

# EDEN CAN WAIT

## EPISODE 2:

*Welcome to the Hotel California*



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# **Eden Can Wait**

A Serialized Novel by

*Ray N. Kuli*



If you want to get an automatic email when the next episode of *Eden Can Wait* is released, you can [sign up here](#). Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.



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*On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair  
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air  
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light  
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim  
I had to stop for the night  
There she stood in the doorway;  
I heard the mission bell  
And I was thinking to myself,  
"This could be Heaven or this could be Hell"*

***Eagles, Hotel California***

## *Episode Two: Welcome to the Hotel California*

They didn't send a black helicopter for me. But they did send a black car.

The Nissan Altima that stopped in front of me at 6pm on Sunday was sleek, moderately shiny and black like a crow. Thanks to its color and its tinted windows it looked every bit like a car a mysterious secretive organization would use to transport its employees. Which was strange, because I had always thought that real secretive organizations tried to blend in. Then again, maybe it *was* their way of blending in.

“Evening, Mr. West,” said a middle-aged man with an amazingly unmemorable face, who emerged from the driver’s door. “Are you ready?”

I nodded.

“Evening.”

“Let’s get your luggage into the trunk then,” he said, rounding the car.

There wasn’t much of a luggage—just a suitcase and a backpack. My instructions had been very clear: “Pack the bare minimum. Everything else will be provided.” Following these guidelines hadn’t been hard, since I had never been too attached to my belongings, save for a few things with some sentimental value.

Once the suitcase and the backpack had disappeared inside an empty pristine trunk, the driver courteously opened the back passenger door for me. I thanked him and dove in. The door closed softly behind me.

I looked around and immediately found two unpleasant surprises—so unpleasant, in fact, that my first reaction was to get out of the car. The windows that looked tinted on the outside were completely opaque inside the car. And as if this wasn’t enough, a snow white blurred glass partition separated the back seat from the front one. They could just as well have offered a ride in a meat trailer.

While I wondered whether the best course of action would be to get out quickly and forget about the whole idea for good, the driver's door banged shut. Thinking time was officially over.

I knocked on the partition. The murky glass slid down, revealing the face of the driver. Behind him I could see the familiar street lit by a still warm late afternoon light. Children were playing in the play yard and a goofy dog was circling them excitedly.

“What's up with this car?” I asked, knowing that there was no need to explain the question.

“We do not advertise the location of our facility,” the driver replied flatly.

“That’s very admirable,” I said. “But I'd like to know where I'm being taken.”

“To the ESI training center,” he replied, turning his head this time.

For a moment we had a staring contest, which was pretty pointless, since I had no idea what I wanted him to do to make me feel more reassured.

The driver looked as if he was considering flooring the gas pedal just to see if I would jump out of the moving car.

“Mr. West,” he said, finally. “While your concerns are somewhat understandable, we have a long ride ahead of us. So I'd appreciate if you could you make up your mind and stop looking as if you are about to walk away.”

“How do I know that you are really taking me to that training facility?” I asked, ignoring his request.

“You don't,” he replied, his voice still flat. “But if you're so concerned about this you can step outside the car, take a picture of my license plate, send it to a friend along with my description and ask him to call the police in case you don't contact him within twenty-four hours. Or if that option sounds too much like a spy movie, you can stop pretending that you have forgotten about the money we have wired to your account.”

I sighed. The money. Of course.

“It's okay,” I said. “Let's go.”

The murky partition went up. Apparently my chaperone had been too irritated by my unreasonable stubbornness to consider wishing me bon voyage.

He had a point. ESI had just made me rich—or at least significantly richer—and I had completely forgotten about it when confronted with opaque windows and conspiracy theories.

The money—exactly ten percent of the promised compensation—landed on my account less than twenty-four hours after I signed my training participation agreement. It didn't turn me into an instant millionaire, but it made me richer than I had ever been. And that was *before* I had done anything. In fact, I had hardly committed to anything. The agreement that I had signed on the

previous day in the already familiar red brick building in Cambridge obliged me only to participate in the training. There was not a word in that document about me providing my services to ESI. Clearly, I was not deemed trustworthy enough until I passed the test.

The signing procedure was the complete opposite of the interrogation I had gone through in that room a few days earlier. Upon arrival, I was greeted by a slouching man in his forties, who without any explanation handed me a thin folder and pointed to a table in the corner. Our entire conversation consisted of “Hi,” “Bye,” and “We’ll be in touch” phrase that he uttered once I signed the papers. Whatever his role at ESI was, he was certainly not a talkative type.

The paper itself didn’t contain any surprises. Nor did it shed any light on the questions that my recent interviewers had declined to answer. I was about to be trained for an unknown life in an unknown place for an unknown reason. And somehow I was fine with that. If anything, I wanted the process to be over with as soon as possible. The decision had been made and I was in, along with everything that came with the territory recklessly mapped by that short message. So I signed the papers and left, feeling fully ready for the next step.

As it turned out, I wasn’t entirely prepared for what followed. Although the agreement did mention the compensation, I still felt something close to a shock when money showed up in my account the next afternoon. I had known the amount in advance—and still found it hard to believe.

It was more than I would’ve made in a year had Stevens not fired me. The number stared at me from the screen as a silent reminder of how seriously ESI was taking our agreement and what kind of organization I was about to deal with. There was something equally reassuring and alarming about the ease with which such a ridiculous sum of money had arrived in my account overnight.

Now Alice was up to her ears in the rabbit hole.

I had to share the news with someone, so I texted Kim. Strictly speaking, I was not even violating the terms of the agreement.

“They wired the money.”

“You da man!” said his reply.

The next thing I did was completely illogical, but it just felt right. I opened an account in another bank and transferred my freshly obtained fortune there. I knew there was no way ESI



could take the money back from my account if they had a change of heart, but still somehow that small act of financial housekeeping made me feel safer about the whole situation.

A short email that arrived the same day informed me that I had a week to get ready and inquired whether I needed more time. I asked for a three-day extension, received it promptly and got myself busy with hitting a pause button on my normal life for three years. The signing bonus significantly simplified the process of terminating the lease and finding long-term storage.

Despite the flurry of things that need my attention, the biggest one on my mind had nothing to do with selling items and closing accounts. There was a reason I had asked for that three-day extension.

I spent a good portion of the six-hour flight to San Francisco trying to decide what to tell Mom. Nevertheless, when the plane landed, I still wasn't sure what I was going to tell her. Using one of ESI's boilerplate stories didn't sound like a good option. Going away for three years was one thing, but living with a lie like that for the rest of my life was something else. Telling the truth was not a smart choice either. My nameless supervisors had been very particular about my obligation to keep the name of their organization a secret. Breaking that rule once was bad enough. There was no good solution.

But once I entered Mom's apartment, everything became clear. There was no way I was going to lie. But I didn't have to tell the whole truth either.

So once the casserole was eaten, the startup fiasco discussed once again and the newest of Mom's drawings reviewed, I told her the truth. The part that I could share.

"I see," she said once I finished. "Is it military?"

"No. Private sector."

"Does it have anything to do with the military?"

"Not to my knowledge. Not that there would be anything wrong with that."

She looked away for a moment.

"You would tell me if it was anything like that, right?"

"You know I would. But it's not."

She nodded, her eyes suddenly glistening. I knew what—or rather who—she was thinking about. Her younger brother, my uncle Steve. It had been seven years since he found his final resting place under a white marble headstone at Arlington. He went away younger than a lot of

highly accomplished people I had known, but for some reason, he—more than anyone else—had always struck me as someone who knew exactly what he wanted to do in life.

“So you won’t be writing?”

“No. No letters, no calls, no visits. Unless you want me to tell them to send you letters on my behalf.”

Her facial expression was hardly unexpected.

“Yes, that’s what I thought.”

“I guess there’s no use asking why.”

“I don’t know myself.”

“But it’s all worth it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Three years. *Three* years!”

“I know. But I’ve thought this through. It’s worth it.”

“Okay, tell me again everything you *can* tell me.”

I told her again. Then again.

She listened, her eyes never leaving my face, and for the second time in the last couple of weeks I felt that someone was listening to my voice without paying much attention to the words I was saying. Only this time I knew why my voice mattered more than words.

“All right, enough of that,” she said, finally. “How is your dad?”

“Maybe you should ask him yourself,” I said, knowing that it wasn’t a good time to get irritated.

She sighed.

“He’s fine,” I said. “I spoke to him last week. He is in Colombia again. But you guys should really talk once in a while. Wouldn’t hurt, you know?”

They divorced when I was in high school. The divorce left both parties wondering about two things: what went wrong and why did it take so long? As for me, while wholeheartedly hating the mere idea of their separation, I could only wonder how they ended up together in the first place. They were both great people, but their ideas about life in general, and married life in particular, were totally different.

“Maybe,” she said, without arguing, as she would usually do whenever I brought up the subject. “Just tell me one more thing. Should I be worried?”

“No, Mom. It’s completely safe. I’ve done my homework and I’m a big boy now.”

She smiled the way only she could smile. For a second she looked as if she wanted to raise her hand and touch my face, but the moment passed and she didn’t move.

“Yes, you are,” she said.

It was only when I left her apartment a day later that I realized that I hadn’t said a word about the surgery. I pushed the thought away. It was already hard enough—harder than I had expected it to be. “It’s not supposed to be easy,” Uncle Steve had told me once when I was a teenager, stupid enough to ask him what it was like to leave for a deployment. “But you want to leave with a clear head and to do that you’d better know how to say your goodbyes.” I had never given that phrase much thought. But now I felt that I knew what he meant.

I called Dad from the airport. The flight was delayed and with just two days left before the beginning of my ESI adventure I wanted to make sure I caught him. His typical flying schedule was crazy and sometimes we would spend a few days playing voicemail ping-pong before connecting. Nevertheless, we spoke at least every couple of weeks, sometimes more frequently. Visits were a whole different story. Sometimes a year would pass without us seeing each other face to face. It had been like this ever since I left for college and he got that new job in Chicago. He relocated for it, but was spending more time flying all over the world than sitting in his office. Luckily, we had just spent a few days together right before I was fired—Dad had come to Boston for a conference.

I didn’t have to leave voicemail this time—he answered almost immediately.

“I’ll be going away for a while,” I said after the greetings.

“I know,” he said.

“You do?”

“Your mother told me.”

I realized that the idea of my parents calling each other was even more alien to me than the absurd idea that had flashed in my mind a second ago. No, my dad didn’t have anything to do with ESI. And yes, I probably had been watching too many spy movies.

“Well,” I said. “I guess there is at least something good about me leaving.”

“I hope this isn’t the best part,” he replied. “Care to tell me more than you told—” He hesitated for a moment. “—more than you told Mom?”

“I can't.”

“I figured as much. Alright, tell me what you've told her.”

I looked around, cautiously relocated to a chair in the corner and repeated my story. Two minutes into my tale, I realized that I was revealing more details than I had shared with Mom and that I was getting dangerously close to the fine line that separated me from another violation of the confidentiality agreement. My conversation with Mom was all about softening the blow. This time, however, I would not have minded getting advice.

“Well, you're a grown man,” said Dad when I was done. “Let's hope you know what you're doing. What kind of background check did you run?”

I conveyed to him the results of Kim's investigation.

“Good,” he said approvingly. “But you should've told me earlier.”

“Why?”

“I would've asked one of our lawyers to go over your contract.”

“But I'm not supposed to show it to anyone.”

“All the more so. It's water under the bridge now, unless you want to ask them for more time. It isn't something I can do overnight.”

“No it's fine. But thanks.”

“Anything else you can share?”

I thought for a moment and told him about the surgery.

“Interesting,” he said in a tone I couldn't quite place. “Well, at least they're warning you about this. Did you tell your mother?”

“No. Listen, please—”

“Don't worry. She won't hear it from me.”

“Thanks. I—”

“It's okay. You did the right thing. Unless you're not sure about this yourself.”

“I'm sure. I want to do this.”

“Will I recognize you when you're back?” he asked after a short pause.

“I'll still have my voice. And they say the changes are supposed to be minor.”

“That's very nice of them,” he said, his voice tinged with a faint note of irritation.

We spent over an hour on the phone—longer than we had in years. I heard him speaking to someone a few times. “Tell him I’ll call him later.” “No, not today.” One time he said, “Cancel the meeting. Yes, I know. Just cancel it.”

The plane was already on the runway when I said goodbye.

Dad coughed.

“Take care, son,” he said.

I was about to hang up when I heard him add, “Stay safe.”

Once I turned off the phone, it occurred to me that I still had almost two days left for another call or two. But then I recalled, “You’d better know how to say your goodbyes.”

I didn’t call either one of them again.

And now I was riding in a car that was taking me to an unknown location for an unclear training that was supposed to prepare me for an unspecified test, which in turn—

Wait! I sat up straight. Who said the location of the training facility had to remain unknown? I’m not the Man in the Iron Mask, this is wasn’t a carriage and—most importantly—we’re not in the seventeenth century. In this day and age there are ways to determine one’s location without looking at street signs.

But once I had pulled out the phone I discovered that I just as well could’ve been taking a carriage ride in Louis XIV’s France. There was no signal. Not even a glimpse of it. The black car evidently had more customizations than met the eye.

I leaned back on the soft seat, listening to the sound of the engine. There was no use trying to beat ESI at their own game. Whatever they were doing in their facility, they meant business.

Watching blurry shadows that from time to time sped across the window, I kept thinking about what was awaiting me at the end of the journey. They probably will have me go through some kind of boot camp. Does it mean I’ll get to meet others like me? Will there be others? And that test . . . Seriously, what’s up with that test? I wonder if they . . .

“Mr. West,” said a slightly muffled familiar voice. “We have arrived.”

I opened my eyes. Did I really fall asleep? How long has it been?

I looked at the watch. Four hours? Not too far, but still a lot of options. We could be in New York or Montpelier or . . . or we could be back to Boston. We also—

“We have arrived,” repeated the driver, lowering the partition and interrupting the flow of my half-awaken deductions. “Welcome to ESI.”

I stepped out of the car and found myself in a large parking garage. It looked pretty much like any other parking garage I had been in. The only noticeable difference was the number of colored pipes that swirled on the ceiling like countless snakes.

“This way,” said the driver.

He had already extracted my belongings from the trunk and was pointing to the elevator on the left.

While we walked toward the elevator I noticed a few other cars with tinted windows: a couple of Nissans like the one we had arrived in and a large SUV. The garage was half-empty, but there were still quite a few cars, considering the time of the day. I managed to take a quick peek at my phone and found, almost with gloomy satisfaction, that it was as useless as it had been in the car.

Getting in and out of the elevator required scanning the driver’s card key. I was hardly impressed—by now I was expecting retina scanners and full-body x-ray machines.

We ended up on the second floor, which immediately reminded me of checking into a cheap but really well-maintained hotel. I was ushered down a very neat, brightly lit hallway with numbered cream doors on both sides.

“Your room,” said the driver, opening the door with number 225 on it.

“Is this where I’ll be staying the entire time?” I asked, stepping in.

He nodded.

“It isn’t a palace, but there’s plenty of room.”

The room—or rather what seemed to be a one-bedroom apartment, since there was no bed in sight—was indeed spacious. A dining table, a refrigerator, a microwave, a desk with a flat monitor and even a decent size flatscreen TV on the wall. Again, everything—except the monitor on the desk—reminded me of a clean and tidy, though not luxurious, hotel. At the same time something about the room didn’t seem quite right. I couldn’t say precisely what it was though—I only had a vague nagging feeling that something was amiss.

“In the morning,” said the driver, “you will get a wake-up call and will be given specific instructions. In the meantime I suggest you get some sleep—your training starts tomorrow. If you are hungry there’s some food.” He pointed at the refrigerator.

“Can I go outside my room?” I asked.

He seemed a little surprised by my question and thought for a moment before answering. “Generally yes, but we would prefer that tonight you stay inside. Tomorrow you'll be given a tour and after that you'll be welcome to walk around freely. Any other questions?”

“No. Wait—” it had just occurred to me what was missing in the room. “Why are there no windows?”

He nodded slightly, as if indicating that he had finally heard the question he had been expecting. “It is part of your training. We believe that without windows you will be able to prepare for your role faster.”

“And what role is that?” I asked. “Count of Monte Cristo?”

He cracked a smile, but it was the polite smile of a man acknowledging someone's botched attempt to make a joke.

“No, the person you are about to become is much more unique. If you have any more questions, feel free to dial zero on your phone. Good night, Mr. West.”

When the door closed I went straight into my new bedroom. Unsurprisingly, there was no window. Not even a tiny one. Apparently, my training had already begun.

Humming some random melody, I wandered around the room for a few minutes, opening drawers, peeking into an empty closet and resisting an inexplicably sharp and absurd temptation to look out a nonexistent window.

There was plenty of room indeed. Plenty of room at the Hotel California . . .

I realized what song I had been humming. It had been probably triggered by the driver's words and the whole feel of checking into a hotel.

*Welcome to the Hotel California,*

*Such a lovely place,*

*Such a lovely face . . .*

There was no lovely face in sight and the place was not as lovely as it was bizarre, but so far I had nothing to complain about. It wasn't any more bizarre than what I could logically expect after dealing with ESI for a few weeks.

So here I was, in an undisclosed location, ready to spend my first night in a room without windows, oblivious as to what to expect in the morning, and, judging by the number of times the

driver had to use his card key on our way from the parking, essentially grounded in my windowless residence.

On the bright side, I had been safely transported to the promised destination, despite falling asleep like an exhausted toddler. The room, even with its lack of windows and the simplicity of its furniture, felt welcoming, even cozy. And then there was something else. A feeling. It was an almost physical tingling sensation of adventure, part dangerous, part safe, that—now I could see it clearly—had been an unrecognized cherry on top of the money cake ever since the first email from ESI had arrived to my mailbox.

I knew that feeling—it had been there when I decided to take a leap of startup faith with Jeremy and Kim and when I worked on that state Senate investigation. I had never thought of myself as an adrenaline junkie, but in retrospect, it might have influenced my key decisions more than I cared to admit. Maybe the anticipation of that feeling had as much to do with my being in the ESI building as the financial freedom I was hoping to get as my reward.

Having arrived at that questionable conclusion, I decided that I had had enough of self-analysis for one evening and turned my attention to the dining options.

Inside the refrigerator I found a decent supply of fruits, vegetables, bread, turkey breast and pizza. Wondering if they had really taken my food preferences into account, which was one of the questions I vaguely remembered answering in the questionnaire, I ate and discovered that after a four-hour nap I had no desire to sleep. Unfortunately, there was positively nothing to do. I turned on the computer but couldn't get past the login screen, which sternly asked me for credentials. The TV proved to be completely useless, since it completely ignored my attempts to turn it on. I tried almost as an act of a hopeless ritual to use my phone, but in full accordance with my grim expectations it showed no signal.

I wished I had brought my dumbbells with me, but just like a decent book or two they hadn't passed the “bare minimum” test. It seemed that my best course of action was to follow the driver's advice and get a good sleep.

That turned to be easier said than done. I spent a good hour tossing and turning until finally dozing off. My last semi-conscious thoughts swirled lazily around another little oddity the evening had brought. The oddity consisted of a single word. *Become*. “The person you are about to become . . .” Why such a strange choice of words? Why didn't he just say “about to play,”



“about to portray,” or something along these lines? How can I become someone else? Do they really expect me to turn into a different man, just by adjusting my looks?

That was the last thing I remembered.

The weirdness of my dreams matched the experience of my afternoon. I was lying on a cold operating table. Next to me stood the driver, accompanied by the bearded man who had interviewed me back in Cambridge.

“You are about to become the man you were always destined to be,” the driver was saying. “The absence of windows will help you in the transformation. You see, the sunlight can really slow it down.”

The bearded man behind him kept nodding approvingly.

The driver pulled a glistening scalpel out of his pocket.

“It won’t take long,” he said leaning down. “We’re a very efficient organization.”

Unhurried sounds of vaguely familiar guitar music filled the air.

“Welcome to ESI,” said the driver as the cold metal of the scalpel cut through my skin.

I didn’t feel any pain. The only inconvenience was the bright reflection of the operating lamp in the shiny surface of the lancet.

The music in the background grew louder. Now it was accompanied by words.

*You can check out any time you like . . .*

*But you can never leave . . .*

“And . . . we’re done,” said the driver, stepping back from the table. “Take a look.”

I lowered my bare legs to the shiny icy-cold floor and took a few steps toward a large mirror in the corner.

The face that stared back at me from the mirror had no features, save for the pair of wide open eyes. These eyes, calm and cold, seemed to be unconcerned by the fact that the face they were on had neither a nose nor a mouth.

“Now you are a truly unique man,” said the voice of the bearded man behind me, intermingling with the sound of music.

“Your training is about to begin.”

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