Guess We'll Just Have to Adjust

by CocoBadShip

Summary

No, Buck does not have a damn crush on Eddie fucking Diaz. No, Buck is not thinking about Eddie's stupid smile or his stupid hair or that obscene sound he made when he pushed the couch the way he did.

Having a crush would be weird. And dumb. And the last thing Buck needs in his already fucked up life.

Notes

I'm new here, so this fic may be OOC? Also, some of the situations may not be physiologically possible. But this is fanfiction about a wild ass t.v. show, so do we really care?
Chapter 1

Buck should’ve asked Maddie to come along to this doctor’s appointment. Because he’s confused as fuck right now.

Okay, so, Buck’s not that confused, right? He knows medical shit! Buck has to know medical shit to be good at his job! Buck knows what words like “fascia” and “paresthesia” mean, and he knows that the weird, tingling pain he’s started to feel in his calf isn’t a particularly good sign.

And, a couple of months back, when he woke up from surgery, Buck knew what it meant when the doctor told him that they had to perform a fasciotomy to see the kind of improvement they both expected. Buck knew that “improvement” actually meant “not amputating your leg.”

So, it’s not that Buck is confused by the words he’s hearing. He’s confused by the fact that he’s hearing them at all. Because this appointment was supposed to be the one where the doctor would tell Buck, “Hey, good news! This clunky ass cast is coming off in like a week, and then you’ll be in physical therapy for a while, and then you can get off your ass and get back to doing your actual job!!”

But the doctor isn’t telling Buck that. Instead, doc’s looking all serious in the face and saying that they’re probably going to wait another few weeks for the cast to come off. Physical therapy is still going to be a thing that Buck has to deal with, but it’s going to be for a lot longer than they originally expected.

And the doctor has not said one damn word about going back to work.

Buck’s been waiting for the doctor to give him a “go back to work” date for what feels like 10 fucking hours. Buck’s been sitting here so long that he actually can’t even remember this doctor’s fucking name. But not once has this doctor mentioned Buck going back to work. Even though that was the whole reason Buck came to this appointment.

“Do you have any questions, Evan?” The doctor finally asks. Oh, thank God, he finally stopped talking long enough for Buck to ask a question.

“Um . . . yeah? When exactly will I be back at the station? So that I can work?” The question comes out awkwardly, but Buck’s gotta ask somehow.

The doctor frowns and kind of tilts his head at Buck.

“Well, Evan, that’s what I’ve been saying this whole time, isn’t it?”

Buck blinks really hard. “No. It’s not. You’ve been very specifically talking about my leg. You haven’t told me when I can go back to work.”

The doctor frowns, and it makes the lines in his face stick out.

“Well . . . I suppose that’s what I’ve been trying to get to. I . . . am not sure that you’ll be able to return at all.”

. . . What?

“At least, not in the foreseeable future.”
. . . He’s kidding. He’s gotta be fucking kidding.

Buck closes his eyes. Shit, he can feel his face heating up--he’s about to start crying. No, no, no, he’s not about to start crying in this damn office in front of a doctor whose name he can’t fucking remember.

“How about in the unforeseeable future?” Buck asks, trying to keep his voice as even as possible. And yeah, he knows it’s kind of a dumb question. But still.

“It’s unforeseeable,” the doctor answers. Buck should probably be pissed, but the doctor’s voice sounds warm and soothing. “I’m not going to rule anything out at all. But, I can confidently say that it will be a long time before you can be back at that activity level.”

Buck takes a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm himself down the way Nash’s always telling him to. Then he finally opens his eyes.

“So . . . what do I do until then?”

The doctor smiles at Buck like he feels sorry for him.

“You take care of yourself. And you go on with your life.”

And, damn it, that does it. Hot tears spill out of Buck’s eyes and slide down his cheek.

“I don’t have a life.”

The doctor frowns, and walks over to Buck. He puts his hand firmly on Buck’s shoulder, and Buck’s actually grateful for the touch.

“I find it hard to believe that a smart, handsome young man like yourself doesn’t have a life. You a workaholic?”

“Yeah, I guess you can say that.”

“Then I think your recovery will be a good time for you to explore other aspects of your life. You know what I mean?”

No. Not at all. Not even in the slightest. Why does no one understand Buck’s situation? Why does no one get the fact that this job is the only way Buck knows that he is supposed to be on this Earth? Why does everyone think it’s as simple as waiting, or not thinking about it?

“Evan,” the doc says firmly, and Buck looks up at him sullenly. “I want you to focus on getting better. Focus on yourself. And not on being a firefighter. Okay?”

The sentence fires Buck’s brain. He wishes he could stand up, kick this damn cast off of his leg and take off in a full sprint towards the fire house. Buck wishes he’d never been sitting in the front of the truck that night.

But he can’t run away and he can’t go back in time, no matter how much he wants to.

So: “Okay, Doc. Okay.”

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“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”
“HELP! HELP! MY GIRLFRIEND IS HANGING FROM OUR CHANDELIER!!”

“Ma’am, do you mean she hung herself from the chandelier?”

“No, no, no! I mean she’s CAUGHT IN and HANGING from the CHANDELIER!! HELP!!!!”

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Eddie should probably be used to all these weird ass calls they get. But he doesn’t think he ever will be.

Nash, Hen, Chimney and Eddie all just rushed into this gigantic house in the Hills with the ladder. He was fully expecting to see a woman hanging by her neck from a silver chandelier. Suicide calls are pretty rough, but they’re part of the job.

But that is not what they see when they arrive on the scene. Instead, they see a woman whose legs, arms, and some of her long blonde hair are literally tangled around a chandelier. She looks like some freaky art exhibit.

Even from 17 feet below, Eddie can see that the woman’s brown face is bright red with strain. Thanks to her hair being stuck, her head is being yanked up in an unnatural way, and her chin is so high in the air that Eddie knows her neck hurts.

“What the fuck?” Hen mutters under her breath.

Eddie looks at the woman, staring a lot longer than he should. It’s just . . . fascinating. She looks like a contortionist. Of course, contortionists choose to twist their bodies in these impossible positions. And this woman clearly didn’t choose this.

“Please get her down from there!!” the victim’s girlfriend yells. Her brunette hair is a mess, and her hysterical crying has made black mascara stream down her face. Eddie can see that one strap of the woman’s white dress has been messily torn off.

“Let’s deploy the ladder!” Nash orders, but even his voice sounds a little dazed as he watches the dangling woman. “Diaz, Wilson, get up the stairs! See just how badly her legs are tangled up in this thing. Han, hold the ladder while I go up!”

Eddie and Hen snap into action, hustling up the long, winding staircase. The victim’s girlfriend trembles as she watches them.

“What’s your name, ma’am?” Hen asks gently.

“J-Jessie,” the woman stammers. “And h-her name is Marisol.”

Eddie frowns at Marisol’s twisted body. One of her legs is definitely broken, and he can already tell that she has several sprains in her back and shoulders. Eddie shoots Hen a look, and she glances at him with a worried look on her face.

“Can you tell us how this happened, Jessie?” Hen asks.

Jessie sobs. “I didn’t even really know. Marisol was just playing around, sitting on the bannister while I took pictures of her. Next thing I know, she’s grabbing onto my dress and she’s falling! I guess the chandelier sorta caught her?”

Eddie moves closer to the bannister, and turns his head as he further examines Marisol’s body. He
grimaces; they’re going to have to either physically untangle her legs and arms—potentially further breaking her leg—or they’ll have to saw through this chandelier.

Or, worst of all, they’ll have to do a combination of both. But sawing through the chandelier could mean getting crystal and glass shards everywhere, including logged into Marisol’s body. And whatever solution they come up with, Eddie and Hen are going to be leaning over a railing while working.

This just went from silly and weird to incredibly dangerous.

Nash climbs up the ladder and frowns. Eddie peers down at Han holding the ladder and starts to feel anxious. They really need another person holding onto it.

But unfortunately—thanks to some homicidal teenager—that other person’s leg got crushed by a fire truck. And Eddie feels a rush of rage every time he thinks about it.

Nash makes it to the top of the ladder, and calmly calls out to Marisol.

“You’re gonna be okay, Marisol,” Nash says in a soothing voice. Then, in a louder, more commanding voice: “Diaz, get the saw! Wilson, see if you can get a good grip on her legs without hurting her anymore.”

“Oh my God, you’re gonna cut off her legs?!” Jessie wails with a horrified look on her face.

“No! No, we’re not!” Nash responds instantly. “But we are probably going to have to cut parts of the chandelier off.”

“Oh, o-okay!” Jessie stammers. “Just—do whatever you need to!”

“We will, I promise,” Nash says.

Eddie and Nash give each other a brief look, and Eddie can see Nash mentally calculating the logistics of what they’re about to do. Nash glances towards the front door of the mansion, and Eddie takes that as his reminder to get moving.

Eddie rushes down the stairs and out to the trunk. After a few minutes of digging inside, he finds their rescue saw and a pair of safety glasses. Eddie can’t help but grimace at it: it’s going to get the job done, but it’s also going to scare the hell out of Jessie and Marisol. Hell, it scares the hell out of some of them.

Namely Buck, Eddie thinks fondly. Buck jumps very time he uses it. He once told Eddie that he’s paranoid about accidentally sawing his face off. Eddie had laughed, but then remembered that they could probably happen, given the type of luck they have.

Wait—stop, stop. Eddie blinks out of his thoughts and puts the glasses on. Now isn’t the time to drift. There’s a poor lady that needs to be cut down from an expensive ass piece of decoration.

Eddie rushes back inside to find that Hen and Nash have made progress: they’ve gotten Marison’s right leg and left arm disentangled. They’re holding her limbs delicately. If they let her arm or leg hang, gravity might work against the rest of her body, especially her neck and hair. From where Eddie is standing, he can see the cuts he needs to make to free Marisol, but there’s no way he’ll be able to do while leaning over a railing.

“Captain Nash, I’m going to climb up the other side of the ladder,” Eddie says, trying to ignore the
spike of anxiety he feels.

Nash and Chimney both look at him. Nash is keeping his face neutral, but Eddie can see the worry in his eyes. Chimney doesn’t even try to hide the alarm on his face.

“Please be careful,” Chimney says. “I’ll hold your side.”

Eddie steels himself and starts to climb. He instantly realizes that this is going to suck: he’s trying to climb up the ladder using one arm while holding a saw in the other. Eddie’s pretty strong, and he trains regularly. But that doesn’t mean that he should be trying to hold this heavy ass saw with one hand. His arm is getting tired, which is no good considering he still has to actually cut through this chandelier.

Eddie finally makes it to the top of the ladder, and steadies himself and the saw. The weight of it makes him feeling like he’ll fall if he leans too far back. Chimney seems to feel it, too, because his grip on the ladder tightens.

Eddie really doesn’t need to cut through much, just a couple of spots to make it easier for Hen and Nash to get her other leg and arm. The problem is going to be Marisol’s hair. So much of it is wrapped around the chandelier that Eddie is likely to accidentally saw it all off.

Marisol suddenly whimpers, the first sound she’s made in a while. Nash tries to move closer to her without jostling the ladder too much.

“That’s his cue. Eddie takes his breath, and turns the saw on. He decides to start with the hardest part--her hair, much of which is wrapped around the column. Eddie tilts the saw and starts cutting through the column.

The sound is loud and kind of horrifying. Bits of crystal, metal and glass start flying, a lot of it landing directly onto Eddie’s glasses and chin. A lot of Marisol’s hair starts to fall into her face, but even more of it starts to fall onto Eddie and the ladder. Eddie really wants to stop and apologize to Marisol for all this discomfort.

But all of a sudden, Marisol’s head flops down, and Eddie hears her take a deep breath. Eddie turns the saw off and peers down to see that he’s cut her hair loose.

“Oh, thank God!” she says, her voice raspy. “My neck is so fucking sore!”

Okay. The hard part is over. Marisol looks a hot mess, and she’s going to be in a brace for a while, but the hard part is over.

Eddie turns the saw back, and starts working to free her right arm. After a few minutes, her arm is loose. Eddie then leans over as far as he can, and starts sawing through the arm where Marisol’s leg is still caught. A big chunk of metal definitely smacks Eddie in the lip, but he doesn’t care. Because after a few short seconds, Marisol’s leg is free, and Nash and Hen are finally sliding her off of the chandelier.

Nash and Hen are able to lift her over the railing and very gently lay her down on the floor. Eddie and Nash climb down from the ladder, and it’s only when both of his feet touch the floor that Eddie realizes just how exhausted he is.

Nash and Chimney rush outside to get a stretcher, and probably a neck brace and splint, too. Eddie, deciding to ignore how tired his muscles are, goes back up the stairs to where Marisol, Hen and
“You’re gonna be okay, Marisol. You did great,” Hen is muttering.

Hen looks up at Jessie. “She’s gonna be in the hospital for a while. You wanna get cleaned up and come by a little later?”

“No, no! I’m following you guys there!” Jessie sniffs and wipes the wet mascara off of her face. “I . . . don’t want to leave her by herself.”

Hen nods, and gives Jessie a small smile. “That’s understandable.”

Eddie gives Jessie a quick smile, too. It’s sweet the way she wants to be by her girlfriend’s side.

Eddie kneels down next to Marisol. She’s got some pretty nasty bruising, especially on her right leg (the broken one, Eddie realizes), and she’s got tiny scratches and cuts from the chandelier. But she’ll live, and that’s all Eddie can ask for.

“We’re gonna get you patched up and to the hospital soon, okay?” Eddie says.

“Thank you,” Marisol breathes out, her voice still croaky.

Nash and Chimney rush back in with a stretcher. Eddie turns to go help them, but as he’s walking away, Marisol calls out to him.

“Hey!”

Eddie whips around, surprised. “Yeah?”

“You . . . owe me a new . . . lace front,” she says jokingly.

Hen snorts as Eddie slowly realizes what Marisol means.

“Honestly, I don’t think I can afford it,” Eddie says with a chuckle.

Jessie laughs, and Eddie can tell she’s caught herself off guard. Then she slides out of the way to let Eddie, Chimney, Hen and Nash load Marisol onto the stretcher and carefully lead her down the stairs. Eddie can't help but cast a glance over the railing at the ruined chandelier and blonde hair scattered all over the floor.

Eddie has to bite back a laugh. Buck's going to get a kick out of this one.
Buck wasn't prepared for how damn boring being on medical leave is.

Buck feels like he’s been spending almost every day in the exact same way: sitting on his couch or at this table with his laptop too close to his face. He doesn’t even bother with t.v. anymore; he can literally feel the daytime soaps melting his brain. Most of the time, Buck’s either watching Let’s Plays or spending too much time looking at the new Chiitan Twitter account.

Look, Buck's never been one to complain about having nothing to do. He likes to chill just like everyone else. But damn, Buck's bored. This is different than chilling or relaxing or just being on vacation.

Buck can barely move around; he either has to use crutches or his wheelchair. Buck can't go out without some intense preparation beforehand. He's still not sleeping in his own bed (Maddie once told him that the decision to have a loft bed would come back to haunt him one day.)

And worse yet, all of Buck's friends are out working and saving lives and shit.

Buck wants to slam his head against the wall. But he doesn't want to risk getting a concussion on top of having the crushed leg.

Today’s worse than usual: Buck can’t stop thinking about the doctor’s visit. Part of Buck wants to write it off as a waste of time, but he knows that the doc was right. Buck’s going to be laid up for a while. God, man. The very thought makes Buck want to tear his hair out. Is this shit ever going to end? As impossible as “having a life” sounds, it’s probably worth trying if it saves Buck from this boredom and sadness he feels all the time.

Not that he could actually get a life right now, Buck thinks sourly. Gotta love the mobility issues. So, here, Buck will remain, he guesses. Just sinking into his furniture.

Buck’s sitting on the couch, drifting towards the weird side of YouTube, when he hears a knock at his door.

“Evan, it’s meeee!” Maddie’s voice calls. “I’m letting myself in!”

“Heeey!” Buck calls back, closing his laptop.

Maddie glides into Buck’s apartment, closing and locking the door behind her. She’s got a big, brown paper bag of groceries in her arm.

“I figured you haven’t gone,” Maddie says as she walks into Buck’s kitchen.

“You figured right,” Buck says flatly. “Thanks, Maddie.”

“No problem!” Maddie starts putting away groceries. She’s got some weird sister sense that seems to tell her exactly where to put everything.

While she’s putting the canned vegetables that Buck’s probably not going to eat away, Maddie tosses Buck a look over her shoulder.

“You don’t sound so good,” Maddie says with a frown. “Everything go okay at the doctor’s?”

Buck glances over at Maddie before he can decide whether or not to tell the truth, his phone goes
off. He’s got a text.

Edmundo: Guess what type of call we had. Give you a hint: blonde hair, expensive crystals and a lot of glass.

Buck snorts as he reads it. Eddie texts him every couple of days, to check in or to tell Buck about some wild shit that happened at work. As pathetic as it sounds, these types of texts from Eddie are one of the only things that keep Buck sane. The whole squad checks in on him, but hearing from Eddie makes Buck feel a little different.

Buck’s texting Eddie back when he realizes he hasn’t responded to Maddie’s question.

Me: Oooo, rich lady was looking at jewelry and got her head stuck in the display case???

“Oh, um, it was fine,” Buck says distractedly. “Really, nothing new.”

“You sure?” Maddie says skeptically. “What exactly did he say?”

Edmundo: Good guess! But it was actually a rich lady who fell from a stair railing and got caught in a chandelier.

Buck bites back a laugh when he reads Eddie’s text. He’s trying to picture the scene now and all he can think of is that one Sia song with the dancer in the video.

“I mean, he just told me that I’ll be in the cast a little longer. And physical therapy would take longer,” Buck answers Maddie with a shrug. He keeps his eyes focused on his phone.

Me: Whuuuut? How tf did that happen??

“Did he say anything about you going back to work?” Maddie asks carefully, slowly walking into the living room.

Buck tries not to flinch.

Edmundo: She and her girlfriend were apparently taking pictures on the stair railing?? One of them’s an influencer so it was probably IG related.

Edmundo: I ended up having to use THE SAW to cut her down. And I carried it up the ladder with one hand.

“He just said it’ll be awhile before I can go back to work,” Buck says, very quickly glancing at his sister. “Leg’s gotta heal and all that.”

Me: This influencer shit is dangerous. I would’ve never guessed.

Me: Wait the fucking SAW?? Oh my GOD. And why would you carry it with one hand???

Were you trying to lose the other one????

“Well, at least it’s not bad news,” Maddie says.

Buck shrugs. “Yeah, I guess not.”

Edmundo: I had go up the ladder to get a good spot to cut her down. And it’s not like we had someone there to pass it up to me.
Buck bites the inside of his cheek. He tries not to think murderous thoughts about a teenager, but on days like this, it’s a little hard not to.

**Me:** So you had to be He-Man and use super strength. Cool.

**Me:** At least you had fun today!

Maddie gently sits down next to Buck on the couch.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “Because the last time you and I had this conversation, you were kinda losing it.”

**Edmundo:** Personally I see myself as more Clark Kent than He-Man.

**Edmundo:** And I can tell you’re starting to go stir crazy if you describe that as “fun.”

Buck snorts, both at Maddie and Eddie’s text.

“I’m okay,” Buck says.

“You sure?”

**Me:** You are kinda Clark Kent-ish.

**Me:** And I aaaaammm. Oh my GOD, Eddie, I’m so fucking bored I’m gonna die.

**Me:** And my fucking doctor didn’t make anything better.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he lies. “I mean, there’s nothing I can do about it, right?”

**Edmundo:** You had an appointment today? How’d it go? What did the doctor say?

“Well, that’s very mature of you,” Maddie says with a warm smile.

**Me:** That my leg is still fucked and so that means that my career is still fucked and that I need to get a life before I get old and ugly.

Buck looks up at her. He almost feels bad about being dishonest.

“Thanks, Maddie. I’m glad you’ve noticed that I’m not being a child,” Buck says sarcastically.

**Edmundo:** For some reason, I doubt that’s what he said.

**Edmundo:** I don’t think you have to worry about getting ugly Buck lol. I think you’ll be hot for a long time.

Maddie rolls her eyes. “I never said you were being a child. I just said you were being impatient. And you were!”

**Me:** That’s basically what he said. My leg’s healing slower than we thought it would after the surgery. There’s no telling when I’ll be back at the station.

**Me:** He told me I needed to do something else other than worry about work. Which means I’m screwed.
“I mean, I can’t help but be impatient,” Buck says quietly. “I’m not used to this. It doesn’t exactly feel good, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Maddie says with a sigh. Then, she perks up and adds, “But you are going to get through this. And I fully believe you’ll be stronger than you were before.”

**Edmundo:** Look, we want you back. I definitely do. But your main priority right now should be getting better and healing. You don’t need to rush anything.

**Edmundo:** I promise this house and the crazy shit in it will be here waiting for you when you get back.

“Yeah, better be,” Buck mutters with a smile.

Maddie squints at her brother and then finally turns looks down at his phone.

“Who have you been texting this whole time?” she asks with a chuckle.

Buck looks up at her, suddenly feeling flush.

“Nobody. Just Eddie,” he says with a shrug.

But Maddie raises an eyebrow at him.

“Just Eddie? Then why are you blushing so hard?” Maddie asks teasingly.

“I’m not blushing!” Buck cries as he starts to blush fiercely.

Maddie scoffs. “Your face is getting so red that I thought you were texting Ali again.”

Buck grimaces, his mood immediately souring.

“Why would I be texting Ali?” Buck grumbles, staring down at his phone. He forces himself not to look at the “Ali” label that’s glaring at him. He should really delete those texts one day.

Maddie shrugs. “I just thought you guys might be talking again. That’s all.”

Buck looks up at Maddie, huffing in frustration. “Why would I want to talk to the girl who dumped me because of my job?” Buck demands. “Even when I clearly cannot do that job!”

Maddie cringes. “Sorry! Didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or anything.”

Buck sighs. “No, you didn’t. I shouldn’t flip out on you. I’m just . . . I’m actually glad she and I ended things. It’s just weird, is all.”

“I hear ya,” Maddie says. “But even this weirdness will pass one day.”

Buck turns his nose up at Maddie. “Your positivity is gross.”

“Shut up,” Maddie says with a laugh. She stands up and walks back into the kitchen. “I’ll let you continue your conversation with just Eddie.”

“Don’t say it like that!” Buck says, his face burning.

Maddie just laughs again as Buck focuses on his texts with Eddie again.
Me: Yeah, you guys better be. You can’t live without me anyway.

A few minutes later, Buck’s phone vibrates in his hand.

Edmundo: Sure can’t.

Buck smiles—*without* blushing.

Me: Glad you can admit it

Buck’s about to put his phone down and pull his laptop back out when he realizes something.

Me: Hey....... did you call me hot earlier???
Chapter 3

God, Eddie is tired.

Hauling his equipment back into his locker feels like the most daunting task Eddie has ever had to accomplish. He feels dead on his feet, like he could fall over at any second and just sleep for the next 12 hours. Eddie is ready to pick up Christopher, go home and spread out on the couch.

As Eddie’s hanging up his equipment, his phone vibrates. Eddie takes his work shirt off, slips his jacket and bag on before closing his locker and digging his phone out of his pocket.

Buckley: Hey……. did you call me hot earlier???

Eddie’s eyes go wide. He did kind of text that earlier, didn’t he?

“Hey! Good job today, Eddie!” Nash calls over to him. “You handled that chandelier very well.”

But Eddie is too busy cringing at his texts to notice. This is how Eddie knows he’s tired: if he were alert and clear-minded, he’d be more careful about what he texts Buck.

Or what he even thinks about Buck.

Me: That was just to make you feel better lol.

“Eddie? You okay over there?”

Eddie pulls a face. That isn’t perfect, but it should work. Maybe Buck will read that and drop the whole thing. But then again, when has Buck ever dropped anything? Buck is hard-headed and stubborn. Eddie swears, sometimes Buck can ask as many questions as Christopher when he gets really curious about something.

While Eddie is having his internal dialogue, Nash walks over to him and puts his hand on Eddie’s shoulder. Eddie, who usually has a pretty strong sense of situational awareness, nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Didn’t mean to scare you!” Nash says with a smile. “You good?”

Buckley: So you DON’T think I’m hot?? I need you to tell me. It’s very important for my self-esteem.

“Uh, yeah, yeah,” Eddie says. “Just a little worn out, that’s all.”

“That’s understandable,” Nash says. “We had a hard day. How’s that arm feeling?”
“Shaky,” Eddie answers with a smile. “I think I’m gonna skip arm day for the next couple of days.”

“Yeah, I bet!” Nash says with a chuckle. Nash pats Eddie on the shoulder and heads for his office. “I’ll see ya tomorrow!”

“See ya, cap!” Eddie calls back. Then he turns his attention back to his phone.

Me: Shut up, you know what you look like. You don’t need anyone to tell you that lol.

That . . . sounds flirty. Eddie is not trying to sound flirty with Buck. Eddie just wants to help Buck feel better; he knows Buck misses work, and his leg is causing him a lot of stress. Eddie wants to be a good a coworker and a good friend. But, he can already tell he’s wading into weird waters now. He can’t help it, for some reason. Eddie’s always felt just a tad bit reckless around Buck.

Buckley: Oh, I DO know. It’s just nice to be reminded sometimes ;)

Eddie chuckles softly at Buck’s response. He imagines Buck sitting on his couch, grinning with pride as he considers his own reflection.

Me: You’re ridiculous.

Me: But at least you sound better now.

“Who are you texting over there?” Chimney calls over with a mischievous smile.

Eddie looks up at Chimney and blinks, trying to pretend like Chimney didn’t also catch him off-guard.

“Oh, it’s no one,” Eddie says casually.

“No one?” Chimney asks skeptically.

Hen looks up from the bag of chips she’s eating and raises an eyebrow at Eddie.

“It’s probably Buck,” she says with a smirk.

Eddie tries not to stammer and blush. He fails, of course.

“Why do you guess Buck?” Eddie asks, trying to fight the look of embarrassment that’s spreading across his face.

Hen rolls her eyes. “Because lately, the only two people any of us have seen you text are Buck and Christopher. It’s actually kinda cute!”

“It’s not cute because it’s not true .”

“Uh huh, yeah, sure,” Hen cuts her eyes at Eddie. “Where you headed now?”

“To pick up Christopher,” Eddie instantly answers. He immediately regrets that answer when he sees Hen and Chimney grin.

“I have to pick my son. Because I want to be a good father, remember?” Eddie adds.

“Yeah, yeah, we know!” Chimney says with a wave of his hand. “Go get Christopher!”

Eddie chuckles and starts to walk out of the fire station.
“I’ll see you guys tomorrow!” Eddie calls over to them.

“See you tomorrow!” Hen answers. “Tell Buck we said ‘Hi!’”

“Whatever, Hen!” Eddie calls back, and he’s extremely grateful that she can’t see the way his face turns bright red.

Right as Eddie’s getting into his car, his phone vibrates again.

**Buckley: I do feel a lot better. Thanks for checking on me.**

Eddie bites the inside of his cheek as he texts back.

**Me: No problem!**

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His abuela’s house is looking smaller and smaller.

Eddie can’t help but sit in the car and just stare at the house for a while. It needs to be painted; the paint’s faded and chipped. There are shingles missing from the roof thanks to a nasty storm that came through a few days ago. Eddie should bring that up to her, although he already knows that she’ll just scrunch her face up and say, “*No, Eddie, I’m not worrying about that roof right now! Es muy caro.*”

Eddie finally lugs himself out of his car and drags himself to the door. He chuckles as he listens to the sounds of Christopher and his abuela rummaging around in the house. After a few moments, the door opens, and Eddie looks directly into Christopher’s grinning face.

“Daddy!” Christopher’s tiny face lights up as he looks up at Eddie.

Eddie pulls Christopher into a tight hug, ruffling his hair.

“Hey, buddy,” Eddie says warmly. He looks up at his abuela and gives her a wide grin. “Hey, Abuela.”

“Eddie, you look awful,” Isabel says with a frown.

“Thank you, Abuela,” Eddie says flatly. “I really appreciate that.”

Isabel tsks at Eddie and waves for Eddie to come inside. “Ah, you know what I’m saying! Come in here and rest for a moment.”

“I really oughta get home,” Eddie says politely, pulling Christopher to his side. “If I come sit down, I may never get back up.”

Isabel frowns. “¿Te sientes tan cansado?”

Christopher squirms against Eddie’s side, leaning his head against Eddie’s body.

“You’re very tired?” Christopher translates, sounding proud of himself.

Eddie grins down at Christopher. “Yeah, buddy, I am. So we gotta get going, okay?”

“*Mi hijo*,” Isabel says, giving Eddie a hard stare. “You sure you alright?”
“I’m fine,” Eddie answers.

But there must be something in his eyes that tells his abuela the opposite, because she narrows her eyes at him. Finally, she nods, and leans down towards Christopher.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, yes?”

Christopher nods vigorously, a big grin on his face.

“Yes, Nana,” Christopher says.

Isabel stands up straight and peers at Eddie in a way that only she can.

“Llámame,” she commands.

“Yes, ma’am, I promise,” Eddie responds. It’s better not to argue. “Bye, abuela.”

“My-eye, Nana!” Christopher calls as Eddie leads him to the car.

“Bye, sweetie!” Isabel calls to their retreating figures. “Take care of your dad for me!”

“Abuela,” Eddie groans.

But Christopher giggles, his body trembling against Eddie’s side.

“I’ll try, Nana,” Christopher promises. “I’ll try real hard!”

~~

Eddie can’t see.

Brown dust and black smoke feel the air, wrapping itself around Eddie’s body like a filthy weighted blanket. Eddie’s eyes burn so badly that he wonders if he’ll ever feel moisture in them again.

The harsh sounds of sirens and alarms mingle together to create a deafening cacophony. If Eddie forces himself to listen past the debilitating noises, he can hear the sound of screams and frantic footfalls. The stomach-turning sounds of civilians running for safety.

Eddie can’t move; he’s pinned to the ground. He feels a warm something laying across his back, and sees what looks like a hand dangling in front of his face, and for one immature moment, Eddie closes his eyes and pretends that he’s not trapped under human bodies. Glass and small, sharp rocks dig themselves into Eddie’s cheek as he struggles to get himself free.

Eddie’s going to die: he can feel it. Every breath Eddie takes just forces more toxic smoke into his lungs. Every move makes him feel like his body is going to break. He’s going to end just like whoever’s laying on top of him right now.

There’s another explosion in the distance. Eddie can see flashes of red and orange light, and he can hear more screeching. Eddie closes his eyes, and lets his face crash onto the ground. He thinks of Christopher. And then darkness overtakes him.

~~

“Daddy! Daaaaaaaaaddy! Daddy!”
Eddie jerks awake as he feels a small pair of hands shaking him. He blinks as he props himself up on his elbow. Eddie glances at the clock--2:41 a.m.

“Christopher? You alright, buddy?” Eddie asks in a rasp. “What’re you doing up?”

“I heard you moving around a lot,” Christopher mumbles.

Eddie’s stomach drops as he looks at his son’s worried expression. Christopher doesn’t say it, but “Are you okay?” is written all over his face. Great, even his kid thinks something’s wrong with him. Eddie’s got to get it together.

“I’m okay, buddy,” Eddie says, reaching over to ruffle Christopher’s hair. “Don’t worry about me, okay? Go back to sleep.”

Christopher nods. “Okay,” he murmurs, but he sounds so sad that it breaks Eddie’s heart in two.

“Hey, come here.” Eddie pulls Christopher into a hug. Christopher wraps his arms around Eddie’s neck, and it makes Eddie feel calmer than he would like to admit.

“Get some more sleep, alright?” Eddie says softly.

Christopher finally lets go of Eddie’s neck and peers into his face.

“Yes, sir,” Christopher says, looking sleepy again. “Night-night.”

Eddie smiles. “Good night, kid.”

Christopher walks back into his room across the hall, slowly pulling his bedroom door behind him. Christopher never fully shuts his door; it’s always slightly ajar in a way that makes Eddie feel like he can go in at any moment. Eddie wonders which one of them is more comforted by that thought.

Eddie gets out of bed to make sure his own door is left ajar in the same way. Then he climbs back in bed. He feels a spike of anxiety rise in his chest as he lies back down.

Tomorrow--well, shit, today --is going to be a long one.
Chapter 4

The good news: the big ass white cast that’s been ruining Buck’s life is coming off of his leg after all! They did another examination and decided to go ahead and take it off.

The bad news: it’s being replaced by a thick, cumbersome black brace goes up to his knee and makes Buck look like a poor excuse for a cyborg.

If Buck were to rank the most unpleasant, painful experiences of his life--getting crushed by a fucking fire truck being number 1, of course--getting fitted for this brace ranks pretty high up there. Buck takes pride in the fact that he didn’t shout or cry once while they were putting the brace on. He gasped a lot and sweat poured down his face, but he did not cry.

The doctor has him walk down the hall a few times to test it. The brace has got scary-looking straps and so much styrofoam padding inside that Buck can barely feel his own leg. And it’s heavy, so Bucky’s walk looks less like an actual gait and more like a waddle.

But at least he’s walking now. That’s something. That’s really something, he reminds himself. Buck’s leaves the office with an appointment for his first physical therapy session, and the feeling that maybe there’s hope for him yet.

Buck stares at the brace as he sits waiting for his Uber. It’s going to be a fucking bother, but it’s a step in the right direction, at least.

He decides to commemorate the moment. Buck pulls his phone out and takes a picture of himself and the brace in all of its medical glory. Then he texts the picture to Maddie.

Me: I got new shoes!!

It only takes a few moments for Buck’s phone to buzz with Maddie’s response.

Favorite Sister: Yay, no more clunky cast!! You’re freeeeeee! Well, almost lol.

Buck chuckles at his sister’s message. As much as Maddie likes to pretend to be the mature one of them, she’s just as goofy as Buck is sometimes.

Buck stares at Maddie’s message for a while, feeling warm as he reads it. Then, without thinking too much about it, Buck decides to send a text to Eddie, too.

Me: One step closer to ruining your shifts again, Diaz!

It only takes a minute or so for Eddie to text back.

Edmundo: Looking forward to it! I’m getting tired of being so productive all the time.

Buck good-naturedly rolls his eyes. He feels a weird fluttering in his chest. That . . . happens when Buck thinks about Eddie sometimes. He’ll get a weird feeling in his chest, or his stomach will start to hurt a little. It’s strange; Buck hasn’t felt weird around Eddie since they first met, back when Buck couldn’t stand the idea of another young, hot firefighter snatching the spotlight.

That was just jealousy, though. No matter how much Buck tried to deny it, he was just jealous. He’s not jealous of Eddie anymore, not like that. Buck might be jealous of how idiotically brave and honorable and good Eddie can be. And maybe Buck’s a tad bit jealous of how much Eddie and
Christopher love each other. But that’s different, right? That’s not petty or hateful or whatever Buck was feeling when they first met. He doesn’t want whatever attention he thinks Eddie gets. Buck just wants to be more like Eddie. Because Eddie is kind of amazing, when Buck really thinks about it.

Buck’s phone makes a loud ding! His Uber’s pulling up. Buck blinks out of his thoughts. Wow, he didn’t think he’d fall down an uncomfortably emotional rabbit hole about his best friend, today, but these things happen, he guesses. Buck shoves his phone into his pocket, and then unsteadily stands up and hobbles to the car.

~~

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“Um . . . I’ve been in a car accident.”

“Okay, are you hurt? What’s the location of the accident?”

“I, uh, I’m not really hurt, I don’t think. I’m at South Mednik and Gleason.”

“Okay, I’m dispatching first responders to your area. Now, are you in a car or truck?”

“A truck. A gray Nissan Frontier.”

“And has it overturned or anything like that?”

“Kinda . . . I’m stuck in the roof of a nail shop.”

“Wait . . . your truck’s on its roof in front of a nail shop?”

“No, like . . . I’m literally in the roof of a nail shop.”

~~

“Uh, Cap, can you run this by me again?” Eddie keeps trying to picture the call they’re responding to, but he’s having a really hard time visualizing it.

Nash glances at Eddie through the rearview mirror. He looks a little confused himself.

“It’s my understanding that there’s a Nissan Frontier lodged into the roof of a nail shop.” Nash answers. “Athena’s got a lot of units responding to the scene, too. She says they think everyone got out of the shop, but that driver is definitely still in the truck.”

“So, we’re going in to get the driver out and watch for any fire danger,” Hen says.

“And probably any flooding danger, if there’s any damaged pipes,” Chimney offers up.

Eddie nods along. That building’s probably a goner, but hopefully the driver is alright. As they pull up to the scene, and file out of the truck, Eddie sees police directing people away from a strip mall. There are barefoot women tenderly walking around, trying to keep their toes from touching the dirty concrete. He sees a few women walking around with their hands in the air, and it takes him a second to realize that they’re trying to keep their new polish smudge-free.

“Everyone to the curb, alright?” Athena yells as she ushers patrons down the sidewalk. “We gotta get all of you guys away from this building!”
Eddie finally gets a good look at the building. Sure enough, the rear end of a gray Nissan Frontier is sticking up into the air, while the front of the truck is dangling just above the floor of the nail shop. There’s water, nail polish, pieces of ceiling, and foam insulation all over the floor of the nail shop. The entire place smells like nail polish remover and acrylic nails, and the smell makes Eddie’s head hurt. Light covers hang from the ceiling, and there are sparking pieces of wire dangling from the busted ceiling.

“We gotta have a power company come out and cut off all the electricity and water,” Eddie calls back.

“On it now!” Nash says. “You and Chimney--head in and check on the driver. See if he’s conscious.”

Eddie and Chimney nod at one another, and then enter the nail shop, gingerly stepping over debris.

“Hello?” A terrified voice calls from inside of the truck. “¡Oye! ¡Ayudame, por favor!”

“¡Estamos aquí!” Eddie responds.

Eddie and Chimney reach the truck. A dark-skinned man with long dreads leans his head out of the window. He’s got blood pouring from a gash on his forehead; it’s dripped down the front of his Dominican flag t-shirt. His dark brown eyes shine with fear.

“Gracias a Dios, pensé que moriría,” the man groans with relief. Then he smiles sheepishly.

“Sorry, I lapse into Spanish when I’m scared.”

“A me también,” Eddie says, flashing the man a smile. “¿Cómo te llamas?”

“Hector,” he answers.

“Hey, Hector. I’m Eddie, and this is Howie. We’re gonna get you out of the truck, okay?”

“Fine by me,” Hector says with a nervous laugh. “But, uh, is it going to totally fall when you open the door?”

Eddie gives the truck a once over. It’ll definitely move when they open the door, and that might put stress on whatever’s holding it up right now.

Chimney seems to read Eddie’s mind, and carefully says, “It might. But, we’re here to make sure you’re good, okay?”

Hector nods, then instantly grimaces. Eddie can’t help but cringe as blood falls into the Hector’s eyes.

“Yeah, that was a bad idea,” Hector says hastily. “Sáquenme, por favor.”

Chimney very gently opens the truck’s door, careful to not let it swing too hard or too wide. Sure enough, the truck starts shifting despite the softness of Chimney’s actions. Eddie quickly steps in the space and reaches his arms out to Hector.

“Come on, I gotcha,” Eddie says.

Hector hesitantly reaches over and latches onto Eddie’s shoulders, letting Eddie hold him around the waist. Eddie walks backwards until both of the man’s feet are on the floor.

They hear a loud groaning noise as the truck tilts forward. The front end of the truck finally
touches the floor now, and more pieces of the ceiling fall.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Chimney says, his eyes focused on the exposed wiring.

Eddie keeps an arm around Hector’s waist as the three of them walk outside. Hector leans his head onto Eddie’s shoulder.

“I really liked that truck,” Hector mutters.

“You’ll get a new one,” Eddie says reassuringly.

Hector snorts. “Maybe. But no one will ever insure me after this.”

Chimney barks out a laugh as Eddie tries to bite back his.

Hen and Nash, who had been attending to the cuts and bruises the shop’s customers received, rush over to them.

“We’re gonna you patched up and on the way to the hospital, alright?” Nash says.

“Ay Dios, a new truck and a hospital bill,” Hector grumbles as he lets Nash and Hen lead him to the ambulance. “See, I shoulda just died. Dying’s less expensive.”

“Well, sir, depending on how this happened, that truck might not be your responsibility,” Athena offers up, following them to the back of the ambulance. “What lead up to this crash?”

“¡No sé! I was just driving, and all of a sudden the gas pedal just got stuck,” Hector says as he’s examined by Hen. “Truck sped up to like 110 or something. I kept trying to throw it into neutral or park, but nothing happened. Next thing I know, I’m barrelling through the guardrails and flying off of the side of the overpass.”

Eddie glances up to the overpass. He can see the misshapen guardrails and pieces of metal all over the roadway.

“Those guardrails should’ve stopped your truck,” Eddie says. “Or, at least, your should’ve flipped over them inside of going through them.”

“They may’ve been really rusty or already damaged. And that’s the city’s problem,” Athena says. “As for that truck, it sounds like a factory defect.”

“Oh, so I won’t have to file bankruptcy?” Hector asks hopefully. “Maybe being alive won’t suck so much after all!”

Eddie can’t help but laugh aloud as Hector grins with optimism.

“Yeah, I think you’ll be okay,” Eddie says.

As Eddie watches Hen and Nash load Hector up into the ambulance, he has a fleeting thought that he wishes that type of sudden positivity was contagious. Maybe then Eddie could pass it onto Buck.

Eddie’s phone starts vibrating in his pocket. Eddie digs it out and smirks at the text he’s gotten: Buck, a huge black boot on his leg and a goofy grin on his face.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.
Okay. So, two things that shouldn’t have been a big deal happen all at once.

The first thing is that Buck’s phone rings as he’s on the way home. It’s Eddie, and Buck’s suddenly forgotten how to answer phones and talk.

“Uh, hey, Eddie, what’s up?” Buck says after spending an embarrassingly long tapping on his phone’s screen.

“Nothing much,” Eddie sounds tired, but happy. “I was just calling to check in on you. Looks like this doctor’s appointment went much better than the last one.”

“Much better,” Buck laughs shakily. “I’m mobile now! Well, I mean, more mobile than I was before!”

“I see! And thank God. I was starting to worry that you and your couch would fuse,” Eddie says teasingly.

“Oh, fuck off, Diaz,” Buck retorts.

Buck hears a noise from the front seat of the car; he realizes that his Uber driver is watching him curiously through the rear-view mirror.

Buck blushes fiercely as the driver quickly looks at the road again.

“So, um, how was your day?” Buck stammers. “Any crazy shit I missed?”

“Oh, you know--a truck drove off of an overpass and crashed into a nail shop. Regular stuff.”

“Oh man. Was the driver okay??”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Eddie says, his voice going soft. “He was kinda hilarious, actually.”

Buck squirms at the way the word “hilarious” sounded just now.

“Glad everything turned out okay,” Buck says curtly.

“Yeah, me, too . . .”

The Uber pulls up to the front of Buck’s apartment complex. Buck gets out of the car and thanks the driver. The driver just gives him a look and pulls away.

It’s at this moment--when Buck is partially trying to focus on Eddie’s voice and partially wondering why that driver looked at him so oddly--that the second thing happens. Buck suddenly hears an extremely loud boom, boom, boom, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Before Buck can process the sounds, he smells heavy smoke in the air.

“Buck! Are you okay?! What’s that noise?” Eddie demands, but Buck barely notices.

Buck glances around wildly--was that an explosion? Where? Does Buck need to get the crew out here? Is anyone hurt? Why is Buck suddenly feeling so damn anxious?

“Sorry, everyone!” Buck turns towards the sound of a man’s voice. Buck sees an older man standing next to a beat-up pickup truck, waving a hand to the crowd that had begun to gather.
“Sorry! This piece of junk backfired! And I dropped my beer,” the man admits.

Buck exhales, his whole body buzzing from the sudden disturbances. Everyone goes about their business, but Buck stays put on the sidewalk, watching the man and his truck from across the street. That truck could catch on fire, Buck thinks. It could literally explode. Buck’s seen it happen before. It could cause a huge fire that spreads through the neighborhood, and Buck wouldn’t be able to help.

“Buck, what’s going on?” Eddie’s voice startles Buck back to reality.

“Sorry--it was just some guys’ truck,” Buck says, but his voice is trembling. His whole body is still trembling, actually.

“You sure?” Eddie asks, concerning bleeding from his voice. “Because you don’t sound like you’re okay.”

Buck walks through the lobby of his complex and pushes the button for the elevator.

“I’m good,” Buck says, but even he can hear how breathless he sounds. “I’m getting in the elevator.”

Buck steps into the elevator, presses the button for his floor and leans against the wall. Eddie tries to say something, but his voice fades in and out thanks to the weakened signal.

“Buck . . .” Eddie’s voice crackles and drops out.

Buck wouldn’t hear it anyway: he’s too focused on the truck. The sound of it backfiring, the smoke in the air, the image of orange and red flames spouting out from underneath the hood and consuming everything around it. Buck can hear sirens in his head, and he can feel the heat on the side of his face as if the walls around him were suddenly set alight.

And then--and then Buck remembers being on the ground, feeling the scorching hot concrete beneath his cheek. There’s smoke in the air, and fire all around him, and sirens blaring, Buck’s chest feels so tight that no air can get in or out of his lungs.

“What’s happening?” It’s Eddie again, his voice clearer now. “What’s going on?”

The elevator opens and Buck stumbles out. He puts one hand on the wall next to him. He’s got his cellphone pressed so hard against his ear that it hurts.

“Eddie, I think there’s something wrong with my chest,” Buck says. His voice is raspy and airy.

“Buck,” Eddie’s voice has gone hard and frightening. “Where are you right now?”

“I’m . . . in the hall . . . in front of my place.”

“Can you unlock your door and get inside?”

“Um . . .” Buck’s head is spinning, and his vision has gone hazy; his front door looks very, very far away from him right now. But Buck gulps and nods before remembering that Eddie can’t see him.

“Um, yeah, yeah I-I can,” Buck says breathlessly.

“Okay, good. Don’t close your door, alright?”

Buck slowly walks down the hall to his door. And damn, it feels like Buck’s dragging his legs
through snow to get there. But he manages to make it to the door and unlock both locks.

Buck trips into his apartment, leaving the door wide open behind him. He suddenly has a thought that now would be a great time for a robber or murderer to burst in and kill him, and that only makes Buck’s heart beat even faster and his breath is getting even shorter, and why the fuck would his brain tell him that at this exact moment??

Buck suddenly collapses against the wall, sliding down to the floor. One knee ends up drawn up to his chest while his bad leg flops down flat against the floor, stretched out and looking weirdly long to Buck’s distorted view. And that does not make his bad leg feel good at all, but Buck suddenly can’t move it and that makes his face heat up and turn red and now he’s crying. Because he can’t breathe and he can’t move his leg and he feels like he’s going to die and no one will even realize it.

“Buck?? Can you hear me?? We’re on our way, okay? Buck??”

Buck can hear Eddie, but he feels far, far away. Buck looks down; his phone’s gone. He dropped it. And it takes him ages to realize that it’s slid across the floor and ended up underneath the couch.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Buck’s going to die. He’s going to die on the floor because his phone is gone and Eddie can’t hear him and Maddie is going to mad at him for dying and fuck. He fucked up again, he’s always fucking up. The only thing Buck’s ever done right was be a firefighter, and now he won’t ever be that again.

Buck closes his eyes and let his head hit the wall. He’s lying on the ground, surrounded by fire, and he feels a thousand pounds on his body. And no one can get to him.

“Buck!”

Eddie’s voice--but it’s so much clearer and closer and louder now.

Buck forces his eyes open, and there’s Eddie, with Maddie, Chimney and Hen standing right behind him.

Eddie drops to his knees next to Buck, and gently puts a still, firm hand right over Buck’s heart.

“Breathe, slowly, okay?” Eddie says quietly. “Breathe like me.” Eddie takes a deep, deep breath, and slowly lets it out.

Buck follows his lead. His breath sounds shaky going in and coming back out. But he can breathe now. Buck’s chest starts to rise and fall evenly again.

Buck grabs hold of Eddie’s wrist, and looks Eddie in his eyes.

“You’re okay,” Eddie says. “We’re here now. You’re gonna be okay.”

Buck almost believes him.
“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Buck.”

Buck won’t look up at Chimney; he’s just staring a hole into the blanket covering him, his jaw twitching every so often. Buck hasn’t said a word to any of them since the doctor came in and told them that Buck had suffered a particularly bad panic attack and would be fine.

Eddie, Maddie, and Chimney had all allowed themselves to relax a little bit, but Buck had suddenly gone stony silent, his face clouding up as he watched the door leave the room.

Buck hasn’t even made eye contact with anyone since then. Well, he’s looked up at Eddie, but that was just a brief glance before Buck redirected his stare back into his own lap.

“Come on, Buck,” Maddie says with a sigh, “I’m pretty sure everyone in this room has had at least one panic attack in the past few months.”

“Yeah,” Chimney adds, “I mean, it’s so common, especially in our line of work, you know? Captain Nash is always talking about resources we could use to help manage.”

Buck furrows his brow and grips the hospital blanket, but he still avoids looking at them. Seeing Buck like this is really bothering Eddie.

“Buck, with the type of stuff that you’ve gone through lately, it’s not weird at all that this happened,” Eddie says gently. “Like Maddie said, we’ve all been there before. Some of us more recently than others.”

Chimney looks over at Eddie as Eddie speaks, watching him closely. But Eddie doesn’t notice, because he’s too busy watching Buck shift around in his hospital bed.

“None of you ended up in the fucking hospital, though,” Buck suddenly mutters. His voice still sounds raspy. “That’s what I’m embarrassed about.”

The three of them breathe a collective sigh of relief. At least Buck’s talking to them now, even if his tone is still a little hostile.

“Why would you be embarrassed?” Eddie asks kindly. “You had a medical emergency, and you asked for help. You did the right thing!”

Buck rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I sure did,” he says sarcastically. “I wasted all of you guys’ time because I thought I was ‘dying’. That was definitely the right thing to do.”

“Buck, please don’t beat up on yourself like this,” Maddie says in exasperation.

Buck’s eyes go glassy, and he bites his bottom lip. Buck’s very fragile right now, Eddie thinks, more fragile than even Maddie and Chimney seem to realize. Eddie thinks of his own nightmare again, and the way he felt when Christopher wrapped his arms around him. Eddie wasn’t in a position to pull himself together on his own last night, and Buck isn’t in that position right now.

Eddie turns to Maddie and Chimney and leans close to them.

“Can you guys, uh, give us a second?” Eddie whispers.

Maddie narrows her eyes and Chimney raises an eyebrow. But before either of them decides to
question him, Chimney puts his hand on Maddie’s shoulder.

“Maybe we should just step out for a second,” Chimney says. “We can call and give Hen and Captain Nash an update?”

Maddie shoots Chimney a look. Eddie watches the couple as they have silent conversation, their eyes and eyebrows arguing with one another.

“Okay,” Maddie finally says. “We’ll be back in a little bit.”

The two of them leave hand-in-hand, Chimney tossing Eddie another one of his looks as they go. Eddie turns back towards Buck to see Buck watching him warily.

“Are you gonna yell at me now?” Buck asks with a glare. “Because you didn’t have to make them leave to do that.”

Eddie sits on the edge of Buck’s bed, careful to avoid Buck’s bad leg.

“I’m not gonna yell at you,” Eddie says.

Buck pulls a face, twisting his nose up as if he’s smelled something foul.

“I don’t want one of your motivational speeches, either, Eddie. I don’t want that much positivity right now.”

“Shut up,” Eddie says a smile. “If I wanted someone to give you a ‘motivational’ speech, I’d called Captain Nash.”

“Oh, God, please don’t,” Buck groans. “I’m already gonna hear it from him later.”

“It’s only because he cares,” Eddie says teasingly.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. And I wish he cared less sometimes,” Buck grumbles, but he has a small smile on his face.

Eddie chuckles softly at Buck’s stubbornness. Then Eddie’s eyes fall back down to Buck’s boot. That night was so horrible. It makes Eddie feel breathless just thinking about it. So he can only imagine how Buck feels having to relive it over and over again.

“Look, man,” Eddie says with a sigh, “I just want you to know that I get this. Like, I really get it.”

“. . . Really?” Buck asks hesitantly.


Buck’s face falls, and his face reddens again.

“That’s different,” Buck says quietly.

“Not that different,” Eddie retorts, looking Buck directly in the eyes. “I get why you’re upset right now. But you shouldn’t get down on yourself just because you’re having a hard time dealing with what happened. It’s completely normal to struggle.”

Buck blinks at Eddie, trying to hold back his tears. But they fall down his face anyway.

“Okay, but,” Buck stammers, “you--you were in a war. Like, full-on, bombs exploding around you,
people shooting at you. I didn’t experience anything like that. I don’t have any reason to be like this right now.

“Okay, first of all, I didn’t bring up Afghanistan so that you could diminish yourself,” Eddie says. “Second of all, you got crushed by an actual fire truck. I think that’s a pretty decent reason to have PTS.”

Buck laughs humorlessly. “Glad you think so.”

Eddie sighs. “What I’m trying to say is, you’re entitled to however you feel. You’re not weak or wrong just because you need some help dealing with trauma.”

Buck smiles weakly. “Thanks, Eddie.”

Eddie feels a warmth in his chest as he smiles back at Buck.

“Anytime.”

Buck watches Eddie for a moment, seemingly searching Eddie’s face, before ducking his head down again. Eddie suddenly has the strangest urge to tilt Buck’s back up; he imagines himself gently pushing Buck’s chin up until Buck’s looking him in the eye again. Eddie’s hand twitches, and he prays that Buck doesn’t notice his sudden shift in demeanor.

Before Eddie can fret over it anymore, his phone rings.

“Oh, sorry!” Eddie says, standing up to answer it.

Oh, no, it’s his abuela.

“Hey, abuela! Is everything okay?” Eddie asks in a hushed tone.

“Eddie! Thank God, you answered! We were wondering if you were okay,” the worry in Isabel’s voice is so noticeable that Eddie can’t help but feel guilty.

“I’m fine, abuela.”

“You sure? You’re normally here by now. Where are you?”

“I’m at the hospital. But not for myself!” Eddie answers quickly.

Isabel exclaims, anyway. “¡Ay, Dios mios! What’s going?”

Then, from a tiny voice in the background: “Is that my dad? Is he okay?”

Eddie heart sinks. “I’m okay! I had a very important call that I needed to respond. I’ll be on my way soon, okay?”

Christopher answers this time; it sounds like Isabel’s handed him the phone.

“Okay,” Christopher says. “I’ll see you soon.”

“That’s right, I’ll see you soon, buddy,” Eddie reassures.

Christopher hangs up Isabel’s phone, and Eddie releases a breath that he didn’t realize he’d been holding.
“Go home.”

Eddie whips around, surprised by Buck’s sudden words.

“What?”

“Go home. Now,” Buck stresses, giving Eddie a hard look. “You shouldn’t be here if Christopher needs you.”

You needed me, too. Eddie bites his tongue. He already knows that would be the wrong thing to say at this moment.

“They’re just used to me picking him up at a certain time,” Eddie says, trying to sound calm.

But Buck glares at him. “I’m not about to be the reason Chris has to worry about you. So get out.”

Eddie’s opens his mouth only to shut it again. He’s not going to win this argument, not as long as Christopher is involved.

“I’ll see you later, okay?”

Buck waves a hand at him and fights back a smile.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go get Chris!”

~

As soon as Eddie pulls up in front of the house, Isabel and Christopher come outside to meet him. Christopher walks to Eddie’s car as fast as his legs and crutches will allow.

“Hey, buddy! I said I was okay!” Eddie says as he gets out of the car.

Christopher wraps his arms around Eddie’s waist and peers up into his face.

“Why were you at the hospital?” Christopher asks fearfully.

Eddie looks at his abuela, who watches him expectantly.

“I didn’t lie to him,” Isabel says. “And of course, he’s worried, Eddie!”

Eddie blinks hard at Isabel. Then he takes a slow, deep breath, and looks back down to Christopher. Eddie needs to be as calm and assured as possible to explain this.

“Buck is in the hospital, and I went to go check on him,” Eddie says carefully.

Christopher’s eyes widen. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He’s going to be just fine. He just got a little sick, that’s all,” Eddie says, rubbing Christopher’s hair. “I’ll tell him you asked about him, okay?”

Christopher nods. “Okay,” he says sadly.

Man, Eddie is so weak when it comes to Christopher; seeing him frown makes Eddie feel like his heart is going to stop.

So Eddie pulls him closer and says, “Hey, I’m off tomorrow, so we can go check on him then.”
“We can?”

“Yep, we can. That okay with you?”

That seems to lift Christopher’s spirits. He gives Eddie a small smile and nods vigorously, causing his glasses to bounce on his face. Eddie chuckles as he straightens Christopher’s glasses again.

“Let’s go home, kid.”

Eddie opens the car open and ushers his smiling son inside. As Eddie helps Christopher into the car, he risks glancing back at Isabel again. Sure enough, she’s looking at him with raised eyebrows.

Eddie fully turns around and smiles at his abuela.

“I’ll talk to you later, abuela!” Eddie says.

Isabel just crosses her arms and watches him suspiciously.

“You sure will, mijo.”

~~

Buck spends the whole morning curled up on his couch, mindlessly watching t.v.

Buck just . . . doesn’t have the energy today. He didn’t get released from the hospital until super late last night and then had to listen to Maddie’s lecturing the entire way home. Buck got up too early this morning and stayed in the shower for so long that it went from scorching hot to icy cold, and he still didn’t want to get out. He ordered breakfast from some restaurant he can’t remember the name of, and ate it even though he couldn’t really taste any of it.

Then Buck parked himself back on his couch, curled up with a blanket like a lonely old man, and turned his brain off. He almost doesn’t regret wasting his morning like this.

Almost. Because, holy shit, he regrets the inactivity when he’s so stiff that he can barely get off of the couch to go pee. Buck stands up, and his legs, hips and back all simultaneously scream “NO.” Buck looks like some pathetic excuse for the Tin Man as he shuffles to the bathroom.

It’s when he’s done his business and is washing his hands that he hears someone knocking on his door.

“No,” Buck grumbles as he dries his hands.

Whoever it is knocks again as Buck’s limping to the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” Buck grumbles. “Who is it, anyway??”

“It’s me and dad, Buck!” Christopher’s small voice sends a shock to Buck’s heart.

“Wait-- Christophe r??”

“And Eddie,” Eddie’s voice comes rumbling through the door. Buck can tell that he’s laughing a little. “Are you gonna let us in? Or do we have to stand out here all day?”

Buck, who suddenly can’t remember how to open the door, lets them in, stepping to the side as Christopher and Eddie walk into his apartment.
“Hey, Buck!” Christopher cheerfully says.

“Hey, buddy! Go ahead and sit down!”

Buck breaks into a big grin as Christopher flops down onto the couch. Seeing Christopher always lifts Buck’s spirits, no matter how shitty he’s feeling. It’s like the kid is magic.

While Buck is watching Christopher, Eddie nudges Buck’s shoulder, and Buck can’t help but be hyper-aware of the feeling of Eddie’s skin against his own.

“Can I sit, too, or do I have to stand?” Eddie asks with a grin.

Buck rolls his eyes. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Eddie snorts and decides to stand, leaning against Buck’s island. Buck, feeling like he needs a little space, sits in his loveseat.

“So, what’s up?” Buck says, trying to sound as relaxed as possible. “What are you guys doing here?”

“We came to check on you!” Christopher says. “Because dad said you were sick yesterday.”

“Sheeepish,” Eddie says, leaning against Buck’s island. Buck wishes he could be more mad about it.

“Sick?”

Buck tosses Eddie a look. Eddie smiles sheepishly, and Buck wishes he could be more mad about it.

“He asked about you,” Eddie says. “He wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Buck stares at Eddie, hoping that he can somehow telepathically yell at him. Eddie’s eyes widen ever-so-slightly, so he must be getting the message.

“Heeeeey,” Christopher says, drawing Buck’s attention, “you don’t have crutches anymore!”

“No, I don’t! The doctor said I didn’t need them anymore.”

Christopher’s face lights up. “That means your leg is getting better!”

Yep, it sure is!”

“And then you can go back to being a firefighter!”

Buck is about to say, “Yeah, I sure can, and I’m excited!” But then--Buck can hear sirens. Sirens, blaring faintly yet obnoxious in his mind. And he smells smoke that he knows doesn’t actually exist. Buck’s chest tightens. And his stomach drops. And the words get caught in his throat. But right now is not the time for a repeat performance of yesterday.

“Yeah, I’ll go back to being a firefighter,” Buck responds more quietly.

Christopher nods, seemingly satisfied. But Eddie seems to instantly notice the change in Buck’s tone. He sharply turns towards Buck and raises an eyebrow.

“Hey, Buck, have you been out of the house today?” Eddie asks pointedly.

“Um . . . no?” Buck glances down at himself. Hell, he hasn’t even changed out of his pajamas, and Eddie’s asking about leaving the house.
“Why don’t you come to the park with us?” Eddie offers. “So that you can actually see the outside world.”

Buck wants to tell him to shut up and leave him to his gloom and laziness. Let him stay in raggedy pajamas on his couch so that he can continue to rot his brain and ignore whatever feelings he’s been having lately.

But Christopher beams at the idea.

“Yeah, come with us!” Christopher asks, his eyes gleaming. “Pleeeeeease?”

And how exactly is Buck supposed to say no?

~~

They end up at Shane’s Inspiration, with Eddie and Buck sitting together on a bench, watching Christopher like two hawks as he has the time of his young life.

Eddie likes to bring Christopher here; a lot of other kids with disabilities like his come and play, and Eddie knows that it can help Christopher feel less alone. Christopher’s playing with two other kids now, shrieking with laughter at some inside joke they’ve made up.

“That kid does not know a stranger, does he?” Buck asks, sounding impressed.

“Nope, not at all,” Eddie answers. “Kinda scares me sometimes, though. I’m a little paranoid, you know?”

“Aw, that’s just you being a dad,” Buck says with a wave of his hand. “Plus, you know, the whole ‘first responder’ thing doesn’t help that much.”

Eddie snorts. “No kidding.”

They sit in silence for a while, their arms occasionally rubbing against each other as they both watch Christopher play. Eddie can feel Buck tense up every once in a while, and, when Eddie glances over to him, he sees that Buck’s frowning a little.

“Hey,” Eddie says lowly. “Are you okay? How are you actually doing today?”

Buck sighs heavily, and his whole body seems to slump.

“I don’t know,” Buck admits. “Mostly drained, I think.”

Eddie nods. That’s a familiar feeling.

“And back at your place . . . when Chris mentioned you being a firefighter again . . .”

Buck smirks. “I was waiting for you to bring that up.”

Buck goes quiet, focusing on Christopher again. Eddie watches Buck as Buck watches Christopher and a little girl play with the giant tic-tac-toe board.

“I just . . .” Buck’s voice is soft and tentative. “I mean . . . how am I supposed to go back to work if I freak out every time I hear a loud noise? Or if the smell of smoke sends me into a panic attack? What good am I if the slightest thing triggers me now?”

“Buck, you have to give yourself time,” Eddie speaks quietly, but urgently. “It’s not just physical
healing you gotta go through.”

Buck doesn’t saything; he stares at the ground, his jaw tense. Before Eddie can say anything else, Buck looks up at him nervously.

“Can I, uh . . . can I ask you about your . . . ?”

Eddie just stares at Buck for a long moment. How much can he tell him without scaring him? Can he tell Buck that his nightmares are so bad sometimes that he just stays up and cries for the rest of the night? Or that he sometimes feels so heavy that he imagines the whole world has landed on his shoulders?

Or that he’d finally started doing just fine when Shannon died, and then his family started talking about El Paso again, and then his best friend was almost taken from him because of some idiotic grudge held by a teenager who refuses to take responsibility? Can he tell Buck any of that without scaring him away?

“I’m sorry,” Buck abruptly says. “That was a bad question. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Eddie says. Jeez, he needs to get a grip. “I was just lost in my own head for a second.”

“I see,” Buck laughs weakly. Then he solemnly adds, “But, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Eddie almost takes the out. But he knows that wouldn’t do either of them any good.

“Some days are harder than others,” Eddie says carefully. “Sometimes I’ll go months without a nightmare or an attack. And sometimes I have them back to back. I’ll have dreams or flashbacks that I almost immediately forget, and then sometimes I’ll have ones that I can’t stop thinking about. Feeling stressed makes it worse, so the past few months have been . . .”

Eddie’s voice trails off before he can find the words to describe this time in his life. But Buck nods anyway.

“I know what you mean. So . . . what helps you? Like, how do you deal with this type of stuff?”

Eddie contemplates Buck’s question for a moment, his mouth twisting as he thinks.

“Well, Christopher does, for one. He reminds me that I’ve gotta get myself together,” Eddie answers honestly. “And talking about it helps. I didn’t really used to be one for counseling, but I found really helpful when I first came home. I had to learn how to let people in, you know? I think it’d really help you if you--”

“Oh, okay, you’re starting to sound like Bobby now,” Buck says flatly.

“He’s right, though! You know he is.”

Buck groans. “Yeah, yeah, I know. I just hate it sometimes.”

“I know you do,” Eddie retorts, rolling his eyes goodnaturedly. “But look, I know a couple of counselors that I think could help out. I could go with you sometimes, if you want.”

“. . . Really?”

“Yeah, of course. We can work through this together.”
Buck smiles, his entire face softening. “Thanks, man.”

“Of course.”

They sit in silence for a while, both of them redirecting their attention back to Christopher and his apparent new best friend. Buck leans against Eddie, his arm pressed more firmly against him now. Eddie glances over to Buck, his eyes falling to Buck’s hand. Eddie has the strangest urge to take Buck’s hand, to lace their fingers together.

Eddie tries to imagine Buck’s reaction to the sudden affection. Buck would probably look extremely confused, his eyes wide and and shifty. Then he’d awkwardly ask if Eddie was okay. Then Eddie . . . shit, what would Eddie do?

“Daaaaad!” Christopher’s happy voice draws Eddie out of his thoughts.

Eddie turns around to see Christopher coming towards them. A little dark-skinned with two big Afro puffs and a Garnet t-shirt is following closely behind him, and a tall, dark-skinned woman that must be her mother is behind her.

“Hey!” Buck says happily, reaching out for Christopher.

Christopher wraps his arms around both Eddie and Buck’s necks, pulling them into a tangled mess of a group hug.

“Hiii. I had fun!” Christopher says cheerfully.

“We can see that,” Eddie says with a wide smile. Eddie lifts his chin just high enough so that he can make eye contact with the woman standing behind Christopher. “Who’s your friend?”

Christopher releases them and twists around until he’s facing his friend and her mom.

“This is Leliah, and this is her mom,” Christopher says. “We both like Steven Universe, dad!”

Leliah waves excitedly at them. “Hi, Mr. Christopher’s dads! It’s nice to meet you both!”

Eddie chuckles and feels himself blushing. There’s gotta be a non-awkward way of correcting Leliah.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Eddie says pleasantly. “We’re not both--”

“Hi, Leliah!” Buck suddenly speaks up. “It’s nice to meet you, too. My name is Buck, and this is Eddie.”

Eddie blinks, and shoots Buck a look. Did Buck not notice that Leliah thinks they’re both Christopher’s dads, or . . . ?”

“I’m Margaret,” Leliah’s mom says warmly. “Your son is the sweetest thing.”

Christopher and Buck both grin from ear-to-ear at the compliment.

“Thank you very much,” Buck says. “It looks like he and Leliah had a great time.”

And then Buck and Margaret engage in the type of small talk Eddie usually finds himself in whenever he meets another parent or a teacher or caregiver or sometimes even with Carla. Buck’s chatting with this woman and her kid as if he’s been a father for his entire life. And Eddie can only watch in fascination.
“Byeee, Christopher!” Leliah says, drawing Eddie out of his trance. “Hope I see you later!”

“Byeeeee, Leliah!”

Margaret politely bids goodbye, and Eddie barely remembers to wave back at her.

When Leliah and Margaret have gone, and Christopher seems to have retreated into his own little world, Eddie turns to Buck, looking and feeling very bewildered.

“Uh, Buck?”

Buck looks at Eddie as if everything about that interaction was normal. “Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you correct them? When they called you Christopher’s dad?”

“It’s happened before.” Buck shrugs as if he were unfazed, but the way he’s blinking at Eddie gives him away.

“It has? When?”

“Yeah, last Christmas. When we took Chris to see Santa,” Buck says with small, nervous laugh. “I guess I don’t see the point of making things uncomfortable by correcting them.”

“Oh.” Okay. That’s... something to think about.

“I mean, unless it bothers you or something,” Buck hastily adds.

“No, no!” Eddie’s face burns, and he feels like he’s babbling in a way he hasn’t done since high school. “It’s--cool.”

“You sure?” Buck raises an eyebrow at Eddie.

And Eddie just rolls his eyes. “Unless you’re gonna start getting weird about it.”

Buck peers into Eddie’s face, his mouth slightly open as if he’s about to argue. But then he just smiles.

“I won’t,” Buck says. “I promise I won’t.”
Chapter 6

“How is your boyfriend doing, mijo?”

Eddie almost drops his phone onto the floor of the supply closet. He was in the middle of doing inventory when his abuela called, and he assumed it was an emergency--something wrong with her or Christopher or maybe the house. Why else would she call in the middle of the work day?

But, nope, nothing’s wrong. Isabel’s simply decided to call in the middle of the day to interrogate Eddie about Buck.

“But, nope, nothing’s wrong. Isabel’s simply decided to call in the middle of the day to interrogate Eddie about Buck.

“Buck’s not my boyfriend, abuela,” Eddie whispers, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one in the firehouse is eavesdropping. “He’s my best friend.”


“I don’t treat him like my boyfriend,” Eddie mutters, suddenly feeling flushed.

“Oh, pobrecito, you are in denial,” Isabel says with a sigh.

“Buck’s doing much better,” Eddie retorts flatly. “I’ll let him know you asked.”

“Good. But you can’t avoid this, Eddie. It does you no good to lie about your feelings, especially not to yourself.”

“I’m not lying,” Eddie’s voices rises a bit too much, and he can feel someone watching him. “We’re friends--close friends. Why is that so weird?”

“I didn’t say anything about you two being weird!” Isabel says. “You know I’m not like that. I just think it’s obvious.”

“Abuela, can we not talk about this right now?” Eddie says pleadingly. “How is Christopher? Has he eaten lunch?”

“How dare you ask me that, as if I don’t feed my baby?” Isabel says sternly. “We are having a wonderful time as always.”

Eddie smiles at the thought of Christopher. “That’s good. I’ll make sure I’m on time to pick him up today, okay?”

“Okay, mijo,” Isabel says. Her tone tells Eddie that this still isn’t over. “We’ll see you later. Be careful at work!”

“I will. Bye, abuela!”

“Bye-bye!”

Eddie hangs up the phone, thankful that this conversation has ended for now. He tries to go back to doing inventory, but he can’t focus; he keeps thinking about the ‘treat like your boyfriend’ bit. What does that even mean, exactly? Eddie knows this is about the trip to the hospital and the couple of days after that. But Buck needed Eddie--Eddie wasn’t going to not be there for him. How else is Eddie supposed to treat someone who means a lot to him?
Although . . . okay, Eddie can admit that he thinks about Buck more often than he thinks about his other friends. And, yeah, maybe Eddie’s accidentally flirted with Buck before. But that was an accident, one brought on by exhaustion.

And besides—Eddie hasn’t had a “best friend” in a while. And he and Buck have been through a hell of a lot in the brief time they’ve known each other. They just kind of bonded very quickly. It’s kind of natural to bond with a like-minded person during stressful times, isn’t it?

Eddie likes being friends with Buck; he likes knowing that he’s friends with someone who loves his son and would do anything for them. And Buck is funny, and ridiculous and bright in a way that makes Eddie feel good.

I just think it’s obvious. Eddie frowns as he reconsider Isabel’s words. The thing is, she’s not the first person to say something like that. In fact, the other people who like to poke at Eddie about Buck are sitting in the firehouse den right now. And they’ll probably have something to say when Eddie comes out of the supply closet.

They can’t all be mistaken, or just messing with Eddie for the sake of it. Maybe Eddie is being weird towards Buck. They did have that kind of awkward moment when they went to the park with Christopher the other day. But Buck hasn’t said anything . . .

But, why would he? If Eddie were in that position, he doesn’t know if he would say anything, either. Or, at least, he wouldn’t know how to say it, not without making things uneasy between them from that moment on. Eddie and Buck are friends and coworkers, which means that, soon enough, they’ll be spending at least eight or nine hours together everyday again. Maybe Buck just doesn’t want to make the time more uncomfortable than it already is. The thought makes Eddie feel anxious; his stomach flutters, and he’s starting to feel fidgety.

Hold on—this is ridiculous. This is childish. Eddie feels like a goofy teenager again. Eddie is a grown ass man, and he should be able to talk to his friend about their relationship without feeling scared.

Just like how he should have been able to do his damn job without getting so distracted by his personal life that he completely lost the count and now has to start all over again. Eddie looks at the med kits he was inspecting and down at his clipboard, and he realizes he has absolutely no idea where he left off.

“Fuck,” he mumbles under his breath. “ Fucking brilliant, Diaz.”

Buck’s leg hurts.

Buck lies on his couch, his bad leg stretched out while his good leg is bent at an awkward, probably unhealthy angle. Buck can’t get comfortable; every time he tries to shift, another jolt of pain shoots up Buck’s leg. He wants to figure out a way to prop his bad leg up, but he doesn’t have the mental or physical energy to devise a way around this damn brace he’s still wearing.

This is Buck’s own fault. Today was the first day of physical therapy, and Buck, like the stubborn idiot he’s always been, decided to go alone. Maddie had asked to at least try to get someone from 118 to go with him in case he needed help afterwards, but nooo, Buck decided he wanted to be a bad ass today.

Worse yet, he decided he wanted to push himself today, to see just how much mobility he’s
regained in his leg. And the good news is that he’s apparently healing very quickly and is showing remarkable mobility in his leg.

It’s just too bad Buck didn’t realize that physical therapy would be the worst fucking pain he’s ever felt in his life ever.

It’s too bad Buck didn’t realize that he would need help to move any part of his body after his first session. Buck’s so busy feeling the hurt that he can’t even be proud of how well he did today. He and his physical therapist discovered he can actually squat and jump on his bad leg now. That should be cause for celebration, but all Buck can focus on is the searing pain.

Buck should’ve asked Eddie to come with him. Hell, Maddie had actually suggested that he ask Eddie first, because “he’d definitely figure out a way to show up, Buck.” But something about that suggestion and the reason behind it made Buck squirm, so he refused to do it.

Things have been . . . Buck’s just felt so odd about Eddie lately. Even texting him as been weird since the day they took Christopher to the park. Buck doesn’t even know why—nothing’s really changed between them. And Eddie didn’t seem too upset about Buck letting that lady think Christopher was Buck’s son, too. Everything’s the way it usually is with them. But, for some reason, Buck just keeps thinking that something’s different, that something’s off with him and Eddie.

Maybe it’s just Buck’s imagination. Or maybe he’s picking up on some subtle hints Eddie’s dropping? Eddie isn’t the type who would just loudly hurt Buck’s feelings or anything. He’d try to be gentle in telling Buck to get the fuck out of his and Christopher’s lives if that’s what he wanted to do. And he hasn’t given Buck any indication that he’s planning on doing that any time soon . . . has he?

Buck’s phone rings, and he thanks the Lord for the distraction (and that he can reach it without moving too much.) Buck picks up his phone to see that Maddie’s calling him.

“Hey, Mads.”

“Hey!” Maddie sounds very happy, and Buck is extremely jealous of that feeling. “How’d therapy go?”

Buck strongly considers lying, but then he feels another pain in his leg.

“It was hell,” Buck admits, grimacing as he tries to move around on the couch again.

“What happened? Is there an issue with your leg?” Maddie asks sympathetically.

“No, not really,” Buck says, staring at his brace. “Apparently my leg’s doing just peachy. It’s just that—Maddie, I didn’t know it would hurt so badly.”

“I’m sorry, Buck. Do you need to come over and help you with anything?”

Maddie could come over and hold his head while he cries. That would be helpful, Buck thinks.

“Uh, no, that’s okay,” Buck says. “I’m just ready for my leg to stop aching so much.”

“Have you taken a single one of those pain pills the doctor prescribed you months ago?”

“You know how I feel about those things, Maddie!”
Buck can hear Maddie rolling her eyes at him. “Buck, I’m pretty sure you can take your prescribed pain medication without becoming a part of the country’s opioid crisis.”

Logically, Buck knows that Maddie’s probably right, but the pain and the fact that Buck’s spent too much time watching continuous news channels is clouding his judgement.

“Okay, but you don’t know that for certain!”

“Oh, my God. Well, then, please take some Tylenol or something. Do you need me to bring you some?”

And Buck’s about to take Maddie up on that offer, but he’s interrupted by a leg spasm so bad that his whole body jerks in response.

“Gah! Someone please fucking kill me!” Buck shouts as he grabs at his leg.

“Evan! What happened?? Evan!”

“It was just a leg spasm,” Buck answers breathlessly. “I-I’ll be okay.”

“Evan! Hello? Are you there??”

Buck frowns in confusion. “Maddie! I’m right--”

Wait a second. Buck slowly looks down at this leg to see that he’s holding it with both of his hands. Which means his phone is . . .

. . . on the floor. Under the couch. Again.

“Oh my Gooooooood,” Buck yells in frustration, and he lets his whole body flop backwards.

Why the fuck does his phone love to fall underneath the couch? Is there some magnet under there that Buck doesn’t know about??

The phone starts ringing again, and Buck knows that it’s Maddie trying to call him back. Common sense tells Buck that he shouldn’t be trying to crawl onto the floor, what with how sore he is and how big the brace is. And he probably couldn’t reach the phone, anyway.

But hearing the phone ring evokes a feeling of guilt that outweighs Buck’s common sense. So, Buck finds himself climbing down off of the couch, getting down on the floor, and fruitlessly reaching for his phone.

But of course the brace is in the damn way, and of course Buck’s phone is way underneath the couch, and his arm is too thick and too short to reach. And after reaching for what feels like 30 minutes, Buck gives up, letting himself deflate on the floor.

He doesn’t even feel like trying to get up; he simply turns until he’s lying on his back, and tosses arm over his eyes. Buck looks--and feels--pitiful as hell.

It dawns on Buck that Maddie will probably come by and find him like this. And she’ll definitely yell at him. Buck feels he’ll deserve it.

~~

After another half hour, Eddie somehow finishes inventory, and drops the forms onto Nash’s desk before coming into the den and flopping down on the couch. Eddie closes his eyes and pinches the
bridge of his nose; he’s given himself a headache.

“You good over here?”

Eddie opens his eyes to see Hen standing in front of him. He moves over so that Hen has enough room to sit down next to him.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Eddie says. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind today.”

Hen sits down and peers into Eddie’s face. “Christopher okay?”

“He’s fine! He’s good. I think I’m just stressing myself out over little stuff.”

Hen snorts. “I know that feeling too well.”

“You and Karen okay? How about Denny?”

“We’re good. Denny’s being his usual bad ass self. It’s just this surrogacy stuff that’s kicking our ass,” Hen says. “You’d think finding a trustworthy donor wouldn’t be so hard.”

“It’s only hard because you want the best for your family. And that’s a good thing!”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll believe that,” Hen says with a laugh. “It sounds better than admitting that I’m worried about fucking up.”

“I have a hard time imagining you fucking up, Hen.”

“I don’t, but I appreciate the faith you have in me.” Hen bumps her shoulder against his, and Eddie chuckles.

“Seriously though, I think you guys will be just fine,” Eddie says when his laughter dies down. “But, if I can ever help you guys out, let me know.”

“Thank you, friend,” Hen says gratefully. “I might have to take you up on that sometime. Two kids is going to be a lot.”

“I bet it is. Hell, one kid is a lot,” Eddie says.

And Hen laughs, and says something in agreement, but Eddie’s sent himself into his own thoughts again. Eddie thinks about how much help he’s needed with Christopher, especially since Shannon’s been gone. Carla and his abuela have been taken such good care of Christopher, and Eddie can never repay them for it. And Christopher loves them to death. Loves Buck to death, too . . . huh, Eddie really does think about Buck too much. It’s the truth, though; Buck is probably Christopher’s favorite person in the world. Christopher even calls him “his Buck” instead of just Buck. Eddie thinks about the other day at the park again, when they’d been mistaken for a family for what was apparently the second time.

It makes sense that Buck would rather just avoid the awkwardness of trying to correct someone when they make that assumption. It’s easier to just go with it. But, still, there’s a part of Eddie that can’t help but wonder what makes Buck feel so comfortable with not correcting them. Or what makes people make that assumption in the first place.

Obvious, his abuela had said. It--whatever it is--seems very obvious.

“Hey,” Hen says, snatching Eddie out of his thoughts.
“Yeah, Hen?”

“Is there something I can help you with?” Hen asks pointedly. “Because you seem pretty out of it right now.”

Eddie blinks at Hen. For a moment, he seriously considers just spilling his guts out to her and letting her help him sort through the mess that is his brain right now. But before Eddie can make such a fateful decision, his phone starts ringing.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Hen says, getting up and leaving Eddie to his phone call.

Eddie waves at Hen and then looks at his phone screen. It’s Maddie. Seeing her name on the screen sends a spike of anxiety through Eddie’s chest.

“Hey, Maddie,” Eddie greets. He prays his voice is even. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Eddie,” Maddie’s voice is quiet, and she sounds worried. “You’re getting off pretty soon, right?”

“Yeah, barring another natural disaster,” Eddie says, trying for levity. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, I was talking to Buck earlier today because today was his first round of physical therapy. He didn’t sound all that bad, but then his phone cut off suddenly, and he didn’t answer when I called back. Do you mind coming with me to check on him?”

Eddie doesn’t even pretend to think about his answer.

“Of course! I’ll see you in a little bit.”

Maddie sighs in relief. “Thanks, Eddie. You have no idea how much I appreciate you.”

~~

Buck is still lying on the ground, contemplating his sad existence, when he hears his front door being unlocked.

“Hello?” Buck calls out, propping himself up. “Maddie??”

Maddie comes rushing into the apartment, followed very closely by Eddie.

Because Buck is definitely ready to see Eddie today. Yep, he sure is.

“Hey, guys! Fancy seeing you here!” Buck says. He can only hope he doesn’t sound as humiliated as he feels.

Maddie and Eddie turn towards the sound of Buck’s voice. Their eyes go wide as they take in the image of Buck on the ground.

“Evan! Are you okay?” Maddie says in a panicked voice. “What the hell happened?”

Buck’s face turns bright red. “I, uh, dropped my phone?”

“God, Buck,” Eddie says softly. “Come on, I got you.”

Without another word, Eddie scoops Buck off of the floor. Eddie’s got his arm around Buck’s waist and Buck’s arm over his shoulders before Buck is prepared for it. Buck makes a small noise
of surprise as he’s swiftly lifted into a standing position.

Buck’s face is much closer to Eddie’s than he’s used to. Every detail of Eddie’s face is suddenly apparent: every single strand of hair in Eddie’s beard, every faint line around Eddie’s eye, the tiny mole just below Eddie’s left eye. Buck looks into Eddie’s face and feels like he could be knocked over with a feather.

“You good?” Eddie asks, and his eyes are roaming all over Buck’s face, too.

“. . . Yeah, yeah,” Buck answers distantly. “I’m good.”


“It doesn’t feel the greatest, no,” Buck finally admits.

Eddie nods. He’s in first responder mode, now. “Okay. Let’s get you on the couch and get something for your leg.”

“I’ll get some medicine and some water,” Maddie says.

“Hey, wait!” Buck interrupts. “I can’t sit on the couch. That’s kinda where my phone is. It’s underneath it.”

Eddie raises an eyebrow at him, his face still dizzyingly close to Buck’s.

“You dropped your phone under your couch?”

“Again?” Maddie asks as she walks out of the kitchen with several Tynelol and a glass of water.

“It’s not like I was aiming to throw it under the couch,” Buck retorts.

Eddie chuckles. “Well, let me put you in your loveseat, then. I’ll get your phone.”

Eddie gently deposits Buck into his loveseat and walks back over to Buck’s couch. Maddie immediately walks over and shoves the pills and water at Buck.

“Take these,” Maddie demands.

“Yes, ma’am,” Buck grumbles. He swallows the pills and gulps down the water to wash them down. “Thanks,” he adds gratefully.

“Anything for my stubborn baby brother,” Maddie deadpans, glaring at Buck. “Do you think you could start following medical advice now?”

“I’ll consider it,” Buck says with a sarcastic grin.

“It’d help us out,” Eddie calls over.

Buck looks up to see Eddie kneeling on the floor, peering underneath the couch. Eddie’s back is arched, and his ass is sticking up in a way that is really distracting. And the fact that it’s distracting is making Buck’s heart beat too quickly, and a ball of confusion and embarrassment hits Buck in his chest.

“I don’t think you can get it,” Buck says falteringly. “I tried and my arm was too big to reach. And your arms are thicker than me.”
Eddie raises up so that he’s sitting on his haunches and grins at Buck.

“Oh, they are?” Eddie says tauntingly. “You’ve finally accepted that? Good for you.”

Buck desperately tries (fails) to fight back a smile. “Shut the fuck up.”

“That’s really rude, Evan,” Eddie says with faux offense. “I’m just trying to be a good friend.”

Buck makes a show of rolling his eyes. “Are you gonna try to get my phone or not?”

“Well, gosh, I guess,” Eddie says exaggeratedly.

Buck watches Eddie as he stands up off of the ground and pushes his hair out of his face. He can do this type of back-and-forth with Eddie. It feels normal.

Maddie makes a small coughing noise, and Buck looks over to her to see that she’s watching him curiously. Buck raises an eyebrow at her, but she just shrugs without saying anything. Before Buck can call her on it, Eddie makes what has to be the most inappropriate groaning noise Buck’s ever heard him make.

When Buck looks back over to him, he sees that Eddie’s pushed Buck’s couch over to get the phone, and then pulled it back to its original spot. He’s standing there with Buck’s phone in his hand, and a smirk on his face.

“Got it.”

“Thanks, Clark,” Buck says. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Eddie walks over and hands Buck his phone back. “Any time.”

Buck shoves his phone deep into his pants pocket. Maddie suddenly squeezes his shoulder.

“Maybe I should onto it? You know, so you don’t end up flinging underneath furniture again?” she asks jokingly.

“You know, that’s probably a good idea,” Eddie chimes in, “considering that you’re a repeat offender at this point.”

“You both can leave now,” Buck says. “Thank you for coming. Now please, get out.”

Maddie and Eddie look at another one and raise their eyebrows. Their synchronicity only fuels Buck’s desire to kick them both out.

“Go now, please,” Buck says, glaring at the two of them.

“Well, I have to pick up Christopher, anyway,” Eddie says. “So, I’ll . . . see you later, Buck.”

Buck frowns at the hesitation in Eddie’s voice. He shoots Maddie a look, but Maddie is smiling at Eddie.

“Thanks for coming to check on this one for me,” Maddie says.


“Um, bye,” Buck says softly.
Before Buck knows it, Eddie’s out of the door, and he’s alone with his sister. Maddie waits a few beats before crossing her arms and staring down towards Buck.

“What the hell just happened?” she asks with a knowing grin.

“I . . . don’t know?” Buck answers honestly. “Why? What do you think?”

Maddie scoffs. “I think you spent all that time making fun of me and Chimney like you haven’t been trying to hide this massive crush you have on your best friend.”

“I do not have a crush on Eddie!” Buck cries. He feels feverish and a little claustrophobic as Maddie starts to laugh.

“You totally do!” Maddie says gleefully. “You know what? I knew it! I knew it when you were texting him a few weeks ago!”

Buck feels like he’s been caught red handed, but that’s impossible because he hasn’t done anything.


“Buck, why are you trying to lie to me?” Maddie asks in a softer tone.

Buck bites the inside of his cheek. If Buck’s being honest--really, really honest--he’ll admit that it’s easier to insist that he doesn’t have a crush than it is to admit that a crush would explain the way Eddie’s texts make him feel. And the way Buck has worried about their friendship. And the way that Buck is more than flattered by the idea of being Christopher’s “other” dad. It would explain why Buck just sometimes sits around and thinks about Eddie for no reason at all. It would explain the way Buck’s heart flutters, and the way being so close to Eddie makes Buck feel like he’s suddenly out of breath.

Buck having a crush on Eddie would explain so much of what’s been bothering Buck. It could also potentially be the end of the best friendship Buck’s ever had.

“I mean,” Maddie continues, “Eddie clearly has a crush on you, too.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Buck says with a sigh. “I think I’m too much of a mess for him to have a crush on.” And Buck really doesn’t mean for those words to come out, but they’re out there in the universe, now.

Maddie’s face falls. “You can’t possibly believe that.”

Buck wishes he didn’t. He really, really does. But he just shrugs.

Maddie sighs heavily, and sits down on the arm of Buck’s chair.

“Buck, that man is head over heels for you,” Maddie declares, “and I can tell you’re head over heels for him, too. And I think the best thing for you both is to stop overthinking it and give it a shot.”

Buck wants to try for sarcasm or some other half-hearted joke to hide the fact that what Maddie’s saying terrifies the shit out of him. There’s no use, though; Maddie would see straight through it.

“I don’t even know if he likes guys, Maddie. Let alone me.”

Maddie smiles sweetly. “I’m entirely certain that you don’t have to worry about that. All you gotta
do is talk to him sometime. Promise me that you’ll at least try?”

There are a dozen and one arguments against this popping up in Buck’s brain. But Buck nods anyway.

“I promise.”

~~

Eddie’s washing his face for the night, trying to erase the day, when he hears a very small knock on his bathroom door. Eddie snorts; he’d tucked Christopher in 10 minutes ago, but he guesses the kid’s not ready for sleep yet.

Eddie dries his face, and then opens the bathroom door. Sure enough, there’s his buddy, sitting there smiling with a crutch in one hand and Eddie’s phone in another.

“What’s up, Chris?” Eddie asks kindly. “You’re supposed to be in bed, you know.”

“Your phone is vibrating!” Chris says. “It’s Buck!”

Buck? Eddie tries not to frown as he takes the phone from Christopher.

“Buck?”

“Hey, Eddie,” Buck answers softly. He sounds anxious. “Sorry for calling kinda late. I know it’s near Christopher’s bedtime.”

“It’s no problem. He’s refusing to sleep, anyway,” Eddie says reassuringly, glancing down at Christopher.

Christopher tugs on the bottom of Eddie’s shirt. “Let me say hi! Pleeease!”

Eddie tries not to laugh. “Do you mind saying hi to Chris?”

“Of course not!” Buck answers, sounding much more relaxed now.

Eddie puts the phone on speaker and tilts it down so that Christopher can hear Buck.

“Hey, buddy!” Buck says cheerfully.

“Hey, Buck! How’s your leg?”

“It’s doing good. Thank you for asking.” Buck sounds genuinely touched by the question. “Are you being good for your dad?”

“Yes,” Christopher says, but he glances up at Eddie with a cheeky expression.

“If he really wants to be good, he’ll get back in bed. Isn’t that right, kid?” Eddie says, leaning down to look Christopher in the eye.

“Yes, sir,” Christopher says. “Goodnight, Buck!”

Eddie can hear Buck laughing.

“Night, Chris! See you later, okay?”

“Okay!” and with that, Christopher walks back into his room.
Eddie takes the phone off of speaker and puts it back to his ear.

“Hey, you okay?” he asks lowly, checking to make sure Christopher is out of earshot.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good,” Buck says, but he still sounds nervous. “I just remembered that, earlier, I meant to ask you if you could come by my next physio appointment? It’s in a couple of days. I mean, if you don’t mind or anything. I know you’ve been doing a lot for me lately, and I haven’t exactly paid you back for any of it.”

Eddie flinches at Buck’s words. Why would Buck think he needs to pay Eddie back for anything?

“I’ll definitely come,” Eddie answers. “Just text me the info, okay?”

“Okay! Thank you, Eddie,” Buck says gratefully. He sounds eerily like Maddie did earlier. “I really owe you one. I owe you a lot, actually.”

“No, you don’t,” Eddie says. “I promise you don’t.”

Buck doesn’t say anything. For a second, Eddie wonders if he’s hung up.

“Okay, but I definitely do,” Buck says in a rush. “I’ll, uh, see you later, then?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll see you later.”

The line goes dead, and Eddie just stares at his phone for a moment. He pictures Buck on the other end--jittery and nervous and unsure--and the images make Eddie feel unsteady. Shouldn’t Buck know by now that Eddie would do anything for him?

Eddie thinks about Isabel’s words for the thousandth time today, and his face suddenly feels flush. Maybe he and Buck really do need to have a talk.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7

Buck doesn’t have a plan.

Buck should probably be asleep right now, but he can’t sleep. Instead, he’s sitting in the middle of his bed, staring at the wall as he contemplates his life.

Buck’s never been known for planning ahead. Actually, he’s mostly been known for impulsive, oftentimes stupid ass decisions that fall apart at the faintest hint of scrutiny. He’s not nearly as bad as he used to be, but he’s still not the most prepared person you’ll ever meet.

But you’d think he’d have to plan to tell Eddie about how he feels, especially considering it could literally turn Buck’s life upside down. It feels like one of the biggest decisions Buck’s ever been forced to make, and he hasn’t planned for it at all.

Like, okay, the whole reason Buck asked Eddie to show up to tomorrow’s appointment is because his sister is lowkey forcing him to be honest with Eddie, and Buck thought he could use the opportunity to tell Eddie the truth. But Buck hasn’t actually thought about how he’s going to tell Eddie.

Is he going to invite Eddie to dinner after therapy? Is Buck going to suggest they go back to his place and watch a few movies and then Buck tells him while they’re dozing off on the couch? Is he just going to blurt it out and hope that Eddie responds with something other than a deer-in-headlights look?

Buck doesn’t know! Should he know these things? Abso-fucking-lutely, he should. But he doesn’t. And Buck’s rapidly running out of time to figure it out.

There’s too many variables for Buck to consider. Starting with the fact that Eddie likely doesn’t know that Buck likes men. The only person Buck’s even said “I like men” aloud to is Maddie. It seems kinda silly for Buck to not be out to the 118, considering, you know Hen and her wife, but he’s never said anything. Buck’s not necessarily ashamed of his sexuality. It’s just something he’s kept to himself. It’s his business, and it doesn’t have anything to do with his work as a firefighter.

Well, it didn’t. Not until now.

Eddie’s not like any of the other guys Buck’s hooked up with in the past. First of all, those were just hook-ups. It was always just sex, quick and messy sex with near strangers, at that. It’s not like Buck’s ever brought a man home to his parents.

Buck’s never been in a relationship with a man before. Abby was his first real relationship period, so Buck still doesn’t quite know what he’s doing. Eddie had an entire marriage. One that ended very painfully, Buck might add. The last thing Eddie needs is Buck trying to press a fledgling relationship on him.

And then there’s Christopher to consider. God knows that the last thing Buck wants is to do something that would hurt or confuse Christopher. If Buck and Eddie were to happen and then go south, Christopher could get caught in the middle of the mess. Christopher’s been through enough as it is. He shouldn’t have to deal with his father’s friend coming in and out of his life, too. Buck’s also being a little selfish with Christopher; he likes spending time with him. And the thought of not
seeing Christopher because Buck fucked up a relationship with Eddie hurts.

There’s too much to be scared for. And none of this even includes the very real possibility that Eddie will just straight-up reject Buck.

That’s very much a thing. Buck wasn’t just being pessimistic when he told Maddie that he didn’t think Eddie would want someone like him. When Buck thinks about it, he’s never heard Eddie much men like *that* before. Granted, Eddie’s really never mentioned *anyone* before. Buck knows that Eddie’s always just focused on Christopher and keeping his relationship with Shannon as civil and uncomplicated as possible. And after Shannon died . . . Buck doesn’t recall Eddie jumping at many dating opportunities.

Eddie could very easily tell Buck, “Sorry, I’m not trying to date my *male* best friend who spends his days whining about his busted up leg. I’m too busy being an adult with a child.” And Buck would have to learn to deal with that, somehow.

A loud yawn crawls its way up Buck’s throat and out of his mouth. Buck drags his phone to his face; it’s 12:33 a.m. Buck groans and lets himself flop down onto his bed. It’s time for him to go to sleep. Whatever happens tomorrow happens.

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It’s a fire.

A **big** one: high-rise commercial building, heavy smoke and fire in all divisions. Ten stories tall, glass front, blinding steel. A fancy office building for some corporation that Eddie didn’t bother to learn the name of. He’s just here to put out the flames.

And, *oh, there are flames.* They’re spewing out of the 7th and 8th floor windows, furious and terrifying as they burn. The black smoke thickens as the building succumbs to the fire. Glass shatters, metal yields and caves and falls to pieces, and Eddie almost buckles under the heat pouring off of the raging flames.

Ladder trucks appear out of nowhere, surrounding Eddie. Powerful streams of water slam against the building, but the fire keeps raging.

“Hey, Cap,” Eddie calls out, turning away from the fire, “where do you want me?”

Except--Captain Nash is gone.

“Cap?? Bobby??” Eddie looks around wildly, but Nash is nowhere to be seen.

Eddie looks and looks, and he realizes that Hen is gone, too. And so is Chimney. The ladder trucks are unmanned; no one’s controlling the hoses. But the water is spraying, anyway.

“It’s okay.”

Eddie whips around towards the sound of the voice. It’s Buck, all suited up, no brace on his leg and a mischievous grin on his face.

Eddie blinks; the smoke is burning his eyes. And Eddie knows this isn’t real, but his eyes are burning and his heart is pounding.

“Buck? How are you . . . what’s going on? I don’t understand.”
Buck laughs like Eddie’s just told a joke.

“Relax, okay?” Buck says. “We’ll be fine. Now, let’s go!”

And Buck runs into the burning building, seemingly disappearing into the flames.

“Buck! BUCK!”

Eddie chases after Buck without giving it a second thought. Buck’s going to kill himself! He’s going to get taken by the flames, he’s going to burn, he’s--

Standing there. In the middle of the building. But there’s no more fire, no more smoke, either.

The top of the building is gone; the metal is bent and twisted into strange curves, and the glass windows have vanished. Water drips from the sides of the ruined building and pools at Eddie’s feet. There are vines growing up the sides, snaking around the name useless beams. It’s like the building burned down years ago, and new life has taken root.

Sunlight pours down from directly above them. Eddie’s never seen a sun so big and bright.

Buck laughs again. Then he wraps his arms around Eddie’s waist, pulling him close. Eddie holds his breath as Buck leans ever closer; their faces are so close that Buck’s lips are just barely touching Eddie’s.

“See?” Buck says, and his lips feel so soft, and Eddie feels lightheaded. “I told you we’d be okay.”

“Buck . . .” Eddie can barely hear his own voice as he whispers Buck’s name.

Buck gives Eddie that wicked grin again.

“Come here,” Buck mutters, and before Eddie can quite realize it, Buck’s kissing him. Buck kisses Eddie, and Eddie melts into it.

Buck kisses Eddie until Eddie feels breathless and unsteady on his feet, and all Eddie can think of is how much he wants this.

Buck pulls away just found to kiss the corner of Eddie’s mouth.

“I love you, too, Eddie Diaz.”

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Eddie’s alarm very rudely wakes up him.

The sound sends a jolt to Eddie’s heart, and he sits upright so fast that it makes him dizzy. Eddie’s incredibly disoriented for way too long, and it’s only when he hears Christopher stirring in his room that Eddie realizes where exactly he is.

And then the dream comes back to him. And all Eddie can do is flop back down on the bed and squeeze his eyes shut.

That . . . is the second Buck dream Eddie’s had. He had a very similar one last night that ended with he and Bucking making out while sitting in the backseat of a fire-engine red Thunderbird that was parked in the middle of a desert.
Okay, okay. *Fine.*

Eddie’s never been one to ignore overwhelming evidence. And between the jokes their friends make, and the assumptions Eddie’s abuela and complete strangers make, the obvious shift in his interactions with Buck, and now these damn dreams, there’s certainly *overwhelming* evidence that there’s nothing platonic about the way Eddie feels about Buck. Not anymore, at least.

Eddie swings his legs off of the side of his bed, planting his feet firmly on the floor. He needs to get up and start getting Christopher up for school, but Eddie just sits here for a moment. Eddie reconsiders the dream; he remembers the sensation of Buck’s arms around his waist and lips against his, and he shivers.

How the fuck did Eddie end up having a crush on Buck? Actually, that’s not the question. It’s not hard for Eddie to understand *why* he likes Buck. It’s just hard for Eddie accept that he does. It’s hard to accept that Eddie is apparently willing to risk the best friendship he’s ever had because he can’t get a handle on his feelings.

Eddie gets off of the bed and drags himself into his bathroom. He mentally smacks himself upside the head as he brushes his teeth and gargles with mouthwash. After he spits the mouthwash down the drain, Eddie stares at his tired reflection and wonders why he can’t just have a nice best friend and keep it moving? He just *had* to have a crush on him?

Eddie washes his face roughly, scrubbing his skin as if the roughness will wash all of the gayness out of his thoughts. *Does Buck even like men?* Eddie wonders as he dries his face off. Buck’s never mentioned being attracted to men before, at least not as long as Eddie’s known him. As far as Eddie knows, Buck’s only been with women. Everyone Eddie’s ever watched Buck flirt with was a woman. Not to mention the fact that he and Alli just ended things. Hell, when Eddie met Buck, he’d just been dumped by Abby and wasn’t taking it very well.

But—Eddie has to remember that all of that doesn’t really mean anything. Eddie dated nothing but girls all through high school, only to end up dating nothing but *men* in college. As a matter of fact, Shannon was the first woman he’d been with in a couple of years. His family (except for his abuela, interestingly enough) had looked at him real sideways when he first uttered the words “bisexual” and “boyfriend,” but things eventually worked out between them. So, Buck’s dating a bunch of women doesn’t necessarily rule anything out.

Hold on. Eddie realizes what he just thought to himself. He’s talking this over with himself as if he actually plans on telling Buck that he has a crush on him.

Tuh. Fuck, no, *that’s* not happening. Nope, not happening. Well . . . maybe? Possibly?

Eddie shakes his head, trying to dislodge the thought from his mind. He gets dressed and goes to collect Christopher, who’s made up his bed and is putting on his shoes now. Eddie watches Christopher for a moment, feeling so much fondness that it’s almost too much to handle.

“Morning, kid.”

Christopher grins up at him. “Good morning.”

Eddie chuckles as Christopher redirects his attention to his tying his shoes.

“You need my help?”

“No, I’m good, thank you,” Christopher says, not breaking his focus on his shoelaces.
Eddie smiles softly as he watches his son. Should Eddie even be considering bringing a boyfriend into Christopher’s life at this point? He wonders what it would like for Christopher if Eddie and Buck were to actually date. It probably wouldn’t look all that different, if Eddie’s being honest. Isn’t that why people are already assuming they’re a family, because they already look and act like one? It’s starting to feel Eddie and Buck are already in this relationship and just haven’t figured it out yet.

“Daaaaad.”

Eddie blinks out of his thoughts, focusing on Christopher.

“Sorry, buddy. What’s up?”

“What are you thinking about?”

Eddie bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling real big.

“You, kid,” Eddie says. “I was thinking about you. I’m always thinking about you. You know that, right?”

Christopher narrows his eyes at Eddie in an expression that looks very similar to skepticism.

“Suuurrre, Dad,” Christopher says, and he gives Eddie a cheeky grin. “Okay.”

Eddie blinks rapidly. Did he really just get caught daydreaming by his 8-year-old son?

Oh, boy. Eddie’s in a lot more trouble than he thought was.

“Let’s get some breakfast, okay?” Eddie says, hoping to distract Christopher.

It seems to work, because Christopher beams at Eddie and cheerfully chirps, “Okay!” before walking out of his bedroom.

Eddie follows closely behind Christopher, smiling as his son moves down the hall. Christopher would love for Eddie and Buck to be more than friends if it meant that his Buck would be around more. Of course, if the exact opposite happened and Buck pulled away from Eddie because he’s uncomfortable and doesn’t want Eddie, Christopher would be devastated. Someone else would’ve left his life without an explanation. And it’d be Eddie’s fault this time around.

Eddie absentmindedly moves around the kitchen, one part of his mind attuned to Christopher sitting at the table and another part of his mind preoccupied with Buck. Is this risk actually worth it? Eddie thinks that it could be. But Eddie also thinks that he’d be setting himself up for failure.

There’s too many opportunities for failure. Way too many chances for Eddie to end up hurting himself more than helping himself. It’s just safer to ride this crush out. Maybe let the feelings die on their own.

That’s cowardly, Eddie thinks as he makes waffles for himself and Christopher. It’s cowardly and more than a little pathetic. But it’s smart. And that’s what matters right now.

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Today’s the extremely rare day where Buck can say he’s legitimately grateful for how painful physical therapy is.

The pain distracts him from the overwhelming anxiety of waiting for Eddie to walk through the
The pain makes Buck want to scream, but he can’t really be that mad. The pain means there’s progress. So, Buck grits his teeth through the squats and stretches and treadmill exercises. Buck squeezes his eyes shut and bites back screams, and he feels grateful for the way sweat pours down his face. At the end of the session, Buck sits down heavily on the bench and gratefully takes the ice-cold bottle of water his physical therapist Hector hands him.

“You’re doing good,” Hector affirms. His dark-brown skin shines bright as he grins at Buck. “Like I told you last time, that leg is coming on really well. You’ll be in shape in time.”

Bucks swallows a swig of water and smiles up at Hector. “You think so?”

Hector pushes his long locs up from in front of his face. “Absolutely! Your insurance ain’t paying me to lie to you. Hell, we might be able to get the rest of you in shape, too!”

Buck ducks his head and chuckles.

“Cute joke,” Buck says and Hector gives him a silly smile.

Buck likes Hector; he’s kind, patient with Buck and he’s easy to look at. These sessions would probably suck a lot more if Hector was the stuffy old therapist Buck was expecting to get.

Buck’s sitting on the bench, drinking his water and wiping his face off, when he sees Eddie walk into the clinic. Buck’s stomach twists into knots and his heart fully stops as Eddie spots him and flashes him a big grin. Of course Eddie actually came to the clinic as he said he would. When has Eddie not shown up for Buck? That means Buck might actually have to do this.

“H-Hey, Eddie! What’s up?” Buck calls out as Eddie approaches him.

Eddie leans down and gives Buck a tight hug. Buck’s about to say something about being sweaty and gross, but he catches the scent of vanilla on Eddie’s neck, and whatever he’s about to say erases itself from Buck’s brain. Eddie’s still smiling as he pulls back from the hug, and it makes Buck feel overwhelmed.

“I wanted to make sure I got here before your appointment actually ended,” Eddie answers. “Figured I should considering that you made physical therapy sound like actual torture.”

Buck laughs shakily. Damn, Buck sounds like an awkward teenager again. Buck used to be better at this type of stuff, he thinks. No matter how strange or out-of-depth he sometimes felt with Abby and Ali, Buck could at least carry on a conversation with them both without feeling like he was going to throw up.

“Yeah, I can see why you’d think that,” Buck says. He nods over to Hector, “but I’ve got a really good therapist. I just gotta get used to it, that’s all.”

Hector, who had been packing up his supplies, turns around at the sound of his name. Buck’s about to introduce to the two of them when he realizes that Hector’s standing up and his eyes are lit up like a Christmas tree as he looks at Eddie.

“Eddie? ¡Mi héroe!” Hector says with a giant smile. “No puedo creerlo.”

Pardon me? Buck’s Spanish sucks, but he definitely understands that Hector just called Eddie his
“hero.” Hector and Eddie shake hands, and Buck immediately notices how tight their grip on each other’s hands is.

“It’s good to see you!” Eddie says happily. “Hector, right?”

Hector nods . . . and is he blushing right now? Buck squints at the goofy look that’s suddenly on Hector’s face.

“You remembered!”

“How could I forget?” Eddie says entirely too invitingly. “We don’t get too many calls like yours.”

Hector flips his dread locs and pretends to preen. “Well, I’m glad to have made an impression. It’s nice to see you again, Superman!”

Eddie laughs, and yeah, no, this is not a thing that needs to be happening right now.

“Oh, so you guys know each other!” Buck says with fake cheeriness. “You met Eddie while he was responding to a fire or something?”

Hector doesn’t seem to notice the shadiness in Buck’s voice, but Eddie shoots Buck a glance that confirms that he definitely did.

“Nah, he had to rescue me after my truck crashed into a building,” Hector says. “Oh, speaking of--I got a new truck that I didn’t have to pay for at all! And I got to keep my insurance!”

“Ah, see, I knew it would work out! I bet the truck is a much better fit for you,” Eddie says charmingly.

Hector nods, and is about to say something when his cell phone starts ringing.

“Permítame,” Hector says, and he walks into the other room as he answers the phone.

As soon as he thinks Hector’s out of earshot, Eddie turns to Buck with a slight frown on his face.

“You okay?” Eddie says.

Buck shrugs. “Yeah, I’m good.” It’s just a little weird to watch you openly flirt with my physical therapist.

“I’m not flirting with him,” Eddie says indignantly. “I was just being nice!”

Aw, shit, Buck actually said that aloud, didn’t he?

Buck blinks rapidly, and he starts gaping like a dying fish. All hope is lost if Buck can’t even control when he says something aloud.

“Well, your ‘being nice’ sounds like flirting sometimes,” Buck retorts awkwardly. “So, just . . . dial it back some.”

Eddie cuts his eyes at Buck. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand what’s happening here? Are you trying to tell me how I can talk to someone?”

Buck stares at Eddie with an undoubtedly dumb expression on his face. What’s happening is that Eddie is grinning at another man while that other man flips his hair and compliments him. What’s
happening is that someone else made that same stupid joke about Eddie that Buck’s been making for weeks now. What’s happening is that Buck is jealous and just shoved his foot so deeply into his mouth that he’s not sure if he can take it out.

And if he’s doing this now --within a few minutes of seeing Eddie--what makes him think he’ll be able to say what he really needs later? Or that saying it would make any positive difference?

“Nothing,” Buck says after a moment. “N-nothing’s happening. I’m just being an asshole because my leg is sore. I’m sorry. Can we pretend like I didn’t say anything at all?”

Eddie looks Buck in his eye and opens his mouth, but then he presses his lips together without saying anything. Hector comes back from the other room and gives them a soft smile.

“Sorry about that,” Hector says, getting Buck and Eddie’s attention. “I have to meet another client in a few minutes. See you next week, Buck?”

“Yeah, yeah, definitely,” Buck answers politely. “Thank you!”

Hector nods goodbye to both of them, throws his bag onto his shoulder and walks out of the clinic. Buck and Eddie watch him leave, and Buck sighs with relief when Hector disappears through the door. Which, of course, prompts Eddie to turn back around and look at Buck with suspicion.

“I’ll drive you home. You ready to go? ” Eddie says, but the look in his eye is no less wary.

Buck bites down on his tongue and nods. He’s done enough talking for today.

~~

Eddie really wants to ask.

Buck’s sitting in the passenger seat, uncharacteristically quiet. He’s slumped down in the seat, and he looks like he’s gritting his teeth. His whole attitude changed once they got into Eddie’s car, and Eddie can’t stand the petulance radiating off of Buck. Eddie knows he’s going to regret asking, but it’s bugging him so much that he can’t keep it in anymore.

“So, Buck . . .” Eddie starts.

Buck looks over to Eddie with those wide puppy dog eyes. “Hm?”

Eddie opts for keeping his eyes on the road. Looking at Buck might make this more difficult.

“If I had been flirting with Hector, would that have really bothered you?”

“Um . . .” Buck shifts around in the passenger seat, and Eddie forces himself to not look over to him. “I mean, I’d prefer if my therapist was focused on my leg instead of my best friend.”

“No,” Eddie says, because he can’t leave well enough alone. “I mean if I was flirting with him. Would that bother you?”

Buck doesn’t say anything for a few moments. The silence feels like an answer.

“Why would it?” Buck says quietly. It’s so quiet that Eddie barely hears him.

Eddie shrugs. He can feel the heat rising in his face, and he wills himself to calm down.

“Don’t know . . . maybe because he’s a guy . . .” Eddie lets his voice trail off. He can feel Buck
looking at him, and yep, Eddie probably shouldn’t have asked.

Buck suddenly twists until he’s looking out of the window.

“Are you calling me homophobic?” Buck mumbles.

Eddie glances over to Buck, and Buck keeps his gaze directed out of the window.

“Not intentionally,” Eddie says in a softer tone. “I don’t mean to imply that, Buck.”

Buck’s shoulders slump. “No, I get why you’d get that idea,” he says with a sigh. “Since I was being a complete jerk back there. But I can assure you that I am the literal opposite. I’d fully support any man crushes you have.”

*Then why were you . . . ?* The question is at the tip of Eddie’s tongue. But Eddie’s not feeling any braver than he was this morning.

“That’s good to know,” Eddie says. And then, after a few moments of silence, “I was *not* flirting with him, by the way. I just pleasantly surprised to see him.”

“Sure you weren’t,” Buck responds.

Eddie hears the faint hint of bitterness in Buck’s words, and he bites the inside of his own cheek. Eddie casts another quick glance towards Buck. Buck has an impatient, downright miserable look on his face, and he’s holding himself tightly.

Eddie made the right decision this morning, he thinks. It was cowardly, and pathetic, but it was definitely the right one.

Chapter End Notes

*Of course they're not going to get together just yet. They're both idiots.*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Before y'all read this, I would like to preemptively let you know that everything's going to be okay 😊😊

“You chickened out???”

Buck can hear the judgement through the phone and it makes his face burn. Buck just wants to curl up on the floor and die a peaceful death.

“Yes, I did, Maddie! Okay? I chickened out. Can you please not rip on me for it??”

“Oh, no, I’m definitely ripping on you for it, Buck,” Maddie says. “Why didn’t you say anything to him?”

“Because he doesn’t like me,” Buck whines. “And I made an ass of myself during the appointment!”

“Wait, hold on--what happened to make you say that??”

Buck sighs. “Eddie and my physical therapist were flirting with each other, and I didn’t handle it well at all. And when Eddie asked me why I was being so weird, I just couldn’t tell him.”

“Let me guess--you got super jealous and didn’t want to explain why you were jealous?”

“I accidentally made him think I was homophobic, Mads.”

“Gosh, Evan. And now you’re scared to talk to him?”

“Bingo,” Buck picks up one of the couch pillows and flings it across the room. “I don’t even know what I’m going to say to him the next time I see him.”

“Well, you now know that Eddie does like men,” Maddie says, “so maybe next time you can not shove your own foot into your mouth and just tell him how you feel? It’d probably help to apologize to him, too.”

“That literally sounds impossible,” Buck groans. “Can’t I just hide from him until I get over him?”

“No, you can’t, Buck,” Maddie answers in a flat tone. “You’re being a wimp.”

“I’m perfectly fine with being a wimp,” Buck argues childishly. “And also--it makes perfect sense! I can avoid him for however long it takes for me to go back to normal!”

“Yeah, I don’t think Eddie would be okay with you ghosting him like that,” Maddie argues. “And why do you say ‘back to normal’ like there’s something abnormal about liking Eddie? Don’t tell me you actually are homophobic, all of a sudden.”

“Shut up! That doesn’t even make sense!”
“Hey, I wouldn’t ask if you weren’t acting so odd about it!”

Buck squirms around on the couch. He knows that he’s being irrational and ridiculous, but he can’t help it. He’s in a predicament that he did not ask for and would love to be removed from.

Huh, that seems to be a recurring problem in Buck’s life.

“I mean normal, Maddie,” Buck tries. “‘Normal’ like . . .”

Normal like “can look Eddie in the eye and not feel like his heart’s gonna explode.” Or, normal like “talking to Eddie and not staring at his lips and wondering what it’d be like to kiss him.” Or normal like “not having increasingly explicit sex dreams about his best friend.”

‘Normal’ like ‘completely oblivious to your own feelings’, Buck?” Maddie says. “Because I’m pretty sure you’ve been in head over heels for Eddie since you first met him, and you’re just now realizing it.”

“I have not!” Buck’s voice squeaks in an embarrassing way as he argues with her. “This is a very new development.”

Maddie scoffs. “Oh, come on! You’ve always had that little boy crush on him.”

Buck finds himself stammering as he looks back on his relationship with Eddie. He hasn’t always had a crush on Eddie! Buck very loudly disliked him! Well, for a short time. Then he saw how Eddie worked with the crew, and saw how he was with Christopher, and listened to his goofy laugh and realized that Eddie was one of the first guy friends that Buck could feel safe being vulnerable around --

--Oh, God, he’s always had a crush on Eddie, hasn’t he?

Okay, but if he could what he felt then was a “crush,” what should he call the feelings that have been plaguing him now?

Because, they are different. They’re more intense, and they take up a lot more space in Buck’s mind. It’s overwhelming to think about how he feels about Eddie.

“We’re not having this conversation anymore,” Buck states, sitting up on the couch.

“Buck --”

“Nope, we’re not doing it,” Buck insists. “I’m hungry, so I’m going to go get a burger and pretend like this isn’t happening.”

“You’re actually leaving your house? Wow, maybe I should annoy you more often.”

“Goodbye, Maddie.”

“Love you, Buck!”

Buck ends the call and shoves his phone into his pocket as if it had offended him. Buck refuses to admit that his sister might’ve been right, or that maybe he’s realizing more about how he feels. Buck just wants to get some food and pretend like his feelings aren’t his feelings. Is that too much to ask?

~~
“You okay there, Eddie?”

Eddie peers to his right to see Captain Nash standing there, watching him with a slightly bemused look on his face. Eddie, who has been sitting on the upstairs couch and absentmindedly watching t.v., sighs heavily.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good,” Eddie mutters. “Why?”

“No reason,” Nash says, and he doesn’t even try to be convincing. “You just don’t seem like yourself lately. I was starting to wonder if there’s anything going on that you might need to talk about.”

Eddie blinks at Nash. He can’t even argue right now, because he knows that Nash is right. Eddie’s been moping around the fire house for almost three days now thanks to stupid Buck and that awkward ride home. He hasn’t felt like talking about his life with Hen or laughing at Chimney’s weird jokes, and he definitely hasn’t felt like having Nash take one look at him and immediately knowing what his problem is.

They all know something is wrong with Eddie. Just like they all knew about Buck. They knew before Eddie himself knew.

Eddie shrugs. “It’s nothing,” he says dimly. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately.”

Nash sits down in the armchair next to the couch. “A lot like what? Is Christopher okay?”

Eddie smiles warmly. “Yeah, Christopher’s fine. Thank you for asking.”

Nash nods, but he’s still watching Eddie with that expectant look on his face. Eddie is not about to sit here and whine to his captain about his sophomoric, unrequited crush on his damn coworker. Eddie bitterly thinks that he shouldn’t want to whine at all.

“Look, Cap, I’m just letting some weirdness in personal life get me down a little,” Eddie says, sitting up straighter on the couch. “It’s not even worth talking about.”

Nash watches him for a moment, then shrugs.

“If you say so,” Nash says.

Eddie smiles at Nash and shifts his gaze back to whatever dumb ass reality show is playing on t.v. right now. Eddie doesn’t relax again, however; Nash is still sitting in that chair, and Eddie can see him glancing in his direction out of the corner of his eye.

Nash is going to start poking at Eddie again in 3 . . . 2 . . .

“So, have you talked to Buck lately?”

Of course, it’s a question about Buck.

“Nope, not in a couple of days,” Eddie answers without looking away from the t.v. “Why do you ask?”

“I was just asking,” Nash lies. “I think he’s been ducking my calls recently,” he adds.

Eddie snorts as he remembers what Buck said about Nash’s “motivational” speeches.

“He probably has,” Eddie says. “You know how he gets.”
“Oh, yeah, I definitely do,” Nash says with a chuckle. “He’s a hard-headed one, sometimes.”

“And stubborn as a mule,” Eddie mumbles. Fondness creeps into his voice. “With a one-track mind.”

Nash nods in agreement. “Absolutely. Although, that comes in handy quite a bit, so I’m not too bothered by it.”

Eddie laughs quietly. He thinks about seeing Buck laying on his apartment floor, about the way Buck’s voice changes when he talks about Christopher, the look in Buck’s eye when he’s staring down a burning building. Buck is stressful, Eddie thinks. And Eddie is weirdly grateful for it.

“The thing that does bother me about Buck,” Nash continues, “is that he sometimes doesn’t talk like he needs to. He has a habit of trying to shove his feelings deep inside himself and pressing forward.”

“Sounds familiar,” Eddie grumbles. He bites the inside of his cheek when he realizes he’s said it aloud.

“Yeah, a lot of us do it,” Nash says emphatically. “But Buck’s a little more obvious about it. Sometimes, it seems like he just needs someone to push him a little. To draw what he’s feeling out of him.”

Eddie stares at Captain Nash. They’re at the part of the conversation where Eddie realizes that Nash knows more than he’s letting on.

“What if there’s nothing to draw out?” Eddie asks.

Nash looks at Eddie as if he’s wondering if Eddie is dense.

“I’m quite certain that there is,” Nash says. He stands up from the chair. “Maybe you just need to let him know that you want to hear it.”

With that, Nash lives the room, leaving Eddie to his budding alarm.

And Eddie has every excuse in the world at the edge of his tongue. I don’t think Buck . . . Buck might not . . . I don’t want to lose . . . Every thought that’s been running through his mind for nearly a week pops up again.

But Nash’s words are a little bit louder. And besides, a part of Eddie doesn’t feel like being a coward right now.

So, before he can stop himself, Eddie snatches his phone out of his pocket and texts Buck.

Me: Can we meet up tomorrow after my shift? Maybe go to dinner? I kinda need to talk about something.

~~

Buck should really not check his phone while he’s eating. Because he sees a text from Eddie and nearly chokes to death.

He doesn’t actually read the text until he stops coughing and is able to wipe the tears from his eyes.
Edmundo: Can we meet up tomorrow after my shift? Maybe go to dinner? I kinda need to talk about something.

No. NO, no, no! “I kinda need to talk about something” can never be good. Buck shouldn’t even set himself up for failure.

But . . . damn it, he can hear Maddie’s taunts in his head again. He can hear her calling him a wimp from miles and miles away. Well, you know what? Buck is a wimp—he’s scared. He’s scared that he’ll text back “Yes,” and then show up to hear Eddie tell him that their friendship has gotten weird, and Eddie doesn’t like it anymore, and it’s over.

Or . . . Maddie could be right about Eddie liking him, too. That . . . could just as easily happen, Buck realizes.

Doubts immediately rush to Buck’s mind. Christopher, Hector, the uncertainty of their future together. It’s all there, still poking at Buck’s brain.

It’s very easy to be a wimp, Buck thinks. It’s much, much harder for him to have some courage. Which is a really ironic thought, considering Buck’s dream career involves running headfirst into danger without a second thought. Why is it easier for Buck face literal natural disasters than it is to tell his best friend that he might’ve fallen for him?

Where’s that courage Buck’s been using all this time?

Buck takes a deep breath before he finally texts back.

Me: If I say “yes,” am I going to go home crying at the end of the day???

(Okay, it’s not the most courageous answer, but Buck’s gotta start somewhere.)

Eddie texts back less than a minute later.

Edmundo: I REALLY, REALLY hope not lol.

Buck laughs shakily as he reads the message.

Okay, then. He’s actually doing this.

~~

The sound of Eddie’s phone ringing shakes him out of his sleep.

Eddie groans as he drags the phone off of his bedside table and answers it. He doesn’t even bother to see who it is.

“Hello?” Eddie says groggily.

“Eddie!” Isabel hisses his name and her voice makes Eddie’s stomach turn.

Nervous energy forces Eddie to sit upright in bed, his entire body tensing. Alarms start ringing in his mind. It’s barely 4 a.m. His abuela gets up early, but she’s never called him this early in the morning.

“Abuela? What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

“Listen to me, mijo. I need you to be very, very careful at work today,” Isabel says empathetically.
“Tuve una visión.”

All of the fear and energy dissipates as quickly as it’d built up, and Eddie sighs heavily. This isn’t the first time Abuela’s called with one of her “visions.” She, Eddie’s mother and all of Eddie’s tías believe that Abuela inherited some psychic ability from her bisabuela. No amount of logic will shake them of their belief, so Eddie gave up trying a long time ago.

“Do you wanna tell me what it was?” Eddie asks tiredly.

“No, no! I just want you to be careful,” Isabel stresses. “And ask for help if you need it! From your coworkers and your friends and us! Do you hear me??”

“Yes, ma’am! Yes ma’am,” Eddie says hastily. “I’ll be fine, Abuela. Go back to sleep, okay?”

“I’m going to go pray,” Isabel declares. “You go back to sleep. I’ll talk to you at the end of your shift!”

Abuela hangs up without another word. Eddie puts his own on the bedside table, and flops back down onto his bed.

Eddie’s got a long shift ahead of him. And he’s got to meet Buck today. He needs all of the vision-free sleep he can get.

~~

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”

“HELP! HE’S GOING TO KILL US! HE’S GOING TO RUN US OVER!”

“Okay, ma’am, I need you to calm down as much as you can and explain where you are and what’s happening.”

“We’re at the Grove! At the American Girl Store! And this huge fucking truck just came out of fucking nowhere and it’s like running over all the cars in the parking lot! He’s all over the place, he’s gonna kill someone!”

“Is it an 18-wheeler? Can you tell if the driver’s conscious?”

“Yes, yes, an 18-wheeler! The driver’s just slumped over the wheel, and the truck is--OH MY GOD! HELP! PLEASE HURRY!”

~~

The 118 doesn’t have to look too hard for the reported runaway 18-wheeler. Because it very nearly crashes into their truck.

“WATCH OUT!” Chimney shouts, and Eddie’s breath catches in his throat as he sees the huge truck barreling in their direction, on course for a head-on collision.

The fire engine swerves out of the way, taking a scarily sharp right turn to avoid the truck.

“HOLD ON!” Nash yells as the engine suddenly lurches, turning so fast and with so much force that it nearly tips over.

Eddie’s body slams against the wall of the engine and the force knocks the wind out of his chest. Eddie grips the rails and braces himself. Before Eddie can try to catch his breath again, Hen’s body
slides into his, and she gasps loudly.

“Holy shit!” Hen cries breathlessly.

Eddie reaches until his free arm is around Hen’s body, and he holds her tightly. He doesn’t want her to go flying to the other side of the engine when they finally stop. Across from him, Chimney and Nash are a similar sight, with Chimney presses against the wall, holding onto Nash as tightly as he can.

“Look, look!” Chimney shouts in a panicked voice.

Captain Nash twists his head, and his eyes go wide. Eddie peers over Hen and is shocked to see that the 18-wheeler is turning the same direction as them. And, thanks to the dangerous angle it’s traveling in, the tractor unit is about to hit the front end of their engine.

“STOP! STOP THE ENGINE!” Nash cries. “WE’RE ABOUT TO GET HIT!”

The engine’s brakes screech as the driver tries to stop. But they’re not slowing down. And worse yet, they’re still turning to the right.

“WAIT!” Hen shouts. “We’re gonna--”

Crash. The fire engine crashes directly into the front of the Banana Republic.

“Fuck!” Eddie shouts, and he twists so that he’s angled over Hen’s body. He can hear customers screaming and running all over the place. There’s glass breaking and smoke in the air, and oh God, the familiar sound of terror is dragging Eddie back to the desert, the very last place he needs to be right now. Eddie’s heart is pounding, and his throat is tightening, and he feels like he’s going to throw up. He wants to calm down, but he can’t, not with all of this going on.

The engine skids to a stop just before they can drive into the cash registers. Somehow, it stays on all four wheels. But Eddie still finds himself laying face down on the floor of Banana Republic. And falling on the cold, white marble floor is not fun at all, but the stability of the floor helps Eddie feel grounded. He takes shaky, uneven breaths as he recenters himself.

Eddie feels a strong pair of hands land in the middle of his back as Hen falls out of the engine as well. Hen rolls over so that she’s laying on her back on the ground next to Eddie.

“You okay??” Eddie immediately asks even as he struggles to catch his breath.

Hen lays there panting for a moment before nodding.

“I’m good . . . I think,” she says. “Got damn.”

Eddie nods and gulps. Eddie desperately wants to just lie on the floor until he feels less petrified. But that truck is still loose out there.

Eddie’s arms shake as he starts to push himself off of the floor.

“We need to get moving,” he says. “We need to--”

A deafening explosion cuts Eddie off, and his heart stops as more terrified screams pierce the air.

“What the fuck was that ?” Hen says as she scrambles off of the floor.

Eddie follows suit, and they maneuver their way around the engine to find that Nash and Chimney
have already gone outside to investigate. Eddie looks through the wrecked front door and sees Nash on his phone while Chimney stands next to him with a startled expression.

“Yeah, we’re gonna need as many units as possible,” Eddie hears Nash say.

Eddie and Hen glance at each other and then rush out to the sidewalk where Nash and Chimney are. Eddie starts to look around wildly, disoriented by all of the screaming around him.

“Oh, that poor restaurant,” he hears Hen say.

Eddie turns to face the direction of her voice, and his eyes fall onto the 18-wheeler.

“Oh, damn,” Eddie says as he takes in the sight.

The tractor unit has plowed directly into the Cheesecake Factory, while the trailer has detached and careened into a clothing store right across the street. Customers and employees are frantically running away from the scene, dropping shopping bags and carryout boxes of food as they try to escape.

“Bobby, please tell me backup is coming to help with all of this,” Chimney says, gesturing to the commotion around them.

“They should be arriving now,” Nash says as he looks around. “I told dispatch we needed crews ASAP.”

Sure enough, as if summoned by Chimney and Nash’s command, fire engines and police flood the scene. Eddie relaxes a little as more firefighters file out of their trucks and start heading for the disassembled 18-wheeler. Athena and at least two dozen police officers spread out across the scene, roping off parts of the damaged stores and guiding witnesses and bystanders away from the area.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on with that driver,” Athena says as she approaches the 118, “but he damn near flattened every car in those parking lots before causing mayhem on Farmer Market’s Place. Witnesses are saying he started driving even crazier on South Gilmore.”

“Yeah, that’s when he almost collided into us,” Nash says. “Oh, and, Athena? We’ve got a major problem with the engine.”

Nash nods over to the Banana Republic. Athena leans around him and her jaw drops when she sees their engine in the middle of the store.

“Are you guys okay?” Athena exclaims, looking Bobby up and down.

Nash looks at all three of them. “We’re all good, right?”

They all nod, but if Eddie’s being honest, his sides are sore, his hands are shaking and his nerves are shot. He can’t wait until they get the “all clear,” and he can go home.

“We’re fine, but I don’t think the city will be too happy with us,” Nash says.

Athena waves her hand. “To hell with the city,” she says dismissively. “What were you supposed to do? Get hit head on? They’ll get over it.”

"Hey! Hey!" someone calls over to the 118.

They all turn to see two firemen walking towards them. The one calling out to them is red-faced
and has so much dust covering his jacket and helmet that the bright yellow has turned a sickly mustard.

"We need help getting the driver out!" The fireman says. "He's unresponsive and basically stuck!"

Nash looks at Eddie and Chimney. "Let's go help."

"Carefully," Athena says pointedly. "No need for all of you to end up squashed."

Nash quickly hugs Athena, and then beckons for Eddie and Chimney to follow him.

Eddie feels a rush of anxiety as they near the tractor unit. They've responded to much worse than this, but for some reason, Eddie can't ignore the feeling of even more impending disaster.

He blames his abuela. Her phone call is floating around in his head.

"Thanks for the help," the fireman says. "Especially you guys were just in a wreck yourself."

"It’s no problem," Chimney says. "What’s your name?"

"Jackson. Jackson McNeil, with the 128. Just joined, so I’m still pretty new to all of this."

Eddie chuckles softly. "Yeah, yeah, I feel that. Stuff like this takes some getting used to."

The three of them make their way through the wreckage. Eddie cringes as he looks around. The tractor unit drove straight through the host stand, took out several tables and booths, and crashed into the bar. The front end looks like a crushed soda can, with the scorched hood touching the cracked windshield. Eddie can see the driver slumped over the wheel, his body leaning in a weird, diagonal angle.

"Both doors are kinda fucked up," Jackson says to them. "The driver’s side is a lost cause, but we think we can yank the passenger side open and pull the driver out."

Eddie, Nash and Chimney all inspect the mangled truck. This is going to be terrible, but Eddie’s pretty sure they can get it done.

"You and Chimney on one side, and Jackson and I on the other?" Nash offers, looking at Eddie directly.

Eddie glances over to Chimney, who nods.

"Works for us."

The four of them start pulling on the door, making sure that one side isn’t pulling harder than the other. After what feels like an eternity, they manage to pry the passenger door open. Jackson stumbles backwards as the door swings open, and Chimney has to reach out and steady him.

"You good?" Chimney asks.

Jackson nods, but he’s staring at the driver. His freckled face looks a little pale.

"I’m fine. But the driver definitely is not," Jackson says.

Eddie and Chimney peer into the truck. The driver is motionless; it doesn’t even look like his chest is moving.
“Oh, shit,” Chimney mumbles.

*Please, Lord, don’t let him be dead*, Eddie silently prays with a grimace. They need to pull him out of the truck to properly examine him. Eddie tilts his head as he looks at the driver’s body. He looks short and quite stocky, but he doesn’t look too heavy. There’s blood all over his face and green-and-white plaid shirt, and it looks like there’s a small amount of foam coming out of the side of his mouth. Eddie’s pretty sure that he can pull him out if he just climbs in, get the man on his side and pass him over to Chimney, Nash and Jackson.

“Let me see if I can find a pulse,” Eddie says. “Then I’ll try to move him.”

Nash nods his approval, and Eddie starts to climb inside of the truck. As Eddie moves in, he hears a loud *groan* and then a *crack!* from above his head. Eddie glances through the damaged windshield to see that more of the wall is cracking, and huge pieces of the ceiling look as if they’re about to fall.

“*Careful,*” Chimney says, his eyes focused on the cracking walls above Eddie.

Eddie moves more slowly, delicately making his way to the driver. He reaches the driver’s body and presses two fingers against the side of his neck. Eddie sighs with relief as he feels a soft drumming under the skin of the driver’s neck.

“I got a pulse,” Eddie announces. “It’s faint, but it’s there. I’m gonna hand him over.”

Chimney, Nash and Jackson crowd around the passenger door as Eddie grabs the driver around his waist. Eddie moves until the driver’s body is almost on top of him, and he tries to ignore the powerful spike of anxiety that he feels as he pushes the driver towards his crew.

Nash grabs the driver’s arms while Chimney grabs onto the belt loops on the driver’s jeans. Soon, Jackson is able to take hold of the driver’s legs, and the three of them lift him completely out of the truck.

Eddie, relieved to be done with it, takes a deep breath and lets himself lie on the seats of the truck for a moment. He’s *tired*, and his body’s begging him to rest for a moment. Eddie lies still as possible while his crew is securing a stretcher for the driver.

Which is a mistake. Because it means that Eddie is still lying there exhausted when parts of the wall and ceiling collapse onto the truck.

“*Eddie!*” Nash yells.

Eddie barely has time to look up as the debris crashes through the windshield, and land directly onto Eddie’s head and chest.

“*Damn it! We need help! A firefighter’s been hurt!*”

Eddie doesn’t even see what hits him. He just feels his chest caving in and his face cutting open. He feels toxic dust filling his lungs. He feels the commotion of his crew scrambling for help.

And then he doesn’t feel anything at all.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter is kinda short. BUT it's significantly less anxiety-inducing 😋 😋

Christopher was taking a nap when Abuela got the call.

They both look tiny and worn as they sit next to Buck in the ER waiting room. Isabel’s leg shakes, and her foot impatiently taps the ground. Every once in a while, Buck can hear her harshly whisper, “I told him to be careful.” Christopher fidgets around, tired and uncomfortable in the waiting room chairs.

Buck can certainly empathize; he’d been sprawled out on his couch, pointing and flexing his foot, when an unfamiliar number flashed across his screen.

Buck didn’t know he could fly into an anxiety attack so fast. The only thing that got him through it was that he needed to call an Uber because he needed to get here as fast as humanly possible.

All of his energy left his body when he got to the hospital. The anxiety that’d been making his heart pound against his rib cage shifted, turning into a soul-sucking force that made Buck’s knees feel weak as he sat down in the waiting room.

Buck wants to cry. He really, really wants to cry. But not in front of Christopher.

“You should get some sleep, kid,” Buck says quietly, leaning down towards Christopher’s ear. “You look exhausted.”

Christopher’s head nods, and Buck can see Christopher’s eyelids sinking lower, but Christopher shakes his head.

“I wanna talk to my dad,” Christopher mumbles in reply. “Wanna see him when he wakes up.”

The sadness in Christopher’s voice breaks Buck’s heart, but Buck is determined to sound as optimistic as possible. He’s got to convince them both that Eddie’s okay.

“Hey, come here,” Buck says softly. He pulls Christopher to his side. Christopher immediately reaches over the arm of his chair and wraps his arms around Buck’s middle. Christopher leans his head against Buck’s chest, and the gesture makes Buck want to burst into tears.

“You’re gonna have plenty of time to talk to your dad, alright?” Buck says. “He’s gonna be as good as new in a few days.”

Christopher tilts his head up to peer into Buck’s face. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. There’s a whole bunch of people that’s taking care of your dad right now. We’ve all got his back, okay?”

“Okay,” Christopher says, but he still sounds unsure.
Buck ignores his own lingering uncertainty and squeezes Christopher.

“Hey, Chris? Your dad is one of the bravest, strongest men ever. Do you know what I like to call him?”

Buck can feel Isabel peering over to him, but he focuses on the way Christopher face lights up.

“What?”

“Clark Kent.”

“Like Superman?” Christopher says with a smile.

“Yep, just like Superman!”

Christopher laughs softly. “I like that.”

Buck smiles down at him. “Yeah, he does, too.”

Christopher sighs contentedly and turns his head back down. His eyes finally slip close, and Buck sits as still as possible as Christopher begins to doze off. Isabel reaches over and gently rubs his Christopher’s head as he sleeps. Buck and Isabel meet eyes, and Isabel smiles softly.

“Thank you,” she mouths.

Buck’s not quite sure why she’s thanking him, but he nods in response before peering back down to Christopher.

Buck’s not sure how long they sit like this. But sooner than Buck expects, the doctor is coming out of Eddie’s room and approaching them. She looks relaxed, calm, and, more importantly, happy.

“I’m Dr. Brie,” she says as she walks towards them. “Are all you guys family and friends of Eddie’s?”

“We’re family!” Isabel says with a wave. “I’m his grandmother, Isabel, this is his son, Christopher, and this is his boyfriend, Buck.”

Buck’s face turns bright red, and he bites down on his tongue. Dr. Brie’s brown skin glows as she smiles warmly at him.

Christopher, who apparently is not as asleep as Buck thought he’d been, quietly giggles.

“Boyfriend Buck,” he mumbles happily.

Isabel gestures over to the rest of the 118. “These are his coworkers.”

Buck looks over to his squad to see that they’re all staring at him, each with a cheeky grin on their face. Oh, he and Eddie are never going to hear the end of this.

“Nice to meet you all,” Dr. Brie says. “Now, I’m happy to report that Eddie is going to be just fine. He’s got a concussion, a few lacerations, and he has some bruising on his ribs. But, there’s no fractures, no internal or external bleeding, no organ damage, nothing scary like that. We’re gonna keep him overnight just to keep an eye on the concussion, but he should be back at 100% very soon.”

“Thank you,” Buck says with a relieved sigh. “Thank you very much, Dr. Brie.”
Christopher lets go of Buck and turns until he’s facing Dr. Brie.

“Can I go see my dad now?” Christopher asks.

“Well, he's resting now, so I don't think too many people should go in,” Dr. Brie says, "but I think it's fine if you and your grandma and your dad's boyfriend see him for a little while."

Christopher grins and Buck blinks rapidly as he tries to not die of embarrassment.

"Thank you, doctor," Isabel says as she stands up. She beckons to Buck and Christopher. "Come on!"

Buck and Christopher stand and follow Isabel to Eddie's room.

"Tell Eddie I'll call him tomorrow," Nash says, and Buck can hear the smile in his voice.

Buck throws a thumbs up over his shoulder. He absolutely refuses to look Nash in his face.

“Will do, Cap,” Buck says tightly.

Buck pretends to not hear Hen giggling as he follows Isabel and Christopher into Eddie’s room.

“Hey, guys . . .”

Eddie’s soft voice immediately draws Buck’s attention. Eddie’s sitting straight up--probably straighter than he should be sitting. He’s got an ugly looking bruise on his right cheek, and he’s got tiny cuts on his forehead and on his jaw. But he’s smiling at them as they walk in.

“Daddy!” Christopher says. He rushes over to his dad, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Careful, niño,” Isabel cautions. “Your dad is still healing.”

Christopher gently gives Eddie a hug. Buck’s eyes water as he watches Eddie kiss the top of Christopher’s head.

“I’m okay, kid,” Eddie says softly. “I’m okay.”

Buck bites the inside of his cheek, but it does nothing to stop the tears from flowing. The way he’s feeling is starting to remind him of how he felt after they found Maddie; relieved, but still tense, still terrified. He can’t handle feeling this scared over someone, having this much anxiety and panic. Buck’s looking at Eddie, and he realizes that he truly has no idea what he would do if anything worse were to happen to him.

Buck feels like he’d fall apart. He loves Eddie entirely too much to lose him. And Buck really needs to tell him that soon.

Christopher leans back just far enough to look Eddie in the eye.

“‘We were really scared, Dad,’” Christopher quietly confesses.

Eddie looks over to Isabel, then to Buck. Buck swiftly wipes the tears off of his face, but he already knows that Eddie saw them.

“We were scared, nieto,” Isabel says. She points her finger at Eddie and tries to smile at him. “You are going to have to start trusting my visions one day! They’ll keep you out of trouble.”
Eddie laughs shakily. “Yes, ma’am, I will. Thankfully, my team will help keep me out of trouble, too,” he adds pointedly, looking at Christopher. “They’ve got my back.”

“Hey, that’s what Buck said,” Christopher says with a smile.

“Really?” Eddie looks over to Buck again with a soft smile. This time, Buck stands up straighter and plasters a smile on his face.

“You know, when you asked me to hang out with you today, this isn’t what I was expecting,” Buck says teasingly.

Eddie chuckles softly. “Yeah, me neither. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Buck snorts and rolls his eyes. “You can do that by making sure you stay in one piece, alright?”

Eddie nods and faintly blushes. Isabel glances between them with a raised eyebrow.

“You two were supposed to go on a date today? Edmundo, you didn’t mention that this morning!”

Buck chokes back a laugh as Eddie’s face drops.

“It wasn’t really a date, Abuela,” Eddie mumbles. “And it’s not like I could’ve remembered to mention it at 4 a.m.”

“You guys can go when you get out of here!” Christopher happily suggests. “You’ll have fun!”

“Yeah, we sure will,” Buck says. “As soon as your dad is well enough to go.”

Buck nods, and tries not to laugh as Eddie’s embarrassed expression. Eddie ducks his head and peers at Buck through his lashes. Buck’s stomach drops and his feels himself blushing bright red.

“I sure hope so,” Isabel says. “Because he’s been a sad sack all week.”

Buck can’t stop the nervous laughter that escapes his mouth. Eddie groans loudly and leans back onto his bed.


Isabel shrugs. “Am I not telling the truth? You can’t say I’m not telling the truth.”

“Okay, so I’m going to go,” Buck says shakily. “I’ll, uh, let you rest and call you tomorrow. Nash said he’ll call you, too, so, yeah.”

Eddie shoots a look at Isabel, and then looks back at Buck with a smile.

“Yes, yeah,” Eddie says softly. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Christopher turns to beam at Buck. “Bye, Buck!!”

Buck beams right back at him, feeling a little overwhelmed by the warmth he feels.

“Bye, buddy! I’ll see you later.”

Buck nods goodbye to Isabel—who waves at him with a mischievous look on her face—and walks out of the room. Buck releases a breath that he didn’t know he was holding as he walks down the halls.
When Buck walks back into the waiting room, he sees Captain Nash patiently sitting in one of the chairs.

“Um, hey, what are you still doing here?” Buck asks in confusion.

Nash stands up and smiles pleasantly.

“Oh, I figured you might need a ride home, and decided I could save you the trouble of calling an Uber,” Nash says.

Buck narrows his eyes at Bobby “. . . You’re cornering me because you think I’ve been avoiding you, aren’t you?”

Nash smirks. “Maybe so. Let’s go.”

Buck rolls his eyes good-naturedly and follows Nash out of the hospital. They walk to Nash’s car, and Buck feels the last bit of tension leave his body as he settles into the passenger seat and buckles up.

“So, how have you been, Buck?” Nash asks as they pull off of the hospital parking lot. “You know, since you have been avoiding me?”

Buck snorts. “You’re not wasting any time, huh?”

“Nope, none at all,” Nash replies cheerfully.

Buck huffs, but smiles. “I’m doing good. A lot better than I thought I would be, if I’m being honest.”

“That’s good to hear,” Nash says sincerely. “You know I can’t help but be worried about you sometimes.”

“Oh, I know. You’ve told me before, all those times you’ve written me up,” Buck says flatly.

Nash chuckles. “You’ll thank me for that one day.”

Buck looks out of the window to hide the smile on his face. He’ll never tell Nash just how much he appreciates the tough love. Buck figures he can keep that to himself for a while.

“How’s your leg?” Nash glances down at Buck’s brace before focusing on the road again. “Physical therapy going okay?”

“It’s kicking my ass,” Buck admits. “But I’m surviving. The goal is to be totally brace-free in a couple of months. Then just regular PT until I’m ready for re-certification. Then I’ll be with you guys again.”

“Yep, causing chaos and ignoring my orders at every turn,” Nash says teasingly. “I can’t wait.”

Buck turns to Nash with a grin. “Aw, so you do miss me being on the squad? That’s sweet!”

Nash chuckles, but he nods. “I do miss you, Buck,” Nash says. “I miss you very much. We all do.”

Buck’s heart flutters, and he can feel his eyes watering. He’s got way too many emotions to deal with tonight.

“Thanks, Bobby.”
“Of course.”

They drive in silence for a while. Buck looks out of the window and watches the bright orange of the street lights as they pass by.

“But, you know something, Buck?” Nash eventually says. “I can’t help but wonder how things will change now that we’re all privy to you and Diaz’s relationship.”

Buck’s heart falls into his stomach. Nash says it in a professional tone, but when Buck turns around to face him, Nash is barely holding back laughter.

“I knew you’d bring that up,” Buck mutters as he glares at Nash.

Nash laughs this time, his face breaking into a bright smile.

“You know you guys didn’t have to hide it this whole time, right?” Nash says. “I mean, we all already suspected that something was up.”

“We’re not hiding anything because we’re not in a relationship,” Buck argues.

Nash shoots Buck a disbelieving look.

“Buck, come on, now,” Nash says. “We all just heard Eddie’s grandmother refer to you as his boyfriend. And neither of you are as furtive as you think you are. It’s been a little bit obvious.”

“We’re not in--wait, obvious?” Buck demands.

“Yeah, obvious,” Nash responds with another chuckle. “Honestly, I thought you two were in some type of argument, what with the way Eddie’s been acting at the house.”

Buck’s lips slightly part as he stares at the side of Nash’s head. Everyone else really did know about Buck and Eddie before Buck and Eddie did. Buck can’t tell if he should be grateful or absolutely mortified.

“Eddie and I haven’t the real relationship conversation yet,” Buck says with a sigh. “We were probably going to have it today, but . . .”

Nash nods. “Yeah, this call was a rough one,” he says solemnly. Nash’s face seems to cloud as he recalls the day they’ve had. “But, the good thing is that Eddie’s going to be okay. And you still have plenty of opportunity to lay out how you’re feeling.”

“Yeah,” Buck says distantly. He thinks about the fear that was gripping him in the waiting room, and he shivers. “That’s the one thing about this job, though. You don’t ever know what’s going to happen. Eddie could go to work and then just . . .” Buck lets his voice trail off. It hurts too much to think about the words, let alone say them aloud.

“I understand. I truly do,” Nash says sympathetically. “This job is a gamble. And it takes an incredible person to want to take it. People like you and Eddie are rare. And very brave.”

Buck sinks into the passenger seat and lets out a shaky breath.

“I guess that’s a word for us,” Buck mumbles.

Nash laughs softly. “That is the word for you, Buck.”

Buck puts his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I’m not gonna fight you on it. I’ll take the compliment
right now. It makes me feel better about how damn anxious I’ve been.”

“Well, the anxiety is to be expected,” Nash says in a serious tone. “Especially considering the year you two have had. Have you guys considered counseling?”

“We’ve talked about it before,” Buck confirms. “I don’t know if I’m entirely comfortable with the idea just yet, though.”

“And I understand that, too,” Nash says. “But I think it’ll really help you guys out, both with your individual problems, and in your relationship.”

“The one we’re not in yet?” Buck mutters shyly.

Nash just smirks at Buck. “The one you’ve been in this whole time.” He gives Buck a soft, genuine smile. “Just promise me you two will try it out.”

Buck nods, feeling his face heat up. “Yes sir. We will, I promise.”

“Good,” Nash says with a proud smile.

They drive the rest of the way in comfortable silence. Buck looks out of the window at the night sky, and he thinks of Eddie.
Eddie is home for all of 2 hours when his cell phone rings.

Eddie tenderly sits up on the couch and reaches to grab his phone off of the living room table, wincing as he moves. He figures it must be Captain Nash calling because he didn’t get a chance to check in on Eddie last night at the hospital. When Eddie looks at this phone and sees that it’s Buck, his heart does a somersault.

“Who’s that?” Isabel calls from the kitchen. “Is that your boss? Or is it Buck??”

Eddie glances back at Abuela, but decides to just answer the phone.

“Don’t ignore me!” Isabel hisses at him, angrily waving a dish towel in his direction.

“H-hey, Buck!” Eddie answers. “What’s up?”

“What’s up with you?” Buck’s happy voice comes through the phone, and Eddie’s entire body warms up. “I wanted to check on you. See if you’re feeling less concussed than you were last night.”

Eddie snorts. “My head does feel better, thanks. The painkillers are doing their job,” he says. “We actually just got home from the hospital. They let me out earlier this morning.”

“Yeah? Is someone there with you and Chris?” Eddie can hear the thinly-veiled worry in Buck’s voice.

“My abuela’s here,” Eddie says. Eddie turns and looks over to Isabel with what he hopes is a charming smile. Isabel looks back at him with pursed lips and a suspicious glare.

Eddie turns back around with a slight blush. “She’s gonna stay here, since I’m gonna be laid up for a day or so,” Eddie continues.

“That’s good that she’s there to help you out!”

“Yeah, help me out,” Eddie grumbles under his breath, glancing over his shoulder. “I feel like she’s gonna watch me like a hawk and let Christopher do whatever he wants.”

“I hear that’s what grandparents are supposed to do,” Buck says with a laugh. “Be grateful for the love, man.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Eddie admits. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Isabel comes out of the kitchen and leans on the couch, peering at Eddie’s face.

“What is your boyfriend right about?” Isabel asks quietly.

Eddie’s face burns, and he puts his phone onto his chest.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Eddie whispers desperately.
They apparently aren’t quiet enough, because Eddie hears Buck laughing over the phone. Eddie’s face turn bright red as he presses the phone back to his ear.

“Please tell me you didn’t hear that,” Eddie says in a defeated tone.

“I did,” Buck says with a soft laugh. “And, um, your abuela kinda told everyone we’re dating last night.”

Eddie looks over to his abuela, who looks back at him with a deceptively pleasant smile. She’s gonna be the death of him. Not the job, but his abuela.

“Of course she did,” Eddie says resignedly. “Listen, Buck--”

“Don’t apologize.”

The firmness of Buck’s tone shuts Eddie up.

“. . . Don’t?”

“Don’t. There’s nothing about being your boyfriend that would offend me. And . . . I hope that it doesn’t offend you.”

Eddie blinks. It’s taking him a while to process Buck’s words. Eddie could blame the concussion, but that would be a cop out, and he knows it.

“You still there, Eddie?” Buck’s hesitant voice brings Eddie back down to Earth.

“Yeah, yeah!” Eddie stammers. “Sorry. You just kinda . . . caught me off guard.”

“In a good way or a bad way?”

“A good way,” Eddie answers without hesitation. “A very good way, actually.”

Buck’s quiet for a second. Then he sighs heavily.

“Oh, thank God,” Buck says, sounding incredibly relieved. “I thought I weirded you out.”

Eddie chuckles lightly. “You didn’t weird me out. You never do.”

“That’s really good to hear,” Buck happily. “Can I come over after physical therapy today?” he adds.

“You don’t have to,” Eddie says, because even now he can’t stop being unnecessarily polite. “I mean, you’ll probably be tired. And a little sore, right?”

Eddie can hear Buck rolling his eyes as he answers. “I’ll be fine. Besides, I want to see you. I want to actually lay eyes on you.”

Eddie bites the inside of his cheek as the words “I want to see you” sink in.

“Okay,” Eddie says demurely. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see you later, Buck.”

“See you in a few hours,” Buck reassures.

They both hang up, and Eddie finds himself smiling at his phone like a love-struck idiot.

“That was cute,” Isabel says, and Eddie startles when he hears her voice.
“I forgot you were sitting there,” Eddie admits with a flustered smile.

“That’s because you were too busy with your sweetheart,” Isabel says teasingly.

Eddie doesn’t try to argue with her. He just rolls eyes and carefully leans back on the couch. Isabel slowly stands up and walks back into the kitchen.

“You know, I think I like this one,” Isabel says as she goes. “Do you think you’ll try to keep him around for a while?”

Eddie chuckles, and he lets a goofy smile spread across his face.

“Yeah,” Eddie says. “Yeah, I think I will.”

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Buck’s not as tired as he was last time.

Buck notices this as he plops down on the bench at the end of physical therapy today. He’s still a sweaty monster, but he’s not nearly as out of breath as he was before. More importantly, Buck’s not nearly as sore as he was before.

Hector sits down next to Buck and hands him a bottle of water. Buck takes gratefully and sips it slowly. He’s not even as thirsty as he usually is.

“I told you that you were making fast progress,” Hector tells him, a hint of smugness in his voice. “You were the one who was being a Negative Nancy and didn’t believe me.”

Buck ducks his head, but he can’t keep from grinning. “Whatever, man.”

It’s taken a few sessions, but Buck feels like he’s finally adjusting to physical therapy. The muscles in his leg don’t resist him nearly as much as they did the first time around. His ankle feels sturdier, his foot feels more awake. Buck feels more balanced when he walks, like he’s developing an actual gait again. Even the brace feels less cumbersome than it did before.

It’s been about 3-and-a-half months since that night, and Buck can finally admit that he’s getting better. Everything’s not lost.

Hector tilts his head and examines Buck’s brace. His eyes narrow as he contemplates it.

“You know, that brace is probably coming off soon,” Hector says. “I’d say in the next month or so.”

“Don’t get my hopes up too high,” Buck warns. “The last thing I need is crushing disappointment and someone to blame it on.”

Hector rolls his eyes. “You won’t have the crushing disappointment because I’m right, and I know it. You’re going to be fine, Evan.”

Buck smiles at Hector nervously. The anxiety probably won’t ever go too far away.

“I sure hope so.”

Hector smiles at Buck again, and then clasps him firmly on the shoulder.

“We gotta work on your confidence, too,” Hector says. “I know a couple of people who can help
with that."

“Yeah, of course you do,” Buck says flatly, but his expression his kind.

Hector laughs, and the two of them stand up from the bench. Hector throws his bag over his shoulders while Buck fishes his phone out of his pocket.

“I’ll make sure to bring you a name and number the next time I see you,” Hector says as he walks towards the door.

“Thanks!” Buck calls over to him as he orders an Uber.

Out of the corner of his eye, Buck sees Hector walking towards the exit. but, Hector suddenly freezes and slowly turns back to Buck.

“Hey, listen . . .” Hector says slowly.

Buck looks up cautiously, sensing the trepidation in Hector’s voice.

“Yeah . . .?”

“Um, there’s something I meant to mention earlier."

Buck immediately glances from his leg to Hector’s face.

“No, no, not about your leg or anything,” Hector clarifies. “It’s . . . well, about Eddie?”

Buck can feel his insides freezing. “Eddie ?”

“Yeah . . . Look, I didn’t mean to be disrespectful when he came through last time,” Hector says in a rush. “I didn’t mean to overstep my boundaries. I don’t know how I didn’t immediately notice that you guys are together.”

Buck blinks at Hector. Then an awkward laugh comes tumbling out of Buck’s mouth. He knows his face must be tomato-red at this point.

“It’s fine, really,” Buck stammers. “You weren’t aware of anything like that. And I wasn’t exactly the nicest, either . . .”

Hector looks visibly relieved. “Oh, okay. So, we’re good?”

Buck nods jerkily. “Yeah, of course. We’re good.”

Hector smiles, a big, slow-spreading grin. Then he waves goodbye and leaves the clinic.

Buck thinks about the meltdown he had a few days ago as he watches Hector leave. All that jealousy for absolutely nothing at all. Buck would think it was funny if he weren’t so embarrassed.

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Eddie hears the doorbell ring, and he feels much more excited than he should.

“I wanna get it!” Christopher says, slowly standing up from his seat at the dining room table.

“Ah, ah! We don’t answer the door alone,” Isabel says, walking towards the front door. “It could be someone dangerous.”
Eddie sits up as carefully as possible, putting both feet on the floor.

“You know I can just get it,” Eddie offers.

“No you can’t, nieto,” Isabel instantly retorts. “How many times do I have to tell you today? Stop trying to move so much.”

Eddie’s shoulders slump, and he turns his nose up. He’s being a child, but he can’t help it. Abuela’s spent the past few hours just fussing at him for simple stuff, like getting up too fast to go to the bathroom, or not keeping an ice pack in constant contact with the bruise on his face. It’s driving Eddie up the wall.

Eddie can hear Christopher quietly snickering from the dining room. Eddie turns around and makes a face at Christopher.

“What are you laughing at?” Eddie asks playfully.

“The look on your face,” Christopher says with a bright smile. “You’re pouting.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too.”

The sound of Buck’s voice makes Eddie whip back around. His head spins, and he can’t tell if that’s from the lingering concussion or from the way Buck’s looking at him right now.

“Buck!” Christopher cheers. Christopher crosses the room and crashes into Buck’s open arms.

“Hey, kid,” Buck says as he hugs Christopher tightly. “You been taking good care of your dad?”

Christopher pulls back and nods at Buck.

“Dad’s in time out,” Christopher says with another giggle.

Buck smiles down at Christopher and ruffles his hair. “Nah, your dad’s just resting.”

Isabel stands next to Buck and shakes her head.

“No, he’s in time out,” she says matter-of-factly. “Because he doesn’t want to listen to me today. Isn’t that right, mijo?”

Eddie’s face flushes, but he refuses to answer, even as Christopher just chuckles again. Buck looks over to Eddie again and bites his bottom lip, and suddenly the sight of Buck’s lower lip caught between his teeth is the only thing Eddie can focus on.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Buck says affectionately. “And yet he’s fussed at me about my leg.”

Eddie crosses his arms and glares at Buck. He manages to not wince at the twinge of pain he feels.

“Did you come here to help her make fun of me in front of my kid?”

“Sure did!” Buck chirps.

Christopher and Isabel chuckle again as Eddie cuts his eyes at them.

“You guys are being silly,” Christopher says softly.
“. . . Am not,” Eddie mutters.

“Are so ,” Isabel says. Then she reaches around Buck and taps Christopher on the shoulder.

“Christopher and I actually need to run a couple of errands,” Isabel tells Buck as she pulls Christopher towards her.

Eddie raises an eyebrow at Isabel. She’d made a big deal of having brought everything she thought he would’ve needed with her.

“We do?” Christopher asks, tilting his head at her.

“Yes, mijo, we do. We need to go to the store,” Isabel says pointedly, and it’s only then that Eddie realizes what’s happening.

“Okay,” Christopher says. He turns back to Buck. “Can you keep an eye on my dad?”

Eddie’s heart melts as Buck smiles widely at Christopher.

“Of course I will,” Buck says, and Eddie can hear pride in his voice.

Satisfied with his answer, Christopher follows Isabel out of the door.

“We’ll be back in a few minutes!” Isabel calls back in a sing-song voice. Then she disappears through the door with Christopher.

Huh. Eddie didn’t know that his abuela knew what “privacy” was.

Buck carefully sits down next to Eddie, his leg lightly pressing against Eddie’s. Buck reaches down into his bag and pulls out a medium-sized med kit.

“I also came to check you out,” Buck says. “I gotta make sure you haven’t damaged yourself anymore.”

Eddie rolls his eyes. “Buck, I just spent hours in a hospital. I’m pretty sure they checked me out pretty well.”

Buck shrugs as he pulls a small flashlight out of the kit. “I don’t know that, though. Now, follow the light, please sir.”

Eddie sighs exaggeratedly, but does what he’s asked. He carefully follows the small beam of light as Buck moves it back and forth.

“Your pupils aren’t dilated or anything, so that’s good,” Buck mutters. “Have you been nauseated or dizzy or anything?”

Eddie blinks at Buck; he’s using his first responder voice on Eddie. It makes Eddie realize just how badly he’s missed seeing Buck in action.

“Nah, no nausea or dizziness or anything. Hardly any pain,” Eddie answers, watching Buck’s eyes as he processes the information.

“Okay, so the concussion wasn’t as bad as I thought it was,” Buck says. “What about your ribs? Pain killers doing their job on those?”

“Yeah, they are. Abuela’s mad that they aren’t bound, though,” Eddie says with a snort.
“Do you want me to bind them?” Buck hurriedly asks. “Because I have gauze! I can make sure it’s not too tight or anything.”

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” Eddie insists. “You don’t have to work on me, Buck.”

Buck watches Eddie for a moment, and then laughs nervously.

“Sorry. I can’t help it. I have a vested interest in keeping you in one piece.”

“Do you?”

Buck nods and ducks his head. “Yeah, seeing you in a hospital bed made me realize that I don’t know what I’d do without you. And I would really rather not find out, so can you try to avoid falling ceilings as much as possible?”

Buck looks at Eddie with a sheepish grin and Eddie can feel his stomach drop. He suddenly feels jittery, bordering on giddy. Like that goofy teenage boy again.

“Well, I can’t make any promises,” Eddie says, “but I’ll try.”

“Good,” Buck says faintly. He moves closer to Eddie, and hesitantly laces their fingers together.

“Good,” Buck repeats, looking down at their hands. “Because it’s a little scary how much I need you in my life. How much I think about you. How I feel about you? I’m . . . kinda terrified of losing you, Eddie.”

Eddie looks down at their hands curiously. He thinks of that day in the park, when he’d had the urge to hold Buck’s hand, and how he was so certain that Buck would be uncomfortable. Jeez, Eddie’s been wasting time.

“I’m scared of losing you, too,” Eddie says, looking up to look Buck in the eye. “I’ve been so scared of losing you that I haven’t been honest with you.”

Eddie sees a flash of fear in Buck’s eyes.

“Oh?” Buck says, his voice going a little tightly.

Eddie squeezes Buck’s hand tightly and leans closer to him.

“Buck, I’ve never felt like this about someone. Ever, in my life,” Eddie confesses. “It’s a little overwhelming how much I care about you--how much I want you, Buck. And I was so scared that you wouldn’t feel the same way that I’d decided to never tell you. Because Buck, I would rather have just sucked it up and kept my mouth shut forever if it meant that I wouldn’t scare you off, or hurt or anything that makes you--”

Buck suddenly leans all the way over and kisses Eddie, and whatever Eddie’s about to say next falls off of Eddie’s tongue and onto Buck’s. Buck kisses Eddie deeply, and it takes Eddie a second to realize that yes, this is happening. Eddie’s hand finds the back of Buck’s neck and a soft moan escapes his mouth as he kisses Buck back just as deeply.

Without warning, Buck breaks the kiss and leans back, leaving Eddie look dazed and confused.

“I’m sorry,” Buck squeaks out. “I feel like I shouldn’t just launched myself at you like that. What with the concussion and the bruises and the--”

Eddie grabs the front of Buck’s shirt and pulls him back over.
“Shut up and do it again before Abuela and Christopher come back,” Eddie commands.

“Shit, okay,” Buck mumbles, and he kisses Eddie again. One hand finds Eddie’s thigh, and the other finds the side of Eddie’s neck and he kisses Eddie like he thinks Eddie might disappear if he stops.

Eddie tightens his grip on Buck’s shirt as he melts into Buck’s kiss. Distantly, Eddie thinks that they could’ve done this a long time ago. Eddie releases the front of Buck’s shirt so that he can slide his hands underneath it. Buck’s skin is hot underneath Eddie’s hands, and Buck moans softly when Eddie lightly runs a thumb across one of Buck’s nipples.

Just as Eddie thinks that he wants to pull Buck even closer, they hear the front door being unlocked.

“Damn it,” Eddie mumbles into Buck’s mouth, and Buck is back on the other side of the couch, straightening his shirt before Eddie fully realizes it.

“We’re baaaack!” Isabel announces as she and Christopher walk through the door.

“Hey, guys,” Eddie greets, hoping that he doesn’t look as rumbled as he feels. “What’d you get?”

“Abuela let me get chocolate!” Christopher says happily.

“Yeah, of course she did,” Eddie says, looking at his abuela out of the corner of his eye.

Isabel beams at Eddie as she walks into the kitchen with her shopping bags.

“It was a reward for being so well-behaved,” Isabel says. “That’s something you could learn, Edmundo.”

“Dad’s a good kid. Right, Buck?” Christopher says, and Eddie might actually die of embarrassment.

Buck nudges Eddie’s arm and grins at him. Eddie’s heart skips a beat as he takes in Buck’s brilliant smile.

“Yeah, you’re right. Your dad’s a good kid.”

Chapter End Notes

Our favorite idiots aren’t such idiots anymore!!

Also, shout out to your family members who go out of their way to embarrass you at every turn.
“Well, aren’t you in a good mood?”

Maddie looks at Buck with a curious smile as he glides in her apartment.

“Hello to you, too, big sister,” Buck says with a laugh as he sits down on her couch. “How are you doing?”

“Not as good as you?” Maddie chuckles as she closes the door and sits down next to him. “What’s going on?”

To be fair, Buck knows that he looks a little bit like a lunatic. He’s been smiling and giggling all damn day. It’s entirely Eddie’s fault! He texted Buck late last night, and they’ve been texting on-and-off all day. Sure, Buck probably could not answer, but why the hell would he do that? Eddie’s still injured and might need help with something!

Or Buck could just text Eddie because Buck’s always willing to spend hours talking to Eddie, and now Eddie knows that for certain. They’re all good reasons! Why shouldn’t Buck want to talk to his boyfriend?

(Holy shit, his actual boyfriend now!!)

“Helloooo?” Maddie calls. “You still with me?”

Buck blinks rapidly at her. He had not been with her, actually. He’d been with Eddie. Again. Like usual. Man, was Buck this bad with Abby? He couldn’t have been this gross and ridiculous.

“I kinda have something to tell you,” Buck says, a slow, mischievous smile spreading across his face.

Maddie raises her eyebrows at Buck. “Yeeaaah?”

Buck laughs again, and he rubs the back of his reddening neck.

“I may or may not have . . . made out . . . with Eddie last night.”

Maddie’s mouth drops open, and she slams her hand over it.

“Oh my gosh , really??” Maddie gasps.

Buck remembers the feeling of Eddie’s lips against his and the way he twisted his fist into Buck’s shirt.
“Yeah,” Buck says dreamily. “Yeah, I did.”

“Finally, dude.”

Buck startles at the sound of Chimney’s voice, his whole body tensing like Chimney’s a rattlesnake instead of his good friend. Chimney comes strolling out of the kitchen with a beer and a smug smile on his face.

“It’s about damn time you fessed up,” Chimney says with a grin.

“Wh- what are you doing here?” Buck demands. “Maddie, you didn’t tell me Chimney was here!”

Maddie shrugs. “Why does it matter? You hang out with the two of us all the time!”

“No, I don’t!” Buck retorts childishly. “And I definitely didn’t think I’d be hanging out with you both when I came over here today to talk about . . . that!!”

“What’s ‘that’?” Chimney asks, making air quotes with his fingers. “You mean ‘Eddie’?”


“I dunno,” Chimney says with a lazy shrug. “Honestly, I’m still trying to figure out what’s so surprising about you making out with your boyfriend.”

“Because he wasn’t my boyfriend! Not until very, very recently!”

Chimney and Maddie look at each other and turn to Buck with a skeptical stare.

“I’m sorry--are we still pretending like you guys haven’t been messing around this whole time?” Chimney asks, gesticulating with his beer. “And if we are, why?”

Buck feels himself getting more and more flustered. Maddie graciously decides to take mercy on her little brother.

“They haven’t been messing around, for some reason,” Maddie says, rolling her eyes at Buck. “I just got Buck to admit he has feelings for Eddie.”

Chimney squints in confusion. “But at the hospital Eddie’s grandma called you his boyfriend . . . ?”

“I mean-- yeah, she did, but--”

“Wait, she did?” Maddie interrupts with a giggle. “You didn’t mention that!”

“I didn’t see the point of--okay, look!” Buck says, holding his hands up. “Yeah, Eddie’s abuela and all of you guys thought we were already boyfriends because it’s super obvious that I’m in love to everybody but myself! But, we were not together! We just got together! This is new and I’m still a little unsure, but I’m excited and happy and that’s what I wanted to tell you today, okay?!”

Buck’s breathless by the time he ends his rant, and his hands fall to his side. Maddie and Chimney are both just watching him with matching, dazed smiles on their faces.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Buck asks.

“Did you just say you’re in love?” Maddie asks cheekily.
Oh. Oh, shit.

“No, those were not words I used,” Buck sputters. But he’s a terrible liar, and Maddie and Chimney have perfectly functioning ears.

“Yeah, they were,” Chimney says slowly. “We heard you, Buck.”

“Okay, but that’s not what I meant?” Buck tries. Because that is a scary phrase that makes perfect sense the more Buck thinks about it, and it definitely is the word to describe how he feels.

“Aww, Buck!” Maddie walks over to Buck and gives him a tight hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Maddie,” Buck whines as he squirms. Chimney walks over and wraps his arms around the both of them.

“Don’t try to fight the love, Buck,” Chimney says gleefully. “Because I’m happy for you, too.”

And with that, Buck gives up, sighing as he’s enveloped in the group hug.

“Thanks, guys.”

Maddie hums happily. Buck leans his head into his sister’s hair and tries not to giggle as it tickles his nose. Buck has to admit that this feels good; it’s nice and warm.

Why fight the love, indeed?

~~

It takes a little over two weeks before Eddie can go back to work.

And Eddie can’t lie: he’s not complaining about the time off. Because as much as he loves his job and loves being with the 118, he loves being able to spend his day with Christopher and Buck even more.

They’ve made a little routine over the course of these past couple of weeks. In the morning, around the time Eddie would’ve normally woken him up, Christopher pokes his head into Eddie’s room to see if Eddie is awake and okay. Eddie sits up and tells Christopher to come and they sit in his bed for a while. Then, Buck either texts or calls to let Eddie know that he’s coming over. (It’s never “Can I come over?” or “Do you need me to come over?” It’s always, “I’m on my way over.”)

Buck arrives, and he scoops his actual favorite Diaz--Christopher--into his arms to help him get dressed while Eddie carefully dresses himself. Eddie pretends to not be jealous of how quickly Buck and Christopher create their own inside jokes while they get ready for the day. The three of them eat breakfast and figure out what they want to do that day.

Some days they just want to sit on the couch and watch movies all day. They have a day where Buck helps Christopher with the work books Eddie bought so that Christopher doesn’t get that summer regression kids tend to get. (“Because daddy says I have to learn in the summer, too,” Christopher grumbles to Buck.) There are a couple of days where Buck and Christopher sit on the floor and put together a giant puzzle that Buck bought them. Eddie has never seen either of them look so focused before and it’s almost a little scary.

Every day, Isabel calls or texts Eddie under the guise of checking in on them. It’s really her way of passively aggressively telling Eddie that she wants to see her grandson. (“I’m glad your boyfriend
is so helpful. He’s welcome to check in once Christopher is staying with me again.”)

Eddie and Buck sneak in kisses. Quick ones when they’re in the kitchen or on the couch. Longer ones when it’s time for Buck to leave for physical therapy and then home. Eddie and Buck press their arms and legs against each other and randomly hold hands during the day, and Eddie finally has to admit that they’re those type of people. The lovey-dovey, touchy-feely ones that Eddie used to think he wasn’t capable of being. Eddie almost wants to be disgusted by them.

Christopher catches them kissing a couple of times. He always giggles at them, grinning at them like they’re the funniest thing in the world to him.

“You like each other,” Christopher whispers teasingly. And all Eddie and Buck can do is laugh.

~~

“Are you sure daddy’s going back to work?”

Christopher asks the question quietly, leaning close to Buck so that Eddie can’t hear them while he’s washing dishes. Eddie still hears him, though, even over the sound of the kitchen sink and the living room t.v.; Eddie would hear Christopher no matter how low his “quiet voice” is.

Buck answers Christopher in his own not-so-quiet-quiet voice. “Yeah, your dad’s going back to work tomorrow, remember? And you’re going to your abuela’s house.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“What’s wrong? You don’t want him to go?”

Maybe Eddie shouldn’t be eavesdropping on his boyfriend’s conversation with his son, but they are talking about him. That’s . . . actually probably a worse reason to eavesdrop, but Eddie can’t help himself, okay? Christopher just sounds so sad.

“No,” Christopher answers in a small voice. “He could get hurt again. Both of you guys got hurt at work. It’s not safe.”

Eddie’s face burns and his heart sinks as he turns the water off and starts absentmindedly drying the dishes. The one and only thing Eddie regrets about his job is this--making his kid worry about him. Christopher shouldn’t be sitting there scared for them like this.

“Yeah, we did get hurt at work. Our jobs can be dangerous sometimes,” Buck responds slowly, “but your dad is going to do everything in his power to be safe and come home to you. Plus, he’s got Hen, and Chimney, and Cap watching out for him. They’ll make sure he’s being extra careful.”

Eddie hears Christopher hum and shuffle closer to Buck.

“You’re not going back to work soon, are you?” Christopher asks.

Buck hesitates, and Eddie knows that there is so much in that moment of silence.

“I might be,” Buck answers. “It might be a couple of months or so, but I’m eventually going back to work, too, Chris.”

“Well, then, you have to be extra careful, too,” Christopher says. “Because I want both of you to come home so that all three of us can be together. Okay, Buck?”
Eddie blinks rapidly and squeezes his eyes shut, but that doesn’t stop the tears from forming in his eyes.

“Okay, buddy,” Buck answers, and Eddie can hear the impending tears in his voice, too. “I promise we’ll both be extra careful.”

Eddie wipes at his eyes and sorts the dishes. Buck and Christopher have gone back to normal conversation, making little comments about the movie they’re watching. By the time Eddie comes back into the living room, the two of them are laughing and smiling again.

Buck frowns when he sees Eddie’s face. Eddie apparently didn’t do that good of a job when he tried to wipe away the tears.

“Everything good?” Buck asks cautiously, trying not to alarm Christopher.

Eddie watches them for a moment. He looks at them and sees both sides of his heart, the source of his life, and he smiles.

“Yeah, yeah. Everything’s good.”

~~

Buck’s doctor’s name is Dr. Allen Jamerson. It’s much easier to remember it now than before, when Buck was so disappointed and hurt that all he could think about doing was running away.

Buck thinks back to that first appointment with Dr. Jamerson while he sits on the examination table. Geez, that was a couple of months ago now. Logically, Buck knows that a couple of months is no time at all, but these last couple of months have felt like years. Buck’s life looks so different now. He feels so different now. It’s kind of amazing.

Dr. Jamerson walks back into the room with Buck’s results and a pleasant smile on his face.

“It’s good to see you, Mr. Buckley,” Dr. Jamerson greets, stretching out his hand.

Buck shakes Dr. Jamerson’s hand and smiles. “Nice to see you, too, Dr. Jamerson.” And then, because Buck is eager and impatient: “So, what’s the verdict on my leg?”

Dr. Jamerson pulls out Buck’s x-rays. The sight of the perfect bone makes Buck want to do a back flip.

“Well, there are no signs of the fractures,” Dr. Jamerson says. “And the CT scan didn’t show any signs of severe atrophy or anything . . .”

“So?” Buck leans forward, a smile playing at his mouth.

Dr. Jamerson smiles at Buck in the same way that Captain Nash often does.

“So, I feel comfortable doing away with the boot a little earlier than I originally anticipated,” Dr. Jamerson says. “Just promise me that you won’t immediately go rock climbing or running a marathon or anything.”

“Can I climb the stairs in my place? There’s like 14 of them.”

“Yeah, that should be fine.”

“Yes!” Buck cheers. Buck throws his head back and stretches his arms high above his head.
“Thank God! I missed my actual bed so much!”

Dr. Jamerson chuckles. “I bet you do! Just promise me that you’ll contact us if you ever feel any pain or numbness or any weirdness in your leg. You understand, Mr. Buckley?”

“You have my word,” Buck says cheerfully.

“That’s good to hear! A nurse and an assistant will be in a little while to remove the boot,” Dr. Jamerson says. He opens the door to leave, but stops and turns back to Buck.

“And--no offense, Mr. Buckley--as much as I like you, I’m hoping I won’t have to see you any time soon.”

Buck beams at him. “Doc, I hope I never have to see you again.”

Dr. Jamerson chuckles loudly, nods at Buck and disappears through the door.

As soon as he’s alone, Buck squeals and laughs and kicks both of his legs back and forth. He probably looks silly, but he can’t find it in him to care.

~~

Eddie’s first day back at work is as uneventful as possible.

It mostly just amounts to Hen, Chimney and Captain Nash watching Eddie like a hawk while they respond to a bunch of medical calls, the most interesting of which is a man who somehow manages to get his head stuck in an open charcoal grill.

“I’m just really, really glad that we hadn’t lit it yet,” his wife says as she peers nervously at her trapped husband.

And Hen and Eddie have to bite back laughs as they slather lube on the man’s face while he complains about the texture and how cold it is and about the word *lube* in general and slide him out of the grill. When the emergency is over and the guy is on the way to the hospital, the squad breaks down into a fit of giggles that lasts all the way until they get back to the firehouse.

Eddie couldn’t be more grateful for the easy day. He’ll take all the boring, non-life-threatening days he can get.

Eddie is lounging on the couch, reveling in the rare moments of peace, when his phone starts vibrating in his pocket.

Buck: I AM BOOT FREE NOW AND I LOVE YOU AND ALL'S RIGHT WITH THE WORLD, EDDIE DIAZ!!!

Buck: We both have mostly functioning bodies now, we need to go celebrate.

Eddie sits straight up like someone stuck a rod into his back. Because he reads the texts and is about to be happy about how Buck’s leg has healed when he focuses on the three words in the middle of the first text. Eddie stares at them; they can’t say what he thinks they say.

Does . . . does Buck mean that? Does he *really* mean it? Because, when they’re together, it definitely feels like Buck loves him.

Eddie’s heart starts jumping around in chest, and he feels more than a little breathless. Eddie starts
to text him back, and he’s suddenly so petrified that Buck’s just joking or making a mistake that Eddie almost puts his phone back down. But Eddie reminds himself that he’s moved past being a coward. He needs to know.

**Me: I’m very, very happy about your leg. Also……did you just say you loved me?**

**Me: Because I thought I was gonna end up saying it first. And in person lol.**

Eddie doesn’t have to wait for a text back. His phone rings a few seconds later. And he hears Buck’s voice, nervous-sounding and full of light.

“So, I, uh, thought I would’ve said it in person, too,” Buck says. “But leave it to me to ruin a moment, right?”

“You didn’t ruin anything, Buck,” Eddie says easily. “Because I love you, too.”

“. . . You know this means you’re stuck with me, right? Like stuck stuck, maybe forever,” Buck says demurely. “Are you sure you want that?”

Eddie grins at the thought.

“I wouldn’t want anything else.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

It's done!! Thank you all so much for reading and coming along on this journey with me lol. I hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

(Also, guess which movie they went to see lol.)

It’s feels a little silly to be this nervous.

Buck’s practically bouncing off of his walls with nervous energy. He’s changed his clothes three times already, and if he touches his hair one more time, it might start falling out. Every time he thinks he looks good, he finds another thing that he needs to fix or pick at. Buck’s going to end up being late, and even that shouldn’t feel like such a huge problem, but Buck suddenly feels an incredibly strong imperative to be exactly on time.

Buck suddenly doesn’t know how he’s going to act around Eddie. Which, again, is dumb because he’s around Eddie as much as he possibly can be, and he’s never had to act a certain way at all. Buck’s always just had to be himself.

This is ridiculous. It’s a bunch of nonsense.

Because it’s Eddie, right? Buck and Eddie have been out together a thousand times before. There’s nothing about the specific experience of going out to a place with Eddie that is particularly new or unknown to Buck. They’ve always hung out together.

But--this is new. Because they aren’t going out as just friends now. They’re going out as actual boyfriends. They’re going out as two people in a relationship. As two people in love.

(But, that’s not new, either, is it? They were both already there--everyone around them could see it. Buck and Eddie just hadn’t said it aloud. But now, they have.)

Buck takes a deep breath as he gives himself one last look in the mirror. He’s going to see a scary movie with his boyfriend even though they both know that Buck scares way too easily. Then, they’re going to dinner, where Eddie can sit across the table from Buck and make fun of whatever embarrassing noises Buck made while watching said scary movie. Then they’ll laugh at each other, and then they’ll kiss. They’ll be Buck and Eddie. Themselves, but only a little different. Buck will be himself --he’ll be the Buck he’s always been around the man he loves.

For some reason, Eddie loves that. Buck doesn’t quite understand it--still can’t quite believe it--but Buck will always be grateful for it.

~~

Eddie needs to chill out.

He’s trying not to bounce from foot-to-foot while he waits outside of the theater for Buck. The fact that Eddie showed up early is an indication that he needs to chill the hell out.
Well, that, and the fact that his heart is jumping around in his chest like a jack rabbit. Seriously, if Eddie’s heartbeat increases any more, he might just pass out on the ground. As much as he likes it when Buck’s lips are on his, Eddie doesn’t want Buck to have to perform CPR on Eddie tonight.

Eddie’s been on plenty of dates before, and he’s never felt like his heart was going to explode before. There’s something different about tonight that he can’t quite put his finger on. Eddie’s finding himself thinking stuff like *I hope Buck thinks I look nice* (even though he’s always saying that Eddie’s hot) , and *I hope Buck didn’t change his mind* (even though Buck wouldn’t change his mind unless he really had to.)

More than anything, Eddie just keeps thinking, *I want Buck to like me.* Even though it’s more than clear that Buck *likes* Eddie.

Is Eddie supposed to feel like this? This is so strange and overwhelming and dizzying.

But--he’s not mad about it. It’s almost a little exciting to be so scared. Maybe that’s just a streak of masochism talking, or the same instinct that compels Eddie to run headlong into danger with as little hesitation as possible. But it’s kind of fun to have so many butterflies in his stomach.

It’s kind of fun to feel himself falling so hard for Buck now, especially since he knows that Buck is going to catch him.

Eddie’s thinking about this and getting comfortable with his nerves when he feels two hands latch onto his waist. And he doesn’t have to startle or panic because he knows who it is without having to look.

“You were almost late, you know,” Eddie says with a grin.

He turns to look Buck in the face, and he feels a fluttering in his stomach as he takes in the look on Buck’s face.

“Wait, I didn’t scare you?” Buck says with a pout.

Eddie laughs and kisses him. And if he has to remind himself to lean in too far just yet--that they’re in a public place around a bunch of people--Buck doesn’t need to be none the wiser.

“Not at all, Buck. Not at all.”

~~

Buck would like to say that he *didn’t* spend half of the movie with his face tucked into Eddie’s neck and/or shoulder. But that would be a lie.

But that’s okay. Buck’s not nearly as embarrassed as he could be. Because while everyone else is traumatizing themselves by watching a guy get stuffed into a disemboweled bear and then burned alive, Buck is noticing the way Eddie’s body reacts to Buck nuzzling him; the way Eddie kind of tenses before leaning into Buck. The way Eddie slightly shifts so that Buck can lean in closer. Buck catalogs every little movement just so he can figure out how to coax more out of Eddie.

At one point, Buck kisses Eddie on the neck, just to see how he’ll react. Buck’s rewarded with Eddie squirming and trying to stifle a giggle, because giggling probably isn’t appropriate right now. Eddie reaches over and grips Buck’s thigh, and Buck focuses so much on the touch and the grin on Eddie’s face that he doesn’t notice the gory horror being displayed on the screen.

“Later ,” Eddie whispers into Buck’s ear, and Buck shivers.
Dinner reinforces the fact that they’re one of those couples.

Because they sit too close to each other, sides pressed against one another like they’re not in a huge booth. Eddie leans into Buck’s space, and Buck keeps reaching over to steal food off of Eddie’s plate, and Eddie can definitely feel people watching them. A few people shoot them looks as they walk by, but Eddie’s in too good of a mood to even think about picking a fight over.

Eddie’s much more interested in watching Buck’s eyes, and his hands, and his mouth. He could just sit here and watch Buck for the rest of the night.

Oh, God, Eddie’s a lost cause.

“What are you staring at, Diaz?” Buck asks teasingly, pointing a fork at Eddie’s face.

Eddie tries to make a face, but he ends up grinning instead.

“You. And the sloppy way you’re eating.”

Buck rolls his eyes, but his cheeks are tinted red.

“Well, excuse me for not being tidy and neat like you,” he says playfully. But then he starts blinking and reddening even more. “I mean, unless I actually am grossing you out. I can stop--”

“Buck,” Eddie interrupts patiently. Because Buck will tumble down the rabbit hole of self-deprecation if he lets him--and Eddie doesn’t want to let him. “You’re adorable.”

Buck blinks and giggles, his smile taking up his whole face.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Clark Kent.”

And he slides closer and kisses Eddie. It’s bashful and shy, but it makes Eddie’s heart skip a beat anyway.

“Are you sure you can go up the stairs? Is your leg okay?”

Because, of course, Eddie is asking that now, when they’re kissing in the middle of Buck’s living room, trying to undress each other without actually breaking their kisses. They’re fumbling with each other’s belts and buttons, and Eddie wants to ask about Buck’s leg.

Maybe on some other day, Buck will let himself be distracted by how fucking nice Eddie and how much he cares for Buck and how that level of care makes Buck feels weightless and free even while keeping both feet firmly on the ground.

How unbelievable it is that Eddie really fucking loves Buck, and Buck loves him back with every fibre of his being.

Buck will think about that some other time. Because, right now, all he can think about is how badly he wants to take as much of Eddie into his mouth as he can.

So, Buck rolls his eyes and walks Eddie back against the wall, and he takes joy in the surprised, lusty look on Eddie’s face. And Buck gets on his knees, and he’s finally got Eddie’s pants undone so he can mouth at the thin fabric of Eddie’s underwear.
“Does this work better for you?” Buck asks with a smirk.

Eddie’s hand finds the back of Buck’s head, and he laughs, his whole body trembling.

“Y-yep, sure does, Eddie says, and he bites his lip.

That’s all Buck needs to hear.

~~

“You don’t have to leave, do you?”

Buck’s half asleep, mumbling the words against Eddie’s ear as they lay tangled together in Buck’s bed. Eddie’s no more awake than Buck is; his reply is drowsy, and he snuggles closer against Buck’s chest like it’s a pillow.

“Not unless you’re kicking me out?”

Buck wraps his arms around Eddie, and Eddie tucks himself into Buck’s body like it’s the safest place in the world.

“No, you’re not going away,” Buck mutters. “I meant what I said . . . about being stuck with me for forever. You gotta deal with it now.”

_For forever, and ever, and ever._

Eddie smiles into Buck’s shoulder.

“Okay. forever. I can do that.”

Him and Buck, together forever. It sounds nice. It sounds like everything they’ve both wanted, but never thought they could have; someone to love them forever.

They’ll hold onto it--to each other--with everything they have.

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