buck showing up on eddie's front porch with a pillow and a blanket and frown three nights after he finds dwayne in his attic. eddie takes one look at him, nods, and then steps aside so he can come inside.

—-

Three days after initially finding Dwayne in his attic and subsequently finding himself unable to sleep under his own roof, Buck hugs his pillow tighter to his chest and knocks on the familiar front door on South Bedford. The blanket on his arm starts to slide, and he yanks his hand back from the door, gyrating his arm to catch the loose corner before the blanket can hit the ground. He's just managed to gather it all up when the door opens and reveals a confused Eddie in a pair of basketball shorts and an old black tank top that has a hole near the collar.

He tilts his head.

He doesn't need to ask. Things have been weird. Buck doesn't just *stop by* since he moved out. He's basically broken an unspoken charter without a word of warning.

"Chim told me to go home," Buck murmurs.

Eddie swallows, gaze dipping down over the sight of him — Buck knows he's a mess. Knows his hair must be all over the place, and the bags under his eyes definitely haven't disappeared in the last couple hours. His clothes are wrinkled and he's wearing two different shoes. Eddie's gaze comes back up, slow, exacting, and then he asks, "So you came here?"

And Buck hears the question behind the question clearer than the question itself.

This is home?

Buck hesitates. "No," he admits. "I went back to my house, sat there listening to the creaking of the old pipes, panicked about someone being in my house again, and *then* came here."

Even though in every way that Buck's never going to claim—this *is* home.

Not the house on South Bedford, even though Buck knows every inch of it better than he knows of even his own bedroom in the house he grew up in Hershey. But Eddie. And Chris. And the way he feels when the three of them are under the same roof.

That's home.

And *the problem.*

And that's why when Chimney told him to go home, he ran in the opposite direction.

Eddie nods, steps aside, turning his back on him to head back into the house, and leaves the door open in an obvious invitation behind him. He doesn't wait for Buck to follow before making his way to the kitchen, muttering, "You shoulda done what he told you to do in the first place. Would've saved yourself a whole lot of misery."

Buck follows him in and drops the blanket and pillow on the couch before taking the same path towards the kitchen. "I . . ." He sighs, exhaling slowly, as he steps into the kitchen and stops at the doorway. "Wasn't sure I could."

Eddie pauses in front of the fridge. He hangs his head, and his hands clench into fists at his sides. "Whatever's going on between us," He says, voice low and serious, as he shakes out his hands and reaches out to pull the fridge open. "You can *always* come here."

He doesn't say it, but Buck hears the quiet correction that twists *here* into *to me.*

He pulls out two beers and closes the door behind himself.

"What is?" Buck asks, refusing to look him in the eye as he turns around. "Going on between us, I mean."

Eddie steps towards him and holds one of the beers out. "You tell me."

Buck takes it, slowly lifting his gaze to meet Eddie's. "It's *different*." *They're* different.

Eddie raises his eyebrows, like he's surprised Buck's admitting to it, but nods, opening his beer and tossing the cap towards the garbage can. It clanks against the rim and falls into the bag effortlessly. He brings the bottle to his mouth and takes a long, slow sip.

Swallows.

Exhales.

And says, "It is." Like it's the most obvious secret. Like it's not really even a secret at all.

Buck's eyes dance over him. "Why?"

Eddie's chest rises with a long inhale and he huffs it out on an empty laugh before side stepping and setting his beer on the counter. "Because," He says, crossing his arms. "I fell in love with you and you freaked out and neither of us know how to move past it."

The beer in Buck's hands slips.

Falls to the floor.

Shatters.

Soaks into Eddie’s socks and Buck’s pantlegs.

"Shit." He hisses, jumping backwards out of the splash zone before twisting to grab the paper towels off the center of the dining table. Leave it to him to make a mess of everything. Of Eddie’s kitchen, of their friendship, of their lives.

A wrecking ball of one.

"Buck, leave it." Eddie says from behind him.

Buck shakes his head, snatching up the paper towels and twisting back around, blinking back the tears stinging the back of his sinus’. "It's a mess--"

"Do you really think *this* is the mess we need to be worrying about?" His hands wave out over the beer still slinking its way across Eddie’s kitchen.

Buck freezes. Forces himself to look back up at him and away from where the beer is sliding down the side of Eddie’s cabinets. "Eddie . . ."

Something in Eddie’s expression snaps—hardens, and he clicks his jaw side to side before saying, "Just say you don't feel the same.” His hands rise at his sides and then slap back down against his thighs with a resounding *smack* that Buck *knows* stings. "Say you don't feel the same and that's why things are weird."

Buck opens and closes his mouth.

He *can’t.*

"Or tell me you *do* feel the same and we can *do something* about it."

But he can’t do *that,* either.

Buck closes his eyes, exhaling slowly, before repeating, "Eddie . . ."

"What the hell are you so scared of?"

What *isn’t* he scared of?

The image of every person he thought he loved, that he saw a future with walking away from him flits through his mind. Abby leaving with the promise of tomorrow, Taylor side stepping the explosion Buck set on their relationship, Tommy leaving because he realized what Buck couldn’t.

A line of backs disappearing into the distance.

And Buck, alone, watching them go.

His mouth goes dry.

“I can’t do this to us,” He says, voice hoarse around the lump rising in the back of his throat.

“To us?” Eddie asks, and Buck can *hear* the frown in his voice. The quiet disbelief.

What else could they call it?

Buck’s—

Buck ruins every good thing. Either by self sabotage or by thinking things are more than they are or by not being what people expect him to be. Whatever Eddie thinks they could be together *now,* one month, maybe even a year from now? It won’t be the same.

It never is.

"Can—can you name anyone I've dated who's still in my life?" Buck asks, quietly.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

He shakes his head. “Maybe . . . maybe dating me finally clued them in.” He shakes his head and his hands flex around the roll of paper towels. “I—I'm too selfish to let my love for you be the thing that takes you from me. I can handle losing *them.* They—they weren’t you. I’d rather have the rest of my life with my best friend than a handful of months or years with a boyfriend."

Eddie scoffs. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does to me! And, yeah, I know that means I’m making everything about me again, but—”

"And what *about me,* huh?" Eddie steps in, socks squelching in the beer.

Buck holds a hand out, "Stop, the *glass,* Eddie—"

"To hell with the god damned glass. What does a few idiots who never even deserved you in the first place have to do with how *I* feel about you?”

"I just *told* you—“

"No, you gave me an *excuse.* This isn't just about you. It's about you *and* me *and Chris.* What we all *are* together. You seriously think we can withstand ignoring the obvious? That trying to *avoid* ruining it all isn't the very thing that's going to destroy us?"

Buck shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

"You'll figure the same thing out everyone else has—"

"Do you *really* think that after eight years at your side, witnessing the good, the bad, and the *Buckley,* that there's anything you could say or do at this point to get rid of me? Buck, I fell in love with you not *in spite of* all your crazy, because god knows there's a lot," He pauses, and Buck knows he's raising his eyebrows pointedly as if to say *case in point,* even with his eyes closed, "but *because* of it. That's the *perk,* man. That's the thing that makes waking up just that much easier when I'm not sure I have the strength to do it. I know I'll have you and Chris and *it's enough."*

He takes another step and hisses as a piece of shattered glass crunches under his foot. Buck's snap open and he instinctively reaches for him, "I *told* you!" He grouches, tossing the paper towels to the table before grabbing him and carefully leading him to the dining room table. "You're wearing *socks."*

"I don't care about the damn socks."

"Yeah, but *I* care about the guy *wearing* the socks," Buck mutters, turning away from him to head for the cabinet above the fridge that he knows has an extra first aid kit. He sidesteps the flood of beer and glass, and yanks the cabinet open with more force than necessary.

"Coulda fooled me," Eddie snipes from behind him.

Buck twists to look at him over his shoulder, pausing just out of reach of the first aid kit, "Really?"

A defeated sigh. "No."

Buck nods and grabs the first aid kit, leaving the cabinet open behind him as he tracks his way back over to him. He falls into the chair next to him and fiddles with the first aid kit. There's a small trail of blood as Eddie slides his foot away from him.

He tears his gaze from it and makes himself look up. Eddie's watching him, face pinched up in frustration.

"You're the first one," Buck eventually says, plucking an alcohol swab and some gauze from the kit. "I thought I loved Abby and Taylor and, maybe, Tommy. I don't know. I'm not even sure I *liked* him."

"Good," Eddie harumphs, “He sucked."

Buck gives him a look. "That's not the point."

"Maybe to you."

“Yeah, well, he was *your* friend first.”

“And *you* were so jealous you almost broke my ankle about it.”

Buck sighs, "Eddie."

"Buck."

He shakes his head, motions for Eddie to give him his leg. “Let me clean it before it gets infected.”

“Who says it’ll get infected?”

“You’re a paramedic. You *know* it’ll get infected.”

“You’re not. You don’t know. I could get beer related super powers.”

Buck gives him his most unimpressed look. “Just give me your foot.”

Eddie narrows his eyes like he’s contemplating arguing, before rolling them and shifting so he can set his foot in Buck’s lap. It’s soaked through with beer and blood, and Buck’s frown deepens. He drags the sock off his foot, muttering, "You're the first one that what happens after we do this—whatever outcomes that comes from it. That it'll *matter.* If I fuck it up, it'll matter. If I—"

His hands tremble as he reaches for the alcohol swab, and Eddie reaches out and grabs them.

"You *sued* me," He says, quietly. "You *died.* You—” He huffs, raising his eyebrows as Buck looks up at him from beneath his lashes, like what comes next is the most heinous offense, “You stole the last eggo the day before you moved out and didn't even *tell* me."

Buck sniffs, "The worst crime of all."

It’s not about the frozen waffles, though.

It’s about leaving.

He didn’t tell him he was doing *that,* either.

"Yeah, actually,” Eddie mutters, holding his gaze, “My best friend left and I didn't have a single sweet thing in the house to make me feel better."

Buck shrugs, slipping his hands out from Eddie’s and grabbing the alcohol swab. "You had Chris."

"He's a teenager,” Eddie murmurs, watching him. “Remind me where the *sweet* is these days?"

Buck sighs, "Eddie—" He stops himself, shaking his head and moving to the cluster of cuts on the heel of Eddie’s foot. *Idiot.* Who steps in broken glass on purpose? Buck’s going to make sure he’s there when Eddie explains to Chim and the team why he’s hobbling next shift.

"If you don't want to be with me,” Eddie says, voice softer, “Fine. I can—*deal,”* He hesitates, his voice catching before barreling past it, “with that. I can let go and move on and figure out the gay thing with someone else—"

Buck pauses, his gaze snapping back up. "The gay thing?"

Eddie’s jaw clenches, and he nods once. *“My* gay thing."

"Oh."

"Yeah." He shakes his head. "I’m done fighting being happy. Done keeping this—*boundry* on myself as if crossing it might somehow make worse things happen. I’m gay. I’m in love with you. The world didn’t end when I admitted it, and it’s not going to when I reach for what I want, either. *And* no matter how hard my instincts fight to tell me otherwise, I *am* going to reach.” He leans forward, his foot shifting out of Buck’s grip.

Buck’s gaze dips back down and he catches it before it can slip off his lap entirely. His breathing feels ragged as he runs the alcohol swab over the cluster of cuts, heart hammering in his ears at Eddie’s quiet hiss of pain in response.

“Buck.”

Buck shakes his head, twisting to grab a cotton swab and a bandage from the first aid kit.

I’m gay.

I’m in love with you.

“All we’ve been through,” Eddie adds, “And I’m still here reaching.”

Buck swallows, pressing the bandage to the cuts and reaching for the tape. Eddie beats him to it, snatching it from the first aid kit and holding it in front of himself so Buck has to look at him. Buck reaches for it, but Eddie holds it firm, and reluctantly, Buck slowly lets himself meet his gaze.

Eddie ducks his head to hold it. “I’m not gonna be another person who walks away. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I mean, my kid loves you.”

“Does Chris love *anything* these days?”

Unwavering, Eddie nods. “Yeah,” he says. “You.” His nose wrinkles, and he bobs his head side to side, before adding, “And that new video game. And eating all the food in the pantry the day I go grocery shopping and not telling me so when I go for a snack there’s nothing left for me. But, mostly? You.”

“That’s not—”

“You’re our *family.”*

Buck’s throat tightens around a lump, and he reaches for the tape again, and Eddie lets it go this time. He can feel him watching him as he unravels it to wrap around Eddie’s heel, one hand steady on Eddie’s ankle while the other wraps it. Neither of them say anything—Buck, because he can’t find the words. Eddie’s are too busy cycling round and round in his mind like the picture perfect fantasy he’s begged the universe for his entire life come to fruition.

And Eddie’s just—

Letting him digest it.

And once Buck’s done with bandaging Eddie’s foot, his heartbeat racing like a war drum in his ears, he sets the tape back in the first aid kit, and fiddles with the clasp on the front of it.

“Buck.”

Buck shakes his head, sinus’ stinging as his vision starts to blur.

“I’m in love with you,” He whispers, hoarsely.

Eddie sniffs, shifting his foot off of Buck’s lap and leaning in towards him. “I know,” he says, like it’s not the most devastating sentence Buck’s ever uttered.

Shaking his head again, Buck lifts his chin enough just to seek out Eddie’s gaze. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Eddie's gaze softens, and he nods, "You think *I* could lose *you?"* He huffs, "Come *on,* Buckley. You know me better than that." He pauses, hesitates, and then reaches out, slow enough that Buck could pull away if he wants, and then takes the hand fidgeting with the first aid kit. "I want this because I *know* who you are. This isn't like Abby, where you were both learning who you were, or like Taylor, who didn't understand you to start, or like Tommy, because he's a dick and didn't even *try* to."

It's a curt summary of each of the most important relationships of his adult life.

But it's not inaccurate.

Even if it does erase Buck's part in the inevitable implosions.

"This is *you and me,"* Eddie continues, "And if there's *one* thing either of us can count on understanding, it's *each other."*

"Not always," Buck tries.

Eddie shrugs. "We always figure it out in the end."

They do, don't they?

Like two magnets drifting in the same place, no matter the environment, they slam back into one another's orbit without fail. No matter how angry or lost or broken they feel. It's even usually in this kitchen that they reunite.

The corner of Eddie's mouth quirks up. "You can't even *argue* it. Stop trying to think of a reason to."

Buck huffs. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Well, the next thing I told you to do was going to be come here and kiss me, but, if you're so against me telling you what to do—"

"Are you sure?" Buck interrupts. "Are you sure it's worth the risk?"

Eddie sits up straighter before leaning in, hand warm over Buck's. "I've spent a lot of time looking for the risks. Weighing the odds of every decision and whether or not I'm willing to pay the cost of being wrong. I'm not wrong about us, Buck. And even if I was? There's no risk in it, for me. Either we make as good a couple as we do partners, or we don't and we go back to just being partners."

Buck blinks. "You make it sound so easy."

Eddie chuckles, *"Something's* gotta be, doesn't it?" His smile falls as quickly as it appeared. "Where'd you wanna go when Chim told you to go home? Was it that house?"

Buck glances back towards the living room before hanging his head and shaking it. "You know it wasn't."

"Then where?"

If he says it, there's no going back.

Arguably, everything's already changed in everything that's been said.

Arguably, there's *already* no going back.

But, somehow, that doesn't make it any easier to look up at him, to take a breath that feels like it's the only thing holding his entire world together, and then to let it go, and quality admit, "You," he says, softly on that life altering exhale. "And Chris. Where—" His voice cracks, "Wherever you are."

He had this theory when he was a kid. Home was never a place. Never the door he finds himself at at the end of the day. It's what's on the other side of the door. The people that greet him when he crosses the threshold.

That's why it was so easy to leave Hershey, leave his parents and everyone who claimed to be friend or family. Because the second he closed that door behind him, the people stayed within. The people never sought him out, never wondered where he traveled or sought to bring him home. Leaving Hershey never felt like leaving something behind—it just felt like another step in the direction that would ultimately lead him *home.*

To a door that never really stays shut when he closes it behind him.

Because the people within care if he returns. Will notice if the locks get turned and the light goes out. Will break it down no matter the side of it he's on. Who he'll go through heaven and hell to always find his way back to—no matter how far he's traveled or how far he's fallen.

And he didn't know it when he stepped into his turnouts at the academy, or onto the polished floors at the 118, or across the threshold the first time Eddie brought him here—but every step since he left Hershey has led him *here.*

Home has been pulling at him, tugging at the veins of his heart to this point.

So, why is it so *hard?*

This is all he's ever wanted. All he's spent so many years now thinking he'd never find.

And that quiet understanding in Eddie's eyes is simultaneously the sweetest relief and the scariest reality he's come face to face with.

Buck—

Buck's never had something worth losing. Something precious and real and *his.*

What happens if he gets lost?

What if he can't find his way back?

How's he going to survive losing the thing he never really believed he could have beyond fantasies building in the back of a closet in Hershey where his parents didn't care enough to look for him?

Or, worse, what if he *hurts* them?

The corner of Eddie's mouth tilts up and he nods once, twice, before leaning back in his chair and carefully crossing his arms over his chest. "Who do I call when I'm scared?"

Buck's brow furrows, the words registering in slow motion. "What?"

"Who do I call when I'm scared?"

He blinks. Shifts to sit up straighter. "Me?"

Eddie hums. "And who does Chris call when he doesn't know what to do?"

"You."

Eddie shifts his head side to side. "Not when he's mad at me. Who's he calling if he doesn't want to talk to me?"

Buck looks over Eddie's shoulder at the backdoor. "Me," he murmurs.

Eddie nods. "And where do *you* go when you're hurting?" He shifts forward again, one eyebrow quirking as the movement forces Buck to look at him. He pauses, adds, "We don't gotta pretend to know how this is gonna work, Buck," He says, face screwing up like none of that matters, shaking his head as if to emphasise it. "All we have to do is *try."*

And that's the thing, isn't it?

Buck.

Well, he—

“I want to,” he admits, his voice cracking in the middle of *want* like the two halves of his existence—the man who’s struggled desperately to find something like *this;* exactly this; and the man who’s been told over and over again that it could never be his—coming to odds in the crackle of his voice at the back of his tongue and the determined gaze of his best friend..

Eddie tilts his head.

Nods.

Watches Buck for a long, long moment.

And then.

Sits up.

“Alright,” He says, clapping his hands together in his lap.

Buck frowns. “A—Alright?”

“Yep,” He leans back into his chair, running one hand through his hair and the other over his face, wiping the tension away as an easy smile takes its place. “Your move, man.”

“My move?”

“If you wanna date me, you’re gonna have to ask me out.”

Buck blinks, lashes fluttering in confusion.

Weren’t they both just on the brink of tears?

Aren’t they busy *hurting* right now? Tearing at their scars trying to find clear skin?

“Uh—”

Eddie shakes his head. “You want this.”

Buck nods, numbly awed. “Y—yeah. I wan—”

“Then ask for it.” Eddie nods. “I’m chasing you, man, but you gotta make a guy feel wanted, too. Woo me. Seduce me.” Buck’s mind short circuits for a beat at the idea of *seducing Eddie.* But Eddie barrels passed it like he hasn’t just dropped another nuclear bomb on everything Buck

thought he could have. “What was it Maddie and Chim were watching when we went by last month?”

Buck’s still caught on *seduce me,* but he manages a quietly stunned, “Bridgerton.”

Eddie snaps his fingers. “Bridgerton, yeah. You gonna *court me,* Buckley?”

Buck’s mouth opens and closes.

Eddie’s smile softens. “Just because it’s hard doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it.”

“Don’t talk about *hard things* after asking me to *seduce you.”*

A laugh jolts out of Eddie, like he’s not expecting it, but isn’t altogether surprised by it. “You’re stuck on the idea of getting in my pants when I’m trying to cement our future. Unbelievable.”

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

“Yeah,” Eddie nods, narrowing his eyes and leaning in—there’s no malice, no frustration, just an excited gleam glinting out of them, a familiar, unspoken challenge that’s never done anything but spark something within Buck. “And if you ever wanna get *there* you’re gonna have to ask for what you want.”

He raises his eyebrows; drops the proverbial gauntlet like an anvil. The air doesn’t shift with the weight of it, the ground remains solid and soaked in beer and in desperate need of a sweep so Chris doesn’t accidentally step on glass when he gets home from whatever movie he and his friends went to. But Buck feels it—feels gravity shift and melt away in order to make room for it.

A foundation.

“Eddie.”

Eddie looks at him expectantly. “Buck.”

“Do—” He swallows, shakes his head with a smile that feels equal parts surprised and confused and excited and absolutely fucking petrified. “Do you want to get dinner with me tomorrow night?”

Eddie’s smile flickers, and his chest rises with an inhale that seems to rocket through his ribcage—an expected influx of air that his body wasn’t prepared to take. The challenge in his eyes disappears as he blinks. And Buck thinks, for a beat, that maybe he’s surprised Buck’s actually doing it, but then, he says, “I think that’s gonna depend, man.”

Huh?

“On what?”

“If my best friend’ll mind.” He tilts his head to the side, wrinkling his nose. “We have a standing movie night on Fridays.”

Still his best friend.

Why does that matter more than the rest of it?

They’re changing dynamics, moving into new territory but—

He’s still *Eddie’s best friend.*

Buck nods with him, brows furrowing as he runs a hand over his mouth and pretends to think about it. “I—I don’t think he’ll mind.”

“No? Skipping out on a friend for *a date?”*

Buck swallows past the racing of his heart and goes for an easy, “Who said it’s a date?”

Eddie rolls his eyes like he’s not even the slightest bit concerned despite how they got here. Still, he steadies Buck with a purposeful nod. “You tell me, then. Is it a date?”

The door in his imagination. The one he’s imagined stepping through and finding warmth on the other side *swings open* and Buck—

“Yeah,” He breathes. “It’s a date.”

Buck steps over the threshold.