

CHAPS

by

Jove Belle



2009

CHAPTER ONE

Come on,” Penny led Eden to the corner, “you need a yoga mat.”

A slender, fair-haired man pulled two mats from a low shelf and handed one to Penny. “So glad you could join us again, Penny.”

Penny—Eden Metcalf’s best friend and sometime lover—giggled. Eden stared, forcing her face to remain neutral.

The instructor’s fingers lingered on the soft flesh of Penny’s inner wrist, a far too personal caress. Eden cleared her throat.

“And you brought a friend.” He extended a mat toward Eden, his grip too close to the end of it for Eden’s comfort. He left Eden very little room to grasp the mat without brushing her fingers against his. The touch of strange men made her uncomfortable at best. Homicidal at worst. That this man had such obvious intentions for Penny pushed Eden closer to an extreme reaction.

Bamboo mats, rolled tight and edged with pastel fabrics, poked out of the open tops of cartons that lined the wall next to him. While the yoga lovers around her stretched out to greet the day, Eden pictured all the little mats rolled up tight and bundled around brick after brick of Luther Wade’s finest-grade cocaine, packed for shipment into the United States. The absurdity of the moment assaulted Eden. She was jealous of the would-be, if not current, male lover of her first lover, and surrounded by the byproduct of her life-taking source of income. All in an environment that assured peace and serenity.

Laughter bubbled inside Eden, pushing past her lips before she could contain it. She laughed hard enough to draw the scornful attention of the instructor, the proffered mat dangling loosely in his hand.

Penny shushed her with a glare that said, “What the hell’s the matter with you?” Rather than explain, Eden simply wiped the tears from her eyes, waved to the pale, Jesus-haired instructor, and stepped outside to wait.

Yoga, Eden knew from the moment Penny dragged her through the doors, was the bastard child of some worm-worshipping cult whose practitioners strove to bend, twist, and stretch themselves into boneless, flaccid creatures. The Egyptians, with their idol worship of cats, were more Eden’s style. They knew what they were doing when they exalted the always fickle, often deadly, feline.

She was halfway through her second fragrant clove cigarette, the smoke wafting dangerously close to the swinging door of the fitness club, before Penny stormed out.

“Seriously, E, can’t you just fucking relax for ten fucking minutes?” She plucked the brown-papered Djarum from Eden’s fingers and took a long drag. Finally she smiled. “Tell me what was so funny.”

Eden jerked her head toward the car and didn’t answer until they were tucked safely inside, air-conditioning on high. “The mats.”

Understanding flickered across Penny’s face. “Shit. I never thought about that before.” After a pause, Penny’s demeanor shifted back to irritated. “Still, it wasn’t *that* funny.” Penny backed out of the parking space and headed toward the street.

“No, it wasn’t.” Eden considered, not for the first time, telling Penny her plan. Hell, Penny was in danger either way. Maybe it would be better for her to have something to give up when Luther questioned her. Then again, if she knew nothing, she wouldn’t get killed out of some misguided sense of loyalty. “Are you working today?” Eden asked instead.

“I’ve got a couple of meetings scheduled, but nothing big.”

Penny took the familiar route to Luther’s place. Neither of them

needed to discuss their destination. Eden started every workday sequestered in a private meeting with her boss. They discussed strategy, how to increase market share, and, as it was Eden's specialty, how to protect current assets.

"What about you?"

"Luther asked me to conduct an audit on one of the independents," Eden said. Just as with any legitimate business, drug trafficking had layers of operators, and sometimes an evaluation of performance was warranted. Eden laughingly called these situations Come to Luther meetings, similar to a Come to Jesus, except Luther didn't preach a message of love and forgiveness. And his disciples carried guns.

Through hard work and ruthless execution, Luther held the keys to the West Coast. The men covering a large portion of San Francisco had gotten sloppy with their financial manipulation of their books. Their profit margin had dropped about seven percent—enough to grab Luther's attention. When Eden reviewed the accounts, she concluded they'd been skimming for much longer than Luther suspected, essentially since the inception of their business agreement. If she played the situation right, he would never know the exact amount. And she intended to use that possibility to her advantage.

"Need any company?" Penny broke into Eden's thoughts as she pulled to a stop.

She shook her head, her mouth set in what she hoped looked like a casual smile. "Not this time."

Penny stopped Eden before she could climb out of the car and squeezed her hand. "Be safe, E. I worry about you."

Eden simply kissed Penny on the cheek and answered with her typical James Dean cool. "Don't worry, doll. I can take care of myself." She wanted to pull Penny against her and hold her long enough to remember the curves of her body. It'd been too long since she'd explored her lush contours. If everything went according to plan, she wouldn't get another chance.

But that kind of display would be enough to warn Luther—who

watched from the top step of the small brick house that served as his operational base—that something wasn't right. The paranoid, merciless man was difficult enough to keep in line. No reason to fuel his suspicions.

Eden closed the car door and walked away from Penny, her heart aching with every step. She turned to give Penny one last smile as Luther guided her into the house, one arm around her shoulders, his mouth set in a firm, hard line. Death and confidence colored the air around him, and she was his instrument of execution.



Framed photos covered the wall behind Luther's desk. Rows and rows of eight by tens in precise lines like soldiers at attention. Or headstones. Luther's fallen warriors all.

Eden scanned the wall, Luther's grim memorial, a warning to those who dared defy him. Lucinda—young, brash, and eager to make a name for herself. She'd expanded her territory at record speed, but neglected to pay Luther his due. She'd died with a plea for mercy on her lips and a bullet from Eden's gun tearing through her skull. Carmine—ruthless and greedy, but not very smart. One too many enemies and he disappeared from service. Luther claimed to have no knowledge of his whereabouts. Eden believed him because she hadn't killed Carmine, so she knew Carmine didn't die under orders from Luther. But he would have soon enough.

And Gabriel. Above Luther's head and a little to the left, watching over Luther like a golden angel. Luther—white-out-of-a-box teeth bared in a grotesque smile—with his arm draped casually over Gabriel's shoulder. He'd died slowly, painfully, and by degrees. And Eden had watched, powerless, unable to save him from the siren song of Luther's fine wares. He'd drowned in a hazy promise of heroin heaven, too deep to be saved. A bullet from Eden's gun took his life as well. She hadn't pulled the trigger, but she hadn't been fast enough to stop it either.

How long, Eden wondered, until Luther added her picture to the wall? Would she get a position of honor over his other shoulder, poised to advise him from the grave? That would be her eternity,

her penance for all her wrongdoings, forever sentenced to sit next to Gabriel and stare down at Luther's head all laid out in row after row of perfect brown-black braids. She'd always loved his hair. When she first joined his crew it added order to her otherwise chaotic world.

The question reinforced her decision to leave. Perhaps she wasn't too late to reclaim her life and live the right way, without blood and drugs coloring every breath. She wanted to be normal. If only she knew exactly what it meant to be normal. Hopefully she'd recognize it when she saw it and be smart enough to not run away.

"They're stealing *my* goddamned money, Eden." Luther gnawed the uncut end of a hand-rolled Cuban cigar.

Eden waited, silent. Luther needed an audience at this point, not a discussion.

"I want their heads." Spittle gathered on his lips. "Their fucking heads. No mercy. None." Luther issued his edicts, like lines from a script, in monotone. He didn't scream or rant. He simply spat out orders, knowing Eden would take care of the details.

She'd debated bringing him an actual head one time. But the work involved—it wasn't easy to sever the spinal column—combined with the mess, made the decision for her. Luther's heads were figurative, holding court on the wall behind him, their obituaries, small and easily forgotten, tucked in the corner of the frames. Newsprint left to age and curl in memory of lives cut short.

"No more college students." Luther set his hand, curled into a fist, on the desk for emphasis.

That fist, hard and oppressive, had guided Eden through years of unforgivable violence. She had spilled so much blood she was certain it soaked clean through her till no part of her soul was untouched. With each bullet she sold off another bit of her humanity, leaving it in tattered shreds. She knew if she didn't act now, she'd never find her way out from the dark shadow he cast on her world. She had no choice but to run, to pray he wouldn't find her, at least not before she found herself. She longed to reclaim her tainted innocence, even if she was unsure it was even possible.

But first she had one more job to do. More bullets to deliver in the name of Luther Wade.

Eden had cautioned Luther when he brought them on board five years ago. They didn't fit in his world, but he'd overridden her protests. A bunch of frat guys, all business and accounting majors—who wouldn't want to recruit that group? And Eden had agreed in theory. If Luther was the head of an investment banking firm, they would have been good choices. But for a drug-trafficking network? Too soft. They didn't understand the rules or, worse yet, the consequences for breaking those rules.

"I'll resolve this today." She left the meaning of "resolve" open-ended.

"Do you know how much yet?"

"I have a rough estimate. Let me be sure before I commit." Eden knew the exact number.

Luther would never accept that answer from another in his employ, but from Eden it was enough. He trusted her with his life. More importantly, he trusted her with his money.

"I leave this in your hands, Eden. You're the only one. All those other bastards? They'd fuck their own mother for a dime."

Eden's mother was long gone, so fucking her for a dime or otherwise was out of the question. Eden would, however, gladly fuck Luther for four point seven million and her freedom.



Litter blew across the parking lot in front of the off-campus housing unit meant for UC San Francisco students. Eden scanned the dull tan exterior and counted the floors, mentally calculating the location of her business meeting. She drew her long overcoat tight around her, as much to hide her Glock 9mm as to protect against the cutting mid-May wind.

Eden climbed four floors, scanning for security cameras as she went. Odds were against them. The main entrance was open and unsecured, an oversight that would no doubt be corrected shortly after she left.

Apartment 409. Eden knocked, her supple leather gloves muffling the sound. Bare wood showed through the worn brown paint, and the metal number nine hung upside down by one nail.

The door swung inward and the sweet odor of recently enjoyed marijuana greeted Eden.

“I told you somebody was here.” A small-framed man wearing a JESUS LOVES YOU T-shirt reported to the others inside rather than greeting Eden. His skin showed through in patches of the threadbare material. He left the door open and returned to his seat on the sofa.

Eden stepped inside and closed the door with a soft click. She scanned the apartment. “Terry, we have a meeting scheduled.”

“I know, man.” The shaggy-haired boy in charge was only a year or two younger than Eden, but he still lived and looked the part of a starving student, not a conspicuously wealthy, heavy-hitting drug dealer. “We were waiting for you.”

Terry stood at the tall counter separating the kitchen from the living room, his thick-rimmed-glasses-wearing girlfriend clinging to his side. The only source of light was the flicker of the television set.

“We were supposed to meet alone.” Eden hung her overcoat on a hook on the back of the door.

Terry looked her over, the lascivious inspection of a man who feels invincible. “We were supposed to meet tomorrow.”

Eden ignored him. “Alone, Terry.”

“These”—Terry indicated Jesus Loves You and another man seated next to him—“are my business partners, Mark and John. And this,” he gave his girlfriend a long, tonsil-inspecting kiss, “is my girlfriend.”

Eden stared hard at the girl. “She should leave now.”

Terry scoffed, his arm in a proprietary circle around her waist. “You don’t want to leave, do you, babe?”

The girl’s eyes drooped and she shook her head in a barely controlled circle.

“So, what did you need?” Terry’s voice, the defiant set of his jaw, irritated Eden.

“Luther sends his thanks, but it’s time for you to return his money.” Eden kept her voice low, monotone.

Terry’s eyes widened and his nostrils flared momentarily. “What are you talking about?”

Early on in her career, Eden would have opted for some grand theatrical show at this point. Perhaps kick a chair, throw the bong across the room—they made a satisfying noise when they shattered—or even push over the television. As much as she enjoyed those little displays of temper, she'd quickly learned that they accomplished very little and left her with a bigger mess to clean up in the end.

“You’re skimming.” Eden spoke slowly and overenunciated each syllable. “Luther knows it. And right now you’re making things worse.”

“What? No way.” Terry explained, “It’s just a mistake. Really. I’ll fix it right away.” The tremor in his voice was barely detectable.

Eden smiled—the magnanimous smile of the person holding all the cards and who might be persuaded to be generous—and spun a no. 2 pencil on the kitchen counter.

“Terry, this would go better if”—Eden jutted her hip out, pulling her jacket open slightly so the well-used black pistol grip poked out above her belt—“you told me the truth. I hate asking the same question twice.”

Guys like Terry were a pain in the ass to do business with. They all thought they were smarter than she was. Worse, they relied on that college-tested frat-boy charm, thinking if they poured it on thick enough they could get out of anything.

“Listen, man, it’s not like that.”

Eden hated being called “man.” She cocked her arm back, her hand curled into a fist, and punched Terry in the mouth. Not hard, just a quick little jab to get him to stop talking and pay attention. The rustling of Terry’s suddenly concerned business partners stopped instantly when she pulled her gun from her waistband and pointed it at the trembling girlfriend. “Tell your boys to settle down.”

Terry spat blood onto the unidentifiably colored carpet that had seen one too many wild parties. “Back off, guys.”

Eden didn’t have to look to know that the two, Mark and John, had halted their motion. A quick glance confirmed that they were sitting tensely on the edge of the couch, ready to pounce as boys wanting to be men often were. Eden held out her hand to the girlfriend. “What’s your name?”

The girl looked suspiciously at Eden's hand, like she held a stick of dynamite, the fuse lit and ready to explode. Still, she placed her hand softly in Eden's. "Annie."

This was the moment of truth. Eden watched as realization seeped in for Terry. For the first time in his life he might not be able to talk his way out of something. A little extra insurance going forward could be the difference between Eden controlling the tempo of the meeting or not. She tugged lightly on Annie's hand, pulling her in close. She hated to do it, to use her. If it were up to Eden, Terry's girlfriend wouldn't be in the room at all.

Now, with Eden's arm around her waist, the gun tucked casually at her side, Annie looked like she wished she'd left when Eden offered her the chance. Eden brushed her lips against Annie's ear and said, "You're going to be okay. Just relax and we'll all get through this together." It was a lie, but Annie softened against her, relieved for the moment.

"Let's start over. How much do you have and where are you keeping it?" Eden knew how much, so that question was a good litmus test of Terry's honesty. She could figure out where, but it would be easier with his help.

"I don't know how much. It's like I've been telling you, it's all a big mistake." Terry tried to grin but ended up with a sharp-lined grimace. Blood trickled from the split in his lip.

Eden waited, her patience taxed. Terry shuffled from foot to foot at her silent regard, but didn't change his story. With Annie pulled close, her back to Eden's front, arms loose around her waist, Eden threaded the silencer onto the barrel of her nine. It threw off the trajectory of a bullet and Eden hated to use it, but given the close proximity of Terry's neighbors, she didn't have a choice. Annie's shoulders shook, a high-pitched sob squeaked between her lips. Eden blocked the sound out, focused only on Terry now, the landscape of his face.

"Whoa, man, back up. That mafia scare tactic doesn't change anything. I still don't know the answer."

He looked right at her, his eyes wild with desperation, but still he lied. Eden knew the total and she wasn't a business major. It was just a question of simple math. Terry skimmed a half percent

the first two months, then stepped up to a full percent. Two months later, another half. Up and up he'd climbed, growing more confident and less careful as he went. He'd been right to be cocky at first. No low-life drug dealer would notice a lousy half percent. They simply didn't check that close. They didn't have to. Everyone knew the consequences of that kind of action. Everyone, it seemed, but Terry.

Terry's voice droned, blending with Annie's barely audible keening. Eden switched the gun to her left hand and pulled Annie tight against her with her right. She looked at Terry one more time, a pause in movement, his last chance to stay the flow of blood. He didn't miss a beat in his constant stream of bullshit. Eden blinked slowly, regretting that it came to this. The silencer would absorb most of the noise, but she didn't want Annie to hear what was coming next. "Cover your ears," she cautioned Annie as she angled slightly and shot the boy on the right side of the couch. Mark, she thought. The bullet made a neat round hole in his forehead, his face a mask of confused surprise as he slumped backward, red soaking the plaid cushion behind him.

John stared for a full beat, then leapt up. "What the hell, Ter? You said this would be a piece of cake. Easy, you said. Look at Mark. I think he's dead, man. I think he's dead."

Eden watched him come undone, the reality of the situation slamming through the room, before focusing again on Terry. "Now, let me ask again. How much and where is it?"

Terry's face was frozen in a wide-mouthed "Oh," eyes blinking rapidly. Shock. Eden wanted to shake the answer out of him. She didn't have time for him to go into vapor lock.

"Terry! Focus!"

"I'll tell you." John was twitching, his skin shining with sweat. "It was exactly four million, seven hundred and ninety-two thousand dollars."

"John!" Terry regained his voice. "Shut up!"

Eden switched the gun back to her right hand and pointed it at Terry, holding him in place, and addressed John. "Do you know where it is?"

John nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes.”

“No, John, don’t tell—”

Eden didn’t warn Annie before she pulled the trigger this time. It was a bit premature, since she didn’t know for sure if John was being honest, but Terry had pushed too far. And worst-case scenario, John didn’t know where the money was and she spent some time searching. Not the end of the world.

Terry collapsed on the floor, his hand clutched to his chest, blood seeping between his fingers. “Ah, fuck,” he gurgled.

The second bullet entered his right temple, silencing any further protests.

Eden motioned to John. “Show me.”

“It’s in here.” John slid the top off the low ottoman that he and Mark had been resting their feet on. Stacks and stacks of neatly bundled twenties and fifties lay inside. “It’s all here. It was an experiment. You know, pull one over on the big, bad drug lord. Like something out of a movie. You can count it.” He shifted side to side, all the while gnawing the skin on the sides of his fingers.

Eden let John ramble, let his words fade into the background. She needed to decide what to do with the trembling Annie in her arms. Leaving a live witness was suicide, but the thought of killing Annie just because her boyfriend was an idiot left a foul taste in Eden’s mouth. That she didn’t want to kill Annie gave Eden pause. A year ago she would have pulled the trigger without a second thought. Maybe this was the quiet beginning of her transformation to normal.

Perhaps Annie could be useful in another way? She noted the similarities between herself and Annie. They were the same height, same approximate weight, same hair and eye color. Annie was a few years younger, but that was workable. She didn’t want to kill her, but she couldn’t leave her here. Luther would investigate and she’d be dead as soon as she answered his questions. The moment Annie stepped through the door that morning, her fate had been decided. Death was a certainty. Now it was just a question of when and how. Eden’s mind raced with the possibilities.

“Put the money in a bag,” she directed.

John dumped his books out of a backpack and started stuffing bricks of green into it. The money filled two book bags to overflowing, the zippers stretched and pulled taut. John smiled, nervous and hopeful, the bags on the ground at his feet.

“Do you have any cleaning supplies?”

“Under the kitchen sink.” John pointed toward the kitchen.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Eden could taste his fear, his desperation for the word *no*. He didn't have the clarity of vision that Eden did. To leave him alive for Luther to discover, torture, and then discard would be an act of cruelty. “Yes.”

John's eyes widened and the color drained from his face, a ghostly precursor to the death awaiting him. “Please, I won't tell anyone. I promi—”

One bullet, neatly placed in the center of John's forehead, silenced any further assurances. John had been the first to crack under her scrutiny. He could not be trusted to keep any secrets.

Annie stopped crying and stared, her eyes moving rhythmically from body to body. Eden needed to move quickly before Annie snapped completely. She sat Annie on a tall bar stool at the kitchen counter. “Stay here. Don't move, don't touch anything, okay?”

Annie barely nodded, her eyes glazed over.

Eden worked her way through the room, cleaning away all evidence that she and Annie had been there. Then she hiked the bags up onto her shoulders, left her gun on the kitchen counter, and led Annie out of the apartment.