



Watch Over Me

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Category: Romance

Description: One rule? Happy ending is guaranteed!

No matter if it's a political romance straight from Washington, DC, or a small town romance of the werewolf variety, Megan's stories end happily. Always.

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CHAPTER ONE

Friday nights were never James's idea of fun, not even when he was younger, but the dislike towards them only grew when he started working as a personal security detail, since they created some of the most unpredictable situations.

And since he lived and worked in Washington-fucking-DC, the levels of unpredictability could get really outrageous.

"Tell us how you really feel," Ryan muttered with a blank face as he observed the mingling crowd on the other side of the room. The two of them had been partners for three years now and James had never seen him crack even a small smile while out on an assignment.

A warm chuckle in his earpiece sidetracked James's thoughts before he could find a witty enough comeback.

"Don't encourage him, Ryan."

Eddie, their comms guy and all-around lifesaver, was the third member of their team whenever they were out on the job, and James was so used to having Eddie's voice in his ear that he'd caught himself more than once wishing he also had it with him outside of work.

And yet, he never dared to call Eddie off the clock.

"As if he needs any prompting from us," Ryan said without even glancing James's

way.

"Ha-ha, you're both very funny," James told them before returning to watch as Senator Corner's husband continued to embarrass himself and his wife by trying to flirt with yet another young female staffer. Senator Corner wasn't watching it happen, at least, busy conversing with the DC's mayor and the police chief on the other side of the room, but it hardly made the situation easier to stomach.

"He's not the first cheater we've ever seen," Ryan pointed out, obviously guessing what was pissing James off. "He won't be the last."

James resisted slumping against the wall. "I know."

If it was a one-off, he would be able to handle it much better, but seeing the same thing over and over again made him both tired and pissed off.

"You'd think the cheaters of DC would warn each other about not hiring us, or at least requesting somebody who's not you." James didn't have to see Eddie to know he was smiling that half-smile of his, where one corner of his lips turned up just enough for a shadow of a dimple to appear. "Your cockblocking ways must have made some rounds by now."

"Maybe I'm stealthier about it than you think."

A snort came through his earpiece. "You keep telling yourself that."

"It's been a while since anyone complained, I'll give you that one," Ryan said. "But I don't think it's about your stealth."

"More about the look Kalei gives them when someone is getting stupid with him."

Ryan hummed in agreement and James found himself doing it, too. Their boss didn't suffer fools lightly and while he had to put up a good front for their clients, he had a way of looking at a person that made them regret their life choices.

Or at least regret complaining about their bodyguard interrupting their extra-marital shenanigans.

"Maybe it's also that the cheaters aren't always the ones footing the bill," Ryan pointed out.

James nodded. Senator Corner was still standing in the same place, but the group expanded now, adding in two more women he didn't recognize. This assignment had started last week, and so far, Senator Corner was easygoing and mindful of where it was okay to push back and where it was important to follow their expertise. She'd contacted them because of an influx of threats she'd received after her recent gun control ballot initiative, and while she'd been obviously talked into hiring them by her staff, she was gracious about it, at least.

"Here we go," Ryan muttered with a sigh, and James turned right in time to see Albert Corner leading the young woman towards the closest doorway that would take them further into the building.

"Damn it. You want to do this?"

Ryan shook his head. "That's not our purview, only your own personal crusade, so by all means, have at it. I'll keep an eye on the senator."

James headed after the pair, wishing the evening could be over already.

He really did hate Friday nights.

* * *

A few hours later, they stopped in front of the senator's house, and she leaned closer to the front seat.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Good night."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

She got out as soon as James and Ryan bid her goodbyes as well, but her husband hesitated in the backseat. James waited for him to say something—with his wife right outside the damn car—but apparently the man's brain kicked in at last and he left without a word.

James watched the pair walk up to their door and get inside before letting himself relax in the driver's seat.

"That was fun," he said with a grimace.

"Well, no one got shot," Ryan offered. "So at least there's that."

"Small comfort," James muttered, but then winced at Eddie clearing his throat over the comms.

Ryan sent him a look that clearly expressed how stupid he thought James was.

"You know how our mother hen reacts when there's so much as a scratch on us."

"I'm not a mother hen," Eddie protested loudly, and both James and Ryan chuckled as they exchanged smiles.

"I didn't say it was you, so I guess—"

"Don't finish that sentence if you really want to get out of this assignment scratch-free."

Ryan grinned. "I didn't take you for a scratcher."

James coughed, but Eddie didn't even pause.

"Who did you take me—"

"All right, all right," James cut him off. He didn't want to listen to the two of them get into it. It wasn't that he was a prude—far from it. He definitely had his share of conversations with Eddie in the same vein. But it didn't sit right when it was Ryan or someone else from the company. "Job's done for tonight, how about we call it a day?" He glanced towards Ryan. "I can drop you home on my way back to the office."

"Perfect."

Ryan had long ago stopped arguing that he could be the one to sign them off at the HQ after they were out in the field, because James truly enjoyed this part. He liked the finality of it, the clear line between an assignment and his free time.

"See you soon, then," Eddie said. "Night, Ryan."

"Night, Eddie. Have a good weekend. Ryan Dawson, signing off," he added automatically before disabling his earpiece and pulling it off.

James muted his own mike but left the earpiece in. After dropping Ryan off, he would unmute it and probably talk to Eddie the rest of the way.

"Here." Ryan put his share of equipment in the bag James would drop off at the HQ, then leaned back in his seat with a sigh. "I want to sleep for a month."

"That's a no-go, but at least you can sleep in tomorrow. We don't have to be at their house before four, so I can pick you up at three thirty."

Ryan hummed his agreement. With his eyes closed, he seemed half-asleep already, but then he opened them and turned to James.

"You know you could ask him out any time and he'd say yes in a heartbeat, right?"

James tightened his hands on the steering wheel.

"No, I don't."

There was no use pretending he didn't know who they were talking about. He wished he was better at hiding his interest, but Ryan was with him on a daily basis, and with their observational skills being a big part of their job, maybe it was always going to be a matter of time before his partner figured it out.

"No, you don't know or no, you don't think he'd say yes?" he pressed James now.

"How about, no, I don't want to have this conversation?"

"That's not an option."

"Is this about me stopping your flirting just now?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Ryan snorted. "Please, as if it even compared to what the two of you get up to. And that's when I'm around to listen. I can only imagine how it goes when I'm not there."

"Your imagination would be way off," James told him. Sure, he and Eddie did skirt the line from time to time, but it wasn't so bad.

"My imagination may be, but the facts aren't. If you think my joke was too much, you need to do some self-reflection, buddy. Or," Ryan added, "finally admit that you want him and ask him out. He's been waiting for a long time."

"He's not—"

"You can't honestly tell me you don't know how Eddie looks at you. You're too observant for that."

When pushed into a corner, redirect.

"He flirts with everyone," James said. "Case in point, you and him, barely a few minutes ago."

"That was nothing and you know it. I don't want him like that, and he doesn't want me, either. You, on the other hand, he wants."

"That's you guessing."

"That's me knowing what I can clearly see," Ryan shot back. "Like when we could tell Martinez was falling for the Judge. Like how we know that Dave and Travis are

fucking or that Vic is head over heels for the boss. We know."

James stared ahead at the road. Sure, he wasn't oblivious to any of what Ryan had listed, but he and Eddie were something else entirely.

"We're friends," he finally said. "Close friends, yes, but nothing outside of that."

"Because for some reasons that I don't understand, you're not letting it move forward."

"We're good where we are."

Ryan shrugged. "Yeah, maybe you're good. But you could be better."

"That is definitely guessing," James told him with a shake of his head. "As if you've never seen a friendship imploding when people try to make it into something else."

He regretted his words as soon as they left his mouth. He wasn't trying to hit where it hurt, he really wasn't, but considering Ryan's history—

"If that's what it is," Ryan spoke in a softer, quieter voice before James could apologize, "I get it. If you're afraid of losing what you have, that's valid. But what you seem to ignore is that you're losing what could've been along the way."

"Now you sound like a motivational speaker from a random YouTube video, please stop."

"I'll stop, for now, if you promise to think about it."

James turned onto Ryan's street with a badly concealed sigh of relief.

"Here we are," he said as he parked in front of Ryan's building. "Get out and get some sleep."

Ryan paused with his hand on the door handle. "I'm serious. Think about it."

"Fine, I will. I will, now go. I have places to be."

It took another second of hesitation, but thankfully, Ryan finally left.

Once James went back on the road and headed towards the HQ, he reached up to turn his mic back on, but then stopped himself.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea, after all.

Maybe he could use some silence for a change.

CHAPTER TWO

Eddie finished up his coffee from the thermos he kept on his desk and took his glasses off to rub his face. James and Ryan were already off for tonight, which left him with only one other team to monitor, and since it had been a quiet night for Jeremy and Martinez, Eddie allowed himself a moment to rest his eyes. He should make himself another coffee, too, but someone had finished off the good beans and hadn't brought more from the stock room, so they were out of anything worth drinking.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

In the morning, he was going to have a talk with Todd, the suspected culprit, but for now, Eddie was stuck with a subpar coffee blend and way too many hours still to go before he could leave.

He glanced at the clock. James had been back already for about half an hour, but he hadn't come down to the comm center yet. He also hadn't turned his mic back on after dropping Ryan off, which... It wasn't a requirement or anything, Eddie had just grown used to it, that was all. And he liked his routines.

Half an hour delay was also nothing on its own—many times it had taken longer for James to drop in—but coupled with that silence on the line, Eddie was starting to worry.

The night had gone as smoothly as it could have, aside from the husband trying his luck with a young and impressionable political staffer. Had Eddie missed something? Had something happened between their signing off in the car and now? The trackers on both the car and James's comm link showed him arriving at the HQ in good time, at least, but it still left Eddie wondering.

Then he heard the familiar sound of the door opening behind him and smiled. He put his glasses back on and turned around right as James came in, holding the equipment bag in one hand and a big travel mug of deliciously smelling coffee in the other.

A wave of relief that washed over Eddie was as familiar as his heartbeat picking up its pace at the sight of James, safe, and whole, and here. Eddie had tried to talk himself out of worrying during those routine, not-that-dangerous shifts, but still, anytime James was out in the field, Eddie couldn't quite relax until he saw for himself

that nothing bad had happened.

While he cared about all of his co-workers' safety and did his best to ensure it on his end of the job, he'd also stopped trying to convince himself that he wasn't treating James differently than the others. He wouldn't admit it out loud, of course, but it was still true.

"Hey," he said now, his shoulders dropping.

"Hey, here you go." James handed him the bag first, then the mug. "I started making myself coffee, then realized I probably shouldn't drink any more tonight, so I thought you could use it."

"My hero."

Shit. That sounded a little too honest, but maybe Eddie could pretend it was nothing more than a sign of his love for coffee.

James stilled at that, and, for a moment, Eddie thought he was about to say his goodbyes and leave straight away—something he hadn't done in months. But then he shook his head and sat on the nearby chair, the one Eddie had been calling James's for a while now, if only in his head.

Sure, other people used it sometimes, too, but no one as often and for as long as James, so Eddie figured it was justified.

"Didn't do a lot of saving tonight, so I'll take saving you from caffeine withdrawal as my heroic act of the day," James said, slumping in his seat as usual, stretching his long legs in front of him.

"You also saved a young staffer from making a mistake with that douchebag," Eddie

pointed out, which turned out to be a bad move, since James frowned in reply.

"There'll be another one soon enough."

"You can save their lives, but you can't save their marriages," Eddie told him, putting out all the equipment from the bag, separating it into a few piles. He'd have to transfer all the data, then clean up and recharge everything before storing it away.

"I know," James whispered, so quiet Eddie barely heard it.

Maybe he wasn't supposed to hear it.

James was now staring at his boots as if they could give him an answer to whatever was eating at him. He'd showered and changed before coming here, which was obvious from the still wet hair and comfortable pair of trousers. He should probably go home or at least crash in one of the quiet rooms upstairs, but Eddie couldn't get himself to suggest that. He didn't want him to leave yet.

"You okay?" he asked, barely louder than James's voice, but loud enough for James to lift his head and meet his gaze.

Eddie held his breath, unable to look away. He stared into those blue eyes and waited—for what, he wasn't sure.

He knew what he wanted to happen. He'd known that for two years and eight months now. During that time, there were moments when he'd thought he might get what he wished for, and others, when he'd been absolutely sure he'd never have it.

Usually, though, he had no idea. No idea if he had a chance, no idea if James was interested, or if he'd ever do something even if he was... There were nights when the questions wouldn't leave Eddie's head, going in circles and pulling him down into the

same old spirals. But other times, he was glad to have this, right here—James seeking him out after a shift, decompressing here, letting himself relax a bit. If a friendship was all they could have, that was fine. As far as he knew, James didn't have any friends outside of work, and Eddie wanted to be that person for him, the safe space where James could go to when he was tired or feeling down.

So Eddie asked, in those quiet moments, when it was just the two of them surrounded by the quiet hum of computers that meant comfort for him and, hopefully, for James as well. And oftentimes—not always, since there were nights when whatever was troubling James had seemed too big to get past his mouth—he answered.

"Perhaps I'm more tired than I thought," he said now before dropping his gaze to his boots again, severing their connection.

Eddie wished he could reach out and run a hand through James's dark brown hair, even darker now when it was still wet.

He reached out with the travel mug instead. "Do you want your coffee back?"

James shook his head. "No, I'd only get more twitchy and not actually more awake. Maybe I'll crash upstairs for a few hours before heading out. Probably shouldn't drive right now."

"You definitely shouldn't drive right now." Eddie pressed the mug to his chest and inhaled deeply. "You can nap here, if you want. We both know this chair is comfortable enough."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Yeah," James whispered, closing his eyes. It was as if he'd been waiting for permission, because less than a minute later his breathing slowed down and evened out, and Eddie caught himself staring at a man who was sleeping, which was creepy.

He took a gulp of coffee—made to his taste, thank you, James—and turned to his monitors. There was still nothing going on with Jeremy and Martinez, so Eddie busied himself with taking care of James and Ryan's equipment.

If he glanced at James every once in a while, then, well. There was nobody here to see it.

* * *

He did, however, work with a bunch of people whose job it was to be extremely observant.

They also knew how to strike and use the element of surprise.

"Why are you whispering?" Martinez asked an hour later through the comms after they exchanged the sit-rep.

Eddie groaned inwardly.

"I have a sleeping guest in the office," he admitted after a moment of hesitation, hoping against hope they would let it go.

And Jeremy might have, given a chance, but Eddie really should have known better

when it came to Martinez, who chuckled and said, "Say hi to James when the Sleeping Beauty wakes up."

"I'll also tell him you think he's beautiful," Eddie threw back, trying for a distraction.

"It will be a shock to him, I bet," Martinez deadpanned. "Not like he has a mirror or anything."

"You think everyone we work with is hot," Jeremy said with a sigh.

"Because they are. Kalei may deny that the hotness level is a factor during the hiring process but come on."

And maybe because of the late hour, because of having heard it enough times that it burned into his brain, or because of James sleeping right there next to him, resembling a statue people would gawk at in a museum, Eddie found himself humming in agreement.

"There are a lot of hot people in this company."

"There aren't that many," James muttered before blinking his eyes open.

Then he looked right at Eddie with those baby blues of his, open and unguarded, and Eddie never had a chance, did he?

His poor heart.

He turned the mic off to keep Martinez and Jeremy from overhearing as he asked softly, "You awake?"

"I am now." James sat up and stretched his arms, forcing Eddie to turn away unless

he wanted to embarrass himself. "What was that about?"

"Martinez went off on a tangent again," Eddie said, deciding to dump the blame on the man who had started this whole thing in the first place.

"He's good at those." James rubbed his eyes before checking the time. "Damn, I thought I'd only close my eyes for a few minutes. Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for. I suggested it, remember?"

James ran a hand through his hair. "I remember."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah. I guess I really needed to crash for a bit."

Eddie nodded. He'd seen it over and over among the field agents, but it happened to him every once in a while, too, when the situation on the op turned south. The adrenaline crash was hard and, for him, nearly impossible to power through.

Still, he had some helpers around here somewhere.

"A-ha!" He pulled a protein bar from the back of his second drawer and handed it over.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

James stared at the offered bar for a moment, as if he had forgotten what it was, but then he took it with a quiet thank you.

"Sure thing." Eddie picked up the travel mug. "You saved me earlier, and I'm happy to return the favor."

"I feel like I got more out of it than you did," James told him with a shadow of a smile right before he bit into the bar.

"Unlikely," Eddie whispered, and, fuck, the surprise on James's face made him backtrack fast. There was being obvious and there was throwing oneself at somebody. "My love for coffee cannot be overstated. Between coffee and a protein bar, there's no competition. Come to think of it, coffee has no competition in my book, period."

James chuckled lightly. "How could I forget?"

Eddie raised the mug in a gesture of a toast and finished what was left in it.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, and the silence was comfortable, born out of many hours spent in similar fashion. Sometimes they talked and sometimes they didn't, but Eddie was happy either way. As much as he liked his fellow communication specialists, he also didn't mind having the whole office to himself, if only so he could have this—a little piece of James's time.

A little piece of James.

"I should probably get going," came the expected words after a few more minutes,

and Eddie glanced at him as James stood up and stretched his arms again.

There was no way to stop Eddie's gaze from slipping to where the shirt rode up and uncovered a sliver of James's stomach, with toned muscles and a dark trail of hair that disappeared under the waistline of his trousers.

Eddie licked his lips and turned away, hoping James didn't catch it.

"Get some sleep. In a real bed this time," he suggested, staring at the monitor without really seeing anything.

"I'm gonna do that." James's voice was slightly hoarse, but that could be from a variety of things. "Have a quiet night."

"You too. Drive safe."

After the door closed behind James, Eddie slumped in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself. "Fuck it all to hell."

CHAPTER THREE

Sitting in his car in the HQ garage, James replayed the whole night in his head.

He blamed Ryan for planting ideas in his head with his comments about Eddie. Everything had been fine before that, and James had been looking forward to his after-action routine, but then...

He'd spent the entirety of the drive back to the HQ arguing with Ryan in his head, coming up with new ways to tell his partner that there was nothing going on between

James and Eddie and that Ryan needed to back off.

A runaway thought that maybe he wasn't trying to convince Ryan but himself had been solely a figment of a tired brain, nothing more.

To distract himself before heading to the comm center, James decided to make himself coffee, but as he stared at the liquid dripping from the coffee machine, he realized that the last thing he needed was to amp himself up even more.

The moment he walked into Eddie's domain, though, everything else became a background noise. Who could blame him for wanting to come back here, when this was what greeted him every time—the flash of recognition in those warm brown eyes, the ever-present joy at seeing him, that smile James might be a little addicted to?

He didn't get it anywhere else. Going home meant something important for a lot of people here, but for him, it had little value. He had nothing, and no one, to come back to. And while he had long ago gotten used to being alone—the years spent bouncing between different foster homes taught him that, at least—it didn't mean he particularly liked it this way. He accepted it, sure, but didn't like it.

And was it so wrong that he sought Eddie's company after work? Was it so wrong that he didn't want anyone messing with their friendship? He believed Ryan had the best intentions, but it didn't mean James was going to risk losing a good friend over Ryan's said-so.

Eddie created space for him in all sorts of ways—the easy smile, the jokes, never making James feel like he was getting in his way. Sometimes, when Eddie needed to get something done, they didn't talk at all. James would lounge in the chair he considered his and rest, relaxing to the hum of computers and typing.

Tonight, though, thanks to Ryan's earlier words, there were moments when James paused and looked at the whole picture from a different angle.

And he didn't know what to do with it now.

The lights in the parking lot dimmed, pulling James out of his head. He needed to get home, not sit around in an empty underground garage overthinking his life choices.

His home might not be what many people had, but at least it had a bed, and it was time he went and used it. Eddie would still be there in the office, tonight, on Monday, and every day after that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

The thought brought James comfort, like always, but there was something else now, too—something he didn't know how to name.

* * *

Sunday meant a pick-up basketball game with a bunch of guys from KRK, so James decided to skip his morning run and let himself lounge in bed for a while.

He tried to remember what he'd been dreaming about, but the vague memories slipped away when he chased them. It might have been something involving Eddie's office and Ryan, but he wasn't sure. He could only hope Ryan wasn't going to start nagging him about Eddie in his dreams now.

Thankfully, Eddie wasn't one for sports, so he never joined their Sunday games, keeping the work hangouts to the barbecues at Kalei's place or occasional beer after work in a smaller group.

Guilt rose uncomfortably in James's chest at the thought. He'd never been grateful Eddie wasn't going to be at the same place he was—quite the opposite, actually.

James rolled onto the side and hid his head in his pillow as he cursed his partner under his breath. Ryan was single, too, and yet James wasn't trying to set him up with anyone at the office. The least the guy could do was return the favor.

To be fair, Ryan did go out on dates from time to time. Mostly first dates, and an occasional second or third that never panned out as anything serious, but he did try.

James, on the other hand, had given up on the notion a long time ago. The idea of seeking a person out, whether in person or through the Internet, made his skin crawl. Hooking up at a bar was different—and he would freely admit to doing that every once in a while—since it was never anything more than sex. Meanwhile, trying to impress a guy enough to have a date with him, and then impress him again to score another, was truly awful. Even his empty house was a better alternative.

Ryan could never understand that, since he wished for a true, lasting connection, but for James, what he had was enough to be content. Maybe not happy, exactly, but happy enough.

Because the friends he could count on, the job he enjoyed, the safe work environment—it was more than he'd grown used to expect. He'd thought he had it before, but he'd been wrong, so to experience it now, and to feel secure in knowing that this time, it wasn't a sham, felt priceless. There was no offer any other company could make to convince him to leave KRK behind. There was also not a date, or a romantic prospect, or whatever out there that could interest him enough to give up his time in the comm center with Eddie.

James was a creature of habit and of simple comforts. Once upon a time, he had no comforts to speak of, then some others turned out to be a lie. So he learned to cling to those few that were true, now. It didn't make him a coward, only a realist. No matter what other people thought.

Eddie got it, though. James smiled into the pillow at the memory of that big grin at the sight of coffee in his hand, of the protein bar offered in exchange, of the quiet invitation to sleep if he needed to. Eddie understood the importance of small things.

He understood James.

And that meant everything.

Did James sometimes watch Eddie and wonder what it would be like to lean in and kiss him, feel those lips against his? To see Eddie in his bed, naked and wanting him, or even to wake up in the morning, with his head on a pillow next to Eddie's? Sure, he'd thought about it.

But were those fantasies enough of a reason to risk everything he did have?

No. No, they weren't.

His cock stirred, clearly interested in some of his ideas, despite what his brain had decided. James sighed into his pillow before flopping onto his back and pushing his hand inside his sleeping pants.

He might as well, now.

He tried not to think about Eddie, though, picturing some of his previous partners instead, then drifting to some faceless images as he picked up speed. But what pushed him over the edge was the sudden flash of memory of opening his eyes in the comm center, still half-asleep, and seeing that look Eddie got, the one James wanted to never, ever forget.

Would Eddie watch him the same way now, if he was here?

James came with a quiet grunt, pressing his feet to the mattress and arching his back as his body tingled with pleasure, his mind blissfully blank.

* * *

A Supreme Court Justice and a senator sitting on the sidelines of their games was supposed to stop being weird at some point, but it had been a while now and the weirdness hadn't worn off yet. Seeing them at Kalei's barbecues had become more

normal, but this? Not so much.

James admitted that to Ryan when he thought nobody else was listening, but it was Martinez who answered, turning towards them.

"It's way worse at the poker nights, believe me. It definitely took me a while."

"Stop flaunting, already," Ryan told him, tongue in cheek. "We're aware you know some important people, it's okay."

"Years ago, he was just like us—a grunt," Dave said in a dramatic voice from the other bench. "Now, he sleeps with Justice, and plays cards with Law and Order. He's the shit."

Martinez snorted. "No one's Order at that table. Unless Jeremy here counts."

"I don't," Jeremy said before turning to James. "It takes a while, but you do get used to it."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"I'm not sure your opinions count, since the two of you sleep with them." James shook his head. "You were accustomed to this."

"No, we weren't," Jeremy protested. "I went with a friend to a poker night and most of them were there already. Aside from the Judge," he added, pointing at Martinez. "This one is on him."

Martinez flashed a wide grin. "Oh, he's on me alright."

Groans went around both benches, loud enough to drag the attention of the senator and the judge in question—or Pascal and the Judge, as they usually called them. Thankfully, before either of the two could ask, Jeremy seemed to have enough of talking, because he told them all to get on the court already.

They were pretty evenly matched, with Dave being the obvious outlier since he'd almost gone pro right after college. Then he'd gotten injured, and once he'd recovered, he'd followed his brother into the service instead.

James was pretty good, too, but with Jeremy covering him, he had basically no chance to do anything. Still, his team was winning at half time, so he would take it.

"You're lucky I'm not the jealous type," Pascal shouted to Jeremy as they were approaching the bench. "Plastering yourself to a hot guy right in front of your partner is usually a bad way to go."

Jeremy rolled his eyes, but James didn't miss him looking around, canvassing the space.

"Shouting about it where everyone and their mother could hear you is usually a bad way to go, too," Jeremy told his partner, who merely shrugged.

"Don't worry, anyone would be too busy ogling you all to bother with me."

"Or me," the Judge added with a crooked smile. "I appreciate that."

"We also appreciate the view, of course," Pascal assured everyone with a placating gesture, obviously trying not to laugh.

Jeremy made a low sound that made James look at him, only to see him frowning at his partner with his arms crossed against his chest.

"Maybe someone else is the jealous type here," James heard himself say, then clamped his mouth shut quickly when Jeremy's glare turned to him.

A second later, Martinez was here, tossing an arm around Jeremy's shoulders, unperturbed by his friend's back-off stance.

"How about we take all that testosterone back out onto the court, huh? The viewers may ogle to their hearts' desire while the players may crush their rivals—hopefully without causing permanent injury, since we all need to be at work tomorrow."

They all huffed and laughed, and followed Martinez onto the court, back to bickering about the game and their performances. At some point, James almost lost the ball because he was laughing so hard, and Martinez and Travis did lose it a few times for that very reason.

All in all, that was exactly what James had needed. Those biweekly games had become the most relaxed time of his week, outside of hanging out in Eddie's office.

And if he sometimes pictured Eddie sitting there in the audience, alongside Pascal and the Judge, it was nobody's business but his.

CHAPTER FOUR

The living room of his parents' residence reminded Eddie of what he imagined British Victorian houses looked like—or at least how they looked on TV. The space was definitely not designed for comfort. The couches were narrow and hard, the chairs forcing him to sit straight and not move much or else he risked falling down, and the rest of the furniture belonged in a museum rather than a place that actual people gathered in.

Family rooms upstairs were more casual, but this floor was a spectacle for the guests, so they all had to sit in those uncomfortable seats and pretend to have a good time. Or maybe Eddie was the only one who had to pretend. Maybe the rest of the family genuinely enjoyed those parties—they sure acted like they did.

Near the window, his parents were entertaining two couples Eddie had never met before. His older sister, Rebecca, stood by the fireplace with her husband at her side, talking to Aunt Theresa and Uncle George. His brother was holding court around one of the couches, regaling a group of women with the stories of his military service—edited for company, of course. If one listened to Robert's stories, they could imagine war like a Saturday-morning cartoon, only with flags waving everywhere and lots of brave acts by the dashing hero.

Eddie's younger sister, Dorothy, wasn't here, but she did have a good enough excuse, since she was currently stationed in Japan. Whatever Eddie's excuses had been, over the years, they couldn't, of course, hold a candle to such a thing, which he'd been told too many times to count.

Growing up, his father's military career and his mother's political one were like two

sons that the entire family orbited around. It had also been drilled into Eddie and his siblings that they were expected to have careers of importance, of substance. Ones that could rival their parents', although Eddie would bet that if that ever happened, neither his mother nor father would take kindly to a relationship of equal standing. As it was, Robert's military career was ever growing and he was now Lieutenant Colonel working at the Pentagon, Rebecca was preparing to launch her first campaign for the House of Representatives, and Dorothy had graduated from Yale Med before joining the Navy instead of taking on a civilian job.

There was no doubt that Eddie, even with his Stanford diploma with distinction, was the black sheep of the family. Being bisexual was nothing compared to the fact that he held a low-ranking job in the private sector and had no intention of moving up the ladder or changing fields to something more acceptable to his parents, like law, medicine, or politics. One would think that working for a company founded by a decorated veteran which employed its field agents almost exclusively from the former military personnel would be an argument in Eddie's favor, but it didn't seem to move the needle. Since he hadn't served himself, working with veterans meant nothing, at least according to his father. Robert was more accepting, but likely because of the reputation of the company and the respect it held in younger military circles rather than because of any brotherly love.

Still, since Eddie lacked the aforementioned excuse of being on another continent, he had to be here at least every other month for somebody's birthday party or a benefit of some kind.

Today, it was a "small affair" of a few dozen family friends gathered under a pretense of his parents' fortieth wedding anniversary, but it was more of a garnering of support before Rebecca officially announced her campaign. There were some high-ranking people around the room mingling with his parents' "friends" with deep pockets, which meant Eddie had to remember to keep his poker face on or he would become not just a black sheep but a pariah. And while it sounded tempting as he listened and nodded

along to the same story the deputy commissioner had told him three times before, Eddie really didn't want to alienate his family, despite what his mother had said a few times in the past.

So he listened, and nodded, and smiled, doing his best impression of a man who didn't want to hit his head against the wall.

At least he didn't have to talk much at these events. People were definitely more interested in being listened to than in listening to Eddie, which was fine with him. He never gave out the name of the company he worked for if somebody didn't already know, since KRK Security was a household name in DC and it could definitely bring up too many questions. Instead, he offered a roundabout answer of doing IT work in the private sector and watched people's eyes glaze over. Then it was a matter of changing the topic back to them, which everyone seemed to like.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

At some point during the course of the afternoon, he even got to talk with his own family members. Rebecca was the hardest to get a hold of, which was understandable, but she finally seemed to need a break from charming the crowd with subtle promises of changes she envisioned.

They were out on the backyard patio now, where she'd found him lounging in a chair, a bottle of wine he'd snipped from the kitchen half-hidden behind his seat. She sat down on the other chair and handed him her empty glass, which he dutifully filled.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Good, I'm good." She took a sip of the wine and sighed, relaxing into the chair more and tossing her hair back. Theyboth had gotten the Baileys' blond curls in the genetic shakeup, but hers were long and much more impressive. His were mostly falling into his eyes if he didn't reign them in properly. "I'm keeping busy."

"I can see that," he told her with a smile, so she knew he was teasing. "Quite the crowd in there for a small gathering."

"You know how they get. A family dinner can become a catered event, which means that a small gathering of friends and family..." She waved towards the house. "It's good, though. I need those connections if I want this to work."

And do you want it?Eddie wondered, but then answered his own question right away:Yes.Yes, she did. Rebecca had always dreamed of following in their mother's footsteps.

"You seemed to be making some headway in there," he offered. And it was the truth—quite a few people had mentioned to him they were excited to see Rebecca in the House of Representatives and beyond.

"This is a soft start." She stared ahead. "These are people who are supposedly on my side already. The real challenge will be convincing others."

Eddie nodded. He'd heard a lot about political strategies over the years, and how it all worked on different stages of the campaign and during a term, if one was lucky enough to get elected.

"You like challenges," he said, and she grinned.

"I love them."

And that was every member of the Bailey family in a nutshell, except for Eddie. They all liked the challenge, the rush, the calculated danger of going out there for what they wanted.

Meanwhile, Eddie liked his computers and his job, he had no desire to be in a spotlight, and he got all the adrenaline he wanted from making sure the field teams were as safe as possible. He wasn't even brave enough to ask his crush out on a date, leaving it all up to James.

If Eddie didn't look like a leaner copy of his father with his mother's eyes, there would be some difficult discussions to be had at the family dinner table.

"And how about you?" Rebecca asked after another sip of her wine. "How are you?"

"I'm good," he told her, glad he could be honest about it. "Same old, same old, but I like the old," he added with a smile and toasted her with his glass.

"How long have you been working there? Three years? Four?"

"Close to four."

As Rebecca tilted her head, Eddie's stomach clenched, already anticipating what came next.

"Isn't IT the field where you're supposed to change jobs often?" she asked, well-meaning, he was sure, but still delivering a hit.

He shrugged. "If you find something better, I suppose. I haven't."

"Did you try?"

Eddie drained the rest of his wine.

"No, because there's no better. There were companies that reached out to me, but I wasn't interested. I'm good where I am."

"There's a bunch of security companies in this town alone, not to mention outside of it. If that's what interests you—"

"Rebecca," he cut her off as he sat up straight. "You're not listening to me. I'm good where I am. I love my job, and I don't want or need to search for a new one. Staying put in KRK, which is a well-respected and highly sought-after company, by the way, is the best I can do for myself."

She raised her hands in a peaceful gesture and lifted her eyebrows, clearly surprised by his reaction.

As if he had no reason to feel attacked.

Or maybe she was surprised he defended himself like that, which,ouch. But Eddie didn't want to get into it now, so he pushed it away and sagged in his chair again, staring ahead.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Lily has a programming class, have I told you that?" Rebecca asked after the silence stretched for too long.

If he'd been waiting for an apology, he'd be disappointed, but since he knew better, he took the olive branch.

"No." He glanced back at her. "Does she like it?"

"She loves it. I only understand half of what she's talking about, but the enthusiasm is definitely there."

"If she ever needs any help, she should call. I'll be happy to answer any questions. At least until she's running circles around us all," Eddie added with a small smile. Lily definitely got the Bailey ambition genes, but in the nine-year-old, it was adorable instead of stressful.

"I wouldn't be too surprised if I come home one day and there's an AI running everything according to Lily's specifications."

Eddie chuckled. "Seems likely."

Before either of them could say anything more, the back door opened to reveal Peter, Rebecca's husband, standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt, but the Millers are asking about you, and I think Weller wants a word, too."

Rebecca put her glass away and stood up, already a politician again instead of just his older sister. Eddie nodded at her and watched them go before turning to stare ahead again. Rebecca and Peter were the couple that fit together perfectly. He'd supported her from the start and helped her along the way, never once appearing threatened by his wife's successes and aspirations. If Eddie had ever been jealous of something his sister had, aside from their parents' approval, it was a partnerlike Peter—a person ready to be there for her no matter what, who cared for her and wasn't afraid to show it. Who loved her and created a family with her.

Eddie's longest relationship had been in college, and even that hadn't lasted half as long as his current crush on a man who would probably never look at him as anything other than a friend and a co-worker.

Eddie reached for the bottle again. There was nothing in this house that made him want to get back inside, so he might as well drink another glass, watch the sunset, and not think about what-might-have-been.

CHAPTER FIVE

Monday morning meant a company-wide meeting on the cases currently on the roster or the new ones that needed to get assigned. James hadn't been fond of these meetings at first, feeling it was a waste of time to sit around and listen to other people's cases that had nothing to do with him, but over time, he'd come to appreciate them. Staying informed meant it was easier to be brought on an assignment when additional personnel was needed, and, having experienced both sides of the issue, James had changed his tune.

Once they'd switched from the conference room that was always packed to the brim to the big auditorium room, the meetings also became much more comfortable.

Coffee in hand, he walked in there with Ryan, and sat behind Eddie, who, along with

other comms specialists, always took over the first row to have more room for all the equipment in case it was needed.

"Hey." And here it was, the smile James had been looking forward to. Eddie's obvious pleasure at seeing him made responding in kind easy—natural, even.

James leaned on his elbows. "Hey. Did you get some rest yesterday?"

"Yeah, I didn't leave the bed until noon." Eddie sighed dreamily and James had to fight hard not to let his mind wander in directions it wasn't allowed to go. "This morning's alarm was hell, though."

"I hear you."

Even though James was more of a morning person, there were still days when leaving the bed early was a struggle. He liked to go for a run before work, so he usually got up an hour earlier than he absolutely had to, and while he allowed himself a cheat day every once in a while, today wasn't it. After foregoing a run yesterday, he'd needed to get one in.

"At least we have an unlimited supply of coffee," Eddie said, then narrowed his eyes at Todd sitting next to him. "Unless someone forgets to stock the right kind after finishing it off again."

"I told you I was sorry!" Todd put a hand to his chest. "I solemnly swear I'll never do that again."

Ryan snorted next to James, but Eddie stared at Todd for another few seconds before nodding.

"Fine. See that you don't."

"Bossy," Ryan muttered, earning himself a glare from Eddie.

"Don't push me. I know how to hack into your phone."

Before anyone could say anything else, Kalei tapped his microphone, pulling their attention to himself.

After his short intro, all the teams currently working on something gave their brief reports. Thankfully, there were no major issues, so they moved swiftly through those.

"Next up, we have a new assignment. CyberMode wants short-term coverage as they're in town for meetings with DoD about some kind of new long-distance communication technology."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Is there a credible threat or are they posturing?" Jeremy asked from his place in the back row. He and Martinez had finished their assignment this weekend, so they were potentially up for a new one.

Kalei shrugged. "It could be posturing, but they claim they have information suggesting at least one of the rival companies might try something to get their hands on the product. The contract could fall into the nine-figure range, so I'd say it's possible enough."

"We can take it," Martinez said. "But we'll likely need someone from communications at the initial meeting at least, to understand what we're dealing with and whether we need some added cyber security solutions."

Eddie straightened up in his seat and James hoped it didn't mean what he thought it might.

"I can do it," came the words that squashed James's hopes. "We finished the other job and Senator Corner's operational schedule is light, so I'm available."

James stared at the back of Eddie's head, wanting to protest, but he didn't have a leg to stand on. Senator Corner's casewaslight this week and they didn't need 24-hour dedicated support. He simply wished Eddie wasn't suddenly going out into the field. There was a line, wasn't there? Comms specialists were not field agents. This wasn't how it worked.

Did Eddie even know how to protect himself?

You need to calm the fuck down, James told himself. Eddie was a grown man, and Jeremy and Martinez knew how to keep someone safe. There was no reason to worry.

And it wasn't James's business what Eddie did outside of the limits of their joint operations.

Still, James couldn't help thinking of all the things that could go wrong, no matter how ridiculous they seemed. They weren't often put in a truly dangerous situation, but each time it did happen, it was handled by a field operative—someone who had training and knew what they were doing. Sending a comms specialist out there was a different ball game. Without the training, the risk of something happening was much greater.

He barely listened to the rest of the meeting and as soon as it was over and people started leaving, he leaned forward and tapped Eddie's shoulder.

This time, James didn't have it in him to respond in kind to that smile.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked instead.

Eddie frowned. "About what?"

"The new op. Are you sure you should be the one to do it? It's—"

He broke off at the sudden cold look on Eddie's face—one he had never seen before, not even that one time when he'd come back from the field with a damaged earpiece.

"I am sure," Eddie told him in a clipped voice. "And luckily, Kalei doesn't doubt my ability to do the job, either. Since he's the one who gets to make those decisions, not you, let's wrap this up, shall we?" He got up. "I need to go," he added, gathering all his equipment in record time and leaving without giving anybody a second glance.

James sat back, not sure what had just happened. He'd simply tried to express his concern.

"What the fuck was that?" Ryan asked, pitching his voice low. Most people were already out of the room, but he and Todd were both staring at James.

"I don't know, he—"

"I mean, what the fuck were you thinking?" Ryan cut him off. "Questioning him like that?"

James shook his head, looking between the guys and the door Eddie had disappeared into.

"I wasn't... I wasn't questioning him, I was worried. He's not a field operative."

Ryan rubbed his forehead and sighed. Todd, for his part, continued to stare.

"What?" James demanded.

"Think about this," Ryan told him. "You called into question his decision and his skills. In a room full of his peers. Optics, man."

"I—" James paused. Obviously, he'd had no intention of humiliating Eddie, but this was basically what he had done.

Fuck.

"I didn't mean it like that," he finally said, prompting Ryan to nod.

"Well, yeah. It doesn't make it right, though."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

James grimaced. "I'll go talk to him and apologize."

"Let him cool off first," Todd spoke up. "He was already in a shitty mood, and this certainly didn't help. Trust me, let him cool off a bit, and then apologize. He won't see reason for at least another half an hour or so."

It didn't feel right, letting it drag on like this, but James had already misstepped today, so he needed to listen to somebody else.

Glancing towards the door Eddie had disappeared through, he replayed the whole exchange one more time.

Fuck.

He'd really made a mess of things, hadn't he?

CHAPTER SIX

While Eddie's Sunday afternoon had not been pleasant, Monday was already so much worse, and it wasn't even noon.

First, he snoozed his alarm one too many times and had to scramble out the door. Not only did he burn his fingers as he was pouring coffee into his travel mug, but he also left his phone at home.

Without it, the ride to work seemed endless. He tried to busy himself with people watching, but a group of men in Air Force uniforms reminded him of his father and

the family visit yesterday, which sullied his mood even more.

He really should learn to say no to those invitations. Facing his family's disappointment over the phone was much better than facing it in person, after all.

Once he arrived at work, he barely had time to leave things at his desk and grab another coffee before the company meeting. As he sat down in the auditorium, though, his mood improved right away at the sight of James. The man walked into the room like he'd never overslept in his life, and he was looking way too good for a Monday morning.

They barely exchanged a few words, but by the time the meeting started, Eddie was ready to be a fully-fledged human being again.

As the discussion about CyberMode started, he leaped at the chance to stretch his wings and go out onto the field. It was something new and potentially interesting—take that, Rebecca—and he liked working with Jeremy and Martinez, so it sounded like a perfect opportunity for him.

Then James had to go and ruin the whole thing.

"Are you sure you should be the one to do it?"

Eddie's whole body tensed.

How dare you?The question was right there, but he managed to swallow it down somehow. And even though he told James off and left the room with his head held high, the sick feeling in his stomach remained.

James doubted him. He doubted Eddie so much that he challenged him in front of everyone. There was no telling how many people had heard it, but it didn't matter,

because with the gossip mill around here, everyone would hear it before lunch.

Eddie could already picture it.

"Did you hear that James doesn't think Eddie can cut it?"

"What was Kalei thinking, letting Eddie do something like that? He should know better."

"Eddie's good with computers, not out there, with people."

He swallowed hard, wishing he could slam the door to the comm center, but the last thing he needed was to draw more attention to himself, so he closed it quietly and took his seat without a word.

Thankfully, Jasmine was talking to someone through her headset, and there was no one else in here yet, so he had a moment to collect himself.

Maybe he was exaggerating. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought—

"Are you sure you should be the one to do it?"

The words cut straight through him in a familiar way. "Are you sure?" questions were polite versions of "I think you're wrong", and he'd heard them enough times over the years from his parents, his siblings, his entire damn family. What usually followed were ideas on what they thought he should do instead.

Eddie definitely wasn't going to stick around to listen to what someone else thought he should do. Even James.

He'd humiliated Eddie and that was not okay. If he had doubts, he should've spoken

with Eddie in private. Yes, it would've still hurt to be questioned like this, but at least it would have been between the two of them instead of out there, for other people to see.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

The door opened behind him and for a moment he thought it was James, coming in to apologize. To explain.

It wasn't.

Todd came in and shot him a careful look, thankfully not saying a word. Eddie didn't think he could handle it if Todd tried to console him.

Another coffee was definitely a bad idea so soon, but Eddie had to get up, had to move and do something, so he went over to their little kitchenette and decided to make himself tea. As he waited for the water to boil, he stared at the text on the tea box without registering anything. His mind was stuck on not being good enough, not measuring up to yet another standard.

The story of my life, he told himself as he took his tea back to his desk.

He focused on work for a while, doing all the little things he usually handled on Mondays. He'd learned a long time ago that the correct set up at the start of the week would make the following days run more smoothly.

When he was about done with that, Jeremy and Martinez came in.

"Are you free right now?" Martinez asked. "We figured we could go over the case together from the get-go, so everyone would be on the same page."

Are you sure? Eddie wanted to ask them, and his stomach rolled at that.

Here he was, doing the same thing he was so angry at James for. One stupid comment was all it took for Eddie to start doubting himself.

And he'd thought that he'd left it behind. That he didn't care so much about other people's opinions anymore.

Yet another thing he'd been wrong about, apparently.

"Yes, I'm free," he said out loud, straightening in his seat. "I need to be back here in—" he checked the time "—three hours, but I don't have anything urgent before then."

"Great." Martinez tilted his head towards the door. "Come on, then."

Going with them meant stepping onto the floor with all the field agents' offices, and even though he didn't see James, Eddie's hands were sweating at the thought of facing others after...

Get it together, he told himself firmly. You have a job to do.

"Okay," Jeremy started when the three of them took seats in Martinez and Jeremy's office. "First, I'm going to talk you through our process step by step, but if something is unclear, don't hesitate to ask."

"He can be very... brief with his words," Martinez said with a smile on his face, "so don't think it's you. It's probably him."

Rolling his eyes, Jeremy handed each of them a folder.

"Do you want to do this instead, then?" he asked his partner.

"Nope." The "p" turned into a popping sound. "Go on."

Eddie looked back and forth between them, amused almost despite himself. Since he'd worked with them on a daily basis, he'd heard more than his share of this bickering, but he still found it funny. A stoic and silent type like Jeremy and an easy-going, social guy like Martinez seemed like an odd couple, and yet they worked together perfectly and, underneath all the snark, there was obvious affection there.

Now, Jeremy turned to Eddie, ignoring his partner.

"You know the beginning," he said, opening the folder, and Eddie did the same. "We go through the entire dossier and any additional documentation if it's there and we take a note of anything important, things we need more info on, and things we need tech support for."

Eddie nodded. He handled some of that initial research, so he was used to getting folders like this one, with post-its and notes from the teams he worked with.

"Then, we usually go talk to the person we're going to be covering, we canvass the areas of interest, and we set up a fitting schedule, depending on what's needed. We want you with us on both the paperwork assessment and the client meeting."

Eddie flipped through the pages. "Anything specific you want me for?"

"That's the thing, we don't know what we don't know." Jeremy shrugged as he glanced at the dossier in his hand. "Some of the stuff we saw in here is already over our heads. We need someone who can translate it into English for us and tell us if there's something we should be paying attention to in particular. Cyber security is your wheelhouse, too, so if you have any suggestions on that, that would help."

"I wonder why they didn't hire a cyber security company in the first place," Eddie

said. "It's way more likely someone would decide to hack their systems than, I don't know, kidnap them on their way to the meeting or whatever."

"Don't jinx it," Martinez warned him. "And it says that they went with us because they 'wanted to seek assistance from outside of the tech world'."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Eddie grimaced. "This is what you get when you're letting the higher-ups make all the decisions, I guess."

"We'll have a chance to ask them more about it during the meeting." Jeremy took a note on his copy of the documentation. "How about we go over what we have and then come up with a list of issues to address?"

"Sure." Eddie pulled his feet up and sat cross-legged on the wide chair, ready to work. He pushed aside James and that clusterfuck from earlier and threw himself into the task at hand.

Everything else could wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

James lasted forty minutes, tense and probably driving Ryan to the brink of sanity with his inability to sit still. Finally, after completing the latest report in approximately twice the time it should have taken, he couldn't take it anymore.

He got up.

"I'll go talk to him now."

Ryan gave him an assessing look from his desk before nodding.

"Good luck."

I'm gonna need it, James thought as he headed out. There were some voices coming from the kitchen, and for a second he was tempted to go check if they were talking about him acting like an asshole earlier, but he discarded the idea right away. It wouldn't do anything except maybe make him angrier at himself.

Then, as soon as he reached the stairway, he ran into Kalei.

"Boss."

"Just the person I wanted to see," Kalei said. "I need to talk to you about something. Do you have a moment?"

"Of course."

The question was perfunctory, anyway. James's need to make things right with Eddie wasn't a good enough excuse to tell his boss no, no matter how awful he felt about the situation.

On his way to the office, James nodded at Vic, whose official title was Kalei's executive assistant, but unofficially, he also ran the field operatives division, since he was handling a lot of their crap before it could ever reach Kalei's desk. Now, he narrowed his eyes slightly, but then his face smoothened out and he nodded back.

Had James managed to piss off everyone today? Fuck.

"So," Kalei started once the door was closed and they took their seats on the opposite sides of the desk. "You know how important the atmosphere in the company is to me. I don't always get things right, but I strive for my employees to feel good about coming to work and about the things that they're doing here."

James had no idea where this was going. It couldn't possibly—

"Most of the time, we don't break up teams that have been working well together," Kalei went on, "because the more you work with the same people, the better you can know and anticipate each other's needs. But it's not impossible to do, if there's a situation that calls for a change. On that note," he said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his desk, "I wanted to ask you if you had any problems working with your current team."

Fuck it all to hell.

"No, sir." James hoped his tone conveyed how sure he was of his answer. "I'm more than happy with my co-workers and I have no problems with them."

Kalei sat back, straightening in his seat. "So if I told you I overheard someone stating that you do, in fact, have an issue with Edward—"

"I would've told you that it was a misunderstanding." James rubbed his forehead and sighed. Kalei was a good man and a considerate and fair boss. James might as well tell him the abbreviated version of the story. "This morning, I put my foot in my mouth and said something that sounded like I didn't respect Eddie's abilities. That wasn't my intention at all, but in hindsight, that's how it came out. I was about to go and clear things up with him when I bumped into you."

"I see." Kalei's face was blank, so James had no idea what he was thinking. "So there's no issue on your part?"

"No, sir. Absolutely not." Then, since he had nothing to lose at this point, he decided to hammer his point home. "I've never had a problem with Eddie on personal or professional front. I actually find him exceptional at what he does. Aside from handling his part of the job, he also goes out of his way to make it easier for us to do ours."

Kalei nodded. "That's what I've been seeing and hearing as well before today. However, it's worth noting that reorganizing a team is possible, so if you ever feel like there's a need for that, come talk to me. Someone may be exceptional at their work, but the interpersonal issues still come into play, and, as you know, a big part of the job is the ability to trust the people on our six."

"I know, sir. But I assure you, that's not a problem in this case. At all."

"Very well." Kalei stood up and James followed suit. "Thanks for talking to me. I'll clear this up with Edward as well and hopefully put the whole thing to rest."

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

James inhaled slowly through the tightness in his chest. One stupid question, and he'd put so much shit in motion.

Suddenly, he wasn't sure if apologizing would be enough to fix things with Eddie.

"If I may—" He paused, not sure how to frame it. "Could you give me time to make things right with Eddie? I don't want to interfere, of course, but I think if I have a chance to apologize and explain myself, he may at least understand my position better than right now."

Kalei stared at him for a long couple of seconds.

"Very well. I don't need to have this conversation with him today."

"Thank you, sir."

With that, James left, even more determined to talk to Eddie as soon as possible.

Before he reached the staircase again, though, he saw him with Jeremy and Martinez, heading into their office down the hall.

He'd missed his chance.

Later, though, James promised himself, swallowing back the disappointment. Later.

* * *

Unfortunately, as the day went on, later continued to slip further and further away. James didn't manage to catch Eddie before it was time to head out to pick up Senator Corner and her husband for a charity dinner, and he ended up "talking" with Eddie for the first time since the morning meeting through the comms.

The temperature of the conversation was chilly at best.

Everyone did their job, of course, but there were no jokes, no teasing, not even a simple exchange about anything that wasn't strictly related to the case at hand. Ryan, for his part, tried to start something, but it didn't hold.

James could sense his partner's eyes on him time and time again, but it wasn't like he could do anything now. Speaking to Eddie had to wait until after the dinner was over.

He only hoped Albert Corner would behave tonight, because with how tense James was, he might not be able to pretend innocence this time around.

Thankfully, everything went smoothly and, since it was a Monday evening, the event was relatively short. They were back in the HQ a few minutes before ten.

"You want me to go drop our things off?" Ryan offered as they disconnected the comms and left the car.

James shook his head. "No, I'll do it. I need to talk to him tonight."

"Lead with an apology. Explanations can come later."

"I know." James slumped his shoulders and leaned against the hood of the car. "This sucks."

Ryan patted him on the back. "You'll straighten things out. Just be careful with your

overbearing tendencies."

James straightened. "I do not have overbearing tendencies."

"I'm not getting into it with you right now." Ryan stepped away and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm heading home. Good luck and see you tomorrow."

James crossed his arms as he watched his friend walk up to his car and leave. He wasn't trying to tell Eddie what to do, that had never been his intention. All he wanted was to express concern, to get him to think about—Oh.

Damn it.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to move. Prolonging this would only make things worse, especially since Eddie couldn't go home until after James had dropped their equipment off.

He headed to the comm center right away and passed Todd, who was on his way out.

For a second, it seemed like Todd would say something, but in the end he passed him by without a word.

James took a deep breath right outside the entrance.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Show time.

The familiar sounds surrounded him as soon as he opened the door. Usually, it was enough to make him drop his shoulders, but this time, coming face to face with Eddie's stony expression, James was the furthest thing from relaxed.

He took a few steps forward. "Hey."

"Hey." Eddie reached out to take the equipment. "Any problems?"

"No, everything's good."

"Okay, good."

Damn. This was dismissive in a way that left James at loss. "You can go now" was more than implied, it was basically spelled out for him.

Still, he'd come here for a reason beyond simply dropping the equipment off.

"Listen, Eddie, I—" He paused, remembering Ryan's advice. "I'm sorry about this morning. I really am." He glanced at his chair. Knowing that he wasn't welcomed in it right now stung like hell. "I shouldn't have said what I said, and I definitely didn't think about how you'd take it—"

"And how was I supposed to take it?" Eddie looked up at him again, eyes bright with fire. "Was I supposed to be glad you were questioning me in front of everybody?"

"No!" James shook his head. "No, you weren't. I meant that I didn't... realize the implications."

Eddie put down the equipment he was still holding and crossed his arms against his chest. "What were you trying to imply, then?"

James did not want to say it out loud, but it wasn't like he had a choice now, was it?

"I was worried," he finally admitted, watching Eddie's eyes widen. "I wasn't worried about your skills, but about you. Field work is different, you never know what's going to happen and—"

"You thought I couldn't handle it."

"I thought you might get hurt!"

James's raised voice sounded particularly loud in the room, but it managed to surprise Eddie into silence.

"I know it's not my place. It's your decision, and Kalei's, not mine. I wasn't trying to..." James shoved his hands into his pockets as he chased the right words to say. "I was just... I was worried."

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was the ever-present humming of computers, but then Eddie sighed, sat back in his chair, and watched him with a look James couldn't decipher.

It didn't feel like anger, though.

"You're awful at worrying, then," Eddie finally said, and it surprised James into a laugh.

"Sorry about that."

"You're forgiven," Eddie offered, and James's shoulders dropped a fraction. "I do know how it is, worrying about you—you guys, so I get it." Eddie scratched his cheek as he stumbled over his words. "You made it sound like I don't know what I'm doing, though, and that's not okay, especially in public like that. I'm not a field operative, sure, but I'm not going out there as one. Either way, you should've talked to me alone and dealt with worry, not, you know." He waved his hand, presumably trying to convey James's choice of words from that morning.

James cleared his throat, the tightness in his chest slowly receding, even though he still felt like shit. It was clear that Eddie was hurt by his stupid behavior, and that was the last thing James wanted.

"I know," he admitted quietly. "I truly am sorry."

Eddie sighed. "I believe you. Don't ever do that again, though."

Ready to put it all behind them, James started to nod, then hesitated. He couldn't promise not to worry, could he?

"I'm never going to question your capabilities, in public or otherwise. So I guess I can at least promise to handle my worry better next time?"

Eddie raised his eyebrows. "Next time?"

"Who knows, maybe you'll get a taste for the field work," James told him, trying for a smile, even if the mere idea of that made him want to vehemently protest.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Eddie snorted. "Unlikely. My place is here." He gestured towards his screens. "Everything else is a bonus. I'm simply trying something new."

"You are going to be careful, though, right?" James couldn't help asking.

Fortunately, Eddie gave him a small smile.

"Yes. I have no interest in putting myself in dangerous situations. I'll leave it to you, guys."

"Good. That's good." James hesitated. "Arewegood?"

Eddie held his gaze for what felt like forever and something in James wanted to run and hide, but this, here, fixing things between them, was too important, so he stayed in place.

"Yeah," Eddie said at last, quieter than before. "Yeah, we're good."

The relief of that nearly took James's breath away.

All was right again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eddie rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep. He was still reeling from the day and everything that had happened.

He couldn't find it in himself to stay angry at James, though, especially after such a surprising confession.

"I was worried."

"I thought you might get hurt!"

How could Eddie not melt at that? Especially when it was coupled with those eyes, and that face, and...

He appreciated James's apology, though, and the way he took responsibility for what he'd done, owning up to it instead of offering excuses or telling Eddie he was the one exaggerating. It was a nice change in comparison to Eddie's past experiences with calling people out on their bullshit.

Then there was a moment when he thought... He thought that something might happen. James would lean in, or maybe Eddie would, and they would finally kiss. He'd pictured many variations of that scene in the past—the two of them, after hours, alone in the room...

Still, it remained nothing more than a fantasy.

James cared about him, that was clear, but he seemed to care as a friend, not someone who's romantically interested in him, and Eddie needed to accept that, once and for all.

He also needed to control himself better, because he'd almost slipped up and admitted more than he wished to. Thankfully, he recovered quickly. He did care about everyone at KRK, after all. He just cared—and worried—about James more than about the others.

Rubbing his eyes, Eddie groaned.

Get it together.

He'd spent most of the day feeling sorry for himself, but there were also reasons to be excited. He was looking forward to taking on a new challenge and enjoyed the time he'd spent with Jeremy and Martinez, who hadn't once made him feel like he was in over his head. They'd treated him like an equal and a partner, which was exactly what he needed after yesterday's afternoon with his family and James's morning stunt.

It sucked that the people close to him still had so much sway over how he felt about himself. He'd worked hard to leave that behind, and yet, every once in a while, one of them would say something and Eddie's insecurities would come back to haunt him.

He'd definitely made progress in that over the years, but the balance was still off, apparently. Getting advice from others was one thing. Betting his own self-worth on whether or not somebody would approve of him and his choices was another.

Eddie sighed. He was over-exaggerating again and he knew it. He didn't have it that bad. While his family was what it was, he'd known that for a long time now and learned to deal. And James had apologized and explained himself.

So Eddie really needed to relax and let it all go, because tomorrow was the first day of his new assignment.

A glance at the clock told him it was past one in the morning.

With a groan, he closed his eyes, hoping to catch at least a few hours of sleep.

He was going to need it.

* * *

Right as he saved the progress of the transcription program, Eddie heard the door open behind him and, a second later, Jeremy greeting everyone before approaching him.

"You ready?"

"Yeah, I'm done for now."

Truth be told, he'd been ready an hour ago and gotten a bit too worked up from the various scenarios running through his head, which resulted in busying himself with monitoring the transcription of the last week's files—a task so boring he usually put it off for as long as possible.

"Any last minute questions?" Jeremy asked once they left the comm center.

"Aside from questioning my sanity, not really, no."

Jeremy smirked. "Well, we all should do that every once in a while, I think."

"Do you?" Eddie tossed back.

"Not as often as I should, given the company I keep," Jeremy said in a grave voice as they walked up to Martinez, who was leaning against the railing, waiting for them.

Eddie chuckled, but Martinez spoke up first.

"That would hurt the good senator, if he heard you," he told his partner with an exaggerated sigh.

Eddie had met Pascal Tirado a couple times at most at the company's get-togethers, but the man was a frequent topic of teasing Jeremy had to endure at work. The only person who was getting more of that was Martinez himself, ever since he'd started dating Justice Krasinsky.

All thoughts about the guys' famous partners went away, however, once the three of them got to the parking garage and Martinez opened the freaking car door for him.

"What are you doing?" Eddie asked, incredulous.

Martinez frowned, then looked between the door and Eddie.

"Force of habit, I guess. We usually have a third person in the car when they're a client." He didn't let go of the door, though, and waved Eddie in. "Get inside already, enjoy me being a gentleman."

"I'm not sure you know what a gentleman even is," Eddie heard Jeremy mutter as he got into the backseat, but then the door closed, muffling their voices.

He only saw Martinez rolling his eyes with a smirk, and then circling the car.

Once they'd left the garage, Eddie picked up the tablet to scroll down the files he'd read three times already.

"This meeting shouldn't take long," Martinez said, and Eddie glanced up, catching his gaze in the rearview mirror. "We usually go over the basics with the client, including the schedule and the scope of the assignment. Since it's rare that we do any cyber security, we're covering our bases here more than anything else, so if they say no,

don't take it personally."

"I won't." Eddie put the tablet away. They'd talked about that yesterday, but he appreciated the reminder. "To be honest, after thinking about it last night, I doubt they will let me into their system. That's where all their secrets lie."

"Well, even without getting in there, you'll be able to understand more about their work than we do, that's for sure," Jeremy said. "Maybe it won't be anything useful, but you never know."

As it turned out, Eddie was right—while Lavon and his VP smiled and nodded, and were generally pretty agreeable, they absolutely did not want him anywhere near their internal system.

"I'm sure you understand," Lavon told him with a dismissive wave of his hand. "In this business, we cannot let people see what we're working with."

"Of course," Eddie said. "We assumed as much, but we wanted to present you with all the options."

"It's not a cyber-attack we're worried about, to be honest," the VP cut in. "But the physical safety of the mind that could change the game forever."

Wow, that was laying it on thick.

Struggling to keep his face blank, Eddie realized that listening to bullshit was definitely easier when he was back in the HQ, able to react however he wanted to.

Lavon pretended to wave the VP's words away as well, but his whole posture made it clear that he, too, considered himself a god amongst mere mortals.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Suddenly, Eddie was more than happy not to have to spend hours in the man's company.

"You're welcome to come to the New Technologies Gala with your teammates, though," Lavon told him with a plastered-on smile that tried and failed not to be condescending. "That may give you a better understanding of what we're doing here."

Eddie glanced at Martinez and Jeremy, who nodded slightly but left the final call up to him.

"I'll be happy to," Eddie said, figuring that he might as well make the best of this.

If Lavon wasn't going to give them anything else, they would work with what they had. It wouldn't even be the first time their clients were resisting their help while at the same time asking for it.

Such was life.

CHAPTER NINE

There were some assignments—few and far between, thankfully—that made James question his life choices, with his choice of profession being on the top of the list.

To be fair, he'd questioned it more during his time in the Army, but still, there were some clients of KKK that seriously made him wonder what the hell was he doing in the personal security field.

One of those clients was Albert Corner.

James hadn't liked the guy from the moment they'd done the preliminary checks, but the dislike only grew as the time went on. A bullet point of "Rumored to have had multiple affairs (very likely)" was one thing, but to stand there and watch the guy come onto women in real life made James want to retch.

Senator Corner, in turn, appeared to be intelligent and capable, so how she could stand the man her husband was, James had no clue.

He wished he hadn't seen it so many times before, too—in and outside of work.

"What's making you frown so hard?" Ryan asked, dropping onto the seat behind his desk.

James blinked a few times, getting back to here and now. He'd spaced out rereading his latest report before he could send it off in their internal system and move on.

"Guess," he muttered and deleted the last sentence, which was an unprofessional, even if accurate, description of Albert Corner.

"Is this about Eddie going to the New Technologies Gala?"

James sat up. "What?"

Ryan very obviously held back from rolling his eyes.

"Eddie is going to the New Technologies Gala with Jeremy and Martinez tomorrow, for their potential corporate espionage case."

James opened his mouth, ready to protest, but he caught himself in time. He glared at

his computer screen instead.

"I overheard Jeremy and Martinez in the kitchen and thought you should know in advance, in case you get stupid again when Eddie tells you himself. But I see you learned your lesson."

"I can't tell him what to do," James said, trying for indifference, even though he knew his friend could see right through him. "Or them, for that matter."

"That's the lesson, yeah." Ryan tapped his fingers over the armrest of his chair. "What else has gotten you into a mood, then?"

"I'm not in a mood."

"You're definitely in a mood."

James shot him a glare before getting back to the task at hand.

"I'm not doing this with you. I'm about to send the report in, and then I'm out."

With Senator Corner's empty calendar for the weekend, they were in for a bit of free time, and James was looking forward to some peace and quiet.

As if on cue, Ryan's phone rang.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Good afternoon, Senator. Yes, of course." Ryan sat up and grabbed a pen. "Yes, if you— Yes. Let me write it down."

James sagged in his chair. So much for that peace and quiet.

Sure, technically, they would have been on call anyway, but he hated last minute change of plans, especially over the weekend.

After confirming they'd be there to pick the senator and her husband up at five pm tomorrow, Ryan disconnected and snorted as he met James's gaze.

"Guess who's also going to the New Technologies Gala."

James raised his eyebrows. "She's not even involved in the technology field."

"She admitted it's a good networking event for her husband," Ryan said with a grimace.

Albert Corner had been searching for a job for a few months now, but apparently nothing fit.

Not that James could fault any company for refusing to work with the guy.

"One more point against him," he muttered as he sat up in his seat. "I may ask Kalei for some kind of an asshole bonus after this."

"The company would go bankrupt if we asked for those every time there's a reason

for it," Ryan said. "Maybe we could double their rates next time, at least."

"Let's hope there won't be a next time." James rubbed his forehead. "For now, I guess we need to check out the blueprints for the gala venue, don't we?"

Ryan sighed. "I guess we do."

"But first, since we're staying, I need more coffee." James stood up. "You want some?"

"No, I'm going to be wide awake until midnight as it is. I would love you forever if you brought me a protein bar or two, though."

James chuckled. "You promised me your undying devotion in the past already, I don't think you can promise it again under new conditions."

"I don't remember doing that."

"I remember at least three separate times."

"Was I sober?"

"Well, there was that time after Chase—"

Ryan groaned. "Stop, I don't want a reminder of that."

James couldn't blame him. Ryan had only gone out with that asshole a couple of times, but it was enough to put the guy squarely at the top of the dating horror stories.

"Don't worry, I'm sure I offered my undying devotion back at least once, too," James told him in an attempt to swerve the conversation away from that landmine.

He definitely needed coffee if he'd invoked Chase without thinking.

"Twice," Ryan said, making James halt in the doorway.

"What?"

"You offered your undying devotion twice so far, but I'm always open to hear about it some more."

James snorted. "How about I go search for those protein bars instead."

"Food is my love language," Ryan shouted after him, which meant that several people in the hall turned towards James.

Why did he have to pick such a troll for a best friend, exactly?

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Don't mind him," James said loudly, looking around. "His brain is off the clock already."

"So many things I could say to that." Martinez appeared in the kitchen entrance. "It's honestly hard to pick."

"Yeah, welcome to my world," James told him, slipping inside when Martinez stepped back. "I need coffee for more than one reason."

"Weren't you guys about done for the day?"

James opened the cabinet with the protein bar stash and grabbed two coconut bars for Ryan and a peanut butter one for himself.

"That was before the senator called with a change of plans," he said as he turned towards the coffee machine. "We're going to the same gala you're going to tomorrow."

Martinez offered a grunt to that, which made James turn around.

"What?"

"Nothing."

James sighed, leaning against the counter. "I already know Eddie's going, if that's what you mean."

"Uh-uh." Martinez took a sip of his own coffee. "Good."

"Listen, I'm—" James hesitated. He'd cleared the air with Eddie, but he only now realized that might not have been enough. "I made a mistake and I'm not going to do it again. I know it's not my business and it's not on me to decide who goes where."

"That's true. And even if it were, there are better ways to do it than out in the open for everyone to hear."

"It wasn't—" James started to protest, but then caught himself.

It didn't really matter how many people were there. He hadn't been thinking about that at the time, either way.

And he should have.

"Like I said, I made a mistake. I already apologized to Eddie, if that's your concern."

"Good."

"And I hope you know I wasn't implying a lack of confidence in you or Jeremy."

Martinez leaned against the counter as well.

"I sure hope so, since we're great," he said with a slow-building smile.

"Damn right. If he had to—" James caught himself quickly, but from the way Martinez raised his eyebrows, not quickly enough.

Fuck.

"I should shut up until the caffeine kicks in," James mumbled and swallowed a few gulps of too-hot coffee.

"Or you should put your money where your mouth is and finally ask him out."

James choked. "I'm not—"

"Don't even," Martinez cut in, straightening with a shake of his head. "I'm too tired for this level of denial, so I'm going to go. See you tomorrow, I guess."

With that, he walked out, and James was left staring after him.

Did everyone think—?

Fucking hell.

CHAPTER TEN

Eddie tugged at the cuffs of the jacket he was wearing as he grimaced at himself in the mirror.

"This is why I prefer working behind the scenes," he told Martinez, who only just finished helping him with a bow tie.

A bow tie. Eddie could count on one hand the number of times he'd ever had a bow tie on, and all of them involved family events—including Rebecca's wedding.

"Well, I am jealous that you get to wear pants you sleep in to work—"

"I don't!" Eddie protested, but Martinez ignored it and went on.

"—but look at you now! You look gorgeous." He gave Eddie another once-over. "We didn't want you to bring any attention to yourself tonight, but the kind you're going to get, you may enjoy," he told him with a wink.

Eddie rolled his eyes. "Sure, in the room with men like you lot, I'm going to be the one attracting attention."

Martinez muttered something inaudible, but then he shrugged and turned Eddie to face him again.

"Okay, remember that you're not there to be the security detail." Eddie snorted at the mere idea, but Martinez cut him off with a shake of his head. "No, listen, this is

important. You're going with us so that we have someone who knows what they're doing in case something computer-related comes up. If you manage to blend into the crowd and learn something useful, great. We all know people like to talk after a glass or three at those things. We still have no idea if there's really someone after CyberMode or not, but if there's any talk about it, that may bring us some leads. Also, any talk about their product may be useful."

"I know all that, we went over this," Eddie reminded him, taking a step back and glancing at the mirror for one last check. The tuxedo was tailored on the company's dime, so it was better fitted and thus restricting his movements more than he was used to, but he could suffer through it for tonight. "Trust me, I have no desire to be James Bond. I see myself more as Q."

"Once again, there are so many jokes I could make right now." Martinez shook his head, taking his own jacket from the chair he'd dropped it onto earlier. "Come on, we'd better get going or our Prince Charming will throw a fit."

Eddie snorted. "Jeremy is many things, but charming, he is not."

"I'll tell him you said that."

"I'm pretty sure he knows and doesn't care."

And he was right. Jeremy simply rolled his eyes and motioned for them to get into the car.

Eddie took a deep breath once he clicked the seatbelt into place. He was a mix of nervous and weirdly excited, but whatever the evening would bring, he was ready for it.

He hoped.

* * *

The venue's main hall was already filled with people when they arrived.

Eddie raised his eyebrows. "That's quite a party."

"It's a big market, even—or especially—for politicians these days." Jeremy paused next to him and looked around. "Digital dominates in most fields and everyone wants to be on top of things."

"I'm surprised your better half isn't here tonight," Martinez told him.

"If you make a joke about being on top—"

"I actually wasn't going to, and that's a missed opportunity on my part." Martinez sounded truly regretful. "But I meant more in the way of him working his ass off and being basically everywhere."

"Ah." Jeremy's eyebrows barely twitched. "Well, I told him he needed to narrow his focus, since he can't do it all."

"He took it as a challenge, didn't he?"

"At first, yes. But once he realized I was serious, he relented a bit. We're working on a compromise."

Eddie muted his two companions, far more interested in his surroundings. The entire venue was ultramodern, with glass, weird lighting, and geometrically-shaped walls. Not his preferred architectural style, that was for sure, but for this particular party, it was actually fitting.

Then he saw James, walking ahead of Senator Corner and her husband, with Ryan at their six.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Eddie barely noticed anyone but James, though.

Damn. He'd thought he'd gotten used to the way James filled out a suit—at least as much as any bisexual man could get used to a sight like that—but, apparently, he still had some work to do in that department.

Then James's gaze met his, and,oh.

The room had gotten hotter in an instant.

"Like I told you," Martinez whispered from his side. "You're getting noticed."

Eddie startled and glanced at him, confused. Jeremy muttered something about shutting up once in his goddamn life, but Eddie wasn't really paying attention, turning back towards James.

But James wasn't looking at him anymore. He was crossing the room like he owned the place, while Eddie was standing to the side, disappointed despite himself.

Then again, he wasn't here for James, was he?

He squared his shoulders. Everyone in his family knew how to work the crowd and get things done. Now, away from their watchful—judging—eyes, maybe Eddie could try his luck at it, too.

"Ready?" Martinez asked him quietly, no longer teasing.

Eddie nodded. He was as ready as he was ever going to be.

* * *

Two hours later, he'd had enough of people for the night.

Hell, for the whole week.

He sneaked into a corridor marked as staff only, but as he closed the door behind him and all the noise turned into a quiet, distant hum, he couldn't find it in himself to feel bad. Slumping against the wall, he let out a deep sigh of relief.

His small respite only lasted about a minute, though.

When he heard someone right outside the door, he bolted inside what turned out to be a small utility closet, his heart hammering in his chest.

As the corridor door opened, he held his breath, waiting to see whether someone noticed him or not.

There was nothing but silence for a while, then the door opened and closed once again.

"You were supposed to find me an hour ago," a man muttered, and Eddie stilled.

This was worse than getting caught by the staff.

"I'm here with detail," the other man whispered. "I couldn't shake them off, especially—"

"Spare me the story, I don't care," the first man cut him off, a bit louder this time.

Loud enough for Eddie to recognize his voice.

That was Karl Lavon, the CEO of CyberMode.

Fuck.

"Do you have an in for us or not?" Lavon asked.

"I'm working on it," the other man said. "Bailey's not the easiest target to—"

Eddie froze at the mention of his last name. Could he have heard it wrong? The man was whispering, so it was hard to be certain.

"Don't tell me you're trying for Geoffrey Bailey?" Lavon cut in again. "That man is old school and too high up the chain of command."

"Let me finish a sentence and maybe you'll get your answers," the other man growled. "I meant Bailey Junior, Robert. He's in the Air Force as well, popular in certain circles. If we get him on board, he might smooth the way for us."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Might? We need an in before they demand more tests. We should already have it."

"I thought you had the tests handled."

"We can handle the short-range ones, but with every passing day we risk them thinking themselves out of it or bringing in people who actually know their stuff and will demand tests we can't... adjust to."

"Hacking your way into a quarter-billion-dollar military contract for a hacking device," the other man said, a bit louder now, and his voice sounded familiar as well, but Eddie couldn't quite place it. "The irony."

"Careful," Lavon hissed. "Don't let the wrong person hear you."

"Fine. I need to get back, anyway. They'll be looking for me. There's only so much time that bird can hold a man's attention with her clothes on and the fucking security guy is like a dog with the bone."

Eddie, who was already hardly breathing as he tried not to attract any attention, felt the air leave him as if he was punched in the gut.

The other man was Albert Corner.

And he was apparently involved in much more than some extra-marital affairs.

"Go," Lavon growled. "And work faster or it's all over."

It was clear that there was no love lost between the two men, but a person didn't need to be friends with someone to steal money from the government together.

Which was what these guys were apparently trying to do.

And they wanted to use his brother to do it.

Over my dead body, Eddie told himself, finally pulling away from the bleach-smelling cabinet as he heard the door open and close two times. His hands were sweaty and his heart was beating fast, but he didn't have time to freak out.

Not yet.

He pulled his sleeve up to uncover his watch. It was a similar model to the ones their clients got, with a GPS and a transmitter, among other things. In his case, it allowed for communication with the team when he couldn't have a comm link in his ear, like now, since he was flying under the radar.

"Hey, it's me, do you guys hear me?"

He got five affirmatives—two pairs inside the building and Jasmine back at the HQ, filling in as the comms support—and he cleared his throat before continuing.

"I overheard a conversation between Karl Lavon and Albert Corner. Lavon's project is a scam," he whispered, covering his mouth just in case. "They're messing with the testing somehow, but they want to push for the contract to be signed ASAP before anyone notices. I guess creating a threat of espionage is also a part of it."

Martinez swore quietly.

"You need to get into a car and leave," Jeremy told him, voice calm but serious as

ever. "Clay will pick you up in five. Go back to the HQ and wait there for us. We need to play our parts, but you're done."

"I can—"

"Eddie." James's voice, although soft, shut him up instantly.

He was on an assignment. He needed to listen.

"Okay. Okay, I'm going."

"Pull out your phone and call Jasmine. Stay on the line until you're in the car," Jeremy instructed. "Nobody should stop you when they see you talking."

"If you say so." Eddie breathed in and out, trying to relieve some of the tension. "I'll keep the mic on the watch active, too, in case you need to hear what's going on."

"Yes, good."

As he stepped back into the main hall with the phone by his ear, he felt momentarily overwhelmed by the sounds and harsh lights, but he powered through it, thanks to Jasmine. She kept him apprised of the positions of their team members as well as Lavon, and then talked to him about the latest movie she'd seen with her roommate, once Eddie was out in the lobby and simply needed a distraction.

No one tried to stop him. No one even looked his way twice.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Finally, he got into the back seat of the company car and met Clay's gaze in the rearview mirror.

"I've got him, he's safe and sound," Clay said. "We're heading back to the HQ."

Eddie disconnected his call with Jasmine before uncovering his watch again.

"I'm here." He tugged at the damn bow tie until it came loose and he could pull it off completely. "Nobody tried to approach me."

"Good," Jeremy said. "Jas, the two of you should handle it as if Eddie was a field operative tonight. You handle his equipment and the files."

"I can do it," Eddie protested, but Martinez spoke up next.

"We're not questioning that. Still, we always use separate people to do separate things, so. Let Jas handle this."

Eddie half-expected James to weigh in here, but the man stayed quiet.

Was he trying to be mindful after their fight? Or was he ceding ground to Jeremy and Martinez, since, technically, CyberMode was their case?

Either way, both assignments were now bound together in a way that seemed impossible to untangle.

They were all in this mess together.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

James was glad Ryan was the one driving after they'd dropped Corners home, because if he was behind the wheel, he'd be breaking the speed limit for sure.

Logically, he knew Eddie was safe, hanging out in the comm center as he waited for them to be done for the night. But logic had nothing to do with the tense, unforgiving knot in his chest telling him that he wouldn't be able to settle down until he had Eddie in sight.

Over the comms, Martinez reported that he and Jeremy were leaving the party now, too, so they weren't going to be that far behind.

Which was good, if any of them wanted to catch any sleep tonight.

Ryan, to his credit, stayed quiet the whole way back to the HQ. He was throwing James looks every once in a while, but he knew better than to ask him anything, especially while their mikes were still on.

What a mess this whole thing turned out to be. Yesterday morning, their assignments were totally separate. Now, their clients were apparently in cahoots together, plotting to steal a fortune from the government right under everyone's noses.

Including the noses of their security detail, which was either colossally stupid or genius, in a way.

The former, if they don't succeed, the latter, if they do, he finally decided.

Even with Ryan keeping to the speed limit, it didn't take long for them to get to the HQ, and after leaving the car in the garage, they headed straight for the comm center.

Both of them tugged their earpieces off and deactivated them on their way up. Ryan opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but then the elevator paused on the right floor, and James rushed out of there, Ryan on his heels.

James basically barged in, not caring about how it might look. He had more important things to worry about.

His gaze immediately landed on Eddie, sitting in his usual chair and dressed in his everyday clothes. Safe and sound, but also a little freaked out, if the little shaky movements that immediately caught James's attention were anything to go by.

"Hey." Eddie waved at them and gave them a half-smile, a shadow of his usual one. He was clutching a stress ball in his right hand.

"Hey." James stepped closer, resisting the urge to pull him into a hug. "You okay?"

Eddie grimaced. "Yeah. I'm worried about my brother, though. If they get him involved..." He shook his head. "I need to warn him."

"Somebody will," James said and shook his head when it seemed like Eddie might protest. "He's going to be fine. We need to figure out how best to approach this, so we should wait for Jeremy and Martinez. Also," he added, glancing at his partner, "we have to bring Kalei in."

Ryan pulled out his phone.

"I'll tell him to give us an hour to come up with a plan, so we have something to discuss with him."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Sounds good." James turned back to Eddie. "We'll handle all of it, including your brother."

Gnawing on his lower lip, Eddie slumped in his seat. "Thank you."

James dropped onto his chair and patted Eddie's knee. "No thanks needed."

Over Eddie's shoulder, he watched Ryan leave the room with a phone to his ear, while Jasmine had her headset on and nodded along to something either Jeremy or Martinez was saying. This was probably the most privacy he and Eddie were going to get for the rest of the night, so he leaned a bit closer.

"How are you, really?" he asked in a low voice.

Eddie stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "This sucks."

James huffed, almost despite himself. "Yeah, we've had better assignments."

"We've hardly had worse," Eddie said, but there was a bit of a real smile on his face now.

"Well, what about that time in Arlington—"

"Oh, no." Eddie shook his head vehemently. "Absolutely not. We promised we're never going to speak of that one again."

James lifted his hands in the gesture of surrender, which reminded him he still had his

fancy suit on. He stood up and pulled off the jacket to toss it over the top of the chair, and as he turned back, he caught Eddie watching his body closely.

The body that responded instantly, to James's dismay.

Fuck. This was not the time.

Eddie rolled his chair back towards his desk quickly, but not fast enough to hide his face going red.

As James sat back down, he reminded himself the adrenaline was running high tonight. Everyone reacted differently to it, and he wasn't alien to his reaction being heightened sexual desire.

The heat traveling up his spine had everything to do with that and not anything else.

The same thing had apparently happened to Eddie. His first outing as a security personnel outside of the preliminary phase, and he'd already stumbled onto a conspiracy—one involving his brother, to make things even worse. Considering all this, arousal was a much better reaction than hysteria or something.

Before James could go further down that road, though, Ryan slipped back into the room.

"Kalei didn't want to wait, so he may get here about when Jeremy and Martinez do. He's going to alert the lawyers, as well, since we're on a shaky ground, here."

That was putting it mildly. The implications of this were frankly mindblowing.

"Whatever the boss wants, the boss gets," James said, but sat up a little straighter in his seat, relieved that Kalei was taking over the things that were above the field

operatives' level.

"What he needs to get is a life," Ryan muttered with a shake of his head. "He admitted that it hadn't been long since he left the office."

"On a Saturday?"

"Exactly."

It was an open secret that after Kalei had lost his husband a few years ago, the company had basically become his life. He'd built it with his brother-in-law, Noa, but he had no more family to speak of and no apparent interest in dating anyone. James wasn't sure if Kalei even had any social life aside from the KRK meet-ups he threw at his house.

Still, staying late in the office on a Saturday, when he didn't have to be at work at all...

"You think Vic knows?" James asked, glancing towards Eddie who was busy on his computer—or appearing so.

Ryan shrugged. "Is there anything about Kalei that Vic doesn't know?"

"Fair point."

Vic had been Kalei's assistant from the very start of the company. How long he'd been in love with Kalei, though, nobody knew or dared to ask. They could—and often did—tease each other about their love lives, but even the most bull-headed of them knew better than to touch particularly sensitive subjects.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

And being in love with your still-grieving boss was pretty fucking sensitive.

Jasmine tugged her headset off.

"Jeremy and Martinez are pulling in, they should be here in a few."

With a nod, Ryan motioned towards the table in the far end of the room.

"If we're doing it here, let's make ourselves comfortable, shall we?"

James helped him move the table to the middle of the room, closer to the computer stations, then grabbed some chairs for everyone.

Right as he took a seat himself, Jeremy and Martinez walked in. At that point, everyone handed over their equipment to Jasmine, and Eddie frowned and opened his mouth like he wanted to protest, but finally he just shoved his hands between his legs and stayed in his chair.

He did, however, roll it towards the table, situating himself next to James.

"Kalei's on his way, so we probably have a few minutes," Ryan told Jeremy, who took a seat on the other side of Eddie, while Martinez made a byline for the coffee machine.

"It's almost eleven," Jeremy reminded his partner, but Martinez waved him off.

"I'm going to crash soon if I don't drink it. You know how I get."

James looked at the coffee machine and considered it, too, but then let go of the idea. He would end up with a killer headache tomorrow otherwise.

Eddie rolled towards his desk and searched through his drawer before rolling back with four protein bars.

He pushed one towards each of them. "Here, have at it."

"Good to know you're hiding them away in here," Martinez said, grabbing one with a grin, and James raised his eyebrows.

He'd known about Eddie's stash for what seemed like forever. Eddie had an uncanny ability to tell when James really needed something to eat, and each time, he would hand over a bar without James even asking.

Judging by the nods from Ryan and Jeremy, it seemed like James was the only one getting this treatment, however, which made him happier than it probably should.

"What about you?" he asked to distract himself. "Don't you want one?"

"I already ate one, soon after I got here. And then another." Eddie grimaced. "I'm a stress eater."

That brought everyone back to the task at hand and to the evening from hell. They ate quickly and got comfortable, and by the time Kalei came in, they were ready to work.

But not before they all did a double take, likely for the same reason as James, because they'd never seen Kalei in khaki pants and a T-shirt in the office. At a barbecue at his place, sure, but never here.

Still, it was close to eleven on a Saturday night. In a way, he was dressed more

appropriately than the rest of them.

"Okay, lay it on me." Kalei sat at the top of the table and leaned on his forearms as the rest of them straightened in their seats. Khakis or not, the man still easily commanded the room. "What are we dealing with?"

Jeremy recapped everything that had happened in a clear, concise way, with Eddie telling his part in more detail when Kalei turned to him for details on his side.

"I know there's a lot to unpack here and it's not a priority from the case standpoint, but I need my brother to know," Eddie added when he got to the end, and James noticed he was clutching his hands between his legs under the table again.

For a split second, James wanted to reach out and touch him, calm him down, but then he remembered himself.

It was no this place.

"He'll find out," Kalei said. "Of course he will. We simply need to think of the best way to approach this without making a mess first."

Eddie slumped back in his chair. "Thank you."

"Nothing to thank me for," Kalei told him. "It's what I would've done whether he was your brother or not."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Still, thank you," Eddie insisted, and their boss nodded.

"Now, let's figure out a plan where you're still doing your job protecting them all while also keeping your eyes open. But remember, we're not the police or the FBI. I'll run this over with our lawyers after we're done here, and I'll take what we have to someone who will launch an investigation. That's not us."

All of them agreed, although Eddie was reluctant to do so, probably preoccupied with his brother.

James wished he could say something, anything, that would make it better, but he had no idea what it could be, so in the end he did what he did best—got to work.

Over the next hour and a half, they went over all the scenarios they could think of at the moment. They had to keep it cool in front of both Lavon and Corner in order not to spook them, which was pissing them all off, but there was no other way. Two months into this job, James had learned they didn't always get to work with people they respected, and this was yet another case like that.

Still, Lavon and Corner might go down in the company's history as the worst ones, since no team had ever stumbled into a criminal case with their clients asculprits, not victims.

By the time they finished, it was almost one in the morning, and their energy was running low, but at least they had a plan. One of the things the Army had taught James was that knowing what came next was key. It was the endless running around in circles, waiting for something to happen, that could break a person.

"Let's all go home," Kalei finally said. "Carpool, if possible, because some of you look ready to drop."

Jasmine had left half an hour ago, leaving them copies of all the recordings, so now it was only the six of them in the room. James took the opening right away.

"I can drive you home," he told Eddie before someone else could jump in.

"You don't have to..." Eddie started, but hesitated, blinking slowly. Clearly, tiredness was winning over being polite.

"It's no problem, really." James turned to Ryan. "Want to tag along?"

"Definitely not," his partner muttered under his breath, but then cleared his throat and spoke up louder. "No, I have my car here. I can take the rest of you home," he added, glancing around the table.

James had never been more relieved about not having to drive Ryan home, but he decided not to question it.

Maybe he was looking forward to being in his bed faster.

Yeah. Probably that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Everything seemed to be floating in and out of focus as Eddie sat there, half-asleep, in the passenger seat of James's car.

James.

Who was driving him home.

A part of Eddie wished that the circumstances were different. That it wasn't merely a courtesy thing, but that James planned to go up to his apartment and press him against the wall before devouring him, driving him completely out of his head, and...

The rest of Eddie simply didn't want to be alone right now. The idea made his stomach turn and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, trying to hold the nausea off.

He had no idea what the hell was going on.

"You're crashing," James's voice brought him back into focus, and Eddie realized he must have said that last part out loud.

At least he hoped it was the only part he'd said out loud.

He shook his head and straightened in his seat in an attempt to make himself more clear-headed.

"Huh?" he managed.

"Adrenaline crash," James told him. "It's hitting you hard."

"It's as if I'm drunk," Eddie admitted, words getting out slowly even to his own ears. "Or sleep deprived."

"Yeah, it may go like that. You'll feel better after you get some sleep and take it easy tomorrow."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"I'm worried about my brother," Eddie heard himself say. "He can be a real asshole, but he's still. You know. My brother. Doesn't deserve this."

"Your brother's going to be fine. Corner admitted that he was hard to influence, right? So it's not like anything will happen overnight. We have time to warn him."

"I wanted to be the one to tell him, but I don't..." Eddie tangled his hands in his lap and rested his head against the window, closing his eyes. "This sucks."

James stayed quiet for a while, and Eddie itched to turn to him, but his body wasn't cooperating.

He was so, so tired. With everything.

Finally, James spoke up. "I think it's easier, coming from a stranger in a professional setting instead of from a family member."

"It is in this case, for sure," Eddie whispered.

Then the car stopped and he realized they were there already.

His stomach rolled again.

"Could you..." He hesitated, but in the end, he was too tired to resist asking. "Would you like to come up? I don't think I can handle being alone right now."

Which sounded awful. Pathetic. Or as if he was trying to trick James into something.

It was all true, though.

James glanced between him and his building, then at the street in front of them before facing Eddie again, his gaze warm and understanding.

"Okay. Let's go in."

"Really?" Eddie asked, unsure if he could believe his ears.

"Yeah." James turned away, pocketing his phone and the keys. "Those crashes can suck, so I get it."

Eddie slowly got out of the car, and thankfully avoided the humiliation of James needing to help him on the way up the stairs onto the second floor where his apartment was located. It was small for a one-bedroom, but cozy and comfortable, with as reasonable rent as one could get in DC, which immediately made it the greatest place ever.

"Sorry for the clutter," he said as they walked in.

James looked around as Eddie locked the door.

"Don't worry about it, I've seen far worse." A corner of his lips turned up. "I'm sure I've done far worse."

"Oh, I've done far worse, too," Eddie told him as they both shed their coats. "This is pretty much my standard, though." He headed towards the refrigerator. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water, please." James walked up to the shelf with Eddie's music records. "Vinyls, huh?"

The question was vague, but there was a genuine curiosity in his voice, not a tease, so Eddie shrugged and smiled.

"Yeah, I collected them for a while in college and right after. My roommate at the time converted me." He handed James his glass and gestured him towards the couch. "These days, it's mostly digital for me, although I may still buy one from time to time."

"It's all digital for me," James said as they settled on the couch, with enough space between them to avoid giving Eddie heart palpitations while he was hyped up like this. "But I've never had even one vinyl, not to mention a record player," he added, pointing at the one in the corner of the room.

There was an invitation at the tip of Eddie's tongue, an offer to play James something right now, but he stopped himself just in time. Playing music would be a date move. And, regardless of what Eddie might want, this wasn't a date.

This was a friend helping out a friend, nothing else.

He took a sip of his water, wishing he had grabbed a drink for himself instead, even though he knew it would've been a bad idea, considering everything that had happened.

Fuck. What a night.

"What's bothering you?" James asked quietly, and Eddie looked up to see his concerned gaze and the small line between his eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

The words rushed out of Eddie after that.

"My brother wouldn't have taken me seriously," he whispered, lowering his head to stare at the glass in his hand. "That's the real reason why I didn't argue for being the one to tell him. I wanted to, I still do, but it's not... It wouldn't have worked."

"Because you're younger?"

Eddie snorted. "That, too. But mostly, I'm too different. I'm not military, or a politician, or any other of the few things that would be acceptable enough for my family to—"care"—respect my work. I have opinions they don't agree with, and I'm voicing them, whether they like it or not." He sighed. "There's a long list of reasons, I guess, and the short of it is, my family and I aren't on the best of terms. We don't hate each other or anything. We're just... too different. If we weren't connected by blood, we wouldn't give each other the time of day."

"But you are," James whispered, and Eddie nodded, lifting the glass as if in toast.

"But we are. I'm some kind of a weird twist in the family shakeup, but we are."

They sat in silence for a bit before James spoke up.

"Not fitting in at home, that sucks. It's like you're alone all the time."

"Yeah." Eddie met his gaze again. "Yes, exactly."

He opened his mouth to say something more, to ask if James felt it, too, since he'd hit

the nail on the head, but he wasn't sure if he should.

"I know the feeling," James finally admitted, glancing down at his lap.

Eddie bit his lower lip. That was an opening, he knew it was.

"You do?" he whispered, hoping not to spook James, because even after all the hours they'd spent hanging out at work, they'd never discussed their families before.

"Yeah." James sagged further into the cushions. "I was in foster care after my parents died, and I spent a few years bouncing between homes until settling into the one that stuck. Feeling like an odd one out was my everyday life, too."

For a moment, Eddie had no idea what to say.

"I'm sorry about your parents," he finally offered.

James ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks. Anyway, none of the homes I stayed at were violent or anything, but I still didn't feel like I fit in. I was becoming a teenager, too, so that made things harder, but mostly, we were too different, I guess. They were all too set in their ways, and I was rebelling against the idea of forcing myself to think how others expected me to think."

"Sounds familiar," Eddie admitted, then grimaced, catching himself. "I mean, I know it's not the same—"

"Relax, I was the one who drew the comparison." James shrugged and gave him a crooked smile. "And it is familiar. Details differ, obviously, but the part about not being understood in the place you're meant to call home, that we have in common."

Eddie sucked his lower lip in for a moment before nodding.

"I guess. Did it get better for you?"

"Yeah, it did. At the last place, the one that stuck, we did feel differently about many things, but my foster parents didn't expect me to change my mind to fit theirs, which was refreshing. We argued from time to time, but generally they respected my right to have my own opinions, as long as I didn't disrespect them. It worked out fine."

James offered a real smile there at the end, definitely more genuine than the previous ones. More affectionate.

Eddie would have loved to ask more questions and learn more about James's family, whoever that entailed for him.

"Sounds nice," he said instead, not wanting to push. "Simple, really, when you think about it, right? Live and let live, how's that complicated?"

"Oh, boy." James snorted. "Apparently way more complicated than either of us thinks, judging by the world."

Eddie chuckled. "I guess so. Anyway, in my family, I definitely have to respect their choices and opinions, but it's not that obvious the other way around. We seem to have gotten stuck on them 'letting me' make my choices with as little complaining as they can stomach."

"Why do I get the feeling you wish they had better stomachs?"

"Because you are a smart man who can pick up on the right clues."

Eddie put the empty glass on the coffee table and immediately regretted it. He didn't have anything to do with his hands now, other than wringing his fingers, which he'd been trying to unlearn ever since he'd noticed the sound of his knuckles cracking

made James grimace every time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"I'm sorry they don't appreciate you the way they should," James offered, and, damn him, the way he looked at Eddie was just too much.

How was Eddie supposed to get his shit together around this man if James insisted on being so perfect for him, from his soft smiles to the way he could bring Eddie to his knees and build him back up with only a look?

How was that fair?

It isn't, the voice at the back of his head told him. Life isn't fair, and love is even worse.

Eddie turned to stare at his glass on the table, swallowing hard. Even talking about his family was better than losing his grip on reality and trying something that could jeopardize the friendship he and James had built.

"I'm used to it by now," he made himself say. "Mostly."

Nodding, James turned the glass around in his hands, over and over. Maybe he didn't know what to say, or maybe he was waiting for Eddie to tell him more.

And Eddie found himself wanting to. Now that he'd started, it all seemed ready to come out, almost bursting out of him.

After all, he'd had no one to talk to about this over the years. He'd tried, a few times, but nobody quite got it, either thinking he was an entitled, ungrateful brat, or that his family was evil. And James... James seemed to understand it.

Hell, he seemed to have lived something like it.

"There are days when it hits harder than usual," Eddie admitted. "I may not see them for weeks and it's fine, it's better. But then I show up for one of their dinners, which are never without an agenda, and I'm reminded of how different our lives are. And, worst of all, how I can be a visitor in their world, but they'll never come over to see how it is in mine."

He was probably babbling and making little sense, but he couldn't help it now. The tame had broken.

"I'm a grown man, and I'm aware I should've left it behind a long time ago. And I have, for the most part. But knowing what I'm walking into and being as prepared as I can be doesn't change the fact that what happens is always the same. I could write a script for the party, and I'd get it right every time, save some details. A few people will suggest I could change jobs to something more suitable, and at least one of them will be a member of my family. One of the usual guests will ask for the tenth time what it is that I actually do, because apparently, it's that hard to remember. And then another will refuse to come up with any question about me and instead tell me how wonderful it is that my mom, or dad, or one of my siblings do what they do." Eddie slid down until he rested his head over the back cushion. "To be clear, I don't want to sound unappreciative. I know my family's accomplishments are great, and I am proud of them. It's still..."

He shrugged, not sure how to finish as he ran out of steam.

"Tiring?" James supplied, and Eddie nodded.

"Yeah. Tiring works."

They fell into a comfortable silence for a while, and Eddie's eyes were starting to

drop when James spoke up.

"At one of the foster homes I went to, I was the only boy. They had three daughters, two biological ones and one they'd been fostering for a few years by that point. But the father had clearly wanted to have a son all those years, so when I came along, he focused on me right away. He was this big-shot lawyer and wanted to teach me the job, took me to the office, and shared all these things he thought a good lawyer should know." James stared at his glass. "I never wanted to become a lawyer, but I was too afraid to tell him, because I thought they'd send me back."

Eddie swallowed hard. He couldn't imagine that kind of pressure, especially as a kid.

"But you know who wanted to be one?" James continued. "His oldest daughter. She loved his work stories, asked him questions, excelled at school and on the debate team. And yet he didn't care. He had three brilliant daughters, all three with ambitions way beyond mine, but he was one of those assholes who thought women had no place doing 'real' careers. He wanted a son because only a son could step into his shoes."

Eddie grimaced. He hated guys like that.

"What happened?" he asked, rolling his head against the cushion to see James frown.

"The daughters all came to resent me. No surprise there. I came out of nowhere and instantly became the center of their father's attention, something they had all been working their butts off for. So finally I told him I never wanted to be a lawyer and also, I'm gay. That was pretty much it."

"I'm sorry," Eddie whispered, mentally beating himself up for ever thinking that their situations were similar. They weren't. For all his family's faults and all his hurts, he was never in danger of being sent away. Being pushed aside, yes, but never abandoned.

James grunted in protest, as if he could read Eddie's mind.

"I meant to say, some people are impossible to please. That guy, he couldn't see how great his daughters were, because he was always searching for something else. And they could never please him while being themselves."

"They didn't have to turn against you, though," Eddie said, angry for that young James who got caught up in the family drama and thrown out.

"They were teenagers," James pointed out. "I don't blame them. I was an easy target, and they needed someone to be angry at."

"Still," Eddie argued. "I don't like it."

Looking up at that, James gave him a small smile. He opened his mouth, probably to say something, but then the air seemed to shift around them.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Eddie held his breath as they stared at each other.

Seconds passed without either of them glancing away, and Eddie's heart started pounding in his chest.

Is he—? Will they—?

He tried not to even blink.

Please.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Still, I don't like it."

As if this was an obvious thing to say.

As if feeling resentful on James's behalf over something that had happened when he was a teen was a normal, everyday reaction.

James stared into Eddie's eyes, wondering what to say or do, because no one had ever done that. No one had ever taken his side in such a way.

Then, between one moment and the next, something had changed. The two of them had seen each other thousands of times, on easy days and on hard nights. They'd laughed and joked, or they'd said nothing and simply sat there in the office that was never completely silent. They'd helped each other through some difficult moments,

but never like this.

James had never shared things from his childhood with Eddie—or anyone from KRK, aside from Ryan. It wasn't a secret, but also not something he advertised.

They'd never even been in each other's apartments before.

He shouldn't have gone up. He could tell they were on the brink of something, and he should've stepped away from the edge. But Eddie needed help, and James couldn't abandon his friend simply because of a feeling.

Now, though, sitting close enough that it would be so easy to reach out and touch him, so easy to put a hand on Eddie's neck, lean in, and—

No.

Absolutely not.

James's immediate instinct was to rear back, but he managed to catch himself in time to slowly lean further against the armrest of the couch, instead.

He clutched the glass in his hand and stared at it, his mind going a thousand miles an hour as he tried to figure out what came next.

Would it be so bad? Would it really be so bad if he—?

Yes, it would, he answered his own question, a dull ache spreading in his chest. He'd never had any trouble finding someone to hook up with, so sex was easy to come by. Friends, though—people he could trust—were much rarer. And to risk a friendship for adrenaline-fueled sex they were likely to regret in the morning would be the stupidest thing James had ever done.

And he'd done some stupid shit in his past.

"I should go," he said out loud, feeling like a coward but knowing that retreat was sometimes the only way to get out of a situation unscathed.

He made a mistake of glancing up right then, though, catching Eddie's disappointed expression before he quickly turned away towards the window.

I'm sorry, James wanted to say, chest hurting even harder than before.

Because he was. He was sorry that he couldn't be what Eddie wanted or deserved. But James had learned a long time ago that some risks were not worth taking, not when there was so much at stake. When you had little to hold dear, you would think twice—or a hundred times—before you chanced losing it for anything.

"Of course. I didn't mean to keep you up so late." Eddie got up and grabbed his empty glass from the coffee table. "We should probably both go to bed," he added, then winced. "To catch some sleep."

James put his glass down and got up as well.

"Yeah, the day seems to be catching up to me," he said as he followed Eddie to the door.

It wasn't even a lie, merely the safest of truths he could share.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Thanks for hanging out for a while. I feel..." Eddie hesitated. "I'm not so hyped up anymore."

James understood the reluctance. He wouldn't be able to honestly say he felt better now, either. There was none of the usual ease between them, and it left him unsettled.

"Get as much sleep as you can." He stepped out of the apartment onto the chilly corridor. "See you on Monday."

"Yeah." Eddie nodded without looking at him. "See you."

After the door closed, James stood there, wondering if he hadn't just lost something anyway, despite his best efforts.

When he left the building a while later, he still didn't have an answer.

* * *

Waking up after a late night was usually a bit disorienting, but this time James went from asleep to awake in an instant, a part of him surprised he was in his own bed and his own apartment.

Where else would you be?he asked himself, and the last remains of the dream flew through his head—Eddie lying on his stomach in James's bed, with mussed up hair, bare, pale shoulders, and a smile half-hidden behind his arm as he watched him.

James closed his eyes and buried his face in the pillow—his own, in an otherwise-

empty bed.

Fuck.

Last night had definitely messed with his head. A stray romantic thought or two about a friend was one thing but dreaming about him lying in the bed next to James, in a clearly domestic, definitely-not-the-first-time scenario, was something completely different.

And he was hard now, too. Brilliant.

He pressed his erection against the mattress for a moment, before more images of Eddie flooded in and James tossed the covers aside to get out of bed.

Cold shower it was, then.

After leaving the bathroom, he put on a pair of sweatpants and an old Army T-shirt and planted himself on the couch with a coffee and a big bowl of cereal. He clicked through the channels for a while, hoping to find something that would grab his attention, but couldn't focus on anything for more than five minutes. And even that long was solely because he saw a familiar face—Pascal was talking about the changes the education reform had already made since its passing.

Once the segment was over, James went from thinking about Pascal to Jeremy and their current assignments, which of course brought him back around to Eddie.

Who was the sole witness able to link the culprits, which put him at much greater risk than even James had first imagined.

And despite wanting to shield Eddie from any danger that might come his way, there was actually nothing James could do.

You'd be able to do much more if you were right by his side instead of keeping a safe distance, a traitorous voice at the back of his head supplied, but James only grunted in displeasure. First of all, that was no reason to get involved with someone, and second of all...

It simply couldn't happen.

Which sounded awfully weak, as far as arguments went, so James decided to go for a run to clear his mind.

Since it was a cold day, there weren't many people in his favorite park nearby, and for the most part he was able to tune out everything else. Not completely—he'd never met a veteran who was able to do that—but enough to ponder things he hadn't thought of for months, if not years.

Nothing lasts forever was a lesson he'd learned decades ago, and while he'd resented it at first, with time he'd started to make peace with it. After all, life kept reminding him of that any time he'd thought he might have found an exception. All the foster homes before the last, Philip, his one serious boyfriend, or even his unit in the Army—everything came and went. So was it really that surprising that now, when he once again was tempted to believe in something different, his entire being resisted it?

Well, most of his being. There were certain parts of him very interested in breaking his self-imposed rules.

But he'd tried that with Philip, once.

Fuck. James hadn't thought about his ex in a long while. Last he'd heard, Philip was an entertainment lawyer in LA, married with twins and a house up on the hill. Good for him, James had thought back then and moved on, as if the heartbreak had never happened. As if the fights, and the fear and helplessness he'd felt back when Philip

had given him an ultimatum about leaving the Army before James had been ready to—as if all that had been nothing but a foregone conclusion.

Looking back, James wished Philip wasn't the only real boyfriend he'd ever had, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Besides, he hadn't really met anyone he wanted to be in a relationship with...

Until now.

Until Eddie.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

The thought stopped James cold, and he leaned against the closest bench, feeling as if he'd been struck over the head.

He didn't just want to kiss Eddie or to have sex with him. He didn't have a harmless crush.

He wanted a real relationship, a partner. A shot at making it work with somebody at his side.

With Eddie at his side.

And while even thinking that was scary, the tentative hope that was now filling his chest, the hope of all that the two of them could be if Eddie was willing...

Maybe James had finally found something worth all the risk.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eddie expected to hear from his brother on Sunday, since the plan had been for Jeremy and Martinez to notify him in the morning, but when by eight o'clock in the evening, Robert still hadn't called, Eddie didn't know what to do. He'd spent the whole day trying not to worry and instead distracting himself by overthinking everything that had happened—or hadn't happened—with James last night.

Waking up at six from a vivid dream of the two of them—a redo of the night with a much different ending—had set up the tone for the rest of the day.

He did his laundry, he vacuumed, he even scrubbed his bathroom and kitchen clean, which he usually hated, but none of it stopped him from imagining what it would've been like, if James had actually kissed him.

They'd both wanted it—at least Eddie thought so, before another wave of doubt came over him and he started worrying that maybe it was all in his head.

Because James wasn't a shy man. If he'd wanted to, he surely would have made a move.

Wouldn't he?

On the other hand, Eddie could have been the one to lean in and kiss James. He would have gotten his answer then.

That prompted him to pick up his phone once again. Maybe he should reach out to his brother first, not sit back and wait for Robert to do so.

The intercom buzzed right as the phone rang in his hand, startling him enough to almost drop it.

Robert's ID flashed on the screen.

"Hey." Eddie stood up. "Wait a second, please, somebody's downstairs and I have to—"

"It's me, let me up," his brother said and hung up.

"Such a charmer," Eddie muttered under his breath. It was a compliment he'd always heard about Robert, but he'd never experienced said charm himself. All he got was stuff like this, as if waiting for a polite end of a call was a waste of Robert's precious

time.

After buzzing him in, Eddie looked around the room for a perfunctory check. Good thing he'd cleaned today, or he would have no doubt heard about the mess.

Loud knocking prompted him to open the door, and he waved his brother inside.

"Come on in."

"Hey." Robert tugged his jacket off and handed it to Eddie, who rolled his eyes but put it on the coat rack. One would think that a guy would be casual in his brother's home, but not Robert. He was still staying in place by the door because Eddie hadn't specifically shown him to the couch.

"Take a seat." Eddie gestured towards it. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Water, please." Robert crossed the room and sat on the couch, his back straight. "I'm sorry I haven't called beforehand," he added like an afterthought, as if he'd only now remembered that he hadn't quite followed the proper protocol for a visit.

"It's fine," Eddie told him as he filled two glasses with water.

"So you weren't doing anything?" Robert pressed, and Eddie's hackles raised, but he forced himself to relax.

His brother didn't mean offense. Probably.

"Nothing I can't stop when somebody drops in for a visit." Eddie handed him a glass and took a seat on the opposite side of the couch, facing him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Robert took a sip of his water before meeting his gaze. "You probably know why I'm here."

"I have an idea, yes." And then, before he could stop himself, he added, "It's not like you do this a lot."

He probably shouldn't have said it, but to hell with it. There was no one but the two of them to hear it and judge.

Something flashed on Robert's face that Eddie wasn't sure how to interpret, but before he could figure it out, his brother started talking.

"I don't often have people come to my house and tell me I'm a target in some scheme to extort the government, either."

Despite everything, laughter threatened to bubble out of Eddie and he had to stifle it.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it's not a regular thing," he said, and Robert chuckled.

"So am I." Then he frowned again. "They told me you were the one who procured that information."

"I was in the right place at the right time."

"I thought you weren't a field agent."

"I'm not." Eddie leaned his head on his hand, his elbow resting on the back of the

couch. "That's actually the first time I'm involved in a field assignment outside of the preliminary phase."

Robert rubbed his forehead.

"First time and you've already stumbled onto a conspiracy like this?"

"What can I say, luck runs in the family." At his brother's confused expression, Eddie raised his eyebrows. "Have you forgotten how you started your first combat tour?"

Eddie definitely hadn't. Before that horrifying week, he couldn't have named any of the Afghan provinces, and after, he knew them all by heart. Especially the one Robert's unit had gotten pinned down in and had to fight their way out of—this one Eddie could probably write a policy paper on, even now.

"That's... not at all the same," Robert told him, and Eddie sighed.

"I'm not really comparing this to your combat experience. I simply meant—"

"I knew what I was getting into and I was trained for it. You were not." Robert shook his head. "You shouldn't have been put in danger like that."

Eddie was rendered speechless for a moment, unsure how to react to this show of concern. He wouldn't have thought Robert's issue with the comparison would be about how Eddie's situation was worse, somehow.

Which was ridiculous.

"I wasn't really in any danger," he assured his brother. "I was at a party, mingling and sipping apple cider. When I overheard them, I was hiding out to catch a breather and they had no way of seeing me. I didn't see them, either. I recognized their voices,

that's it."

"Still, you're a comms specialist, not a field agent."

"True. But I went there precisely because I'm a comms specialist. It wasn't like they were short a field operative and they thought, hey, let's grab someone from the comm center on our way out." Eddie sagged into the cushions. "We're not idiots, you know."

"I know you're not an idiot," Robert said, which was as close to a compliment as Eddie had ever gotten from his brother. "I've heard great things about your company, too, but the jury's now out on them as far as I'm concerned."

"Again, they weren't making me—or letting me, for that matter—do anything dangerous. I attended a party, that's it."

"If it was an innocent party, I wouldn't have had two men in suits knocking on my door on a Sunday morning," Robert told him dryly. "Anyway, I didn't come here to argue about this."

"What did you come here for, then?" Eddie asked.

Robert opened his mouth, then closed it, frowning as he looked to the side.

"This is fucked up," he finally said before taking a sip of his water.

When nothing else followed, Eddie prompted him. "What is?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

He got a shrug in response, but then his brother found words again.

"Everything about this. They contacted my office a few days ago, actually, and I only put off calling them back because I was out of town for most of the week. I was going to get in touch with them tomorrow and set up a meeting, because there's a real interest in that project inside the DoD, and I was more than willing to smooth the way for them." He frowned at his hands. "This would've been the end of my career."

"No, it wouldn't, you didn't know—"

"At my level, you don't get to say you didn't know." Robert leaned back against the cushions, finally breaking the hard line of his posture. "Especially when so much money is at stake. Not to mention, the security of our troops."

"Wouldn't it require more tests before the deal was signed, though?" Eddie asked. "That's what's bugging me about this. Would they really sign the contract without seeing it actually work?"

Robert grimaced. "It's complicated. Sure, in an ideal world, we buy things that already exist in prototype and can prove their value. But sometimes there are situations like this one, when it's more about wanting it to work and not wanting anyone else to have it, so we'll buy it before it goes out to other interested parties. You'd be surprised how often we have to compete for something that's merely an idea on a few pieces of paper."

Eddie had seen it, of course, in some parts of the techworld, where everyone was hungry for the next big thing. He'd had no idea it happened in the military, too, but he

should've guessed it. Military relied heavily on tech, after all.

"You need a better screening process," he said, and Robert nodded.

"I'll definitely push for that once we deal with this mess. I want to know how they've gotten this far."

"Have you talked about this with anyone yet?"

"No, I've agreed with your guys to hold off and see what happens. I'll notify my counsel, to have it on record that I'm going to proceed with this in order to provide more evidence, not to profit. The more proof we get, the better. And if I stall and they get desperate, they may make a mistake."

Eddie opened his mouth to point out that if they get desperate, they might become dangerous, but he caught himself in time. Robert knew more about danger than Eddie ever would.

"Be careful, though," he told him instead and took a sip of his water.

Robert, for his part, simply nodded.

"You, too. You've done enough already. Stay put, okay?"

If this had been an order, Eddie would balk at it. He'd heard enough of those in his life, from both Robert and their dad. But this time, Robert was asking, the same way Eddie was asking him—like a brother, not a soldier.

"I will. There's no need to involve a person with tech knowledge anymore when we know it's all fake anyway."

Robert snorted and shook his head. "I can't believe they'll go down because of the security company they hired. I mean, I've seen people who tried to make themselves appear more important by hiring a detail for show, but to subject themselves to being observed all the time when they're out there committing a crime... That's next-level stupidity, right there."

"Yeah, that's what we thought, too. I mean, we suspected they might have hired us for appearance's sake. We've seen it too many times to count. But this... This is new."

"They underestimated you." Robert downed the rest of his water before putting the glass down. "So did I."

It took Eddie a second to register the words, and then he stilled.

Whatever he'd expected as he waited for his brother to get in touch, it wasn't this.

But Robert wasn't done yet.

"It's been made clear to me that you were the one who uncovered this whole thing," he said. "The guys who came to my house clearly think very highly of you in general. I'm sorry I—" He paused. "I've never intended to look down on your career or anything, but this made me realize that I did."

For all that Eddie had wanted to hear something like this for years, now that it was happening, he didn't know how to react to it, at all.

"Thanks," he finally said, clutching the glass in his hands like a lifeline. "I appreciate it."

Robert relaxed his shoulders another fraction. If he keeps progressing like that, he'll be lounging on this couch by next week, Eddie thought and couldn't help smiling.

It got him a rueful smile in response, one that showed a bit of that charm everyone kept insisting his brother had.

"Still, I'll feel better if you stay behind a screen and impress us all from there," Robert told him, and they both chuckled at that.

"You'd all be terribly impressed if you understood what it is that I can do," Eddie tossed back. "Anyway, I feel much better where I am, so I'm not interested in a permanent change."

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Going out had been a fun idea, and he'd learned some new things, but he preferred being the person behind the scenes and he suspected he always would.

Besides, he never wanted to give up overseeing his field teams. Temporarily letting Jasmine handle them had been hard enough.

"You want a beer now?" he asked his brother out of the blue. "Or more water?"

Robert hesitated briefly, then nodded. "Beer would be good."

"Beer it is."

Maybe the invitation to hang out together longer was pushing their luck, but it seemed like the right time to take a risk.

Could've tried that last night, a voice at the back of his head told him, but he pushed the thought aside as he opened the fridge to take the beers out.

He'd wasted too much time today already, overthinking his every move, and he had better things to do now. Real things. Not fantasies of what could've been.

* * *

The next morning, he was once again rushing out of his apartment.

It wasn't as bad as last week—he'd prefer not to have another Monday like that one for a good long while—but Eddie still needed to hurry to the station in order to get to

work at his usual time.

He shouldn't have snoozed his alarm again, that was for sure. But he'd gone to bed late and had some confusing dreams about James, Kalei, and Robert plotting something together and refusing to let him in on it. To make matters worse, he kept waking up every hour or so and struggled to fall asleep again.

That was apparently the price one paid for deciding to go out in the field for a change.

Never again, he promised himself as he ran down the stairs. Once was more than enough.

He slowed down right before the entrance door and walked out of the building at a quick pace, but not running. There was no way he'd be able to run all the way to the station unless he was running for his life, and even then, he might not make it.

He was already breathing a bit faster after a few flights of stairs, but he tried to slow it down now as he inhaled the sharp, cold morning air.

Looking down as he went, he only noticed he was about to collide with someone when the man's shoes appeared in Eddie's line of vision.

He came to a halt and was about to apologize, but as he lifted his head, the words died on his tongue.

The man was dressed in all black, with a baseball cap covering half his face, and he wasn't alone.

Another guy moved quickly behind Eddie and covered his mouth with some kind of cloth, gagging him, then the two of them pushed Eddie into a van parked near the curb—a van he should have noticed the moment he stepped outside.

But it was too late now. He didn't even manage to shout or put up any kind of a fight before one of the men put him in zip ties quickly and pushed him onto the filthy rubber floor that smelled like beer and cigarette smoke.

All Eddie could do was watch as the door was shut close, leaving him in a sudden darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After Sunday's self-reflection, James was eager to talk to Eddie and finally take the risk, but he knew doing it at work was a bad idea, regardless of the outcome. If it went well, he would want to do things they shouldn't do in the office, and if it went badly... Well, that would make the situation even worse than last week, when Eddie was angry at him and barely said a word that wasn't related to the job.

With that in mind, James resisted approaching Eddie first thing in the morning and instead spent some time hanging out in the kitchen, which was crowded as usual before the Monday morning briefing.

If he kept an eye out for Eddie, nobody had to know.

He realized it wasn't anything new, though. He'd been looking forward to seeing Eddie every day for months now.

Which meant he'd been in denial for equally long. Damn.

"Are you sleeping on your feet again?" Ryan asked, walking past him to the coffee machine to fill up his cup for the second time in under ten minutes.

"With all that ruckus going around?" James tilted his head to indicate the loud and crowded room. "Not likely."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"Spoken as if you'd never spent weeks falling asleep to the lulling sounds of the enemy dropping artillery basically on top of your head," Martinez told him as he topped his cup with the rest of the coffee in the pot and went on to prepare the next one.

"Or fallen unconscious in a vehicle as your teammates sang every possible Johnny Cash song out of tune," Ryan said.

"Or drifted off to the cacophony of snores in the tent," Martinez added.

"Or—"

"Fine, I see your point." James saluted them with his mug. "You people are worse than a combat tour."

Ryan and Martinez both snorted and shook their heads.

"Sure," Ryan offered dryly. "I forgot how the unlimited supply of coffee and the air-conditioned office and training spaces are the things that could break the spirit of any man."

"They could, if you come with the package."

"Man, maybe we should switch partners for a week, pair you up with Jeremy while Ryan and I take a break from all the grumbling," Martinez suggested as he measured the coffee out. "See how you like it."

James raised his eyebrows. "How would I like the calm and quiet, you mean?"

"You'd want me back in no time," Ryan told him.

They all knew it was true, of course—James was certain none of them wanted to switch partners for anything—but before he had to come up with a retort, a loud whistle sounded from the doorway.

It was Vic, holding a stack of files and a phone.

"Five minutes out," he announced. "Get your coffees ready if you haven't yet. We have a lot to go over today."

With that, he left, and the three of them followed him out, making room for others who still needed their caffeine fix.

"Where is Jeremy, by the way?" Ryan asked.

"On the phone with Eddie's brother." Martinez tilted his head towards their office. "It seems like the guy is eager to knock the assholes out, but he knows the smarter thing to do is to catch them all in the act so they can't talk their way out of it."

"You went to notify him yesterday, right? How is he?" James asked, hoping it could pass for the professional curiosity, but judging from the way Ryan snorted, he, at least, wasn't fooled.

"Pretty much as you'd expect any lieutenant colonel to belike, only with his brain still mostly intact," Martinez offered. "He heard us out and was pretty cooperative, considering everything. Obviously not happy that he came so close to trusting the wrong guys, but he wasn't in denial, either."

Good. The last thing Eddie needed was family drama on top of everything else this case represented.

"Also, he looks like Eddie, if you took Eddie's glasses off and added more muscle mass," Martinez said as they entered the auditorium and took their seats.

That mental image was not unattractive, but James preferred Eddie as he was—with his glasses, his lean frame, his long fingers...

He wasn't going to say it out loud, though, since he'd never live it down. Ever.

Todd, sitting in the front row ahead of them, turned around.

"Hey, have you seen Eddie this morning?" he asked, addressing all three of them but pausing on James.

"No," Ryan said, while James and Martinez shook their heads. "Why? Did he sleep in again?"

Todd shrugged. "No idea, but I haven't seen him yet, and I've been in the comm center since seven."

Martinez made some joke about early birds, but James's thoughts were already focused on Eddie. He knew mistakes happened, but it didn't seem likely that Eddie would sleep through his alarm clock again and not notify anybody he was going to be late.

James glanced up when the door opened, but it was the same group of guys that had been in the kitchen, followed by Kalei. Jeremy slipped in quietly a minute later and sat down next to Martinez.

There was still no trace of Eddie.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

After Kalei welcomed them and went briefly over the familiar agenda for the meeting, Melissa took over, talking about the recent developments of the case she was working on with Keri. Then it was Clay's turn. Then Dave's.

Soon enough, it was time for Ryan and James to speak about the Corners, but they realized quickly that it was hard to talk about one case without the other, the one Jeremy and Martinez were working on with Eddie. Right as James opened his mouth to say it and suggest a joint presentation, the door to the auditorium opened and in came Jasmine in a hurry.

"I'm sorry, everyone, but it's urgent," she told them and headed straight to Kalei, who covered his mic as she approached him.

James was in the second row, though, and was able to catch "Eddie" out of all the words she was saying in a rapid manner.

It was enough to make his heartbeat quicken in response.

Eddie was in danger.

In that moment, James was as certain as ever that his hunch was right. Something was wrong with Eddie.

Before he could react—how, he had no idea—Kalei nodded sharply at Jasmine and uncovered the mic.

"We have an emergency situation, so we're cutting the meeting short," he told

everyone. "Callan, Martinez, Fowler, and Dawson, follow me to the comm center. The rest of you, you're dismissed, but teams who are not scheduled for any field work today should be ready to provide assistance at a short notice, if needed."

James clenched his hands into fists under the small desk before getting up. He wanted to grab Kalei and demand to know what had happened, but this wasn't how things worked.

"Be cool," Ryan whispered next to him as they followed their boss out behind Jeremy and Martinez. "We'll know soon enough."

Definitely not soon enough, James thought. Never before had he despised the fact that the comm center was on a different floor as much as now, when it seemed to take forever to get there.

Finally,finally, they all got in, and Kalei started talking as soon as the door closed.

"Eddie has been taken from the street right outside his house."

It felt like a punch to the solar plexus.

James couldn't breathe.

"His tracker was deactivated about twenty minutes ago," Kalei went on, "which means whoever's behind it, they know what they're doing. Or at least they're learning quickly. Before that, the tracker indicated the North Springfield area."

"He was in an abandoned warehouse," Jasmine spoke up from her chair, typing fast on her keyboard as the screenshots flashed on the monitor, one after the other. She put a tracking map on a big screen above her head. "He left a few minutes later, though, and the signal disappeared basically right outside the building."

"They realized he had a tracker on and decided to change the locations," Jeremy said, moving a few steps closer to the screen as if that could help him see better which way they could have gone.

"Most likely, yes." Jasmine nodded without glancing away from her monitor.

Fuck.Fucking damn it. That was not supposed to happen. Not to Eddie.

"Okay, so what does it mean, then?" Jeremy turned towards them. "Did Lavon or Corner realize he'd overheard them?"

"Apparently." Martinez frowned. "It would be too big of a coincidence otherwise."

"But how?" James spoke up, his throat unclenching just so. "They never went into the storage room, which was completely dark, from what Eddie described. And they left first."

"Maybe they saw him leaving after them—or someone else at the party spotted him and connected the dots later on," Ryan said from his side. "Or maybe they didn't see him at all, but figured that if he looked too closely into their project, he'd realize it was a hoax."

James bit his lip hard.

This was the result of risking their comms personnel like that.

A part of him knew that was unfair to say, which was why he stayed quiet. He didn't need to make anyone else feel bad because he was panicking and his stupid brain was running with it.

"Whatever it is, it's almost certainly connected to the CyberMode assignment, and,

beyond that, the Corner assignment." Kalei turned to Jasmine again. "Check the trackers on Lavon and Corner. Maybe we'll get lucky and one of them slipped."

They didn't. Both of the trackers had been turned off, which, although allowed, wasn't what the security team recommended at the beginning of any assignment.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"What time did they turn it off?" Ryan asked.

"In Lavon's case, almost as soon as he got one. Corner did it at seven-oh-two, this morning," Jasmine told him. "Why?"

"He spends an entire weekend with the tracker on, day and night, and suddenly he turns it off at seven in the morning on a Monday?" Ryan shrugged. "That's no proof, of course, but it's at least suspicious."

"I doubt Corner's the one to actually do the dirty work," James said. "He's a coward. Besides, Eddie's not a field agent, but I'm pretty sure he could take the guy. Which means two people or someone else completely."

"He could still be there with them, though, to question Eddie or something," Ryan pointed out. "Maybe talk him into helping them."

"But why Eddie?" Kalei asked. "Did they consider him an easy target out of your group or do they want something from him?"

"Computer skills?" Martinez suggested. "But what for?"

"Maybe to make sure that their project would pass muster? Who knows?" Ryan glanced at James briefly. "They could also use him as leverage, if they're getting desperate."

Kalei frowned. "For us?"

"No." James needed to lean back against the wall as the realization hit him. "His brother."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eddie tried not to panic in the back of the van as the car quickly pulled away from the curb and sped ahead. While at first he made an honest effort to keep up with every turn, he was sure he'd lost at least one, because he was simultaneously straining to listen in on the hushed conversation the two men were having in the front seat.

Which meant they could be anywhere, really.

Keep calm, he told himself for about the thousandth time, but since he'd been fucking kidnapped in broad daylight from right outside his home, he needed that repetition. Otherwise, he would start freaking out in seriously counterproductive ways and that was the last thing he needed.

Eddie didn't recognize either of the two voices, but it was obvious who'd orchestrated this whole thing. Eddie didn't know why, though. Had they somehow found out he'd been in that storage room and overheard them? Did they want to silence him?

That made his heart double its pace and he had to fight hard to stave off the panic that threatened to overwhelm him again.

If they simply wanted to kill him, there were easier ways than kidnapping him first, right?

Right?

Besides, they weren't stupid enough to believe he hadn't told anyone, were they? And sure, without first-hand witness the case was weaker, but not lost. And it definitely

didn't stop anyone from uncovering the truth about the project being a scam.

Blackmail could do that, though, he realized. They could use him to blackmail Robert, if they realized he wasn't going to get them what they wanted.

That would be a truly desperate play, but maybe they needed one at this point. Maybe the idea of all that money slipping away was enough to risk being charged with kidnapping and extortion.

The van finally stopped and he held his breath, waiting. When a few seconds later the door opened and the taller guy told him to get out, Eddie exhaled, swallowing hard against the gag.

Not dead yet.

He stumbled but caught himself, which was more difficult with his hands tied than he'd ever thought.

After the darkness of the van, he blinked a few times before he could take in his surroundings.

They were in an industrial building of some kind, a big space, open in every direction, but with only two doors visible, on the opposite walls and almost equally far from where Eddie was standing.

That ruled out running. He would never make it outside.

The space seemed abandoned, which meant they were probably somewhere in the outskirts of the city, although not too far. Their ride hadn't been that long and they'd made at least a few loops, if his sense of directions hadn't failed him completely.

He hoped that the signal here was good, at least, so that the people at the office could track him through his watch.

As it was, he couldn't do anything but wait for them to save him—and hope that they'd get here fast. Who knew how long these guys would keep him here, or in what condition.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Stop it, he told himself firmly. No courting bad luck.

He knew how to get out of those zip ties, at least, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself, so he stayed still. For now.

A moment later, the door on the left opened with a loudcreaking sound, and Eddie looked towards it on instinct.

Fuck.

Albert Corner was standing in the entrance, talking to a partially obscured guy in a baseball cap pulled so low he probably barely saw anything.

Eddie turned away quickly. Who knew if Corner would even recognize him from the party, or what would that mean, but Eddie figured it might be better to keep these guys in the dark about his connection to KRK Security, if at all possible.

He kept facing the other way, but his heartbeat sped up again when he heard a raised voice—most likely Corner's—coming from the direction of the door.

Then one of the guys grabbed Eddie by the arm and removed his gag, only to tug him out of the building next, tossing a sack on Eddie's head to block his sight.

"What the hell?" the other guy asked, voicing Eddie's sentiments to the T.

"This place's burned, there's a tracker on the guy. We need to change locations before they find us."

"Tracker?" The man tightened his grip on Eddie's shoulder hard enough to hurt, then paused in his step and Eddie almost stumbled again. He could feel they were outside, but he didn't see anything, and with the way they were tossing him like in a lame game of football, it was a miracle he hadn't fallen down yet. "Where is it?"

Eddie stayed quiet, but it didn't help much, since someone grabbed his hand and removed the watch from his wrist before tossing it to the ground and stomping on it, then kicking it off to the side, from the sounds of it.

Eddie wished he could kick him in retaliation.

"Get in." The guy pushed him into the van again. "We're going for another ride."

One good thing about it all was the realization that if they wanted him dead, they wouldn't feel the need to change locations. They'd kill him and leave, not caring about trackers or anything. If they were taking their time to move him, they needed him alive.

A small comfort, perhaps, but it was better than nothing.

* * *

As soon as they were inside some kind of a building again, someone tugged the sack off Eddie's head, almost tossing his glasses off with the force of it.

Eddie grimaced and blinked a few times against the bright light coming from the windows. The new location turned out to be a private residence, but no one seemed to be living in it. It looked more like a staged apartment for potential buyers—rich ones, judging from the top of the shelf security systems and modern, high-end decor.

The man who came in here with Eddie pushed him towards the couch in the open

space living room.

"Sit."

"You don't have to push me every time you want me to move," Eddie said, too irritated to keep quiet. He'd had enough of being shoved around at this point. "I can walk."

"Be glad that you can," the man growled as he passed him by. "And better shut up if you want to stay that way."

Instead of arguing further and pissing the guy off even more, Eddie took in his surroundings. Only one of the guys had come in with him this time, probably guessing that with the zip ties on, Eddie was no threat.

Presumptuous, but in Eddie's favor, so he wasn't going to complain.

The apartment was on the ground level, but the view from the windows didn't help him much. He still had no idea where they were.

The living room area was large, bracketed with the front door on one side and an open kitchen on the other, next to a corridor most likely leading to a bedroom and a bathroom, maybe more. What interested Eddie the most, though, was the security control panels—one near the door, the other by the counter separating the kitchen from the living room. And there was a tablet connected to the two panels on the shelf under the coffee table.

If he had a few minutes with that tablet, he could get himself out of this mess and call in the calvary to pick him up, since the second guy was likely watching the door from the outside.

The pushy guy who'd come in with Eddie was now talking on the phone, leaning with his hip against the counter and facing away. If he stayed like that for a bit longer, Eddie could grab the tablet from the shelf. He wouldn't do much with it under the scrutiny and with his zip ties still on, but he'd be a step closer.

The knocking on the door was an unwelcome surprise, since the fewer people were there, the better chance Eddie got.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

Sadly, no one asked for his opinion, and the pushy guy headed for the door.

Now or never, Eddie figured, and quickly leaned forward on one knee to grab the tablet from the little shelf. Returning to his seat was harder, but the adrenaline must have given him some additional boost, because he hoisted himself up onto the couch and slipped the tablet under his sweater, tucking it into the back of his jeans. If they decided to pat him down again, he'd be screwed, but they'd done it twice already, so he hoped they wouldn't try the third time.

The door opened, and in walked a man with a mask covering his face. He greeted the pushy guy with a nod, then paused at the sight of Eddie.

"It's you," he said, followed quickly by, "Fuck, I can't believe this."

Eddie recognized that voice. It was Lavon.

"What's wrong?" the pushy guy demanded, looking between the two of them. "We got who you wanted. That's Bailey's little brother."

Eddie tensed. It wasn't about the party at all, then. As he suspected, he was here as leverage for Robert.

"Yeah, but he's also—" Lavon paused, probably catching himself in time. "Fuck, never mind, I'll tell you later."

"Do we know each other?" Eddie decided to play dumb. "Also, what do you want from me? No one is telling me anything."

"You don't have to know anything," spat out the pushy guy.

"We've met, but it's inconsequential, really," Lavon said in a lower voice than before, probably trying to change it so Eddie wouldn't recognize him. "I assure you, it's nothing personal."

"Feels personal if it's about my family."

"Well, yes," Lavon admitted. "I suppose it's personal to you. But to us, it's just business."

"What kind of business?"

Lavon chuckled humorlessly. "You're not here to ask questions but to help us convince your brother to work with us."

"You don't know my brother very well, then," Eddie said, even as an icy rush of fear ran through his body. He'd pushed back the reality of the situation for long enough, but the armor was beginning to crack.

"We'll see." With that, Lavon seemed to dismiss him, addressing the other man instead. "The less he hears, the better, so let's talk in the other room, and then I'll call his brother."

The guy grunted in agreement before coming up to Eddie and gripping his shoulder.

"Do not try anything. I don't mind using my gun, and my friend right outside that door doesn't, either. Remember that."

As Eddie watched them leave, he could feel panic rising inside him, threatening to overwhelm him. He wished he could curl into a ball and wait for a miracle.

He knew better, though.

He needed to get himself to safety and call for help.

And while he couldn't leave the room he was in, he could make it a safer place for himself, once he was able to access the security protocols.

But first, he had to get out of these zip ties.

He pulled the tablet out and dropped it on the couch next to him before slowly standing and moving to a place where he'd have a bit more space.

You've got this, he told himself. You've practiced this with Kalei a bunch of times.

Taking a deep breath, Eddie leaned forward, then pushed his arms down hard, snapping the ties off. He hissed at the pain in his wrists, but he didn't have time to waste. He grabbed the tablet, which had, to his astonishment, a digital note with a security code right there on the screen.

A staged apartment, he reminded himself. The tablet was probably there for an agent to easily access it during a presentation for a potential client.

Whoever it was meant for, though, today it saved Eddie some precious time.

He quickly accessed the security app and pulled up the settings. With the bedroom already set up as a panic room of the apartment in case of an emergency, it only took a few clicks to engage the lockdown protocol.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

When the confirmation flashed on his screen, his hands trembled.

He did it. The bedroom was now cut off from the outside world and so was the front door. Eddie couldn't get out, but neither could Lavon and the pushy guy, both trapped in the bedroom.

And nobody would be able to come in from the outside without Eddie disengaging the security measures.

Now, it was time to call in that cavalry he needed.

Either the police or the company that provided the security system could be on their way, but Eddie wasn't going to bet on that. If the place was staged, like he assumed, the system could be partially disabled.

Besides, there were people out there he trusted to get him out, no matter what.

With his hands still trembling, he called the company's emergency line.

Any second now, the men in the other room would realize something was wrong.

"This is Jasmine, how can I help you?"

He sagged in his seat as the relief hit him, but he had to get it together. He wasn't safe yet.

"This is Eddie Bailey, needing immediate assistance," he said, lowering his voice.

"I've been taken to an unknown location, but I've managed to initiate a lockdown protocol in here and I'm temporarily safe. I think," he added, then quickly ran through the situation. "My tracker was destroyed, but I'm about to connect with our internal system, so you should be able to pinpoint my location."

"I got you," Jasmine said a few tense seconds later. "I'll notify the police, but our guys are coming, too. Can you stay on the line with me?"

Eddie took a deep breath. "I think so."

"That's good."

Then, there was another voice on the call—one Eddie had hoped to hear from the very start.

"We're coming," James said, his voice tense but steady. "We're coming for you, Eddie. Hang tight."

Eddie nodded, even though nobody could see him.

He had done his part. Now, all he had to do was wait.

James was on the way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sitting around and waiting was up there amongst the hardest parts of James's job, but sitting around and waiting when it was Eddie's safety on the line was infinitely worse. He'd left the comm center earlier to gear up, to be ready to leave the building at a moment's notice, but he was back now, and they still didn't have enough to track Eddie past the warehouse he'd been taken to first. Jeremy and Martinez had gone to

check it out anyway, but they hadn't found anyone there.

Ryan stayed by his side and tried to engage him in a conversation a couple of times, but James ignored anything that wasn't the big screen above Jasmine's head, waiting for it to show the answer they needed.

Then, right as he was approaching the absolute end of his tether, a new signal pinged and a blue dot flashed on the screen.

Jasmine halted her fingers above the keyboard. "This is Jasmine, how can I help you?"

James held his breath until—

"This is Eddie Bailey, needing immediate assistance."

James gripped the arms of his seat, swallowing hard as he listened to Eddie's quick report.

He was fine. He was alive.

And he managed to pretty much save himself, the only thing he needed now was their assistance to finish the job.

That, James knew how to do.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"We're coming," James said, already on his feet and grabbing the headset Jasmine had prepared. "Send us the location," he told her and then spoke louder, hoping Eddie would hear. "We're coming for you, Eddie. Hang tight."

"Roger that."

There was something in his voice James didn't know how to interpret, but soon, he'd be able to ask. And to see with his own eyes that Eddie was indeed safe and sound.

"I'm rerouting Jeremy and Martinez there," Jasmine said into their headsets when James and Ryan were in the garage already, "but you're probably going to get there first."

"Alert the cops we're coming, too, so they know we're the good guys," Ryan told her. "If we get there first, we'll wait on them, assuming Eddie's situation doesn't get worse. We want the men who did this arrested on site. This will make it much harder for them to talk their way out of."

James headed for the driver's side, but Ryan grabbed his shoulder.

"No. I'm driving."

"I—"

"Let's not waste time," Ryan cut him off. "You're not fit for driving, so I'm doing it."

There was a protest on the tip of his tongue, but James relented quickly. Ryan was

right, even if it was a hard pill to swallow.

Once Jasmine connected Eddie to their headsets and they could hear him again, James's shoulders dropped a fraction. She put Jeremy and Martinez through, as well.

"Yes, I'm sure I'm fine," Eddie said when Jasmine asked again if he was okay. "They didn't hit me or anything. I have some scratches on my wrists, but I've done it to myself, getting out of the zip ties. That's it."

"Praise be to Allah," she murmured quietly. "And to Kalei for his training," she added a bit louder.

"Oh yeah, I'm buying him a beer for sure," Eddie tried for a joke, but James could hear his voice wasn't too steady. While he wasn't freaking out, per se, the circumstances were probably catching up with him.

And he wasn't completely safe yet. The kidnappers were locked out for now, but it might not last forever, if they managed to power through locked doors on either side or call in reinforcements.

And Eddie was stuck there in the middle.

James closed his eyes and counted to a hundred as his heart was pounding in his chest.

Eddie needed him calm and collected now, not freaking out.

They arrived at the place at the same time as the police cruiser pulled in. The officers were already briefed on the situation and took over, but thankfully didn't order James and Ryan to stay back, recognizing that Eddie would trust the two of them much more willingly than a stranger, uniform or not.

The man at the door went running at the sight of two police officers, but he was way out of luck—Jeremy and Martinez pulled out of the alley right then and boxed him in. He tried to scale the fence along the parking lot, but Jeremy got to him before he made it onto the other side. He pushed the guy onto the ground and kept him there until one of the cops cuffed him and put him in the back of their cruiser.

"We should wait for—" the other started saying when Eddie spoke up in a tense voice.

"Guys, you need to hurry up. It seems Lavon has figured out a way to override the system, and I'm not sure I can keep them locked in there for much longer."

Ryan repeated Eddie's words to the officers while James ran back to the apartment door.

"We're right outside," he shouted, when the others joined him.

The officers motioned for him to step to the side.

"We've got this," one of them said, pulling out his gun. His partner did the same. "You have to stay behind us the wholetime. We can't have you in the line of fire. Tell your friend to hide somewhere, just in case the guys from the bedroom come out first."

Then, they gave Eddie a go-ahead to disarm the locks.

"I'm in the closet," he whispered, "on the left from the entrance."

James bit his lip hard as he stared at the door.

Finally, they heard the click of locks disengaging, and the officers went in,

identifying themselves right away. James and Ryan were a few steps behind.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

James's only thought was to get Eddie to safety, so while the officers walked further into the apartment, he zeroed in on the closet door on his left.

As he watched, it opened slowly, and Eddie's gaze locked with his.

Breath caught in James's lungs, but before he could find his voice, a few things happened all at once—Eddie started to get out of the closet, the door at the end of the corridor opened and slammed into the wall as someone ran out of there, and the officers started shouting as they raised their guns.

The sight of a weapon pushed James into action. He caught Eddie and rolled them onto the floor, covering him as best as he could.

There were two shots and more shouting, but all of James's focus was on Eddie—his body underneath him, his quick breathing against the side of James's neck, his hands clutching James's sides.

Finally, the loud noises quieted down, but James didn't lift his head until he heard Ryan right by his side.

"It's over now," his partner said, squatting a step away. "There's no danger, you can let him go."

James looked down at Eddie, who was staring at him with shining eyes and pupils blown wide.

"Okay. I'm getting up now," James whispered, slowly sliding his hand out from under

Eddie's head and pulling back. Eddie halted his movement when he didn't let go of James's jacket, but dropped his hands quickly when he realized it.

Once back on his feet, James reached down to pull Eddie up as well. Glancing around to survey the space, he saw Lavon kneeling on the ground with his hands behind his head and another guy, who was lying down, cradling his bleeding arm against his chest. Ryan was fine, and so were both officers—one of them kept watch over the detainees, and the other was talking on the radio as he stood a few feet away.

"James," Eddie whispered, and James turned back towards him in a blink of an eye. "You're bleeding."

There was indeed some blood on his hand, along with a few bruised knuckles. James had protected Eddie's head when they went down, so his hand had taken the brunt of the fall.

"It's nothing," he said, stretching out his fingers. It stung, and he was going to feel it tomorrow, but that hardly mattered. "Merely a few scratches."

Eddie curled his fingers around James's wrist and lifted his hand gently before his breath started to come faster.

"Hey, hey," James whispered, putting his other hand on the side of Eddie's neck. "You're safe now. We're all safe."

As he talked, he rubbed his thumb over Eddie's skin, and Eddie leaned into the caress as he closed his eyes and obviously tried to control his breathing.

Catching the gaze of one of the officers, James tilted his head towards the door in a silent question.

The officer nodded. "Take a few minutes, then I'll come get your statements."

James led Eddie out of the apartment and onto the parking lot, with Ryan right behind them. Jeremy and Martinez were there as well, keeping watch by the police cruiser with the guy they'd caught earlier still in the backseat. They moved as one at the sight of Eddie but must have seen something on Eddie's face—or maybe James's—because they paused and stayed back.

Eddie was gripping his hand tight as he followed James to the car and sat in the passenger seat, half in, half out of the vehicle, clearly trying to keep his breath measured and even.

James didn't mind holding his hand through it all—hell, he couldn't imagine letting him go now. He wanted to stick by Eddie and keep him safe, always. There was no place he'd rather be and no better job to have.

"That was nuts," Eddie said after a while, staring at the pavement before his feet.

"Yes, it was." James squatted in front of him and met his gaze. "But it's over now. You're with us, and you're safe. I'm not—We're not going to let anything happen to you."

Again. But he swallowed that part down, because that can of worms was for another day. Not here, not now.

"Is Robert okay?" Eddie asked, eyes widening suddenly.

"Yes," James assured him quickly. "Jeremy talked to him earlier, so he can tell you himself, if you want?"

Eddie nodded, so James used his free hand to motion for Jeremy to come closer.

"You talked to Robert?" Eddie asked as soon as Jeremy approached the car.

"I did," he confirmed. "At first, we notified him what happened, since we suspected this might be an extortion attempt and wanted him to be prepared in case they contacted him. He was obviously very worried about you, so I called him a few minutes ago to let him know you were safe, and that this whole mess was over."

At that moment, another police cruiser and an ambulance pulled up onto the lot. Martinez walked up to where they were and all five of them watched the events unfold for the next little while.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

When Lavon left the apartment with one of the officers and noticed Jeremy and Martinez standing there, he started screaming something about the NDAs.

"Another one who hadn't reviewed our NDAs closely." Martinez sighed. "Such a shame."

"Yeah, he might've thought twice about committing crimes under our noses," Jeremy said dryly. "But then again, he should've thought twice about hiring anyone, period."

Martinez leaned back against the hood of the car. "Not the brightest mind we've come in contact with in this line of work."

"Definitely not," Eddie said, and they all turned to see him offer them a shrug. "What, I can judge the guy now."

"You can judge him as much as you want," James told him, earning himself a small, soft smile that was like a shot to the heart.

He couldn't believe it had only been a few hours since he'd come to work with a plan of approaching Eddie tonight and showing off his entire hand.

Now, James didn't know if he could even make it another fifteen minutes.

Still, while they were all eager to leave the parking lot, especially Eddie, the police held them back for their statements, so it took well over an hour before they were done.

Finally, though, they were free to go. They needed to make a stop at the headquarters, but they were all heading home after, on Kalei's orders.

Unable to take his eyes off of Eddie, James offered him a ride, and Ryan—the best friend James had ever had, no doubts about it—took one look at the two of them and announced he would go with Jeremy and Martinez.

Eddie stayed silent in the passenger seat for a while, staring through the side window.

Then, he turned to James.

"Why didn't Ryan ride with us?" he asked in a soft, quiet voice that broke through the last of James's defenses.

He reached out and took one of Eddie's hands in his before tangling their fingers together.

"Probably so I could do something like this. If I dared."

Eddie tightened his fingers around James's hand before relaxing the grip slightly but not letting go. "You did."

"Yeah."

Another beat of silence, and then, "Was this all he thought you'd do?"

James shook his head. "No. That's not all I want to do, either. But... After?"

The next red light allowed him a quick glance, and he saw Eddie watching him, wide-eyed and hopeful.

It made James want to take a sharp turn and head home right away.

He didn't.

Eddie's answer, though, was a promise in itself.

"After, then."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eddie wished he could grab James's hand again and take him home, close the door and not come out until they were both ready to face the world, however long that might take.

A week, at least.

But for now, they needed to be here—at the HQ, doing a short debrief after Eddie's security and medical check-ups.

What was amazing, if a bit overwhelming, was the outpour of people who stopped by to tell him they were glad he was back safely. Some, of course, were closer to him than others, but even those with whom he rarely interacted offered their well wishes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"One of the perks of working here," Martinez said, when Eddie commented on it. "They've done the same after I got shot. Including you, if I recall," he added with a wink.

"Well, yes, but you got shot." He paused, his throat suddenly dry. "I didn't."

"Good thing you didn't," Martinez muttered before raising his voice to a normal level. "Still, you were in danger and people are glad you pulled through. Enjoy it."

Before Eddie could say anything to that, Vic came in.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Eddie, there's a Robert Bailey downstairs, claiming he's your brother and being quite demanding about getting to see you. We can push back or I can offer him a visitor's badge and send him up to the VIP lounge. Whatever you prefer."

"Oh." Eddie stood up. He hadn't expected his brother to come here. He'd texted Robert on the way to the office and figured he'd give him a call later to reassure him, but that was about it. "I can meet him wherever, it doesn't have to be the VIP lounge."

Vic raised his eyebrows. "I know it doesn't, but I'm offering it. Lounge it is, then," he said on his way out.

Eddie turned to the group he'd been sitting with around the conference table and saw James stood up as well, obviously ready to follow.

When their gazes met, James hesitated, glancing around, then huffed and rubbed his

hand over the back of his neck.

"I'm a little on edge and I'd prefer not to take my eyes off of you, if that's... If you don't mind. I can stay outside the room, of course, and—"

"It's fine." Eddie reached out and squeezed his hand briefly. "Let's go, then."

He didn't feel up for wandering anywhere alone quite yet, either, but he wouldn't have admitted that, even to these men. James's offer helped him save face and provided the security he needed.

If he hadn't been so completely gone on the guy before, Eddie would have fallen today—and fallen hard.

Later, he reminded himself, unable to look at James now without doing something stupid, like pushing him against the wall and kissing him until he couldn't anymore. They needed to talk first, though. Really talk.

So, later.

For now, he apparently had a distressed big brother to reassure.

Since the VIP lounge was empty when they walked in, Eddie busied himself with doing a quick tour of the space. He'd been here once before, soon after it was remodeled, but it made even more of an impression now, with some added books, art works, and tied-back curtains showing off a marvelous view of the city.

Then, the elevator pinged and Robert stepped out with Vic, who motioned him forward before turning around and leaving.

Eddie moved to welcome his brother, only to be surprised by Robert pulling him into

a hug.

A proper hug.

They hadn't had one in... around twenty years, perhaps? Or whenever it was that Robert had decided he was too cool for his little brother.

After a moment of hesitation, Eddie closed his arms around Robert and hugged him back.

Something in his chest suddenly threatened to come undone, though, so he pulled back quickly to stay calm. He had pushed through it this far. He wasn't going to fall apart in front of his brother. No way.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Robert put both hands at the sides of Eddie's neck and met his gaze. "Did they check you out?"

"I'm not hurt, but yes, the paramedic on the scene checked me out, and then my boss insisted I talk to our physician here, as well, so I did. She gave me some ointment for my wrists and told me to take it easy for the rest of the day, that's about it."

Doctor Omara also talked to him about acute stress symptoms and what to expect when the shock wore off, but Eddie decided not to share that part with Robert. He might share it with James, if asked, but not with anyone else.

"Your wrists?" Robert glanced down at his hands, and Eddie sighed.

"Yeah, they had me in zip ties and I bruised my wrists a little when I got out of them. It's nothing."

Robert stared at him. "You got out of the zip ties they put you in."

"Yeah." When his brother continued to stare, Eddieshrugged. "Kalei, our boss, teaches basic self-defense to every employee in admin and tech support."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"You're full of surprises, aren't you," Robert said after another long moment of silence, making it sound more like a statement than a question. Then he looked behind Eddie. "Who's that?"

Turning around, Eddie saw James further inside the lounge, keeping an eye on him from a distance, probably to give them some privacy.

Eddie exhaled slowly as his shoulders dropped a fraction at the sight of him.

"Robert, this is James, he's one of the field agents I work with." He gestured for James to come closer. "James, this is Robert, my older brother."

"Nice to meet you," Robert said, offering his hand, which James took with a nod.

"Likewise, Colonel."

"Robert's fine. I hear you don't care for ranks around here."

"James, then. And that's true, we don't, but none of us are active military anymore."

"And which branch did you serve in, if you don't mind me asking?"

Eddie lifted his eyebrows, but James just smirked.

"The Army."

"Deep condolences," Robert offered in a grave voice.

"We did alright," James told him, ignoring Eddie's indignant "Robert!". "Can't say the same for the flyboys, but you get some points for trying, I guess."

Then, to Eddie's astonishment, both men grinned at each other, and dropped their handshake.

Of course. He should've known. He'd seen it too many times to count, and yet he didn't expect it between these two, for some reason.

He shook his head, resigned, but then James turned to him and tilted his head towards the elevator.

"I'll wait out there, give you two some space."

A part of Eddie wanted to protest, which he knew was stupid. He was safe here. He had his brother and James with him. Nothing was going to happen.

"Thanks. We shouldn't be long. I know we have to go back for the debriefing."

James nodded at them both before taking a post by the elevator, leaving Eddie to lead his brother to the lounge.

"They're making you do the debriefing today?" Robert asked as they sat down on the couch so comfortable that Eddie immediately wished for the same one downstairs as he melted into the cushions.

"The basic version of it. They won't keep me here for long."

"Don't sign anything, though. Our lawyers can—"

"I don't need a lawyer, and if I do, I'll arrange for one." Eddie sighed, rubbing his

forehead. "Not everyone is out there to get you."

"No, but it's their client who—"

"Don't." Eddie sat up, cutting his brother off. "I'm not doing this with you. If you came here to lecture me—"

"I came here because I was worried," Robert told him, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his thighs.

The fight went out of Eddie in an instant.

"I appreciate that. I do. But, as you can see, I'm fine." He gestured at himself. "It sucked, for sure, but I'm fine. And after I finish here, I have a ride home," he said, turning to look at James, who offered him a small smile when their gazes met, making Eddie forget his train of thought for a second.

Soon, he told himself. Soon.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"They wanted to give me a week off, but I bargained it down to tomorrow only," he added, turning back to his brother.

Robert clasped his hands together. "Some time off wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Yes, it would. I have no interest in staying home. I like my job and I like the people I work with."

"I can see that." Robert glanced towards James and back. "I'm not stupid, you know."

"No, but you are presumptuous." Eddie stood up. "As I said, I appreciate you coming to check up on me, but I need to go back to my debriefing so I can go home."

Robert stood up as well and, after a moment of hesitation, brought him in for a hug again.

"I'm glad you're okay," he offered quietly. "I'll still check on you tonight, though. By phone," he added when Eddie opened his mouth to protest. "I'm not going to cramp your style, don't worry."

Eddie grimaced.

"Please never say that again," he told Robert as he gestured for him to leave the lounge first.

"I'm going, I'm going."

Thankfully, Robert didn't say anything to James, other than a quick goodbye on his way out.

And then Eddie and James were alone again, for a brief moment before they needed to head back downstairs.

Leaning his forehead against James's shoulder, Eddie sighed.

This whole day was... a lot.

A warm weight of James's hand on the back of his neck made Eddie swallow hard against the tightness of his throat.

He refused to fall apart now. Herefusedto.

"Soon," James whispered, echoing Eddie's earlier thoughts. "I'll get you home soon, I promise."

"Good," he whispered and brushed the backs of his fingers against James's other hand.

He couldn't wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It took much longer than James would have liked to get Eddie out of the headquarters and into the car, but finally,finally, they were on their way to Eddie's place.

As soon as they left the company's underground parking, Eddie put his hand, palm up, between their seats, and James took the invitation, tangling their fingers together.

It seemed like the easiest thing in the world, and he couldn't believe they had never done it before today.

James had never held anyone's hand like this, but with Eddie, it felt natural. Touching him in general was already addictive, actually. He'd had to catch himself not to reach out for him back at the office, and when Eddie had leaned on him and brushed his fingers against James's after seeing Robert out, James wanted to gather him in his arms and never let go.

Now, they drove in silence, and their tangled hands were like an anchor point, keeping them in the moment, together. James only now realized how much he'd needed that—especially after a day like this, but also beyond today. There were no words, just a simple, physical contact.

The time for words would come, of course, sooner rather than later, but this, right here, was a nice stepping stone—something that brought them closer without feeling scary and overwhelming, which the words could be, sometimes.

The drain of the day and everything that had happened was slowly dragging his body down, but he couldn't let it overwhelm him. He needed to take care of Eddie, whose day had been infinitely worse than his.

James needed—and wanted—to be there for him.

Also, he'd made a promise they'd address the thing between them, whatever it was and whatever it might become. On one hand, it seemed like the cat was out of the bag, with the handholding and the looks they'd shared, but on the other, they hadn't named the cat yet, or established what kind it was.

Hopefully, he would do better at that conversation than with the metaphors inside his head.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

When he parked outside of Eddie's place, neither of them made a move to get out, so they just sat there, holding hands and not saying a word. Eddie seemed to be watching the street, and James... James was watching Eddie.

He didn't care to watch anything else.

After a few minutes, Eddie turned to him and nodded sharply, as if he'd come to a decision.

"Come on, let's go up."

With that, he opened the door and got out, prompting James to do the same.

It seemed familiar, as the memories of Saturday night were still vivid in his mind, but it also felt new, in a way.

What a difference two days could make.

They didn't touch on their way up, a space between them small but clearly there, and James itched to bridge that gap.

He didn't, though.

Not yet.

Then, the door closed behind them, sealing them off from the rest of the world, and Eddie turned and pressed himself against James, his arms sneaking around James's

waist under the jacket, and his head resting in the crook of James's neck. With one hand on Eddie's nape and the other on his back, James pulled him even closer, until there was no space left between them.

Inhaling deeply, he marveled at the fact that he could do this now. He could have it.

He had no idea how long they stood like this, but at somepoint, Eddie sagged against him, as if his muscles had simply given out and refused to work any longer, other than the arms still keeping a strong grip on James's waist.

Not that James minded. He was happy to support Eddie however long he needed.

But then Eddie tilted his head and pressed a kiss to James's neck. And then another one. And another.

Air left James's lungs in a rush, and he opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Eddie took that moment to pull back a little and kiss James's lips.

The touch was soft, and warm, and perfect, and when James returned the kiss, it was slow and equally soft—an unhurried meeting of lips that seemed inevitable now, and yet no less cherished for it.

James half-expected it to grow fast and desperate, but it didn't. They traded kiss after kiss like they had all the time in the world. Like there was nothing stopping them, because everything would have its time and place.

And maybe it would, now.

At some point, they moved to the couch, and Eddie ended up straddling him, his legs bracketing James's and their groins pressed together, rubbing against each other in the best of ways.

James was in danger of coming in his pants like he hadn't even as a teenager, but he didn't care.

Eddie seemed to, though, because he reached down to unfasten their belts.

With his head clouded by the growing need, James clearly wasn't the brains of this operation. He wanted anything and everything, and it all came back to Eddie—Eddie's touch, Eddie's scent, Eddie's taste.

They both groaned when Eddie curled both of his hands around their cocks, pressing them together and squeezing. James bucked his hips and tightened his grip on Eddie's waist, eliciting a moan from Eddie straight into his mouth.

While they might have started slowly, now they were racing towards the finish line, tumbling and swearing, tossing shirts aside, and pressing just on this side of too-tight. They were both sweating and breathing harshly, but neither of them seemed ready to stop, to slow down. James definitely wasn't.

He wanted to come. He wanted to watch Eddie come.

He got his wish a moment later, when Eddie tossed his head back and let out a loud moan as he came all over his hands, James's cock, and both their stomachs. The sight alone could've probably pushed James over the edge, but then Eddie tightened his grip, and that was it. James was gone, the pleasure rushing through his body fast like a lightning.

He came back down to the sound of their quick breathing, Eddie's weight on his thighs, and the soft brush of Eddie's lips along his jaw.

"You don't even know how long I've wanted this," Eddie murmured, accentuating every other word with a kiss.

Something in James's chest burst open at that, the tentative hope he'd only discovered yesterday flooding him now and taking his breath away.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"How long?" he asked as he squeezed the back of Eddie's neck, wishing to hear that quiet moan...

There it was.

James smiled, proud beyond measure.

"Embarrassingly long." Eddie hid his face in James's neck and nosed at the skin there before sucking on it, gently at first, then harder.

Laughter threatened to bubble out of James, but he pushed back on it, kissing Eddie's ear instead.

"No such thing," he whispered, breathing over Eddie's ear and watching him shiver in response.

Then Eddie pulled back to meet his gaze, biting his lowerlip as he stared at him.

And James let him look. Whatever Eddie was searching for, James hoped he'd find. He didn't feel the need to hide anything anymore. Now that they'd crossed the line from friendship to this, there was no reason to hold back. No reason to be afraid.

It was as if all his earlier worries had dissipated into the thin air, and now that the two of them were here, James was ready to go all in.

This could be the endorphins talking, of course, but he didn't care.

He was happy. That was the important part.

Beaming at him, Eddie brushed his fingertips over James's brow.

"Worth the wait," he whispered.

James caught Eddie's hand and dropped a kiss onto his wrist.

"Definitely worth it."

Reluctantly, they made their way to the bathroom and crammed into the shower stall together. Eddie's movements were getting slower and James could feel himself getting tired, too, so he hurried them through a quick wash to hopefully get to bed before the adrenaline ran out.

They didn't quite make it, though.

After leaving the shower, Eddie stood there, blinking slowly and dripping water on the floor with a towel in hand, as if he didn't know what to do with it. James dried himself quickly and tucked his own towel around his hips before taking Eddie's and running it over his body. Then he turned Eddie around and led him straight to the bed.

Eddie melted into the mattress, closing his eyes as soon as his head hit the pillow, but he still reached out towards James, beaconing him closer.

"I'll be right back," James told him as he dropped a kiss on top of Eddie's head and, because he couldn't stop himself, on his exposed shoulder.

He turned all the lights off and rechecked that the front door was locked, then hung the towel in the bathroom before coming back to the bedroom and slipping under the covers.

Eddie slid closer immediately and James pulled him flush against his body.

He didn't care that it was still early, or that he was probably going to stay up half the night later on if he slept now. He had Eddie pressed against him, naked, pliant, and already half-asleep. They were safe, and they were together.

Safe...

And together...

He drifted off with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eddie woke up when he felt somebody shifting under him, but it took a few seconds before he recognized it as unusual and his eyes flew open.

James.

For a moment, Eddie thought he had to still be asleep—he'd had quite a few dreams featuring James in his bed, after all—but then the memories of the day came back in a rush, leaving him cold and shivering.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

James moved so that he was face to face with Eddie, bathed in a soft, warm light of the bedside lamp as the rest of the room had grown dark while they slept.

"Hey, you okay?"

"I'm f-fine." Eddie's teeth started chattering, belying his words, and he had no idea what to do, other than burrowing further under the covers.

"That's probably residual shock," James told him gently. He hovered his hand over Eddie's neck for a second before resting it on Eddie's shoulder. "Unless you have some serious misgivings about—" he pointed at himself "—this."

"No!" Eddie protested loudly, needing to make this point clear. He tilted his head so it bumped into James's hand to hopefully make it even clearer.

Smiling now, James moved his hand to lie on the side of Eddie's neck.

Perfect. Eddie closed his eyes and enjoyed the heat seeping into him from the contact, but the shivers were back a moment later.

"I don't k-know wha-what's happening," he muttered, opening his eyes to meet James's concerned gaze.

"Like I said, probably the adrenaline." James rubbed his thumb along Eddie's jaw. "Humans aren't used to life-threatening situations, so we can't simply shrug them off."

"I was fine earlier." Eddie slipped his hands around James's waist and pressed them together again, seeking both warmth and closeness.

"You were still in shock," James whispered against the top of his head. "And your body was still ready for anything. Now it's trying to get back to normal but needs to dispose of whatever adrenaline that's left, first."

Eddie grimaced as another shudder ran through him. "This sucks."

"Yeah, I know."

Shit. Of course James knew. He'd served two tours and he'd probably seen things Eddie didn't want to imagine. Even now, he continued to put himself on the line every day for their clients. Sure, a kidnapping or a gun fight happened rarely, but they weren't out of the question, either.

"Hey, what is it?" James ran a hand over the back of Eddie's neck. "You can talk to me."

Eddie hesitated, unsure if it was a good idea or not, but when he opened his mouth, the words flew out of him faster than he could register the thought.

"I know you're used to that kind of thing, and I feel stupid for freaking out. In the end, nothing happened, and yet, I'm trembling like a little kid, hours later. It's stupid. Maybe everyone was right, you were right, I should've never done any of it, should've stayed behind my computer and left the field agents to handle this. You all are pros and I'm... me."

He was glad he wasn't looking at James as he said all of that, but he wasn't glad for long, because James pulled back and lifted Eddie's head until he met his gaze again.

"You're you and you're incredible," James told him, his voice not leaving room for any discussion. "That wasn't an op, you were kidnapped in an attempt to extort your brother. And without any field experience, you not only held your own, but you also managed to lock them out and call for help. That's seriously impressive, Eddie. And I'm not telling you this because we're in bed together, or because of how highly I think of you on any given day. What you did today, many people with experience wouldn't be able to do. You must have seen that back in the office, too. Everyone was impressed."

"I wasn't shaking then."

James snorted humorlessly.

"Everyone in that conference room shook like a leaf at one point or another. I know I have, more than once. That's why I recognized what it is." He rubbed Eddie's neck again. "Trust me, you're doing well. Your body's having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation."

That last part let Eddie breathe a little easier. He was still shivering, but not as violently, and he could think more clearly now.

"I feel like, since the worst part is over, I shouldn't be like this," he admitted.

"The worst part is over," James said with a nod and a look in his eyes that reminded Eddie that he wasn't the only one who'd had a shitty day. "You're safe now. No one is threatening you or keeping you against your will. Your body simply needs to process this." James ran his teeth over his bottom lip. "It may take a while, too. Even though you're aware of the stress symptoms in theory, when they happen to you, it's... not fun. But you have our support, okay? You have me."

Eddie swallowed at that. "You have me."

His heart was ready to jump from joy, but a part of him wondered if he could count on keeping James for good.

"Too much?" James moved like he wanted to pull back, but Eddie caught his forearm and kept him in place.

"No!" He shook his head to underscore his point. "I just... I can't believe you're here. And if it's because of what happened today—"

"It's not," James cut in.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:35 pm

"You didn't want this on Saturday."

Eddie wished he could take the words back as soon as they were out, but it was too late.

James glanced away for a moment before meeting his gaze again.

"It's not that I didn't want it. I just didn't know what it could be. I never—" He hesitated. "I didn't want to lose what we already had. I don't have a lot of... real connections with people, and sex could never be worth the risk of losing that, for me. But then I realized that it's not only sex with you that I want, or only hanging out as friends. I want everything else, too."

Eddie had stopped breathing, his throat tight, but James wasn't done yet.

"I want to see what else we could have, on top of everything that's already there, not instead of it. And I planned on talking to you about it today." He reached out his free hand and tangled their fingers together. "It's not a spur of a moment decision, I promise you. The furthest from that, actually, since I feel like I've been really dumb about this for a very long time."

Eddie chuckled, and then started laughing—loud, joyful sound that came out of nowhere, his heart bursting open.

James wanted him. He wanted to build something real with Eddie, something Eddie had been dreaming about for years now.

"In the interest of full disclosure, though," James added, making Eddie still, "I wasn't planning on having sex with you right away. This part, I admit, was fueled by what happened today. It didn't cause it, but it did make it harder for me to restrain myself."

"You asshole, you got me worried there for a second." Eddie huffed another laugh. "But I hear you. I wouldn't normally do this before we even went on a proper date."

Shifting a little, he slipped his thigh in between James's legs and pressed it against James's groin.

"Oh yeah?" James raised his eyebrows and let his hand travel down Eddie's body slowly. "Which date would this be?"

Eddie's breath caught when James brushed his thumb over his nipple. He could feel his cock getting hard against James's thigh.

"How about we count all the time you spent in my office after hours?"

James grinned as he pinched Eddie's nipple and made him gasp.

"I don't know," he said, staring at Eddie's mouth. "That's easily a few hundred hours by now. Are you sure you'd want to be doing this with me after so long?"

"Yeah," Eddie told him without hesitation. Maybe it was a serious answer to a silly question, but he didn't care. He had no reason to hide anymore, not if James wanted everything Eddie wanted, too. "I'm sure."

The admission earned him a kiss that was different than the ones before, harder and more demanding. James licked into his mouth as he rolled them until Eddie was on his back, with James leaning over him, pressing their cocks together.

Moaning into the kiss, Eddie opened his legs. He wanted James inside him, wanted to feel him everywhere.

"Fuck me," he whispered when they broke the kiss to catch their breaths. "Please."

James's eyes clouded with want, which made Eddie's heart skip a beat. He would say pretty much anything to see it happen again.

And if he thought the previous kiss was demanding, he had no words to describe this one. James was like a force released from a tight leash, and Eddie was just along for the ride.

A very, very happy ride.

About to be even happier.

"Condom and lube?" James asked when he pulled back, and Eddie gestured towards the nightstand.

"The drawer."

It had been a long time since he'd had company here, but the lube, at least, was well-used.

What came next was probably the longest and the hottest prep of Eddie's whole damn life. James took his time kissing every inch of his upper body as he teased, and teased, and teased, running his lubed fingers over Eddie's perineum, squeezing his balls, circling around his entrance. Every time Eddie thought he couldn't take it anymore, James would change some little thing, drawing out the pleasure.

By the time he slipped the first finger inside, Eddie was breathless, panting, and

covered in sweat, and his moans had become hoarse as his voice started to give up.

"Please," he whispered over and over, clenching around James's finger, then two, then three. "Fuck me, come on."

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

"Are you sure you're ready?" James whispered against his ear, making Eddie laugh and shiver at the same time. Bastard.

"How can I be any more obvious?" He slid his hands down James's slick back to grab his hips. "Get in me."

James grinned as he slowly pulled out his fingers and picked up the condom. "Seems obvious enough."

Eddie let out a chuckle that turned into a choked-off groan as James started to push his cock inside him in one long slide.

Fuck. Yes. Finally.

Once he was all the way in, James paused.

"You good?" he asked softly, brushing his nose against Eddie's, and Eddie swore his heart did a somersault. Or three.

This fucking guy.

How did Eddie get so lucky?

"Never better," he whispered and squeezed James's hips.

It was true, too. He couldn't remember ever feeling so good, so full, so connected to another person—in or outside of bed.

And then it got even better. James started moving, slowly at first, then picking up the pace until he was slamming into him, leaving Eddie breathless and riding high, balancing on the edge of orgasm but never falling. Not until a brush of fingers over Eddie's cock, so different from the onslaught on his prostate, sent him flying into a million pieces.

He could hardly breathe as every cell in his body seemed to have come alive.

Returning to reality took a while, but when Eddie opened his eyes, James was right there, leaning over him with those bright eyes, and those lips, red from biting, and the weight of him that helped to anchor Eddie back in the here and now. James had come soon after him, Eddie felt that even over his own pleasure, and now they were grinning at each other, happy and spent.

Eddie never wanted to move ever again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

James had experienced great sex before, whether with his ex-boyfriend or, a few times, with a casual hookup. But he realized now that he hadn't really understood what a truly amazing, earth-shattering sex even was, before tonight.

Because, holy fuck.

His arms and legs were aching, and his back was probably going to extract revenge next time he went to the gym, but James didn't regret even a second of it. And, judging from the wide-eyed and open-mouthed look Eddie was sporting, neither did he.

James gathered enough energy to roll onto his side and rest his chin on Eddie's shoulder, marveling that he got to do this now—have sex with Eddie, yes, but also

touch him like this, casual and intimate, without needing to keep a safe distance to maintain some artificial boundaries he'd made up out of fear.

"What the hell," Eddie muttered, blinking slowly at the ceiling, and James chuckled, pressing a smile into the warm skin that smelled of Eddie and sex.

"We did good," he said cheekily and got a lazy swat in the stomach for it.

"If we do any better, I'm not sure I'll survive it." Eddie turned his head towards him. "I guess we really don't have to worry that what happened on the couch was an adrenaline-fueled one-off."

"No, we don't." If James could, he'd gladly start another round right away, but his body wasn't having it. "What do you say we hit the shower again and grab some late dinner? We skipped a meal somewhere."

"Yeah," Eddie said, but didn't make any effort to move. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Ten thirty."

"Wow, we slept longer than I thought." Eddie sat up with a sigh and rolled out of bed. "Come on, then. Let's do this."

With that, he headed towards the bathroom, and James let himself admire the view for a moment. Eddie's lack of worry over being naked was another new item on a list of things James loved about him, and seeing him like this—

James's brain came to a halt and he stumbled on his way out of bed.

Loved.

Page 55

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

Fuck.

Could he, really? Could he have fallen for Eddie without noticing it?

He had no idea. If he was invested enough to take a risk he'd spent a long time cautioning himself against, it had to count for something, but... was that love?

Perhaps. He had so little experience with it that he wasn't sure.

"You coming?" Eddie's head appeared in the bathroom doorway, surrounded by bright, harsh lighting.

James crossed the room quickly, stealing a kiss once he was close enough to do so.

He might not know how to label his feelings, but he was ready for whatever they were. He'd already stalled for too long and come frighteningly close to missing his chance. He wasn't going to make that mistake again.

And if it turned out to be love... He wouldn't mind it.

He wouldn't mind it at all.

* * *

The next morning had him grabbing a bag with a spare change of clothes from his car, since he hadn't even tried to pull himself away from Eddie last night.

"You need anything, call me," James said when it was time for him to head to work and he found it harder than expected. "If I don't answer, call Ryan. Or Jeremy, or Martinez, they'll be stuck doing a bunch of paperwork today, too."

"I'm fine, and I'll continue to be fine." Eddie curled both hands around the coffee mug as he blinked slowly, not really awake yet. He had only a pair of pajama pants on and he was sporting impressive bed head curls. "I'll stay in all day and catch up on some sleep, or Netflix, or both. You're welcome to come by after work, though," he added, suddenly a bit more alert as he grinned at James. "To check on me, of course."

James chuckled, relaxing a bit. "Of course."

While he didn't think Eddie was in danger anymore, he still subscribed to the better-safe-than-sorry approach. A little hyper vigilance for a few more days wouldn't hurt.

For now, he pulled Eddie into another, coffee-flavored kiss.

"See you later."

On the way to work, James tried to focus on everything he needed to do today. Senator Corner was traveling out of town with her children for a few days, which had been scheduled as the time off for him and Ryan right from the start of the assignment, but now it was particularly lucky timing as the Lavon investigation unfolded.

They'd told the officers some of it yesterday at the scene, then the rest to the detectives who had come to the headquarters to talk to them afterwards. With their testimonies, especially Eddie's, the police had enough for an arrest, but finding Albert Corner might prove to be tricky. While it was possible that the asshole believed he'd be able to bluff his way out of his involvement, he could also try to leave the country, just in case.

All in all, things didn't look good for the Corner family, and once the KKK Security's role became clear, their assignment would no doubt be terminated, but for now, James and Ryan were still officially on it.

However, while they wouldn't get a new case for now either way, they were going to be busy with paperwork and multiple meetings in the next few days, since there was a lot of after-action stuff that needed to be handled.

A kidnapping of one of their own had never happened before and they'd handled it as best as they could, but Kalei would probably expect a contingency plan for the future. Which was smart, of course, but James didn't relish trying to put everything that happened into protocols and decision trees.

After arriving at work, he left his things in the office he shared with Ryan, then went straight to the kitchen for coffee, where he ended up bombarded with questions about Eddie—was he alright, did he need anything, was James sure he was safe or maybe they should set up some drop-ins?

He reassured everyone, repeating what Eddie had told him, but he didn't miss a glint in Ryan's eyes when James let it slip that he'd talked with Eddie this morning.

Nobody missed the wide grin Martinez gave him, but thankfully, nobody asked.

Yet.

Because there was no doubt in James's mind that he was going to be answering questions as soon as he and Ryan went back to their office.

And then whenever Martinez and Jeremy would corner him.

James didn't even want to think about the rumor mill.

He paused, realizing he and Eddie hadn't talked about that. Multiple people had seen them holding hands yesterday, but James had no idea what was Eddie's stance on sharing anything more.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

Pulling out his phone, he excused himself from the kitchen. Since Ryan didn't immediately follow, James hid in their office before hitting the call button.

"I'm still fine," was the first thing Eddie said. "Also, I was supposed to be the one to call you."

James sat down behind his desk and took a sip of his coffee, already smiling. "Maybe I couldn't wait to hear your voice."

That earned him a chuckle in response.

"Liar. A charming one," Eddie added, "but still a liar."

"Well, at least you think I'm charming."

"Oh, I'd say I've already proven I think very highly of you." Eddie's voice lowered a bit, making James wish he wasn't at work but back where he could properly appreciate it. "Multiple times."

"Stop that." He shook his head, even though Eddie couldn't see him. "I actually did have a reason to call."

"Oh?" The change in Eddie's tone was immediate. "What's up?"

"You know how we work with people whose job it is to be observant?"

"Yes?"

"So, some of them have already caught on that there's something going on between us, and I realized we didn't have a conversation about that," James said before taking another sip of coffee. "And I know doing it over the phone isn't the best idea, but I'm about to be cornered by Ryan, at least, and wanted to check in with you about it."

There was a beat of silence, and then, "What do you want to do?"

It sounded weird, as if Eddie tried very hard to appear neutral but couldn't quite get there.

"While I don't want to lie to Ryan, especially, I also don't see any reason to hide it from others," James admitted. "I mean, we have to report it to the HR, of course, but after that, if anyone asked, I'd prefer to tell them the truth." He paused, staring into his half-empty cup. "Unless you don't want that."

"I do!" Eddie said, right as James was finishing the sentence. "I prefer to tell the truth, as well. I don't want to have to pretend. And, as you said, they'll all probably catch on anyway."

James smiled again, relaxing back in his seat. "Okay. That's great."

He didn't even want to imagine how he'd feel if Eddie insisted on keeping it a secret from everybody.

"Yeah." Eddie's answering smile was evident in his voice. "I guess we should've predicted this."

"We were kind of busy," James teased, right before he saw his partner approaching. "I have to go, Ryan's coming."

"Good luck!" Eddie said and hung up, leaving James to wait for the interrogation to

begin.

Ryan held back for maybe two minutes, keeping busy with logging into his computer and rearranging the files on his desk, before he turned in his chair and pinned James with a look.

"Sooo," he started, dragging out the word. "You talked to Eddie this morning, huh?"

"Yes." James took a sip of his coffee, already wishing for another cup.

"In person, perhaps?"

James sighed. "Yes."

"Mhmm." Ryan lifted his eyebrows. "Care to elaborate or should I continue to ask you yes or no questions for the next few hours to get the whole story out of you?"

"I'm pretty sure we'd have to do at least some work during those hours."

"I'd fit it in," Ryan assured him dryly. "But it would definitely be more efficient if you elaborated now."

James sat up in his chair. He wanted Ryan to know, anyway, so he might as well get it over with already.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

"Fine. I talked to Eddie this morning, in person, because I stayed over at his place. We're seeing each other now. Yes, you told me so. No, don't tell anyone yet until we notify the HR."

Ryan snorted at that. "That's, like, your shortest report ever."

"I hit the major points."

"These were some major points, I'll give you that." Ryan leaned on his forearms against his desk. "You're seeing each other now, huh?"

"I thought we'd be done with yes or no questions?"

Ryan shrugged. "I'm simply savoring the moment before I say I told you so."

"I've already admitted that."

"You won't take away my moment."

James rolled his eyes. "Okay, hit me with it."

"I," Ryan announced, puffing out his chest, "told you so."

"Yes, you did."

"You should listen to me more."

"Let's not get carried away," James said, and they both chuckled. "Happy now?"

Ryan's grin turned into a smaller, softer smile. "Yeah, man. I'm really happy for you. Both of you."

James hadn't expected a turnabout like that, so he didn't know how to react at first. Then he simply nodded.

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"Our op communication's going to get even more interesting now," Ryan added, apparently unable to help himself.

"Stop."

"Just not too interesting," Ryan mock-warned him. "I'm drawing a line at comms sex when I'm there."

"Shut up, you asshole."

"No, you—"

"Don't finish that."

Ryan raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, but the grin he was sporting suggested he had a lot more material where that came from. James was in for a lot of teasing.

A lot of it.

Still, he wouldn't change a thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The weekend couldn't come fast enough.

Eddie didn't experience that feeling often, but he really needed the rest this week. After Monday and all the testimonies and briefings that followed, as well as not enough proper sleep, he was ready to drop by the time Friday arrived.

Or, at least, to lock himself and James in his apartment for the entire weekend, with the rest of the world conveniently cut off from them, barring a delivery person or two.

James would gladly support this plan, Eddie was sure—and not only because it was clear to both of them at this point that Eddie couldn't fall asleep without James next to him, since he was still too keyed up to fully relax on his own. Another, much more fun reason for the two of them to stay in was their complete inability to keep their hands away from each other whenever they were alone.

Inability. Unwillingness.

Potayto. Potahto.

It had truly been the saving grace of this week, though, not to mention the best thing that had happened to Eddie in years. Finally having James there, not solely as a friend but also as a boyfriend, was the best kind of overwhelming, and Eddie's heart was bursting at the seams.

If not for everything else that had happened in the last few days, he would have been shouting about it from the rooftops and literally jumping for joy whenever possible.

As it was, he couldn't muster enough energy, but since a completely free weekend rarely happened in their work, Eddie wanted to make the most of it.

And what better way to do so than to spend it with James and no one else.

Before he could fill his boyfriend—his boyfriend!—in on the plan, however, his mother called.

Of course she did.

Eddie considered not picking up, but given the whole kidnapping thing, everyone around him was a little overprotective, including his mother, who usually didn't call him for weeks at a time and was now calling for the third time since Monday.

At least he was currently alone in the comm center, so he didn't need to step outside

to talk to her.

"Hello, Mother." He pushed his phone between his ear and his shoulder as he continued to scroll through a floor plan of the venue KRK would be securing next week for the economic summit.

"Hi, Eddie. Listen, I want to have dinner for the family tomorrow night, six o'clock. You do have a free weekend, don't you?"

And this was why he should always be very, very careful while talking with his mother. Even the most innocent things could be used against him.

"I'm not working, but that doesn't mean I don't have any plans, you know."

"Oh." She paused. "But do you have any plans for tomorrow night? Because I've already talked with Robert and Rebecca, and—"

Of course she had.

"I have no desire to come to a party," he said with a sigh. "It's never a family dinner with you, but a few dozen people you currently need for one thing or another. Just call it a party, like most people do. But count me out of this one, I'm really not up for it this week."

That came out more blunt than he'd been in quite awhile, but he couldn't be bothered, not today. The mere idea of schmoozing his way through an evening made him want toretch. He'd much rather spend that time with James.

Which he would pick over most things right now, anyway.

"It's not a party," his mother said, voice hesitant. Eddie would even call it apologetic

if it was anyone else. "It truly is simply a family dinner. I thought... I thought it would be a good idea. We haven't had one in a while."

No, they hadn't. Eddie couldn't even remember the last one, really.

"So, will you come?" she pressed after he didn't respond right away.

Staring at his desk, Eddie bit his lip. Did he want to give up an evening with James to go play nice with his family? Definitely not. But the more mature part of him recognized the effort his mother was making.

"Yeah, okay," he finally said and sagged into his chair, resigned.

Here goes your quiet weekend.

"Great! See you at six thirty, then."

After they ended the call, Eddie tossed the phone onto his desk and ran a hand over his hair, already second-guessing his decision.

Maybe it wasn't going to be so bad, though. His family was able to have a normal conversation when everyone made an effort.

The problem was that they rarely all wanted to make an effort at the same time.

But before he could go further down that road, the door behind him opened, and he turned, expecting Jasmine or Todd, only to see James instead, with a greasy paper bag in his hand.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

Eddie grinned brightly, standing up to kiss him. "Hello, you."

"Hey." James circled his arms around Eddie's waist. "Are you up for a coffee break?"

"I don't see any coffee in your hand," Eddie teased, basking in James's smile and not caring one bit how cheesy it was.

"Oh, well. I have it on good authority that you have the good stuff in here, and I thought you might share, in exchange for a croissant."

"Cherry and cream?"

"As if I'd dare choose something else."

Eddie stole another kiss before pulling back. "You have yourself a deal, then."

Waving James towards his usual chair, Eddie busied himself with making coffee, sending glances James's way every couple of seconds.

It hit him once again how much had stayed the same between them. He wouldn't be able to tell how many times they'd hung out here, talking and teasing each other. Sometimes James had brought something to eat, and sometimes Eddie had made them coffee, or green tea, when the last thing they needed was more caffeine in their systems.

In some ways, they'd been dating for a long time now. They'd just never let themselves acknowledge that.

Not anymore, he thought as he ran his teeth over his lips, imagining he could chase James's taste there.

"What has you smiling like that?" James's question pulled him out of his musings, and Eddie quickly filled two mugs with coffee and brought them to his desk.

"It's too sappy to say out loud," he admitted and shook his head, pushing one mug towards James. "It is about you, though, in case you were worried."

"Terrified," James deadpanned, but soon enough, his face broke into a soft smile. "So, how's the standby going?"

Since Lavon and Albert Corner had been arrested, both teams Eddie usually covered were on standby, and so was he. Both contracts had been terminated by now, but with all the paperwork and legal matters, they were likely to get at least another week off rotation, so they all tried to stay busy in the meantime with other things.

"Kalei let me at least look at the summit stuff, so I'm checking it out," Eddie said. "You?"

"You had to catch him at the right moment, then, because he's pissed off now, after yet another dozen of calls blaming us for Senator Corner's resignation. A couple more, and I think Vic is going to storm the Hill to knock some sense into people." James bit into one of the croissants. "Ryan, Jeremy, Martinez, and I managed to sneak off to do some training earlier when the lawyers let us out from the conference room, though, so there's that."

No amount of money would convince Eddie to spend even a third of the time the field agents did in the training area, but he definitely appreciated the results. James's body was worthy of worship, and Eddie had already spent some quality time doing exactly that.

He was looking forward to doing more of it, too, as soon as possible.

If only he hadn't let his mother mess up his plans for a weekend in bed.

Shit, he'd been so stupid. He should've said no.

"Are we still on for tonight?" He nudged James's knee with his and earned himself a smile.

"I sure hope so." James pointed at him with the croissant in his hand. "You promised me tonight is curry night."

"That I did." Eddie took a sip of his coffee and wondered how to best approach the topic of the weekend. They hadn't made any plans, but—

"Hey." It was James's turn to nudge his leg, prompting Eddie to meet his careful gaze. "What is it?"

Eddie sighed and scooted down in his chair.

"I had this idea of the two of us spending an entire weekend at my place, clothes optional."

James lifted his eyebrows. "Sounds great to me. But I'm guessing it's not going to happen?"

"My mother called," Eddie grumbled. "And now I'm going to a family dinner tomorrow night."

"Ah."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

When nothing more followed, Eddie frowned. How the hell was he supposed to interpret that?

"What does that mean?" he asked, trying hard not to sound defensive, but failing at it even to his own ears.

James put the mug down without looking away from Eddie. "That means I'm acknowledging what you said."

"It's more than that and you know it. You have an opinion, I can tell."

"My opinion is that although I wish we did spend that weekend in bed, I also know that family is important to most people. I gathered, from the things you said or didn't say, that you don't have the easiest relationship with yours, so I hope it goes well for you. That's it."

As he was speaking, James straightened in his chair, and there was now a tense line of his back Eddie wanted to run his hand over.

So he did just that—both as a caress and as an apology.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You have nothing to apologize for." James put a hand on the side of his neck and ran his thumb along Eddie's jaw. "My only worry is your family and how they can affect you, that's all."

Eddie leaned into James's touch with a sigh.

"They're not that bad. Whatever you're imagining is probably way worse than it should be. They're not... awful or anything. They're all driven and ambitious, and I'm the black sheep of the family. The weak link."

"Hey, no." James brought up his other hand to put on the other side of Eddie's neck. "You're no one's weak link. You're a badass in front of the computer, and you're level-headed and capable even if someone kidnaps you, for fuck's sake. You basically rescued yourself on Monday." James's eyes were boring into his, as if he tried to push his words into Eddie's head, making him believe they were true. "You're strong, and resilient, and so fucking smart. If someone discounts you for whatever reason, they do it to their own detriment."

"You don't have to do this," Eddie muttered, glancing down.

"Oh, trust me, there's more where this came from." James pressed his thumbs under Eddie's jaw gently until he lifted his head again. "And I'm trying to be generous towards them, since they're your family. If anyone else made you feel like this, I'd be much less pleasant."

Eddie chuckled, and he found himself able to breathe a little easier. James's words didn't magically fix anything, but it still helped to know he had someone squarely in his corner. Up until now, whenever he was facing his family, it was always him, alone, against their united front.

Not anymore, though.

Not anymore.

* * *

To Eddie's relief, his mother kept her word. The dinner was indeed a family-only affair, and they all fit around the big table. As they ate, they stuck to safe topics, like Rebecca's early campaign efforts, but Eddie knew it was a matter of time before the conversation turned to what happened on Monday. Robert had briefed the family on the basics, but during her calls, his mother had stuck to asking Eddie how he was feeling without pushing for any details, which meant they were likely biding their time.

And indeed, the peace merely lasted until they moved to the living room after the meal and the kids ran down the hall towards the back porch, with Peter following slowly behind them.

"Now, Eddie, Robert told us what happened on Monday," his father started, balancing a glass of whiskey over his thigh. "While we're glad you were unharmed in the end, I, for one, can't imagine how your company allowed that to happen—"

"Stop right there," Eddie cut in, straightening in his chair. "My company didn't allow anything to happen, they are the ones who helped save me."

"You wouldn't be there if not for them!"

"I wouldn't be there if someone didn't decide to—"steal millions of dollars from the US government and extort my brother"—break the law!"

"Oh, please, I don't know the details, but I know enough." His father waved him off. "It was their client who did this. This is not the line of work we raised you to choose, and to think—"

Eddie's nostrils flared. "If you're implying what I think you're implying, you're dead wrong."

Of course even his own kidnapping was turned against him. Of course.

He put his own glass down and the soft click of glass on the wood seemed loud in an otherwise silent room.

"I've had enough of this," he said, to himself and to his entire family, looking from his father to his mother, Rebecca, then finally Robert before turning back to face his father, no longer caring about choosing his words carefully. "I'm not going to sit here and take it any longer. All of you have repeatedly questioned my judgment and my choices, over and over, and it seems to be so natural to you that you don't even see any problem with that anymore. You either don't understand that you keep disrespecting me by doing that, or you simply don't care. I love what I do," he added, ignoring the way his mother scoffed. "I'm not going to change jobs to satisfy your ideas of what my life should be like. I've never told any of you to leave the Air Force or politics, and the least you could do is give me the same courtesy moving forward. What I'm not going to allow, under any circumstances, is for you to disparage my work and the people I work with. Several of them put their lives on the line for me on Monday without any hesitation and you should be grateful to them for that instead of disparaging them without cause." Eddie stood up. "And if you can't see that, then you need to think twice about your judgment and your choices. Because I'm happy with mine." He looked around the rest of the family again. "Now, excuse me, I've had enough of this for tonight."

And perhaps for the foreseeable future.

Then, Robert spoke up.

"He's right, you know? We should all be grateful and instead you throw things in his face you have no idea about."

Eddie turned to his brother, but Robert was staring at their father with a clenched jaw, challenging him in a way he'd never done before, at least not with Eddie there to see.

"He wasn't kidnapped because of his work," Robert went on, "but because of his connection to me. So if you want to blame someone other than the kidnappers, blame me."

Shaking his head, Eddie opened his mouth to protest, but both their mother and Rebecca spoke up first with a clear "No!".

"No one's blaming you," their mother added firmly as she glanced between Robert and her husband. "We didn't know you were involved, so we assumed—"

"Maybe we should all do less assuming around here," Robert cut in, finally breaking his stare-down with their father to turn to her. "We tend to think we know more than we actually do. That's definitely a family trait that only Eddie seems to have been saved from."

When his brother looked at him, Eddie didn't know what to say, but Robert wasn't done yet.

"I had a lot of time to think this week, and I realized I hadn't been fair to you. I didn't

respect your judgment enough, and for that, I'm sincerely sorry. I will do better in the future."

Eddie stared at him, wide-eyed, before managing a small nod. He definitely hadn't expected his brother to back him up or apologize, but he would gladly take it.

Maybe Robert had indeed learned to see things at least a bit differently. Maybe the two of them had a chance to understand each other better from now on.

Eddie wasn't willing to give the rest of the family the same benefit of the doubt again, not after tonight.

Not after the week he had.

He was through proving anything to anyone.

"Thanks," he told Robert. "I appreciate that. But I'm truly done for today. I'll see myself out."

Walking out of that room felt good. Freeing. At some point over the last several years, he'd resigned himself to the fact that his family was not going to change and he needed to get used to it.

He was done with that, though. There were some things he was no longer willing to keep quiet about.

To his surprise, Robert appeared in the hallway right as he was about to open the front door.

"Wait for me." His brother quickened his pace. "I'll drive you home."

Eddie shook his head. "You don't have to leave on my account."

"Don't worry about it." Robert put on his coat without a backward glance. "And I know I don't have to. I want to. Come on, let's go."

As he followed his brother to the car, Eddie hid his grin in the collar of his jacket. He might've waited a long time for someone in the family to speak out for him, but now he finally got his wish.

It felt good to have his brother on his side.

Still, Eddie hesitated before telling Robert not to drive him home and giving him James's address instead. He and James had decided to spend half the weekend at Eddie's place and the other half, after the family dinner, at James's. And while Eddie wouldn't change those plans for anybody, he was still wary about Robert's reaction.

But his brother surprised him yet again.

"Is it serious?" he asked as they left their parents' driveway.

Unable to stop himself, Eddie smiled down at his lap. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good." Robert stared ahead at the road. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks."

Eddie turned his head toward the window and grinned at the streets they were passing for most of the way, enjoying the surprisingly comfortable silence.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

When they arrived at James's place, Robert simply wished him a good night.

"You, too." Eddie got out, then turned and leaned down to look at his brother again.

"Thank you, truly. For everything."

And then it only took one text and three flights of stairs before the door opened and here James was, in old jeans and a T-shirt that stretched in all the right places.

"Hey, you," he said, and put his arms around him the moment Eddie crossed the small space between them and plastered himself to James's front, inhaling deeply.

This, right here, was where he wanted to be.

Hopefully forever.

EPILOGUE

A few months later

It was an uneventful night, thankfully, and the congressman and his wife decided to leave the party early, which meant that at half past ten James was back at the headquarters, showered and changed, and ready to head home.

But first, he needed to make one more stop.

He could hear the music playing from down the corridor. It was the latest of Eddie's obsessions that James sadly knew all the lyrics to, since he was subjected to it on a

daily—sometimes hourly—basis. He didn't mind it right now, though, because it meant Eddie was alone in there. He never put on any music on speakers with somebody else present.

As James pushed the door open, the familiar sight greeted him—Eddie turning around in his chair and smiling brightly before standing up. Meeting in the middle of the room for an I'm-glad-you're-okay kiss was familiar, too. The way Eddie's mouth tasted, the way he smelled, the way his body felt pressed against his...

"I can't wait to get home," James murmured into the corner of Eddie's lips and felt them stretching into another smile before Eddie pulled back.

"Well, then you'd better hand me the equipment so we can get this over with." He poked James in the chest. "Don't. Don't make an equipment joke."

Unable to resist the tips of Eddie's ears turning red, James brushed his fingers over them as he swallowed what he was about to say.

The sooner they went through this, the sooner they could leave, after all.

These days, neither of them lingered at work any longer than they had to.

They had someplace better to be.

"Spoilsport," James told him, but took a step back, then another, and settled in his chair as Eddie returned to his seat and opened the bag James handed over.

"Stop complaining and tell me about your day," Eddie said, inserting the USB drive into the computer. He was able to easily carry on a conversation and process the files, something James was a little jealous of.

"Ryan's cage-y in his texts," he admitted with a sigh.

"Which makes you suspicious."

It wasn't a question, more like a statement, but James still hummed his agreement. It was weird, not having his partner here, but what was even more weird was how quiet Ryan had been.

"He says it's fine, and he always had good things to say about his family, but I feel like there's some drama he doesn't want to share. Christmas can bring the worst in people."

Eddie grimaced. "I agree with that last part, that's for sure."

"Yeah."

While Eddie's relationship with his family was slowly changing for the better, neither he nor James were really looking forward to the upcoming Christmas Day dinner at the Bailey residence.

"In the worst-case scenario, we'll commiserate after he's back and tells us all about it." Eddie glanced at him. "Maybe he just doesn't want to do this over texts. Or, he may be too busy having a great time and we're a pair of Christmas haters."

"I'd take that." James stretched his legs in front of him. "Anyway, moving on from my full-time partner to my temporarypartner, I have new scoop on Ian and the You-Know-Who," he said, grinning at the expected groan.

"I didntsay he looks like Voldemort," Eddie told him for yet another time, rolling his eyes.

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:36 pm

"Close enough."

"Close enough!" Eddie turned in his chair and pointed a finger at James. "You're asking for a movie marathon, and don't think I won't do it."

"We're not watching those movies ever again. You said it yourself. But have it your way. You meant Lucius Malfoy."

"You know I'm right. The guy looks like a younger and hotter version of Lucius Malfoy, and Jason Isaacs was plenty hot in those movies already," Eddie told him and this time it was James who straightened in his seat.

"Are you really telling me how hot you think other guys are?"

Eddie lifted his eyebrows at him. "It's not that funny when someone is trying to rile you up, is it?"

"Fine." James fell back against the seat. "Anyway, do you want the scoop or not?"

"I do. But—" Eddie paused and clicked his mouse a few times. "I'm done. You can tell me all about it on the way home."

"Home".The move had happened barely a few weeks ago, but Eddie had already gotten used to calling formerly-only-James's place that, and it made James ridiculously happy for whatever reason.

Okay, maybe the reason wasn't actually that mysterious. Finally having a home he

shared with another person felt like a missing puzzle slipping into place, and hearing Eddie acknowledging that was huge.

"Come on, then," James said now, standing up and stretching his arms above his head, only to have Eddie's hand sneak under his shirt where it drove up his stomach. "No-o," he protested, stepping back. "Don't start something you end up not wanting to finish here."

Eddie shrugged and then stood up, taking his backpack with him.

"I don't share your office kink, that's all."

James chuckled. "I don't have an office kink. I have a you kink."

"Oh."

Eddie beamed at him, with that smile he sometimes got when a compliment landed just right. He still struggled with accepting praise or even acknowledgment, but they'd been making progress. And James was more than willing to help Eddie practice, especially since he had a lot of good things to say about him.

However, Eddie knew how to disarm him in a mere second, too.

"I love you," he whispered now, pressing a kiss against his lips.

James inhaled sharply. That was still new, as well.

"I love you, too," he whispered when he got his voice back. "Let's go home now."

Eddie tangled their fingers together and pulled him towards the door.

"Let's."

THE END