



Garden Daddy

Author: *Golden Angel*

Category: Romance

Description: Their marriage may have wilted, but a second chance at happily-ever-after is starting to bloom...

Years after their painful divorce, Marcus has replanted himself back in Eden's life, though he's nothing like the man she remembers. It seems he rose to the occasion and spent their time apart focusing on his personal growth. Now he's become everything she needed him to be.

And he wants her back.

But it will take a lot more than flowery promises and good intentions to get past the walls Eden built around her heart. Can Marcus convince her that his changed ways have taken root, or will their second chance at love wither away?

Total Pages (Source): 24

1

Marcus

This is a terrible idea.

It wasn't the first time he'd had the thought, which was why it had taken him so long to get around to doing this. But it was time to face his ex-wife. He and Eden couldn't continue on the way they had been. The constant sniping and arguing would have been kind of fun if he'd also been getting make-up sex at the end of it, the way they used to, but without that, it was just annoying. They couldn't avoid each other, not unless they wanted to lose friends. He wasn't willing to step away from his best friends, and he didn't think she would be, either.

They might be very different people than they were five years ago when they'd been married, but she still knew how to get under his skin. And he knew how to get under hers.

He wasn't sure how facing her head-on was going to go, though. During their marriage, she would have appreciated his directness. Now... he wasn't so sure that would be her reaction.

Taking a deep breath, he stopped staring at the door to her apartment and knocked before shoving his hands in his pockets. Then he listened really hard. He could hear her approach, though her footsteps were soft. He held his breath.

Then nothing.

She was standing on the other side of the door. Probably looking through the eyehole and deciding whether or not to open it when he was on the other side. Should he knock again? Tell her that he knew she was there?

The door flew open with a suddenness that almost made him jump, and there she was. Pink hair down around her shoulders wearing a blue shirt that said “I Like Tacos and, like, Three People” with a taco on the chest and a pair of cute, cute-off shorts. The kind of thing she liked to wear when they were dating.

The kind of thing she’d stopped wearing once they were married to try to fit what Marcus thought his wife should look like when they were out in public. Just in case they ran into anyone from his office. He’d had appearances to maintain.

He’d been a fucking ass.

Eden’s chin jutted upwards, her eyes narrowing as she glared at him.

“What do you want?”

Well, that was his opening. Marcus squared his shoulders, lifting his own chin and looking down at her. She used to like how much taller he was than her, saying it made her feel protected.

“I think we need to talk. Can I come in?”

Immediately, she stepped forward, so she was standing in the doorway, completely blocking him from her apartment. Marcus’ lips twitched. Moving forward had also put her mere inches away from him, and he wasn’t backing up. Her head tilted back even more, frustrated anger flaring in her gaze as she realized he was now in her space, and it was her fault. It also meant he was looming over her.

“No.I’m busy.”

“Really?Because it looks like you’re just watching television.”He could easily see over her head into the apartment where a show was paused.

“Yes, it’s called relaxing downtime.Supposedly, something you know about now.”She sniffed derisively.“I guess reports of your reformation have been greatly exaggerated.”

Yup, this was their new reality.If he could haul her over his shoulder, take her to the bedroom and spank her before fucking her senseless, he would have been totally okay with the bratty banter.It was part of what he’d fallen in love with the first time around.

Right now, it was frustrating because he couldn’t haul her over his shoulder or spank her.What he really needed was for her to listen to him.

“I only need a few minutes of your time.”

She rolled her eyes.“If I wanted to hear from an asshole, I would have farted.Bye.”She stepped back, and his hand came up to block the door from closing on him.Marcus stepped forward, and he didntlaugh at her insult, no matter how much he wanted to on the inside.Eden glared at him.

“Get out.”

“I’m not in,” he replied, keeping his tone as reasonable as possible.He knew it ticked her off that she couldn’t get the reactions she was used to out of him anymore.Back when they were married, he would have given back as good as she gave.Now, he tended to let things roll off his back, and when she did get under his skin, he didn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing.He pointed at the floor, where his feet were

clearly not over the line of the doorframe. “The sooner you hear me out, the sooner this conversation can be over.”

He was hoping it would lead to future conversations, but he figured she was probably going to need some time to adjust to his new agenda. So, he had a game plan.

Tell Eden his intentions.

Give her time to adjust.

Remind her of how good they could be together.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Show her how he'd changed.

Get his girl back.

Even though he'd dated other people since their divorce, having Eden back in his life was making it impossible for him to look at anyone else. She was here to stay unless he wanted to ditch his two best friends, which was not an option. His two best friends were now in committed relationships, heading toward marriage with her two best friends, and he was so filled with envy, it was debilitating.

Not only that, but the more time he was forced to spend around Eden, the more he got to know her again and the more he wanted her back. She was similar but different from the woman he'd married. More confident, more sure of herself, and somehow even more bratty than when they'd dated, which he wouldn't have thought was possible.

She was definitely brattier than when they'd been married, and that was his fault. He'd tried turning both of them into the people he thought they needed to be in order to be successful.

Out of the two of them, he'd changed the most in the past five years. He'd learned a lot about himself and about relationships. He could see where he'd gone wrong and where he'd been a colossal ass. And he wanted to do better.

He wanted to be her Daddy again.

Eden huffed.

“Fine. You have two minutes, then I’m getting back to my relaxing downtime.”

Thank God. He’d take two minutes.

Eden

Dammit, why did Marcus have to be so hot? She’d always liked him in a suit, until she’d started hating those suits, but the way he was filling out his Flower Power t-shirt also did things to her. Then she got mad because she didn’t want to be attracted to him anymore, and that stupid t-shirt reminded her of all the shit he’d refused to do when they were married.

Now, he was super relaxed, hanging out, respecting downtime, and willing to wear something besides business casual clothes. Great.

She wasn’t sure why he was showing up, wanting to talk. Maybe he just wanted to stop arguing with her all the time since they had to hang out, thanks to their friends. Yeah, fat chance. She’d been saving up insults for him. Eventually, she was going to find one that bothered him. She’d really thought the fart one would do the trick, but he’d seemed more amused than anything.

The big jerk.

Two minutes, then she would close the door, even if she had to shove him back to do it. No matter that she was pretty sure he’d gained about twenty pounds of muscle since their marriage, she had the power of petty rage fueling her.

Marcus nodded, accepting her edict. Good. Once he agreed to something, he would follow through. The ‘almighty deal’ was very important to him, and once he said he would do something, he would. Which wasn’t always a good thing when he’d overloaded himself by promising things to people at work and neglecting everything

else.Everyone else.Like his wife.

“I will be honest.I thought if I ever saw you again that I would feel like we made the right decision about our divorce.I never wanted to hurt you, and I wanted to see that you had moved on and were happy.I’m a different man now.A better man.And the more I see you, the more I miss what we had, but also the more I like the person you’ve become.I think we should try again.”

Eden stared at him.

Blinked.

That was not what she’d expected to come out of his mouth.

“What could you possibly like about me?”she asked incredulously.Not because she wasn’t likeable—she damn well was—but because after their divorce, she’d deliberately set herself up to be the opposite of who she’d become as his wife.

She’d dyed her hair bright, crazy colors that made her poor Japanese mother despair of her ever finding another husband.She’d started wearing the most offensive t-shirts she could find, smirking at what she imagined Marcus’ face would be if she’d ever tried to wear that while they went out and about.Eventually, she’d gotten over doing things because of how her ex would have reacted and realized she actually just liked all that stuff.

Then she’d stopped doing it for him and started doing it for her.

But helikedit?

“I like that you’re the girl I fell in love with again.That you reclaimed that part of yourself after I... well, if I didn’t kill it completely, I definitely caused you to bury

it. I like your sass. I like how you look after your friends. I like your confidence. I like... you. I've always liked you, even when I felt like there were parts of you that went counter to the image I was trying to project. I was wrong about that, by the way. You were right. I should never have asked you to be anyone other than yourself."

She'd been willing. She hadn't said no. She'd tried to pack herself into a little box, into the form he'd wanted because she'd wanted his attention and approval. She'd lost herself for him, and it wasn't just because he'd asked her to. Although he hadn't asked it of her, there had been ways she'd tried to change because she'd seen the other corporate wives doing it.

That was part of the danger. She'd been willing to do that for him. For a scrap of his affection and attention.

This new Marcus? This self-aware, repentant, humble Marcus who took care of himself, took the time to relax, and made space for his friends? This Marcus was a million times more dangerous to her than the arrogant, 'I know best,' self-involved husband who'd started taking her for granted.

"Thank you for the apology," she said, even though he hadn't actually said sorry. Marcus had always had a thing about apologizing. Even when he was remorseful, he'd had trouble saying the words, so pretending he had apologized gave her a little petty spurt of happiness.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“I didn’t apologize, but I should have.” While she gaped at him, Marcus reached up to brush a strand of pink hair out of her face, his fingers gently skimming her skin and lighting up all her senses like a fireworks show. “I’m sorry, Eden. I loved you, but it wasn’t enough. I turned into a shitty husband, and I didn’t even see what was happening. I took you for granted instead of appreciating everything you did for me. I’ve learned a lot since our divorce. I want a second chance.”

For one sweet, horrifying moment, Eden almost leaned toward him. Almost tipped her head back for a kiss. Almost fell right back into the Marcus-trap she’d already escaped from.

“Fuck off!” She jumped back, slamming the door in his face, her heart pounding like she’d just run a marathon. Lifting her hand, she pressed her palm against her chest. Her whole body felt flushed, as though she was overheating.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She was going to need to work on her Marcus-defense-system. She had not been prepared for him to say any of that, and she sure as hell hadn’t been prepared for her reaction. Not in her wildest dreams.

“I’m not giving up, Eden,” Marcus called from the other side of the door. “I did that once before. I’m not making the same mistake twice. Thank you for the two minutes. I’ll see you later.”

Mother fucker. Eden leaned her back against the door, closing her eyes as she heard him walking away.

The television was going to have to wait.

She needed backup.

2

Eden

Sitting at the table in the House of Starrett, Eden jiggled her foot. The chances of Marcus showing up here were small but not nil. The restaurant was a popular hangout for the guys as much as it was for her and her friends. Plus, Marcus, Owen, and Andres were also friends with the owner, Chef Sean.

She happened to know that both Andres and Owen were preoccupied today with some kind of business webinar they were attending, though, and she doubted Marcus would come here without them. He also wouldn't expect her to come here since it was somewhere he regularly hung out. Which made it the perfect place to meet up with Rita and Bree, aka her ride-or-die besties, aka the women responsible for her current predicament.

When Rita and Bree had hooked up with Andres and Owen, that meant she and Marcus had been stuck playing fifth wheel... together. So, really, it was their fault he was back in her life, saying such tempting things and making her want things she knew better than to want.

So, now they were going to get to listen to her bitch and hopefully, offer up some sound advice and a metaphorical smack back to reality.

She and Marcus were a bad idea.

Period.

“Hey!What’s the emergency?”Rita asked, startling Eden as the pretty blonde pulled a chair out.Eden had been so lost in thought, she hadn’t noticed her friend walking in, which was not like her at all.

“Let’s wait for... oh hey, Bree.”Eden switched tactics mid-sentence because she hadn’t realized Bree had also arrived.She took the seat next to Rita on the opposite side of the table from Eden, her dark brown eyes sparkling with mischief.Her hair was done in a new style, in a myriad of cute little poufs atop her head.

“Hey, Eden.I thought you were busy all day having ‘you’ time,” Bree said as she scooted her chair in.

Eden sighed.

“Figure out what you want from the menu, because once I start, I want your full attention,” she said, waving her hand.

They both laughed as if she was kidding.Little did they know.Once everyone’s food and drink orders were in, both of them looked at her attentively.

“Marcus showed up at my door about,”—she checked the clock on her phone—“an hour and a half ago to tell me that he’s decided I should give him a second chance.”

As different as they were in looks, Rita and Bree now had utterly identical expressions of shock.At least she wasn’t the only one feeling that way.

“Seriously?”The incredulousness in Rita’s voice made her feel a little better.Eden hadn’t known Rita and Bree until after she and Marcus had divorced, but they had heard the whole story.They’d been her two first real friends post-marriage.“Just like that out of nowhere?”

“I’m sure he didn’t say it exactly like that,” Bree said, glancing at Rita, then giving Eden a look. Bree was usually the voice of reason, which was both necessary and annoying since both Eden and Rita liked to shoot off at the mouth.

“Close enough,” Eden grumbled. She shook her head. Even the glimpse of pink she caught at the edges of her vision, which usually made her smile, didn’t cheer her up.

“What did he actually say, Eden?”

She sighed, then got a very short reprieve when the server came by with their drinks. Stirring sugar into her iced tea, she avoided her friends’ gazes for as long as she could, but eventually, their silent glares were unavoidable.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“He might have apologized for the past—way too late, might I add—and said something about how he likes who I am now, which is such bullshit. Then he said he’s learned a lot since our divorce—way, way, way too late for that—and said he wants a second chance.” She glared at her glass. “Then when I slammed the door in his face, he said he’s not giving up and threatened that he’d see me later.”

“Uh huh.” Rita, who had been firmly on her side before, was now giving her one of ‘those’ looks. The problem with having besties was they could often read through the lines of what was being said to hear what wasn’t. “So, he apologized, maybe even groveled a little, and you’re still so mad that he didn’t change back when you were married and waited till after you left that you slammed the door in his face.”

Leaning back against her chair, Eden scowled at her friends as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“You’re supposed to be supporting me.”

“Absolutely,” Bree said immediately. “He’s an asshole and should have his dick cut off.”

“Well, that might be going a little far,” Rita murmured, though she grinned. Out of the three of them, Bree was the most patient and forgiving, which made the statement sound way more ludicrous than if Rita had said it. Rita, being the voice of reason, was also fairly ludicrous.

She was also right. That was going a little too far. It would be a waste of a very nice dick, and it wasn’t like he’d cheated or anything.

On the other hand, she didn't love thinking about how other women had gotten to enjoy that very nice dick attached to the man who'd fucking changed into husband material after he was no longer married.

Ugh.

Men.

"I think the real question is what Eden is going to do," Bree said, glancing at Rita, then focusing on Eden. She rested her chin on her hand, her eyes alight. Eden could practically see her thoughts.

Bree was a hopeless romantic, and she'd gotten even worse since hooking up with her Cheesy Daddy Dom. Owen was practically perfect, though. Both Bree and Rita had the good fortune of finding amazing Daddy Doms, who were ready to commit to a relationship and doted on them. Their only fault, as far as she could see, was being best friends with Marcus.

She couldn't even really be mad at them because the Marcus he'd become was a much better friend than the Marcus he'd been.

The big jerk.

"Obviously, I'm going to avoid him as much as possible until he gets the message."

"Does that mean you're going to be avoiding us?" Bree asked hesitantly, as if she understood why the answer might be yes and she'd support Eden even if she didn't like it. Eden seriously had the best friends.

"No, it just means I won't be doing any more of that arguing with him or engaging with him while we're all together. If that's what he likes about me now, I'll change it

up.Eventually, he'll get the message.”

“You think you can really do that?”Rita’s question was asked with no hesitation.She wasn’t one to mince words and tended to blurt out what she was thinking, so blunt questions were her style.Eden didn’t mind since they were her style, too.

Even if sometimes she didn’t like the question itself.

“Sure,” she said with a lot more confidence than she felt.She wasn’t completely lacking in self-awareness.She knew Marcus was great at getting under her skin, but ignoring him was a challenge, and she was also good at challenges.

Besides, she was rather looking forward to him trying hard to get her attention.

That way lies danger.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.Eden ignored the little warning voice in her head.Sometimes it was fun to live dangerously—as long as she didn’t fall into the actual trap.

“Well, good luck,” Rita said, shaking her head.Their food arrived just as she spoke, which gave Eden the excuse not to answer.It took a moment or two for everything to get settled once their plates were in front of them.When she looked up again, her friends were both on their phones, which was unusual.Normally, they all tried to stay off their phones when they were hanging out, unless they were looking something up.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Andres,” Rita replied, while Bree just looked guilty and shrugged.“I want to know why he didn’t tell me that Marcus was going to try to get back together with you... Huh.”

“What?” Eden did her best not to squirm with impatience in her seat.

“It seems he didn’t know.”

“Neither did Owen.” Bree held up her phone with the screen turned toward Eden to prove it. “He’s going to text Marcus now.”

There was a little part of her that was hurt Marcus hadn’t told his friends. How serious could he be about pursuing her again if he hadn’t talked to them about it? Especially since their girlfriends were her best friends? Why had he kept it quiet?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

I don't want him to be serious about pursuing me, remember?

Right.

3

Marcus

Patting down the soil around the potted orchid, Marcus put an ice cube on top of it. The ice cubes were his favorite method for watering the orchids. He could control exactly how much water they got without having to measure out every drop. Plus, that way, the water slowly dripped down to the roots rather than flooding the soil.

Tending to the plants in his nursery always made him feel better. Ten years ago, he would have never guessed he was a plant person, but his heart attack had changed his life completely. When he was recovering, taking care of a potted geranium an old co-worker had brought him as a get-well-soon present had been soothing, but it had also given him purpose.

Purpose he'd lost when Eden left him.

It seemed strange that caring for a plant had done that, but it was true. He'd ended up going to get the geranium, which he'd named Gerry, a friend at the store, so Gerry wouldn't be lonely when Marcus couldn't be home with him. Then he'd added another, and another, filling the balcony of his apartment with greenery, which had soothed something inside him.

That was where he went to meditate. He also had an indoor room for the winter where he could keep the less hardy plants during the cold months, though he had to be careful to make sure there was space for them... which could be difficult because as soon as he saw another place where a plant could fit, his impulse was to fill it.

Investing his savings in the nursery had been risky, but it had not only paid off, it allowed him to be constantly surrounded by plants. Caring for them and finding good homes for them made him happy. He could always recognize another plant person, often dragging their resigned partner through the store while their face lit up with every plant they added to their cart.

Working a job that not only paid the bills but gave him true personal satisfaction had been a revelation. Even with the stresses of being the owner of the nursery, he was far less stressed than he had been before. His doctor had been a little worried when he'd first decided to purchase the space, but now, he was fully on board with the changes it had wrought in Marcus.

It was true flower power.

His phone chimed with a text message.

By the time he'd reached his hand into his pocket, it had chimed again. And again.

Concerned, he frowned as he unlocked the screen to see what was going on.

Multiple texts from both Owen and Andres, with almost identical messages.

You're trying to get back together with Eden?

Well, it looked like Eden had gone running right to her friends. He probably should have expected that, but back when they'd divorced, she hadn't gone to talk to her

friends about it. Of course, all her friends had also been in some way involved with him and his job. She'd probably talked to some of her friends at work about it, but none of the people they'd hung out with... because all their non-work time had been about making work connections for him.

That wasn't who she was anymore, so he probably should have expected that this go around would be different, and she wouldn't be keeping everything to herself. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to talk to his friends or keep it a secret. He'd just figured he'd let her decide whether she wanted the others to know.

Especially since she'd been so quiet to their social circle about their divorce. Different circumstances, obviously, but he'd wanted the ball in her court. For some reason, he really hadn't thought she'd go running right out to tell everyone, though. He thought he'd have some time to prepare.

Oh, well.

As always with Eden, he should probably expect the unexpected.

Both of them had texted him individually, but he moved to the group chat to answer them rather than having to reply twice.

Marcus: I saw her this morning to tell her that I want to try again. I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure if she'd want everyone knowing her business.

That was short, succinct, and hopefully would clear everything up.

Owen: Good luck with that, man. Bree says she's not interested.

Andres: Rita says she doesn't want to be interested, but she is.

Marcus liked Rita's interpretation better, so he'd go with that one. The one that gave him hope.

Maybe he should let Eden know he wasn't going to give up that easily.

Marcus: Where are they?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Owen and Andres answered at the same time, and the responses made him grin. The House of Starrett was just down the street from his nursery. It was also one of his favorite places to go because he, Andres, and Owen were all pretty good friends with the owner, Saul. Which meant it was the last place he would have expected her to go.

Sneaky, sneaky Eden.

He realized he was grinning. She was going to keep him on his toes, that was for sure.

“Hey Judy, I’m going to take a walk. Shouldn’t take me long.”

“Okay, boss.” Judy was thirty years older than him and thoroughly enjoyed teasing him by calling him boss when, really, she did as much work as he did running the store. Eventually, she would want to retire, and it was going to be a bitch replacing her when she did. Giving him a salute, she sashayed away to check on something in another aisle.

Chuckling, Marcus headed out to the street, turning in the direction of the restaurant. It was a nice day out, a good one for a walk. What he was going to do when he got there, he wasn’t sure, but he wanted Eden to know both of them could use their friends to their advantage.

Plus, he wanted to see what she would do when she saw him.

He was in luck. Just as he walked up to the door, Eden, Rita, and Bree all spilled out from the exit, laughing, until Eden spotted him and came up short.

“Afternoon, ladies,” he said with an easy smile, his gaze flicking over each of them before landing on Eden and not moving away.

“Hi, Marcus!”

“Hello!”

Rita and Bree looked at Eden to see what she was going to do. Tipping her nose up in the air, Eden turned toward her friends.

“I’ll see y’all later.” She opened her arm for a hug.

“Ah, good. I see I’ve already gotten to you,” Marcus said.

Eden whirled around to glare at him before remembering herself and turning back to give Bree the hug she’d started.

“If you’re trying to convince me you don’t care at all about me, the fact you feel the need to put up a barrier isn’t going to do it, sweetheart.” He drawled the words, knowing she’d hear the challenge in them, knowing his easygoing and relaxed mocking tone would spark even more anger from her, which was what he wanted.

Old Eden had been endlessly patient. She’d gritted her teeth when she was annoyed. Tamped down her reactions when her emotions were running high. Not so new Eden. He was pretty sure he could use that to his advantage right now. Was he entirely sure where he was going with this? Nope. But he felt calm. In control. Like the universe was taking him where he needed to go.

“Oh?” Eden turned around to face him, planting her hands on her hips. Her glare would have set fire to his hair, if he had any. “So, what will convince you that I don’t care about you at all?”

“Scene with me.”The words popped out of his mouth without thinking, but as soon as he heard them, he knew they were right.

Behind Eden, Bree and Rita’s mouths dropped open in twin expressions of shock.

“What?”Eden practically screeched.

Marcus shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned at her.

“Scene with me.If you really don’t care about me at all, if you’re not worried about having lingering feelings for me, it shouldn’t be a big deal, right?”

“I only scene with men I’m attracted to.”Eden sniffed, lifting her chin defiantly.

Oh, hell no.Though her feelings might be ambivalent, the chemistry between them was undeniable, and he wasn’t going to let her get away with that.He stepped toward her, into her space, the same way he’d done this morning, but this time she didn’t have a door she could put between them.And with her friends there, she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of making her back up with witnesses—especially since that would be proving his point.

“Well, then, that shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”he asked, raising one eyebrow.Placing two fingers under her chin, he used them to tilt her head back, as if he was going to kiss her.Her breathing stuttered, pupils dilating, and her lips parted automatically.“Attraction was never the issue between us.”

The air between them sizzled.It took an immense amount of willpower to step away, letting his hand drop.Willpower and control.He liked touching her again—far too much.

“So?Scene with me next Saturday at the Outlands?”

“Fine.” The expression on her face as she bit out the word revealed she wasn’t nearly as sure of herself as she wanted to seem. He wasn’t sure that was what she’d actually meant to say, but she had said it and in front of her friends. There would be no backing out now, unless she was willing to swallow her pride. Marcus was betting she wouldn’t. “But afterward, when it’s clear I don’t have any feelings left for you, you agree to leave me alone.”

“It’s a deal.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

It was a risk, but one he was willing to take. Now, all he had to do was prove to her that she still had feelings for him and convince her that it was worth admitting it.

4

Eden

If you really didn't care, you wouldn't have accepted his damn challenge.

Shut up, brain.

She'd fallen neatly into his trap, and she couldn't get out of it without basically admitting she cared, whether or not she said the words. So, now she was going to go through with it just to show she could scene with him and shake it off immediately afterward. The way someone who didn't care could.

It was just attraction.

It didn't help that the whole week she'd been unable to keep memories of past scenes from playing out in her head like the world's most taunting movie reel. But memories weren't always truthful. Chances were, things hadn't been as hot as she remembered them. Her brain romanticized it because once they were deeper into their marriage, once things started falling apart, it wasn't like that anymore. So, her brain romanticized the earlier relationship, telling her the sex had been hotter than it had been to help her justify why she'd stayed with him for so long.

That made sense, right? So, once she had sex with him again, she would know that it

wasn't as good as her brain was trying to make her believe. It was just sex. Then she'd be able to walk away with her heart intact.

Are we having sex? He said scene, not sex... maybe he doesn't plan to have sex...

Shit.

Right back to the mental circles she kept running around all week because her brain kept interpreting 'scene' as 'sex' and there was a part of her that really, really, really still wanted to have sex with him. That part was her slutty vagina, which didn't care that he'd broken her heart all those years ago.

Looking down at her crotch, Eden scowled.

"Stop being so selfish," she scolded the part in question. "You can't just run things from your own agenda."

Since her vagina didn't have ears, it couldn't exactly listen.

The alarm on her phone went off, letting her know it was time to head to the Outlands. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her purse and headed to the front door, pausing to take one last look in the entryway's mirror. It hadn't been easy to find an outfit that combined "I don't care about you" with "Eat your heart out because you made a mistake when you lost me," but she thought she'd done pretty well.

No babygirl stuff here—she was wearing a sexy pink dress that clung to her body and matched her hair, which she was wearing down. The dress wasn't fetish wear, but it was hot as hell, sexy, and made her feel damn good. With the bright color, low cut top, and tight skirt with a slit up both thighs, it was the kind of dress Marcus would have had a shit fit over if she'd tried to wear it out anywhere.

Which was exactly why she'd chosen it.

Even if it didn't bother him now, it was a reminder to both of them that—at one point—it would have. Memories were better armor than any clothing she could put on, and she had a feeling she was going to need every advantage she could get.

Or you could just cancel.

Shut up, brain.

That would be admitting defeat. Then she would have to face the reality that she'd be disappointed at not getting the chance to see what things were like now. Besides, how was she supposed to wash away the romanticized memories with reality if she didn't do the reality?

She'd always be left wondering if it was really as good as she remembered and wishing she'd taken the opportunity to find out. Plus, he'd agreed to leave her alone after they scened. Well... as long as it was clear she didn't have any feelings left for him.

And it would be clear.

Right?

Shut up, brain.

Shaking her head to clear it, she yanked the door open and headed out.

The Outlands kink club wasn't far from her in downtown Pittsburgh. It used to be a restaurant that turned into a dance club at night on the top floor and a BDSM club in the basement, but last year it had undergone some renovations. Now it was just a

BDSM club. There had been an increase in membership fees to use all the amenities, but Eden had felt it was more than worth it.

The new club had two floors, all dedicated to kink. The top floor still had a bar and a dance floor, but now there were private rooms, stations for sceneing along the walls of the main floor, and a large space balcony where they could look down on what was happening below them. The lower floor was still where most of the sceneing equipment was out in the open and there were more private rooms down there as well.

Eden wasn't surprised to find Rita, Andres, Owen, and Bree already there at one of the bar tables with Marcus when she arrived. Marcus was always early for everything, and she didn't think any of their friends were going to want to miss whatever happened between them. The moment they spotted her, all of them straightened up. Rita didn't bother to hide her excitement, her blue eyes sparkling as if she was about to watch a movie she'd been looking forward to.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Lifting her hand, Eden sent her bestie a one-finger salute, which made her and Bree laugh. Marcus shook his head before he caught himself.

Uh huh.

Some old habits died hard. Just seeing that little head shake was enough to help clear her head. Part of the reason she'd focused on Rita was because of the visceral reaction she had to seeing Marcus waiting for her, his gaze running over her body like he was mentally undressing her. He hadn't looked at her like that before now.

Not even when he'd made the challenge. The heat in his eyes flustered her, made her want to avoid his gaze, made her want to turn and run out the door... so she responded by antagonizing her friend and doing something that would have pissed him off in the past.

It didn't help that he looked damn good, wearing leather pants and a vest that proved he was in fantastic shape. Even better shape than he had been before when he was working at the office all the time. Granted, she'd sort of known that, but she hadn't seen him in full-on Dom gear or with his shirt off before now. She'd seen the way his shoulders and biceps had filled out his clothes, but who knew those Flower Power t-shirts were also covering up pecs and abs?

Well, she knew now, and so did everyone else.

Eden pressed her lips together, lifting her chin up and sauntering over to the table. If Marcus wanted to undress her with his eyes, that was fine. It didn't bother her because she didn't have feelings for him. She recognized he was an attractive man and enjoyed

his appreciation of the effort she'd put into her appearance for tonight without it meaning anything more.

"Did someone send out a memo to get here early?" she asked when she reached the table.

"Nope, just wanted to make sure we didn't miss anything," Rita said, still grinning unrepentantly. Bree shot her a look.

"She means we wanted to be here in case you needed anything."

"I said what I said."

The laughter helped break the tension, and Eden could breathe a little easier. God, she loved her friends. They were going to have her back no matter what, and they knew what she needed. She was acutely aware of Marcus watching the interaction, like he was studying them. Studying her.

She couldn't help but wonder what he saw.

She'd never been like this with any of her friends while they were married. Not once he started becoming more concerned with appearances. A lot of her friendships from before their marriage had fallen by the wayside, other than the co-workers she was friendly with, but she hadn't really been friends with them, either. Her social life had been consumed by Marcus' needs. She'd known to behave 'properly' around their joint friends... because they all worked with Marcus. The ones who didn't actually work with him were either married to or romantically involved with someone who did.

This kind of behavior would never have been acceptable. She sure as hell wasn't going back, though. Not that she'd need to. Marcus wasn't at that job anymore. He'd

seen who she was now, how she interacted with her friends. If he was still interested, he needed to take her as she was currently. She wasn't going to change for him or making herself smaller for a man ever again.

He apologized for that, remember? He knows.

A really heartfelt apology. Which just made him more dangerous to her. Deep down, she knew she wouldn't have agreed to tonight without that apology having already happened. He'd offered it up before she'd asked for it, and by the time he challenged her to a night together, it had gotten under her skin and was motivating her to make stupid choices.

"Would you like a drink?" Marcus asked. "Or would you like to jump right in?"

"Jump right in."

She didn't need a drink. She needed to get this over with, so she could figure out what happened next.

5

Eden

The jerk had gotten them a private room.

She hadn't been surprised when he'd led her to it, but the confirmation had upped both her arousal and her anxiety. Part of her had wondered if he'd want witnesses. Especially when this scene amounted to a bet.

Instead, he'd chosen privacy.

Intimacy.

I am so fucked.

Her traitorous vagina cheered.

Not that kind of fucked, you slut.

Her vagina was going to be a problem. Maybe if she'd had a boyfriend or a play partner within the past six months it would be easier, but the truth was she really missed being with an actual man. Someone who could spank her and hold her, then fuck her to a screaming orgasm.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Toys were fun, but they couldn't do all that.

The room Marcus had chosen wasn't themed, though it was very attractively decorated. The dark wood and lush red fabrics made for an erotic boudoir, filled with all sorts of implements, along with the furniture. There was a St. Andrew's cross, a wooden frame, a spanking bench, a couch, and a bed all squeezed into the space of the room, yet somehow, it didn't feel crowded. Whoever had designed and decorated the place deserved what they'd earned.

"Let's go over to the couch and talk for a minute," Marcus said, taking her by the hand and leading her over.

Eden bit her lip against a snappy comeback.

Without her friends standing there watching, she was feeling more vulnerable and a little less brave. It was one thing to be sassy to Marcus when her friends were there or she was at her apartment. It was another when they were at a kink club, and she'd agreed to let him dominate her for the night. She might be a brat, but she wasn't sure where his head was at, and he'd have every right to discipline her for disrespect if he wanted to.

Sure, she could say her safeword—and she would if she really felt she needed to—but that wasn't how she wanted this night to go.

So, she reined in her brat, following him docilely to the couch and sitting down where he placed her. Marcus sat right next to her, spreading his knees wide so his leg was touching hers, and she wouldn't be able to change that without moving away.

Which she wasn't going to do.

She couldn't back down from a challenge, but she also... liked it. Little sparks were traveling up her leg to her core. Touching him felt nice, and he'd been the one to make the move, so she hadn't started the touching.

Besides, there was going to be a lot more touching soon enough. She needed to try to get a handle on her reaction to his touch while it was innocuous. Soon enough, it wouldn't be.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" she asked with forced cheerfulness, reaching up to run her fingers through her hair. Marcus' gaze followed the movement. She dropped her hand back in her lap, feeling awkward rather than the confidence she was going for.

"Well, it's been a while since we've scened. I wanted to talk about limits."

Right. Of course, he would. Marcus was a conscientious Dom. Eden did her best to meet his gaze. One of the things she loved about kink was, once limits were established, a Dom could sweep her off her feet, over his shoulder, and have his way with her. One of the things she hated was that they had to talk about those limits before anything could happen.

It was necessary, but when she was already feeling vulnerable, it only increased that feeling. She also had kind of expected Marcus to get right down to it, since he already knew all her limits, but of course he wouldn't jump right in. Things might have changed, and he wanted to address that.

Still, she could try to move the process along a little. Eden shrugged one shoulder.

"All my limits are the same as before. If you remember them." Was she taunting him?

Yeah... maybe just a little.

Marcus

He remembered Eden's limits, every last one of them were burned into his brain, despite the amount of time since they'd last scened, but that wasn't the point.

"Are you saying you want to abide by all those old limits? So, I can put you on your knees right now and slide my cock in your mouth?" He reached out, curling his fist under her chin to lift it up, his thumb sweeping over her lower lip, as her eyes widened. "Or put you over the spanking bench, spank you with a wooden paddle, then fuck your pretty little ass?"

His voice was harsh with need, because fuck if he didn't want to do all of those things, but he didn't think she was ready yet. He'd deliberately mentioned the wooden paddle, which she had a love-hate relationship with, making it a perfect implement for actual discipline. Eden hated being spanked with it, but she loved the afterburn.

Of course she couldn't just acquiesce easily and admit he was right and that they needed to talk.

He might have thrown her off for a moment or two, but she recovered quickly, licking her lip where his thumb had touched before answering him with as much sass as before.

"Well, it has been a while since I've had anal sex, so I would at least need some prep."

His cock, which had already been thickening, was instantly hard. She wasn't saying 'no.' He wondered exactly how long it had been.

Since the last time he'd had anal? Which had been with her. It could mean something, or it could mean nothing, so he didn't want to get hung up on it, but he knew he'd be obsessing about it later.

Right now, he didn't want to ruin the moment by finding out there had been someone else because he knew himself well enough to know it would make him jealous. Irrational but true.

"But you're okay with sexual intercourse during this scene?" His cock was practically fighting to get out of his leathers in anticipation, so he wanted to be sure he understood what she was saying. He'd abide by whatever limits she wanted to lay down, but this was unexpected.

Sex wasn't necessary for a scene, and he hadn't expected it with her tonight, to be perfectly honest. However, he was absolutely willing to adapt if that was not one of her limits.

Eden shrugged one shoulder.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Sure. Sex is fine. Whatever you want to do. It won’t make a difference to me.” She batted her eyes at him, but he saw the uncertainty behind her casual smile.

So, that was how she wanted to play it. She was going to do her best to prove that she didn’t have any lingering feelings for him by pretending sex wouldn’t matter. Well, hell, if she wanted to make things easier for him, who was he to argue with her?

He knew Eden. It didn’t matter how much she’d changed over the years, the core of her was still the same. She wouldn’t give him this much leeway unless she still trusted him on some level.

No new barriers.

No keeping herself from him.

All in the name of proving she didn’t have feelings for him anymore, but really, she was revealing the feelings remained. Or maybe, like him, her feelings had changed over time, but when they’d met again, she’d found something to like about him.

He’d gotten over her after their divorce, he really had... until she’d come back into his life, and he’d found that he liked the new her. Maybe she liked the new him, too. Hell, she should. A lot of the changes he’d made were things she’d asked for while they were together that, to his shame, he hadn’t implemented until after she’d left.

“And no objection to calling me ‘Daddy’ for the course of the scene?” he asked, keeping her chin firmly held in place with his forefinger and thumb, so she couldn’t

look away or hide her expression. Which was why he saw the flaring of her nostrils as she sucked in a quick breath, her eyelashes fluttering in reaction.

“No objection.” Her voice was higher. Shriller. Less confident.

He hadn’t earned the title of Daddy from her yet, and he’d held it without merit for too long while they were married. Marcus intended to start making up for that tonight.

“No objection, what?” he asked, because he needed to hear her say it.

Something flared in her eyes, her tongue flicking out over her lips again.

“No objection, Daddy.”

Little brat. The emphasis she put on the title made it sound almost sarcastic, but it didn’t matter. His body responded with pure need.

6

Marcus

Letting go of Eden’s chin, he took her hand and pulled her forward. It took no effort at all to drag her over his lap. The tight dress she was wearing was sexy as hell, but he recognized an unspoken attempt to brat when he saw it. Did the dress bother him? No. Did he know that she’d worn it in an attempt to bother him? Yes. That was enough of a reason to indulge in some funishment, especially since she’d already agreed to a scene.

“Hey!”

“Tell me, little girl,” he said, resting his hand on her upturned bottom, the tips of his

fingers brushing against her thigh where the hem ended. It was just under the curve of her ass, so he was touching her sensitive sit-spot and felt her shiver in reaction. The soft side of her stomach was pressed firmly against the bulge of his cock, rubbing the leather over the aching shaft and head as a massive tease when she squirmed. "Did you wear this dress because you thought I would find it inappropriate?"

Eden went still.

He could practically hear her thinking.

If she admitted it, he could spank her for it.

If she didn't admit it, he could spank her for lying.

This was a funishment, not a punishment, so it didn't really matter what she said. Either way, she was in trouble. Even if she didn't admit it, they'd both know she was lying. He could still read her like a book. He knew exactly why she'd worn that dress.

"What's inappropriate about it, Daddy?" she asked, her voice so overly and insincerely innocent, a judge would condemn her on that alone.

So, that was how she was going to play it.

Rather than answering, he lifted his hand and brought it down hard on her bottom, making her squeal. She jerked upward, and he used his forearm to pin her down across his thighs, his cock throbbing in response to... well, everything.

"It was a yes or no question, little girl, not an invitation to ask Daddy a question."

Eden squirmed. Since she'd indicated sex was fine, he dipped his fingers down,

brushing the tips along the wet fabric covering her pussy.She was already incredibly turned on.

Fuck.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Keeping his desire under control was going to be a massive feat of willpower.

“Noooo, Daddy, I wore it because it matches my hair.”

Marcus snorted. He had no doubt that was part of the reason—that was a very Eden thing to do—but that wasn’t the whole reason. He lifted his hand and gave her bottom another hard swat.

“And because I wanted to look hot!”

He yanked up the skirt, revealing the skimpy, lacy black underwear. It cupped her curves, her paler skin peeking through the lace, a hint of blush on the places where his swats had landed.

“Okay, fine, and because I thought it would piss you off,” she huffed, but he could hear the amusement in her voice. She wasn’t admitting it because the spanking had actually hurt her. She was playing the game, playing the role of naughty little girl who didn’t want the spanking.

Even though she really did.

“That’s what I thought, naughty girl,” he said, shaking his head as he pulled down her panties. Not because they would protect her bottom at all—they wouldn’t—but because there was always a psychological component to scenes like this. The lack of any protection over her bottom, the knowledge she was completely bare, would have an effect on her.

He'd also chosen to use his hand for the same reason since it was more intimate than using an implement.

His hand came down hard on her cheeks, making her squeal and squirm again, even as her hips pushed upward, lifting her bottom for more punishment. Fuck, he'd missed her.

Missed this.

"Such a naughty girl, deliberately trying to provoke your Daddy," he said as he rained down swat after swat on her curves, turning the skin from its normal creamy hue to a nice, hot pink, while she squealed and kicked.

He knew he wasn't really hurting her; she just liked the production of it. He did pause to check, dipping his fingers into her eager pussy and giving the wet folds a stroke before returning to his work.

Eden

Fuck, she'd missed this.

As much as she hated to admit it, even to herself, she couldn't deny that being over Marcus' lap felt different from when she'd scened with some of the random Doms here at the Outlands. Even the Daddy Doms. It hadn't been the same as this.

Hadn't felt the same.

Because she still had lingering feelings for him, dammit.

Or, at least, new feelings that had grown when he'd come back into her life, and she'd realized he'd turned into a new and improved version of Marcus. She couldn't

even say he was the Marcus she'd married—he wasn't. He was even better.

More self-aware. More mature. More introspective. More observant. More present in the moment, rather than half his focus being on work even when he was 'home.' Not that she'd seen him at home, but that he had things to talk about other than work when he was with his friends was a huge difference from before.

Sure, he talked a lot about plants, but he was talking about actual plants, not just the business side and how much money he was making or how well the nursery was doing. He had hobbies. He took time off. He was... fun.

Which was why she was constantly snapping at him. She was so mad he'd waited until she was gone to turn into her dream man.

One tear leaked down her cheek. Then another. And another. Each blazing swat added heat to her bottom and another tear sliding down her cheek. It wasn't the spanking that hurt though, it was her heart.

A sob ripped from her, and Eden's hands flew up to her mouth to cover the noise, but it was too late.

"Eden? Baby?" Marcus sounded panicked as he pulled her upright, resting her hot bottom on his thigh, turning her so he could look at her face—which she immediately tried to turn away because she didn't want him to see her tears. If they'd been from the spanking, she wouldn't have cared, but right now, she felt so vulnerable, she couldn't bear for him to look at her. "Eden, what's wrong? Did I hurt you? Fuck, I'm sorry, I should have checked in to make sure the spanking was?"

She opened her mouth to tell him that the spanking had been just fine, that he hadn't hurt her, and what came out was a wail. Burying her face in her hands, she felt him wrap his arms around her as he rocked her on his lap, making soothing noises and

telling her everything was going to be okay. Even though he couldn't guarantee that, he said it, and he sounded like he meant it.

Which just made her cry harder.

Had she shed tears when their marriage ended? Sure, but not as many as she had during their marriage.

She'd never allowed her inner Little girl to grieve. She'd let herself cry over the end of romance, over the loss of her husband, for letting go of the future she'd envisioned for herself... but she'd never cried over losing her Daddy Dom. She'd shut that part of herself away to keep that lonely Little girl inside her safe, long before their marriage had ended, way back when she'd stopped being able to rely on him.

So, she'd never really mourned that loss.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Now, it was all bubbling up to the surface at the worst time possible, and she couldn't stop it. The barrier had broken, and there was no time to rebuild it. So, she sobbed and sobbed against his shoulder, letting the Little girl at her core cry on her Daddy's shoulder and receive his comfort.

The comfort she'd needed so long ago, when he hadn't been there to give it to her.

By the time she was hiccupping and finally able to get a hold of herself, her tears slowing, her breathing normalizing, she felt utterly spent. Marcus continued to make the soothing noises, his chin resting on top of her head, his hands gently stroking her. Her butt was still on fire, but the rest of her felt... better.

Calmer.

Empty but in a good way, as though she'd been holding something toxic and terrible inside her, and it had been purged. She felt lighter.

"Eden?" Marcus' voice was hesitant. Soft.

All he knew was he'd been spanking her, and suddenly, she'd been sobbing in a manner extremely disproportionate to the spanking he'd been giving her. He was probably freaking the fuck out.

Eden giggled.

"Eden." The hesitation was gone, and there was a hint of warning in his voice. "What just happened?"

“You’re right, I have feelings for you, but some of them are that I’m still so, so mad at you.” She hiccupped again.

7

Marcus

Relief flooded through Marcus. He didn’t think he’d been spanking Eden hard enough to make her cry like that because of the physical pain, but he’d worried there was some unknown injury or something that he’d hit upon. Instead, it had been an emotional injury, one inflicted by him... which meant it was incumbent upon him to make it right.

“You have every right to be mad,” he said softly, stroking her hair.

“There were things I could have done, too,” she admitted. “I was mad at myself by the time our marriage ended. It was my own fault for letting your life and your needs consume mine. I didn’t fight for myself until I realized that nothing I did was going to change your behavior.”

“I should have been paying more attention to you. I should have noticed how unhappy you were.” Instead, he’d been blindsided because he’d been so focused on himself. And that had made him angry and uncompromising. Neither of which had been good.

“I could have told you sooner. I could have gone out and made my own friends... I just, I hit a point where I didn’t know how to separate myself from you without actually separating myself from you. And I didn’t want to be with the person you’d become.”

“I don’t blame you.” The person he’d become had been a pretty crappy husband and

an absolutely terrible Daddy. All things he'd made strides in changing after she'd left him. "Losing you was a huge wake up call to me."

"Even bigger than your heart attack?"

"Much." Because it was losing her that had motivated him to actually open his eyes to what he'd turned into. He couldn't blame his diet or anything else for that. It was his behavior that had driven her away. Sure, he'd been angry and had wondered why she'd kept her unhappiness to herself, but he'd also known—deep down—that once she started trying to tell him, he hadn't been listening.

A lot of therapy had helped him work through all of that and recognize what he could have done. Yes, there were things she could have done, too, but fundamentally, their marriage had needed a big shake-up regardless, and he hadn't been willing to give it one until she shook herself right out of it.

He sighed. Even though she'd admitted that she had feelings for him, this wasn't how he wanted her to give him a chance. He didn't actually want her to be forced into it. He wanted her to want it. He'd hoped that sceneing tonight would put her in a position where she'd realize that a second chance was what she wanted.

"Eden... thank you for giving me the chance to scene tonight. I will leave you alone after this, I promise. The ball is in your court, and I won't pressure you, and I'll stop trying to antagonize you when we see each other with our friends."

She shifted on his lap, stirring his cock again—his erection had deflated the moment she started sobbing so brokenheartedly—and he manfully ignored the involuntary reaction. Eden was not a pretty crier. Now that she was sitting so he could see her face, he could see her swollen nose and red-rimmed eyes, and the way even her lips had puffed up.

It didn't matter.

She was always stunningly beautiful to him.

“What if I don't want you to leave me alone?”

Marcus stilled, staring at her, trying to decipher if she was serious or if she was teasing him. But it was Eden. She might be a brat of epic proportions, but she wouldn't joke about something like that.

“Really?”

She took a deep breath before answering him, as if she was gathering her courage.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Really. I mean, I’m still mad. Like, how dare you become exactly what I wanted you to be after I left you.” She hiccupped and laughed again.

“But since I am, you might as well give this version a try?”

“Exactly.” She tilted her head, one side of her lips curving up. “I deserved this version before.”

“You did. You won’t regret this, I promise.” He lowered his lips to hers for a kiss, tasting the salt of her tears. Regretting that she’d shed them while simultaneously wanting to cheer that she was giving him this chance.

“Uh huh.” She didn’t have the chance to say anything more before his lips touched hers, which was probably a good thing. He could tell from her tone that whatever response she’d had, it was pure brat, and he didn’t think he could spank her again. Not right now.

The kiss was meant to be gentle. A brush of the lips, a promise for the future...

Her hand came up to wrap around the back of his neck, and she met his lips with unexpected hunger. Marcus’ grip on her tightened as his need roared to life, thrumming through him with heavy demand. That had not been his intention, but once her lips latched onto his, she wasn’t willing to let go.

She wriggled in his lap, deliberately rubbing herself against his growing bulge. Little brat. He should have expected that she would try to take over and push things in the direction she wanted, whatever his intentions were.

Thankfully, he was more than willing to go in the direction she wanted, but they were going to do it on his terms.

Sliding one arm under her knees, he wrapped the other securely around her back and stood. Eden squealed, breaking off the kiss and clinging to him as the stable lap she was resting on disappeared, until she was being held in front of him.

“If you don’t want to continue the scene, now is the time to say so,” he warned her, walking toward the bed.

“If I somehow wasn’t clear enough, I want you to hurry up and do me, Daddy,” she retorted, her fingers stroking over the back of his neck where she knew he was sensitive. All the hair on his arms stood up in response to the ticklish sensation. If he had any hair on his head, it probably would have stood as well.

His cock sure as hell was standing at attention again.

Part of him wanted to ask if she was sure, just because he wanted the reassurance, but he knew that was guaranteed to piss her off. When it came to asking for what she wanted, Eden didn’t say things she didn’t mean. Asking if she was sure she really wanted to have sex with him was questioning her judgment, and they’d already been through enough emotional upheaval this evening.

“If you’re sure,” he said, which got him an eyeroll from her, but she didn’t get mad like she would have if he’d asked rather than left it open. “Don’t roll your eyes at Daddy, little girl.” He tossed her onto the bed, making her bounce, and she immediately rolled to her side with a squeal as landing on her butt reignited all the sting from the spankings.

“Ow, Daddy!” She pouted up at him, and he shook his head because he knew that it was all an act. “My bottom hurts.”

“Oh, no. Poor baby,” he replied, giving her his best mock sympathy. “Here, let Daddy make it all better.”

Grabbing her by the ankle he pulled her toward him so he could finish stripping off her clothes. Not that he did it quickly. No, he enjoyed baring every delicious inch of her, taking his time to caress, stroke, and kiss the skin revealed as he relieved her of her underwear and rolled her dress up and over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra, so he fell upon those pert, sweet, brown nipples like a starving man.

Moaning, Eden arched her back, running her hands over the smooth skin of his head and down to the nape of his neck to hold him in place. Not that he needed any encouragement to lick, suck, and bite the swollen nubs. He showered attention on her breasts like the starving man he was. He hadn't truly fed since long before the divorce papers had been signed.

Now, she was offering to let him back into her garden, and he fell upon her like the manna from heaven that she was. Once he was done with her breasts, he moved down her belly, coming closer and closer to her promised land. His tongue delved into the valley, the taste of her ambrosia exploding on his tongue.

Eden cried out, writhing, her thighs clamping around his head as he swept his tongue between her folds, flicking the tip against the little bundle of excited nerves at its apex. Her hips moved in time with his tongue. Sliding his hands under her thighs, he pushed them farther apart with his shoulders, wrapping his hands around them to hold her open for his oral assault.

And he feasted.

This was better than she'd remembered.

It was a good thing she was no longer following her plan to try to convince herself that there was nothing between her and Marcus and that the sex with him couldn't have been that good. If she had been, the plan would have been blown out of the water. Marcus was lavishing attention on her, worshipping every inch of her body, and she was drowning in pleasure.

This was what she'd dreamed of—those lonely nights when she'd been hoping for her husband to turn back into the man she'd married. Was she crazy to give him a second chance now? Maybe. But it did look like he'd truly put in the work and made the changes, and after all that she'd given up, shouldn't she get the benefit of that?

"Oh, fuck... oh, Daddy..." Eden writhed as he sucked her clit into his mouth, pulsing the swollen nub with his tongue. Pleasure welled up in her core and washed over her in a wave as her fingers dug into the base of his skull, gripping him, trying to pull him more firmly against her as she came for him.

She'd barely come down from the high when he pulled away, licking his lips, his eyes hot with need. Shoving his hand into his pocket, he pulled out a condom packet.

"I'm still on birth control, Daddy. Just fuck me," she pleaded, sliding her hands over her body to tempt him. She didn't want to feel him through the rubber. She wanted to feel just him inside her, the way it had always been between them. The birth control was necessary to keep her periods regular, even when she wasn't having sex, so she'd never stopped taking it—besides, better safe than sorry.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

A decision she definitely didn't regret now as desire flared in Marcus' eyes, and he dropped the packet.

"I got my tests run at the doctor's three months ago, and I haven't been with anyone since," he said, his voice a growl as he dropped forward, his forearms bracing himself against the bed on either side of her.

"Two months ago for me.And same."

His mouth claimed hers in another kiss, and this time, she could taste her pleasure on his tongue.As his big body moved over hers, she spread her thighs wide for him, moaning against his lips as she felt the blunt head of his cock rubbing between her pussy lips, coating the tip with her arousal.She squirmed, moving to get him in the right spot, needing him inside her.

Both of them moaned as he thrust forward, stretching her open.The pointed tips of her nipples brushed against the wiry hairs on his chest, adding to the pleasurable stimulation as he sank into her.Eden moaned again, lifting her hips to meet his thrust and wrapping her legs around his to dig her heels into the backs of his thighs, wanting him deeper inside her.

"Oh fuck, babygirl," he groaned, flexing his hips to retreat, then thrust in again.

If she hadn't already been cried out, hearing those words from his lips would have made her tear up again.It felt as if she'd been waiting forever to hear him call her that, in exactly that tone.

“Daddy, harder, please, fuck me harder!” She whimpered as his hands curved around her arms, sliding from her biceps over her elbows to her wrists, pushing her hands up above her head. Their fingers joined, his weight pushed her arms down into the bed, pinning her as he began to move harder and faster within her.

Unable to do more than wriggle beneath him, Eden moaned and squirmed, her pussy clenching around him with every hard thrust. His body rubbed against her swollen clit as he lowered his lips to hers for another searing kiss, muffling her cries of pleasure.

It was everything she’d been missing.

Her pussy clamped down around his thrusting cock as her pleasure mounted, another, bigger orgasm growing within her. Shuddering, her legs tightened around his waist, feet pulling him into her so she could rub her sensitive parts against his hard body. As his thrusts grew wilder, driving deeper, he could no longer maintain the kiss. He pulled his lips away, allowing her cries to fill the room again.

“Oh, Daddy, I’m going to come... oh fuck, I’m going to come...”

“That’s it, babygirl.” His voice was a deep growl, reaching to some inner part of her that craved his command. “Come for me, come all over Daddy’s cock.”

It was filthy and hot, so wrong, yet so right. Eden cried out as her orgasm peaked and the waves of pleasure crashed over her. Her back arched, her arms straining, but she couldn’t move them from where he had her restrained by his own hands. The inability to move increased the pleasure of her climax. She writhed on his cock as he pumped harder and harder.

With a wild cry, he buried himself inside her, and her pussy clenched hard as she rubbed her body against his. The stimulation sent another wave of ecstasy sweeping through her. She dug her heels into his thighs as the intensity of her erotic bliss

became almost painful.

“Daddy!”

Feeling the burst of his climax inside her, the hot pulses of cum filling her, her muscles spasmed around him as if her body was trying to pull every drop of cum deep into her. They’d talked about having kids, but their marriage had fallen apart before they’d done more than discuss the possibility. Even though she was on birth control now, there was something incredibly hot about knowing he was filling her with his seed.

The fact that her brain was already there said more about what she felt about him than any of her sassy shields and barriers had.

She was so fucked.

And not because he’d just filled her with his cum, though that, too.

“Holy fuck, babygirl...” Marcus’ words echoed her thoughts.

He lifted his head, looking down at her, and her gaze darted around as his intense look, while he was still inside her, made her feel more vulnerable than ever. One of his hands slid down her arm to cup her cheek, and she met his gaze, inwardly and outwardly trembling at the intimacy. Marcus’ dark eyes were soft. Loving. The way he’d looked at her forever ago, yet somehow different.

“Guess you were serious about giving me a second chance, huh?”

“And using you for sex while I do so,” she retorted. Her sassy barriers were coming back up as she tried to hide her rising panic.

Yes, she'd decided to give him another chance.

Yes, she'd wanted the sex.

But now that her arousal had been reduced to a simmer rather than a firestorm, and her desires were no longer playing havoc with her brain, she was panicking a little. This was what she wanted, but it was also too much, too fast—and her pride wouldn't let her admit it. Her first instinct was to prod Marcus and try to push him away.

Instead, he chuckled and lowered his lips to hers for a kiss.

“Consider my dick at your disposal.”

That wasn't the response she'd expected, and as Eden laughed, she felt something inside of her relax. Not completely. Her brain was still picking apart all the ways this could go wrong. All the ways she could be hurt again. But at least she wasn't panicking anymore.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Let’s get you cleaned up, babygirl,” he murmured, brushing his lips over hers again for one last kiss. Eden sighed, focusing on the now and pushing thoughts of the future away as best she could.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Her body hummed with satisfaction, her bottom a little sore from the spanking, her pussy sore in a good way from the fucking. And her eyes were a little sore from the crying, although it felt like most of the aftereffects of her emotional breakdown had been wiped away by the hot sex. At least in a kink club, when they left the private room, no one would think that evidence of tears was unusual.

Well, Rita and Bree might, but they wouldn’t bother her about it.

“So, now what?” she asked as Marcus helped her put her dress back on.

“That’s up to you,” he replied, slipping the straps back over her shoulders, caressing her skin with his fingers. Not like he was trying to turn her on, but like he couldn’t stop touching her now that he’d started. “I’d like to take you out on a date.”

“I’ve got nothing going on tomorrow.” Although she hadn’t really meant it to, the words came out sounding like a challenge. Spontaneity had never been Marcus’ strong suit, and during their marriage, it had been nearly impossible due to his work schedule.

Which wasn’t fair now since he owned his own business, and he really did have to work.

“Great.I’ll bring you breakfast before I have to go to work.”

He kissed the top of her head, amusement threaded through his voice as if he’d known what she was doing.The itch to get out of there to get some space and put up some shields again was growing stronger.As if he sensed it, Marcus wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Come on, let’s get back to our friends.”

As much as Eden wanted to pretend like everything was normal and nothing major had happened, it was kind of hard to do with his cum slowly dripping down her thigh... but she was going to try her best.

9

Marcus

Showingup at Eden’s door in the morning was a little nerve wracking.Things had been weird last night when they’d rejoined their friends.Well, when they’d rejoined Bree and Owen, who had waited for them.Rita and Andres had ended up finding an empty spanking bench to claim.

Bree had been concerned, Owen had been concerned because Bree was concerned, and Eden had put back up all the walls Marcus had broken down during their scene.He’d stepped back a bit to give her space, unsure if he was doing the right thing, but since they’d done a one-eighty from a bet about her feelings to her giving him a second chance, he’d decided not to push.

He was still questioning whether that had been the right decision.

She’d texted him this morning that Rita and Bree would be joining them for breakfast

and to bring enough for everyone, as well as giving him coffee orders. Was it another test? Absolutely. Was Marcus determined to pass with flying colors? Yup.

Was he going to punish her for testing him later?

Undecided.

He understood why she was doing it and understood why she'd invited Rita and Bree on their 'date.' Which he no longer considered a date since they had chaperones.

He'd gotten under her skin last night, even more than she'd expected, and now she was trying to walk back some of the progress they'd made, which was fine. Marcus still had a toehold, and he was going to make the most of it.

Besides, the way to a woman's heart was often found through her friends. If the friends approved, his job would be a million times easier. He needed to win them over anyway since they were going to be part of his life for years to come. Whether or not things worked out with him and Eden, he wasn't going to be giving up his friendships.

That was why his anxiety spiked a little when he heard voices and laughter behind Eden's door. They were all there. Straightening up, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, quelling his racing heartbeat and slowing his breathing. Anything to do with Eden felt high stress, and he did his best to avoid that.

Once he felt calmer, he knocked on the door.

All the voices within fell silent. A moment later, Eden called out in a sing-song voice.

"Who is it?"

“Daddy.”

The door jerked open, and her face was bright red. Marcus grinned and pushed the tray full of coffee drinks at her.

“Good morning, babygirl.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Oh my God, get in here. The last thing I need is Mrs. Vaughn hearing you and getting ideas!” She grabbed his arm—the one attached to the bag of food, not the coffee—and pulled him into her apartment. Marcus raised his eyebrows.

“You care what the neighbor thinks about you?” That seemed very unlike her.

“I care that she’s on a smutty-Daddy-romance-reading binge and overshares on everything. I don’t care about what she wants to know about me. I don’t want to hear what she has to say about her and Mr. Vaughn’s sexcapades.” Eden shook her head, brushing strands of pink hair out of her face as she looked up at him with a pained expression. “They’re in their eighties, and I can tell you the exact day she lost her anal virginity. Because she told me. Because I made the mistake of telling her that I also read naughty romance.”

Marcus nearly choked. He hoped to meet Mrs. Vaughn one day, not because he wanted to know about her sex life—he’d have to watch what he said—but because anyone who could discompose Eden was worth meeting.

“Good for her,” he said. “I would think you would find her inspirational.”

“She does,” Rita piped up from where she was sitting at the kitchen table. “But it is still a little uncomfortable. Mrs. Vaughn reminds me of my grandma. And I absolutely approve of grandma getting down, but I’m not so enlightened that I want to hear too much about it.”

“Especially when she describes how she gets Mr. Vaughn to get it up,” Bree muttered.

Marcus cracked up, shaking his head as he went to the table and began to unload the bag of goodies he'd brought. Bagels, cream cheese, several omelets, and fruit salad. He grabbed the Southwestern egg white omelet he'd gotten for himself and sat down in the chair next to Eden's.

At least she had left that chair open rather than putting Bree and Rita between them.

"I'll be more careful about what I say in the hallway," he promised. Though he might find it funny, he was trying to make a good impression on everyone, especially Eden, which meant making sure she stayed comfortable.

"Thank you," Eden said primly, taking the seat next to him. The next few minutes were silent while everyone grabbed what they wanted to eat, loading up their plates, and claiming their drinks.

Marcus began to eat his omelet, just happy to be there. He was going to treat Eden like a skittish animal—first step was getting her used to his presence. If they had been alone this morning, it might have been a different story, but they weren't.

Eden

Marcus was sitting in her apartment, eating breakfast at her kitchen table. Even with her friends there, it felt oddly intimate. Maybe because it was so unexpected.

She stared at his meal.

"Are there vegetables in that?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a Southwestern egg white omelet. It's got peppers, spinach, and low-fat cheese." He grinned at her. "I've changed up my diet a bit."

Apparently. While she knew the job and stressful lifestyle he'd been leading had led to his heart attack, she'd also known his diet wouldn't have helped. He'd had the tendency to eat a lot of takeout and fast food, and he didn't usually choose anything that had vegetables in it—burgers, fries, steak and cheese subs, tater tots. For breakfast, he'd been more likely to down a few sausages than anything else. Nothing wrong with those things in moderation, but it had started to be all he ate unless she made something for him. Which had eaten into her time, and he'd never reciprocated.

To be perfectly honest, she'd expected to see him show up this morning with the usual kind of breakfast he'd gotten when he'd been in charge of food.

It was good to see him taking care of himself, especially in the wake of the heart attack, and another reminder of how things had changed. If they got back together, she wouldn't have to nag him about his diet. He was already taking care of it.

“So, Marcus, what are your intentions toward our friend?” Rita asked, tilting her head toward Eden.

Eden rolled her eyes, but she didn't protest. She knew she'd be doing the same thing in Rita's shoes. Even kind-hearted Bree didn't try to temper Rita's bluntness. Instead, she gave Marcus the same hard look Rita was as they waited for his answer.

“To show her how much I've improved as a romantic partner and hope that she's willing to give me a second chance to cherish her the way she deserves,” Marcus replied with perfect sincerity, his gaze moving to meet hers rather than looking at Rita or Bree.

“Awww,” Rita and Bree chorused in unison. Bree had softened more than Rita, but they were both looking a little starry-eyed now. Their own romances had prepped them to be open to anything romantic that came out of Marcus' mouth.

Truth be told, Eden was feeling a little melty after the pronouncement as well.

Yes, he'd said something similar to her last weekend, but it wasn't the same as announcing it to witnesses. Especially since last weekend had been a surprise and this weekend... well, she'd already really been able to see some of the changes he'd made to his life and the differences in his approach to her. Now, he was setting himself up for what could be an embarrassment since he was announcing his intentions so baldly.

He didn't have to.

He could have hemmed around it or said something less declarative. But he hadn't.

The shields around her heart were already starting to feel a little cracked, even though she'd pulled them back up overnight. Now he was battering at them some more.

Rita gave herself a little shake.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“So, you’re not going to fall back into old bad habits, right?” she asked pointedly.

Eden coughed as she swallowed a piece of bagel wrong, and Marcus reached out to pat her on the back as he answered.

“I’ve had a few years of practice now,” he replied with a chuckle, not at all put out by Rita’s questioning. He was a lot chillier than he had been while they were married. “And I’ve been through a lot of therapy and done a lot of introspection.”

“You went to therapy?” At some point, she needed to get past being surprised by all the things he’d finally done after she’d left him.

“I did. I still go in for a tune-up sometimes.” He grinned at her. “Dr. Silverwood would be happy to meet you any time you’d like to come with me, in fact. I’ve told her all about you. She’s kind friendly.”

Eden knew that. She’d actually heard the name before, from her cousin Eben who worked at the Outlands. Sometimes, it seemed like Eben knew everyone in the community. Dr. Silverwood was one of the therapists the Outlands recommended to anyone who asked for a suggestion.

“Uh, maybe some time.” Depending on how things continued on with Marcus, it probably wasn’t a bad idea, but it wasn’t something she was willing to jump into right away. Hard to do couples therapy when you weren’t officially a couple yet.

Bree asked Marcus a question about his nursery, taking him off the hot seat, and conversation flowed much more easily until he had to leave. Eden walked him to the

door, feeling as though she was on a first date, even though she'd invited her friends along.

Will he kiss me?

It turned out the answer was yes. When she opened the door, before she could step away, Marcus leaned down to steal a kiss... and she let him.

"I'll give you a call later, baby— ah, beautiful." He winked at her and sauntered away, whistling as he went.

Eden let herself check out his very fine ass for a few moments before shutting the door and sighing as she pressed her head against it.

"Girl, you are in so much trouble," Rita called from the couch. "That man means business."

"I know." She turned to look at her friends. "I'm not being crazy, though, right? Like, it's worth giving him a second chance?"

"Seems like it to me," Bree said immediately. "It's not just that he wants one. He's been doing the work to be a better partner."

"And a better Daddy," Rita chimed in, grinning widely. "Besides, you know you're going to regret it if you don't at least try."

"Are you okay?" Bree asked. She sat up a little, appearing concerned. "You know you know you don't have to give him a second chance if you really don't want to. We don't have to be three couples."

"Oh, she wants him. That's why she's struggling," Rita answered before Eden could

open her mouth.

Bree rolled her eyes.

“Rita’s right.” Eden groaned, making her way over to flop onto the couch between her friends. They were both right. Marcus had clearly been putting in the work, and if she didn’t give him a chance now, she would always wonder. Always imagine. It wasn’t about what was fair to him. It was about what was fair to her... “I deserve to know where this could go. I’m not over him, or at least, I’m not over the idea of him, and I want to check out this reality.”

Bree studied her closely for a moment.

“Okay. I’m just a little worried because you seem subdued.”

“That’s because he subdued her with his penis,” Rita suggested helpfully.

Picking up a pillow, Eden whacked her bestie with it.

10

Eden

“I can’t believe you brought me to the Mattress Factory.” Eden turned in place, a slow spin, so she could take in every inch of the exhibit around them. She loved art installations and had been to this particular gallery many times on her own, but trying to drag Marcus to immersive art experiences—really anything to do with art—had always been a painful endeavor, one that she’d given up on after the first couple of tries. He’d never enjoyed them and always spent most of the time on his phone, which meant she ended up wishing he wasn’t there at all.

This time, he'd been the one to choose the location for their date, his phone was firmly in his pocket, and he was walking through the installation with interest. It was uncomprehending and confused interest, but Eden would take it. She didn't expect him to love it the way she did. It was enough that he was taking the time and effort to arrange the date and be there with her.

Talk about putting in the work.

"I know you like it here," he said, his incomprehension clear in his voice. Eden giggled and squeezed his hand when he looked down at her. Marcus was never going to be an art person. "Sorry, I know you always wanted me to pay attention to these things, but... I don't get it. It's interesting?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Is that a question or a statement?” she teased. The lilt at the end of his sentence had rendered it far more like a question than an opinion.

“I mean, it is interesting...”

“But you’re not really interested. That’s okay.” She leaned against his arm. “I prefer knowing your true thoughts, good or bad.”

Marcus looked around again, studying the walls.

“I think it’s just not really my thing.”

“Thank you for being here with me, anyway.” That was the point. It wasn’t his thing, but he was doing his best to make the whole experience enjoyable for her, despite his personal feelings about it.

“Of course.” This time it was his turn to squeeze her fingers, and Eden smiled back at him. There was no ‘of course’ about it, going by their past experiences, and they both knew it. But she was doing better at appreciating the changes he’d made without the bitterness of wondering why he’d waited until after she’d left. She was happy it had happened, even if it had taken longer than she’d wanted.

They’d spent the past few weeks getting to know each other again—without all the bickering and sniping that had characterized their interactions ever since their lives had collided for a second time. They’d done a lot of catching up about what they’d missed over the years. Eden had been surprised, but not shocked, to hear that all of his old work friendships had fallen by the wayside after he’d stopped working.

She'd thought maybe a few would endure, but Marcus didn't seem to be broken up about it. Then again, his whole attitude now seemed to be zen and going with the flow. He seemed to accept that their lives no longer intersected with his. Their interests had remained focused on work, and they didn't have time for anything outside of that.

He didn't say it, but she got the feeling it helped him understand how she'd felt about him and his relationship with the office during their marriage.

They'd had a few more scenes at the Outlands, too.

Eden had insisted on keeping the sex there for now. Was it one of the barriers she was keeping up? Absolutely. She knew it. He knew it.

Walking through the gallery, she was starting to feel like she might be ready to lower it. Yes, they were still in the 'new relationship' glow where things were shiny and bright, but it wasn't as if Marcus had completely changed. He still worked hard. He just didn't make the nursery his entire life, even though he owned it.

He took time off. He had hobbies outside of it. And friends outside of it, although technically, Owen and Andres were right outside of it in their food trucks. So, they were nursery-adjacent. But none of them spent all their time there.

She was starting to feel like this new Marcus wasn't just real but as though he really was everything she wanted.

She was starting to fall in love again.

And hoping the fall didn't completely decimate her this time.

Once they'd made their way through the current installation and stepped out into the sunshine, she felt the kind of happiness in her soul that always came from good

art.Sighing, she closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun to soak in some of the rays.All the good things.

“Ready for lunch?”Marcus asked, giving her hand a squeeze.Eden opened her eyes and beamed up at him.

“Sure.I’m starved.”

The words had barely left her mouth when his phone rang.Immediately, his hand went to his pocket, but instead of picking it up and answering it—what he would have done during their marriage—he pressed the side to turn off the ringer.Eden raised her eyebrows at him.

“If it’s important, they’ll leave a voicemail,” he said firmly.

Well, okay then.

They hadn’t taken more than a couple steps before it started to ring again.A little pit formed in the bottom of Eden’s stomach.This was all too familiar, but she tried to shove it away.

Marcus frowned, reaching into his pocket.He still didn’t answer it, but he was checking to see who it was, which was fair.That was two calls right in a row.It was probably something important.

“It’s the nursery,” he said, still frowning.Hesitating.

She knew if she wasn’t there, if they weren’t on a date, he would have answered immediately because he was the owner of said nursery.He was hesitating because shewasthere, and theywereon a date.

“Answer it.”She managed to sound mostly supportive and cheerful.After all, he had just taken her through an art installation he had no interest in.

“I’m sorry.It’ll be quick, I promise.”

Eden nodded her understanding, keeping her fake smile firmly planted on her lips, but Marcus surprised her again.He didn’t turn and walk away, phone to his ear, as he would have in the past.Instead, he stood right there, still holding her hand as he answered it, so she could hear the conversation.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

Not that she could understand every word. Whoever was calling him was frantic, their words spilling out as soon as he answered the phone. Marcus straightened up, his expression becoming stony. His gaze cut to hers, softening with apology.

“Janet... Janet. It’s okay. Close up shop. I’ll re-open it when I get there, okay? You go with Dillon.”

Eden’s heart clenched.

This wasn’t the same. It wasn’t.

He owned the nursery. He wasn’t just another worker. Whatever had happened, it was bad, and it was ultimately his responsibility. Which meant he needed to be there.

So, this wasn’t the same as before.

Marcus sighed as he hung up the phone, his fingers tightening around hers.

“Plant emergency?” she asked, trying to push amusement into her voice.

“Sort of. One of my employees, Dillon, who also happens to be Janet’s nephew, tripped and fell. He is bad off enough that she called for an ambulance. She wants to go to the hospital with him. It sounds like he might have broken his leg.” Marcus winced, and she could practically see the wheels turning in his brain.

His sympathy for Dillon and Janet was clear, but he also had to think about things like worker’s comp and the fact that if Dillon needed the hospital, he was also going

to need his hours covered.

“Do you want to come with me?”

Eden blinked. That was unexpected. Not that Marcus could have ever offered to take her with him to work in the past, but she was so used to being pushed aside and left out of anything to do with work, she'd thought it would be the same.

“You don't have to,” he said hastily. “I can call around to my other workers and see if anyone can come in. And I can order you food to eat in the breakroom? I might even be able to eat with you if it's not too busy.”

Not too busy on a Sunday in the summer. He was kidding himself if he thought that was possible, especially since he was going to be taking the place of not one but two of his employees. His expression became pained.

“I'm sorry, I know it's not ideal, but?—”

Letting go of his hand, Eden reached up with both of hers to cup his face, cutting off whatever he was going to say as she went up on her tiptoes to kiss him. He relaxed as her lips pressed against his. She dropped back down, smiling up at him, and this time, the smile wasn't at all forced.

“Tacos or grilled cheese in the breakroom sound great.” She didn't need to explain that she was talking about getting lunch from either Andres or Owen's food trucks, both of which would be outside the nursery at this time of day. Marcus beamed at her, his gaze full of sheer relief.

“Thank you.”

Hey, if he was going to put in the work to change, so could she. This wasn't the same

as before, and she wasn't going to react like it was. He was including her, not pushing her away.

It made a world of difference.

11

Marcus

What could have been a disaster of a day had turned out to be... well, definitely not what he'd been hoping for, but not a total disaster, either. Mostly because Eden had taken pity on him. It could have been a lot worse if she'd gotten upset about him ending their date early, and he wouldn't have blamed her.

The circumstances were out of his control this time, but he was sure it brought up a lot of bad feelings from the past. He'd seen it in her face when he'd first picked up the call from Janet, even though she'd been doing her best to smile and pretend she wasn't bothered. Thankfully, she was a compassionate person who really wasn't bothered once she knew what was going on.

She didn't just sit in the breakroom and eat, either. Though she did eat first—a Hangry Eden was not an Eden anyone wanted to be around. Marcus didn't have that problem, so he grabbed bites between customers. Once she was done eating, she came out, grabbed an extra Flower Power shirt, and joined him on the floor.

Did she know anything about plants?

No.

She laughed and joked with the customers, encouraging them to teach her instead... and they loved it. She wasn't any more interested in the details of caring for miniature

roses than he was in art installations, but she smiled and listened, anyway. If he hadn't already been in love with her, he would have fallen today.

"So, boss," she said, hopping up on the back counter where he was organizing the receipts and balancing the register. The front door was locked, and the food trucks outside were long gone, leaving them completely alone in the place. "What kind of pay do I get for all the work I've done today?"

Little brat. Marcus shook his head. The sultry tone of her voice let him know exactly what she was angling for.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Oh, well, I don’t know... I wasn’t expecting to have to pay an extra employee for today.”He shook his head regretfully.“I don’t think I can pay you for today.Maybe we can work... something else out.”

Eden’s eyes widened in mock surprise as she put her hand to her chest like she had a pearl necklace there to clutch.Her fingers lingered over the top petal on her Flower Power t-shirt.Maybe it was silly, but seeing her in his nursery’s shirt did things to him.

“Are you suggesting alternate payment?”she asked in pretend shock.

“Sure.I can pay you in sausage.”He winked at her and grinned as she cracked up, unable to keep a straight face after his suggestion.Hell, it wasn’t such a bad idea.She did deserve a reward.

Covering her mouth, she snorted as she tried to get her laughter under control, trying to get back into her role, but she couldn’t keep the grin off her face.

“I, uh, suppose that’s acceptable.”She coughed, trying to cover more giggles.

“You’re going to have to come back to my place to get it.”

“Also acceptable.”

“And you’re going to have to leave me alone for a few minutes so I can finish this.”

Before he’d finished speaking, Eden was already shaking her head, a mischievous

smirk on her lips.

“Absolutely not acceptable.”

“Brat,” he retorted, chuckling as he looked back down at the receipts. Still giggling, Eden sat beside him in companionable silence, doing something on her phone while he finished everything he needed to do for the evening. Having her there was nice. Distracting but nice. Marcus whistled under his breath as he locked up before turning to Eden and holding out his hand.

She slid her fingers into his.

“Sorry our date got messed up.”

“That’s okay. It wasn’t like you could plan for an injured employee. At least he’s doing all right.” During the afternoon, he’d gotten the text from Janet. Dillon had a nasty sprain, but at least his leg wasn’t broken, which had been the initial worry. He also had a minor concussion, but they’d released him to go home. She’d offered to come back in, but at that point, Marcus had told her to stay with her nephew and that he’d see her tomorrow.

“Yeah, and he wasn’t supposed to work tomorrow, anyway. I’ll have to figure out the schedule for the rest of the week and tweak some things so he can stay on the cash register once he comes back until his ankle is healed up.” His mind was already moving ahead to all the little things he was going to have to take care of—then he yanked it right back to the present. Where he wanted to be was here, with Eden.

Thinking ahead was natural and easy for him, and it was easy to get lost in his head, but that meant he’d sometimes accidentally left Eden behind while he was distracted by his thoughts. He was doing so well today, he didn’t want to get bogged down with his head on work. Those were issues for future him. Right now, he wanted to focus on

current Marcus, who was about to take Eden back to his house and fuck her silly.

“Already figuring out the schedule in your head, aren’t you?” Eden asked.

At least she sounded amused rather than upset. Something had shifted between them today, even though he’d had to cut their date short.

Maybe because he hadn’t just canceled it completely and asked her to come with him. If that was the effect it had, he’d happily take her along to work anytime. Not that he wanted more of their dates cut short by issues, especially not ones involving people getting hurt, but as the owner of Flower Power, sometimes there were things only he could handle. And, in an emergency, he was the one ultimately responsible.

“I’m trying not to,” he admitted, making her laugh.

“Go ahead. I know you’ll feel better and be better focused on, ah, doling out my payment once you’ve got it figured out.” She winked at him as they reached the car. Shaking his head, Marcus smiled and opened the door for her to get in.

She really didn’t seem bothered by his preoccupation, so he let his mind dwell on the schedule, what Dillon might need, and how to balance the hours he’d been putting in the entire way home. He was mentally writing out the email in his head when they pulled into the driveway, and he gave her a guilty look.

Eden laughed.

“Do whatever it is you need to do.” She pointed her finger at him in warning. “It better not take more than five minutes, though. Tops. That’s a real five minutes, not a Marcus-five-minutes.”

“Done,” he agreed. “I just need to send a quick email to the other employees, letting

them know about Dillon and asking them to send back any openings they have to help cover the gaps in the schedule.”

“Okay, I’m going to hold you to that,” she said.

It was more than he’d expected.

Letting her into the house, Marcus went to his computer in the den since he could type faster on the keyboard than on his phone. He didn’t get pulled into checking anything while he was there—he wouldn’t let himself. No looking at the other emails, definitely no opening them. Just get in, type up the email, and get out in exactly four minutes from the moment he sat down.

Hopping up, he went to look for Eden. She’d been in the kitchen getting a glass of water when he’d gone into the den, but now she was nowhere to be seen. Marcus frowned.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Eden?” he called out. She hadn’t left, had she? No, he would have heard the door close. Besides, Eden wasn’t the type to leave in silence. If he’d upset her enough to leave, he would have heard about it before she walked out the door.

But she didn’t answer.

Frowning, he walked through the house, heading to his bedroom. Maybe she’d gone back there to wait for him. Especially since he was supposed to be paying her in sausage.

The door was closed, which confirmed that Eden was behind it since Marcus never left his doors closed during the day. He always left his bedroom door open when he walked out of it.

Opening it now, he stood in the doorway and stared at the bed. Eden was in the middle of it, stark naked, but she wasn’t posing and waiting for him... no, she’d gotten started without him. One hand cupped her breast, thumbing her nipple, while the other was between her thighs. Her knees were pointed to the ceiling, feet firmly planted on his comforter, giving him the most open view possible as her fingers moved between her slippery folds.

“Oh, there you are.” She smirked at him, pink hair spread across his pillow. “Took you long enough.”

The little brat. She was definitely getting a spanking before she got his sausage.

Eden

Provoking her Daddy was always playing with fire, but it was also a way to get all of his attention focused on her, and that's exactly what Eden wanted right now. She wasn't mad he'd had to attend to work, but she wanted to make sure she now had his total attention.

It seemed she did.

His gaze was now laser-focused on where she was making little circles around her swollen clit with her fingers. He shook his head, like he was trying to come out of a trance, and lifted his gaze to meet hers. Heat and desire burned in his dark eyes.

"You've been a very naughty little girl." The growl in his voice sent a shiver down her spine.

"Oh no, Daddy. I was a good girl, getting my pussy ready for your cock."

Pressing his lips together, Marcus shook his head as he kicked the door shut behind him. Stalking toward the bed, he stripped off his shirt, his hands going to his pants to undo the closures.

"Did Daddy say you could play with your pussy?"

Eden pouted at him because, of course, the answer was no. She hadn't asked, and she'd known she'd been courting a spanking. Stopping at the side of the bed, Marcus shucked off his pants and boxers, placing his hands on his hips. His dick was pointing at her like a compass at true north, giving her the urge to reach out and bring it.

So, that's what she did.

“Boing.”She giggled as it bobbed up and down.

“That’s it.”

Marcus’ reaction was completely predictable.He yanked her off the bed and over his lap before she could say, “Daddy, don’t,” and started swatting her butt with enough force to make her squeal.His cock rubbed against her side, the soft skin covering his hard shaft feeling like silk as she squirmed and rubbed herself on it.

“Ow, Daddy!I’m sorry!”She wasn’t sorry yet, but if he kept spanking her like this, she might get there.

Each swat was firm and crisp, the burning sting flaring hot and barely getting the chance to subside before his hand came down again.He moved the location of the swats all over her butt, covering the area completely, but there was some overlap because Marcus had big hands.The overlap stung the most until he started spanking her sit spots.Eden shrieked and wriggled as he heated up the extra sensitive areas.

“Daddy, no!”

“Oh, are you getting exactly what you asked for, babygirl?”His mock sympathy made her want to kick him even as it turned her on.“Are the consequences of your own actions too much for you to take?”

“No!Ow!”Her high-pitched whine negated her ‘no’ as he managed to catch both sit spots with one swat.It didn’t stop her from persevering with her claim.“I can handle whatever you dish out!”

She could, too, because she knew he’d never harm her.No matter how they’d hurt each other in the past, her Daddy would never do anything to injure her.She still trusted him.Hell, she might trust him more now than she had back then.

“I’m so glad to hear you say that, babygirl,” he purred. Another flurry of swats on her already heated cheeks had her shrieking and squirming until she lay panting over his lap while his hand caressed her burning skin. Tears had sprung to her eyes, though they hadn’t spilled over to her cheeks yet, and she whimpered as Marcus squeezed her abused flesh.

Between her legs, her pussy pulsed with need. She’d already been turned on when he’d started spanking her, and now, she was extra aroused.

“Such a naughty girl.” His fingers dipped between the swells of her cheeks, and Eden sucked in a breath as the tip of his finger rubbed over the crinkled star of her anus. “I think it’s time to remind you where naughty girls get Daddy’s cock.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Daddy, nooooo,” she whined, even as excitement surged up inside her. It was one of her favorite fantasies back when they were married. Part of Eden loved butt sex, part of her hated it, and she loved to indulge in the hate of it. Especially when Marcus made her feel like it was extra dirty, often only indulging when she’d been a ‘bad girl.’ It turned her on and made her feel utterly wicked and like a bad girl.

“I think the punishment fits the crime,” he said, lifting his hand. She felt him lean to the right and heard the sound of his nightstand drawer opening. Lube was in there. “You were playing with your pussy without permission, so now your pussy doesn’t get my cock. However, I shouldn’t be deprived just because you were a naughty girl.”

“I’ll suck your cock!” she said, squealing as she felt his slick finger probing her anus. Wriggling, she tried to lean forward to escape the insistent pressure, but Marcus’ forearm across the length of her spine kept her pinned in position over his thighs as his finger began to stretch open her little hole. Eden whimpered at the slight sting.

“I don’t want your mouth, babygirl.” His finger pushed in deeper, making her cry out, a demonstration of where he wanted his cock to go. He thrust it back and forth several times before beginning to push a second finger into her protesting hole. “Where do naughty girls get their Daddy’s cocks?”

His fingers twisted, adding to the sensations coursing through her, and Eden clenched down around the probing digits, even though it did no good.

“In their bottoms.” Her pussy clenched as well as he made her answer the question, his fingers moving and stretching her open, readying her bottom for his cock. She

made a whining sound. “They get Daddy’s cock in their bottoms.”

“Damn right.” His fingers spread inside her, pushing at the tight ring of her entrance, and Eden squealed. The stretch burned. It hurt. Yet her pussy pulsed with need right next to her aching hole.

There was no real relief when Marcus finally removed his fingers, knowing something larger was about to replace them.

A moment later, Eden was on her hands and knees on the bed with Marcus behind her, the tip of his lubricated cock pushing at her tight entrance. She whimpered. Though he’d used a plug on her a couple times in the past few weeks and his fingers as well, this was the first time they’d have anal sex since their separation.

The intimacy of it was almost painful in its intensity.

“Oh, fuck... Daddy...” She dropped her head between her arms, bracing herself as he pushed in. Her muscles trembled, and she panted for breath, shuddering as she clenched around the thick log slowly impaling her. Though his fingers had prepared her somewhat, they weren’t as thick as his cock.

It hurt.

It cramped.

It filled her.

And she loved it as much as she hated it.

Feeling Marcus’ cock slowly sliding into her bottom, she truly did feel like a naughty girl. Not just like a naughty girl, like a dirty girl. Only a wicked, dirty girl would call her

man Daddy and let him put his cock in her bottom. Only a truly perverted girl would cum while he fucked her forbidden hole.

“That’s it, babygirl.” Marcus’ fingers flexed on her hips as he crooned the words. “Take it for Daddy.”

He thrust in deeper, and she cried out, panting again, her body pulsing as he slid his dick between her heated cheeks. The last man to fuck her ass had been Marcus, so it had been a long time since she’d had anal sex. She didn’t want to be anyone’s naughty girl except his.

“Now, you can play with your pussy all you want, babygirl,” he said as his cock bottomed out, his groin coming to rest on her hot cheeks. She could feel the stiff bristles of his pubic hair rubbing against her sensitive skin. “Daddy’s going to fuck your ass hard.” He groaned, and she felt him flex inside her. “Daddy missed this ass.”

He began to move, not gently but not too roughly as he started to ride her. Eden didn’t need to be told twice. As soon as she could shift her weight onto one hand, the other was between her thighs, rubbing her swollen clit. She already knew she wasn’t going to last long, which was exactly what she wanted—to cum while Daddy’s cock was embedded deep in her ass.

Her elbow buckled as pain and pleasure washed over her as Daddy slammed into her harder and harder. Going down onto her forearm, she rested her head against it as she braced herself against the steady onslaught of hard thrusts, her fingers working furiously on her clit.

Heat and need billowed out from her core, her ass spasming around Marcus’ cock as she cried out from the ecstasy that exploded inside her. Waves of pleasure washed over her with every thrust of his cock, sending her higher and higher into sexual bliss.

“Fuck... Eden...” Marcus thrust in deep, holding himself within her as he began to pulse. Hot liquid splashed inside her, her ass gripping him, milking him, sucking every last drop into her bowels while her orgasm crested and rolled through her, leaving both of them spent and satiated.

Wrapped in her Daddy’s arms, curled up as his little spoon, Eden was drifting off to sleep when she heard his whisper.

“I love you, Eden.”

“I love you too, Garden Daddy.”

“If I’m Garden Daddy, what does that make you?”

“Your hoe.” She didn’t need to spell out the pun for him. His chuckle rumbled against her, and she smiled into the darkness.

Epilogue

Epilogue – Four Months Later

Eden

“He literally hid it in cheese?” Eden snorted, even as she admired the sparkling diamond on Bree’s hand. It was perfect for her—small but extra sparkly and nestled between two emeralds, her favorite stone. Owen had done a good job picking it out... of course, he’d had a little help. Seeing Bree’s glowing happiness, Eden felt a little smug.

“In brie, no less,” Rita teased, grinning widely. “He’s the ultimate cheese Daddy.”

“Oh, like Andres is any different,” Bree retorted, though she was smiling so wide, her face might crack if it got any bigger. She was clearly perfectly happy with her fiancé’s cheesy proposal. “He’s lucky you didn’t gulp down your ring.”

Andres, Rita’s now fiancé, had put hers in a margarita... because that was her real first name, even though she went by Rita. He’d paired it with one of his infamous birria tacos, and he’d put a little too much heat in the taco. Rita really had gotten close to accidentally swallowing her ring, all thanks to the extra spice. It was a gorgeous princess-cut pink sapphire with rectangular diamonds on either side, which was perfect for Rita. Also, partly thanks to Eden’s influence.

Laughter from the kitchen made all of them pop their heads up, looking over their shoulders, but the guys weren’t quite visible from where they were sitting together on the couch. Andres and Owen were in the kitchen making dinner with Marcus. At least, that’s what they were supposed to be doing.

“Do you think you’re going to get one of these soon?” Bree asked, lowering her voice

so there was no chance of the guys hearing it, wiggling her ring at Eden.

“Marcus and I haven’t talked about it.”Eden shrugged.Was she envious that her friends were getting engaged and she was left out?Yeah, a little bit.But she and Marcus also had a lot of baggage about marriage that neither of them did, so she was trying not to have any expectations.

Just because both of her best friends had gotten engaged in the past two weeks didn’t mean she would be getting engaged any time soon.She and Marcus had only been back together for a few months, after all.

Though it was long enough for her to know that when—if—he asked, she would say yes.

He was a completely changed man.Everything she’d loved about him the first time around was still there, but he was far, far better.More attentive, more thoughtful, more engaged, and a lot less stressed.It made all the difference.She’d blossomed under his care over the past few months, and she didn’t feel so on edge all the time or as though she had anything to prove.

Her hair was still pink, and she still wore the sassy t-shirts she loved, but she felt more relaxed now.Less angry at the world.Less confrontational.Funny enough, it was Marcus and living among all his plants that had helped make her calmer.The yoga didn’t hurt, either.

They fit better this time around.She wasn’t going to go asking for a ring just because her friends had one, though.Whether or not they ever got married again, Marcus was still who she wanted to spend her life with.

Her love.Her Daddy.And if he was her ex-husband but current boyfriend until the end of their days, they’d make it work.

“Okay, ladies, we’re almost ready,” Andres said, coming out of the kitchen and walking by them with a salad bowl in his hands. He grinned at them, an extra sparkle in his eyes when he locked gazes with Rita. Sending her a wink, he kept on going to the dining room table to set down the bowl.

“Hey, Eden, come help me with the meat?” Marcus asked, exiting the kitchen and heading in the opposite direction of Andres, toward the door to the back porch. He was holding an empty tray to put everything on.

“Oh, I’m always happy to help you with your meat.” She grinned and bounced to her feet, leaving her friends cracking up behind her. Marcus shook his head, but he was laughing, too.

“I know you are.” He popped her on the bottom with the tray as she sashayed past him. “It’s one of the many things I love about you.”

Giggling, Eden scampered in front of him, opening the door and turning so he didn’t have another opportunity to spank her before going out the door. He brushed a kiss against her forehead as he walked by instead, making her sigh with happiness.

Yeah. Things were really freaking good between them.

“Here, hold this,” he said, passing the tray to her as he went to lift the grill top. Eden took it from him, waiting patiently.

Then blinked as the grill top went up.

There was no blast of heat.

No array of meat.

Instead, there was a giant bouquet of flowers. Not just one kind, many kinds. It was a sprawling bouquet, more of an arrangement, really. Eden recognized all the flowers she'd come to love the most from Marcus' shop. Marcus lifted it and turned to her, grinning as he placed it down on the tray she was holding.

Holy crap, that was heavy.

Not that she had time to really think about it because right smack dab in the middle of the arrangement was a little black velvet box.

"Marcus?" she asked, her voice coming out in a croak.

Rather than answering her, Marcus picked up the box and dropped to his knee. The tray almost tipped over onto him as her grip quavered.

"Marcus!"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:16 am

“Eden.” He stared up at her over the bouquet. “When I lost you, I lost everything that meant anything to me. I’m so sorry it took losing you to make me a better man, a better partner. I am so grateful you’ve given me a second chance at being in your life, and now, I’m going to ask you for a second chance at being your husband. Will you marry me... again?”

The tray dropped with a clatter, and she vaulted over it, throwing herself into his arms before he even managed to get the box open.

“Yes!” She started peppering his face with kisses. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!”

Laughing, he wrapped her up in his arms, so he could pull her lips to his for a real kiss. As he kissed her deeply, jubilantly, she could hear their friends cheering, pounding on the glass door as they celebrated with them.

Everything was perfect.

The End