is my housemate, Suki." My fingers run through my unruly long hair. "I'll be in shortly. Give us a minute." I'm not asking and her nostrils flare, not liking my command.

She shakes her head, punctuating her displeasure, and her shiny, pin-straight black hair rustles against her smooth skin like a sleek curtain.

"What's going on?" Her narrowed eyes slide over my body, widening inch by inch as she takes in the rich olive-green dress. "Holy shit, what are you wearing? That dress... it's gorgeous. *You're* gorgeous. You look fucking fantastic."

A giggle springs from my lips, unleashed by her enthusiasm and genuine adoration. I love this woman.

Walker's hand slides around my waist. "I couldn't agree more."

Butterflies flutter in my chest, and my roommate tenses, eyes ping-ponging between us with a zillion burning questions. She doesn't like missing out, and if it were up to her, she'd stay put. I can't have that. My gaze begs her to go inside with a promise of all the details.

"You've got two minutes." She holds up as many fingers just in case we can't comprehend the concept of time or her words.

Once the door closes, I turn to Walker. "Sorry about that. She can be a little overprotective."

"I can see that." He brushes a stray lock from my cheek, and I shiver, knees weakening at his touch.

Needing space from this sexy, drugging man, I reach for the door. "I should go. I'll see you Sunday."

"Sunday." He leans down and plants a kiss on my cheek. "Goodnight, Eden."

I slip into our two-bedroom apartment and drop my bags at the door. Suki paces a patch of hardwood in her Hello Kitty T-shirt and shorts.

"Not cool, Eden. Not cool." She drags me to sit next to her on the sofa. "I was going out of my mind, and you know I don't worry. Didn't you get my texts? I even called."

I grimace, remembering the texts that came in when we arrived at the party. I planned to read them, but by the time I had a moment, my battery was dead.

Her thigh nudges mine. "Last I knew, you were going to Ivation to get your stuff. What the hell happened? Who's Walker? Although, he looks familiar; do I know him?" Her hand skates along the fabric of my gown. "And this dress—"

Uh-oh, she's rambling.

Suki and I met at university and couldn't be more different yet similar. Both driven and smart, both crazy and silly, both without a dad. We were inseparable, and after graduation, we moved to Toronto together.

Before she pulls us too far down the rabbit hole, I grab her hand. "Take a deep breath. You aren't going to believe the day I've had."

Suki's brilliant. A software engineer, singer and songwriter, and fluent in four languages. The retelling of what happened today takes three times as long thanks to her multitude of comments and questions.

She also curses and screams and oohs and aaahs in all the right places. By the time I settle into bed, I'm ready to sleep though still in awe of this day.

This morning, I set out to accomplish one thing—get my proposal—and that in itself would have been a resounding success. Yet here I am, not only with my proposal securely in my possession but that much closer to making my dream a reality, and as if that isn't enough, I met the man of my dreams.



The weekend passes like any other, and while I do some work, I worry Billie might have made a copy of my proposal. If so, my brief tango with pilfering might have been for nothing. Bile rises up my throat. I can't stress about that. There's nothing I can do if she has a copy. All I can do is focus on what's in my control.

It's now Sunday, and as the time nears for Walker to pick me up for my date, there's a knock on my bedroom door.

"Come in." I lower the makeup brush and turn toward the door. "Lou, did you just get here?"

Alouette, Suki's longtime partner now turned one of many, nods and sways into the room, tall and lean and beautiful, and

I marvel at her long, blue braids. “Hey, are you getting ready for your date?”

I wrinkle my nose and try to banish the topsy-turvy sensations in my stomach. “Yes. I love your hair. Did you get that done yesterday?”

“Yeah, thanks.” She leans against the closet door. “What are you wearing?”

For the millionth time, I stare at my clothes and want to cry. “I’ve nothing to wear.”

Walker has seen me in my best red dress—sexy yet passable as professional in a *leave-them-wanting-more* kind of way—and I can’t wear the designer gown he bought me.

“Don’t say that. What about the blue wrap dress or your black one?” She riffles through my clothes. “Or you could wear my boho print dress.”

I bark out a laugh and spring to my feet. “There’s no way in hell I’m getting into any of your clothes.”

Alouette and I couldn’t be any more differently shaped if we tried. Where I’m curvy with a generous chest to match, she’s willowy with small breasts.

“It’s got stretch. It’d be a totally different look, but you’d be banging. I think it’s in Suk’s closet.” She swings toward the door, and I grab her hand to stop her.

“Thank you. Even if I could get into it, I don’t think I’d feel comfortable. Too clingy, too sexy.”

She rolls her eyes. “Babe, have you seen your body? You’re sexy even in that.” Her eyes roam my ratty, comfy clothes, and I snort.

“Whatever. I’m keeping it simple.” I rest a black tunic dress against my body. “What do you think? It isn’t glamorous but—”

“Girl.” She runs her hand down my hair, and her smile softens. “A sexy billionaire asked you out. He clearly likes you. It doesn’t matter what you wear. Embrace that, baby.”

A blush creeps up my neck. “Well, when you put it that way. But he didn’t exactly ask me out for a romantic dinner for two.”

Neither of us miss my sarcasm, and her eyebrows arch. “What do you mean?”

“We’re going to his friends’ place. Other people will be there.” I want to barf at the longing in my tone.

“Eden, he’s texted you, has he not?”

I nod and smile at the two random texts he sent this weekend. Neither is particularly sweet or intimate, but I like to think he wanted me to know he’s thinking about me.

“I’m not sure what to make of this man. He came out of nowhere and everything’s moving too fast.”

“He likes you. From what I’ve heard, he’s a unicorn. Men like Walker Drummond don’t exist. Billionaire or not, in our world, throwing yourself into a stranger’s car doesn’t end with a date.”

“True. All things considered, I should’ve been tied up and tossed into a dungeon, terrified, as the creep sharpens his knives, fantasizing all the ways he’s going to cut me up into little pieces.”

She howls. “What an imagination you’ve got. You and Suk... I can’t even begin to think up the stuff you two do.” Her expression sobers at the mention of her girlfriend, and she casts her gaze to the floor.

Both of them were instrumental in putting together my business proposal. Suki designed a prototype of the app and Alouette helped create the online experience. They had my back throughout it all, ready to commit murder when Billie stole my idea.

I only wish I could help them now.

Suki’s on a date of her own, and my heart clenches for the woman standing in front of me. “How are you doing with all of this?”

“Not good. I shouldn’t even be here. What if they come back here?” A tear slips from the corner of her eye, and I pull her in for a hug.

“Oh, hon. Maybe you should go. You don’t need to see that.”

Alouette and Suki have been together for years, and while Alouette’s ready for marriage, a house, and maybe even kids, Suki changed the rules. Not long ago, my best friend announced she wanted an open relationship, and if Alouette wasn’t comfortable with that, then they would call it quits.

She pulls back, expression warm and sincere. “Enough about me. Tonight’s about you. You’re going to knock his socks off. Let me know how it goes.”

“Thanks. I will.”

Alouette leaves, and I’m mired in both sadness and anger for one woman and confusion and compassion for the other. No matter their long and solid history together, Suki’s still cautious and afraid to commit, and it doesn’t seem like any amount of Lou’s love will make her secure.

Leaning against the wall, I slide my back down until my butt hits the floor, and just then, my phone buzzes. Walker? Is he canceling? That might not be a bad thing.

I pull my phone from the pocket of my hoodie. Nope, it’s Mom. I could let it go to voicemail and call her tomorrow, but we always talk on Sunday. Suki aside, Mom’s the only family I have. I was four when my dad died and since then, it’s been just the two of us.

Blythe Carpenter lives in Winnipeg where she was born and raised, having only moved to Toronto because of my dad. We’ve lived in the city all of my life. When I moved to Kingston for university, it was the hardest decision I’d ever made. Leaving my mother felt like we were breaking up.

She only ever encouraged me to pursue my dream, and once I left home, she quit her office job in Toronto, tired of the rat race, and moved back to Winnipeg.

“Hi, Mom. Now isn’t a good time.” I cringe at the snap in my voice.

“Well, hello, my lovely daughter.” Her singsong tone teases at the corners of my mouth and lifts them into a smile. “What’s got you so happy and with an endless supply of time for your mother?”

Her sarcasm spikes a burst of laughter from me. “Sorry. But it *is* a bad time. I’ve got to get ready for a date and I’ve nothing to wear.” The tunic dress isn’t simple; it’s boring.

“A date? Do I know him?”

So much for making this quick.

“How would you know him? I haven’t seen you in three months, and last we spoke, there was no one in my life.”

“No need to be snarky, young lady. I was wondering if maybe it was Miles—I think that was his name—the one you’d mentioned a few months back.”

Inwardly groaning, I push to my feet and go to my room. “Mom, I’m not interested in Miles.”

He’s a friend of a friend, and all I did was comment on how I found his black-rimmed glasses attractive. She’s probably planning our wedding.

My fingers dance across the hangers in my closet, hoping the perfect outfit will jump out at me. “And no, you haven’t heard me talk about my date because I’ve only just met him.”

Flashes of Walker’s hard body pressing into mine under the garden archway fly at me, and my stomach cartwheels. My skin still tingles everywhere he touched me, and I buzz with anticipation, eager to see him again.

I’m not sure what’s gotten into me. Until Walker, I wasn’t looking for a guy, solely focused on my career, and while that hasn’t changed, I can’t bring myself to turn down any chance to see Walker.

“Oh. Does he have a name?” Now look who’s sarcastic.

If I don’t tell her, she’ll be on the next plane to Toronto.

“Walker Drummond.” His name sends wild, tiny shivers down my spine. “Mom, I have to go—”

“Pardon?” she cuts me off. “The billionaire, Walker Drummond?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t he too old for you? Like fifty or something?”

“He isn’t even forty.”

“Isn’t he married?”

“Divorced.”

“How did you meet him?”

“Mom, I really have to go. His driver will be here in fifteen minutes.”

“Driver? He isn’t picking you up?” Her disapproval slaps me in the face, and I don’t want to get into this.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, and you can interrogate me then. Promise.”

“All right. But listen to me,”—she pauses and my stomach clenches, unsure of her next words—“you’re a beautiful woman with plenty to offer.”

I open my mouth, ready to protest the platitude even if she means it with every fiber of her being, but she isn’t done. “Don’t stress about your clothes. You’re beautiful in anything. Even in whatever old and frayed outfit you’re wearing right now.” The smile on my face grows wider at the reminder of how well she knows me. “If Walker Drummond is worth your time, he’ll like you in anything.”

And there you have it. This is why I love my mother so. Even when she’s testing my last nerve, she’s there for me. My biggest fan and the love of my life.

I’m now a puddle of goo, and wish I could hug her through the phone line. If only.

“Thanks, Mom. I love you too. I’ll call you later.”

Several minutes later, while I'm putting on another coat of lip gloss, the doorbell chimes. Hair gathered back and high in a sleek ponytail, I survey the knee-length blue polka-dot dress in the mirror. It's too late to change.

I rush to open the door and nearly run into Walker. Not Tony.

He's more handsome than I remember in expensive dark jeans and a light-blue button-down shirt that makes his already breathtaking blue eyes pop.

A large bouquet of stunning flowers in pastel shades is in one hand, and he gifts them to me with an equally dazzling lopsided grin. My knees quake at how much his smile affects me. I can't take my eyes off him, and maybe the feeling is mutual.

"Eden, you look..." His hooded gaze leisurely tracks the length of my body, undressing me from the swell of my breasts to the tips of my toes. "You're gorgeous."

Without invitation, he enters my apartment, and I flounder, gaze skittering from his broad back, getting farther away from me, to the flowers in my hand.

Suki's oversized water bottle catches my attention, one of many she is always leaving around our place and as usual, at least half-filled with water. I place the bouquet into the wide mouth of the plastic container and smile at how perfectly it fits.

Walker pauses to peer back at me, eyebrow arched as if to ask, *aren't you coming?* and I eagerly close the few feet between us. This is when something shifts. He effortlessly changes the dynamic, and I'm no longer the one chasing him. He prowls toward me like a hungry lion. I'm his meal.

Excited and speechless, I retreat until my back hits the wall. A large hand latches onto my waist while his other cups the back of my neck. His touch does wild and frenzied things to me like I'm plugged in, electricity mainlining my veins.

Walker is everywhere.

“Since the other night, I’ve been thinking of nothing else other than kissing you again.”

If I wasn’t taken with this man, I might scoff or roll my eyes at what sounds like a cheesy line.

It was only a few days, but logic has no place in my mind, and his words don’t sound absurd to me. I feel the same way and this—our immutable attraction—scares me.

He dips his head, angling his face so close to mine that his sharp, minty breath skates across my mouth, and the tip of my tongue darts out to lick my top lip.

A growl rips from deep within his throat. “Eden, I’m going to kiss you now.”

His lips crash against mine, and his tongue delves into my mouth as my fingers dig into his hard biceps to bring him closer.

I can taste his desire as the weight of him, his heat and full body, presses into me. My nipples harden and my panties, no surprise, are wet. Wetter than ever before. I’ve never been turned on like this.

Forget dinner; I’m starving for this man.

Our kiss is wild, fiery, and reckless, and before I register what I’m doing, I thumb the buttons of his shirt, desperate to feel his hard, sure-to-be-hot skin under my palm.

His hand treks up the back of my thigh, dipping beneath my dress to cup my butt. My deep throaty moan slips into his mouth when his fingers slide under my panties, sinking into my flesh.

The length of him, hard as steel and huge, rubs where my thighs join, and he rips his mouth from mine, dipping his head into the crook of my neck. His warm breaths skate along my collarbone.

Savage blue eyes now stare down at me. “We better go now, or else you’ll be naked in seconds flat, and I’ll be feasting on you for the better part of the next day.”

I giggle, and the nervous tittering sounds nothing like me. “I’d be okay with that.” Shocked at my brazen response, my cheeks heat and I drop my gaze.

Chuckling, his finger tilts my chin so our eyes meet. “I want you. I’m barely hanging on to my control.”

Sassy and emboldened by his lustful gaze and my own desire, I say, “Don’t hold back because of me,” and no sooner clamp my mouth shut.

What the hell am I doing? Egging him on when I’ve no intention of sleeping with him tonight or maybe ever. I’m not a first-date-sex kind of woman, not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Sex has to mean something to me. The guy has to mean something to me. Yet here I am, willing to give it up before we even get out the door. As crazy as it is, and in spite of our differences, I want this man.

It’s chemical and undeniable, but the fact remains that we barely know each other, and the garden party aside, this is our first date. I can’t get lost in the magic of all this and how good he makes me feel.

I’m finding it hard to believe this isn’t a dream.

Abruptly, I step away from him, and my spine bows a little at the loss. He straightens his collar, also putting distance between us as his expression shifts to stern and commanding. “Let’s go.”

WALKER

F iery hair.

Infectious laugh.

Endless curves.

Eden's killing me.

I can't remember the last time I've wanted a woman so badly. So much so, I almost blew off Zach and Paige's dinner in favor of fucking her.

Yeah, the first time would be hard and fast, and I'm certain once wouldn't be nearly enough. Then I'd take my time with her.

Hours.

Days.

I'd relish coaxing out every one of those sinful mewls and whimpers she makes when I kiss her.

Fuck. Why am I torturing myself like this?

Across the living room, Eden and Paige chat like old friends, and I can't take my eyes off the redhead, in that cute-as-fuck dress and the way the fabric hugs all the places I want my hands.

Zach sidles up beside me. "If you keep staring at her like that, everyone will figure out real fast how much you want her."

"So?"

“You look like you could use a drink.”

Without waiting for my response, he saunters over to the bar and brings back my favorite single malt scotch, Talisker 25.

“Perfect.” I smile when he hands me a glass.

His wife belts out a laugh, and we both turn to look at the women, now doubled over in fits of giggles. The doorbell rings, and Paige straightens and wipes her eyes.

Zach chuckles and shakes his head. “She hasn’t stopped talking about Eden since Marlowe’s. She made quite an impression.”

His wife strolls to the front of the house, leaving Eden alone in a rare moment, and I’m tempted to ditch my friend in favor of whisking her away.

The heat of Zach’s stare forces me to look at him. “She’s that kind of woman.”

“Paige also likes that she isn’t your usual type.”

“What does that mean?”

“We both know what that means.” He takes a sip of his scotch, enjoying how he keeps me waiting. “Sybil.”

Paige came into Zach’s life after my divorce and has only ever seen Sybil on my arm. We have an arrangement. Both of us lead full social lives and obligations, and in most cases, it’s beneficial to have a plus-one if for nothing else but an exit strategy. I’m Sybil’s plus-one and she’s mine. Nothing else.

“She’s business, and you know that.”

“Do I? For the past two nights, you were out with her, and now you’re here with Eden. I’d be careful if I were you.”

He’s referring to the business dinners we both attended over the weekend, and I regret not asking Eden if only so I wouldn’t have to listen to this bullshit. “Spare me and just spit it out.”

My friend laughs and bends his chin to his chest in concession. When he looks at me again, he’s solemn. “You’ve

never brought Sybil or anyone else to our dinners. Not since...”

He stops before mentioning my ex-wife, and I’m grateful for that even if I wish this conversation would end altogether. We’ve been friends since grade school, and before he married Paige, his grandmother used to host these monthly dinners. I’ve nearly always been a regular, and only Vanessa—before the demise of our marriage—has ever come with me.

I stare down at the scotch in my glass, wondering how much I’d need to erase the past. “And your point?”

“What makes Eden different?”

“She isn’t. We’re having fun, and maybe we’ll do a little business too.” A sharp pinch at the base of my neck reminds me that I haven’t been clear with Eden. We need to be on the same page before we go any further.

“Really? Then I’ll say this in another way. Why is Eden here?”

“Do you have a problem with me bringing her tonight?”

“No. Not at all. But you only do flings.”

“Yeah.”

“Does Eden know that?”

My gut clenches, resenting his demand for an explanation, when a man cackles behind me, and I spin around to see Eden and Paige among new arrivals. Two of the men from the garden party, Paige’s friend and the dark-haired one, are sniffing around Eden again.

I tighten my grip on the glass and growl. “What the fuck?”

“What is it?” My friend follows my line of sight and snickers.

“You think this is funny. I saw them with Eden at Marlowe’s.”

“They’re harmless. Boys.”

“Easy for you to say. If I remember correctly, when you were dating Paige, you wanted to take a hit out on Tom.”

I beam at how Zach squirms, probably remembering how Tom was always popping up around Paige.

A wistful smile coasts his lips. “True. Paige and Tom are like siblings, but at the time, I didn’t trust it.”

“Don’t you mean trust *him*?”

“Yeah. But Tom’s an incorrigible flirt; he doesn’t know how to be anything else.”

“And from the looks of things, the women love him.” I stare as the man in question tweaks the nose of his youngest sister, Claire, and she bats his hand away, annoyed but playful.

“Not all women are like...” This is the second time he stops short of mentioning Vanessa.

“Zach.” I needn’t say more. He’s gone too far into treacherous waters, and if he keeps scratching at the ugly wound left by my ex, I’m leaving and he knows it.

Until Vanessa, I wasn’t a jealous, distrustful man, but that’s what happens when the person you love the most in this world betrays you. I value loyalty and one’s word above all, and she desecrated both.

Matt Carruthers, a retired NFL quarterback and Claire’s soon-to-be husband, wraps an arm around her. Smart guy. I should go over there and remind Eden who brought her here as well as stake my claim in front of those boys.

As if reading my mind, Zach walks toward them. “If it’ll make you feel better and calm you the fuck down, let’s join them.”

I wedge my way between Eden and the dark-haired guy—I can’t remember his name. It’s something stupid like October or November, and it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter but isn’t easy to get rid of. He shifts to Eden’s other side as if he’s politely making room for me, and I wish he’d get lost.

To stop myself from hauling him out of here, I greet Claire with a kiss on her cheek and shake her partner’s hand. “Claire.

Matt. It's good to see you."

"Walker, it's great to see you, too." Claire snuggles into Matt's side. "Eden was just telling us how you two met. Isn't real life stranger than fiction?"

"It can be." My fingers dig into Eden's waist.

She turns to look at me, but the guy I nudged out of the way draws her attention to him when he opens his big mouth. "That's for sure. Look at us." He motions between them as if they're a couple. "We didn't know each other until a few days ago, and now we're collaborating."

Collaborating? What the hell?

I tighten my grasp on Eden as if she's something to claim. I'm an idiot, and she must agree with the way she tenses under my hold.

Tom lightheartedly slaps his friend's shoulder. "Gus, shut up about ACE for just one minute. We're here for dinner—to chill and have fun."

August. That's his name.

Chastened, August rakes a hand through his already disheveled hair. "Sorry."

"It's okay. He's excited. I get it." Eden rests her hand on his forearm in reassurance. "We should set a time to meet this week."

What the hell am I missing? She's meeting with this guy?

Before any plans can be made, I dip my head to her ear. "Could I please have a word with you?"

Several sets of eyes watch our exchange. Some of the people nearby even stop talking, and Eden turns to me, forgetting August—my task accomplished—and nods. I usher her to a secluded corner of the room, far from the group, and use my body to block the eyes on us.

Her green gaze softens, almost concerned. "Is everything okay?"

“Well, that depends. Do you want to get out of here?” My knuckles brush her cheekbone and she quivers. “I can’t stop thinking about what I want to do to you.”

Her cheeks flame. “Walker...”

Like a siren call, I’m a sailor willingly drawn to the rocks. Unable to stay away, I close the gap between our mouths. On contact, my head swims and cock twitches as I wade in her scent and the sweet taste of her.

Her teeth nip my bottom lip and cause a guttural rasp from my chest. Someone snorts behind me, and I quickly look over my shoulder.

Tom shoots us a wicked grin. “You two...keep it PG.” At his side, August cackles.

Juvenile.

I grit my teeth to stop from saying something I’ll regret, and Eden shifts out of my grasp though she stays shielded from the others. Without any comment, I give them my back and I stare down at her.

Her hands cover her cheeks. “Walker, this is embarrassing.” She peers around to check if they’re still there.

I swear in the back of my throat, low and torn. “Eden, I’m sorry.”

But my remorse doesn’t prevent her from slipping out from under my arm, and I spin to face her.

“Why would you do that here?” She glances at the group now scattered around the room as if to remind me that we aren’t alone.

Some of them are now paired off into smaller conversations while Paige and Claire traipse toward the dining table, hands filled with platters of food.

“I wasn’t thinking.” I rub a hand down my face and grapple for something to say or do that will make this right. Better.

I don’t regret kissing her. Never.

But doing it here was wrong, and I was purely acting on a base need to stake my claim. There's no way I'm telling her that because I'm pretty sure my misplaced motives won't help my cause.

Work. I know—I'll talk about her work.

"I've asked my assistant to contact you first thing tomorrow about those venture capital firms I mentioned."

She furrows her brow, and I shift from foot to foot, suddenly feeling more than a little foolish. No, more like, for the first time in forever, I feel like a child. "You know, to get the ball rolling. She'll set up a couple of meetings for this week. I told her to make time in my calendar for you."

"Excuse me? What is this? A business meeting or a date?"

"What? It's a date. You know that."

"Then why are you talking about venture capital meetings? I don't know what we're doing." She's annoyed or anxious. "I realize this might seem too soon, but are we business or personal?"

"Why can't we be both?"

"Both?" Her eyes widen, and somewhere or somehow, we've taken a turn for the worse, and it's all my doing.

I haven't been clear, and I'm muddying things before we even get started.

She shakes her head. "So you want to date me? See where things go and also help me get my business up and running?"

I don't like the subtle edge to her tone, but she isn't wrong. For some reason, Eden makes me want to do both, have fun with her and also help with her business.

"That isn't how I'd word things—"

"Then how would you?"

"Well...I've already told you that I think you've got an innovative idea and a solid plan. I want to help connect you with the people who can bring it to life."

“And on the relationship front?” The question is innocent as is her tone, but that word smacks me square in the chest.

Relationship.

The word fast-tracks us from a first date into something long-term. Permanent. Is that what she wants?

“I only want casual.”

“Casual? And what does that mean?”

“You know what that means.” I chuckle, uncharacteristically nervous. “Everyone does.”

“Humor me. I don’t want to make any assumptions.” Expression neutral, her steady gaze doesn’t deviate from mine. “What’s casual mean to you?”

“We go out. Have fun and let it run its natural course.”

“Natural course?” Again, she stares, expecting me to spell it out for her.

I want to be clear and with each word out of my mouth, I can’t help but get the sense that I’m fucking this up, screwing any chance I might have with her. Even so, I need to set expectations.

“Things eventually fizzle out. When it does, we go our separate ways. No hard feelings.”

She nods and presses her lips together for a beat. “And while we’re taking this *natural course*, we’re exclusive or can we see other people?”

A strange tightness bands my throat.

Eden with another man.

Like Tom or August.

Fuck.

I nod, not trusting my voice, because that’s what a fling means to me. I don’t want monogamy or any false pretenses. I no longer trust easily, so why set us up to fail before we even get started?

Since the divorce, I haven't had many flings. At first, I itched to screw whomever and whenever I wanted in a strange and misguided way of exorcising the demon that was Vanessa.

But that was my rage and hurt talking.

I never gave in to the urge.

I'm smarter than that.

A man of my standing could be ruined by a scandal of that nature, and deep down, I had no interest in living like a playboy. If so, I'd have never gotten married.

Eden's voice cuts in, "Just so I understand, you mean no strings attached?"

Again, I nod with nothing else to add. I'm not a rambler. If I can say what I mean in the least amount of words, even better.

"Okay. While I'm attracted to you and the idea of business and pleasure might've worked..." She blushes and casts her gaze around to see if anyone is listening, but she needn't worry. We're alone in this corner of the room. "I don't do flings. This, us, needs to be strictly business."

She wants only half of what I'm proposing, and though I fully support someone's right to choose, this...

Her rejection.

It stings.

"Eden." I want to reach for her but don't, not with the shuttered way she's looking at me.

She gnaws on her bottom lip. "I can't be casual with you and also see you in business meetings. Work with you. I just... I'm not wired that way." She shrugs unapologetically. "Maybe we can be friends?"

Something primal and possessive flares within my chest, bright and burning.

Friends? Screw that.

I want to persuade her, show her how much fun we could have, but I don't get the chance. She backs away as if her resolve may crumble if she gives me a chance to talk.

EDEN

*S*lide a foot into a high heel and take a wobbly first step. I'm nervous. Raucous laughter rings out from the living room, and I nearly stumble. Why are they still here? They need to leave.

A clammy hand smooths down the front of my pencil skirt. It's a little snug, but I haven't got much else to wear when it comes to business clothes. Most of my past jobs required no more than jeans and a hoodie.

This is different.

If I want the venture cap firms to take me seriously, I've got to look the part. Sure, they're used to all kinds. Genius business ideas spring just as easily from people in five-thousand-dollar outfits as they do from those in ripped jeans and stained T-shirts.

Looking the part is more for me than for them.

Walker's a billionaire, and I don't want him to regret helping me. I'd rather be overdressed than anything else.

Another round of playful howls barrels down the hallway, and I march toward the noise. I need to get rid of them before Walker arrives.

At the doorway to the living room, I clear my throat and all eyes lock on me. August lets out a low, appreciative whistle while his gaze traverses the length of my body. Tom's eyes widen and so does his smile. These two guys are great for my ego.

Tom prowls toward me, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Where are you going dressed like that?”

He’s flirting, but there’s no heat or desire in his gaze, only friendship, and I’m relieved to admit the feeling’s mutual. Both men have become my friends in a short amount of time.

“I told you, I have a business meeting.”

Tom rolls his eyes. “With...?”

Suki curls her top lip suggestively. “Her billionaire.”

“He isn’t *my* anything, and he has a name.” I pluck my satchel from the sofa and sling it over my shoulder. “I’m meeting with Walker.”

“Ooh, I see. This is the business side of whatever it is you two have going on?” Tom winks. “You were so cute, canoodling at Paige’s. Though, Eden, I figured you for discreet, not like this one.” He hooks a finger in Suki’s direction, and she snickers while my mind leaps back to a couple of days ago.

The kiss at Paige and Zach’s house. The one where I almost completely forgot myself.

I rub the center of my chest, and the aching memory of Walker’s pure, yet brutal honesty is still there. His declaration of wanting something casual lacerated my hopeful heart.

But what did I expect? That he wanted something lasting with me? I can’t be upset with him for speaking the truth.

Suki’s giggle pulls me to the present. “Eden might surprise you. She looks all goody-two-shoes, but something tells me her billionaire will change all that.”

Scoffing, I shake my head to clear it of any thoughts other than business and shove August’s feet off the coffee table. “Okay, guys, you need to go. Now.”

True to his word, Walker’s assistant arranged an afternoon of meetings with potential VC firms, starting with a meeting with him. I don’t want these guys here when he arrives.

“Why can’t they stay?” Suki pouts. “August and I are still going over the specs for the app.”

Inhaling deeply, I try to find the calm I need to deal with Suki and also stay focused on the meetings this afternoon. I’m nervous and anxious in both good and bad ways. Good because I want to see Walker. Good because this is the first significant step to achieving my dream. This is more than I could hope or ask for at this stage in my life.

On the other hand, it’s bad because what if turning down Walker means I’ve made things awkward between us or worse, I’ve ruined everything? There’s no telling how Walker will act.

I haven’t spoken to him since that night at Paige’s, and the rest of that night things were subdued and tense. We barely talked. My only hope is we can move past this and get back to the ease we had with each other.

“Suki, please.” My gaze petitions my roommate to help me clear the house. “I think we should take a break and regroup in a day or so.”

At the garden party, I’d shared some ideas with August to help move his business forward, and he was more than eager to hear me out. Today, we spent the morning going over plans for ACE. Why Tom came, I’m not sure, since he isn’t August’s business partner, but maybe he should be. He’s easy to have around and did contribute to the discussion.

Brent was a no-show, and August shrugged it off when I asked about his business partner’s absence. Brent hasn’t changed a bit—not interested in the hard work, but more than happy to cash in his half of the revenue. I’d also asked Suki to join us given her software expertise. She was invaluable in our talk about improving the ACE app.

August blushes and springs to his feet. “Of course. We’ll get out of your way. Eden, thanks so much for today.”

Tom follows suit, and finally, Suki nods reluctantly in agreement. “Hey, what are you guys doing next Wednesday night?”

I stiffen at her question. What the hell is she doing? I love how easily she accepts someone as a friend, but sometimes I wonder why she does what she does.

“Uh, nothing.” Tom glances at August and he nods.

“We have hip-hop class, and next week is bring a friend night. Do you want to come? I think it would be a blast.” She beams and my eyes bulge at her.

“Sure, we’d love to go.” Tom has his phone out, eager for the details.

Someone knocks at the door. Great. Walker’s here. I glare at Suki before spinning to answer it.

Alouette used to come with us to dance class, but since the shift in their relationship, it’s only been the two of us. I didn’t think we’d bring anyone to next week’s class, and I can only hope she isn’t interested in either of them because that can’t happen.

Tony fills the doorway, standing tall and stoic, and my chest deflates a little. Why did I expect Walker? He most probably isn’t even in the car.

“Ms. Carpenter. Are you ready?” His unreadable expression is a little unnerving.

“Hi, Tony. Yes, I’m good to go.” Without a glance at the peanut gallery, I pull the door closed behind me. “Is Walker here?”

“No. Mr. Drummond’s in a meeting. You’ll meet with him once we get to the office.”

My disappointment balloons in my chest at this news. When we arrive at Zenith Point, a large modern building of glass and concrete just west of the downtown core, Tony hands me over to Walker’s assistant, Trina—a tall brunette with glasses and a librarian vibe. We exchange hellos, and she escorts me into the building and up the elevator.

“Mr. Drummond will be with you shortly.” She leads me down a hall of conference rooms, most with doors closed and muffled voices wafting through the frosted glass walls. “As I

mentioned when we spoke, Mr. Drummond will spend about thirty minutes with you and then the two of you will go to the first of two meetings offsite.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Trina ushers me into a room fit for thirty or more and pulls out a leather chair for me. “Can I get you something to drink?” She strolls back to the door. “Coffee? Tea? Water?”

Suddenly more nervous than anything else, the fear of spilling something on my outfit causes me to shake my head. “No. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“All right. If you need anything, I’m at the other end of this hall.” She points to the way we entered. “The floor is a circle; if you follow the hallway, you can’t get lost.”

Now alone in the large conference room of glass and chrome, I remove my tablet from my bag to prepare for our meeting.

Time moves like molasses uphill in January, and it’s nearly an hour before Trina returns, expression contrite. “Ms. Carpenter, unfortunately Mr. Drummond’s no longer able to meet with you.”

Tensing in the chair, I’m a mixture of disheartened and puzzled. Before I can press for more information, she continues in her take-charge manner.

“I took the liberty of rescheduling this afternoon’s meetings.” She purses her lips, and it’s plain to see whatever is to follow isn’t recommended. “Unless you’d rather go ahead and meet the VC firms without Mr. Drummond.”

While I’m anxious to move things along and as of now, today’s all but lost, the smart thing would be to go ahead with those meetings. But the idea of doing this without Walker’s guidance... He promised to be there.

He’s a busy man, and I understand there are huge demands on his time. I’m more than grateful for all he’s done and how quickly he’s making things happen. Yet I can’t help but wonder if he’s changed his mind.

My skin prickles as I study his assistant's standoffish posture. She wants to get rid of me as quickly as possible.

"No, that's fine. I'd prefer to meet with Wal...Mr. Drummond first."

"Excellent. I'll send you the bookings. Tony's out front to take you—"

A blonde woman slips her head into the room. "Excuse me." She gives me a tight smile. "Trina, Jerry's on line one. He's upset to hear Mr. Drummond is taking the rest of the day off."

The woman pauses when Trina whips her head sharply in my direction. Face flushed, eyes narrowed, and lips flat, it's plain to see I wasn't supposed to hear that Walker isn't working this afternoon.

She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose and guides the blonde into the hall. It's futile. I can still hear them.

"Trina, Jerry refuses to talk to anyone but you or better yet, Mr. Drummond."

"Shhh. I'll talk to him. Go." Silence follows, and I wonder if Trina's left too, until she returns with the most unnatural smile plastered on her face.

"Ms. Carpenter, I trust you can find your way out?" Not waiting for my response, she leaves.

What on earth just happened? Is Walker bailing on me because I refused to have a fling? Mind muddled, I shove my things into the satchel.

I need to talk to him. If he changed his mind, it would be a huge setback and I'd be upset, but ultimately, he isn't obligated to help me.

I step into the hall, and Trina's words play in my head. If I keep walking this way, I'll eventually find Walker's office, and if he's still here, I'm going to talk to him. Clear the air and find out what's really going on.

Trina's voice, professional and clipped, hits me before I see her. She's on the phone and hasn't spotted me yet. She's

too busy trying to calm the person on the other end of the line.

There's no way she'll let me see Walker. She gives off strong guard-dog vibes, but she's preoccupied and I storm past her desk, deliberately refusing to look in her direction.

She gasps and my feet stutter. Trina calls my name, but I barrel ahead, too determined to heed her pleas. I open the huge wooden door to Walker's office, and my breath catches. He stands with his back to me, facing a wall of windows overlooking Lake Ontario. I can't help but notice his broad shoulders and sleek, defined back muscles.

It's now or never. Any second now, Trina will haul me out of here.

"I'm pretty sure keeping things professional like we agreed doesn't mean you blow me off."

A nearby thud causes me to drop my gaze in its direction. On the floor, only feet away, a young boy with big, clear blue eyes stares up at me. "Daddy doesn't like that tone. He won't talk to you if you're rude."

The boy drops another toy car onto the carpet, though his all-too-familiar eyes never leave mine. I've never seen him before but those piercing eyes, his dark hair... The resemblance is undeniable.

Everything happens at once. Walker's assistant bursts into the office and almost crashes into me.

"Apologies, Mr. Drummond. She ran right past..." The words wither on her tongue at the dark expression clouding her boss's features.

He speaks into the phone at his ear, "Alan, I'll call you back." He doesn't wait for a response and lowers the receiver to its base.

Features softening, he looks to his assistant. "It's all right, Trina. You can leave." Then his sharpening gaze lands on me as he clears the large desk. "Eden, I canceled today's meetings because of a family situation." Intense blue eyes flick to the child. "No matter my personal desires,"—that word causes my core to quiver, and his penetrating gaze smolders—"I would

never let them get in the way of business. Certainly never to, what did you say? Blow you off.”

Again, his final three words are laced with naughty innuendo.

“Walker, um, I’m sorry.” My cheeks flame and I avoid his stare and glance to the boy who’s no longer interested in the adults.

On his knees, he fashions engine noises while propelling a toy truck over the bumpy terrain of carpet.

Walker gestures to the child. “Eden, this is Alex. My son. He’s six.”

The boy looks up, piercing me with his innocent yet proud gaze like his age practically makes him a man, before he returns to his game.

“Alex, it’s nice to meet you.” I close my eyes for a beat trying to get over my utter embarrassment. “Walker, I’m sorry. I—”

How do I even begin to explain my faulty line of thinking? How could I think so much of myself that I barge in here and suggest that he’d do anything to avoid me?

His toned arms fold across his wide chest, and the expensive fabric of his tailor-made suit bunches and pulls under the bulge of his muscles. Then a lopsided grin dons his chiseled features.

“Forget about it. As you may have already guessed, I canceled our meetings because I unexpectedly have my son. We have shared custody, and I don’t like leaving him with others when he’s with me.”

Something dark or heavy blankets his features as he grabs a dinosaur-patterned backpack and motions to Alex to start cleaning up his toys.

“Now that you’re here, let me make it up to you.” He saunters over to his desk and hits a button. “Trina, tell Tony there’s been a change of plans.” He releases the button. “I’m

heading home with Alex; join us. We'll have our meeting at my place."

His place...

That feels too personal. I should say no, but now that I've seen him, I realize I've been looking forward to this since Sunday when we last saw each other. And as much as I was the one to erect the walls and keep this strictly a professional relationship, I can't walk away from this opportunity.

I don't want to leave.

WALKER

“*I* feel like a fool.” A rosy red colors Eden’s cheeks, and I smile in a way that I hope puts her at ease.

She won’t let go of the incident at the office, unable to shake her embarrassment at misjudging the situation. Although I quite enjoyed her ballsy move. Blitzing my office the way she did, coupled with her outfit...

Holy hell. She had me tongue-tied.

Dressed in a mid-thigh black pencil skirt and a white button-down top, the fabric clings to her perfectly, emphasizing her scandalous curves and making every part of my body come alive.

If she hadn’t done what she did, we wouldn’t be here, so I’m not sorry for how things turned out.

But I do want to put her out of her misery. “Hey, you’ve more than explained yourself.”

Alex bounds up the spiral staircase to his room, and that familiar pang of guilt pricks at my chest. This is his home, and even still, all of this is new to him. He’s only here half the year, and until the divorce, he’d only ever known one home.

He’s adjusted well to the custody arrangement—or at least I hope he has—but there are moments like this when I wonder just how much he misses the way things once were. There was a time when I did, even considering what Vanessa did.

Eden swings her satchel awkwardly in front of her as if looking for something to do. “I just wondered, after the way

we left things the other night.”

Leading us into the living room, I peer at her over my shoulder. “Unlike you, I thought things were fine between us. You were clear about what you did and did not want, and I respect your wishes.”

The room is expansive and luxurious with oversized couches, chairs, and ottomans. I motion for her to sit and then settle into an armchair. Generally, I don’t conduct business in this part of the house—only in my office—but Alex is here. I don’t want him to feel like I’ve abandoned him for my work. So long as we stick to business, neither of us can confuse this for anything more than it is.

“Look, Eden, if we’re to work together, let’s get one thing straight.”

Wide-eyed and worried, she cautiously sits on a sofa across from me. “What?”

“If I have a problem with you, you’ll be the first to know. I don’t give excuses. I’ll always be upfront and honest, and in turn, I expect the same from those I work with. Understood?”

She nods as my housekeeper waltzes into the room. “Good afternoon, Mr. Drummond. I’m preparing a snack for Alexander. Would you like anything for you and your guest?”

“Thank you, Janice. Water would be good. Eden, what would you like?”

“Water’s fine. Thanks.”

“Very well.” Janice proffers a pointed stare. “Dinner will be in a couple of hours.”

I chuckle, knowing her statement is code for the question, *will my guest be staying for dinner*. I hadn’t planned on it, but figure why not and nod.

Her perplexed gaze lingers a little longer before she leaves the room. This is unusual territory for both of us. When I have people over for dinner, Janice has ample notice, and I’ve never had only a woman over, even if just for business.

Having Eden in my home could blur the professional versus personal line, although she did mention being friends. At first, I'd rejected the idea. Being only friends would be a first in a long time for me, but maybe that's possible.

The next couple of hours are spent going over the two VC studios and how best they could help Eden with launching her business. Through it all, she's rapt and peppers me with countless, well-thought-out questions.

We're wrapping up when Alex barges into the room with Janice behind him. "Mr. Drummond, dinner is ready."

Eden plucks her phone from the table. "Oh, I didn't realize how late it was. I should go."

"No. Stay for dinner." I get to my feet and smile.

My son lifts his hands in the air and jumps. "Yes. Stay. We're having my favorite—pizza gondolas."

Alexander beams and Eden frowns. "What are pizza gondolas?"

"You've never had them?" He's incredulous. "Then you have to stay." Spinning on his heel, he races out of the room.

Janice chuckles. "It's Italian sausage-stuffed zucchinis. If you like pizza, you'll love them. It's basically a healthy version."

"Oh, that does sound good."

"Great." She starts toward the hallway. "The table is set for three."

As if on cue, Eden's stomach growls and she grimaces. "Excuse me. While I'm clearly hungry, I don't want to intrude."

"You're not. Let's get washed up. Janice is a tyrant if we're late for dinner." I show her to the powder room and marvel at how easily she agrees to stay.

Famished, we dig into our meal, and only once Alex has had two servings does he start to interrogate our guest. I'm surprised it took him this long.

“Eden, how do you know my daddy?”

“Um, we work together.” She looks at me across the table.

“I’m helping her get her business off the ground.”

He shoves garlic bread into his mouth. “Are you in newspapers too?”

I rest my fork on the plate. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, and how many times do I have to tell you that Zenith Point isn’t just a newspaper?”

Alex rolls his eyes and sighs. “Daddy, I don’t care.” Then he turns to Eden. “Do you want to play with me?”

“Uh...” She wipes the napkin across her mouth. “What do you want to play?”

He pushes his chair from the table and grabs a bin of his toy vehicles from the corner of the room. “Trucks.”

I cast my gaze toward his plate where the knife and fork lay strewn at odd angles. “Alexander, are you finished?”

He flushes and places the cutlery side by side like he was taught to indicate he’s done. “Sorry. I am. May I now be excused?”

“Good job,” I encourage and glance at Eden. “Would you like some more or anything else?”

“No, thank you. That was delicious.”

He leans into Eden, eyes glittering hopefully. “Is it now your favorite too?”

She’s quick to smile. “One of my favorites, for sure. I’ll have to ask Janice for the recipe.”

“You like to cook?” He tilts his head to one side and stares at her with an unwavering gaze.

Children can be so innocent and yet so intense at times, and I wonder if Eden finds him amusing or annoying.

She traces the lace of the tablecloth in contemplation. “Sometimes. When I have the time.”

“Maybe we could make pizza gondolas together some time. I’m always asking Mommy, but she’s so busy.” My son’s voice holds no blame, only the simple truth, and I try to rein in any residual disdain for my ex based on our abrupt and less-than-friendly exchange earlier this afternoon.

“Oh, um... Sure. That would be fun.” She seems flustered, and I wonder if it’s more to do with the probability that they’ll never cook together and it feels like she’s lying to him, or that she isn’t comfortable with children.

Alex hands her a truck, and while she slides her plate out of the way, he smashes his yellow dump truck into hers with a snicker of delight. Startled, she releases a nervous laugh but quickly rallies and plows her vehicle into his.

My son’s laughter lights up his entire face, and I’m transfixed as the two of them play as if this is far from their first time doing so.

When Janice returns to clear the table, we adjourn to the living room where I’m cajoled into joining this bizarre game of crashing into each other, or at least that’s what I think is the point of the game.

Sometime later, Janice finds the three of us sprawled on the rug as we bowl our trucks into the others’, complete with animated smashing and explosion sounds.

“Sorry to interrupt.” My housekeeper steps close to my son. “Alex, it’s time for a bath and bed.”

Eden scrambles to her feet, straightening her sexy, form-fitting skirt, and I force myself to look anywhere but at her. I can’t get up off the floor, not just yet. I need a minute to get my burgeoning arousal under control.

Janice’s calm sweet-talking does the trick, and he relents and puts his toys away.

Sliding onto the edge of the couch, I widen my stance and open my arms. “Alex, come here.”

He willingly falls into my embrace, pressing his warm cheek into my chest, and I bury my face into the top of his

head, breathing in his heady, boyish scent. I miss him so much when he isn't here and wish he could stay with me every night.

“Night, Daddy.” He kisses my cheek, then turns suddenly shy when he glances at Eden. “Thanks for playing with me.”

A smile blooms, and she drops to her knees while releasing a monster truck roar that sends Alex into a fit of giggles followed by his own imitation of the machine. All shyness forgotten, he launches himself at her and they hug.

A strange longing scuttles through my chest as I watch my son and this woman I barely know cuddle. Alex took to her so easily, and any concern I had about Eden not being comfortable with children never materialized. She's a natural like she is with so many things.

When we talked about the upcoming meetings, I was impressed with her approach and strategy to determine which firm would be best for her. She's not only beautiful and kind, but also very clever, and while not surprising—her smarts shone through from the very first moment I met her—this is troubling. Eden's far more tempting than she should be, and I better watch myself.

Now just the two of us, she asks, “How often do you have Alex?”

“Not often enough. We're supposed to alternate weekly.” I relax into the sofa. “This isn't my week...” I hesitate but not enough to stop me from spilling my frustrations. “I'm not complaining. If it were up to me, I'd have him all the time, but typical of his mother, she likes to mess with me and what better way than our son.”

My jaw tightens, and I force away the constriction in my throat. “She made last-minute plans and dropped him off at the office without warning. This isn't the first time she's done that.”

On the carpet, legs folded under her, she leans into the ottoman and props up her head with her hand.

“Oh... You and Vanessa?” She pauses, searching my gaze, perhaps questioning if she got the name right.

I nod, tensing though not surprised she knows my ex-wife's name. Given my job, a constant media spotlight comes with the territory although it's mostly been business focused. All that changed during the split and divorce. My marriage—the good, the bad, and the ugly—was on constant display during the dissolution of our union. Not all of it was true, but enough of it was for anyone to get the gist of things.

“You were married...for a while.” She searches my face again, and whatever she finds encourages her to tread forward, although lightly. “I hope this doesn't sound too nosy...”

“Go ahead, ask.” My ex is the last thing I want to talk about. Vanessa is my past and that's where I like to keep her, but Eden's my guest and the evening was wonderful. She was so good with my son, and isn't this what friends might talk about?

“You said you only do casual, and I'm guessing that's because...” She shifts awkwardly. “Why did you divorce?”

The moment the words are out, she leans forward, lines of concern deepening the edges of her mouth. “Oh, shoot, that's too personal. I'll shut up.”

“It is.” I give her what I hope is a sardonic grin. “But it's fine. I should start by saying, problems aside, Vanessa's a good mother.”

I can't explain why I feel the need to defend my ex-wife even when she broke my heart. But I don't want Eden to get the wrong impression, and there's no doubt she's familiar with my very public and very nasty divorce.

“She cheated and I ended the marriage.” I'm unprepared to rehash Vanessa's dalliance with one of my closest friends, Phillip.

And especially the part where the affair went on right under my nose for the better part of a year. As much as it would be easy to leave it at that, there's so much more to the dissolution of our marriage, and for some inexplicable reason, I'm compelled to tell Eden.

Maybe it's because she's interested. I have her complete focus. Warm, patient green eyes carefully watch my every move. "After Alex's birth, Vanessa suffered from severe postpartum depression."

"Severe?"

"Yes. From the very beginning, it was clear that something was wrong. She wanted nothing to do with the baby and withdrew, and at first, I figured it was natural. We were both adjusting to our new life, lack of sleep, the feeding schedule... but Vanessa grew more despondent. It got to the point where the nanny was taking care of Alex when I was working and Vanessa...."

My chest burns at the memory of her struggle. She was a mere shell of who she once was, and no matter how hard I tried or what I did, I couldn't reach her.

"She went away for help, and when she came back, she was on medication...and I withdrew in my own way." I shake my head, ashamed of my part in how things are between us today. "It isn't her fault. No one's to blame."

My words sound hollow despite the overwhelming futility and anger I'd nearly drowned in all those years ago. There wasn't something or someone I could easily blame for what happened, and it was something I worked on accepting in therapy.

"I turned to my work. Outside of Alex, my work was everything. I felt like I'd lost my wife, and I had tried but I couldn't get through to her." I pin Eden with an earnest stare, hoping she can see how true those words are.

Did I do everything right? No.

Are there things I regret? Of course.

"It was several years before Vanessa was better and by then..." I rake a hand through my hair. "She tried to reach me, but I was so entrenched in my new life, buried in work and armor firmly in place that I didn't respond. We were already broken before she started the affair."

My ex-wife's words echo in my own voice. "Vanessa wanted things to be the way they were and now I was the one unreachable. Desperate to shake things up, she took drastic measures, and my asshole of a friend was all too happy to oblige. Things got nasty when I found out. I wanted her gone and she wanted another chance."

Eden pushes onto her knees and comes to me. "I'm sorry, Walker. You had known her for forever, right?"

Her seemingly harmless comment strikes a nerve, and my chest spasms. We knew each other for what felt like forever. Outside of Zach and the cheating bastard, Phillip, she was my best friend.

"Someone's done her homework." My wry tone causes her gaze to drop to the floor on a flinch, perhaps guilty for knowing more than she originally let on.

"No, I didn't." She looks up at me. "I swear the little I know is from... I'm kind of embarrassed to say this but I keep up with the latest on celebrity sites. And I'm only going from memory, but the two of you were..." She stalls again, her lips together and moving like she's mulling over her next words.

I help, finishing for her. "Splashed all over the media?"

"Sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut." She turns her head as if fascinated with the decor.

"I'll only ever tell you the truth, and if I don't want to talk about it, I will say so." Two fingers slide under her chin and guide her head to show me her emerald depths. "What is it you want to know?"

"She hurt you, didn't she?"

At first, all I can muster is a terse bob but force myself to say more. "The affair hurt, but the rest of it... She had no more control over the postpartum than I did. Sadly, I believe that with time, we'd have found our way back to each other. Unfortunately, Vanessa was tired of waiting."

Shrinking a little at my admission, she tries to pull back, but my hand drifts down and latches onto her nape. Her skin is

soft and smooth. Eden cranes her neck to look at me in a way that tugs at my heart and scares me.

She looks at me like she wants more, more than I can give, and I swallow past the ugly scars of my marriage.

I must reinforce where I stand. “When we ended, and in the way that it did... Relationships...marriage...I no longer want any of that.”

I force a tight-lipped smile, and she matches me with one of her own. Both a literal and proverbial distance grows between us as she pulls from my grasp, her expression crestfallen. “This makes sense now.”

She worries her lip, and without stopping to think of how bold and stupid I’m being, my thumb presses down on the center of her bottom lip, pulling the plump flesh away from her teeth.

Eden sucks in a breath, mouth opening as her tongue lightly flicks the top of my thumb. My groin swells. Neither of us move, only inches apart, and the desire to kiss her, to claim her mouth, burns within me, hot and fierce.

But I can’t.

I won’t.

I abruptly stand and walk away. “I’ll get Tony. It’s time for you to leave.”

We want different things, and as much as I want her, I have nothing to offer. Well, nothing except a broken heart.

EDEN

The buzzing of my phone rips me from a deep sleep. I roll over and stretch out an arm to rummage among the heap of last night's clothes to find the thing. Whoa, everything aches, my head throbs, and my stomach revolts.

Last night, Suki helped me drown my sorrows, and at the time, it seemed like a good idea. Now, with my mom's face flashing on the screen, I regret everything.

I flop back onto the pillow and take a deep breath before groggily hitting the video button, already anticipating my mother's comments about sleeping till noon.

"Good morning, Eden." She takes in my appearance. "You're still in bed? Is this how you spend your days now that you don't have a job?"

I roll my eyes, too sleepy and achy to hide my expression. I was fired a little over a week ago, and yet she makes it sound like I've been unemployed for months and doing nothing about it.

"Happy Mother's Day," I croak, trying not to let her questioning inject sarcasm into my voice. "You do know I'm supposed to call you today of all days, and I planned on it."

"Thank you, love. And I've no doubt you'd have called, but I can see you've had a rough night? A bit too much to drink?" They're questions and still I can't help but take it as an accusation.

“Mom, Suki and I went out last night, and yes, we had a few drinks, but I wasn’t wasted. It was late, and I should’ve had more water. I’m tired, that’s it.”

Her pursed lips loosen and she sighs. “Have you found a new job yet?”

It has been four days since dinner at Walker’s and not so much as a peep from him. The kiss that never happened changed everything, or maybe it was my big mouth and all the talk about his ex-wife.

When his thumb grazed my lip, he ignited a fire within me, and I was needy for him. I wanted him to kiss me, but he pulled away and left me stunned and teeming with loss. The uncomfortable moment still claws at me, digging a deep and troubling groove in my mind. He rejected me, and as much as it stings, I have to accept it’s for the best. Nothing good would have come of it.

My mother sighs at my silence. “Eden, what are you doing about a job?”

It’s my turn to sigh and groan. We’ve talked about this in our conversations both before and after I was fired. And while I’ve explained what I hope to accomplish with my business proposal, and she’s supportive, my mother can’t quite trust in the process of turning my idea into a business without having a job to fall back on. She isn’t wild about my plan to not look for another job while I’m pursuing my business proposal. This approach is too risky to her.

“Mom, things are moving along. I’m meeting with a couple of venture capital firms...soon.” Unease burrows deep in my chest like a tick beneath layers of skin, feeding on my blood.

Walker’s assistant hasn’t even contacted me with new dates for the meetings she was to reschedule. Did I mess everything up and he’s cut his losses?

My bedroom door inches open and Suki saunters in with two mugs of coffee. “Hello, sleepyhead. I thought I’d remind you why you keep me around.”

I laugh and flip the phone toward my roommate while she places a mug on the table beside me.

She beams at my mother and scoots onto the bed next to me. “Hey, Mrs. C.”

“Suki, darling, it’s lovely to see you. I love what you’ve done to your hair.”

Given she drank as much if not more than I did last night, my roommate is bright-eyed and far too chipper. Perfectly braided pigtails accentuate her dewy, makeup free face. She looks fantastic, and I give her the side-eye.

She winks at me, most probably tuned in to my grumpy internal dialogue, and smiles delightedly. “Thank you, Blythe. It needs a wash so I thought I’d get it out of my way. How are you?”

“I’m lovely, darling. I made the final plans for my trip to Prince Edward Island.”

“That’s great.” I take a sip of the coffee, and Suki claps her hands excitedly.

“Wow, that’s coming up soon, isn’t it?”

Mom rents a small cottage annually on the sandy shores close to the picturesque city of Summerside for about six weeks, and I always visit for a week or two.

It’s so beautiful there and an inexpensive vacation since Mom only lets me pay for my airfare. I look forward to it every year, where I can eat all the lobster I want, lounge the day away with my mother, and mingle with the easygoing, salt-of-the-earth locals.

While Suki and Mom prattle on about the upcoming trip, I enjoy the coffee, eyes falling shut as I half listen to them. For the past several years, Suki and Alouette have come with me to PEI and we’ve had a blast. This summer will be different without Lou.

Suki’s fear of commitment echoes Walker’s tone and cautious words, when he talked about Vanessa and how she hurt him. His actions make sense although I wonder if he’ll

ever open himself up again, and for Suki, it's strange to see how insecure she is even after all these years of love and companionship from Lou.

The doorbell snaps my eyes open, and both Suki and I look to the doorway out of my room. We aren't expecting anyone, and for one brief second I allow myself to imagine it's Walker at the door, here because he wants to see me.

I need to get my libido in check. There's no way Walker would be here.

Suki blows a kiss at the screen. "I'll get that. You two talk. Love you, Mrs. C." Then she leaps off the bed.

"Bye, darling." Mom watches me sip my coffee as fretful lines form on her forehead. "Honey, are you worried about finding a job?"

"No. I only wish things would move faster." I blow out a breath and shake my head, not wanting to believe Walker won't keep his word. "It's taking a little more time than I thought, and I'm anxious to meet the VC firms."

"And if you decided to work with one of them, you'd be giving up an equity stake in your company, right? You're okay with that?"

"Yes, I need investors and additional support to get this off the ground now. And I'll have the option to buy them out at a later date, and by then—"

Suki's appearance in the doorway causes me to pause as an icy dread skates up my spine at her tense and gloomy expression. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's"—her eyes flash to the phone, my mom—"um, here for you."

Not heeding her concern that Mom's on the screen, I ask, "Who?"

"You need to come." Out of view from the phone screen, she motions for me to end the call.

"Uh, Mom, I have to go." My legs shake as I get out of the bed, not sure why I'm worried but only that Suki is freaking

me out. “I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, hon.” She smiles, and I’m glad she doesn’t notice my unfurling nerves.

I end the video call and slide an unsteady leg into my jeans. “Suk, what’s going on? Who’s here?”

Lips pale, she swallows slowly. “It’s Greene.”

My entire body seizes as air pools in my lungs and my heart forgets how to beat.

Greene.

The asshole from Ivation.

Billie’s henchman.

After stealing my satchel back, I’d anticipated a run-in with him. After all, making threats and carrying them out is his job—that’s why Billie keeps him around so she doesn’t get her hands dirty. But when one day passed, then two, and then a week, I foolishly reckoned I was in the clear.

“What does he want?” My fingers, now cold and trembling, fumble to pull a sweatshirt from the drawer, and I hastily throw it on.

“He won’t say. He’ll only talk to you, but you better hurry because he isn’t in a good mood. Almost angry.”

“Great. What else is new?” A wave of heat rolls through me, and I’m lightheaded and faintly nauseous. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

She leaves, and I quickly run a brush through my unruly head of hair. There isn’t time to wash my face or brush my teeth. Maybe I’ll get lucky and my morning breath will make him pass out.

Greene stands like a warrior, stance wide, shoulders squared, in the center of the room as if he owns the place. This is my space, not his, I remind myself, forcing movement into my limbs and willing the apprehension to release its hold on me.

“What do you want?”

Ruthless brown eyes rake up and down my body. His sharp angular features are boldly marked with contempt. “Losing your job doesn’t agree with you.”

“If you came here to throw insults, get out.”

Greene terrifies me though I like to think I hide it well. As Billie’s attack dog, he never passes on a chance to bite.

“I’ve got a message from Billie. She liked you, even wanted to keep you on as part of the team despite all that happened.” He attempts sincerity, but I don’t miss the cutting edge to all his words. “But you made things difficult. She wants to end things once and for all.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from snorting. She doesn’t want me going to the media, and I only wish I could prove she’s a lying fraud. While I could put all my time and effort into trying to discredit her, I don’t stand a chance. I’ve made a few calls, and everyone around her has closed ranks. No one will talk to me.

It’s my word against hers.

Going public would cast a stain on her impeccable reputation, but without proof, in the end, I’ll look like a disgruntled former employee. It could destroy my future endeavors.

His lips twist like barbed wire, sharp and ugly. “If you don’t drop this now, she will file a workplace injunction order. And if you don’t know what that means, it’s like a restraining order. And she wants what you stole.”

“You’re delusional.” I echo his words from the other day.

Suki bursts from the hallway, her usually serene features warped and menacing. “Asshole, you stole from Eden.” Her rigid hands wave in the air like missiles as she jabs a finger at him. “How dare you come in here threatening her. Get the fuck out.”

He glowers and steps closer, trying to intimidate her, and the sight is ghastly and in a perverse way, almost comical. She’s half his size and though fierce, he could easily snap her in two before either of us have a chance to blink.

I pull her back by the shoulder to put as much distance between them as possible. “Suki, it’s okay.” Blocking her eyeline to Greene, I lower my voice and try to convey with my body language just how much I appreciate that she has my back, but I’ve got this. “Please go.”

She fumes, nostrils flaring, chest heaving, and cheeks a bright red, but grudgingly, she slinks out of the room.

Greene chuckles. “Damn, who’s that?”

Scowling, I dig deep for a measured though venomous tone. “Back to what you were saying about a workplace injunction. I didn’t steal anything. It’s my idea. I worked on it alone, on my own time, and it has nothing to do with Ivation. She can go ahead and do whatever she feels she has to do, and I’ll do what I have to do.”

His broad muscled body jerks at my response, not anticipating my boldness or maybe shocked that, unlike Suki, I’m controlled, even levelheaded in my threats. His pause is long while he scrutinizes me as if trying to discern if I’m posturing or if I’ll make good on going to the media.

“Look, we both know you got the shit end of the stick, okay.” He softens his voice although his leer never fades. “This is the way it has to be. Do yourself a favor and don’t take her on; you don’t stand a chance. Trust me.”

I shake my head, uncertain if my hearing works. Is he saying what I think he is? He was too vague for it to be a full admission, but his words hint at Billie’s culpability, and I push. “What are you talking about?”

A large vein in his temple pulses with every breath, and his beady eyes bore into me for a beat or two.

Dammit.

A miscalculation on my part—where exactly I’m not sure—but the moment is broken. His shields are back and firmly in place.

“Stay away from Billie and Ivation. If you continue to make yourself a problem, she will destroy you.” He steps into my personal space, now less than a foot away, towering over

me. “You know, in some messed-up way, while Billie wants you to go away...disappear, I almost wish you’d fight back.”

He bends so we’re eye to eye, and the stench of his breath causes me to hold mine. It takes everything in me to not utter a sound. I won’t let him smell or see my fear, and I strengthen my glare and continue to hold my breath captive until he leaves.

Suki rushes from the shadows and deadbolts the front door. “Holy shit, Eden, are you okay? What a fucking asshole.” She pulls me close and studies my face. “You don’t look so good. You’re whiter than snow. Talk to me.”

“I was going to leave this alone. I reached out to a few people about Billie and what she did to me, to find out if there are others who have had the same thing done to them, but everyone I talked to stonewalled me. I figured it was a waste of my time. But now, I’m not so sure.”

A hot tear slides down my cheek, and I harshly wipe it away. “Billie can’t get away with destroying hopes and dreams...people’s lives. I’m going to stop her.”

EDEN

Suki slides off the barstool and leans across the round tabletop to be heard over the booming bass. “Do you want another one?”

Paige nods and places her empty wineglass down. “Yes, please, but why don’t you stay? The server should be by soon.”

My head swivels this way and that in what feels like my zillionth attempt to find our server. Despite the silvery full moon and the twinkling pepper lights, it’s hard to see anyone in this chic Yorkville rooftop bar. Since our arrival a few hours ago, this wildly popular haunt has lived up to the hype with great music, good drinks, and a constantly growing crush of hot bodies.

Suki claws at her throat like someone dying of thirst. “No, I’m parched.”

I snort, and Paige laughs as she thrusts out her credit card. “If you insist on braving the crowd, they’re on me.”

Hastily, I fumble for my wallet; she got the last round too. “I’ll get this one.”

“Nope.” She snatches the plastic from my fingers and slaps it onto the table. “I invited you for drinks. Tonight’s on me.”

Suki leaves before I drag her into our battle of wills, and reluctantly, I thank Paige once again for her generosity.

When she called with tonight’s invitation, I was surprised and also pleased she’d followed through on her promise from

dinner at her place. Tonight has been two weeks since my firing and given the timing, we are celebrating my freedom.

I need to look at everything that happened with Billie, and even with Walker, as a good thing. Change for the better. Although Walker might be completely gone from my life, at least I seem to have gained a new friend out of our brief interlude.

Competing with the music to be heard, she leans in close. “So Tom tells me that you’re helping August with ACE.”

“Yes. I’m actually enjoying the work.”

“They couldn’t stop talking about you the other day. I was surprised to see Tom so fired up over something. Usually, he’s so laid-back and can’t be bothered.”

This piques my interest. “What does Tom do? He isn’t involved in ACE, is he?”

“He has a BS in mathematics and has done a little of everything, but he doesn’t want to settle in any one career. I think that’s why he’s interested in Project Miranda.”

“Project Miranda? What’s that?”

Her face lights up like the Northern lights. “It’s my baby. As part of the Rothwell Foundation, it’s a program to provide fresh water to communities that don’t have a viable drinking source. We launched our first full-scale operation in Africa to turn saline water into freshwater and we’re always looking for volunteers. Tom’s signed up to go.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yes. I’m so glad he’s helping out. He’s wicked smart, and I think it’ll be good for both him and the project to have him on the ground over there. He’s just got to get his shots and paperwork in order. So hopefully in a month or so.”

I marvel at this news, and her smile grows as she inches closer. “Okay, I’ve been trying to be good but I can’t take it anymore. How are things with you and Walker?”

My stomach sours. I was afraid she’d bring up her husband’s best friend at some point tonight. Like other guests

at her house for dinner, she probably saw Walker and me kiss. Or Tom or August could have blabbed—those two aren't exactly discreet.

“Um, good.” *Liar.* “We are supposed to meet the VC firms soon.” I shrug and glance around for Suki, our waiter, or anyone to derail this conversation. “We had to postpone, and now I'm waiting on a new date.”

It has been well over a week since those meetings were canceled, since I last saw Walker, and still nothing. I've thought about texting him constantly, so much so I even started a few but never sent any.

While he said he'd help, I'm not entitled to this, and I keep telling myself there might be a logical explanation, one that doesn't involve his retaliation for my rejection. Though I'd argue we're even, given the last time we saw each other, he rejected me.

She smiles. “Good, I'm glad to hear things are underway with your business. And...” Her eyes bug out, pointedly staring at me.

“And what?” I'm not sure what she's getting at or more like, I don't want to talk about Walker, not in the way she does.

With a dramatic sigh, she lightly shoves me. “What about the two of you?”

“What about us?”

She crinkles her nose. “Oh, no you don't. He likes you, it's as obvious as the nose on his face. Don't tell me he didn't ask you out. I know him. When he wants something, he goes after it.”

There's a contraction in my middle, and I stare down at my now empty wineglass, wishing I had more. “He did, but—”

“But what?” Her fingers tighten around my forearm. “You aren't interested?” Though a question, her tone suggests she can't fathom anything but my interest, and sadly, she isn't wrong.

After meeting his son and dinner at his place, and shoot, maybe because he respected my boundaries and didn't kiss me when he had the chance, I can't stop thinking about him.

While he promised to connect me to the VC firms, and I'm worried and a little perplexed why I haven't heard anything about this, my interest in him goes beyond professional.

Paige doesn't let up, her stare expectant, and I round my shoulders, resigned to rip off the Band-Aid and give her what she wants. "Walker only wants a fling and I—"

Suki lightly hits my back, leaning over my shoulder to plonk the drinks onto the table. "And you're a fool."

I groan. Figures she just happens to return at this moment. Paige sips at the new glass of red wine and smiles. "Ah. Thank you." Her gaze sharpens, back to the topic at hand. "How's she being a fool?"

Suki adjusts the thin strap of her tank top and sits. "The man wants her. She wants him, but she turned him down because he doesn't want anything serious. I say get some of that. Live a little and have some fun."

She doesn't know that I haven't heard from Walker or his assistant. Call it pride or stupidity or who knows what, but I don't need her telling me all the things I did wrong.

Paige giggles and nods, but I'm not amused and take this opening to give a little of what my roommate is dishing out.

"Oh, is that what you're doing with what's his name?" I arch a brow, challenging Suki. I know the name of the guy she's casually seeing, the very one she's using to thwart any long-term plans with Lou.

Before I can push further, she shakes her finger at me and purses her lips. "Uh-uh, we're not talking about me."

Oh, of course we aren't. Typical Suki. She has no problem poking the bear, but when someone starts poking at her, it's game over.

We've talked about both Alouette and Walker, and while I insist our situations are different—she and Alouette have been

together for years—Suki won't hear of it. She says I'm missing out on a chance with a sexy billionaire.

She isn't wrong, but I know myself. If I pursue anything with Walker, I'll get hurt. I already like him way too much. Even if I go into things with my eyes wide open, when he tires of me, there's no way I'm leaving without a broken heart.

And then there's the professional side of things. Do I really want to start something with the man who can help get my business started? I can just imagine what people might say.

I only got where I am because of Walker.

I won't start my business with rumors and speculation about my abilities. People need to see I'm smart and hardworking.

And why am I even stressing about this? Walker hasn't called me. I've likely heard the last of him. Frustrated, it's time to redirect the conversation, and I straighten my spine and lock gazes with my best friend.

“When things get too personal, too serious, you—”

She growls, “Eden.”

“Suki.”

Just then our server slaps his tray onto the table and breaks the tension. “Sorry ladies, tonight's a madhouse. Can I get you another round of drinks?”

In unison, we cheer, “Yes.”

I fall into bed well after midnight, wired and a little tipsy. Fortunately, Walker didn't come up again, and we danced and drank until Zach arrived to take Paige home.

Walker's friend said a quick hello, and during those seconds, I was tempted to corner him and ask him a hundred questions about the man I can't get out of my mind.

First and foremost, why hadn't Walker called? But luckily I wasn't that drunk and kept my mouth shut. But now that I'm under the covers, Walker camps, front and center, in my mind and I grab my phone, wanting answers.

What better way to get them than to go to the source? Before I can chicken out, I hit send on the text.

Me: I thought you were a gentleman and had manners. I guess I was wrong.

Immediately the timestamp and read pops up as dots appear on screen. He's awake and replying.

Walker: I am a gentleman.

No manners?

You don't even say hello or how are you before you lambaste me.

Oh, lambaste. That's a good word and I giggle. He could be annoyed, it's hard to decipher with a text, but I'm going to go with amused and joking. Before I can respond, another reply comes in.

Walker: Good to hear from you. How are you?

My fingers fly over my keyboard as a kaleidoscope of butterflies swoop low in my belly. Direct is the only way to go, though I might not like his response.

Me: OK. But I'm confused.

As I take my time and hem and haw about how best to phrase my next words without sounding entitled or upset, another one comes in from him.

Walker: Why?

Okay, here goes nothing.

Me: I thought the VC meetings were being rescheduled.

Walker: Yes, and?

Me: I haven't heard anything

Within seconds, my phone rings. It's him. Calling me.

The fluttering multiplies, and I put the phone to my ear. "Hello."

There's no preamble or pleasantries as he dives in from where my text left things. "What are you talking about? Trina booked the meetings and sent you the details."

"Um, Walker, I didn't mean for you to call at this hour—" I fidget to sit upright in bed as my fingers comb through my ratty hair.

"Eden." The way he says my name, a hint of a warning as he cuts me off midsentence, sends a shudder of anticipation spiraling through me. "I'm glad you reached out. It's good to hear from you." He echoes his text, but the rasp in his voice as the words pass his lips—lips I wish I could see—causes my pulse to quicken. "I was up... Thinking about..."

He pauses, clears his throat, and though we aren't in the same space, I perceive a shift even before his voice grows more professional. "This doesn't make any sense. The meetings are in my calendar. Sometime next week. Hang on, let me check."

I sit up in bed, surprised, relieved, and still confused. Trina hasn't contacted me since that day in his office; of this I'm sure, even though she said she would. Still, doubt creeps in the longer I listen to his steady breaths, and I hit speaker on the phone and open my emails.

In the dark of my room, his deep voice over the phone causes me to briefly suspend my hunt for answers. "Yes, here it is. We've got two meetings, back-to-back, on Thursday. Trina sent the email to both of us."

He rattles off my email and yes, it's right, but then why didn't I get it?

"That's strange. I'm looking at my emails and I don't have anything." I nibble on my lip and click the junk folder, already dreading yet also hoping I find her email.

Then I see it. The email sits unopened on my screen, and now it seems obvious. I'm a dolt, and I don't know why I

didn't think to check here before.

“Um, oh, I'm sorry. The email's here. In my junk. I feel like a fool.” I scan the details of the upcoming meetings, and my cheeks burn.

The deep rumble of his laugh hits my ears and though it should unsettle me, it doesn't. Instead, my insides warm and I laugh too.

He's first to stop when he rasps, low and almost suggestive, “Tell me something.”

“What?” I slide the blanket up over me, toasty and turned on.

“Was this all a ruse to call me? To talk to me?”

My heart skips a beat at the inkling of truth in his question. I had wanted to connect with him, but I've got a truth of my own, and a small chuckle escapes my lips.

“Um, Walker... You called me.”

WALKER

Three dots dance on the screen and my anticipation—what will she say?—buzzes through me like fizzy champagne bubbles. My stomach dips and swirls, heart racing and breath coming in jagged inhalations. This is insane.

On my left, a server surreptitiously leans toward the table and removes my dinner plate. At the same time, my phone pings, and I nearly jump out of my skin, feeling both giddy and foolish.

Eden: You tell me. I only do math if I absolutely have to. But I know we'll see each other soon. Until then.

Captive to this odd and intoxicating state of Eden, I forget my surroundings and throw back my head in a chuckle. My thumb hovers over the keys, itching to type out a witty response, but that isn't the game we play. I never respond.

My latest text to Eden was a question where I'd already done the math and knew the answer. I'd asked her if she knew how long it was until our meeting with the VC firms.

Until we see each other again.

Tomorrow. Finally, it's almost here.

Exactly thirteen hours, twelve minutes, and—I glance at my watch—ten seconds until we see each other.

Sybil, my date, spins in her chair to face me, expression quizzical. "What's so funny?"

She inches closer and drops her gaze to the phone in my hand. Fortunately, I'm taller and quicker and shift the device out of her view. Then, thinking better of it, I slip it into my jacket pocket, away from her prying eyes. It's just as well. With the phone now out of my reach, it limits my temptation to respond to Eden.

"Nothing. It's business."

"Well, it must be good business because I've never seen you laugh or smile at anything I've had to say, business or not."

"You aren't funny."

"Neither are you." She pinches the stem of her empty glass. "Please get me a drink."

The words "get your own" stomp on the tip of my tongue, fighting to get out, but I hold back. I was brutally honest a moment ago, forgetting to play the game, and now she's upset, exerting the little power she has.

"Fine." Without bothering to ask her what she wants, I excuse myself from the table and stroll over to the bar.

Though an inkling of annoyance scratches at the back of my neck, I don't allow her nosiness to douse the high I'm riding, the thrill of Eden's sassy response.

Since we talked in the early morning hours last Friday, I kept our connection going by sending a daily text. She'll respond and that's where it ends. We don't have endless conversations. Just one point of contact, and this little interaction has quickly become a highlight of my day. I don't want to think about what that says about me.

Before that, when I'd almost kissed her at my house, I pulled away and cut off all contact. We don't want the same things. I have nothing to give her, or at least nothing she wants—only a fling, albeit fun—and my interest in helping her business still remains. Things have to be strictly business, and the best way to get over my attraction to Eden was distance.

Until she sent that late-night text.

I could have answered her via text and been done with it. But no, it didn't take much for me to call her. Truthfully, I was looking for a reason to hear her voice, and in my weak moments of desire, I contemplated throwing out my strict rules and just seeing where things go with her. But I must stick to my guns.

Now single once again, I'm more gun-shy than ever about relationships. Talk about the seventh circle of hell. I still have shrapnel in my chest and am permanently scarred from my foolishly blind foray with love roulette. I gave Vanessa the power to destroy me, and I'll never make that mistake again.

When I return to the table, Sybil stands and takes her wine from me. "Thank you. I should work the room. I see Sheffield is over there." She arches a brow at me. "Do you think he'd invest in my new business venture?"

"Maybe." I straighten the sleeve of my tux. "I told you I might be interested." When Sybil gave me the highlights of her new venture, it sounded like the something I was looking for, to challenge me. "Get me your proposal and revenue projections, then we'll talk."

Smiling, she flattens her hand on the center of my chest. "That would be my first choice. For you to partner with me. We keep talking about doing something together but never do."

"Well, it could happen. You know what you need to do."

She nods. "Very well then." Then she sashays across the crowded ballroom.

I'm grateful for my arrangement with Sybil to attend functions like this together. We arrive alone, leaving no room for outside speculation of a relationship from the media or otherwise. Neither of us spends too much time with the other, and we leave alone. It's perfect.

As I ponder Sybil's latest business endeavor, Eden comes to mind, and I wonder if I should introduce the two women. Eden could do well working with only a chosen VC, but

Sybil's always looking for a promising entrepreneur to promote, and Eden could use the support.

But first things first—tomorrow's meetings. I'll wait and see how things go before anything else. Eden might not need Sybil.

Paige's melodic laughter snags my attention, and at another table, several feet away, she's pulling Zach into her side, phone up in front of them. *What?* I saunter over to the couple, curious as to why she's taking a selfie.

"Are my eyes deceiving me? What was that all about?" My chin dips to her phone, still in her hand.

"Walker, good to see you." On a chuckle, Zach kisses his wife's temple and gets up from the table to shake my hand. "I'll let Paige explain."

She stands to greet me. "Hi. Where's your date?" Paige doesn't agree with my arrangement with Sybil and makes her opinion known in not so subtle ways.

"Hi, you look lovely as always." I choose to ignore her sardonic question. "Why are you snapping shots like a teenager—at a board dinner of all places?"

"It's a photo sharing app Bas insisted my family join."

I arch a brow, still perplexed. "That still doesn't explain why you'd be taking a picture here just because your brother asked you to get the app?"

She blushes and shakes her head. "Sorry, I'm not explaining it very well. This app is different from others. You don't get to choose when to use it or more like, to take a picture to share. Once a day, you get a notification to post, and you never know when it's going to be. And then you have two minutes to take a picture, capturing whatever it is you're doing at the time."

"Hmm, that is different. And you just got an alert that you had to post?"

"Yes. And it's cool because there are no filters and you have no time to curate the perfect setting. It's all about being

real.”

I scoff, unbelieving. “Seriously? That goes against everything social media is. To create the image of your best life,” I mock.

She swipes across her screen and turns the screen to face me as she scrolls through pictures of her doing different things. “At first, I hated it. Depending on what you’re doing, the pictures can be less than flattering. Like when I’ve just come in from a run.”

Paige makes a disgusted sound and grimaces at the image of her, red-faced and sweaty with her hair plastered to her forehead.

Zach laughs and slides his arm around her waist. “Honey, even at your worst, you’re beautiful.”

“I love you, but don’t try to convince me otherwise. Some of these are brutal. Anyway.” She switches her focus to me. “Now I don’t mind it, even like it because I get to see what my family’s doing.”

She hits an icon on her phone and an image of her mother, Olivia, at her computer pops up, then Sam, her stepdad, with an ice rink in the background with someone in skates behind plexiglass. Next is her younger brother, Bas, in hockey gear on the ice and then Drew and his wife, Pippa, walking with the George Washington bridge in the distance, and finally Matt and Claire snuggled on a couch.

Her finger hovers over the screen, and she hesitates before flipping the phone down. She stares up at me guiltily. It’s an odd sensation, as if something more is going on but I’m not sure what.

Zach doesn’t seem to notice and I clear my throat, eager to move past whatever this is. “All those photos are from tonight?”

She nods. “Yes. So, I know you came with Sybil, but why didn’t you invite Eden tonight?”

“And that’s my cue to leave.” Zach presses his lips to Paige’s cheek. “I’m going to have a quick word with Cormac.”

His wife snorts. “Quick? There’s never anything quick about your conversations with Cormac. Say hi to him for me.”

He laughs and leaves me with his inquisitive wife. Her gaze bores into me. “So...Eden?”

“Paige, being a busybody really doesn’t suit you.”

“Uh-uh, don’t turn this around. I saw you with her at Marlowe’s and our place... I’ve never seen you smitten with any woman.”

Paige didn’t know me when I was married to Vanessa and has never seen me in a relationship. I never bring my flings to anything personal or business related.

“Smitten?”

“Yes, and don’t even try to deny it. But if you don’t want to give it a chance, it might be just as well.” She sways on her feet and glances down at her phone in a way that makes it impossible for me to see the screen. “I doubt Eden would have come anyway.”

I stiffen, not liking the sounds of that. How does Paige know what Eden would’ve done if I’d asked her here tonight? Have they talked? About me? If so, what did Eden say?

A growl slips past my lips. Since when do I give a crap about things like this? “Why do you say that?”

“It looks like Eden already had plans.” She flips her phone to face me, and on screen is a group shot of four people, cheek to cheek, grinning and laughing.

Suki, Tom, Eden, and August.

What the hell? Where are they? On a double date?

I want to roar.

I want to hit something.

I want to destroy.

My throat constricts as something cold, sour, and thick slides down into my now-hollow chest where my long-dormant heart lies. This foreign thing, ferocious and greedy, so

much like jealousy, wraps around the useless organ, and since I've no use for emotions and relationships, I want it gone.

Paige eyes me intently, concern and something knowing scores her features.

I struggle to find my voice without revealing anything. "This is from tonight?"

The picture is in the same app Paige just shared with me. "Yeah. Tom is family just like his sisters, Pip and Claire, and even Finn, though I don't see him as much."

At the mention of Finn, Tom's older brother, everything clicks into place. Paige already saw the picture of Eden with them before I joined her and decided against showing me. But why?

She pockets her phone. "You should've asked her. I think she would've changed her plans if you had."

"If you say so." My voice is devoid of emotion as I grapple with what I just saw, what it could mean. "Have a nice evening, Paige. Excuse me."

I walk away from her and though she calls after me, apologizing and wanting to explain, if there is an explanation to be had, I don't want to hear it from Paige. There's only one person who can tell me what's going on.

Without bothering to find Sybil, I text Tony to bring the car up to the front of the building and send a quick text to let my date know I've left.

During the drive to Eden's, I recall last week, when Tony mentioned August and Tom were at her place when he'd picked her up for our meeting at Zenith Point. At the time, I didn't give it much thought, foolishly believing I had a chance. But now, after the photo, is that why she turned me down at Zach and Paige's?

Her excuse of not wanting casual, was that all that it was? An excuse? And in reality, she didn't want me because of her interest in someone else. How did I miss that?

And if that's the case, then who? Tom? August?

Fuck me.

The car slows to a stop, and Tony clears his throat. “Mr. Drummond, we’re here. Do you want me to go to the door?”

“No. I’m going in. Wait here.” I step out of the car and stride up to the front door.

In a rare moment of doubt, I wonder if I should have texted or called first. What if she’s with one of them? Better yet, I need to see it with my own eyes, and I need her to be honest with me.

That’s why I’m here. Right?

Yeah, right. I’ll examine my barbarian motives another time. Right now, I need to talk to Eden even if I won’t like what she has to say.

Suki opens the door in a T-shirt and shorts. Her pin-straight hair is clipped to the top of her head with the sharp ends fanning out like stalks of straw. “Walker? Um, is Eden expecting you?”

She peers over her shoulder into the house, chewing on the inside of her mouth, and I wonder what or who she doesn’t want me to see.

“No, but I’d like a word with her.” I inch closer to the open door and she reluctantly lets me in.

The final steps into the house feel near impossible, my feet heavy and immovable.

Dammit.

Showing up at her home was a bad idea. If either of those jackasses appear half naked or worse, if Eden saunters out looking well fucked, I’ll lose my shit.

And none of this makes sense. We are nothing more than business acquaintances. I can’t give her what she wants.

“Eden.” Tone urgent and impatient, Suki shuts the door. “Eden. Come here.”

More exasperated than concerned, Eden traipses into the living room with a towel draped over her head as her hand

rubs the terry cloth against damp hair. Her legs are bare and my mouth dries.

“What’s wrong?” She flips her head up to face us, and the towel falls to her shoulders.

She gasps, and her body jerks at the sight of me, causing her thin, white oversized shirt to lift above her hips. The vee of her blue panties snags my attention. Now riveted, my gaze drops to the apex of her thighs.

A hand glides through her long, damp hair, seemingly self-conscious of her appearance. “Walker. What are you doing here?”

My head spins and heart pounds. Where the hell am I supposed to look?

She isn’t wearing a bra, and pinkish-brown nipples poke through the time-worn fabric. The zipper of my tuxedo pants tightens, imprinting its teeth into the swell of my groin.

Motherfu—

“Eden.” Restraint waning, I step closer and curl my fingers into balls to stop myself from reaching for her. “I had to see you.”

“What’s wrong?” Her chest heaves and her nipples strain against the next-to-nothing cotton.

I swear she’ll kill me with her next breath, and I rip my gaze from her gorgeous body to the mouth of the dark hallway just behind Suki. “Are you alone?”

Eden tracks my sight line. “What?”

“Where were you tonight?” I shouldn’t be starting our conversation this way. What is my problem? I shouldn’t even be here.

This woman drives me to distraction.

Suki sucks her teeth, clearly unimpressed and, in her own way, in agreement with me. I’m going about this the wrong way. Then she powers a warm smile and clears her throat. “Um, I could go to my room or stay if you want—”

Eyes on me, Eden says, “Good night, Suki.” Her cutting tone and sharp green eyes slice into me as do her next words. “Walker, you need to leave.”

EDEN

Walker's finally here. In the flesh. In my home. This is what I've wanted for quite some time now and even more so since he started his daily, random texts, only once a day. Things like...

How are you?

Remind me, does your plan have three and five year projections?

Next Wednesday can't come fast enough.

What are you doing?

And over the past weekend—it was a long one since Monday was a holiday—he sent a photo of his son holding a large, yellow Tonka truck with his small teeth bared, lips curled back, nose wrinkled, and eyes squeezed shut.

I broke out into a huge grin and couldn't help but laugh. Alex's roar of the engine sprang to life every time I looked at his image. And Walker sent the picture to me with the message:

Alex misses you.

Even now, just thinking about it causes a strange pang in my chest and the urge to pull my phone out and study the image.

No matter the time or what I am doing, I always respond to his texts. He doesn't.

It should bother me, but oddly it's kind of become our thing. One single text, my response, and that's it.

And now, what's even better than his text is him. Here. And yet, given his questions, the tone of his voice, I have the overwhelming impulse to punch him.

"That wasn't how I wanted to start things." Walker tugs at the bow tie of his tux as if he can't breathe.

Although I'm annoyed with him, there's no way I can ignore how sexy he is in a tux.

Walker Drummond is hot.

It's as simple as that.

Full of confidence and swagger, he looks more disheveled than I've ever seen him. His dark hair, usually styled to perfection, sticks up in all directions, and its unruliness matches his mood. What has him so undone?

The intensity of his blue eyes digs into me. "Can we start over?"

Suddenly aware of the very little I have on, I wrap an arm around my chest, and despite my unease and huge dislike of his caveman demeanor, I am curious about why he's here. And I am happy to see him. I want to give him a chance.

"Go on then."

"How was your night?" He waltzes into the living room, removes his jacket, and drapes it over the arm of a chair.

"Okay. And yours? Why are you in a tux?" I tentatively edge closer to where he now sits on the sofa.

"Long. Boring. I was at a board dinner. Paige and Zach were there. Paige and I are on the board, and she showed me this picture of you."

I can't imagine what picture that would be unless she grabbed something from social media. Or is it a photo from

drinks the other night? It still doesn't explain his weird vibe as if he's bottled up electricity, keenly seeking release.

“Okay?”

“It was of you with Suki, Tom, and August. Tonight.”

“What?” My confusion doesn't last long as the picture Tom took of us pops into my head. “Oh, you mean at dance class.”

“Dance class? You dance with Tom and August?”

“Yes, I mean, no. Not normally.” Then I proceed to explain it was “bring a friend” night and abruptly stop. I'm rambling and I don't have to explain myself to him. “Walker, what's going on? You can't have come over here to ask about my hip-hop class.”

Eyes glued to me, he gets to his feet. “What would you say if I did?” He stands close enough to touch. Too close.

I have to tilt my head back to look up into his blue eyes. “You did?”

“Yes. Is anything going on with you and Tom? Or with August?”

I recoil, and a flash of something sharp flares inside me. “What?”

Lines of concern or regret crease his forehead, and he rubs at it, head hung. “Shit, I'm out of line but...are you interested in one of them?”

“Yes, you are. Out of line, that is.” On instinct, I back away, eager to put distance between us. The temptation is too great. “Not that it's any of your business, but no. We're friends. I'm helping August with his business, and while working together, we've gotten to know each other. And if you must know, Suki invited them, not me.” I cringe the second I say it. It sounds like I was forced to take them to dance class when that wasn't how it went at all, and I hastily add, “And we had a lot of fun.”

His brow wrinkles but he nods. “I see. You know, I know how to have fun too. Why didn't you ask me?”

“Ask you what?”

“You said it was bring a friend night. You could have asked me.”

A derisive snort slips out. “Why would I? We’re business.”

He flinches at the truth and I immediately regret it, but he recovers quickly. “You said you wanted us to be friends.”

Closing the gap once more, he’s now so close that the tips of his expensive Italian dress shoes lightly nudge at my bare toes. The heat of his broad chest and his heady, masculine scent floods my senses, and a quiver runs through my core.

“Eden, can we be friends?”

I’m uncertain what he’s up to, and it definitely seems like he’s asking for a lot more than friendship, and I can’t say I don’t like the way my body reacts to him.

In fact, it’s all I think about.

No, that’s the problem.

I’m not thinking.

Only feeling.

Adrenaline spikes my blood, and the charged air around us causes the hairs on my body to stand and my skin to break out into goose bumps.

“Walker...why? What are you doing to me?”

He leans in until his forehead rests against mine. “Answer the question, Eden. Can we be friends?”

In my silence, he rubs his nose along mine, and it takes everything in me to focus on the conversation, not on how the nearness of him scrambles my brains and roasts my body.

“Sure.” The one word comes out like a breathless whisper. “But even if we’re friends, I can’t see you doing hip-hop.”

“Teach me.” His large hand slides around my waist and takes a little of my shirt with him.

Almost all of my legs are showing, maybe even my underwear, and I’m frozen to the spot, unable to right things or

give a crap.

“C’mon, Eden.” His head bends and he brings his soft lips to the shell of my ear. With every breath, our chests touch. “Teach me. I want to be your friend.”

He’s testing every ounce of my self-control because suddenly friends doesn’t feel like enough, and as if he’s reading my mind, his husky voice, velvety like honey, wraps around me with his next request. “More than friends?”

At first, I nod, dizzy with an insatiable need for him, but as the words sink in, my spine prickles with awareness and I spring back.

“More than friends?” I tug at my suddenly less-than-oversized shirt. “Walker, I don’t understand what you’re doing. We already talked about this. We want different things.”

“What if we didn’t?”

“Didn’t what?”

“What if we want the same things? What if I changed my mind?”

I step closer, uncertain but also intrigued, maybe even mistakenly bolstered by hope. “Have you? You want something more than casual sex with me?”

He loosens the top two buttons of his shirt to reveal a sliver of his sinewy chest, with golden skin and a light sprinkling of dark hair.

A jolt, hot and fizzy, cartwheels through me. Even when he’s messing with my head, I still want him.

“I can’t promise a long-term relationship. How long we’ll last but—” He pauses and runs a thumb across the bottom of his lip.

Damn. I can’t be sure he’s aware of how sexy that move is, or maybe he is and it’s calculated. Though right now, I don’t care, and I take in every ounce of him.

“But I promise I won’t go into this with an expiration date in mind. Eden, I like you. A lot. And it’s no secret I want you.

A lot.” His smile is so warm and easy, and all of my misgivings melt away. “If you’re willing, let’s see where this goes.”

“That’s all anyone can ask. None of us know if things will work out or not.” I nod and find myself moving nearer to him.

“And you’ll promise to not go into this expecting a marriage proposal?” His tone is light, even playful, but I can’t help but stiffen.

“Marriage? I never said anything about marriage.” My arms fold across my chest, suddenly needing to guard myself. “I just don’t see the point of going into something already anticipating the end. That’s one sure way to doom any relationship.”

He nods, contemplative, and slowly a smile creeps along his full lips. “Fair enough. So we’re in agreement?”

His gaze skims up my exposed legs, and his hand reaches for my hip once more as he turns me gently and guides my back to his front.

I should say something, confirm we’re on the same page, but my mind is too muddled, too caught up in how it feels to be this close to him. How good we feel together.

Walker brushes my hair from my neck and licks his way up the sensitive skin until he reaches my ear. “Eden, do we agree it’s just you and me?”

He breathes into me and I nod, my head falling back to lean against his shoulder. A rogue wave rushes at me and my eyes spring open.

I whirl to face him. “You aren’t saying all this to get me into bed and then you’ll call it quits, are you?”

For a few beats, he appears insulted, mouth flat and eyes narrow, before he shakes his head. “No. I would never do that. Remember what I said before. I’m a straight shooter and say it like it is.”

“Sorry, I had to ask.” Ashamed, as it isn’t my inclination to distrust people, I drop my chin to my chest.

He has every right to feel injured by the question yet slides his finger under my chin so our eyes meet.

“While we’re on the topic of honesty. Just so we’re clear, our seeing each other will be monogamous.”

“Of course. You don’t have to clarify something like that. I’ve never slept with more than one person at a time.”

Suki pops into my head, or more Alouette, and how my heart would be pulverized if I was in an open relationship. I’m not cut out for that. Committing to one person can be hard enough, and Suki knows this. Isn’t that why she’s running in the opposite direction?

“I’m not only talking about sex. I mean monogamous in every sense of the word. Whether or not we have sex, there’s no dating anyone else, not even for a casual coffee.”

“Seriously? Coffee is harmless.” I’m partly playing devil’s advocate and partly put out at how blunt and dead serious he is.

“Is it? Things have to start somewhere.”

And with those words, it hits me. Vanessa.

Trust must be hard for him when the woman he planned to spend the rest of his life with cheated on him and destroyed not only their marriage but also his trust.

“Of course. Walker, I never would.”

“Am I turning you off dating me?” He pulls me into him, as one hand wraps around my waist and the other skates along my leg toward the juncture of my thighs. I suck in a breath but don’t stop him.

“Eden, answer me. Are we doing this or not?”

“Yes.” My fingers curl his bicep to keep me close, right there with his hand only seconds away from where I want him.

My core clenches, already imagining his fingers inside me as my eyes flutter closed. He nips at my lips and tastes faintly of bourbon, and for a brief moment, I wonder if he brought a date to the board dinner.

It's a jarring and unwelcome thought and one I could get lost in, but I know where it would end. If he did, I might—no, I would—end things here for now.

I can't go there. I'm tired of being practical. I want Walker Drummond, and he wants me.

My fingers tangle in his hair, and his moan rumbles into my mouth, deepening the kiss as his palm is hot against the cotton fabric between my legs. Growling, Walker roughly shoves his hands under my panties, and our kisses become more desperate.

His deft fingers touch my pussy, sliding between my folds, and in no time at all, I'm at the edge of release. Fire flashes up my spine, and for a split second, I have the wherewithal to remember where we are.

We're not alone. Suki's only feet away, even if behind a closed door.

But I'm too far gone and can't stop. I bury my face into his shirt and come, crashing into ecstasy and muffling my cries in his pulsing chest.

He kisses along the damp nape of my neck and though I should be spent, I lean into his strong palm still on my sex, needing the pressure to relieve the once again growing ache that has been slowly building since Walker appeared at my door.

Heat curls in my belly, loud, demanding, and increasingly frenzied when first one, then two of his fingers thrust inside me. My mind spins into oblivion as he stretches me, working my body mercilessly, stroke for stroke.

When I come again, his name fires from my mouth, throaty and full of want, and any regard for Suki is long gone. I kiss him like I can't get enough of him and want to show him just how much.

My hands go for his zipper, and he wraps a hand around my wrist. "Eden, not tonight." He pulls back, arms slowly releasing me so he can button his shirt.

"What? But I want to. Don't you?"

“I do and as much as it pains me to say this, let’s stop here tonight. I didn’t come here for this, and we only just decided to see where this goes.”

Hazy and confused, I run a hand through my hair and watch him slip on his jacket and slip the bow tie into his pocket.

Is he having second thoughts? Cold feet?

No, if he was, he’d tell me. This is Walker. One sexy-ass gentleman.

That’s it.

Ugh.

He wraps me in his arms and kisses me senseless before heading for the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

With the click of the lock, I find my voice and whisper goodbye to the empty room.

I made a terrible mistake.

Not only is his world so far out of my league but so is this man. I’ve had good boyfriends, all sweet and sexy in their own way, and none of my relationships were hard or ended painfully.

No, they’ve run their natural course, fizzling out as we grew apart. But no matter the chemistry, or in one case the love, none of them made me feel like this. Like I might just give my right arm for him. And now that I’ve had a taste of him, of how effortlessly he owned my body, I’ll never be the same again.



“*A*nd this is Marvin Ramsey, managing partner at Endeavor.” Walker, as handsome as ever in his custom slate-gray suit, gestures to a blond man in his late thirties.

Marvin shakes my hand firmly, smiling. “Ms. Carpenter, great to meet you.”

“You too, and please call me Eden.” The introductions are getting easier even as I feel a lot like that famous deer, motherless and lost in the woods.

“And you can call me Marv.” He turns to the tall brunette to his right. “And this is Nadine Garten, a senior partner.”

She’s the first woman I’ve met today, and when she shakes my hand with both of hers, wrapping around mine like a cocoon, oddly, it settles my nerves. “So nice to meet you, Eden.”

When I met Walker this morning at his office for hours of meetings, I feared things might be awkward after fooling around last night. But if anything, they were better. Easy and effortless.

We didn’t have a chance to talk about juggling both a business and personal relationship, and we’ll have to at some point, but so far, it doesn’t seem to matter.

Walker presses his hand into my back, a welcomed constant during these introductions, and leans into me. The bright pop of his minty breath livens my senses and only amplifies my gratitude. I can’t begin to thank him for being here.

“I’m going to leave you with Marv and Nadine. Tony will come back once he’s dropped me off to take you home when you’re done.”

Earlier, at another VC firm and our first meeting of the day, he made the introductions and then held a conference call in another meeting room. And while we didn’t see each other for nearly two hours, I was comforted knowing he was close by. I didn’t realize he was leaving me here.

My fingers wrap around his wrist. “Wait.” I glance into the expectant gazes of Marv and Nadine. “Could you give us a minute, please?”

“Of course. We’ll be right in here.” Nadine points to a room a few feet away.

The walls are glass, looking very much like an aquarium without the fish, with a round table and six chairs in the

middle.

Walker stares at me thoughtfully. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. But I thought maybe you’d sit in this time?” My question is futile.

From the onset, intimate relationship or strictly business, he’s made it clear this is my baby. To bring my idea to life, I need financing and support, and that’s what these firms do.

Walker has opened a lot of doors for me, and fast, but that’s where his involvement ends. And as scary as that is, I’m also grateful for his hands-off approach. I want to do this on my own.

“You’ll be fine.” His strong hands cup my face, and at his touch, butterflies stir in my stomach. “I’ll talk to you later.”

His lips lightly brush mine, then he’s gone, and I’m stunned. Nausea sets in.

Up until now, we’ve been nothing but professional. I can’t face Nadine and Marv. Will they think I got here by sleeping with Walker Drummond? Shit. That’s exactly what I didn’t want.

Plastering on my game face, I march into the conference room and get down to business. After several hours, the meeting ends on a high with promises to talk soon. Now it’s up to me to decide which VC firm to go with.

Head swimming, I walk outside and find Tony behind the wheel of the limo. During the ride home, I catch up on texts and emails, all the while wondering how best to reach out to Walker. Should I text him? Or is a call better?

“Ms. Carpenter.” Tony catches my eye through the rearview mirror. “We’re here.”

Without waiting for me, he slips out of the car to open my door, and that’s when I realize I’m not at home. Tony’s taken me to Walker’s house.

WALKER

Eden walks up the steps to my home, frowning. “Walker, what am I doing here?”

This can’t become a habit. I’ve been repeating the phrase in my head as I watched the car circle the driveway. Though now that I see her, it’s hard to remember why this was a bad idea.

“I hope you’re hungry; dinner’s almost ready. Come in.” I take her hand, and although she appears confused, she doesn’t resist.

“Dinner? What’s going on?”

“I want to hear all about your meetings and spend some more time with you. Besides—”

In socks, my son skates across the marble floor, laughing, only to bump into my leg as his only way of stopping. “Hey, Alex, you need to be careful.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” Cheeks flushed, his gaze flits to Eden. “Are you here to play with me?” He thrusts a truck at her and takes her hand.

She giggles and readily accepts the toy. “I suppose I am.”

Quickly glancing at me, Eden lets him guide her down the hall to his playroom, and silently, I follow, marveling at how quickly my son has taken to her. I suppose there hasn’t been a woman in my life since his mother, so I’ve no idea if this comfort they have between them is because Alex is easygoing,

or if it's because of who Eden is. Something tells me it's the latter.

Since the divorce, he's more cautious with new people. The fact that his world was turned upside down left a scar and made him less likely to easily trust new situations and new people.

My son should be another reason why not to have Eden for dinner, but he was the opposite. The way he opens up around her puts some of my usual "must keep my distance" signals to rest.

During dinner, Eden and I don't have much time to talk, and afterward, Alex continues to dominate her attention. I never thought the day would come where I'd be jealous of my son.

I leave Alex reading to Eden and make a few more calls and return when it's his bedtime. Janice is already upstairs getting his pajamas out and prepping his toothbrush.

My hand slides around Eden's back and I lean into her. "I'll be a few minutes. Make yourself comfortable, and if you want anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"I'll be fine. Take your time." She gives Alex another hug. "Sweet dreams, my sweet boy."

Her endearment wrestles a smile from me as my heart spasms, and I leave the room, needing space to get myself together. "Come on, Alex. Bedtime."

"Will I see you tomorrow?" He pauses in the doorway to stare back at Eden, and my heart does another anxious flip.

She stares at me wide-eyed, not quite sure how to answer, but she doesn't wait for my direction. Her gaze softens and steadies as she looks at Alex. "Um, maybe not tomorrow, but hopefully, I'll see you soon. Okay?"

"Aww, all right." He hangs his head but quickly perks up. "Night, Eden." And then he races past me to his room.

When I return, her back is to me as she stares out at the garden. I clear my throat so as not to startle her. "Sorry, that

took a little longer than usual. He's excited you're here."

She turns and smiles at me. My chest swells, and all of me twines around her smile as if I need it to keep me alive. These sensations exploding inside me aren't new—I've felt them before but maybe not as intense, in another lifetime. So long ago, they're almost foreign and definitely unwanted.

I didn't sign up for this. In my heart, I only have room for Alex and this, what I'm feeling right now, it leaves me unsteady and shaken.

Luckily, Eden's oblivious to the commotion going on inside me. "He's such a great kid. So bright—he keeps me on my toes. Thank you for today and for letting me spend more time with him, and for dinner." She picks up her purse. "I want to talk about today, the meetings, and how we go forward from here, but my brain is just too full right now." She gestures with her hands at the sides of her head as if things are spilling out and she can't contain them.

I chuckle. "Of course. I understand, and this gives me an excuse to see you again. Soon." I pull her in for a kiss, and she gives in to me but doesn't let the kiss linger.

"You don't need an excuse to see me, but I should get going."

She ambles into the hallway, and it takes me a beat or two to realize she's leaving. That's the last thing I want. I tug on her arm and before she can take her next breath, my mouth crashes onto hers. She's so soft and smooth, and I get lost in the feel of her hot lips and willing tongue.

This time she doesn't cut things short and fully gives in. Together, we stumble until we're against the wall, and she grabs at my clothes.

Her lips stay pressed to mine as she says, "Walker, what are we doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" My lips curve upward against hers. "I want you," I murmur into her mouth.

Our kisses are wet and sloppy, sucking, and nipping at each other's mouths, and I can't taste enough of her, feel

enough of her.

My fingers bury into her mass of fire-red hair and she arches her neck, offering up the sweet column of flesh.

Her breaths are mere pants, and her fingers tease free my Armani embossed shirt buttons, one by one. “Yes, I want you too.”

My patience exhausted, I yank my shirttails from the waist of my pants and pull them in different directions, tearing the remaining buttons clean off. They pop and spring in all directions, some bouncing across the floor.

She half giggles, half squeals, ducking and squinting so as not to get a button in the eye. I chuckle and it morphs into a moan as her warm, soft fingers map the expanse of my chest. Her mouth latches onto my neck, teeth scraping along my skin.

“Eden, bedroom.” Even at that command, I’m unable to stop. My fingers pull her blouse free of her pants and wrap around the hem.

She stops kissing me, clawing at me. Heavy-lidded eyes traverse my body, slowly inching higher and higher until our gazes collide. “Walker, we really should move this to the bedroom... Alex.”

I nod. While my son’s a sound sleeper, I don’t want him walking in on us. For both his sake and Eden’s.

She dashes along the hall toward the staircase, her purse dangling from her shoulder, undeterred by the fact that she doesn’t know where my bedroom is, and I give chase. At the top of the stairs, I grab her hand, tuck her into my side, and lead the way to my room.

As we pass a closed door, I point and whisper to her that it’s Alex’s room. Once in my bedroom, she grins wickedly at me and whips her blouse over her head and shimmies her pants down her legs. *Sweet mother of—*

From the window, a pale milky shaft of moonlight slices through the darkness and it’s enough. Enough to get my fill of the miles of creamy skin.

Her lacy bra leaves little to the imagination, and her sweet mounds spill from the cups. A dusky shadow teases suggestively where her nipples are hidden. My hands itch, my cock twitches, and my mouth waters, wanting to suck those stiff peaks, to make her writhe underneath me.

I wanted to do that and more last night but stopped for both our sakes. Things were moving fast, and we'd only just agreed to change the rules of the game.

We needed time to digest the shift. I didn't want to rush into anything, not when we were no longer casual.

I wanted Eden to be sure. And if I'm being honest with myself, I needed time to be sure, though if I was going to try for something more than a fling, Eden would be the one.

My cock throbs as I drop my pants to the carpet and step out of them. I remove my shirt while leaving her side to grab a condom.

I never take my eyes off her. "You're beautiful."

A small, almost shy smile tugs at the corners of her lips but she doesn't move. She's only a foot away from me, and it might as well be miles.

"Come here." My voice is confident and commanding, and she does as she's told.

She steps into me, pushing onto her toes, and grazes my lips. Cinnamon and something uniquely Eden conquers my senses. Her slender fingers, featherlight, tremble as they sweep across my jaw and along the arch of my cheekbone.

One hand grips the curve of her hip, her skin hot and soft, and my other feels the weight of her breast through the flimsy fabric. She leans into me, and I lift her off the floor, my hands eating her skin as I hoist her up my body so she can wrap her legs around me.

I move us onto the mattress and place Eden on her back as I hover from above. My lips lower to her collarbone, and she moans as I plant a searing kiss against her heated skin. Once again, she wraps her legs around my middle.

My teeth sink into her sensitive flesh, and I bite down on the sweet spot at the base of her neck. She grabs my shoulders, thrusting her chest into mine, and shamelessly grinds her hot pussy, panties damp, against my stomach.

I pull back to stare at her. “Not just yet.”

She’s so fucking sexy, lying there, a flush high on her cheeks, pupils wide and mystical, and lips swollen from my kisses. I drink her in, realizing she’s the most addictive thing I’ve ever had.

The clasp of her bra sits in front, and I flick it open and lean forward for more of her. Unable to resist, my lips latch onto hers, knowing I’ll never tire of the taste of her.

Greedily, I admire her perfect tits, nipples tightening into perfect little buds as the cool air hits them. I groan, and my cock, thick and hard, throbs against the cotton of my briefs. I’m so fucking ready.

“I’m going to fuck out of you all the minutes, hours, and days you’ve consumed my thoughts since you dove into my car.”

She shivers and bites on her bottom lip while nodding in agreement.

“You’re the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.” I flick one of her nipples, itching to pull them into my mouth. “Ever tasted.”

She gasps, arching up, begging for more, and I roll one stiff peak between my thumb and forefinger, appreciating the uncontrolled groan of pleasure that flies from her open mouth.

“Fuck, yes, I’m going to make you feel so good.” Unable to wait another second, my lips latch onto a hard nipple.

Without tearing my mouth from her flesh, I hastily remove my boxers and rip at the cotton of her panties. She half growls, half giggles as I toss the ruined material onto the floor.

I pluck the condom from the mattress and tear the foil wrapper open, slowly rolling it on as she watches, licking her lips. The crown of my length aligns with her entrance and I press just the tip inside her.

Eden's eyes snag mine, and a shaky breath skitters past her parted lips. Then I grip her ass as the other hand hooks around her nape and I drive my hips into hers.

Holy shit.

One thrust and I still.

“Walker.” My name is a whisper on her swollen lips. “Move, please. I need more.” Her hands drag along my back, nails marking my heated flesh. “I need you.”

Once more, I push fully inside her and struggle to keep it together, to set a steady rhythm. I've got to hold on, relish every second inside Eden and make it good for her. Not lose myself too soon.

It has been years since a woman has made me feel this alive. This dangerous and impulsive. This out of control.

“You... Eden, you feel...you're extraordinary.” I pick up the pace, the pressure gathering at the base of my spine, and I squeeze her hip, listening to her ragged breaths.

She's close.

“Come for me, Eden.”

Her hand clutches my shoulder, and beads of sweat trickle down the side of my face. Eden cries out, muscles tightening and trembling. She mumbles something incoherent and bathes my face and neck in kisses.

“Hang on. Let's see if we can do that again. And this time, we come together.” It's a promise that I whisper in her ear.

Without giving her a chance to come down, I piston my hips into hers and bring her closer to me, chest to chest as I claim every inch of her that I touch.

I work my tongue, lips, and teeth along her neck and behind her ear while rolling my hips and thrusting deeper and faster into her. Before long, she's strung tight again, clinging to me, and then my muscles are steel and I hiss out a breath through a locked jaw. On a roar, I spill into her as she too falls off the cliff, her core spasming around me.

We lie like that, wrapped in each other for a few minutes before the fog clears from my stupor. I drop a soft kiss onto her shoulder and start to rise.

She shudders, and a lazy smile crawls across her lips. “That was...” she pants, holding me. “Walker...”

“Relax. I’ll be back.” With a peck to her cheek, I get up to remove the condom and come back with a warm washcloth to clean her up.

When I’m done, she rolls to one side of the bed and reaches for her clothes. “Thank you.”

“Hey, where are you going?”

The question isn’t needed. Eden wants to leave, and this should be a good thing. This way I don’t have to be the one to tell her to go.

This is for the best and yet, for the life of me I don’t know why I say, “Stay.”

I pull the sheets back and wait for her to accept the invitation as I internally stuff down any misgivings or warnings that this isn’t how you keep things low-key and less complicated.

“I should go home...and there’s Alex. If I stay, I’ll be asleep in no time.” Her rueful smile does nothing to dissuade me.

“He’s asleep, and in the morning, you’ll be gone before he gets up.” I stand up and pluck the blouse from her grasp to toss it across the room.

“Hey. That’s no fair.” She laughs and shakes her head.

I kiss her forehead and pull her into my side. “Stay. Sleep...or maybe take a nap. We might not be getting that much sleep.”

She arches a brow but doesn’t protest. “Okay, but let me text Suki and let her know where I am. My last text to her was in the limo when I thought I was going home.”

“Okay, I’ll get us some water and be back.” When I return, she’s naked in my bed, and I can’t get under the covers fast enough.

Though she intimated she was tired, we spend most of the night exploring each other with languid touches, lazy kisses, and intimate murmurs. And just before dawn, as slumber comes to snatch her away for the third or fourth time, our arms around each other, face-to-face, I can’t resist taking the chance.

This may only be the beginning of us, but life has taught me not to take things for granted. We could be together for months or only for this night. Either is possible, and I heave a shuddering breath.

I’m trying to keep an open mind and not search for the exit or for the inevitable end. And even as I struggle with that, I can’t let our time go to waste.

“Eden.” Her name is a whispered reverence in the barely inch of a gap between our mouths. “Are you ready for me again?”

EDEN

I saunter out of Walker's mega-sized bathroom that I could easily live in, showered and dressed sans underwear, and I come face-to-face with him. "Hey. Good Morning."

He smiles and sweeps a kiss over the hinge of my jaw, tongue darting out to taste my skin. Surprised and tickled, I quiver and let out a small laugh at his hum of appreciation.

"Good morning. Did you sleep okay?" No surprise, he's dressed in another tailored suit that fits him like second skin.

"Sleep? I don't recall getting much of that last night, though from looking at you, you'd never believe you got less sleep than I did." When I woke up this morning, he wasn't in the bed and his side was cold to the touch. "But no matter, I'll live. I was rejuvenated in other ways."

I waggle my eyebrows, remembering my multiple orgasms, and those more than make up for the bags under my eyes or the fatigue in my limbs. "Although, I do have a problem."

His amused expression morphs into something more somber. "What?"

"Thanks to you, caveman, I'm commando." I hold up my near-shredded panties, and his blue eyes darken with lust.

He prowls around me, heated gaze first fixed on my groin and then my ass. "It's a shame you aren't wearing a dress." From my back, his front presses into me, and his lips brush the

shell of my ear. “Easier access. But I promise to not let the pants stop me.”

Walker’s hand grasps my hip, but I’m quick and twirl away. “Hey, I can accept one piece of ruined clothing. But you’re not ripping my pants too.”

We dance around each other, close enough to touch but neither of us breaking this playful spell. Walker’s clearly entertained by my teasing even if everything I say is true.

“Besides, this girl needs a day off. As much as I enjoyed last night, I’m sore.” My cheeks heat at the admission.

He nods and cups my face. “Of course. I wish I could see you tonight.”

I open my mouth, ready to tease him that he clearly hasn’t listened to a word I’ve said if he thinks he’s getting some tonight, but he barrels on as if realizing how he might have sounded.

“Not for anything more than talking.” His lips brush my forehead. “Maybe for some kissing.” Then they’re on the tip of my nose. “And some snuggling.” His mouth is on mine but it’s quick.

“That all sounds divine. I’d be down for that.”

“Right? But I’ve got a business meeting I can’t miss, and you”—he kisses the tip of my nose again—“need some rest.”

“Okay.” I almost add, “I’ll miss you,” but wonder if that would be too much, too soon.

I can only imagine the scars left by Vanessa’s betrayal, and given he’s willing to give us a try, I don’t want to push. I can be patient. God, if last night is any indication of what this man has to offer, I can be *very* patient.

His direct question yanks me from my naughty musings. “What else is bothering you?”

A flash of surprise zaps me and our eyes collide. His are warm and caring, and I’m emboldened to share what, in the shower, I’d mulled over and quickly dismissed as something that could wait.

“We need to talk about business.” I twirl the ring on my finger nervously and stop. “From the beginning, you’ve said this is my show and you’re only here to guide me, and I’m cool with that. But now that we’re doing this,”—I motion my hand between us—“we might need more guidelines.”

“Like?”

“I think we should keep the two separate.” My fingers track the lines of his hand, now palm up in mine.

“Okay.” He wraps his fingers around my hand, and I look up at him, feeling the need to better explain things.

“I mean, the kiss yesterday in the office with Marv and Nadine only feet away...that can’t happen. I know this sounds like such a cliché, but we can’t mix business with pleasure.”

The desire to speak my truest fear, that I don’t want my reputation ruined before I even get started, lodges in my throat. People will talk, and where he’ll look magnanimous for helping me out with my career, I’ll look like an opportunity whore, sleeping with him to get a leg up.

A wry smirk springs to his lips and he quirks a brow. “I get it.”

“Do you? I mean, I want your help and expertise when it comes to my business, and I appreciate all you’ve already done...it’s just, if this is going to work—”

Suddenly, I’m tongue-tied and not sure if I’m being presumptuous. To him, it might look like I’m assuming more than he intends or if I’m mentioning this too soon, am I scaring him away?

“Eden.” Both his hands clasp mine and he leans forward, holding my gaze with the intensity of his. “It’s okay. I shouldn’t have kissed you in the office, you’re absolutely right, and I’ve no excuse for my poor judgement. I wanted to kiss you and selfishly did.” His soft lips brush mine. “See, I just did it again.”

Laughter bubbles up my throat and rids me of any lingering doubt or trepidation about having this conversation now.

He brushes away a wisp of hair that's stuck to my cheek, and his touch sparks a tingle along my spine, even going so far as to wake up my tender lady parts.

"But I promise not to kiss you again in a business setting. No mixing business with us." His lips find mine again. Kiss.

"Thank you." The melty, sated feeling he elicits within me makes it hard to pull away. "Okay, now I need to get going."

"Me too."

"What about Alex?" I had every intention of getting up with the sun but my body had other plans, and now I might be stuck in this room until he's gone.

The last thing I want is to run into his son and confuse the kid.

"Don't worry. He just left for school, so you're free to roam the house." Walker ambles toward the door and pauses to glance back at me. "Janice wants to know what you'd like for breakfast."

I pause in looking around the room for my purse and any last-minute things I might have forgotten. "Oh, that's nice of her, but I should just go."

"Have a good day, Mr. Drummond." It's as if the mere mention conjures her, and Janice slips to one side of the doorway to let the man of the house pass. "Good morning, Ms. Carpenter. What would you like for breakfast?"

"Oh, morning, Janice—" I'm prevented from saying much more when Walker reappears behind her.

"Eden." He looks at me across the large expanse of his plush, inviting bedroom. "Listen to Janice and have breakfast." He winks and then he's gone.

She clears her throat and nods. "We have eggs, bacon, egg whites, yogurt, oatmeal, cereal. I could make a granola parfait or pancakes, waffles."

"Ah, Janice, that's very kind of you, but I'm okay."

“Please. Mr. Drummond will be disappointed if we don’t take proper care of you. If none of what I’ve mentioned interests you, name it and I’m sure we have it.”

The pressure to give in is real. “Okay. Do you have coffee?” I pause, hoping that’s an easy fix, but after her nod, she continues to stare expectantly. “And I’ll have yogurt and toast, please.”

“Excellent. Come on then.”

I follow her out of the room. “Oh, and Janice, please call me Eden.”

Once in the kitchen, she sets a place for me at the table. The coffee is good as is the breakfast, and she even pours me a to-go cup of coffee for the road.

“Thanks so much, Janice. That was delicious.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good day, Eden.”

At the bottom of the staircase, I stop to take my phone off silent and snort at the latest text from my adorably pesky roommate.

Suki: Hello?

Where are you?

Are you coming home today or ever?

Or was the sex so good that you’ve willingly become his concubine?

Juggling the coffee and my phone, I quickly text a reply.

Me: Maybe.

Immediately, dots appear followed by her reply only seconds later.

Suki: Get home now. I want all the tea.

Me: Maybe. See you soon.

I drop my phone into my pocket and traipse up the stairs to Walker's room. It wasn't until I was in the kitchen that I remembered I left my purse upstairs.

My phone pings against my leg, and I laugh at what I can only imagine is Suki. My silence must be killing her. She always has to have the last word. I pull out the phone and I'm surprised to see it's a string of texts from August.

When we'd last talked about ACE, he asked me about my business, and I ended up spilling every ugly detail about Billie, and Greene's threats on her behalf, and how I suspected she'd stolen business ideas from others before.

Though I had no proof, August offered to nose around and see what he could find. His first couple of texts ignite a flare of hope.

August: You're right.

Billie has stolen from others

Then the flame dies as reality once again burns me.

August: But no one's talking

Now what?

Me: Thanks for looking into this. Maybe this is a sign. Leave things alone?

He's quick to respond.

August: No way. I don't like what she's doing. And I know you don't. We can't leave it like this.

His determination feeds the need for justice. At first, I wondered if I was making this too personal and that's why I was gunning for Billie. But August feels the same way, and he has the benefit of being objective. This is the boost I need to keep going even if, in the end, this is as far as we go.

Me: Can we meet to talk next steps? Tom might have some ideas.

I don't bother to mention including Brent. He has been MIA since the garden party and that's fine with me, though I wonder if August sees that his business partner is using him.

We make plans to meet later today, and I slide the phone back into my pocket and enter the bedroom. Not an item is out of place in the showcase-worthy room. The bed is made and carpet recently vacuumed. While I ate breakfast, someone tidied the room.

My purse lies on the table on the far side of the bed, and it might as well be the other side of the world for how big this room is. My entire apartment could fit in here and then some.

While its size is intimidating, everything about the room is inviting with its simple yet tasteful décor of creams, grays, silver, and glass. And the bed, last night I thought I was sleeping on a cloud.

Out of nowhere, the temptation to go back to sleep comes on strong and, still bone weary from the mind-blowing sex last night, I fall onto the freshly made bed. A contented sigh escapes my parted lips as my back hits the mattress and I giggle, wishing I could sleep the day away.

A woman's voice cuts through my childlike wonder. "Walker, I know what you're going to say..." She appears in the doorway as I bolt upright and immediately recognize her. "But I want to talk—"

No. No. No. This can't be happening.

I would recognize Vanessa Drummond anywhere, or is she now going by her maiden name, Newton?

During their split and the divorce proceedings, the media chronicled her life. From the daughter of a Canadian aristocrat to a global supermodel, then an adoring wife and mother, to an adulterer and now, a divorcée.

She nearly trips at the sight of me, and the color drains from her flawless face. "Oh. I didn't know... I thought Walker was in here."

At first, I attempt to stand but quickly realize I look like a stumbling clown, rolling around on a gigantic bed.

Miraculously, I find my voice and straighten my spine to make myself look more presentable, as if. “No, uh, Walker left a while ago.”

Gaining her composure, she gracefully smooths a hand down her hair, and her features tighten as she cautiously steps closer to the bed. “Who are you?”

My name is like an anvil driven through my tongue. Heavy, rusted, and unwanted.

I don’t want her to know who I am. I’d never even considered that I might meet Vanessa, and now I wish it could be a more innocuous and mundane meeting.

“I’m Eden Carpenter.” I scramble off the bed and straighten my hair and clothes, not wanting to look her way.

“And who are you to Walker?”

The very words I uttered to her ex-husband not too long ago spring to mind—friends—and while it isn’t false or a lie, it would be grossly inadequate.

But what else would I say?

Lover?

Business acquaintance? God, no, business associates don’t wind up in Walker’s bedroom.

The coffee curdles the yogurt in my stomach, and I hesitate to answer, knowing no matter what my response, I’ll never measure up to this woman or women like her. I want to vanish. Why didn’t I refuse breakfast? Or better yet, leave after dinner.

As outstanding and unforgettable as last night was, I could have avoided this, and when Walker finds out I was in his room and met Vanessa like this... What will he think?

Willing courage into my body and voice, I face her, head held high. “I’m Walker’s friend.”

She opens her mouth as if to say something, but she never gets the chance. Just then, Alex walks into the room with his backpack slung over one shoulder. He’s adorable in dress shorts and a white, short-sleeved button-down shirt.

“Eden, what are you doing in my dad’s room?” He cocks his head to one side, staring both perplexed and expectant.

“Hey, Alex.” His name comes out like a breathy whoosh of air, and Vanessa sharply clears her throat as she cuts me with an annihilating glare.

WALKER

“*W*hat did Vanessa say?” I lean against the edge of my desk, somewhat annoyed though I’m not too sure who with.

Eden, who stands in the middle of my office, looking anywhere but at me, myself for bringing Eden into my bed and my life, or my ex-wife for sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong.

When Eden’s text came in this morning, I was in a meeting and didn’t see it until hours after. By then, I couldn’t get ahold of her to find out what the hell was wrong. Her message was cryptic. She’d met Vanessa and something had happened.

I didn’t need to deal with this shit on top of everything else.

Someone knocks on the door and Trina peers in. “Mr. Drummond, so sorry to interrupt.”

I don’t usually snap at my assistant, but it takes everything not to when she was given strict instructions not to disturb us. “What is it, Trina?”

My day consisted of back-to-back meetings, and though it’s almost five in the afternoon, I’m supposed to be on a call right now, followed by another meeting that will go well into the evening.

“I’ve asked them to go on without you, but Jerry’s insisting they wait for you.”

“Then postpone the meeting.” I clench my jaw. “I can’t say when I’ll be free, so if it’s easier, tell them I won’t be attending.”

“No, it’s—” Eden finally speaks, but my glower cuts her off.

She isn’t leaving until we get to the bottom of whatever this is, and clearly, she understands this when my one look causes her to clamp her mouth shut.

From the doorway, Trina observes us, and only when I stab her with an intense stare of my own does she snap to attention and nod. “Very well, sir.”

Once we’re alone again, I wander over to Eden and take her hand, waiting for her to look at me. “Hey, talk to me. I can’t help if I don’t know what it is.”

“I’m not looking for you to fix things. Vanessa didn’t say anything.”

“But?”

So much worry or is it something more—shame?—clouds her usually clear, vibrant green eyes.

“When she asked me who I was to you, I told her that I was your friend.”

“Okay.” My chest tightens, uncertain how I feel about any of this, and she gives me a look that says the word “friend” conveys a lot more meaning than its dictionary definition.

Vanessa isn’t a fool, and finding Eden, or any woman other than my house staff, in my bedroom wouldn’t make it hard for her to figure out what might be going on. And I don’t need my ex-wife interrogating me or anyone else for that matter. This is why a relationship is a bad idea.

“But when she finds out we’ve also been working together... When others find out too.” Her mouth twists into what looks like a painful frown. “I don’t want them thinking I slept with you to get my business off the ground.”

The utter despair in her gaze melts some of my ire, and I slide a hand behind her neck to draw her near.

“Eden, no. I’ve made it clear and will continue to do so to anyone and everyone that your business has nothing to do with how I feel about you. Those are two separate things.”

I haven’t had to defend her or impress that fact on many, more because no one dare hint otherwise. Most know I’m a businessman, first and foremost, and my dick doesn’t drive business decisions.

No matter my interest in someone, I wouldn’t support Eden or help her if I didn’t believe in her business venture.

“But people are going to think what they want. You can’t stop that no matter what you say. And sometimes, saying it makes them think it even more. I just—”

She goes to pull away, but I stop her by gently squeezing her neck reassuringly. “True, but who cares what others think?” I bend my head to look her in the eyes, hoping to impress upon her what matters most. “You and I know the truth. And when you’re running your business and it’s a success,”—I pause to give her time to get there, see the picture I’m painting—“and it will be a success, of this I’m sure, then who’ll show them what’s what?”

Her wan smile does nothing to loosen the fist-sized ball lodged in my chest. “I suppose. I just don’t want to create a scandal or trouble for you.”

I chuckle at how concerned she is likely based on my history with Vanessa and the media chaos she created. Just the fact that she cares eases my concerns.

My arms wrap around her, and I bring her in for a hug. “Eden, you couldn’t if you tried. Now, have you eaten? I need dinner and was thinking Indian. You game?”

“What? Walker, you’re busy. You’ve got a room full of people waiting for you, a call you should be on.”

“Jerry should have handled it, and I’ll be telling him as much later.” The fingers of my free hand curve and tighten at how angry that man makes me.

He’s my second in charge and supposed to make my life easier, but time and time again, he does the exact opposite.

How am I to branch out, find time for other business ventures, when the person I depend on to keep Zenith Point running smoothly needs me to hold his hand?

More and more, Zuri, my chief operating officer, is looking like a better bet to be my backup. Fuck tenure. She's proving to be more capable all around.

"I'm starving and now that you're here, you should join me." I lightly kiss her before I go to my desk and call Trina with our dinner order.

After that's done, I slide onto the couch next to Eden, who still looks worried as she picks nervously at a hangnail.

"Listen, what Vanessa did today—it isn't the first time." I slide my arm around her shoulders, and while I'm trying to bring her closer, she pulls back.

"What? She's found other women in your bedroom?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "Ah, no. What I mean is, when we separated, she'd come back to the house after picking up Alex under some false pretense of talking to me. She'd walk around my home like she owned it. We've argued about this many times, and for a while, she stopped. I don't know what today was about because I haven't heard from her."

"And Alex? What are you going to say to him?"

I tense slightly, wondering what garbage my ex might be putting into his head. "I don't see him again until next week, but I'll talk to him. He likes you and like you said, I'll tell him we're friends. I don't want to lie to my son, but it's too soon and he's too young to understand..."

I don't add that this is also too new to be making any kind of declaration to my son. Or to myself, for that matter.

"Hey, not that you're asking, but I agree. And I'm so sorry that he saw me. I'm just glad I was dressed." She covers her face with her hands.

"Me too. Though I must say, I think you're wearing far too many clothes right now."

Dinner arrives not long after, and we have a good time talking and laughing, and toward the end of the meal, we wind up discussing the two VC firms she met with yesterday.

She dumps an empty takeout container in the brown paper bag. “I’m leaning toward going with Endeavor. What do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” I hand her another carton for the bag. “Why Endeavor?”

“It’s going to sound silly.” She blushes and casts her eyes to the carpet.

“Try me.”

“Both firms are highly rated, their clients rave about them, and when it comes to their skills and services, it’s really hard to choose. There isn’t much difference.”

I nod and encourage her to go on. Her assessment is correct.

“And this is where you might roll your eyes at me. I clicked better with Marv and Nadine. I know it sounds silly, and how irresponsible would it be of me to make a huge decision like this based on the way I felt about the people I met yesterday, but that’s what it comes down to for me.”

“Eden, it isn’t silly at all. You’re absolutely right. Half the time, the business decisions you’ll make will be gut-based. You might not be able to accurately explain why, but you just know.”

She opens her mouth to say something when her phone pings on the coffee table. We both look at the screen, and from this distance, I can only make out who the text message is from. August.

“Oh, I have to read this.” She snatches her phone from the table.

I try not to stew in doubt and distrust. She’s only working with him. She’s told me as much, but when she squeals at the screen as her fingers fly over the keyboard, I lose any modicum of disinterest.

“What’s got you all excited? The text is from August, right?”

I don’t lie.

I saw his name on her phone and I won’t play coy to see if she’ll be honest with me or not. Although the idea of testing her does sound appealing.

Dammit, what am I doing?

I want, no, deserve answers.

“Mm-hmm.” She nods, still engaged in her online conversation with him.

She’s given me no reason to question her, and before Vanessa, I wasn’t a jealous man. Still, I’ve been burned and know what can happen between two people, married or not, when there’s even an inkling of attraction. I wouldn’t be surprised if August or Tom or both of them are attracted to Eden.

I’m not implying she’s like Vanessa. From what I’ve seen so far, they are nothing alike, but I don’t know her well enough to say if she’d cheat or not. I’m being cautious. Another reason why relationships aren’t worth the hassle. Who needs self-doubt and distrust?

“Sorry about that.” She places the phone facedown on the table. “Yes, that was August.”

“Work?”

She wrings her hands together. “Kind of. Well, not really.”

On my way to the desk, I spin to face her. “What does that mean?”

“We’re...um, we’re on a crusade for justice.” Her nervous laughter matches the jittery vibe rolling off her. “But it’s most probably futile or worse, dangerous.”

While I should be placated that she didn’t admit to screwing him or something like that, I’m not. “Okay, now you’re worrying me. What are you talking about?”

“I ended up telling him about my former boss and what she tried to do. I think she’s done it before.”

“Done what before?”

“Stolen someone else’s idea.”

“And you have proof of this?”

“No, but—”

I hold up a hand to stop her from venturing any further. “Hang on a second, those are strong accusations to be throwing around without proof. Does your former boss know you think this?”

“Yes. She had her henchman show up at my home to threaten me.”

Alarm bolts up my spine. “What? When?”

“It doesn’t matter. I handled it.” She carelessly waves it off as if threats are no different from brushing your teeth, an everyday occurrence for her. “But the way he reacted when I suggested I knew they’d done it before...there’s something there.”

I march over to her, grip her biceps and haul her to her feet. “Eden, how were things left? Have they tried anything? Done anything to hurt you?”

“No.” She’s dismissive. “They told me to back off, go away. But I don’t want to.”

The text—why I started this conversation in the first place—remains at the forefront of my mind. “And how does August fit in to all of this?”

“We’re just looking into things to see if there’s any proof. He might have found someone willing to talk.”

“I don’t think you should pursue this. How can you trust whatever this person says? They may have an ax to grind with your employer, and it could all blow up in your face. Like you said, it could be dangerous. Your boss, she’s well-established, right? She could come after you.”

I don't stick my neck out for just anyone, and this situation spells a disaster waiting to happen, but I can't stay idle and let Eden take this risk. Not when she's so close to having all her dreams come true.

"No. I'm tired of saying nothing." She steps back, clearly frustrated though it's hard to say if it's with me, herself, or all of it. "My silence lets people like them get away with this kind of thing, time and time again."

If I knew who we were dealing with, I could maybe make a difference. If I recognized the firm name or knew the players, I might even have some evidence or leverage. I've got lawyers who deal with this kind of thing all the time.

"Who did you work for? What's your boss's name? The company name?"

Once more, Trina raps on the door and sticks her head in. "Mr. Drummond, five minutes. Most have arrived and are waiting in the Billings room."

"Thanks, Trina."

My assistant's gaze tracks how close Eden and I are before focusing on me. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, thank you, and not to worry, I'll be on time." I offer a tight smile and wait for her to close the door.

Eden places a hand on my chest and leans in. The heat of her body seeps into me, and I wish I could blow off this meeting to be with her. To finish this conversation and more.

She pushes onto the tips of her toes, lips inches from mine. "I should go. I hope your meeting goes well and it doesn't end too late." Her mouth crushes mine, and where I expect it to be quick and chaste, it isn't.

The shock of her tongue darting between my lips, body grinding shamelessly against mine, causes my hand to wrap around her throat. I need the control to ground us.

Her heart beats a steady pulse under my palm, and I inhale deeply, trying to curb my concern for her, for now, and my

growing concern for how easily, how quickly, she's gotten under my skin.

She breaks the kiss but keeps her head down, and I don't like it. "We should talk more about this. Maybe I can help."

Finally, she tilts her head back, green eyes finding mine. "Thank you, but you've done more than enough. This is something I have to do on my own."

Eden leaves, and I gather my things for the meeting. My phone rings on my way to the conference room and Sybil's name flashes on the screen. I let it go to voicemail, not in the mood to hear how upset she is with my disappearing act last night.

But maybe now is a good time. I've got a meeting and can cut this conversation short. "Yes."

"Hello, Walker. I'm glad you picked up."

"Keep it brief; I'm going into a meeting in two minutes."

"Somebody's in a bad mood."

"Sybil, if you called to be a pain in my ass, not interested."

"All right. I wanted to make sure you were still on for next Thursday night with Sheffield."

"I'm no longer interested in dinner or hearing what he has to say. You'll have to go it alone, or cancel. I'll leave that up to you."

"Really? Why?"

Frustrated with her questions, now seems as good a time as any to end things. But am I being rash? Should I keep this arrangement going? After all, it's only business, and what if things with Eden don't work out?

"Walker? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

Her frustrated sigh tells me she wants more, and I'm torn—unlike my usual decisive self—between ending our arrangement or not.

Eden's new to my life, and here I am, in a short period of time, disrupting my carefully crafted lifestyle. I've already begun to change things to make room for her.

Is it a mistake?

Should I keep things as is because when Eden's gone—my chest squeezes at the thought though it's more than likely inevitable—where will that leave me? Like before, I'll have to rebuild. I like my life the way it is.

“Walker, aren't you going to answer me?”

I'm drawn back to our phone call. The only other commitment I have to Sybil is the opera next month. I could do the polite thing and take her. Keep things as they are, just in case, but what would Eden think? I know what I'd think if I were in her shoes.

“Yes. About *La Bohème*, that's also a no. Our agreement's over.”

Through a mutual business partner, we'd both received two tickets to opening night of Puccini's *La Bohème* and decided to go together. Neither of us has relinquished our plus-one tickets yet, and there's still time for her to find someone else. Maybe I'll bring Eden. This would be a good way to introduce her to my crowd, or maybe I'll go alone.

Sybil's shrill question pierces my thoughts. “What?”

“Don't make this difficult. We agreed when the time came and either of us wanted to end our agreement, all we needed to do was to say so. No questions asked.”

There's a long pause on her end of the line, and finally she releases an exasperated sigh. “You've met someone, haven't you. Who is she?”

“Good night, Sybil.”

“Wait. Okay, fine. Don't tell me. But are you still interested in my latest business venture, or are you ditching me on that too?”

“I'm still in. Send me what we discussed. Good night.”

EDEN

Cool air feathers my bare legs as the covers rise above me, and I tremble at the nearness of him. His broad, chiseled body looms over me while he crawls in between my legs. One of his large hands wraps around my ankle to spread my thighs apart.

A whoosh of air hits my sensitive spots, and I squirm, unfurling my limbs and trying to work out what's real and what's part of my imagination.

It's been nearly two weeks since Vanessa found me in Walker's bedroom, and while I haven't seen him as much as I'd like, things are progressing. He's busy pursuing other business interests while running his media corporation, whereas I'm learning so much working with Endeavor and so grateful for their guidance and support.

Warm lips kiss their way up my body, far too soft, reverent, and real to be any imagining. I hold my breath, trying not to wriggle, when he pauses at my belly button, tongue flicking at the delicate edges of my flesh.

My head pushes into the pillow, lips parting to release a moan. "Walker."

He murmurs against my skin, urgent fingers digging into my hips, and his hot mouth trails lower on my stomach, bestowing open-mouthed kisses on my body until he's nestled between my thighs.

Whenever his mouth is on me, I quake, and now my hips buck and fingers curl into his thick, damp hair. He groans and

exhales heated breath over where I'm most sensitive, as his scruff rasps my inner thigh. I jerk, writhing and aching for what only he has to give. This man.

After meeting his ex, it took a bit of coaxing to get me back to his house, but eventually I relented, not able to stay away from him.

I tug on his head of hair, and my intense reactions must feed him, encourage him, because he doesn't let up as my body tenses and spasms. I'm having a hard time breathing, but I'm totally all right with dying like this. My name is forgotten, yet his is tattooed on my tongue, worshipped between my pleasurable moans and monosyllabic whimpers.

A sweet groundswell of pleasure rips through me.

My attraction for this man—and even that doesn't adequately describe what I feel—is so intense it physically hurts, pulling wildly at not only my heart but at every part of who I am.

Loose-limbed and beyond satisfied, I lie there as his honeyed rumbles of laughter drift up from beneath the covers where his head rests on my lower stomach.

He tosses back the sheet, crystalline blue eyes peering up at me. "Damn, you taste so good."

Sublimely bemused, I watch him with heavy eyes as he prowls on hands and knees up the length of my body to brush wet, tart lips against mine. The taste and scent of me clings to him.

"Good morning," I drawl, fingers winding into his locks.

"That it is." His satisfied smile mirrors mine. "Time to get up."

Walker's already worked out and most probably had breakfast by now, and it's barely seven in the morning. We tried the whole working out together thing. Once. But things didn't go so well.

He teaches self-defense classes just for kicks, and despite him being an excellent teacher, I resented the crack of dawn

start time. Unlike me, he's an early bird, where I'm a night owl. And unlike me, the man only needs four or five hours of sleep a night. I'd be a grizzly bear if I tried that. How he does it, I don't know. And he's twelve years my senior. I'm a slacker compared to him.

He whips off the cotton sheets, exposing my naked flesh along with his, and bounds from the bed, tugging at my foot to get me up. I laugh, flipping onto my side, and watch him.

My head and heart cartwheel at the sight of him in his naked glory as he saunters to the bathroom. He's in better shape than men half his age, not overmuscled but lean and fit.

His back is a magnificent map of hard planes and angles, muscles flexing and bunching with each step. And his backside, damn, his ass is so firm I could bounce a quarter off it.

He disappears into the large bathroom, and my gaze darts to his closed bedroom door as if needing to confirm it's locked. Alex didn't sleep over last night, so I don't have to worry about him walking in, and all is fine between us. Walker told me his talk with his son went well and since then, Alex hasn't given it a second thought.

And he assures me that Vanessa knows what the consequences are for venturing upstairs, though I'm still anxious she'll make another appearance.

His head peeks around the corner, eyes shimmering. "Get out of bed. I promise to make it worth your while."

Like a thief in the night, I soundlessly slip from the bed and join him in the shower. If there's more of what he just dished out, I want some. And I'm also feeling mighty generous myself and want to show him my appreciation.

I'm having the best sex of my life. Before Walker, I had no complaints with the men in my life. A girl can't miss what she's never had. But now?

He's wrecked me for all other men.

Anything or anyone before Walker pales in comparison, and I cringe at some things I used to think were enjoyable. In

reality, they were okay at best. And I mean anything—dinner, just having a coffee or hanging out, sex—nothing compares to when I’m with him.

Once out of the shower and dressed, I’m slipping on a low kitten heel when my phone rings on the dresser.

Walker’s closer and peers down at the screen while knotting his tie. “It’s your mother.”

He hands me the phone. “Thanks.” I answer the call. “Hey, Mom. Everything okay? Isn’t it early for you?” I try to curb my concern.

“It isn’t that early, and while I may no longer work, I don’t while away my day in bed.” Her sarcasm draws a snort from my mouth.

“Glad to hear it. Let’s start over. Hi, Mom.”

Walker arches a brow and tips up one side of his mouth. He hasn’t talked to my mother but each of them knows about the other, and this is the first time he’s had the pleasure of hearing my half of our mother-daughter conversations.

“Good morning, Eden. I was only calling to hear your voice.” With the softening of her tone, my heart does too, and I drop to the edge of the bed, my other shoe forgotten.

“It’s good to hear your voice too.” Though we speak several times a week and we last spoke two days ago, my sentiment is true.

“So how are things with Walker?”

I sigh, pushing to my feet and shaking away her current one-track mind, and slide my foot into the other shoe. I made the mistake of telling her we were seeing each other, and now she calls more than usual, always wanting to talk about the man in my life.

“He’s fine.”

Walker chuckles from inside his closet, clearly listening to my every word.

“Fine? What kind of response is that? Suki tells me that she never sees you anymore. Are you living with him?”

I snort and make a mental note to wring Suki’s neck. Snitch.

“Please don’t harass me before I’ve even had my coffee.” I grab my purse, and with Walker already out the bedroom door, we wander downstairs.

“Fine. Fine. You never let me have any fun.” Mom’s mock grumbling brings a smile to my face.

“Hey, you sound real chipper for someone who’s an hour behind, and who, I’m willing to bet, hasn’t had her coffee either.”

“Well, I should be. Only a few more days and then I’m down east.”

“Wow, you’re right. I still have to figure out when I’m going to come and book my tickets. I’ll talk to Suki tonight.”

“Yes, you do. Why don’t you invite Walker?”

Midstep, I pause with one foot in the air, less surprised at her suggestion and more about the timing. Of course my mother wants to meet the man I’m falling for. We may live in different cities and time zones, but she knows me, and no matter how hard I try to cover and play off this thing with Walker as no big deal, I’m not fooling her.

Yet what would Walker think? We’ve only been doing our thing for a couple of weeks, and at times, I sense he deliberately keeps his distance.

And there’s the fact that I can hardly picture him in the quaint beach cottage we’ve rented for years. The thought alone unleashes a medley of competing sensations.

“I’m not sure he can get away.”

The man in question stalls on the final step and turns to look up the stairs at me, expression perplexed or maybe all knowing or disapproving? But of what?

That I'm so quick to dismiss the possibility of the two meeting? Or that I'm speaking for him. Am I worried he won't like my mom? Or that she won't like him? No, that isn't it. Or that he won't have a good time? No. Our vacation may be low-key, but I always have a good time there and anytime I'm with my mother.

Mom cuts through the clutter in my mind. "How do you know? You haven't even asked him."

"He's very busy," I say but stop when Walker growls and slowly climbs the few stairs to me.

He whispers, "What are you talking about? What can't I get away for?"

I swallow with difficulty, feeling chided like a child caught in a lie. "I'll ask him and let you know."

He backs off, shoulders relaxing as he takes a few steps down, and I feel like I can breathe again.

"Good." Mom's smile shines through the distance in that one word.

I should leave things like this. I've satisfied her, and hopefully, Walker won't be too upset, but no, I don't. I'm driven by the need to lower her expectations.

"Mom...don't get your hopes up."

At the base of the stairs, he waits for me to wrap up the call while tapping his fingers impatiently on the banister. My mom and I talk for a couple of minutes more about how things are going with Endeavor, and the second I end the call, he pounces.

"What was that about?"

"Uh, my mom's vacation in PEI. I told you about it."

"Yes. You'll visit with her for a week or two. But that wasn't what I meant. The two of you were talking about me, and you said I couldn't get away."

A tickling sensation scurries along my arm. I don't want to have this conversation but owe him an explanation. The truth.

“She wanted to invite you to come with me. To meet her. But I know—”

He crosses his arms over his chest and cuts me off. “And you don’t want me to?”

“It’s not that I don’t want you to come. It’s that I know you’re busy and we’ve only just started to see each other. We’re in the early stages...”

“Yes, and?” Why is he making this so difficult? He’s the one with commitment and trust issues. If he wants to come, he’s more than welcome.

I ignore the odd flip my stomach makes at the idea of Walker with me in Summerside. We could have so much fun.

His intense stare, unwavering and questioning, forces me to concentrate on the here and now. “I didn’t want you to freak out or scare you away by moving too fast. I mean, meeting the parents is kind of a big deal.”

“It is.”

“And?”

“You’re right; I’m not coming.” Suddenly there’s a chill in the air.

“Wow, you don’t have to say it like that.” I inwardly cringe at my defensive tone.

Pensive, he arches a brow yet his features remain unreadable. “Eden, every summer, I get Alex for two weeks. This year, we’ve yet to settle on dates, but it’s coming up and we’ll likely go to BC or the Eastern Townships—”

“I get it.” Irritation or hurt or a whole host of negative emotions perch, heavy and overbearing, on my chest.

We stand like that, silently staring at each other for a few beats until he breaks the weird uneasiness between us. Or rather abandons it. He nods, then continues to the kitchen, leaving me there to stew.

My chest still pinches at his quick and aloof words even though I’d anticipated his response. I suppose, secretly, a small

part of me had wished he'd at least consider the invitation. He didn't. Not even a breath of hesitation when he nixed the possibility.

Then why was he irritated with me in the first place for answering my mother the way I did? He had no intention of going with me.



“*T*hanks, Tony.” I dash through the glass doors of Zenith Point, glad to be out of the rain.

Outside with the umbrella securely above him, Tony races back to the idling car, and I wipe a few raindrops from my cheek.

It's been a week since Walker and I talked about PEI, which was the last time I slept at his house or saw him. We text and have talked a few times, but there's been no physical contact, and I ache to see him.

Desperate to defrost the chill between us, on more than one occasion during our late-night calls, I've offered to come to his place. While not ideal, as our coming together would be more about sex than anything else, I can't fix whatever this is if he won't let me in.

Even at that, I failed. He turned me down, professing fatigue or that he still had too much work to do. Today, I'm hoping to change that.

The day is almost over and we, at Endeavor, had a last-minute meeting cancellation with a prospective vendor. This left me with a full hour free before I promised Suki I'd be home for dinner, so I called Trina.

“Hi, it's Eden. Does Walker have ten or fifteen minutes to spare in the next hour? I want to come by and see him.”

There's a long pause on the other end of the line, but I can hear her breathing. Finally she releases a long drawn out huff. “You know, this isn't an easy ask. His schedule is insane.”

She's preaching to the choir. I'm more than aware of how busy he is, and this is why I'm willing to beg for seconds of his time. Next week is supposedly better for him, and he invited me to the opera so there is a promise of getting some time with him. But I can't wait until then.

"Please. I'll take whatever you can give me."

"You can have ten but that's it. Come now and you'll have to wait."

Trina greets me at the security desk. "Eden." She doesn't bother with small talk, and once on the floor to Zenith's executive offices, she points to an open door. "Stay in here. He'll be here soon."

It isn't long before Walker's voice, coming from the hall, snags my attention and my entire body comes alive. I straighten and stare at the doorway, only seconds from finally getting time with him.

He walks right by the conference room, head down and angled away from me, deep in conversation. Given his height and the breadth of his formidable frame, I'm unable to make out the person he's talking to on his other side.

I spring from the leather chair, but it takes far too long for me to slip on my shoes, and when I dart through the doorway, he's closer to the door than to where I am.

The woman next to him is petite and weirdly familiar in a disturbing, something is terribly wrong, kind of way. My lips part, his name on my tongue, when I nearly choke at the man's voice behind me.

"Eden Carpenter, what are you doing here?"

My head snaps around, and Greene stands less than a foot from me. He sneers down at me like I'm a pile of shit he's just stepped in. Flustered, it takes far too long for my mind to catch up, and I'm slow to ask my own question.

"Greene, what are you doing here?"

"Uh-uh, me first." He closes in on my personal space, and bile rises in my throat.

Am I in an alternate universe? Stuck in a nightmare? Why is Greene at Zenith Point? And if so, Billie's got to be behind this.

I'm struck by lightning. My muscles spasm at how eerily familiar the woman next to Walker was.

It's Billie Ivers.

I glance in their direction and watch them disappear into the elevator. I'm too late to go after them.

Greene rudely snaps his fingers in front of my face as if I'm his pet or puppet and will react on command. "Earth to Eden, what's wrong with you?"

He waves his hand in front of my eyes, and I smack it away.

"Stop that. Um...was that Billie talking to Walker?"

Why am I bothering to ask—of course it was. The exploding collision of my worlds nearly brings me to my knees. The corner of his mouth ticks up into a smile. No, not a smile, more a wicked grin.

"Yup, and don't even think about it. You might as well go home now. Those two go way back. They even dated. If you think you can tell him lies about her, about Ivation, and he'll print them—think again."

I shake my head as his words sink in. He thinks I'm here about Ivation and he's so off base. I never considered talking to any of Walker's reporters about Billie. Since that time in his office over Indian food, I'd refused to talk about it with him. I asked him to respect my wishes and let me do it on my own.

Did I get it all wrong?

Was Walker playing me all along? Did he know Billie was my ex-boss, the one who stole my portfolio, and is he working with her?

Oh my God, is that why he slept with me? To keep me from going to the media?

EDEN

*T*rina spares me from having to deal with Greene. “Eden, I never got a chance to tell him you were here.” She looks genuinely distraught and a little puzzled to see the smarmy asshole standing so close to me. “And now he’s gone to his next meeting.”

I back away from both of them and mutter something about it being okay.

It isn’t.

I’m not sure if anything will ever be okay again.

In a daze, I stumble into the elevator, but I’m too slow to hit the close button. Greene slides in next to me, deliberately bumping his shoulder against mine. The hit knocks me off-kilter, and a harsh, far from funny, snigger seeps from his thin lips.

By the time I figure out his intimidation is about to get physical, it’s too late. He spins to face me as his hand shoots out to grip my face.

The full weight of his body pins me to the elevator wall. “Why the fuck are you here?”

It’s hard to move my jaw with my face in his vise-like grip as his fingers pinch into my cheeks.

“You’re hurting me. Let me go.”

His top lip curls like the body of a snake, and with one final squeeze, he shoves my face and releases his hold. The

weight of him is gone, but my relief is fleeting. The jarring force of his push causes my head to sway like an uncontrollable pendulum.

My neck rolls from side to side and only the smack of my head against the metal wall stops the momentum. Cheeks stinging, I blink away any disorientation with only one thought. I must put as much distance between us as is possible in this tin can.

I scurry into the corner opposite him, and I immediately realize my mistake. I shouldn't have moved.

His cruel expression darkens. "Billie told you to stay away or else she'll destroy you."

He lunges for me and I scream, and thankfully, our bodies never collide. He fakes me out, in my face and gone without a touch. Greene thoroughly enjoys my discomfort based on his wide, almost ghoulish, grin.

The back of my hand wipes at my nose. "I wasn't here to talk to Drummond about Ivation or Billie."

I don't owe him anything and certainly not the truth, but I've got to give him something. Maybe enough for him not to mention this to Billie, and in the short term, enough to keep him calm until the doors spring open and I can get out of here.

"Then why were you here?"

He can't know I have a relationship with Walker, so I lie. "I had an interview with Zenith Point."

If he thought about it, he might question why I'd be meeting with the CEO. I'm not that important or impressive, but I don't give him a chance and ramble about switching careers, having no intention of ever stepping foot inside or thinking about Ivation.

The elevator slows and we've got only two more floors.

"So leave me the fuck alone, or I'll go to the police. Tell them you're harassing me. Stalking me."

He scoffs but backs up, maybe suddenly realizing how out of line his behavior is and just how close he is to me—how his

actions and his words could be perceived as threatening.

Yeah, not likely. Greene isn't the kind of person to be decent or considerate of others.

Now on the ground floor, I bolt as soon as the elevator doors slide open, not wanting him to see me getting into a limo. By the time I reach the car, I'm soaked and bang on the window for Tony to open the door. The poor guy practically launches himself from the vehicle.

"Eden, I figured you'd be longer." He curls his body around mine as close as he can get without being inappropriate, trying to shelter me from the rain. He opens the car door and guides me inside. "You're wet. You should've called me."

I wait until he's behind the wheel and then our eyes meet in the rearview mirror. "It's okay, Tony. Things were kind of sudden. Could you please take me home?"

"Of course. Did you see Mr. Drummond?"

At the mention of Walker's name, a lump forms in my throat, and I blink rapidly, trying to keep the prick at the back of my eyes from morphing into tears. I manage to shake my head and then look away, hoping he gets the hint and leaves me alone.

On the drive home, I ask him to pull over at a nearby grocery store, and I run in to get reinforcements. Suki and I usually stock comfort foods in the house, but I haven't craved any in a while, so I don't know what's at home and I don't want to go without.

The final steps up the walk to my home seem to take forever. Fortunately, the rain has stopped, and I insist Tony stay in the car, but I feel his eyes on me as I unlock the front door with only thoughts of a hot bath, a tub of Ben and Jerry's, and a good cry.

I have to talk to Walker but not tonight. We'd already talked earlier today, and he might text...but who knows. I

thought I knew him, but now I'm not so sure. He has been pulling away, and maybe Billie is the reason why. I'll deal with him tomorrow.

Once inside my home, I find Tom, August, and Suki lounging in the living room. They all wave, smile, and offer hellos, and I should be grateful, maybe even happy for their cheer and warm welcome, but the tears rush the corners of my eyes.

“Hey, you're all wet.” Suki prances toward the kitchen. “And you're in luck. I made miso soup. Let me get you a bowl.”

I nod and shuffle to my room, but Tom stops me to take the bag with the ice cream from me.

“Freezer,” I mumble. “I want to get out of these wet clothes and have a quick shower. I'll be fifteen minutes.”

Under the falling hot water, I cry and I'm not really sure why. My chest aches, and every time I think about Walker, I want to scream and wail, but I also want to call him and demand answers.

On the other hand, we haven't been together long, and I went into this knowing he didn't trust easily. And I suppose, deep down, a part of me—albeit small—must have believed we'd never last.

How could we? He doesn't want a relationship, and I don't fit into his world.

Greene's horrible words play back in my mind.

They dated.

I won't even allow myself to go there, to think of Walker and Billie, and I know rationally this would have been before he met me. Maybe even before Vanessa, though I have a sinking feeling Billie was one of his flings.

Oh God, I'm going to be sick.

Once dried off with a towel wrapped around my pinkened skin, against everything I said I wouldn't do, I foolishly type Ivers and Drummond into the search bar.

In the past, I've come across details about Walker's life while reading the business news or occasionally on a celebrity gossip site, but I've never actively sought out personal information about him. Not until now.

Instantaneously, a myriad of images of Walker and Billie at this gala or that dinner or this fundraiser or that board dinner fill my screen. My vision blurs, tears flood my eyes, and it's next to impossible to make out the images let alone the words.

There's a small rap on the door, followed by Suki's inquisition. "Are you okay in there?"

I can't form the words for fear that my voice will crack, and I close the search window on my phone.

"I'm making sure you didn't drown," she says as she taps on the wood, and I still don't say anything. "Eden...you okay?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat and force strength into my voice. "I'm okay. Just give me a sec to get some of the excess water out of my hair."

My wet hair's already braided and out of the way, but she doesn't know that and it'll give me a few more minutes to compose myself.

The three of them let me eat in silence, and I wonder if they sense this is what I need.

"Mmm, I love your miso soup." I drain the bowl and wipe my mouth with a napkin.

Tom sits next to me at the table, nodding, and spoons mouthfuls of the warm broth into his mouth.

"It's so good." When he heard there was more soup, more than enough for seconds—he'd already had some—he asked for another bowl.

Suki laughs and ruffles his blond head of hair when she swoops in to grab our empty bowls. She nudges my shoulder, and I jump. For a brief second I'm back in the elevator with Greene in my face.

"Are you okay?" Her voice is low and filled with concern.

“Yeah, just had a huge shock tonight.” I’m not sure which shock I’m referring to.

First, there’s running into Greene, then finding out that Billie and Walker know each other, and finally, Greene’s psycho actions. I wonder if he would’ve done what he did if he knew how close I was to Walker?

Or maybe he already knows?

Oh, God, if that’s the case, Walker and I are over. And suddenly the distance this past week feels like a blessing. It’ll make ending this that much easier. I’ve already got a head start in cutting myself off from him.

“What happened?” Tom saunters to the fridge like he lives here and plucks out the two tubs of Ben & Jerry’s. “What’ll it be? Cherry Garcia or Half Baked?”

Both are my favorite, and at the same time, Suki and I say, “Both.”

For the first time all night, I laugh as does everyone else, and through two tubs of ice cream, shared four ways, I tell them what happened.

Suki pulls her polished spoon from her mouth. “That prick.” She’s aware he’s been dodging me this week, or that’s how it feels, and while I thought it was on account of his past, being hurt and not easily trusting, now I’m not so sure.

“Hey.” Tom raises his palm in a slow down and stay calm gesture. “Let’s give the guy a chance.”

“Yeah, Tom’s right.” August crushes the empty cartons and heads for the kitchen. “I don’t know Walker all that well, but he seems like a decent guy.”

Tom nods, and I can’t figure out if this is some bro code—they share a gender and so they automatically have one another’s back—or if what they’re saying makes sense.

“Paige adores him, and there’s no way she’d feel that way if he was an asshole.” Side by side on the couch, Tom taps my sweatpant-covered knee. “Besides, she likes you; you’re her

friend. She'd have warned you if he was double-crossing you or doing anything crappy."

"Sure, but she might not know." My phone buzzes, face up on the table, and four sets of eyes veer to the screen. Walker.

"Are you going to check that?" Suki's fingers hover over the device, ready to hand it to me or, more likely, enter my passcode and read the text.

I shake my head, and as if sensing I wouldn't appreciate her intrusion, she drops her hand onto the floor next to my legs. "You know, you're going to have to talk to him."

"And I will. I just want tonight to get my head on straight."

"Maybe there's a reasonable explanation." August tries again and with one look from me, he sheepishly shoves his hands in the front pocket of his jeans.

"Maybe." I shrug and bend my legs up and under me. "Can we not talk about this anymore? Do you want to watch some mindless reality TV?"

For the next couple of hours, we play *Madden*, then Suki demands we watch *The Great British Bake Off*, and throughout the show, my phone buzzes and buzzes and even rings once. Walker's name lights up the screen every time. Tonight will be the first time I haven't answered his text, let alone a string of them.

It's close to midnight when the guys shuffle out the door as a familiar limo pulls up to the curb.

August glances from the car to me. "Eden, he's here."

Tom moves in behind me to stare out into the street. "Do you want us to get rid of him?"

Suki pushes past us. "No, I got this."

"Hey. No." I hold her in place. "This is my problem. Please go inside and make yourself invisible."

She groans but trudges back into the house, and now, Walker's only steps from where I stand with the men and he

pauses. His dark, penetrating gaze assesses the situation, and he clearly doesn't like what he sees. Too bad.

And little did I know, all it would take to get him here is to ignore his texts and calls.

"August, Tom." I hug each of the guys in turn. "Thanks for coming over, and I'll see you for your party."

Tom leaves for Africa in only weeks, and his mom's throwing him a going away party. The guys wordlessly pass Walker with only a nod, and then it's only the two of us.

"I texted you. Even called. I thought something was wrong, but it seems that I had nothing to worry about." He glances in the direction where the guys amble down the sidewalk. "Or maybe I did."

I scoff at his innuendo, and our equally guarded gazes clash. It takes so much effort to ignore the prick at my chest or how much it hurts to see him. How good he looks in his tux—obviously having been at some event tonight—and sadly, if only for the last time, how much I want to hug him, kiss him.

But I won't give in to the urge.

"From the beginning, you told me you wouldn't ever lie to me, but *that* was a lie." My pain and sarcasm live and breathe in every word, and he rears back like I've hit him. "You're a liar. All this time, you've been lying to me."

WALKER

“Eden, what are you talking about?” I shuffle closer, hands up in the air, nonthreatening and careful, as if approaching someone with a gun. “I’ve never lied to you.”

She sneers, yet her eyes, swollen and red, cause my breath to catch. She’s been crying, and everything aches in me to comfort her. It’s been too long since I’ve seen her.

Foolishly, I’ve stayed away, not wanting either of us to get caught up in this too soon. Or truth be told, I didn’t want to risk getting burned twice.

But tonight at the charity event, when she wouldn’t respond to any of my texts or the one call I broke down and made, I figured this was my doing. I’d let the distance grow too much, taken our time apart too far.

Eden enters the house, only leaving enough room for me to step inside. She doesn’t want me any farther than the entrance to her home. I’m not welcome.

“Spare me more of your lies. I saw you today. I saw you with Billie Ivers.”

“Billie? Who?” The last name I know but the first isn’t familiar. “You mean Sybil?”

“Sybil?” She cocks her head to one side and frowns as her gaze sharpens like she’s remembering something. “You mean the woman Marlowe and others mentioned at the garden party?”

I nod but offer no comment on that as I don't want us to get derailed. "I had a meeting with Sybil Ivers today. I believe she goes by Billie for some of her work with entrepreneurs. She thinks it makes her sound cool."

"Sybil." She rubs at her temples as if working out the nickname versus her given name is causing a headache.

"What does she have to do with you ignoring me all night?" I hold back a cutting comment about how she was with Tom and August. That isn't productive, and we didn't have plans tonight and...I have to trust her. Trust that they are only friends who sometimes do business together. "Do you know Sybil?"

"Sybil, Billie, or whatever the hell she calls herself is my ex-boss. The woman who stole my business proposal. I used to work at Ivation."

The vise-grip that's been around my chest for most of the night, or at least for the hours that ticked by while my texts went unanswered, loosens somewhat.

At least her anger now has context, though I'm still confounded because she has jumped to the wrong conclusion and believes I lied to her.

"The day we met—you were running from Ivation." The statement is more for my benefit as I mentally run through past events.

It makes sense now. Sybil's business is on the same street where I was stuck in traffic the day Eden jumped into my car. And although I'd wondered about her former employer and even asked for more details, I never pushed or looked into it. I didn't want to overstep and figured, or more hoped, Eden would open up to me when she was ready.

"You didn't know?" Her sardonic tone carries an ocean of implication.

And no matter how I respond, it's plain to see she's already made up her mind. She doesn't believe me.

"No. I didn't know you'd worked for Ivation, and I can understand your confusion and even irritation at seeing me

with Sybil, but I can explain. We're business acquaintances, and we were talking about a joint venture."

She snorts, shaking her head, disgusted. "You didn't know? Sure, and you're"—she holds up air quotes around the next two words out of her mouth—"business acquaintances. Yeah, right."

"Yes. That's what I said. Don't you remember? I did ask who you'd worked for and you never said. You didn't want to talk about it." My flat tone does nothing to lessen my unintentional insinuation.

It sounds like I'm blaming her, like she was trying to hide something. That isn't what I mean.

Her impenetrable demeanor causes my stomach to roil, this turmoil poisoning my insides. "Seriously? Now you're implying I knew about *your relationship with Bil—Sybil?*" She says it like there's way more going on than there actually is. "How long did you know? Was it from the beginning?"

"Know what?"

Fire burns in her brilliant green eyes. "That I worked for Billie. It all makes sense. All these weeks we've been together, I haven't been able to figure out why you're with me. But you really aren't with me, are you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You've been avoiding me, keeping me at arm's length." She pauses as if to give me a chance to refute her claim or defend myself, but I've got nothing.

I'm an asshole for staying away from her, and before I can say as much, her face flushes red with rage and she continues.

"I thought you were pulling back because you'd made a mistake. I realized that I wasn't right for you and your kind. I mean, look at Vanessa, the women at the garden party—I'm nothing like them." Even as her words suggest she's insignificant, she widens her stance and is truly formidable. "You know, you aren't the only one with insecurities and doubts. I kept wondering why you were with me."

She sways from side to side, too enraged or hurt to stand still. “You gave in so easily about us being more than a fling. I wondered why. It didn’t make sense but now, with Billie, now it does.” She purses her lips and shakes her head. “I almost don’t need to ask—I already know—but heck, why not? Was all this because of her?”

I rear back, muscles shuddering like I’ve been tasered. “What? Are you seriously asking me if I’m with you because of Sybil?”

“Yes. Are you working with Greene and Billie to keep me silent?”

My entire body quiets, mind reeling and unable to fully stick with one coherent thought. I’ve seriously messed up and have to make this right.

“How can you even ask that? I can’t begin to understand why you’d think I’m with you because of Sybil, or that I’m working with them. Greene’s an asshole—”

She scoffs and nods. “Well, at least we agree on that.”

I shudder, not liking the idea of Eden having to deal with him. They worked together. Her claims of IP theft are front and center now.

“Is this about your...”—I grapple for the word she used—“your crusade for justice? I didn’t even know you were talking about Sybil.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and clenches her jaw, clearly unsatisfied with everything I’ve said.

Reining in my frustration, I soften my voice. “Until now, I had no idea you knew or were in any way connected to Sybil. Honestly.”

She doesn’t take my pause as an opportunity to say anything, so I press for more on some of the other troubling things she said.

“All the shit you said about why am I with you. It isn’t true. Yes, you’re nothing like Vanessa or those other women.”

I step toward her, trying to close the gap between us in more ways than one. “Eden, you’re better than they are.”

Hanging my head, I growl, more than willing to punch myself in the face for my colossal mistake. Stepping away and guarding my fucking bruised heart from this woman who got so close to me too soon seemed like a good idea at the time. But look at where we are now.

I stare into her troubled gaze. “I fucked up. I pulled away because I’m wildly attracted to you. There was no other reason other than I’m the guy who’s crazy about you.”

Her body stutters and she opens her mouth, only to quickly shut it again as her lashes flutter closed. It feels like she’s blocking me out in every way possible, as if she isn’t willing to hear me. Believe me.

My eyes and throat burn, and the desire to speak my heart, no matter how scary it is, swells. “None of those women can even compare to you. Eden, you’re *real*. Smart. No, make that brilliant and fascinating. Funny. Kind.” I drop my voice and lift my hand to reach for her but think better of it when she stiffens. “Sexy as hell.”

I pause and place a hand over my rapidly beating heart, for fear it might rip free from my chest. This feels like my only chance.

“If you need more reasons why I’m here, why I tabled casual in pursuit of more with you, I can go on.” My attempt at flirty wit, although inarguably sincere, does nothing to temper her resolve.

She remains rigid and immovable, and I want nothing more than to hold her, to take back these days apart, or better yet, start over, and all of that fucking terrifies me. Although doing nothing or worse—walking away—is unimaginable. It would kill me.

Finally, she blinks and swallows hard. “How am I supposed to believe you with...with how it looks?” Her voice cracks and she looks away to hide the tears now spilling down

her cheeks. “You mean to tell me, the two of you have never talked about me?”

Fuck, she doesn't seem willing to let go of the idea that Sybil and I were somehow conspiring to hurt her.

Boldly, I swipe a tear from under her eye and she lets me. My chest loosens, and I take it as a good sign that I might be getting through to her.

“Never. We never discussed you. She'd be surprised, maybe not as much as you are, but surprised nonetheless to find out that I'm with you.”

For the slightest moment, the sharp jagged edges of her anger ebb and her expression crumples, folding in on itself. She reminds me of a little girl, lost and alone in a big department store, surrounded by others, but eyes tear-filled as she wails for her mother.

Her raw vulnerability tugs at my chest, so much like mine, and only feeds my burgeoning need to make everything right, to make her believe me.

Another inch closer to her and she pulls back.

Shit.

I rake an irritated hand through my hair. “I get it. This doesn't look good. Not to sound too banal, but sometimes coincidences happen and business circles can be smaller than we think. Sybil and I have a strictly professional relationship, and I swear to you, our time apart this week is all on me. It had absolutely nothing to do with anything but my...”

Eyes trained on me, her steady gaze feeds my soul and gives me the strength to bare all. “It was all me. I acted out of fucking fear, and like you said, insecurity.”

The world doesn't implode at my confession no matter how naked I feel, but my confusion and desperation grows when her features painfully contort like I've stabbed her.

“You dated her. Don't even try to lie. I saw the pictures online.”

Nausea rises as I'm powerless to get off this merry-go-round. Although, there's something in her voice—fear maybe, definitely anguish, and even a touch of jealousy. All of this, I can relate to.

Sybil is to me like August and Tom are to her. Nothing more than a friend. And what's going on right now, between us, all comes down to trust.

I understand where she's coming from. I have to ease her fears, though my situation is a little more complicated than hers. No matter how I put this, I've no doubt Eden isn't going to like it.

“Yes, we made it look like we dated, but it isn't what you think. Sybil and I were never intimately involved.” Her glower darkens and I try to douse that heat. “Not even casually. We had an arrangement. We'd be each other's plus-one when needed. That's it.”

Some of her fire seems to fizzle, and her posture becomes less granite-like. “She was your plus-one?”

I'm hoping she remembers our conversation in the limo when I asked her to Marlowe's party. Then I'd explained the need for having a date at certain functions.

“Yes, and I ended it the second we started seeing each other. Not because there was anything going on with Sybil, but because you're now my plus-one. Like the opera in a few days.”

I clamp my mouth shut. I might be making things worse by mentioning our upcoming date and assuming she's still going with me. Things might be so far beyond fucked up that she'll back out.

She cocks her head to one side. “*La Bohème*? What about it?”

“Originally, Sybil and I were to go together, but a few weeks back, I ended things and told her to find her own date. I wanted to take you.”

She licks her lips and presses them together. “I see.”

“Do you? I’d never lie to you. I promise. I didn’t know any of this until now, and yeah, I understand how it looks to you.” I give her a playful smirk. “All I can do is thank you for listening to me. I’m sorry for my part in tonight’s mess. If there’s anything else you want to know, all you have to do is ask.”

“You kind of make it hard to stay upset with you.”

My hand slides around her neck, and she relaxes into my grip. Encouraged by her surrender, I drag her body to mine and glide my other hand around her waist. “Good. I don’t like it when we fight.”

“This is our first.” She emits a small, shaky laugh, and the melodic vibrations of her tentative joy warm me.

“Yeah, and I still don’t like it.”

She quirks a brow. “Are you going to continue to be hot and cold with me?”

“Uh-uh. I’m all hot.” I bend my head and nuzzle her neck. “For you.”

“I’m sorry too. I hated seeing you with her—”

“Hush.” My finger presses her mouth, and I raise my head. “Let’s not talk about that again.”

My mouth covers hers, and the night’s confusion immediately fades away like a bad dream. Although her words echo through my head.

I haven’t been able to figure out why you’re with me. I’m nothing like them.

How could she think she was less than anything but spectacular? If it’s the only thing I ever give her, I will make her see herself the way I do.

The longer we kiss and the longer my hands touch every part of her, languid, indulgent, and lingering, the harder it is to breathe.

It would be too easy to dismiss this thing we have as purely lust. It might have started out that way because since

meeting her, I have a healthy dose of desire constantly thundering through my veins.

But this is something else.

Something more.

This woman awes me. Eden brings me to my knees—my control all but shattered. She makes me want to try to do better, be better.

At some point, she leads me into her bedroom and we get into bed, both of us fervently trying to show the other how much we want them. How grateful we are to be here, to have moved past our disagreement. To be together again.

I awake sometime in the middle of the night, and while at peace, listening to her soft breathing and feeling her heart beating rhythmically against my rib cage, I play back the pieces of our conversation that we didn't fully explore.

Eden's convinced Sybil stole other people's ideas and passed them off as her own like she tried to do with Eden's business plans.

I can't shake the feeling Eden has it wrong.

All of it.

Sybil isn't that kind of person.

Greene must be behind this. He most probably orchestrated the theft and made it look like it was all Sybil. Does she know what her right-hand person is capable of?

Normally, I'd tell her, or any other business associate, but this situation is different. Eden's important to me, and Sybil could potentially be my business partner.

I'm caught in the middle and have to tread carefully. Like Switzerland, I'll have to remain neutral until I have answers. I'll need to look into this, hire someone to do some digging.

Sybil can't know about Eden's crusade for justice—well, not yet—and Eden can't go around making claims of wrongdoing against Sybil without any proof.

The biggest risk is this could blow up in Eden's face and ruin any chance at a future in business.

WALKER

Showered and shaved, I walk through Eden's apartment, looking for her when I hear voices by the front door. There I find her talking to a tall, willowy, black woman with long blue braids.

"Tom's more than willing to help. He's expecting your call." Eden squeezes the woman's hand, then, as if sensing my presence, she glances over her shoulder at me. "Oh, good, you're here. Alouette, this is Walker."

She grabs my hand and pulls me into her side. "And Walker, this is Alouette, a really good friend of mine and Suki's..." Her pause comes with a distressed expression as if she's unable to find the right words.

Luckily, she's talked about Alouette before and her complicated relationship with Suki.

"It's okay, Eden." Alouette shakes my hand. "Walker, it's great to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"And you. What's this I hear about Tom?" It's none of my business, but I can't help myself whenever Eden talks about one of those two men.

"I'm giving away some furniture and need help getting it out of my place and to its final destination. Tom's the muscle." She laughs.

"Oh, I could have arranged for some help. Still can."

"No, but thank you. Anyway, I should get going." Alouette gives Eden a hug and leaves.

“That was nice of you to offer to help, but you didn’t have to.” She shuts the door and saunters into the living room. That’s when I notice there’s something about her demeanor. The slight deflation in her shoulders, sadness to her usually bright eyes.

“No problem. Is everything okay with her and Suki?”

“Not really. Lou got here when you were in the shower, and Suk was still here.” She frowns and presses her lips together.

“What happened?”

“They’re over. Lou can’t do an open relationship, so she dropped out of Suki’s life. It’s so sad because I know they love each other. I love them both, and while it’s their situation, I’m caught in the middle.”

“Hey, come here.” I hug her and kiss the top of her head as her arms tighten around me. “And how’s Suki doing with this?”

When Eden talked to me about her best friend’s love life, she mentioned her roommate’s a commitment-phobe but strongly denies it. And she thinks Suki used “I want an open relationship” as a way to stall the natural progression of her relationship with Alouette.

Strangely, I understand this, having similar issues myself, but being on the outside, I can also see that it’s how you deal with it, the actions you take to face your fear or not, that makes all the difference.

“Suki says she’s fine, but I’ve noticed she hasn’t gone on any dates in a few weeks, and this morning, after Alouette broke things off, she darted out the door. I’ll give her some time and then check in, but I can’t push. It won’t help. Anyway, enough about that.” She hands me a mug of coffee.

“I gotta say, I didn’t say anything last night, but I used to think I preferred men in casual clothes. You know, jeans, gray sweatpants—hello—but...” She stares at me in my wrinkled, day-old tuxedo.

Since my sleepover wasn't planned, I had nothing else to wear but the tux from last night. She continues to stare like I'm something she'd like to devour, and I nudge her to go on. "But?"

"You in a tux." Her fiery hair shakes from side to side while she seductively pulls her bottom lip into her mouth. "Damn, I could get used to seeing you like this twenty-four seven."

I bark out a laugh and haul her into my chest with my one free arm. "Don't tease me. I've got to get home and change so I can get into the office before the day's over."

Last night was amazing, and though I'm still uncertain about our future, I'm choosing to embrace this—whatever we have—because it's too great to pass up.

Her lips kiss the underside of my jaw. "I don't want you to go, but yes, I also have to get dressed. I should be at Endeavor."

She unwraps her arms, and before she goes too far, I pull at her arm with one hand while placing the mug down onto the table with the other.

"Let's sit for a minute." I lead her onto my lap on the sofa. "You're perfect, you know that, right?"

Her nose crinkles, and she chews on the inside of her cheek but expresses a shaking laugh. "No one's perfect, and why are you saying this?"

I rub my thumbs in small circles on her neck with my fingers interlaced at her nape. "True. You're imperfectly perfect. I didn't like how you spoke about yourself last night, knowing that's what you think. You aren't less than anyone."

"Thank you, but I think you took it the wrong way. I have a healthy sense of self-esteem. Trust me. I had my issues growing up with a less than twig-like body, but eventually, I embraced my curves, and in the end, I'm in a place where I love myself."

"I'm not talking about your body, and there's nothing fucking wrong with your curves or any part of you." My

fingers sink into her hip, loving the feel of her flesh in my grip. “Sometimes you sound like you don’t feel worthy of my attention or affection.”

“God, when you put it like that...I suppose it’s our worlds. They’re so different, and working with Marv and Nadine, I’m more comfortable with their role than mine. I’m used to being the one providing support and advice to someone more successful and put together than me. I don’t know how to handle feeling like this.”

“Like what?”

“I’m usually fierce and fearless, driven. I’ve wanted to do what I’m doing right now for what feels like forever, but sometimes I worry it isn’t real. Like I’m going to wake up and find out it was all a dream and I’m still working for jerks like Billie and Greene.”

She checks my reaction at her description, and I keep my expression neutral. This is her experience, her feelings.

“Go on.”

“Or that one day, someone’s going to call me out for being a fraud.”

The word catches me by surprise, both in that it’s her fear and it’s the same word she used to accuse Sybil.

“Hey, your life’s changing, that’s understandable, but you know that you deserve this, right? You’re doing the work. It’s your idea. Eden, you’re clever, driven, and have so much to offer. Don’t let anyone take that away from you. So what if one person has more zeros in their bank account than another? That doesn’t make them any more important, more special, or more intelligent than you.”

“I guess.” She tries to get up, but I hold her hips until she settles back into me. “That’s just one part of it. I sense you still don’t believe or trust why I’m with you despite anything I’ve said.”

“I’m working on it.”



After our talk, Eden and I see each other at least once a day for the few days leading up to the opera, and sometimes we are even able to share our nights. And in hopes of lessening her concerns about not fitting into my world, I arrange for Celine to select a dress for her to wear this evening to *La Bohème*.

“Have I told you how stunning you are?” I squeeze her hand as Tony pulls the car up to the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

“Only a few times since you’ve picked me up.” She laughs and I bring her hand to my mouth to kiss her knuckles.

“Well, I’m going to say it again, you look stunning.”

“Thank you.”

Tony hops out of the car, and I figure now is as good a time as any to prepare her for tonight. We’ve talked about who will be here, but I want to make sure she’s ready.

“Remember, Sybil will be here.”

She blows out a long breath and nods. “And if you talk to her, I’ll find someone else to talk to, okay? I just can’t...”

Tony opens her door, and she takes his hand and steps out. I slide over and jump out, quick to slide my arm around her waist and lean my head in so my lips are practically kissing her ear.

“It’s going to be okay. So long as you don’t bring up your wild theory that she steals from others,” I joke and immediately feel like a fool.

A light gasp slips from her mouth, and she jerks away from me. “Seriously? Is that what you think I’d do? I wondered what you thought now that you knew who all the players were. Well, now I have my answer.”

She grabs the sides of her gown and lifts the fabric to climb the steps to the entrance without me. Fuck me, when am

I going to learn to keep my mouth shut?

“Eden, wait. I was joking and realize that wasn’t the best way to bring this up and certainly not now. But we do need to talk about this. Can we table this for later?”

“No. I don’t think so. You aren’t going to dissuade me, not with the information I now have.”

Information? I need to better understand what information she thinks she has on Sybil and how she plans to use it.

Unfazed by my surprised and questioning reaction to her vague comment, she says, “Let’s agree to disagree.”

“It isn’t as simple as that. I’ve done business with...” I stop to look around and make sure no one can overhear us. “I’m currently exploring another lucrative venture where we’d be partners. It would be a big deal. Good for me.”

I sound like a selfish bastard, only caring about my business forays, and once again, that isn’t my intention. The news of Eden’s history with Sybil has caused me to ramp up my own due diligence.

“Walker, I won’t presume to tell you what to do, and I want you to have all the success in the world so all I’ll say is this—be careful of anything Sybil Ivers is involved in.” She turns to smile at the gentleman holding open the door, then pauses to peer over her shoulder at me. “Are you ready?”

Her brittle smile prompts an unnatural one from me as I nod and follow her inside. As if things could get any worse, they do.

We’re no sooner through the doors than Sybil marches up to us like she was waiting for our arrival. She stops short when she gets a good look at my date, and for a brief second, her cool, composed mask slips, but by the time she reaches us, it’s firmly back in place.

Eden attempts to spin away from me, but I secure my hand on her hip and mutter under my breath, “This will be quick. Stay. Remember what I said; you have as much a right as she does to be here, and”—I turn to face her—“you’re my date. We belong at each other’s side.”

“Walker, I didn’t know you knew Eden, my former employee.” She leans forward and turns her cheek toward me as if expecting me to kiss it.

I don’t. Instead, I take her hand and shake it. “Sybil. Nice to see you, and I believe you know my date, the spectacular Eden Carpenter.”

She cackles. “Clearly, she’s misrepresented herself. I had to fire her. Did she tell you?”

My date stiffens ever so slightly and flicks at something invisible on her dress, pretending not to hear or see the woman in front of us.

In that moment, Greene strolls up to Sybil’s side and flashes us an easy smile. “Eden, looking good. I see you’re moving up in the world.”

Near lecherous, his gaze traverses her body, and I wonder how quickly I could wipe the ogle off his face if I punched him in his balls.

“Don’t talk to her—”

“Walker, I’ve got this.” Eden fashions a relaxed expression and shifts her attention to Greene, then Sybil. “I see you’re still slumming it.”

His smug grin disappears, and her former boss fixes her with an icy stare and opens her mouth to say something.

I press my hand into Eden’s back. “Enjoy the performance, Sybil.”

We walk away, and given the time, close to curtain call, I lead us to our seats. Eden remains tense and silent, and once seated, I attempt to smooth things over. “Are you all right?”

Cheeks pink and eyes fiery, she leans in close even though no one is close by. “Do you believe her nerve?”

Before I can respond, my phone rings, and I quickly take it from my breast pocket, realizing I forgot to silence it. The name on the screen causes me to spring to my feet. “Excuse me, I have to take this.”

Not far from our seats, I turn my back to the growing number of people filtering into the orchestra and answer the call. “This is Walker Drummond.”

“Mr. Drummond, Kirby here.” It’s the investigator I recently hired, and my pulse quickens, wondering if he’s already found something although it’s only been a few days. “Sorry to bother you at this hour, but I had a few follow-up questions about Sybil Ivers.”

“Now isn’t a good time. Did something happen or can it wait until first thing in the morning?”

During our initial meeting, I told him everything I knew about Sybil, her history, and her businesses. I even shared details about Eden and her allegations of IP theft, which I’m not questioning though I wouldn’t be surprised if Greene’s behind it and lying to the both of them.

Until I have evidence, I can’t talk to anyone about this. I could potentially tarnish Sybil’s reputation if anyone caught wind of this. Just the hint of something like this can linger and stick to you even if proven to be false.

And I didn’t hire him to find more of the same but to look for anything suspicious or illegal. I’m not going into this to vindicate Eden, though I wish I could, but more that I’m a realist and want to know for myself, either way, what kind of woman Sybil Ivers is.

“No. I don’t have anything yet, but as I’ve started to look into her background, I have a few more questions that you might be able to shed some light on.”

“All right. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Very well. Have a good night, sir.”

Shoving the phone into my jacket, I head back to our row.

“I know I promised no work tonight, so sorry about that.” The lights dim as I settle into my seat and take her hand. “Are you going to be able to relax and enjoy the performance?”

She nods and gives me a small smile, though her posture remains tense, maybe not fully able to shake off her earlier

encounter with Sybil and Greene.

During the intermission, the moment Eden leaves my side to go to the restroom, my sister appears. “What on earth are you doing?” She pulls me into a nearby corner away from anyone. “Why did you bring her here? Sybil’s in quite a snit.”

“Marlowe, *she* has a name.”

“Fine.” She shoots me a withering look. “Why did you come here of all places with Eden? She isn’t...”

“She isn’t what?” I grind my molars in anger.

My sister maneuvers us so my back is to the crowd. “She doesn’t belong here.”

“This is none of your business, and she has every right to be here. Since when did you become this petty and offensive?” I turn on my heel and freeze.

Eden, pallid and shaky, stands only a few feet from where Marlowe and I bickered. Did she hear us? And if so, how much?

Given the sickly color or lack thereof to her complexion, she heard enough. Heart erratically beating, I grab her hand and bring her to my side.

“Marlowe, Eden’s fucking brilliant and beautiful and far more interesting than anyone else here.” I narrow my pointed gaze on my sister, voice strong and clear. “You better get used to seeing a lot more of her. Eden’s in my life to stay.”

EDEN

“*H*ey, are you still with me?” Nadine waves a hand in front of my face.

A rush of heat spreads from my neck into my cheeks at being called out for daydreaming. “Sorry. I’m here.”

“What’s going on?” She leans back in the chair across from me. “You’ve been distracted these past few days. Is something wrong?”

These past two weeks, since the opera and the last time Walker and I had a night out, have been busy for both of us. Things are moving at warp speed with the Endeavor team as we focus on getting my business ready. We’ve come up with a working name, Novus, found potential office space, and have started recruitment. We’re much closer to proverbially opening the doors, and I’m scared.

Nadine stares at me, patiently waiting for my response, and I bite the inside of my cheek. It’s an annoying habit I’ve picked up in an attempt to stall. I never used to do this, but I also never had a zillion decisions to make every second of every day, and this is only the beginning.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that...”

“Eden, it’s okay. Tell me what’s on your mind. It doesn’t matter if I’m going to like it or not.”

My burst of laughter startles the both of us, and I shake my head at how accurately she nailed my hesitation.

“I’ve, um...been stewing over here for days because, and forgive me, this is going to sound horrible. My heart isn’t in this.”

“Okay.” She plants her elbows on the conference table. “What do you mean? Is it all the details? It can be a lot and it can be boring. Or have we veered off track from your vision and you didn’t know how to call us out?”

“Yes and no. We’re on the right track, that isn’t it. And yes, the nitty-gritty is tedious and mind-numbing but...” I lock eyes with her and my stomach drops to my toes.

Okay, I’m doing this.

I wanted to talk to Walker first, before saying anything, maybe hoping he’d talk me out of it. But he’s in Ottawa on business, and this is happening now.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful or clueless...”

“Don’t worry about how it sounds. We’re here for you.”

“I’m not so sure this is what I want anymore. Don’t get me wrong, I still believe in Novus, but I don’t know if I’m the right person to bring it to market.” Relief and dread tussle low in my stomach, and a wave of queasiness washes over me.

Nadine’s expression is unreadable. “Okay. There are options. You know, from day one, we’ve believed in Novus, and we’d be foolish to let it die on the vine.” She pulls her laptop closer and pauses to glance at me. “We’ve said it before, but there’s a high probability that someone else is also working on a similar idea at this very moment. We want—no, make that we *need*—to be first to market.”

We’ve talked about filing for a patent and have most of the paperwork ready, but I’m not sure what she’s getting at. Does she think I need to suck it up and finish the work, or does she have something else in mind?

“I totally agree and don’t want any of our work to be wasted, I just...”

The words won’t form.

I feel like a failure. I've lost the wild passion I once had for this project. Who does that? Creates something and then walks away from it in the middle of the process. I look like a flake or an asshole. And what will Walker think?

Nadine walks around the table and sits next to me. "The work isn't for nothing. Like I said, you have options. It all depends on how much you want to be involved. Eden, what do you want to do?"

"That's the thing, I'm not sure. Going through this, I've learned a lot about myself and what I love doing. And what I thought I would love, I've now discovered I don't." I swivel the chair to face her. "What are my options?"

"Well, there are several. For starters, if you want to be part of Novus, you don't have to be the CEO, if that's not what you want. With your skills and interests, we can figure out the best role for you. You'd still have a majority equity stake in the company. Or if you want out completely, you could sell Novus. I can think of two potential clients who might buy your ownership stake."

"Really?"

She drags the laptop to face us. "Let's go through a couple of scenarios and talk more about what you loved and didn't about what we've done so far."

Hours pass as we explore my options, and the more time passes, the more I'm glad I spoke up. While still uncertain about my future, I have time to figure it out, and we've decided to keep moving ahead with Novus.

With a light tap on the door, Endeavor's receptionist walks in. "Excuse me, Ms. Carpenter, your driver's here."

"Oh. Already?" I check my phone and am surprised at how late it is. "Please tell Tony I'll be there in five minutes." Then I stand. "Nadine, thank you for being so understanding."

"Of course." She shuts her laptop and smiles. "Have a nice evening, and we'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night."

During the drive to Walker's, my mind wanders, mostly excited to see him plus nervous to tell him about today's development. Actually, I'm terrified to tell anyone. What will Mom or Suki think?

He has only just returned from his business trip, and we're having dinner at his house. It has been four days without speaking or texting, the longest we've gone without contact since I discovered his connection to Billie.

Tony slows as the gates open, and my phone rings. It's my mother, and we haven't talked either this week. Now isn't a great time, but I want to hear her voice. I'll make it quick.

"Hey Mom, how are you?"

"Eden, you picked up. I was about to book a flight to Toronto." I can hear the jest in her voice but have no doubt she'd be on a plane if her calls continued to go to voicemail. "Is everything okay?"

As I fill her in on my hectic week, the car drives toward the mansion and a familiar dread sits heavy in my stomach. Everything about his home leaves me speechless—from the manicured lawns to the French chateau-like appearance to the gigantic statues and fountain in the center of the circular driveway.

Marlowe's mansion is spectacular, from what I saw on the outside, but Walker's rivals the homes in *Architectural Digest*, and most times, I feel out of place.

Mom's question cuts through my wanderings. "So what are you going to do?"

"Would you think less of me if I sold Novus for an obscene amount of money?"

Earlier today, when Nadine mentioned how much my stake in Novus could fetch, I almost fainted, unable to fathom the numbers.

"What? No. I wouldn't begin to tell you what to do. I'm proud of you no matter what you do. Like I've always said, you can clean toilets or build spaceships, I love you just the same."

A warmth only my mother can generate spreads throughout my chest. “Thanks, Mom. I have to go, but I’ll send my flight details.”

“You booked your flight?” Her excitement beams through the phone line.

“Yes. Okay, love you, Mom. Bye.”

“Love you. Bye.”

Walker isn’t outside to greet me like he’s done before, nor is he in the foyer or living room, and I can’t help but give in to a niggling irritation. While we were okay after the opera, other obligations prevented us from spending time together, and when we could, more often than not, one of us inevitably would get pulled away by work.

And on top of all this, I sensed despite his wonderful declaration to Marlowe, he may be okay with this work-imposed distance. Maybe he regretted being vulnerable with me when he confessed the deliberate distance he’d put between us out of fear?

Or maybe I’m paranoid and missing him?

We are both overworked and I’m all over the place since talking to Nadine. It also doesn’t help that I had next to no time this week to help August with our crusade to expose Sybil, or that the man I’m seeing might end up her business partner.

Alone in the hallway, I’m a little lost and peeved when Walker appears. “Eden, apologies, I was pulled onto a call about an urgent HR matter.”

“Oh.” I’m nearly all out of understanding, though I shouldn’t be.

He’s visibly exhausted with a hint of scruff on his chiseled jawline, and his smile is feeble. Finally laying eyes on him lessens my annoyance.

A wicked jolt zips through me at the sight of him in his expensive suit, exquisitely tailored across his broad shoulders and chest and tapered perfectly for his trim waist. Dark hair,

thick and wavy. Sharp blue eyes that make me feel like I'm all that exists for him.

I've missed him so.

He wraps a hand around mine and leans in for a quick kiss on the cheek. "I have to get back to the call. But I should be out in time for dinner."

He isn't. I eat alone.

At the end of the meal, Janice returns to the dining room. "Mr. Drummond's in the study. He'd like you to join him once you're done."

"Okay. Thanks."

It's a trek to the opposite end of the ground floor, and before opening the door, I wrap my arms around my middle and steel my spine. The evening is likely over before it has begun. Walker must still be working, and he'll have Tony take me home. Sadly, this has quickly become our new normal.

I enter the study—one of the more intimate rooms—and my insides smile and settle somewhat. From floor to ceiling, books line almost all the walls, and the décor is dark wood and leather with an oversized fireplace, dormant given the time of year, taking up most of one wall.

"Close the door and come here." Walker sits in one corner of the leather sofa, and I do as he asks, sitting close to him.

He pulls me into his arms until I'm nearly on his lap, and I can't decide if being this near to him is heavenly or torture, especially since he'll send me home any minute now.

I stare up at him, inhaling his intoxicating masculine scent. "Is everything okay? Are you done with work for the night?"

He closes his eyes and tilts his head back against the leather. "For tonight, but it isn't over." His blue eyes find mine. "I'm truly sorry about dinner. I ended up eating while on the call."

"Mm-hmm." My head rests on his chest, and I count the beats of his heart as he drags unsteady breaths into his lungs. "How was Ottawa?"

The question could be loaded. He never did tell me if his trip was for Zenith Point or one of his other business pursuits. For all I know, it could have been about the potential venture with Sybil. She could have gone with him. Gah, I can't think like that.

“Good. What about you? How are things with Endeavor?”

“We came up with a name. Novus, do you like it?”

“Yes. Good. What else?” His thumb rubs the pulse point on my wrist, and I'm on the verge of closing my eyes.

Rehashing the hours of conversation with Nadine and my realization that running Novus isn't what I want to do is daunting, and the last thing I want.

He brushes my hair behind my ear. “You okay?”

“Yes. You must be tired.” My eyes shut, and I could easily fall asleep listening to him breathe.

“You never called or texted while I was away.”

My eyes pop open, but I remain looking at his chest. “You told me not to.”

His thumb stops stroking and his body tenses. “No, I didn't.”

I lift my head to look at him, exasperation bubbling inside me. “Uh, yeah, you did. You said you'd be busy and wouldn't have time to talk so not to expect to hear from you.”

At the time, when he called me to say as much, I bristled and tried to bury the hurt. I didn't like it but didn't want to scare him away. If he needed space or to focus on work, that's what I'd give him.

He pulls at his shirt collar. “I didn't mean you couldn't contact me...if you needed me.”

What is it with him?

If I needed him.

My lips flatten, squashing the smirk he wouldn't appreciate, and I climb off his lap. He's slow to react, and I'm

already a couple of feet away when he grabs for me.

Of course, I would be the reason we talk while he was in Ottawa, because I would be the one who needed him. Not that he might miss me or want to hear my voice. Or heaven forbid, he might need me.

Mind overworked and exhausted, and also on edge, not sure if selling Novus is the right move, I should let his comment go.

But I can't help myself and shrug as I inject as much indifference as possible into my voice. "I was busy too, and besides, I didn't need you."

EDEN

Lies. Lies. Lies.

Not in the least bit amused with my flippant response—telling him I didn't need him—Walker's jaw tightens. "Were you punishing me?"

"What?"

"Because I had to go away on business and said I might not be able to talk. So you thought you'd show me."

"It wasn't like that at all. Talk to Nadine and Marv. We've been working around the clock. I haven't seen Suki for over a week—she's always asleep when I get in at night and leave in the morning." Exasperated that I have to defend myself, my voice rises. "And today was the first time in days that I've spoken to my mother, and it was for seconds as we drove up the driveway. But I ended the phone call thinking that I'd finally get to spend some time with you."

I sound near hysterics and should dial back my frustration. We're both tired, and I do want to be with him, spend whatever time we have together, but I can't seem to get a grip. "As hard as this might be for you to understand, while you were gone, there have been more pressing things on my mind than you."

Now on his feet, he squashes the distance between us until we're so close I can see the pulse point in his neck, how odd bits of his stubble are silvery white or gray instead of jet black, and the way the ends of his hair curl in every direction.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that.” Voice a smooth rasp like crushed velvet, he takes my hand once more, and immediately, his touch weakens my indignation. “What’s wrong?”

I tear my gaze from his, unable to let down my guard. “Nothing.”

“C’mon, we haven’t seen each other in days.” His thumb affectionately sweeps along the ridges of my knuckles. “I want to know.”

Relenting to his tenderness, I sigh. “Nadine and I talked about other options for Novus.”

He nods, fully focused on me, and if I had to venture a guess, he won’t be surprised with any of the options we discussed. He’s a smart and successful businessman.

“Aren’t you going to ask what they are?”

He quirks a brow and plays along. “What are they?”

I roll my eyes. “I could sell my interest in Novus to a start-up or a bigger, already-established company. There are companies out there that would pay fair market price.”

“I’m sure there are.”

“She even gave me a ballpark figure, and I was shocked.”

“Well, there’s always the potential to make more once the business is up and running, but the opposite is also true, and it could be a while before you turn a sizable profit.”

“Yes. I suppose I don’t know why the thought never crossed my mind. All this time I only envisioned running my own company, but companies and ideas are sold to others all the time.”

“It is an option. Is that what you want?”

“Maybe.”

“And you’d be okay with selling to someone else and having nothing to do with Novus?” While his gaze and tone are neutral, I can’t help but hear criticism.

“Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“Nope, it doesn’t work like that.” He shakes his head, a reluctant smile playing on his lips. “This is all you. My opinion doesn’t matter.”

“But what if I say it does?”

“Uh-uh. Nice try. All I will say is this—if you want to see Novus come to life by your hands, then running your own company is the way to go. If it’s more about knowing you helped bring a brilliant, viable idea to market, then sell.”

He studies me as I dig deep for the strength and courage to bare all to him. “This week was hard...”

I steal a look at him and attempt to go back to staring at our hands, but he’s having none of it and lifts my chin. We stare at each other, and I swear his eyes turn a darker shade of blue. The longer his piercing eyes focus solely on me, the more I feel a vibration in my bones, muscles, and in both my heart and core. It’s more a rousing pulse of want or something far too vast and far too significant to name.

“Eden.” The deep rumble of my name from Walker coaxes me back to our conversation, and he stares intently. “Go on. This week was hard?”

“Um, yes. Working on Novus wasn’t as easy or as fun as usual. My heart wasn’t in it, and at first, I couldn’t figure out why. My dreams were coming true.”

“You’re exhausted.” His hand kneads the muscles of one shoulder, and I want to melt into him.

“Sure, I’m tired, but it was more than that. I wasn’t excited anymore, now that we were getting down to the nuts and bolts...” I pause, scared to admit the next part for fear of what he might think of me. “I wanted to bail or gouge my eyes out with a fork.”

“That bad, huh?” His chuckle surprises me.

I was prepared for reproach, but without missing a beat, he turns me so his front is to my back, all the while continuing his bone-melting rub to one shoulder. Then he adds his other hand to the mix and massages my neck and both shoulders.

“Oh, that feels so good.” I sway, knees buckling, and he presses his lips to the sensitive spot just behind my ear.

“What do you want to do? What excites you?”

His question throws me, and I forget what we’re talking about. All my inhibitions gone.

Leaning into him, I turn around to face him. “You excite me.”

His defined chest rubs against my achingly hard nipples, and he growls when I impatiently tug on his shirt to loosen it from the belt and waistband of his pants. My fingers find the warm, solid flesh of his abdomen.

“Finish your thought.” He bends his head and pulls his torso out of reach. I whimper, and he makes a tutting sound with the tip of his tongue against the back of his teeth. “I want to hear what you have to say...”

His lips mirror mine, teasingly close, but he holds them there. No kiss. Only the ghost of one hovers in the nonexistent space between our mouths, and I want to snatch the phantom between my teeth and devour it.

His breath mingles with mine. “What excites you?”

My head arches back in agony at his denial and his mouth follows mine, closing the small space between us once more, and he swallows my groan. His jaw tics at the sound I make, but none of it makes a lick of difference.

Unrelenting, he doesn’t kiss me despite how much he might want to. I can feel the hard length of him against my stomach. Instead, he brings both my arms in front of me and raises them above my head, then he circles my wrists with one hand and guides my back against the wall.

Walker’s in control.

Having not forgotten his question, I repeat what excites me the most. “You.”

“Yes. Already got that.” One dark eyebrow quirks as does the side of his mouth. “And what about work? Novus?”

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

His thumb presses at the pulse point of my wrist. “Eden.”

There’s something different in the way he says my name. Not quite a command to stop this little game I’m playing, but more like a command to stay with him. Follow his lead. Like we’re in this together and he’ll take care of me.

Oddly, tears prick at the corner of my eyes and I blink several times to banish them. I don’t want to cry. I want him to kiss me, claim me.

My silence, or maybe it’s something else, does something to him, and he tightens his hold. “Eden, you want me to fuck you raw?”

“More than anything.” My cheeks burn at the admission, but I don’t look away.

“Then let’s finish this conversation. I promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

Getting into the headspace of work isn’t easy. My mind’s fried, consumed with wanting Walker, but I try and close my eyes. Center my thoughts.

“I liked the early stages and I loved problem-solving, coming up with the idea. I’m also really enjoying the work I’m doing with August.”

Walker visibly jerks, and I want to take back the other man’s name. Unintentionally, I may have broken this supercharged, electric bond between us by bringing someone else into our space.

He remains silent and I forge on. “Nadine was very helpful in reassuring me that no matter what I decide, Novus will become a thing. It’s just that I don’t know what that means for me.”

Blinking, his expression softens. “There are companies that do just what you described. They come up with the ideas and find the home of best fit. It can be a lucrative business, especially if you hit on anything trending or in technology or if you get ahead of a coming demand.”

I wriggle free of his hold and he doesn't stop me. The moment's gone, thanks to me, and now I feel silly, self-conscious, and have an unquenchable need to move. "So what should I do?"

He pulls the rest of his shirt free from his pants, and I take it as a good sign. We'll get back to where we left off. After all, he did promise to make it worth my while.

"That's for you to figure out." I frown at the same sentiment my mother said hours ago and he studies me. "Look. There isn't a wrong answer. It's what feels right to you."

"I understand all that, but there must be a *better* way."

"Better is relative. Either one of those choices is *better* depending on the person. You need to figure out what it is you want and base your decision on that."

I mock pout and place my hands on my hips. "You're no fair."

My words flip a switch in him, and before I can figure out what's happening, the distance between us is gone. His arms swallow me and his lips torturously sweep my mouth before his tongue plies mine open, and I taste him as he deepens the kiss.

Medicinal, leafy, and smoky. Scotch. I don't like scotch or is it whiskey? I almost gagged the one time I tried it, but on Walker, I'm an instant sommelier or noser, or whatever you call a scotch lover.

I can't explain it but the kiss feels different. All of this does.

Walker's an amazing kisser, and the sex is out of this world, but something about him feels exposed, freer than he was when we first came face-to-face tonight. And it all translates in the way his mouth is insistent on me.

Somehow, he unbuttoned his shirt while kissing me and unveils his perfect build as a flash of white dress shirt flutters to the floor. He has a great body, and my fingers roam his chest, reveling in its hard planes and ridges.

I pull my mouth from his when I hear the yank of a zipper and seek his face. His expression is bare, no mask. Warm and open though the sharp angles of his jaw remain set, and the constant intensity of his eyes sends a buzz through my veins.

My desire sparks tenfold when my name is almost a whisper on his lips at the same time as his pants drop to the floor.

I lean forward and press my lips to his Adam's apple, and the skin there jumps on contact. His hands make quick work of getting me naked, and those sexy eyes of his change once again.

Now bottomless and hungry.

But like everything else, this is new, different.

There's more there than just lust in his gaze.

One hand fondles my breast while his other slides down my stomach, under the waistband of my panties, and strokes my wet slit. "You feel so good."

He leans in and slants his mouth over mine in a slow and deep kiss, and I hiss out a breath when he finally slips a finger inside me.

"Walker."

"Say my name again." He adds another finger and thrusts faster and deeper as I chant his name, and my vision fades to only the sensation of him owning me.

"Eden, I fucking missed you."

WALKER

I missed Eden. We were apart for four lousy days, and I had no problem sharing this with her. I'm exposed and fully committed.

To Eden.

My fingers shake as I roll on the condom, cock aching to be inside her, at how I'm shedding my armor. And the one thing in my favor is that Eden's no less committed, and this makes things right. Maybe even goddamn perfect.

Naked on the couch, her red hair fans out across the leather, legs open and ready, and she looks on eagerly, lips puffy and pink, pussy slick and greedy for me.

Briefly, I have a moment of clarity and turn away from her. We're in the study, where anyone could walk in.

"Where are you going?" The panic in her voice sends an unwanted shiver up my spine.

"Just making sure the door is locked." When I spin around, everything within me stops, and I'm lost to her adoring eyes on me, one corner of her mouth hiking up into a smile.

The expression isn't simply desire or even relief left over from her sudden alarm at my retreat only moments before. It's more a simmering glow emanating from her every pore that calls to me, sinks inside my body, and wraps itself around my heart. It both fucking terrifies me and thrills me.

With the door locked, now I'm the one panicked, unable to get back to her fast enough. She lifts her legs and wraps them

around the backs of my thighs as I breach her entrance in one fluid moment.

Jesus Christ, I'm home.

My entry steals her breath, and her lashes flutter closed as she arches her back and thrusts her tits out for me. I roll one pointed peak, she clenches around me, and the sudden flush to her cheeks only spurs me on as my hand seeks her other boob.

She lifts her hips, inviting me to move with her, and I rasp, "Fuck, Eden. Missed you."

I did it again. Said those words, and each time is easier and truer than before.

She runs a hand up my back, and the nails of her other hand score my back, then her fingers are in the hair at the nape of my neck as she tugs me closer. "I'm here."

We kiss.

The rhythm I set is tremendously slow at first, then builds until the couch rocks back and forth with each of my thrusts. The side table screeches along the wooden floor and a low hum in the back of my throat gains momentum and pleasure as I sink deeper into her.

"Yes. Walker." She gasps and digs her nails into my flesh. "Right there."

My eyes close at the bliss in her voice.

I want to block out everything and lose myself in the sensations of my impending climax. But this doesn't feel right. My eyes snap open, unsure what's off, until the sight of her nearly causes my legs to give out. My chest painfully constricts and cock swells if that's even possible.

That's what's missing.

Eden.

I want to lose myself in the pleasure of her, and to do that, I need to see her. I need to consume everything about her.

How her breath hitches every time I pump into her.

How her pupils dilate when our gazes lock.

And how, when she's close, her lips fall apart as she does.

She explodes like a rocket, body clenching around my cock, and my balls draw up. I'm so close, and just seeing her undone tips me over the edge. I spill into her, and she grabs my wrist to hold my thumb to her clit until the last of the aftershocks flow through her body.

After I take care of the condom, I slide behind her on the couch, our slick, heated bodies sticking to the leather and one another. The furniture groans.

"Do you think we broke the couch?" She interlaces her fingers with mine and nestles our entwined hands between her breasts.

"Don't care if we did."

She giggles and I take her mouth, kissing her, slow and sweet, over and over again. At first I don't realize it, but when I do, there's no denying it.

My kisses...

I'm trying to tell her everything I can't bring myself to say out loud.

Not yet. I never thought I'd ever feel like this again.

Shit, this isn't the same as what I had with Vanessa. I was younger and didn't know what I know now.

This, with Eden, is different and new and more, so much more than ever before.

Dammit, how the hell did I get here?

It's strange and startling how, in a short span of time, this woman, who was not that long ago a stranger, has quickly become one of the most important people in my life.

Eventually, we make it upstairs to bed without anyone seeing us, and before we fall asleep, I take her again. This time, true to my word, I fuck her raw until we're both strung out.

In the morning, Eden sleeps while I work out and shower downstairs. When I return to the bedroom, she's coming from the bathroom in only a towel, hair wet and cascading from her bare shoulders.

Jesus, what is this seductress doing to me?

"I don't know how you do it."

"Good morning." I remove the damp towel from around my neck. "How I do what?"

"Exercise so early." She traipses to the closet to get her clothes. "It isn't even seven o'clock."

I follow and stand in the spacious closet, liking the way she looks in this space, in my room, my house. A silly grin takes over my face. We're in a full-fledged relationship.

Last night was amazing, and though Eden may not realize it, she destroyed any barriers left between us.

As if sensing my eyes on her, she twirls with her bra and panties in hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I force my gaze from hers to the clothes on the bench in the middle of the closet, the ones I picked out before exercising.

"I meant to tell you last night, I got tickets for us to take Alex to a demolition derby the weekend before I go to PEI."

This news causes an unexpected spiral in my gut at the thought of her going away followed by a quickening of my pulse. She cares about my son.

"What? You did?"

Given his obsession with smashing cars and trucks, she'd mentioned wanting to do something he'd enjoy.

"Yeah. I was talking to Tom about it, and he mentioned they have these—"

There she goes again mentioning one of those annoying boys she's always hanging around with, and I can't help myself.

“Tom?” My interruption comes out harsher than I intend and yet her expression remains inscrutable.

She deposits her clothes on the plush cushioned bench next to my clothes and walks to me, nodding. “Yes.” She plants a kiss on my chest right where my heart is. “I was telling him how much I care about you and your son.”

Another kiss to my right nipple and my cock twitches, excited. “How wild I am about both of you and that I wanted to do something special for Alex.”

She kisses my other nipple, and this time, my pectoral muscle jerks and she giggles. Then she steps back, and I’m immediately swamped with the empty, hollow feeling of loss. But she isn’t too far and when she cocks her head to one side and licks her lips, my cock hardens.

“I noticed your reaction when I mentioned August last night. It’s the same way you reacted when I just mentioned Tom. I hope you know by now that I’m not in the least bit interested in either of them...or any other man. Only you.”

She splays her palm flat over my heart, and surprisingly, with that one innocent gesture, the jealous beast deep within me slinks back to its lair, accepting of her and ready to slumber. My chest muscles loosen.

“I know.” I draw her close and kiss her forehead. “It isn’t about you. It’s my problem and I’m working on it. I trust you.”

Our mouths meet, and I taste the mint of her toothpaste and something distinctly Eden.

“Good.” She stares dreamily up at me, and my heart swells knowing I put this goofy, blissed out look on her face. “And thank you. It means a lot that you trust me.”

Not yet willing to put distance between us, I lightly kiss the tip of her nose, and she buries her face into my neck. Her warm, throaty laugh and the breath she exhales skating over my skin causes me to shudder.

If I don’t back up now, we won’t be going anywhere. I want to rip off her towel, sink so deep inside her, and spend

the day worshipping her luscious curves while she screams my name. My arms fall to my sides and I saunter to the bench.

“Walker, what’s your day like?”

“Same as usual. Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. Why?”

“I thought maybe...” Her hands slide up and around my neck. “Maybe we could skip work and hang out.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I can’t.” My fingers squeeze her waist through the towel. “I told Jerry he’s out as second-in-command, and Zuri’s in.”

Her eyes widen, understanding the significance. She’s had to listen to my rants about how incompetent Jerry is. “Oh, how’d that go?”

“It’s the right decision. Zuri will do well. She’s shadowing me today, and I’ve got at least four meetings that can’t be canceled.” I don’t mention one of those meetings is with Kirby, the investigator, and Zuri won’t be in attendance for that one.

I haven’t spoken to him in a few days, though I expect a daily update, even if it’s only a few lines in an email. So far, he hasn’t found anything concrete. Only a few rumblings that mirror Eden’s sentiments but nothing we can use, nothing to suggest Sybil’s a fraud and a thief.

“Are you sure?” She kisses the base of my throat, and I groan at how agonizing it is to turn her down.

“People have flown in from out of town to meet with us.” I grab my pants and glance at the time on my phone. “And if I stay much longer, I’m going to be late for my first meeting. I can’t keep Sybil waiting.”

It’s only a beat, but she’s suddenly lifeless in my arms like a cold, dead fish, then she pulls away. “Billie?”

I’m orphaned, missing her nearness, and internally curse my misstep. I shouldn’t have mentioned the one woman we agreed not to talk about.

This is totally on me.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have—”

“Fine.” She retreats to the bedroom. “I should go to work too.”

“Eden—” I scramble after her, but she’s already in the bathroom and locks the door behind her.

I quickly get dressed, keeping an ear out for the click of the bathroom door opening. When ready to leave, I tap on the door and call her name.

Tone flat, she mumbles, “Bye. Have a good day.” But she doesn’t open the door.

Like that’s possible.

In the limo on the way to work, I try to focus on the day ahead and go through the emails that have come in overnight. There’s an email from the head of building security at Zenith Point. The subject line reads: Urgent. Thought you would want to see this. The body of the email contains only a video attachment, and I hit play.

Speechless, I watch the altercation in the elevator unfold on the screen of my phone. Greene cornering Eden, grabbing her face. There’s no audio so I don’t know what words are exchanged, but it’s clear to see the bastard’s intimidating her, assaulting her. And she’s terrified.

“Tony. Change in plans.” I quickly google Schwartz’s residence, fingers shaking with rage. “We’re not going to the office just yet.”

“All right, boss. Where to?”

I prattle off the dead man’s Summerhill address in a smaller, upscale neighborhood in the city, and the remainder of the drive is a blur.

Tony barely puts the car into park outside of his semidetached home, and I lunge onto the sidewalk like a caged animal finally let loose.

Timing is everything. Before I have a chance to bang on the door, Greene opens it, dressed for work and ready to leave.

His beady eyes widen, shocked to see me, and his bag slips from his hand with a thud onto the floor.

I pounce and grab for both his biceps. Controlling his body, I barge into his place and slam his back against the wall.

Greene cries out, more taken by surprise than anything else. I haven't hurt him...yet.

“Walker? What the hell?”

With my forearm, I pin him in place by the throat and use my other hand to hit play on the video. “Who the fuck do you think you are? What's this?”

He watches in silence as his shocked expression morphs into one of worry. I can easily see when he has an “oh, shit” dawning.

His dark eyes, turbulent and pleading, find me. “Hey, Walker, it isn't what it looks like.”

“Really? So what exactly is it?”

Movement from my peripheral vision causes me to swing my head toward the doorway, only to see Tony standing guard at the door. We share a look, and I'm not sure if he saw the video—he could have from where he is—but it doesn't matter. He nods to tell me that he has my back.

My arm drills into Greene's larynx and I turn back to him. He gurgles about not being able to breathe.

That's the point, asshole.

Reluctantly, I ease up. I don't want him to pass out, not until he's heard me. “Answer me.”

“I'm sorry.” His body shakes. “I don't know what she means to you—”

“That's not the point. You don't intimidate and assault any woman, got it?” My full body weight pushes into him, and his eyes bulge as my forearm bears down on his neck. “Especially my woman. And that's all you need to know, asshole. Eden's my business. You so much as talk to her, and I'll hear about it. Stay the fuck away from her or this right here”—I jam my arm

once more into him with all that I've got—"is only the beginning of what will be frequent surprise visits by me."

His fingers claw at my suit sleeve, but I don't budge and wait for a sign that he understands.

He chokes out, "Walker, please."

"Say it." I ease up. "Tell me you understand."

"I do." He tries to nod his head, and I cautiously remove my arm. "I'll stay away from her."

"You better or you'll regret it."

EDEN

The acclaimed restaurant, owned by celebrity chef Samson Beaulieu, brims with Tom's family and friends, all gathered to wish him a fond farewell. In three days, he'll be in Africa.

On my way to the bar, I try not to get swallowed by the press of people and spy August strolling toward me with cocktails in hand. "Eden. Good to see you. Have a drink on me."

"Hi." I take the frothy yellow drink from him. "Why do I feel like this was for someone else?"

"Because it was." He chuckles, and a light pink stains his cheeks. "It's for Tom, but I lost him. Don't know what it's called, but it's lemony and damn too easy to drink." He slurps on his straw and skims the crowd. "Where's Walker?"

"Not sure." I moan when the sugary goodness hits my tongue. "This is good. Look, I'm sorry that I haven't been able to talk since our meeting. The past couple of days have been crazy."

A few days ago we'd last met with Damon Wheeler, our whistleblower or so we hope, to go over his story. He used to work for Billie well before Ivation and, like me, respected and admired her. So much so, Damon shared his business idea with her, and no surprise, she stole his work, fired him, launched the business, and sold it for a ridiculous amount of money.

"It's okay, but something happened?"

I can't contain a smile. "I'm selling my equity stake in Novus."

"Wow. Congratulations." He gives me a quick hug. "And Walker? He's good with that?"

"Yes. Like I've said before, he only connected me to Endeavor. He takes no credit for Novus and insists it's all me." His praise and saying it out loud, time and time again, makes it easier to stop thinking of myself as a kid playing dress-up.

"That's great. Do you have time to chat now? Do you think it's safe?"

It's been over two weeks since Walker returned from Ottawa, and we're closer than ever. That night, when we made love, and that's the only way for me to describe it, something shifted between us, subtle and unnamed.

Now, when Walker's with me, he's *with* me, more present, no longer seeking an escape hatch in case things get too serious or intimate. But regrettably, Billie still remains a hot-button topic that we avoid.

So much so, he had another meeting late this afternoon with her, and that's why we came to the party separately. Neither of us said anything, but he has no problem disparaging Greene, which I can't say I have a problem with. He talked to me about what happened in the elevator, how he'd seen the footage and confronted Greene.

The asshole won't bother me again. Thank goodness. Walker wants me to press charges, and I'm thinking about it, but I don't want to stall or confuse things with the work August and I are doing to bring down Billie.

"Earth to Eden, what's going on in there?" He pretends to knock on my head.

"Sorry, yes, we should talk." I take another sip from my quickly disappearing drink. "How's Damon since the meeting?"

Before our one and only meeting, all contact with him was online. And even after meeting in person, Damon was vague and skittish about the details. Most of his encounters with

Billie can be easily refuted by any decent lawyer. Sadly, it's a case of he said, she said.

August deposits his now empty glass on a nearby table. "Not good. He's getting cold feet."

"He understands I believe him, right?"

"Yeah, and I do too. But I'm not so sure it's enough to put his fears to rest." He frowns. "Like we've said from the get-go, our chances of any legal action are slim to none. Damon didn't patent, trademark, or copyright his idea. At most, we'll throw shade on Billie, and that's if we can get a reporter to write about it."

My stomach churns, nauseous and desperate, unable to bear the thought of giving up in spite of this being a long shot.

Billie has to get what she deserves, even if it's only damage to her reputation because of a hint of intellectual property theft. Any media on this could ruin her and would certainly cause her business partners, present and future, as well as employees to think twice.

I bite the inside of my cheek, mulling over our next move. "Should I call him?"

Damon and I bonded over our similar struggles with Billie, and while Tom and August found him, he trusts me and agreed to meet me in person.

"It wouldn't hurt, but more importantly, I think we have to move now. We need to find a reporter who'll listen. The longer we wait, the more tight-lipped he's going to get. Or worse, disappear." His pensive expression deepens. "You sure Walker won't help us?"

The weight of his words strains my muscles. I've wanted nothing more than to talk to Walker about this. I value his opinion and guidance, but that isn't an option.

Regardless of my warnings or what happened to me, he seems set in his ways and determined to do business with Billie.

"No. They're going to be business partners."

“Shit. Still? Have you told him about Damon? What she did to him?”

“I want to, but he doesn’t want to hear it. He says it’s a conflict of interest.” My arms fold around my middle to stop myself from unraveling because of the gaping wound that won’t heal. “He’d be obligated to tell her since it might impact their joint business venture.”

August knows all this; we’ve already discussed it. Walker Drummond is a dead end despite being the best person to make this a national news item.

“I don’t get it. You’re his girlfriend. He knows what Ivers did to you. That should be enough.” His jaw clenches, and the incredulity in his tone brings some comfort to the gnawing ache in my chest.

August’s support reminds me that I’m not making waves without cause, but it isn’t nearly enough. Sorrow grabs hold of my throat, cutting the air from my lungs, and I’m unable to breathe or defend Walker’s actions or make sense of them.

We met while I was fleeing Ivation. He saw my fear and anger yet we’re at opposite ends on this. And while he’s never given me any reason to think he doesn’t believe me, it’s getting harder to justify the way things are.

He won’t accept that Billie isn’t who he thinks she is. Or that I might not be the first person she’s done this to. And most of all, when I dare to face my deepest and darkest unanswered question, I can’t explain why he isn’t angry for what she did to me.

Fury simmers in my gut.

I hate how Billie takes up time and space in his life.

I truly hate how when I dwell on this for too long, I feel less than Billie in his eyes. And I am not. I’m better than she is.

August slides an arm around my shoulders, pulling me from my riotous thoughts, and wipes a stray tear sliding down my cheek. “Hey, I’m sorry. I’m a dick. I didn’t mean to dis your boyfriend.”

I didn't even realize I was crying. "It's o—"

A gruff, cutting voice comes from behind us, and I'd recognize it anywhere. "Am I interrupting?"

We both turn to face Walker, and his usually warm blue eyes are glacial and fixed on August's arm around me. My friend lets go and steps back.

"We were, um..." I struggle to explain without mentioning Billie.

A hint of a frown creases his forehead, and his hand cradles the side of my face. "Hey, you're crying. What happened?"

He scowls at August like he wants to rip out the man's throat, and my fingers curl around his wrist to draw his eyes back to me. "I'm okay. We were talking about our...crusade."

"Oh." He releases me, suddenly stiff, and straightens. "Excuse me."

I bristle but don't have a chance to respond when from behind, a muscled arm slides around my waist. It feels like the universe is conspiring to keep us at odds.

Tom drops his chin on my shoulder. "Eden. You came. I was getting worried that my new bestie wasn't here. Walker, nice to see you too."

My boyfriend nods and forces a tight smile but quickly drops it in favor of something softer—more *mea culpa*—when he looks at me. I can't bring myself to give him any reassurance that we're fine. I'm not so sure we are.

Lou and Paige join our growing group, and my arm loops Tom's waist as I try to infuse as much enthusiasm as possible into my voice. "Hey, man of the hour, are you all set for your adventure?"

"I only get an hour?" He brings me in tighter, and Walker growls loud enough to be heard over the din of the party.

All eyes stare at him, and I'm quick to smooth over the mounting tension. "No, most only get fifteen minutes, or I think that's fame. Anyway, you always steal the show."

“What can I say? I’m as ready as I’ll ever be, but this one here”—Tom hooks a thumb at Paige—“won’t give me a break. You should see the list of things she wants me to do once I get there.”

His whining is deliberately over-the-top, and Paige plays along. “Uh, mister, you’re going there to work, so damn straight I’m giving you a list of things to do. If you’re going to be a problem, you can be replaced.”

Most of us laugh, and Alouette inches to my other side, which puts more distance between Walker and me. She leans in and whispers, “Hey, thanks for introducing me to Tom.”

“Any time. He’s a good guy. I’m glad he invited you tonight. You’re hitting it off?”

She nods, grinning. “He more than invited me to the party.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m joining Project Miranda.”

“You’re going to Africa with Tom?” Suki springs to mind, and my heart aches for her.

“Yes. Not today but soon. I’ve still got to get my shots and —”

“Oh...wow.”

“Yeah. We got to talking about it when he helped move my furniture, and he mentioned Paige is always looking for volunteers. I mean, there’s no pay but I’d have room and board, food, and my work’s been amazing. They’re willing to give me the time off as a sabbatical. My job would be waiting for me. Like, how awesome is that?”

I drop my arm from Tom’s waist and turn to her. “That’s, um...are you serious?”

Paige sidles up to Alouette, clearly having overheard our conversation. “Isn’t this great?”

From only a few feet away, Walker’s sharp stare calls to me, and I fight the urge to look at him, too desperate to hear

more about Lou's news.

Paige beams from ear to ear. "Half the time, Tom's a pain in my ass, but he more than makes up for it the other half of the time. He's a dynamite recruiter."

"Right?" Tom elbows his way in. "I *am* dynamite, thank you, Paige. Eden, you should come too. You'd be another great addition to Project Miranda."

Paige snickers and glances from Walker to me, eager for a response. Neither of us react, then he clears his throat like he's going to say something, and this prompts words from my mouth.

"Ah, thanks, but I've already got a lot going on. I'll miss you." My gaze drifts from him to Lou, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Walker leaves. My knees wobble and my heart skips a beat, but I force myself to carry on. "Both of you. And Lou, if this is what you want, I'm so happy for you."

Paige clasps her hand. "I'm so lucky to have you."

My gaze searches the crowd for a dark head of hair or a tall frame and broad shoulders, but Walker's gone. I've lost him.

Suki appears from the crowd, and her gaze snags on her ex. "Hey. What did I miss?"

Lou and I share a knowing glance, and then chaos ensues as Paige, Tom, and Lou talk over each other. It's several minutes before everything's sorted out, and Suki's stunned silent. The news of Lou's impending departure is a blow to her bubble.

Regardless of how much she claimed to want an open relationship, Suki must be dying on the inside now that she may lose the woman she loves. My best friend takes Lou by the hand, and they quietly excuse themselves.

Their departure casts a strange melancholy on the group, and before the silence has a chance to consume us, my skin tingles and I feel him before I see him. The broad expanse of his chest presses against my back as he leans down to place his lips to my ear.

His voice brushes over me like a warm, comforting blanket. “We need to talk.”

Nodding, we leave the others and find a quiet spot. “Are you okay with Lou’s news?” Walker asks.

“I’ll miss her, but she has to do what’s right for her.”

“True.” He studies me, and his gaze becomes more pointed as the seconds tick by. “Why does it feel like you’re talking about more than Lou?”

“Does it?”

He releases an exasperated breath. “I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did when you mentioned your...crusade. I don’t like that we have things we can’t talk about, especially something like this.”

“Me too.”

“Is there a way past this?” He isn’t asking me to drop it, but I can’t help but feel it’s implied.

Luckily, I’m saved from saying so and veering us farther down this bumpy road, when Suki interrupts. “Sorry. Eden, I need to get out of here. Can you please come with me?”

Tears swim in her usually bright brown eyes, and my heart cracks a little as I wonder about the state of things between her and Alouette.

Walker emits a low growl but doesn’t say a word for my sake. Yes, we need to talk, but what am I to do? I swallow past the lump in my throat, torn between my best friend, who has always been there for me, and the man I’ve fallen for and yet can’t seem to get things right with.

Perhaps sensing my indecision, she narrows her gaze on Walker, just as confused as I am with his actions regarding Billie. “I know you’ve got your own shit to work out, but I need you.”

This is big. Suki claims not to need anyone, so when she asks, things are dire. Over the past several weeks, we’ve barely spent any time together, and I’ve no clue how she’s

been dealing with the breakup, let alone tonight's news about Lou leaving. I'm a shitty friend.

He places a hand on the small of my back. "Eden and I do need to talk. The sooner, the better."

The two most important people in my life stare intently at each other, and sadly, this isn't a contest where the first one to blink loses. The decision is mine, and I don't want either to lose.

"Walker..." I shift from foot to foot, not able to easily say what feels right since he isn't going to like it.

"You're going with her, aren't you?" He mashes his lips into a grim line, resigned.

I wish I could cut myself in two, help them both at the same time. "I don't think this is the best place to have this conversation and... Can we talk later or maybe tomorrow is better?"

Walker nods and offers a small smile to Suki before turning his back on me, and that's when it hits me.

We've been going about this the wrong way. Billie Ivers is the kind of thing that if left in the dark, will grow to epic proportions like a fungus or bacteria. It already feels like she's bigger than the both of us.

And given that I want to expose her and any day now, she'll be Walker's business partner, the Billie conversation is inevitable. We must talk about her.

WALKER

Eden leaves with Suki, and I sulk in the shadows, helpless and pissed off. I should go after her, but Suki needs her, and the least I can do is let them have their time together.

I just had another useless meeting with the investigator. He hasn't found anything solid on Sybil, and with the exception of one person who he hasn't been able to talk to, he's close to concluding that Eden's claims are unfounded.

And this concerns me. Eden's determined like a dog digging for a bone. She has the scent and refuses to give up, but this could backfire and ruin any chance she may have to make a name for herself.

Fuck, I don't want that to happen and yet, my hands are tied at the moment. Not that she'd want my help anyway.

Zach hands me a scotch. "Is everything okay with you and Eden?"

Grumbling thanks, I take a sip and appreciate the smoky burn of the amber liquid. Although brief, the scotch rids me of the aching chill that crept in, unwelcomed, when Eden left.

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Come on. What's going on? I like her. A lot, and especially for you."

I'm glad he likes Eden. Zach's my oldest and closest friend, but I'm confused by the way he's phrased it. "What does that mean?"

“It means she’s a better match for you than Vanessa ever was.”

I lower the glass. “What? How can you say that?” Vanessa and I crashed and burned, but we understood each other, ran in the same circles. “Eden and I don’t have a lot in common. Our worlds couldn’t be more different.”

What the fuck am I doing?

It sounds like I don’t think Eden’s right for me.

But I do.

Don’t I?

He smirks as if loving my inner turmoil. “We both know none of that matters. Look at Paige and me. We come from completely different backgrounds, but we work. I think the same can be said for you two. Eden’s real, honest, and...she doesn’t need you.”

His final words hit a little too close to Eden’s comment when I’d returned from Ottawa. Unlike Vanessa, Zach’s right. She doesn’t need me.

She’s a strong, independent woman, and while, at times, she might question her place among the people of my world, she doesn’t let them see her self-doubt. It’s only when she’s alone and even then, she’s confident in who she is—a smart and wildly talented person.

I growl, not liking his scrutiny. “Oh and that’s a good thing?”

Something cold and too much like fear nips at my chest and raises the hair on the nape of my neck. I’d be lying if Eden walking away from me hasn’t crossed my mind.

I’m under no illusion that she’s not fully capable without me. And sometimes, like tonight, she might think it’s just easier to leave all of our differences and the difficulties that come with us being together behind her.

“Yeah. Vanessa was too clingy and always wanted more from you than was possible. I love her—”

I open my mouth to protest, remind him how Vanessa gutted and betrayed me, and first and foremost, he's *my* best friend.

God, I feel like a whiny teenager.

But I don't get the chance. He holds up a hand to stop me from uttering a word. "Let me finish. I've known Vanessa for most of my life. We both have, and there's no question, I'll always have your back, but she's a good person. She was in a dark place for quite a while."

He lets that sit between us for a few beats, expression grim, and I nod. If not for him, I don't know how I'd have survived. He listened to me rail and was there for me through all the dark and perilous stages of my marriage.

"Vanessa wasn't right for you even when things were going well."

"Yeah, but I can't regret her. I'd never trade anything for Alex." I smile at the thought of my son.

Zach swirls his glass. "Of course. Alex is the best."

"I think Eden's good for me too, but things aren't so good right now."

The warm wave swelling in my chest becomes uncomfortable the longer I sit with the reality that Eden and I appear to be at odds, and I'd hoped to fix that with the investigator, but it's proving to do the opposite.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"The same thing. Sybil."

"She's never going to like Sybil, and that's understandable. Can't you just agree on that and move on?"

When I'd explained most of it to Zach, he figured it was a simple misunderstanding, and since I have no evidence to the contrary, I haven't corrected him.

Intellectual Property theft isn't something to be taken lightly, and to make that kind of accusation against a successful business person can have lasting, damaging effects.

“I wish it was that simple. We’ve tried, but it keeps rearing its ugly head. And Sybil approached me with a potential business venture that I’m considering.”

I want to tell him more, tell him about the investigator and how, if I could help Eden, I would. All of which I wish I could tell Eden. But I can’t.

“Is that why she left?”

“Partly. Suki’s dealing with the news of Lou leaving and wanted to talk.”

Until I have definitive proof either way about Sybil, my hands are tied. I must remain neutral to both parties even if I’m in love with one and friends with the other.



Tony parks the limo outside Endeavor, and it isn’t long before Eden slips into the backseat. Our gazes collide, and her smile slays me, tight and way too small for someone who should be celebrating.

She scoots onto the bench across from me, and I bite my tongue and hold back the demand to know why she’s sitting so far away from me.

“Hey, Tony.” She looks at him then me. “Hi. Thanks for picking me up, but you didn’t have to.”

It’s only been a few days since Tom’s farewell party, and we’ve spoken and texted, but this is the first time we’re face-to-face.

“I wanted to. Everything went okay?”

She nods and brushes her hair away from her face. “I’m filthy rich beyond my wildest dreams and also a little disgusted with myself.”

Marv called me this morning and suggested I call her. He didn’t tell me anything that would breach her privacy, only that she had news.

Eden sold Novus.

“Well, I hope you can get to a place where you’re proud of your accomplishment. It’s no small feat.” I gesture to the champagne chilling in an ice bucket. “We should celebrate.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have. I’ve already made plans... Suki’s waiting for me.”

I push a jittery hand through my hair, shaken at how she can’t get away from me fast enough. “Are we ever going to get past this?”

There isn’t any need to clarify what *this* is. The proverbial elephant is suffocating both of us in the back of the car.

“I don’t see how. Not unless you drop it or I do. And I’m not going to.” She crosses her arms over her chest as if to protect herself...from me.

“You and I agreed not to mix business and pleasure, and I’ve honored that. Can’t we muddle through this until it’s behind us?” I’m adamant and sincere.

“We’ve tried. Billie can’t get away with this. That’s one of the many problems with the world today. Too many people get away with bad things, and sometimes because no one’s willing to bring it out into the light. That’s how nothing changes. I can’t stay silent.”

“Eden, she may get what’s coming to her.”

“Really? Am I supposed to trust in the universe? You of all people don’t believe in that bullshit. Things don’t balance out. Bad people get away with bad stuff every day.” Her eyes narrow into thin slits, so cold and so pointed. “Have you stopped to ask yourself why you’re having such a hard time with this? Because I have, and it’s because you care about Bil-, ah, pardon, Sybil.”

Mouth suddenly dry and gritty, as if filled with sand, I choke out, “No, it isn’t that. I need you to trust me. If we can just let this go for a little longer. Be patient.”

The investigator called as I was leaving to pick her up. He sounded hopeful, said he had news, though he might sound

upbeat because he's closing this boring-ass case. I don't know.

I had to cut the conversation short, and we've arranged to speak tomorrow. I hope it's the proof I need, one way or the other, to put an end to this.

She hangs her head, shaking it back and forth. "I didn't want to do this here, like this."

My heart races at how ominous she sounds. "Do what?"

"I've been thinking, and given a lot's going on right now, with me trying to figure out what comes next, and you with Zenith Point and your...deal, I think we need some space."

"Space? What the fuck does that mean?"

"Walker, hear me out. We're both stressed with all this Bil...shit, Sybil Ivers crap, and we both have our reasons for doing what we're doing and neither is willing to budge. We both know it's a huge strain on our relationship." Despite how her voice cracks, impenetrable ice radiates off her, and I shiver like I'm in the middle of a blizzard.

"Eden, I don't think—"

She barrels over me. "I can't do this right now. Not to say too much because I know you're concerned about a conflict of interest." Her sardonic tone cuts me to the quick. Clearly, she figures it was my excuse when that's farthest from the truth. "But I'm moving forward on stuff concerning your business partner—"

"She isn't my partner and—"

"Not yet, and I think it's better if we're not together. Not now, at least."

"Not together?" The sharp crackle of intense agony rips through me. "That's it? You're ending things?"

She averts her gaze and expels a shaky breath. "Maybe it doesn't have to be forever."

"Fuck, Eden. You're the one who didn't want casual, said you couldn't do it." My aggressive tone alarms not only her but me. What the hell is happening? "Now you're out? What

happened to sticking to a relationship? Commitment? Is this really about Sybil?”

Throwing her words back at her isn't the best approach, but I'm struggling to keep hold of things, to find a way to get through to her.

“At the heart of it.” Her eyes lift to meet mine. “Yes. But it's more about you.”

“Me? Explain.”

“I've told you she's a fraud and a thief. You saw me the day we met; I wasn't making it up.”

“I never thought you were making it up.”

She viciously wipes her tears away with the back of her hand. “Dammit, I told myself I wouldn't cry.”

I lean forward, needing to be closer. “Eden, if you're hurting like I am, this should tell you that space or ending us isn't a good idea. There's got to be another way.”

“This hurts because I told you she steals from others, but yet you're still going through with this deal. I can't help but feel like... God, I didn't want to do this, but I need to say it. I've kept it in for far too long, and maybe I should have said it sooner.”

My breath stills, and she juts out her chin almost in defiance or as if to say I can't hurt her. “I can't help but feel that you going ahead with this deal means you not only don't believe me, but you're choosing her over me.”

I rear back. It would hurt less if she'd slapped me across the face. “Shit, no. You need to trust me. I haven't finalized anything... I'm still... Eden, shit, I believe you and I'd never choose anyone, well, except Alex but you understand that, over you.”

She slides toward the door, and my fingers wrap around her wrist to stop her. “No. Please, let me go. I know this is shitty timing with the demolition derby tomorrow... Alex... I'll understand if you don't want me to come but—”

“Fuck that.” My mind reels, chest aching. “Of course I want you to take him. This was your gift. Your idea.”

“Thank you.” She opens the door as tears slide silently down her cheeks, and I want nothing more than to make them stop. “Will you come with us?”

Suddenly overloaded with too many emotions, I’m numb and unable to think. “What do you want?”

“I think for Alex, it would be sweet for the three of us to go, but if you think it might be too confusing for him if I’m not around after...” A sob breaks from her as she asks, “Why does this hurt so much?”

“Why are you doing this?” I rub at my chest, and she shakes her head and drops her foot onto the asphalt.

I don’t want her to go. I wish I could say more but I can’t, not yet, but I will be honest with her. Always.

“I don’t know if I’ll come with you and Alex. I’ll sleep on it.” Icy fingers of defeat claw at my chest.

She nods and slips out of the car. I’m suddenly more alone than I’ve ever felt before. Alone and left to drown in a pit of desolation.

The back of this car is where we first met, and in some twisted way of the universe balancing things out, it seems fitting that this is where we should end.

EDEN

Vanessa Newton opens the front door, and I'm stunned to see her in Walker's house and even more so, only a day after I ended things with him.

"Eden, come in. Walker isn't able to come with you and Alex today." She ushers me inside like she's the lady of the house, and I try to ignore the sick queasiness in my stomach. "But Alex is so excited. Thank you for doing this."

"Uh, sure, of course." I shove my trembling hands into the pockets of my pants and glance around the foyer, hoping Alex is nearby and we can go.

Her gaze never veers from me, and my skin crawls at her scrutiny.

"Vanessa, where's Alex?"

"Oh, Janice just made him a snack. He should be out in a few minutes. You have time, don't you?" She looks at her watch.

"Yes. We've got a couple of minutes." Suddenly, I wish I'd rented a car instead of Tony driving us so I could make some excuse to leave now.

"I'm not sure if Walker told you, but please bring him back here when you're done. He's staying with his father for the next week. It's his vacation week with Alex." She laughs nervously and plays with the ends of her hair. "Oh, I guess you already know that."

Walker hasn't told me anything nor should he, but I paint on a smile and nod. I can't tell if Vanessa's fishing or only doing the motherly thing. More than likely, it's a little of both.

Funnily enough, the week I planned to visit with my mother is the same week Walker took off for his trip with Alex. For one fleeting moment, when we'd both realized we'd be off during the same timeframe, I contemplated inviting both of them to PEI. The idea no longer felt outlandish like when my mother first suggested it, and having Alex with us would be fun.

But that was before I ended things.

"Are you going anywhere with the time you have for yourself?" My question is more to fill the silence than because I care.

"Maldives."

"Oh. Nice." I have nothing more to add. I haven't been outside Canada and have no clue where the Maldives is, only that it's a place for rich people.

This torturous waiting finally ends when Alex barrels down the hall, laughing. He whoops at the sight of me and launches himself into my arms. I drop to my knees and envelop his small, wiry body in my arms.

"Eden, hi." His tiny arms wrap tight around my neck, and I'm taken by his surprising strength for a little guy and nearly topple from my knees onto the floor.

"Hey, Mr. A. Are you ready for the demolition derby?"

He pulls back, one arm still around my neck, and thrusts a toy truck at me. "Do you think they'll have a truck like this?"

His smile is so big and so bright, and I nearly cry at how much he looks like his father. Gah, this kid.

My chest aches with longing for Walker. I wish he was here so we could do this together, but we both ruined the chances of that.

I get to my feet and take his hand. "I don't know, maybe. But there's going to be so many, we're going to have to pick a

favorite. Do you think you can do that?”

“Of course.” He jumps up and down.

Vanessa hovers like a mother hen. “Honey, you need sunscreen.”

Janice enters the foyer. “Let me put some on him now, and I’ll put it in his bag for later.”

Alex groans and scrunches his tiny nose. “Can’t Eden do it?”

“Hey, we’ll both have to lather up again. I can do it then.” I shoot out a bare, pale arm. “I turn into one big freckle without it, and we don’t want you to burn. Let Janice do it and I’ll double-check what you’ve got in your bag. Does he have a hat?”

Janice hands me his backpack. “Come on, we’ll be quick.” The two trudge off and I unzip his bag.

Vanessa still looms, and I want to be done with this uneasiness. “You know, if you’ve got somewhere to be, it’s okay. You can go.”

She wrings her hands together, and the corners of her mouth push up into a wishy-washy smile. “You’re lucky, you know.”

I slide Alex’s water bottle back into his bag. “What?”

“You have everything I wanted.”

Something prickly and burning like hot oil splattering on the stovetop bursts in my chest and sends sparks of blazing apprehension through me. So much for getting her to go without incident.

“Pardon?”

“Walker loves you. He respects you. It’s all I ever dreamed of getting from him. There were times when I thought we were close...I was close to getting that, but I just couldn’t quite grasp it.”

I swear I've swallowed my tongue. No words will form. What am I supposed to say?

Walker is the last thing I want to talk about with her. Especially now when we're over. But Vanessa does nothing to fill the silence, waiting for me to speak, and I've got nothing but the unvarnished truth.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you want me to say." I stare down the hallway, worried that Alex could come back at any moment. "I don't understand."

"Everything I did...the affair, the nasty divorce. I only made things difficult and ugly."

Oh, no, she did not just go there.

Oblivious to my unease, she continues as if driven by an insatiable need to get this off her chest. Fine, I can understand that, but why with me? Why now?

She perches on the edge of one of the antique Queen Anne chairs. "Sorry. I went about it the wrong way. All I hoped was that he'd want me back. That he'd forgive me and we'd be stronger than ever. I never loved Phillip or even cared about him."

Phillip Wentworth, the man she had the affair with, Walker's close friend.

"Can you understand what I did?"

Her question throws me for another loop. She expects me, no, wants me to answer her.

I'm close enough to her to see how erratic her heart beats at the pulse point in her neck. She's nervous, most probably the same, if not more than me. And somehow, this realization helps, gives me the courage to answer her.

"You wanted to get Walker's attention. Make him care."

She nods and quickly wipes at a tear at the corner of her eye. "He's driven, very ambitious. I'm sure you see it."

I nod, not wanting to talk, hoping she'll say what she needs to say and go.

“After Alex was born, things changed for me. I no longer felt like myself and I withdrew. Thank goodness for Breanna, his nanny, and Janice. They took care of Alex for me. And Walker did too. He tried but couldn’t reach me, and I refused to see someone. Eventually, he retreated into his work, more so than ever. But he always made time for Alex. You see, it took me longer than either of us would have imagined to get out of my postpartum depression.”

“Vanessa... I have no idea what you must have gone through.” It’s true. My heart breaks for her. For Alex and for Walker. “It wasn’t your fault, and from what both Walker and Alex have said, you’re a great mother.”

She gives me a watery smile. “When I came out of it, I wanted our old life, but too much time had passed for the transition to be simple. I expected so much and Walker... I can’t say how it was for him, but to me it looked like I’d lost him to his work. At one point I even thought he was having an affair.” She violently shakes her head as if to exile the preposterous notion once and for all. “That’s how I got the idea, a way to get his attention.”

Her story isn’t new but it’s still sad. I can’t figure out what she hopes to gain by telling me this. Does she want me to step aside, give her another chance with her ex-husband?

My stomach roils and tears burn at the back of my eyes. I ended things with Walker, and I suppose, now, anything is possible.

She keeps talking, not to me like I first thought. No, she just needs to say this, and I keep an eye on the hall, not wanting her son to overhear or see his mother torn up like this.

“I can see you won’t make the same mistakes I made. You’re way more confident than I ever was at your age.” Her words grab hold of me, and my initial scoff withers at the back of my throat.

Normally, I’d challenge her or anyone like her. She easily fits into Walker’s world. Heck, this is her world. I was intimidated the moment I set eyes on Vanessa. With long, sleek dark hair, tall and lean, and her chic, expensive

wardrobe. Next to her, it was hard not to feel like a bumbling, dowdy girl.

Yet as she talks, her insecurities are more apparent than ever, and I can't deny the epiphany that this strange and surreal conversation brings.

Another person's acceptance of you doesn't equal self-esteem or self-confidence, and for all the ways Vanessa Newton belongs in the world of the wealthy, upper class, she's no more comfortable than I am. She may even be less so.

While I'm stuck in my head, she waltzes over to my side. "Promise me you'll go easy on him." She lowers her voice almost conspiratorially though there's a tenderness to her voice that confirms just how much she still loves Walker Drummond, likely always will. "My betrayal..."

A sob wrenches from her closed lips, and she squeezes her eyes shut as her hand covers her mouth.

"It's okay." My reassurance feels weak though I mean it from deep in my soul.

Her eyes flash open and she squeezes my hand. "God, I never meant to hurt him, and I can make all the excuses in the world for why I did it, but the truth is, I don't know. It was irrational. I was desperate. Not in my right mind."

I nod, swallowing back the tears threatening to join hers.

"Give him time, make allowances for him. For his distrust and possessiveness. I did that to him and for that, I'll always be sorry."

My mouth opens, and I'm not sure what to say when Alex careens toward us. His small body knocks into us and Vanessa clings to me, laughing. "Alex, honey, you've got to be careful."

She crouches down to his level and pulls him in for a long hug. Then she kisses the top of his head and stands. "Goodbye, Janice. Thanks so much. Alex, you be good for Eden and Daddy."

Vanessa ruffles his thick head of hair and turns to me. Troubled brown eyes silently appraise me, and I want to squirm.

“Goodbye, Eden. It was lovely to finally have a chance to chat. You two have a wonderful time.”

WALKER

“*I* don’t care what she’s doing. Tell her I’m here and have to talk to her now.” I march past Sybil’s assistant into her large office.

Within minutes, Greene appears in the doorway, smug as shit and all casual, like we’re buddies. Though I don’t miss the way his leg shakes nervously. Is he thinking about the last time we saw each other? I hope so.

“Hey, Walker, Billie wasn’t expecting you. She’s busy right now. We’re in the middle of a call with Shanghai and—”

His friendly demeanor pulls a humorless laugh from deep in my throat. “She’s got two minutes to get in here or she’ll regret not talking to me.”

I don’t usually do business this way—by throwing around my weight and threatening ultimatums—but in this instance, it’s necessary.

After meeting with the investigator, I headed straight to Ivation to confront Sybil. Kirby finally found something. Sybil had gone to great lengths to hide her illegal activity, but like cracking a walnut, once he hit the right spot, everything sprang loose.

Greene blanches. I mean business. He mumbles something about getting her and goes.

Not long after, Sybil strides into the office, annoyed. “Walker, really, what’s your problem?”

I turn from the window to face her. I'm already incensed, and I haven't even said a word to her. "Shut the door."

She stiffens and does as told. Meanwhile, Greene lingers on the other side of the glass wall, chewing on his thumb and pacing.

"I don't appreciate you coming in here like this." She drops the pen in her hand onto the desk and glowers at me. "Explain yourself."

When I think of all the time I wasted being at odds with Eden over this woman...my insides sting and fester like an infected wound.

"No, that's what you're going to do." I narrow my gaze and drop the bomb. "Nilo Osborne."

I'll give her credit, she doesn't so much as flinch at the name. Only the tiniest twitch of an eyebrow suggests I'm on the right track.

"Who?" Despite the question, she knows what this is about.

"We've known each other for a long time, and because of that, I gave you far too much leeway. When I first met Eden, you had the chance to explain, tell me why she was fired from Ivation, but you passed it off as miscommunication."

"Not this again." She sneers and refuses to look me in the eye. "She wanted me to back her idea, and when I said no, she got angry with me and lied in retaliation. Told you and anyone who would listen that I tried to take her idea. Please. Like I need to resort to that. Look at my track record."

Her story has changed. Before, when she first explained things to me, she kept it simple, made it seem inconsequential and an unfortunate ending, nothing more. Now, she's more elaborate and overly defensive, making accusations of her own.

Yeah, she's lying.

Time to go in for the kill.

“I did some digging of my own. Pantheon. It isn’t yours.” This is the joint venture she thinks we’re going in on.

Still indignant and sticking to the role of the aggrieved party, she taps her foot on the carpet impatiently and doubles down. “Walker, I don’t have time for this bullshit. If Eden’s withholding and this is your way of getting into her panties, don’t drag me into it. You can’t go around accusing me of these kinds of things.”

Her jab misses the mark, and she knows it when I narrow my gaze and chart a path toward her.

“Are all the start-ups that you sold for millions stolen from poor unsuspecting entrepreneurs looking to you as a mentor?”

She widens her stance and squares her shoulders, but the move does nothing to hide the slight tremble in her frame.

“Lies. I don’t know who you’ve been talking to or why you’d even think any of this is true. You know me.”

“I thought I did, but clearly, I was mistaken. Here’s what’s going to happen.” Now in front of her, I tower over her petite frame. “The Pantheon deal’s dead. I’m out and I’ve talked to the other investors; they’re out too.”

Her body spasms like she’s been tasered and her mouth gapes open. She may be in shock, but I’m not finished.

“You’re also giving all the work done to date on Pantheon to Osborne, the rightful owner, including the team working on it. At no cost.”

Aghast, she spins away from me toward the door. “You’re out of your fucking mind—”

My hand shoots out to grab her bicep. “You aren’t listening to me. Pantheon is Nilo’s. I saw his work and talked to those involved in the process of developing the proposal.” I pause to punctuate my next words clearly and slowly so that it sinks through her denial. “Those. People. Are. His. Witnesses.”

Her eyes are cold and hard on me, and she remains silent, though her bravado begins to slip as her lips quaver.

Now isn't the time to let up, and I take another crack at her brick wall. "Nilo's a smart guy, and I love his vision. Sadly, I see why you wanted his idea, but how could you? It took him more than a year of work, and then in a matter of days, he lost everything because he trusted you."

Many years ago Sybil founded a nonprofit to help entrepreneurs succeed by offering guidance, mentorships, and networking at no cost to them. Both far and wide, she received accolades for all her great work, but her motives weren't altruistic.

The organization serves as her personal pool of business ideas from which she steals and pawns them off as her own.

Her dazed look pleads with me. "Walker, why are you doing this? Can't you see he's lying? These people can't cut it and because of that, they try to blame me."

"And his legal problems—nice try, by the way, at trying to bury him under to keep him quiet—that stops today. Get your lawyers to back off and you leave him alone. Are we clear?"

Something shifts in her look. "And if I don't?"

"This will only be the beginning. Do you want to talk about Michaels and Viani?"

I throw out two more names of people she's done the same to. Sybil visibly pales and staggers backward into a chair.

These situations aren't as solid as Osborne, given the time that's passed, but if enough of them talk, the proof will matter less because just the sheer number of them will speak volumes about the fraud she is.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Sybil, I will expose you if you don't do as I say, and the media and business community will do the rest. You've got twenty-four hours to pull the plug. If I don't get a call from Osborne by then, you'll be ruined."

I brush past a stunned and speechless Sybil and march out of the Ivation offices. As promised, Tony's in the car and ready to take me to Eden's. I'm in a daze, so anxious to see her and hoping I'm not too late that I don't realize when Tony lowers the window to announce we're here.

Her flight's today. I don't know when, only that it's this afternoon. And that tidbit of information I got off Suki's social media story about packing for their trip.

As I stroll up the walkway to her front door, Eden steps outside with her suitcase in hand and Suki at her back.

She pauses midstep. "Walker?"

Suki nudges her shoulder but gives me a scornful look. "What are you doing here?"

I only have eyes for Eden. "Can we talk?"

Her roommate huffs and takes the handle of Eden's bag. "Your timing sucks." She wheels the luggage past me. "Eden, I'll wait for you at the curb. Our Lyft will be here in five minutes. We don't want to miss our flight."

Eden only has eyes for me. A vibrant green, swirling with confusion and something akin to longing, or is it regret?

Licking her lips, she gives her head a little shake. "I don't have much time. What's wrong?"

Yesterday she'd taken Alex to the car thing, and I could have joined them—God, I'd wanted to—but I didn't trust myself to keep it together. And I couldn't let Alex see the tension between us; it would only worry and confuse him.

Now, seeing her and knowing she could get on a plane within hours, I wish I'd given myself yesterday to spend with her. Though it would have been foolish. Nothing was settled yesterday.

Today's a different story. Now I have what I need to settle things, but if this doesn't work or it isn't enough, this could be our last time together.

My chest caves in on itself at the thought. Hating the distance between us and needing to touch her, I grab both her hands.

"I'm sorry. Suki's right, my timing sucks, leaving things to the eleventh hour, but I only just resolved things."

"What are you talking about?"

“I wanted to tell you sooner but couldn’t. Not until I had evidence.”

“Walker, are you okay? I don’t understand.”

“I found someone else who Sybil stole from. IP theft just like what she tried to do to you. I confronted her and walked away from the joint venture. I’m trying to make things right.”

“What?” Her eyes widen and she tries to pull from my grasp, but I won’t let her. “Wait a sec. You’ve been working on this for a while and wanted to tell me sooner?”

I’m dumping a lot on her, and by the way she furrows her brow and nibbles on her lip, she’s trying to work through it all.

“Yes. I hired an investigator from the moment I realized your ex-boss was my potential business partner.”

“You? Holy...” Hurt flickers in her gaze but it’s quickly replaced by insult. “Why didn’t you tell me? It would’ve changed everything.”

“I didn’t want to get your hopes up. IP theft isn’t easy to prove or prosecute and though I believed you,”—this is where things get tricky and I can only hope she understands—“I also thought you might have it wrong.”

She tugs on my hold. “Wha—”

“Eden,” Suki hollers from the sidewalk, and we both turn to look at her. “Our car’s here. Let’s go.”

She points to the Volvo idling by the curb as the driver pops the trunk.

I tighten my grasp on her. “Hear me out. Greene’s a piece of work. I’ve never liked him, and I wondered if he’d somehow lied to you and Sybil and played you against each other.”

She releases a snort of irritation and yanks once more on my grip. “And what, Sybil was just an unwitting accomplice?”

Her gaze drifts past me to her friend and the car waiting to take her away from me. I’m not letting her go.

I nod, not able to defend my thinking now that I know the truth. “Foolishly, I didn’t want to believe that someone I’d trusted and known for years was capable of something so despicable.”

Eyes back on me, everything about her softens at my revelation. “And now?”

“Sybil will pay for what she’s done. You were right, there’s more of them out there, and while many of those robbed will never get any tangible restitution, we can expose her. End her. I want to help you in any way I can.”

Her silence and hesitancy intensifies my sinking dread that I’m too late, and it almost causes me to heave.

Shit. I can’t have lost her. There’s no way I’m giving up on her. On us.

“Eden, can you forgive me? I never chose Sybil over you, even when I gave her the benefit of the doubt. I swear. I was on your side. Always.”

“You could’ve told me. It would’ve stopped the doubts...” She pauses when her voice cracks, and when she starts again, her words are fainter and more vulnerable. “I thought you didn’t believe me.”

“Fuck, no.” My teeth clack as my jaw clenches. I did this. “No way. I hate that you doubted yourself. Us. I never wanted that. I tried to tell you without telling you.” Clearly, I did a shitty job. “I asked you several times to trust me. To be patient.”

She nods, hopefully remembering those moments, but it does nothing to lessen the tension in her features.

“We also found someone who Billie stole from and a reporter who’s interested in potentially doing a story. She won’t commit to anything until she verifies what we’ve given her.” She sighs, already defeated. “Though I fear it might not be enough.”

“I can help with that. I’ve got enough with Nilo Osborne for a story, and if the reporter you’ve contacted won’t do it, I know at least half a dozen who will.”

She clasps her fingers around my hands and inches closer. “Oh my God, Walker, thank you.” Her eyes shine with unshed tears. “I wish you’d told me. I’d like to think I’d have waited.”

“I wanted to and maybe I should have. I told myself until I could put this to rest, it was best to not say anything. I tried to stick to our agreement about not bringing business into our relationship.”

“Our relationship...do we still have one?” Her small, tentative smile aches with regret. “I shouldn’t have hit pause on us.”

“We gotta go.” Suki’s words hit like she’s right beside us, and her tone suggests her annoyance. “C’mon, Eden.”

She opens her mouth, and before she can tell me goodbye—I’m not taking that chance—I let go of her hands and curl one of mine around her nape.

My fingers gently squeeze her neck, and with that simple connection, I hope she can feel that I’ve fallen in love with her and won’t ever let her go.

“I never accepted the pause. I always intended on coming after you.” I bend my head and drag her face close to mine until our foreheads touch. “Eden, I love you.”

EDEN

Walker's mouth claims mine, and a groan wrenches free of him when he deepens the kiss. The hand at the back of my neck tightens as his other draws my body flush against his.

Someone taps on my arm, and I reluctantly break our kiss, a little startled and concerned. Suki stands only inches from my face. Her nostrils flare and her eyes are as sharp and thin as a knife's blade.

"We're going to miss our flight if you don't get your ass in that car now. You can talk to him when we get there." She throws Walker a nasty, exasperated look, and I shudder to think how she'd look at him if she *didn't* like him.

He strengthens his hold on me. "Stay, and I promise to get you to Summerside as planned to spend the week with your mom and Suki tomorrow."

"What?" I say at the same time Suki says, "Oh, no, you don't. You'll get her in bed and her brain will be mush in no time flat. She'll do whatever you ask."

Insulted, I scoff. "Hey, give me some credit here. I want to see my mom." While all that is true, I'm also curious about his offer. "How could you get me there tomorrow?"

My best friend nudges me once more. "Aw, hell, you can FaceTime him twenty-four seven for all I care. Besides, you aren't going to be halfway around the world." The reference to Alouette isn't lost on me nor is the flash of sadness in her eyes. "You'll see him in ten days."

Perhaps sensing she's determined to get me on the flight, Walker pulls at my waist to get my attention. "You can take my private plane. We'll have you flying out tomorrow afternoon and you'll be there in time for dinner."

In unison, Suki and I say, "Private plane?" But she isn't done. "Of course. Why didn't you offer the plane before she booked her ticket?"

My annoyance flares, and I stab my friend with an irritated glare. "Suki, enough. Walker and I need to talk, and I'll be there tomorrow. Just leave my suitcase at the curb, and I'll call my mom to tell her."

"Are you for real?" She pouts, and her shoulders roll inward, but in the next instant, something shifts and she dons a genuine smile. "Shit, I'm sorry. You two talk and I'll see you tomorrow."

She leans in for a hug, and I hold her a little longer than usual. For these past few days, we've both been in a sad place, missing the ones we love, and no one more than Suki knows how much I want things to work out with Walker.

His news about Billie isn't shocking. I know firsthand she's a liar and thief, but his activities are a revelation that I need time to fully process.

At first, I was comforted that I had his support all this time but also upset to have been kept in the dark. And while he had good reasons—and on a logical level, it's all acceptable—I only wish he'd told me sooner.

But I suppose, if he had, then he wouldn't be the prudent, honest, and upstanding businessman I respect and admire. How can I fault him for that?

He holds my hand while Tony deposits my suitcase in the trunk, and Suki gets into the Volvo. She waves as the car pulls away, then Walker steers me toward the limo.

We talk some more about his conversation with Billie, how he killed the Pantheon deal and made her give everything to Nilo Osborne that was rightfully his. He also fills me in on everything the private investigator unearthed.

I shouldn't be happy to hear there could be two more people with similar stories, and who knows how many more, but the more we have, the better our chances of getting this into the media.

It's our only weapon against Billie, and on this note, we call August and fill him in. He offers to contact Nilo and start the ball rolling with the reporter. I even suggest we arrange for Nilo and Damon to meet.

When we get to Walker's, I'm ushered upstairs to his room, and he shuts the door behind him.

"Where's Alex? Don't you have him for the next two weeks?"

He removes his tie and tosses it onto the dresser. "He's at a sleepover. We leave for Danville in two days."

I nod and swallow against the sudden flurry in my throat, wishing I could go with them. That's impossible.

He owns a heritage home in Quebec's Eastern Townships and had shown me pictures of what I'd call his mansion. It's beautiful, and Walker likes to spend a couple of weeks there at different times throughout the year.

"Nice." I drop my eyes to the floor, unable to look at him without baring my longing and melancholy.

At least we have now, the time we so desperately need, even if passing.

In one long stride, he's in front of me, and his hands cup my face. His thumb traces my bottom lip, and my eyes snag on his simmering blue gaze. Then his head dips and he softly presses his mouth against mine.

Suddenly ravenous for him, I slide my hands underneath his shirt and up his back, trying to bring him closer, but he slows my efforts and plants gentle kisses against my mouth.

"Thank you for being here." Another kiss and he pulls back to stare at me. "Thank you for hearing me out." His lips meet mine, and as my tongue attempts to spear between his lips, he's gone once more.

I expel a frustrated hum from the back of my throat. This is sheer torture. His kisses, while divine, aren't nearly enough. He laughs as goose bumps fire up my arms and I quiver.

“Walker, please.” I press onto the tips of my toes and reach for his mouth.

At first, he veers to the side, and I get his stubbly cheek. Then he gathers my dress and hikes it up to expose my thong. His fingers dig into my backside, and he groans as he grinds his erection into me.

“God, I love your ass.” His mouth crushes mine. “Your mouth.” He thrusts up and against me, and I moan and my thighs shake.

“Oh, Walker, stop teasing me. Let me show you how much I love you.”

He stills, gaze locking with mine and his pupils darkening to near coal. “Eden, you stole my heart from the moment you dove into my car. And I only say stole, not because I wouldn't give you my heart—I would. Every single time. Willingly.—but because I had no idea it was for the taking.”

Luckily, for most of my life, I've believed in myself. Sure, I've had my moments of self-doubt and insecurities, but for the most part, I have self-confidence. My mother helped me believe in my smarts, my will, and that if I put my mind to anything, I would succeed. I didn't need another person to make me whole.

And I still believe that now, even with moments of doubt, but having Walker look at me the way he is right now—giving me his heart, unconditionally—it's a heady, all powerful and intoxicatingly beautiful feeling.

I can't explain it and how I feel for him—there are no words.

“I'd steal your heart any day and now that I have it, I'm never giving it back.” My tongue flickers along his fevered lip, savoring the salty, masculine taste of him.

“Take it. It's yours. I'm yours.” His mouth covers mine, and the punishing kiss leaves me gasping for air and wanting

more of him.

His tongue invades my mouth and lures shameless whimpers from me that I hardly recognize as mine. One hand fists my hair as his rough, stubbled jaw brushes against my cheek as he releases a pleasurable moan.

I allow myself to sink into him, us, without any doubt as to how this man feels for me or if we belong together.

It doesn't matter if our worlds don't mesh; we do.



“Oh, my goodness, his lips are blue.” Mom grabs the beach towel, gets to her feet, and ambles to where Walker and I stand at the edge of Bedeque Bay in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

“Alex, time to get out.” Walker waves for him to join us on the shore.

His son isn't too far out, only waist deep, and despite the chilly temperature of the water, Alex laughs and splashes as he trudges toward us.

Taking the towel from my mother, I crouch to his level with my arms open wide. He rushes into my embrace, laughing and burrowing his face into my neck. Walker chuckles, and Mom uses the edge of her T-shirt to dry the top of his head.

“Did you have fun?” I murmur into his soft, damp cheek.

Nodding, he pulls back and grips the towel around him, likely now feeling the disparate temperatures of the cold water and balmy summer breeze. “Yes. Can I have a snack and go back in?”

“Snack? It's dinner time.” Suki ambles down the sandy slope toward the blanket spread out on the ground. “I was coming to get all of you. I'm starving and it's the cocktail hour.”

Walker scoops his son into his arms and grabs my hand. “You don’t have to tell me twice. Who wants a martini?”

Alex fills the air with squeals of glee while the three of us—Mom, Suki, and I—call out for a drink.

After a long and wonderful night with Walker at his home, I woke up the next morning not prepared to part ways. I didn’t know if Walker wanted to come to PEI with me, to meet my mom and hang out with a bunch of women, instead of a quiet week with his son in Quebec, but it was worth a try.

Over breakfast, I invited him, and I barely got the words out before he was making calls and switching his plans to leave with me and Alex that afternoon.

When we got here, I expected Suki to sulk given we’d planned an all-girls’ getaway, but she and Alex bonded within minutes, and she was nothing but thrilled to see all was good between Walker and me. And my mother was over the moon to meet the man I love.

“I was going to grill lobsters tonight. How does that sound?” Mom opens the door to the beach house to resounding agreement from all.

Suki beelines for the cabinet where she pulls out a bottle of Grey Goose, olives, and glasses. “Walker, work your magic. Mrs. C, I’ll help you get dinner started.”

While my man gets busy with the drinks, Alex and I mosey to the bedrooms for clean clothes and his bath. Once dry and in warm clothes, he sits cross-legged in front of me on the floor while I comb his hair.

Alex twists to face me. “Eden, I really like it here, and I really like your mom.”

I smile and place the comb on my thigh. “I’m so glad to hear you’re having a good time, and guess what?”

He cocks his head to one side and wrinkles his brow, curious. “What?”

“My mom really likes you too. She told me how much she loves having you around.” I ruffle his almost dry head of hair.

“And I do too.”

Tonight marks the halfway point in our vacation, and a little bit of gloom nips at my chest. Soon, we’ll be on our way home.

“Do you think we could come back here again?”

I pause, uncertain how to answer. While I wish for a life with Walker and all the years ahead that will see Alex grow from a loving boy into a strong and kind man, Walker and I haven’t gotten that far. I don’t want to confuse Alex or offer him false promises.

Just then, his father appears in the doorway with our drinks in hand. “I don’t see why we can’t come back.” He hands me a glass and helps me to my feet. “Maybe not this house, but one like it, for sure. And maybe we could invite Paige and Zach next summer? What do you say, Eden?”

He slides an arm around my waist and tucks me into his side. Alex does the same to my other side and stares up at me expectantly.

I sound almost shy, though I’m more overcome with emotion. “I’d love that.”

WALKER

I saunter through the beach house and double-check every room to make sure Alex hasn't left anything behind. Eden and Blythe have taken him down to the water for one last time, and I don't envy their challenge. He isn't going to want to leave.

Today, we head to Charlottetown for a few nights before all four of us fly home. Once back in Toronto, Blythe will stay on for about a week before heading home to Winnipeg. These two weeks down east have been amazing, and every day, I'm grateful Eden and I worked things out, and I can't stop myself from planning our future.

As I pass the upstairs bathroom, a faint sound of crying hits me from the other side of the door. Suki's the only one left in the house, and she said she'd be down in a minute.

At the door, hand poised to knock, I hesitate. For the most part, we've gotten along on this trip though there have been a few times we've butted heads. And I can't tell if it's because she's threatened by my existence, worried that it'll somehow change her relationship with Eden, or if she's dealing with the loss of Lou. She loves Lou, that much is clear, no matter what she has done or said.

My knuckles rap against the wood. "Suki, you okay?"

Her sniffles stop. "Um, yeah."

"Eden and B are down by the water with Alex. Do you want to join them?"

“Ah, no, I’ll wait for them here.”

“Okay.” I’m about to leave but stop. What have I got to lose? “Hey, Suki, do you want to talk about it?”

Voice sharp and cautious, she asks, “Talk about what?”

“Whatever’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bo—”

I cut off her defense tactic. “Listen, I’m not here to mess with your relationship with Eden. She has enough love for both of us.”

She whips open the door, which is what I hoped for, and glowers at me. “I’m not worried about that. Nothing can come between Eden and me.”

I hold up my hands and smile. “Hey, I’ve no doubt. That’s my point.” I lean against the doorjamb so she can’t shut the door and stare down at her. “So if it isn’t Eden, then it’s Lou.”

She pales beneath her bronze tan and purses her lips. “We’re not doing this.”

“Okay. You don’t have to say anything. Just listen. From one commitment-phobe to another.”

Her mouth opens, most probably to protest, but she must see something in my face, something that causes her to change her mind, and she closes it.

“You love Lou. I don’t know the two of you that well, but it’s clear to see. And now that she’s gone, you’re miserable. Maybe even feeling like you’ve lost your chance to tell her how you feel or that you fucked up.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Fair enough. I’m just saying it like I see it. You haven’t lost your chance. She’s only in Africa, not gone. And it’s never too late to tell her how you feel.”

She pushes past me, heading for the stairs, but she doesn’t run. Her paces are slow and measured, and she glances back at me every second or so, almost as if urging me to go on.

“Take it from me. I know it’s scary to put yourself out there. Especially if you’ve been hurt before. I’d long since given up on love and relationships, believing I’d had my one chance and it’d been blown to bits and along with it, my heart. But Eden changed all that.”

She casts a soft, pleased smile at me and nods before heading down the stairs.

I’m lucky enough to have found Eden, a woman I admire and who amazes me daily, and best of all, she adores my son.

And I’m lucky enough to have found love again and not just any love, but a one-of-a-kind love. Before, with others, they needed me to rescue or support them like Vanessa or provide social stability and credibility like Sybil.

Eden...at first, I not only struggled to trust her and accept my growing feelings for her, but I had nothing she wanted, and that’s where I was wrong. My riches and power meant nothing to her; she only wants my heart.

That’s it.

And as soon as I realized that, everything else fell into place. Giving her my heart was easier than I thought because she already had it.

I feel the same is true for Suki and Lou. Suki fears she can’t give Lou what she wants or keep her because she’ll fail. And I want to help her see the possibilities of taking a chance, and the pitfalls of doing nothing.

Once we’re downstairs, she nears the front door, and my fingers circle her wrist to gently tug her back to the top one of the two steps that lead from the foyer into the rest of the house. We sit side by side.

“I don’t want you to miss out on something phenomenal. Lou loves you.”

“I pushed her away. I’m the reason she left.” She picks at a loose thread on her shorts.

“Okay, you pushed her away. For sure, you hurt her.”

She winces and utters a growl but doesn't lash out. She only nods and bows her head.

“Hey, I'm not saying this to make you feel like shit. You know I goofed with Eden, a few times. And maybe she did too, but look at us now. If you don't take a risk, nothing can change. What have you got to lose?”

Her head snaps up, terror in her eyes. “Everything.”

“Really? Nah. I don't know your story, but from where I'm looking, this is about fear and control.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes like I'm completely clueless.

“No one likes to get hurt, but when you do, there is a sick silver lining to it all.”

“What?”

“It reminds us that we're alive, taking risks, living life to the fullest. And control...” I poke at my chest. “This is my problem more than anything else. The thing about control is, none of us really have any. We're not controlling shit even when we think we are. We're hiding. Nothing can happen to you if you do nothing. And we confuse that stasis for control.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Look at me.” I wait until her gaze meets mine. “I'm living proof that you can get hurt, think you're done with love and relationships, and live to have something bigger and better.”

“Bigger and better?” A slow grin sweeps across her face. “This is how you feel about my girl?”

“Definitely.” I beam back at her and bump her shoulder playfully. “And she's my girl.”

We both laugh and in that same moment, Eden opens the front door, nearly stumbling at the sight before her—the two of us on the step, laughing.

She eyes us suspiciously. “Uh-oh, what are you two up to?”

Alex bounds in after her. “Daddy, we gotta go. Blythe promised me ice cream as soon as we get to Charlottetown.”

Just beyond the door, Eden's mother mouths sorry. Good old bribery works every time and was most probably a last resort to get Alex away from the water.

I chuckle and wink at her. "All right. We're coming. Why don't you and Blythe get in the car, and we'll be there in a sec?"

He eyes me skeptically. "Daddy, is it gonna be a second or forever? You do this all the time."

The women snicker at his dramatic sigh as he levels me with his no-nonsense stare, and I shake my head sheepishly.

"I promise, we'll be quick. I want ice cream too."

He shouts his approval and stomps off with Blythe. Eden inches out the door backward, never taking her eyes off us. "Should I be worried? What were you doing?"

Now on our feet, I hook an arm around Suki's neck and lead the way out the door. "We're bonding over our love for you."

EPILOGUE

Eight Months Later

Eden slips off her shoes, a small package in her hand, and plants a quick kiss to my mouth. “Miss me?”

“Always.” I push my chair from the desk and stand. “How are things with Pantheon?”

After working with August to expand his business, she quickly realized the critical thinking and problem-solving aspects of running a business excite her. So when Sybil gave Nilo Osborne back Pantheon, Eden was quick to offer her services as a consultant. She has been working with him ever since and taking on new clients.

My hand in hers, she pulls me to the leather couch in our home office that we share. “Good. We’re still trying to fix the app. I wish Suki was here.”

After we returned from PEI, Suki spent almost another month miserable and lonely before she finally caved and followed Lou to Africa. Eden was thrilled albeit a little lost without her best friend.

Shortly after Suki joined Project Miranda, she and Lou called with great news. They were back together and planned to buy a house once they returned to Toronto. For Eden and me, this only reaffirmed our belief that no relationship is without problems, but with love and trust, things can work out.

At that time, Eden didn't need another housemate; she could afford to live on her own. But on the rare occasion when she wasn't at my place, she dreaded going home to an empty apartment. She wasn't used to living alone and didn't like it.

So before she could start the hunt for a new housemate, I asked her to move in. It was a big step but one I was more than ready for. And prepared for a battle, I even had Alex lined up to help persuade her, but she surprised me and agreed on the spot.

On the couch, I pull her legs onto my lap and begin to work on her calf muscles.

"I already told you, I know some people who could take a look at the app, or you could ask Marv or Nadine."

Her eyes drift closed and she sighs. "Yes, I called Nadine today. Nilo and team are going to Endeavor tomorrow. How was your day? I'm sorry I had to bail. I promise, I'm all yours tomorrow. You can work tomorrow, right, or are you at ZP?"

Like me with Zenith Point, she splits her time between consulting and our cofounded venture to help entrepreneurs and foster innovation. It started out as a way to fill the void that was left by Sybil's now defunct one, but it's slowly becoming so much more. We only opened our doors a little over a month ago and have much still to do.

"Hey, don't worry about it. The meeting went well. We got the permit."

She springs to sitting and clambers onto my lap. "Oh my God, that's great." She peppers me with kisses. "I knew if anyone could persuade them, it was you."

I chuckle and pull her closer while deepening our kiss.

The news about Sybil only hit a little over two months ago, and leading up to that, Eden worked tirelessly with the reporter, Nilo Osborne, Damon, and others who came forward to ensure all the details of her crimes came to light.

The process was long and arduous, and at times, she wondered if the reporter would ever publish the story. Sybil

wouldn't serve time, but the story needed to be airtight if she was to face her crimes in the court of public opinion.

Like any good journalist, she interviewed as many people as she could, garnered more than one source for most, if not all, of the key points, and then verified every fact.

During this time, Sybil followed through on my demands, and despite rumors of our falling-out, for the most part, she thought the worst was over.

Then the story appeared online and overnight, her world fell apart. Sybil lost the support of the business community, the banks and other lenders, and slowly, one by one, her businesses folded.

Unlike Sybil, Greene paid for at least one of his crimes through the penal system. Eden pressed charges for assault, and with the security video, his conviction was a slam dunk. He did try to drag me down with him for my attack on him at his home, but given it was his word against mine, his claim never went anywhere.

As Eden became more of a permanent fixture in my life and all of this slowly came to light, my sister, Marlowe, came around. I had made it clear to her shortly after the opera that if she couldn't accept Eden, there wasn't room for her in my life.

She's been making amends for her atrocious behavior, trying to build a friendship with Eden, and Alan has even hired Eden to help bolster growth with some of the firms his company has invested in.

Eden's fingers play with the ends of my hair at the nape of my neck as she grinds down on my growing arousal, all of which drags me back to the present.

I groan and pull my mouth from hers. "As much as I want to see where this goes, we've got to get Alex shortly."

This isn't my week to have him, but I asked Vanessa if he could come for dinner tonight. While in PEI, Eden told me about her conversation with Vanessa, and surprisingly, though it shouldn't be—my ex-wife is a good person—our co-parenting has gotten easier, better with Eden in my life.

Vanessa and Eden aren't necessarily friends, but they get along, and sometimes, my ex-wife calls Eden, instead of me, about Alex. She recognizes how much Alex loves Eden and that their relationship is important to him and good for him.

Tonight is also another great example of how well things are going. I didn't tell Vanessa my plans, only that I wanted Alex to be with us, and she readily agreed.

I want my son to be a part of tonight even if his arrival will come a little later, and while Eden doesn't know it yet, we're celebrating, and like me, she'll want Alex to be here.

Resting her forehead on mine, she lightly presses a final kiss to my mouth. "Yes, we do."

She climbs off me, and I immediately regret my self-control. The small package on her lap slips from between us onto the couch.

I pick it up. "What's this?"

Her name and our address are handwritten on the front and she reaches for it. "I'd almost forgotten about this."

Just then, her phone buzzes on the table, and I look at the screen. August, and she hits the red phone icon to ignore it.

"You don't want to talk to him?" I can't help but smirk, remembering a time when a text or call from him would have irked me to no end.

Nibbling on her lip, she stares at the screen, then fingers the package and looks at me. "I should. I feel bad; he's having a rough time."

"What? The overbearing girlfriend?"

She wrinkles her nose and twists her lips like something has soured in her mouth. "Ugh. Yes. He should just break up with her, but he's too much of a nice guy. Just look at his crappy business relationship with Brent. August does all the work. Anyway, I don't have it in me to listen to the latest shitty thing she's done."

Their working relationship aside, August and Eden grew closer after Tom's departure. And even when he started dating

someone, their bond only got stronger and even more so when cracks started to form in his relationship with the viper, as Eden refers to her.

August has concerns for Eden as a good friend and the same goes for her, and funnily enough, all of this no longer bothers me. Even when Eden wished August would break up with his girlfriend, I wasn't in the least bit disturbed. That's when I realized I was secure in our relationship and trusted her implicitly.

"Well, call him later then. Now about this." I tap the package.

She rips it open, pulls out an envelope and something small wrapped in blue tissue paper, and reads the card. "It's from Lou and Suki." Unraveling the paper, she holds up a leather band with colorful beads. "Oh wow. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes. It is." I take her left wrist and wrap the straps around a few times and secure it. "How are they?"

"So good. Remember, Tom says they make him sick with how lovey-dovey they are." She giggles and holds up her wrist to admire the bracelet.

At least one of the three of them call when they can, and not too long ago, it was Tom. Suki and Lou weren't there as they were helping to build a school in a neighboring village.

"Apparently, Lou runs a workshop where some of the local women make jewelry like this and sell them abroad. This is huge for them, a way to make an income and help support their families." She holds up a business card with a name, address, and website.

"That's great." I fasten my hand around her wrist with the bracelet and bring it to my lips. With a quick kiss to her knuckles, I slide from the couch onto my knees. "You might have a problem though."

"Walker?" She leans forward, puzzled. "What are you—"

"This is a pretty bracelet, but I'm not so sure it'll go with this." I slide my free hand into my pocket and pull out a small box.

My heart batters against my rib cage, not doubting what I'm about to do but more suspended in disbelief. All these months with Eden have been, at moments, surreal, and the happiest in my life.

With her hand still in mine, I flip open the box with my thumb and take out the diamond solitaire.

“Eden Carpenter, with you in my life, I'm already happy beyond my wildest dreams, but will you make me even more so and do me the honor of marrying me?”

She covers her mouth with a shaky hand, tears glistening in her eyes, and nods. I chuckle and squeeze her fingers. “I need to hear you say it.”

“Oh, Walker, yes.” She leans toward me, and my lips capture hers. She murmurs the affirmation again and again against my lips. I'll take all her yeses and never tire of her love.

If you or someone you know needs help:

Postpartum Support International (PSI): 1-800-944-4773

<https://www.postpartum.net/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY bestselling author, S.M. West writes sexy, angsty stories about brave hearts and wild love, including, more times than not, heart-pumping twists and turns. Apart from her infinite love of books, she's a self-professed wine, chocolate, and travel junkie. When not writing or hanging with her family, she's usually talking to her characters (in her head) or planning her next adventure.

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