

From Eden With

LOVE



by
Alessa

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Out back, in the gym hall, next to the high school playground, there's a school dance going on. But I never liked those things anyway.

She presses her live-wire lips to the cool, downy expanse between my neck and my shoulder, and it all falls away: the cheesy pop music bursting through the gymnasium walls; that brick-and-mortar building filled with classes and desks and old books hardly anybody reads anymore; until there is nothing left but me and her and the burning of her lips on my skin.

"You're everything to me," she confesses as she brushes the sweaty strands of blonde hair out of my face. "I lo—"

"Don't," I frown and move closer to her, this beautiful girl with the ocean eyes. "Don't say it." And then I kiss her again, to shut her up, and because kissing her is like coming home.

Do I still recall the path to my own destruction? It was simple, easy really; all it took was a terrible pun, an undeserved detention, and a whole lot of poor judgement on both our parts. But mostly mine, because when it all comes down to it, underneath all the seductive glances and lustful gasps, she's still sixteen, and I'm still her teacher.



It began, unremarkably enough, five months ago.

I'm running late, as usual. My alarm didn't go off, or maybe it did, and I snoozed it, but *shhh*... And to top it all off, the damn shower's broken *again*, so I have to suffer through three minutes of freezing cold water beating down on my skin. I stayed up too late last night, drinking the last remains of cheap red wine and reading Hesse while pretending it wasn't another Monday morning just on the other side of midnight. I dash around the apartment, forcing my legs into ripped pantyhose, wolfing down a piece of burnt toast, and shoving my things into a purse, and I laugh when I realise that I've never *not* been late for the first day of school. From that bus route mix-up in Kindergarten to the traffic jam in eleventh grade to the wrong lecture hall last autumn, I've been late every year as far back as I can remember.

At least I'm consistent.

Then I realise what makes this year different from all the others—I'm no longer a student, late for show-and-tell, or trigonometry, or the senior Classics seminar. This time, I'm the *teacher*, the one who's

meant to frown disapprovingly at the late-coming stragglers trying to slide into the classroom unnoticed five minutes after the bell.

So I fling the remainder of the toast into the rubbish bin, forget about doing anything to make my hair look halfway presentable, and fly out the door to jump in my beat-up old car. This is my first real job, and I'm not going to screw it up by being late on the first day.

Somehow, I arrive on time, and I manage to be the first one in the classroom. I glance down at my schedule and smile to myself when I see that first period is the sophomore English class, the one where I get to actually teach good literature instead of trying to compel fifth graders to write a passable paragraph.

The students trickle in, hugging each other after being apart all summer and moaning about how early it is. I half wish I could join in on those complaints, especially because I didn't have time to grab my regular mocha from that coffee shop on the corner this morning.

The bell rings and I slide out from behind my desk, smirking a little to myself at the facial expressions of the kids as they finally register my presence. They're not used to such a young teacher; I can tell as I take in the puzzled stares of the girls and the sneaky glances of the boys trying to check me out without me noticing.

"Good morning," I tell them, and my voice betrays just how tired and sleepy I am. I make my way to the front of the classroom. "And welcome to English 10. I trust that, given your presence in this class, all of you know how to read." Muted laughter, then silence. Not that I'd expected anything else—these are sixteen-year-olds, after all, more desperate to be cool than anything. "I have the dubious honour of trying to get you to actually *think* about what you read. Not to enjoy reading—even I don't have enough confidence in my ability to do that. But if I can make you think, really think, about what some of these authors are trying to say... I'll have done my job."

I pass out syllabi and try not to roll my eyes when the overambitious redhead in the front row asks a dozen questions about the coursework. Eventually, I begin the discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, which had been assigned for summer reading by the former teacher because she wouldn't have been able to get them to read anything longer.

The redhead in front won't stop offering her opinion. "And I think that the primary conflict in the plot is not between any external forces but within Kurtz's soul. He embodies contradictory dual natures, in that —"

Fed up with the sound of her voice, I interrupt her in the middle of her sentence. "Okay, that's all very well and good, but if I wanted that kind of simplistic analysis, I'd go read Sparknotes," which, I suspect, she has probably memorised in an attempt to impress me.

Redhead bristles at my comment, but I ignore her and turn to the rest of the class. "Forget conflict, theme, and symbols. What I want to know is, what did you think of the book? What did the book make you think about?"

"Well, for one thing, I thought it was a pretty dark choice to start off the year with." The sanguine, slightly husky voice comes as a surprise, and I look around for its source. Eventually I locate it in the open doorway, in the form of a lanky, somewhat breathless girl. "Pun intended, of course," she adds with a wink.

She is beautiful. I notice it right away, almost instantly, as in a flash, but not that of a spark but rather of an atomic explosion—it's blinding, and painful, and devastating in its path. Her luxurious dark bangs fall into her face, nearly obscuring her brilliant blue eyes. There are high cheekbones, and a softly rounded chin, and slightly chapped lips far too sensual than a high schooler's should ever be. Her school uniform is a wrinkled mess, with a loose tie hanging over her white shirt and, beneath it all, the school-issue skirt that is way too short on her legs. She is at once a dangerously attractive woman and a carefree child, and my heart starts pounding out a siren alarm in my chest.

"You're late," I tell her deliberately, even though a tiny part of me wants to smirk at her comment and a bigger part of me wants to drool over her slender legs. "What's your name?"

"Eden Hall," she replies confidently.

A pretty name for a pretty girl. "Do you have a pass, Eden?"

Hypocrite, my brain yells at me, because wasn't I just thinking about how I was late to every first day of school for nearly eighteen years straight? But I'm supposed to be the authority figure now, so I have to at least *try* to act the part.

The girl surprises me when she shoves off the door frame she'd been leaning against and ambles to the front of the class. "Course," she replies and extends her arm towards me, a crumpled piece of paper in her hand.

Oh. I hadn't expected her to actually have a pass. I hold out my hand, and she slides the paper into my grasp, her fingers brushing against mine for a bit too long. I can't help but look up at her through heavy-lidded eyes, startled by the heat of skin-on-skin contact and the visceral reaction it's stirred in me.

And then my world shifts around me, because her eyes avert to my extended hand and the rainbow-coloured bracelet tied around my wrist. I can see a sparkle of recognition on her face, a flicker of hope forming behind those eyes for just a second, before I withdraw my hand and turn around, hiding my wrist within the folds of my sleeve. I take the note and shove it into my pocket, trying to stay composed as Eden takes a seat near the back.

Somehow, I make it through class without letting on how flustered she has made me. The bell finally rings to signal the end of the period, and once all the students are gone, I collapse into my chair, head in my hands. Tomorrow, I'll make sure I save enough time to get that coffee.



That night, when I'm home and sliding out of my clothes to change into sweats, I reach into my pocket and see the late pass from the morning English class. I unfold it, remembering the heat of Eden's fingers against mine that morning, and gasp when I see that the paper is completely *blank*.

"That... that..." I sputter, blind with rage. "Little fucker!" She'd taken advantage, no doubt knowing that I'm a new teacher.

I pace around the apartment, furious that I've been outsmarted—and by a high school student, for that matter.

Later, I slip under the covers, and I *don't* dream about impertinent schoolgirls with midnight hair and deep blue eyes.



"I got a C-minus on the Faulkner test you passed back today."

I let out a weary sigh and pause in the process of unlocking my car in the teachers' lot. "I know," I reply without turning around to see who it is. Who could it be but Eden? She's the only one who turns up unexpectedly like this in places where she *really* shouldn't be, like right now, at my car after school, or in the faculty lounge, or at the coffee shop on the corner of my street. And she's the only one with that voice—that low, breathless voice that nearly undoes me every time.

"Well, I don't think I deserved that grade."

I turn around and arch an eyebrow, my arms crossed. "Is that so?" My response to her, like all my others, is clipped and curt. I pray that it makes me come off as aloof and superior, and that the truth—that she makes me feel like a teenage girl all over again, that I'm afraid of sounding stupid in front of her, that I get so distracted by her lips sometimes that I can't think of anything to say—remains hidden.

Eden nods vigorously, her hair falling into her eyes until she reaches up a hand to shove it back impatiently. "You're always going on about how much you value creativity and critical thinking. I read the book *twice*. And I stand by my answers—maybe they weren't perfect, but I put a lot of thought into them."

Your answers were brilliant, I think, and I bite my lip. "Maybe so, but your handwriting is utterly atrocious. I could barely read a word of what you wrote." It's true that her handwriting is so sloppy and haphazard that it takes me twice as long to make out what she writes, but her responses on the test and on every other assignment have been so insightful and clever that I get nervous, sometimes, that this sixteen-year-old girl knows more about literature than I do.

Eden wrinkles her eyebrow. "Well, maybe I could stay after school one day and read them to you."

It's an almost painfully innocent suggestion, so it shouldn't have me blushing, imagining her reading to me in that soothing voice of hers.

"That won't be necessary," I respond, turning back to stick my key in the lock. "And all grades are final."

I get in the car and drive away.



Ever since that first day, when she sauntered in halfway through class, Eden has been early. So early that most days, she's there before even I enter the class. The school is quiet since the other students haven't arrived yet, and it's just me and her and the steady drone of the ceiling fans in the classroom. I try to ignore her by tidying the room or grading papers, but I always feel a secret little thrill when I walk in and see her there waiting for me.

But as time goes on, I start to do an increasingly poor job of ignoring her. It's not all my fault—she doesn't let me ignore her, really. It's just one more unneeded reminder of how attention-starved teenage girls can be. She bombards me with incessant chatter, tales of what really goes on under the bleachers at school sporting events, questions about my past and my future, and comments about the books I'm reading in class that would impress even the most standoffish college professor.

And before long, these early morning conversations become the highlight of my day.



One morning, Eden brings me a stack of papers and hesitantly asks me to read them. "It's nothing much, just a short story I've been working on." She wants my opinion on it, she says.

She sits there and fidgets as I squint at her handwriting, trying to pretend like she's not staring at me through those silky wisps of hair that fall over her eyes.

When I'm done reading, my mouth is dry, and I've nearly forgotten how to breathe. Her writing is so good that my hands are shaking as I hand the papers back to her.

"I liked it," I tell her, even though that's the understatement of the century. I can see it now—she's the next Jane Austen, the next Virginia Woolf; she'll have a career so illustrious she'll be talked about for centuries to come.

But my grandiose visions of her future pale in comparison to the grin she breaks into at my words. She beams at me, and suddenly, everything glows.



"I'm going to a party tonight," Eden tells me offhandedly on her way out of class one Friday. "You could come too, if you want." Her tone is flippant, but her eyes are longing.

I glance up at her from the seat at my desk. "Don't be ridiculous," I reprimand her.

Her face falls.

"You know you're being ridiculous, right?"

Eden shrugs. "Yeah, sorry, I know," she grins at me wryly. "But hey, a girl can dream, right?"

She walks out of the classroom then, merging seamlessly into her crowd of peers in the hall, but I sit there staring after her, her last words echoing in my head.

A girl can dream.

Right?



Late that night, I'm in my pyjamas on the couch, watching foreign films on TV, drinking red wine, and eating Pad Thai, when I hear a knock on my door. I pad over to answer it.

"Hello?" I ask in confusion when I see that it's the Cat Lady, the respectably crazy woman with the apartment one floor down. She's wearing a bathrobe and slippers and holds a grey cat under her arm.

"I believe you have a guest," she tells me with a scowl.

"Huh?" My mind is a little foggy from the wine.

"There's a young girl," Cat Lady explains. "She's outside the building on the stoop, knocking on the door and calling for you." She frowns. "One too many drinks for her, I think."

I wrinkle my eyebrow in confusion, but Cat Lady leaves after that with no further explanation. Baffled, I throw on a sweatshirt and head downstairs to see what the hell she's on about.

I open the front door to my grungy little apartment building, and my jaw nearly drops when I see that it's Eden, leaning against the railing, clearly drunk out of her mind.

My name dies on her lips when she sees me, and she beams. "You're here!" she exclaims. "I've been calling your name for ages, and now you're here!"

I frown at her. "What the *hell* are you doing here?" Because now this has gone way beyond early morning literature discussions before class—she's here, at my apartment, at midnight on a Friday night, and I'm really starting to freak out now.

I scramble to think of how on earth she knew my address until I remember that one Sunday afternoon I ran into her at the corner coffee shop, when I was having a mocha and reading and she'd stopped in to pick up a pastry for lunch. I'd happened to mention that my apartment was just down the street, and she must have remembered it.

Maybe I'd wanted her to remember.

"I was at the party... You know that party I was telling you about? And the music, and all the beer, and the noise... and the guys—all these guys—they kept coming up to talk to me. One tried to kiss me," she adds offhandedly, and I feel a sharp tug of irrational jealousy in my stomach, "but I told him no, thanks. All these boys, and I didn't care about any of them because... Because I don't want boys. They mean nothing to me... None of them can compare to *you*."

I take in a sharp breath at that, and all the colour drains from Eden's face. "I'm sorry," she mutters.

I force myself to swallow.

"Really... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that." She runs a hand through her hair and reaches out to the railing to steady herself.

"You shouldn't be here, Eden." I breathe, and *damn*, there should have been a lot more conviction behind that statement. It's just that it's *her*, and she's so drunk and confused and adorable, and the street lights are illuminating her beautiful face from a weird angle that makes her look even more vulnerable; makes her look unbearably young, and lost, and lonely.

She takes a step towards me, reaches up to hold some of my hair. "Why won't you believe me?" she murmurs, looking at the lamplight reflecting off the blonde strands in her hand, and then she's running her fingers through it. "I know you're like me. Stop pretending that you're not."

I step back abruptly so that my back is against the door, just in time to notice the first tears in her eyes. "Go home, Eden," I warn her, and this time I say it forcefully enough that she nods and turns to go.

"I'm *not* sorry!" she cries suddenly as I'm opening the door. "I'm glad I left the party, left all those stupid people and all those guys, and came to see you! And I'm not sorry for thinking you're pretty, because you are. You're amazing, and I can't stop... I think about you all—"

I slam the door in her face, race up the stairs to my apartment, and throw myself on the couch, taking deep, desperate breaths.



Eden doesn't come early to class the next Monday, and it puts me in a foul mood. I sit there at my desk, watching the second hand twirl around the clock, but she never shows up, and then the overambitious redhead shows up, and then the kid who always texts, and soon enough the whole class is there but her.

I start the lesson on Ibsen, feeling completely thrown off without my daily conversation with Eden. About ten minutes after the bell, she finally comes through the door.

I glance over at her. "Late," I snap, trying to avoid looking into her eyes because I know my limits and this would be one temptation too many—her eyes are all I've been thinking of ever since Friday night, after all. "I don't suppose you have a pass—a *real* one?"

She gulps at my biting tone and shakes her head, and I narrow my eyes at her. "Detention, after school today. Please attempt to be on time for that."

Surprisingly enough, she doesn't protest, even though teachers aren't really supposed to give detentions for being ten minutes late to class.



In detention, I have Eden help me grade fifth grade essays. They're all mediocre at best, and both of us are scrawling red marks all over the pages. We work in silence, until, about twenty minutes in, she finally speaks.

"Do you know why I usually come in early?"

I'm so startled that I drop my red pen. My gaze flicks over to her, seated at the redhead's usual desk in the front row.

"So I can spend more time with you. I love listening to you, even during class when you're going on and on about objects in Ibsen. I think you're wrong, by the way. The Christmas tree does actually have a meaning beyond just being a Christmas tree. And I like that you don't put up with all my bullshit. And most of all, I like just being around you—like this, right now, it's not really a punishment for me at all, is it? Because I'd grade a hundred of these stupid essays if it meant I got to be around you." She says all this so earnestly, so frankly, staring right through me with those disarming eyes that right now appear wise beyond her years.

I blink, made speechless, as usual, by her. "Eden, you can't... you can't just say things like that," I protest, but she just smiles at me.

"Come for a coffee with me," she says, and I stare at her in shock. Didn't she hear what I just said?

"Don't look at me like that," she laughs. "Come on. One coffee won't kill you. God knows you drink enough every morning. We can just go to a café and talk. It'll be nice to be someplace that's not your classroom."

I want to say yes so badly that I have to gnaw on my fingernail to stop the word from falling from my mouth. Finally, I shake my head. "You know we can't, Eden," I tell her quietly.

"But—"

"You know why."



I'm walking out of the faculty lounge after lunch one day when I suddenly feel a warm touch on the back of my shoulder. I whirl around, ready to tell off the creepy Music teacher, but my words go unspoken when I find myself looking down into ocean eyes.

"There's a reading at the bookstore on Cedar tomorrow night," she murmurs into my ear. "I think you'd really like the author. Come with me."

She is the soul of temptation, then, her soft hand burning through my dress, her eyes wide and intent on me, but I know what I have to do. "No, Eden," I reply. "Leave me alone or I'll report you to the principal."

"You wouldn't!" she decries behind me.

I stop in my tracks and turn around. "Then stop this nonsense, Eden. Stop being this immature, little girl."

"I can't." And now she is looking at the hallway floor. "Love is not only something you feel; it is something you do."

I'm lost for words as I stare at her and hope to God that no one has overheard us. "I'm sorry," she offers timidly. "I didn't mean to offend you. I only wanted—"

"It's alright, Eden," I sighed. "You don't have to explain yourself."

"Would it be easier for you? Me not explaining myself? Pretending there are no feelings, no need to be with you, no desire to make it clear—" I pull myself out of her grasp and head to class.



My downfall came one afternoon during an anti-drug assembly in the auditorium.

I had nearly forgotten about the event, and I'm sitting in the faculty lounge alone, grading papers, wondering why no other teachers are there, when suddenly I see a notice about the assembly tacked to the bulletin board. I grab my things and dash to the auditorium, bursting through the doors a few minutes late. I take the first seat I see, on the very end of a row, just as the lights go dim and the kids in the Good Decisions Club, or whatever the hell it's called, file onto the stage to begin their little performance.

I figure this is as good a chance as any to catch up on some sleep—it's so dark that no one will be able to see me anyway—and I'm just leaning back in my seat when I feel a hot breath on my ear. "Hey."

I nearly jump up and scream, but I calm down when I realise who it is. It's Eden in the seat next to me, of course, because I have the *worst* luck in the history of bad luck. "What are *you* doing here?" I whisper.

She chuckles under her breath. "What, would you rather I skip out of school early? I'm just being a good girl and learning about drug safety."

I scowl. "Well, you didn't have to sit right *here*," and even as I say it, I know how absurd I'm being. I'd inadvertently sat next to her, after all.

"*Shh*," someone hisses from the row in front of us, and I roll my eyes but stay quiet.

A few minutes later, I feel her small hand slide over and settle on my knee. I bite back a gasp. My mind starts racing, and before I really know what's happening, her thumb has begun to stroke dizzying circles into my skin.

I should yell at her because sixteen-year-old students are not supposed to behave like that towards their teachers, but I don't want to attract undue attention, so I reach out a shaking hand to touch her wrist. She doesn't stop, and now I can't find it in myself to make her stop, so I just end up sort of holding her wrist ineffectively and rather pointlessly. As her hand skirts higher, making lazy patterns across my skin, my hand falls away from her entirely, and I have to grip the armrest in between our two seats to try to keep myself somewhat composed. I'm not entirely successful, though, and I accidentally let out a little sigh at the feel of her warm hand against my soft skin. My eyes flutter shut, and this feels so nice, her hand feels so nice, this feels lovely, heavenly, yes, and her hand creeps higher and higher, and I can't help myself from leaning a little closer to her, leaning into her as her other hand comes up to stroke my hair...

Next I'm leaning over her shoulder, my lips at her ear, breathing, "Meet me outside in one minute," and I slide out of my seat and slink out of the dark auditorium. I collapse against the wall once the door shuts behind me, struggling to catch my breath, and far less than a minute passes before the door opens once again and Eden emerges, her eyes hooded with lust. There's no one else around since everyone's inside watching the show, so I snatch her arm and pull her over to the supply closet across the hall.

Neither of us speaks, then, because there are no words that can do this moment justice. She's resisted for so long, and I've been in denial for ages, but neither of us are as strong as we pretended to be, and as I finally give in, I wonder why the *hell* I waited this long.

Eden pulls the closet door shut behind her, and then I pin her to the wall, kicking a box out of my way on the floor. I press kisses to her hair, to her forehead, all down her soft, round cheek and jaw before finally arriving at her mouth. She murmurs something silent and indiscernible against my lips, and then she's kissing me back, and it's good, so good, and standing on her toes, she's almost as tall as me, and I can pretend for just a moment that she's not only sixteen.

I slide one hand through those heavenly strands of her silky hair and pull her shirt with the other so I can get her even closer to me. The only sounds are the rustle of my clothes against hers and our heavy breathing. I kiss her greedily, as if trying to reclaim everything I have denied myself, and she's all too eager to give, leaning in so she can cup my face in her hands and kiss me again. And then her thigh presses between my legs, and one of her hands slides down to my side and up my shirt.

I've almost entirely lost myself in her when she pants my name into my hair, and that is what brings me back down to earth. "Wait..." I pull away from her slowly, the haze around my mind gradually dissipating, and then I realise where I am, who I'm with, and what I've *done*.

"Fuck..." I mutter, running a shaky hand through my hair. "Fuck, I... we... this can't..." And then I shove her away from me, open the closet door, and run away as fast as I can.



"Shit," I say to my empty apartment for about the billionth time that night. "Shit, shit, shit..."

There's nothing else to say, really, not when I've just compromised my job, and my future, and my entire life. And for what—to make out with some messed-up teenage girl in the school closet?

But I know that's not all it was. It was more than that; *Eden* is more than that, and honestly, that's what should scare me the most.

I try reading to distract myself, but every book I own reminds me of her. The rain is pounding down outside my window, and normally stormy nights like this make me feel content and cosy, wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, but right now I just feel like I want to cry, curled up on the floor in some dark and unreachable corner.

I stare listlessly out the window, watching water droplets slide down the glass, and I don't know how much time passes before I'm interrupted by the buzzer. I shuffle dejectedly over and press the button. "Yes? Who is it?" I ask, confused as to who would be visiting at this time of night.

There's a long pause, and then, "It's me." It's that low, melancholy voice, the one that's burned into my mind forever, and I hardly know what's happening, but I know that she's downstairs right now, and that's all that matters.

In a split second, I'm out the door and making my way down the stairs. I throw open the front door, and she's standing there, out on the stoop, her hair even darker with water and plastered to her face, her skin glistening, her clothes soaked through and clinging to her freezing skin.

She is so devastatingly beautiful that my knees buckle and I can't breathe.

"I tried every button until I found you," she says, her voice hoarse from the cold.

I don't know what to say. What can a person say to her, this lovely girl who's been out in the rain for God knows how long, and who stares up at me now, her eyes pleading and brimming with tears as they burn holes through me?

I bite my lip and then give into her fall. "Come inside." And she does, and this is my damnation, my ticket to hell.



Eden still comes early mornings before class some days, and we talk about literature and life, but now she also sleeps over at my apartment sometimes on the pretext of staying at her friend's house, and those nights when she stays over, neither of us get to school early the next morning.

There are exactly four freckles on her back, and I trace a line between them over and over, until I've memorised the path of my finger on her skin. "Sometimes I swear you're not even real," I mumble into her shoulder blade. "You're like a poem."

"Maybe none of this is real," she sighs and flips over to wrap her arms around my neck, and I can't decide what's scarier—if this were all to be a dream or if it were really happening to us.



I've sneaked out of the dance I'm meant to be chaperoning to meet her in my car, and this is *so high school* of us, but hey, we are at a high school, after all.

And I kiss her neck, and she pushes my hair out of my face. "You're everything to me. I lo—"

"Don't. Don't say it." And I kiss her again, so that she won't finish that sentence; so that I won't cry in her arms.



There are a lot of ways our story could end. I could get caught that very night by a fellow teacher, get dragged in front of the principal, and end up arrested and in prison. Or maybe I could send her off to college with a kiss and a promise, wait four years, and when she graduates, we would move together into some cute little house in some sleepy country town and get a dog, and a cat, and a coffee machine.

I could also end things with her that very night, and she'd be devastated, and so would I, of course, but ten years later she'd be a famous author, and I'd run into her at some bookstore, or library, or café somewhere, and the two of us would fall in love all over again.

Or we could try to make things work for another year or so, but the age difference would become too much, and we'd break up, and she'd meet some cool artsy girl in college, and I'd end up dating a cheerful Biology teacher in a couple of years.

And it would be like none of this ever happened.

Nothing at all.

The End