

## Paper or Plastic?

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# Paper or Plastic?

by [Elder\\_Higgins](#)

## Summary

Race knew nothing would ever come out of these stolen glances or witty remarks. The wink that followed a quick brush of fingertips would never amount to anything meaningful. This affair was nothing but a new daydream for Race to add to his long list of “what if’s.” Then again, Race always had a decent track record with accomplishing the unanticipated.

NOTE: This is the first story in the Modern Newsies series, but is classified as the second because the previous story is a prequel

## Notes

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## A can of sardines

Culinary school was by no means cheap. Even with the scholarships Antonio Higgins had been awarded, he would still be paying thousands of dollars a year and he would be doing it completely alone. His family was still back in Italy. They had been for the past eight years of his life. Race was the only Higgins to live ‘the American Dream,’ which currently meant working as a part time cashier for a grocery store.

That was where he stood now, at 10:50 at night, waiting the next hour until close. Customers milled about the aisles. The time passed slowly. Race was rather bored.

The only saving grace was his coworker, Albert, his bagger for the evening. When Race first started they mainly talked about school, he found out that Albert was attending Julliard for theater and dance. He had seen some of his work and, damn, could that boy dance.

It was just about Race’s sixth week in, and it was safe to say that Albert was no longer a coworker, but also a friend. He was the first one Race would call when he needed someone to taste test a recipe and soon integrated into hanging out with with Race’s closest friends: Elmer, Finch and Specs.

Davey was also working tonight. He was around 23 years old, only 2 years older than Race, and quite possibly the only reason he got this job. Jack would always tease him about it, after all, how often was it that his best friend’s boyfriend got him work that he would end up falling in love with?

Race genuinely did enjoy his job, even though it was only as a part-time cashier. He did not mind standing from 3pm – 12:15am every day after hours of school. He did not mind the customers that cursed him out when he denied them a coupon or repeating the rewards number spiel every five minutes. He did not mind that his late hours meant no one ever came in after nine; there was ample time for him to finish homework.

Let Jack make fun of him. Race was making money, making friends, and completing schoolwork all in one place. He was happy, after a long while of being trapped in that dark place in his mind, and he couldn’t ask for anything more.

The automatic doors slid open with a soft hiss. Race groaned, lifting his gaze from his algebra to crane his neck and see what asshole needed to go shopping ten minutes before closing. “Hey, Dave?” He called out, hoping the male could hear him from the backroom. “Can you close the doors? I would like to leave before twelve-thirty tonight.”

His response was drowned out by Albert screeching the lyrics to “Tainted Love.” His sing was something to be desired, but he was trying to improve, figuring a decent voice paired with his exceptional dancing would land him a role on Broadway. Race supported him, in every moment except for the current one. “Albert, for the love of all that is holy, shut yer trap.” He whined, closing his textbook to go and lock the automatic doors leading in.

Albert was indignant at the reaction, ready to start a brawl, but Davey came out and interrupted. "Sorry, I had to make sure everything was all set to go." He already had his hat and coat on. "Once this last customer leaves I can count your drawer and we should all be out in ten minutes tops."

Said customer, placed their singular item on the belt. Race made his way back to his register, opening his mouth to greet them but was stunned into silence. It was rare for him to see Jack with his eyes open this late at night, let alone with the most gorgeous stranger he had ever seen.

"Jack?" Race composed himself and decided that focusing solely on Jack was the only thing keeping him from spontaneously combusting in the presence of this attractive stranger, "Since when are you awake past ten?"

Jack's companion (acquaintance? Race honestly couldn't tell) in line snorted while Jack let out an embellished gasp. "You wound me." He cried, dramatically throwing his hand to his head and groaning. "Davey, babe, are you going to let him talk to me that way?"

Davey simply rolled his eyes, muttering something to Albert about how he should have just walked home. The two laughed, only fueling Jack's melodramatic façade. "Even my lover turns on me, what have I done to deserve such abuse? Oh, cruel world--"

"Aye, Jackie, you should'a majored in actin' 'stead of art with all these overreactions," said the stranger. Race turned to him with grin, it was rare someone could match his wit. He quickly typed in his password and scanned the single item: a can of sardines. Weird, but hey Race had seen a lot crazier things in retail, so he wasn't one to judge.

"Jack aren't ya gonna introduce me to your friend over here or am I going to have to rely on my charm?" Race cooed, winking at the male. He was short, 5'4" at the tallest, but his build made up for it. He could probably lift a car without breaking a sweat based off the size of his biceps.

Jack rolled his eyes, too busy pouting at being outnumbered to answer. The stranger sighed, sticking his hand out around the register to properly introduce himself, "Spot, Spot Conlon, friend o' Jack's."

Race grin would have widened if it could and he eagerly shook Spot's hand. "You can call me Racetrack Higgins. I am Jack's official best friend," He said so quickly it was surprising Spot could even follow along. Somehow, he did, going as far to raise his eyebrow at the title Race had bestowed upon himself.

"Offical ya say?" He let out a low whistle. "That's an impressive label." There was a glint in his eye, Race could have sworn it. Whether it was love or jealousy was yet to be determined; there was also a strong possibility that glint was simply the florescent lights of the store, but Race was a romantic.

Davey let out a loud laugh. "Race is anything but impressive," He teased. Race let out an offended gasp, but Albert was quick to come to his rescue. "Are you implying that him teacher poker to a nine-year-old was not impressive or when he single-handedly orchestrated

a city wide shut down for 34 hours or that time he got Beyoncé – Beyoncé, Davey – to retweet him and then-”

Jack’s boyfriend threw his hands in the air crying out, “Ok! Ok, I get it. Race is the greatest person to walk the planet.” Before Race could even plaster on the mischievous grin Davey had a pointed glare aimed at him, “Don’t you grow a big head. That nine-year-old was my brother and I kicked your ass.”

Spot let out a bark of laughter, “No way, the walkin’ Mouth kicked yer ass?” Race reddened, this was not the first impression he was expecting to leave on Spot.

“Paper or plastic?” He blurted out, in attempt to switch the topic of conversation literally anywhere else. Everyone stared at him like he had three heads. “What? I’m just doing my job.”

“Racer, he’s got one thing and it’s a small ass can of sardines,” Jack laughed as Davey punched him in the arm in an attempt to shush him once he noticed the embarrassed blush across Race’s cheeks had only deepened. There was some hushed whispering between the two, along the lines of ‘be nice he’s got a crush’ and ‘no I will not apologize for speaking the truth.’ Eventually, Jack looked back at Race and muttered a small, “I am sorry for calling you out on your own stupidity.”

Davey pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. At least he apologized, no matter how half-assed it may have been. Race took it in stride and salvaged what little dignity he had left, “I forgive you, Cowboy. After all, someone needs to relieve you for your role of dumbass every once in a while.”

Race wasn’t religious, but if he was he would have thanked the gods above because Spot laughed at that shitty joke. It was midnight now, closing time. Davey was antsy, bouncing about and tugging on Jack, so Race figured it was best to finish up the order and let Davey close up. He handed Spot his can of sardines, not in a bag, and pulled out his drawer for Davey to count out in the back.

“So, why are you getting a single can of sardines?” Albert asked. Race made a mental note to take him out to lunch for being such a good wing man.

Spot looked down at his purchase and laughed, “Yeah, I guess it’s a little weird for a midnight shopping run. They’re for my cat. She’s been good this week, so I’s decided I would reward her.”

Race arched an eyebrow. Hot and he had a pet, this may have just been the man of his dreams. “You’re a cat person?” He asked in shock, quickly adding, “and you’re treating her like you would a dog. Rewarding her for good behavior, love, she’s only going to see the treat and keep doing whatever the hell she wants.”

Albert died at that comment, laughing so hard he had tears running down his face. Race knew that his boyfriend, Finch, had three cats and had spent two years trying to train them to sit like a dog would, it was a huge waste of time. Spot didn’t lose his smile, “Laugh all you

want, but she hasn't pushed anythin' off the counter all week, so she's getting' a reward. Plus, I wanted a dog, but my roommate's allergic."

Race smiled, packing his homework into his bag and following Davey, Jack, and Albert out the door. Spot fell into step next to him. "If you could have a dog, what kind would you get?" He asked, gently hip checking the shorter fellow.

"A pitbull, they's good dog's, just 'ave a bad rap." He said after a moment's deliberation. Jack made a small scoff, "I can't believe you didn't say Crutchie. You are always talking about how you want to steal my dog."

Spot let out a small chuckle and shrugged, "I's would be too scared ta fight you's for him, ya would probably kill me." Everyone knew that Jack loved his rescue lab. The poor thing was found hurt and abused so badly they were forced to amputate his front leg. No one wanted to support the puppy, claiming it was too much work, but Jack stepped up and took him.

Race nodded in agreement, "Both would have been a good choice, if you had said something like Chihuahua I would have been forced to never talk to you again."

At that comment Spot grinned and nudged him, "That's all it would 'ave taken? You's should 'ave told me that before I answered." Albert let out a loud "Ohhhh burn" before saying a loud goodbye and heading off towards his car.

Jack checked his watch and sighed, it was 12:15. "Yeah, we should be heading out too. Sure, you're okay walking home Racer?" He asked, voice laced with worry. Race had been mugged once, maybe two, times on his walk home and ever since then Jack practically went into cardiac arrest every time Race's shift ended.

"Jack, I have walked home for three months without an incident. I will be perfectly fine, it's only four blocks." Race reassured him with a dramatic eyeroll that caused Spot's eyebrow to arch. Davey was quick to shut down any further conversation by complaining about his legs hurting and his desperate need for a warm bed.

"See ya 'round, Racer." Spot winked, and Race laughed.

"We both know you'll be counting down the seconds until you see me again," Race teased. "Night everybody, get home safe."

Jack dragged him into a small hug, "Call me if you see anyone suspicious." Race sighed but nodded when Jack pulled back to look him in the eye, muttering a small, "Please?"

He waved them off before starting home. Part of him wished he had asked for Spot's number, but it would have been weird coming onto one of Jack's friends in front of him. They didn't do that. Even when Race and Specs had that weird thing they never did it around their friends; no one did unless they were officially a couple. Less drama that way. Plus, it wasn't like Race would ever see him again.

It turned out that Race would be graced with Spot's presence once more. A little over a week later, Davey and he were closing with a new bagger – Race was already having a bad day and

the fact that Albert was not there to talk his ear off just added to his sour mood. The automatic doors slid open with the same annoying hiss and Race let out a small cry. His bagger looked at him with concern but stayed silent, he hadn't said anything since Race yelled at him for bagging frozen items with soup from the hot bar. Even Albert wasn't that bad of a bagger and Davey almost fired him twice because of customer complaints.

Once more they were ten minutes to close. Race had failed to start any homework; the store was unusually busy for a Wednesday night plus he had to instill some common sense into the new kid. The last thing he wanted was to help another customer. With the way today was going they would end up taking half an hour, meaning Race wouldn't get home until one and only get a few hours of sleep to be up for his 8 am class tomorrow.

Davey came out of the backroom, doing last minute checks to make sure the other registers were empty and going to lock the doors going in. He winked at Race on his way by, just as the customer placed their items on the belt. Race, as confused as he was, simply plastered his best customer service smile on and turned.

"Hi, you found everything okay- oh. Hiya, Spotty." The fake smile fell, but he quickly recovered and winked. "You missed me that bad, huh?" Race laughed, reaching over to scan his items. There were two this time: sardines and ice cream.

Spot blushed, at least, Race thought he had blushed but that could have been due to his overly active imagination, then he let out a loud laugh. "First of all, my name ain't Spotty. Second, I was sitting in class this mornin' drooling over the freeze-frame memory I 'ave of you and just thought to myself, 'Golly gee, I should go in an' spend my money just to see him in person.'" Spot deadpanned, the corners of his lips threatening to twitch up into a small grin.

Race wheezed with laughter at the story, but the "golly gee" coming out in his monotone voice was the cherry on top. Once more Spot's face went pink, but this time he allowed a shy smile to make its way onto his face. "You are something else. . . Spotty," Race said, a sly smirk spreading over his features. Spot raised his eyebrow, scoffing slightly at the use of the name, leaning forward slightly as if to say something. They stared at each other, Race's eyes darting from deep brown eyes, to the freckles scattered across his nose, and to his slightly chapped lips before bouncing back up to meet his challenging gaze.

The new bagger gasped, having somehow managed to rip the bag filled with just two small items. Race leaned back, giving a tired smile and a loud sigh. "How in the hell were you able to do that?" he snapped, the kid nervously shoving Spot's items into a new bag before scampering off to clock out.

"Aye, go easy on the kid. He's 'bout as smart as you are," Spot snorted softly, eyes trailing over Race's tired features. He only earned a breathy chuckle in response. "Hey, you're ok there Race?" Spot asked, leaning against the register, head cocked to the side.

Race blushed, avoiding his eyes and shrugging. There was no way he would be able to respond to that with an intelligible sentence. Luckily, Davey returned with a smug grin on his face and grabbed Race's till. "Hello, Spot. How are you doing today?" He asked, using his award-winning customer service voice. The voice was truly award-winning, Davey had earned employee of the month for the past six months. The customers absolutely adored him.

The bag was held up in response, “Oh you know, my boyfriend dumped me on Monday and I’m still not over it, so I got’s myself some ice cream,” Spot said with a bitter laugh, “Little does the bastard know, I still got his Netflix password.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. I know how close you and Tommy Boy were,” Davey said, sympathetically placing a hand on his shoulder with a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll find the right person, someone who deserves you. I know you will.”

Race nodded, biting back a smile. Last week he had texted Jack almost as soon as he had gotten home. He demanded to know everything about Spot, especially why the two had never met until now. Jack, always one for drama, told Race the bare minimum: Spot had lived with Jack for two years in Medda’s foster home but had been adopted by his birth father, only to show up a few years later, he mainly kept to himself (Jack was honestly shocked that he even joked around with Race), and he was in a happy, queer relationship.

*Not anymore*, Race allowed himself the selfish thought, quickly jumping into the conversation with a, “Yeah, Spot. Davey is right, anyone would be fool to turn you away,” before karma could bite him in the ass.

The conversation ended there, with Spot muttering about how they were just being nice, and Davey finishing in closing up the store. The three fell into a comfortable silence as they made their way outside. It was April, the weather was just being to warm up and the sky, though bright and sunny, always seemed to have a raincloud in the sky. A soft drizzle fell in the darkness, Race let out a small groan, “Why does it always rain when I’m working? It’s like mother nature knows I walk home.”

Spot and Davey laughed at his expense, tilting their heads upwards to watch the rain fall. “I can give you a ride if you want,” Davey offered, but Race shook his head.

“Nah, you live all the way across town it would just be an inconvenience,” Race sighed, fumbling around in his bag for an umbrella. Davey knew better than to argue, he could be just as stubborn as Jack sometimes, plus he was tired and ready to go home. He said his goodbye then rushed to his car. Spot made no move to go to his car.

It seemed that the umbrella, which Race had just used earlier that same day, was not in the bottom of his backpack where he had remembered putting it. Instead, it was sitting on his kitchen table with a sticky note on it that read ‘Don’t forget me!’ How ironic. “Fuck, I don’t have my umbrella,” Race whined, in the most unbecoming manner he could manage.

“I can give you a ride home, I ‘ave ta head that direction anyways,” Spot offered, grinning sheepishly. If it was Albert or Jack, Race would have immediately agreed; however, this was Spot and if there was one thing Race hated more than walking home in the rain, it was being an inconvenience.

He have a hesitant nod. “If it’s not too much of a trouble,” Race muttered, zipping his bag back up as Spot laughed.

“I wouldn’t ‘ave offered if it was too much of a trouble, dork,” he teased, nudging Race softly with his shoulder. “Move quick when you’s goin’ ta the car. I don’t want my seats ta be



soaked.”

Of course, Race took this as a challenge. He set down his backpack and grabbed his foot, stretching out his quad out. Spot watched with a curious stare, waiting until the fourth variation of stretch to comment. “What the actual hell,” he emphasized the ‘actual’ with his thick Brooklyn accent, “are you doin’ strechin’ at 12:30 at night?”

This observation broke Race out of his concentrated stupor. “Clearly, I’m getting ready to tell you that the last one to the car is a rotten egg,” he said matter-of-factly, as though that was the most obvious thing ever. The tall blonde looked down at Spot and the two burst out laughing. That didn’t last long because Spot screamed “go!” while Race was distracted and took off.

“Hey, that’s no fair!” Race shouted, fumbling to grab his bag before taking off after him. There were many reasons Antonio Higgins had gotten his nickname: he liked to bet on the horse races, he had once fallen into one and almost drowned, and he was the fastest runner back in high school. So, it wasn’t much of a surprise to him that he passed Spot with ease, even after the head start.

The rain was comfortable but coming down faster as the two ran. Race slipped, slamming into the side of Spot’s 2010 Chevy Colorado. “Be careful with her!” Spot laughed, reaching the truck moments later. The two of them stood in the steady downpour, hunched over for a moment as they caught their breaths then Spot leaned over and opened the passenger door, waiting until Race was stowed safely inside before closing it.

“Thank you,” Race panted, brushing wet curls from his forehead. “I just have one question.”

Spot hummed in response, still too tired to speak, as he slammed his door. He glanced over at his passenger, waiting until he had buckled up to stick the key in the ignition. The engine spluttered for a moment. For a moment, neither were sure it would turn over, but as the suspense peaked the truck roared to life. Spot’s cheerful whoop brought a blush to Race’s cheeks and he couldn’t help but giggle at the childish way his face lit up.

“Why the hell did you park so far away? All the front spaces are wide open,” Race asked, staring at Spot with a bemused grin. They stared at one another, wheezing and damp.

Spot shrugged, responding with a simple “I honestly have no clue.” There was a beat of silence then he broke down into a fit of infectious laughter that Race couldn’t help but join in on. It was 12:45 and Race was pretty sure he had met the love of his life.

The car pulled out of its spot and started down the empty roads towards Race’s apartment. Typically, Race loved to be in the midst New York’s wild lifestyle, the ones that could only be seen in movies. Something changed in him, maybe it was the way the streetlights reflected the rain or the way a lazy car drifted down the street every once in a while. Maybe, just maybe, it was sharing this tranquil realization with Spot. He stared out the window with a small smile, listening to the shitty pop music Spot had put on and was desperately trying not to belt along to. It was definitely the latter.

The few block drive went faster than expected and it wasn’t long before Spot pulled up a little ways down the street from Race’s apartment. “This is me,” He let out a long sigh but

made no move to leave.

It was common knowledge that Race developed attractions easily. He was a generally outgoing person, the type that could be friends with anyone, which often meant he fell into crushes often. There was one time a kid in his baking class went out of her way to hold the door open for him and Race was convinced she was his soulmate. His tired eyes glanced over at Spot, studying his profile: the freckles littered across his face, the strong bridge of his nose, the slope of his forehead pushing his brows forward to form his hooded eyes. He didn't want Spot to be just another crush.

"Thanks for giving me the ride," Race gave a lopsided grin, hand on the door handle. Just as he was about to push it open, he was interrupted.

"Wait!" Spot sounded a little too enthusiastic, but Race didn't mind. It meant he was not overthinking their encounters, the part of him that was convinced Spot enjoyed his presence was at least partly correct. He cleared his throat before continuing. "I's, um, wanted ta know if you's is really ok? I know earlier, you's. . . well quite honestly, you's looked like crap and I know's you has been havin' a tough day," Spot stumbled over his words, a hand reaching up to rub sheepishly at the back of his neck. His face was turning red with every word and his gaze flickered everywhere but at Race. "I just wanted ya ta know that I's is here if you need ta talk."

Race bit back a smile, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he thought this over. Spot, someone whom he was currently on his second encounter with, had no clue what his favorite color was, and did not have his phone number, was telling Race that it was ok to talk to him. He let out a shaky exhale, the burning urge to laugh dissolved in his throat. Instead, he asked, "What's your favorite color?"

There was a lapse in the conversation. Spot cocked his head in confusion, hesitantly answering with 'red.' Race nodded along as if that was the best color to have ever been created, even though he was partial to sky blue himself. "Sorry, I just make it a rule that I at least know the favorite color of the people I unload my problems to," He laughed nervously, praying that Spot didn't notice.

To his surprise, Spot accepted the random question with no complaints and listened patiently as Race recounted the details of his day. He had worked till close the night before, almost got hit by a drunk driver on his walk home and collapsed in bed after three hours of homework. The next morning his alarm failed to go off because he had forgotten to charge his phone, which meant Race was sprinting to his 8 a.m. class in his pajama's. When he burst into the classroom, sweaty and out of breath he realized that there was no alarm set because he did not have an 8 a.m. class Wednesday morning.

It only got worse. He ran into his ex on the way back to his apartment, she gave him a disgusted look but felt the need to stop and talk to him anyway. The conversation was anything but pleasant, her mentioning how much happier she was with her new man. He walked away mid-conversation and had a caramel vanilla iced coffee with almond milk and a shot of espresso dumped onto him. His ex proceeded to call him a dick and stomped away, empty Starbucks cup in hand. (Spot had some choice words to say about her.) It took him half an hour to walk home. Race's favorite sweatshirt was ruined as was his favorite pair of

flannel pajama pants. When he got in the shower, the water pressure was so low he couldn't even get the coffee out of his hair properly.

Race ended up washing his hair in the sink and wiping the rest of his body down with a wet wipe. His clothes would have to wait until laundry day. That meant his bathroom would smell like overpriced coffee for the rest of the week.

Somehow it got even worse. He got a text from his mom saying they couldn't come visit over Spring Break and the plane to visit them was all booked up well up into May. Race spent the next two hours crying his eyes out. All he wanted was to see his family, hug his mom, play tag with his little siblings; he wanted to not be alone in America anymore. Sure, he had Jack and his other friends, but it wasn't the same.

The exhaustion of crying had caused him to fall asleep once more and he woke up late for his 1 p.m. class. Not even bothering to run, Race emailed his professor to say that he was sick, and they sent him fifteen pages of math problems to complete for tomorrow. No get well soon, nothing.

Then he went to work, still smelling slightly of Starbucks and found out he had to help train the new kid. Without Albert to bitch to, all the anger of the day was slowly building up inside of Race, which meant that poor new bagger was taking the heat on every small mistake.

"I'm going to have to apologize to him next time we work together," Race said with a small sigh. His entire monologue lasted about half an hour.

"If he hasn't quit by now," Spot teased and the two fell into easy laughter. Getting it all off his chest left Race feeling lighter, laughing was easier.

It was about 1:15 in the morning, neither of them wanted to go back to their normal lives. This late night, car rant session was solely their own; that isn't just something one can walk away from. Race made the first move to break the silence, part of him wanted to say goodnight then go home and crawl into bed, but his lack of impulse control had his asking another question instead.

"Are you buying sardines because your cat was good again?" The question was innocent enough, despite the teasing nature hidden below the surface.

"No, you were right about her. I's gave her the sardines an' not even an hour after she had pushed a bowl offa the counter an' shattered it," Spot followed his explanation with a hearty laugh. "These sardines are just because I can't say no to her when she curls up on my chest afterwards and meows like she actually feels bad."

It was odd, Race realized, that under all those muscles and tank tops that Spot would be such a softie. He would have expected there to be part of him that was closed and cold to the world, like Jack had told him, but he just couldn't see it. All Race could see was a college kid buying sardines for his cat because he loved her. All he could see was a man trying his hardest not to embarrass himself by screaming the lyrics to "7 Rings" at the top of his lungs with a cute boy in the car. All Race could see was Spot for who he truly was, right off the bat.

“What’s her name?” Race asked, tilting his head the way Spot does when he’s curious, like a dog. It fit him, the scrappy bulldog image. Maybe one day they could adopt a bulldog together- no, he was thinking too far ahead of himself. Live in the moment, that’s what his mother always said.

Spot grinned and spoke with the utmost importance in his voice, “Is I glad you asked. Her name is Pickles and she is one year old.” Race couldn’t have said he was expecting such an odd name from Spot. He had assumed it would be rather unoriginal, like Whiskers or Stormy, but Spot was full of surprises.

“Before you’s judge me,” Spot quickly followed up, and Race couldn’t help but laugh. “Her name is Pickles ‘cause the first week I’s brought her home I’s couldn’t tink of a name for her. For some reason, she got used to the house very quickly- like, I’m talkin’ freaky fast - and had already figured out how ta hop up onto the counter and survey the entire livin’ room and kitchen like she owned the place.

“My roommate, Henry, was makin’ his lunch: pastrami on rye with a sour pickle. Don’t ask, it reminds him of his childhood or some shit. Anyway, Pickles hops up by him ta watch and sees the jar o’ pickles out on the counter; the edge of the counter, might I’s add. So, she does what any sensible cat would do and swats at it until the entire jar falls ta the floor an’ my whole house smells like pickle juice for the rest of the day.”

The urge to crack up is too much to bear and soon the two of them are roaring with laughter. Tears rush down Race’s cheeks, there’s a tightening in his sides from laughing for so long, but he doesn’t mind it too much. Hearing Spot laugh along with him with the rain tapering off was well worth the discomfort.

“I think I’m gonna have to meet her one day,” Race says, crinkling his nose in delight. The thought felt entirely domestic: Spot and him sitting on the couch, playing with Pickles. He was never one to settle down with one person, those types of relationships had always ended poorly, but with Spot in the picture it didn’t seem half bad.

He was definitely going to have to call Davey later, someone needed to talk some sense into him. Race could not fall too far in too fast, it had been months since his last relationship and it all fell apart because of that exact reason. His phone buzzed with a text from Davey, speak of the devil, asking if he got home safe. It was only then that he realized it was already 1:37 a.m. and both of them probably needed sleep at some point in the night.

“Thanks for giving me a ride home.” Race smiled, making the impulse decision to lean over and press a kiss to Spot’s freckled cheek. Before he could hear any response, he was out the door and hurrying down the sidewalk cursing himself for being so foolish. Spot’s truck rolled slowly alongside him, shitty pop music blaring. “Race,” Spot called out from his window, “I’ll see you ‘round.”

Race waved to him, rushing up the steps to his building with a large grin on his face. God, he hoped he would.

True to his word, Spot kept popping up in Race’s life. A few times a week he would come in. At least one of those times he would always have a can of sardines. There were days where

he would come in during the busiest time of the day, which meant they couldn't talk, but the two would smile and wave; that could hold them over for a few days.

Other days Spot would come in when there were no customers. Typically, it was an hour or two before close, giving he and Race plenty of time to talk. Race learned a lot, for instance, Spot was at NYU obtaining a financial degree. It wasn't his passion, but the jobs he got would pay well enough to make up for that.

Spot was left-handed, his favorite meal was a corned beef on rye sandwich (he and Race argued for weeks about whether or not that constituted as a meal; Spot won, naturally), he got his nickname. not for his freckles, but because of the dark hickies he would leave on people in high school, he hated watching the animals hurt each other on Animal Planet, he could not stand the taste of coffee even though his favorite flavor of ice cream was java chip. The list went on and on.

If Spot was nervous, he would fidget; it didn't matter with what, he just had to release the anxiety somehow. When he heard something funny he would bite his bottom lip, trying to hide a smile, but end up breaking into a loud laugh anyway. If there was something bothering him Spot's face would settle into a poker face almost as good as Race's. Few things, Race being one of them, could break it.

They still hadn't exchanged numbers, neither one of them wanted to make the first move. Davey kept trying to convince Race to just ask. Watching the two flirt over the past two months was causing the 23-year-old to implode.

"The sexual tension is too much to bear!" Davey had cried out one night after Spot had left. The two had been sitting onto of one of the belts, shoulders and hands brushing, whispering about their hopes and dreams. Albert was quick to agree, "Yeah, Racer, make a move already! He makes you so happy and you two are already so close. There is no way even you could mess it up."

Race wasn't convinced. There were so many things that could go wrong. After three months of Spot's nightly visits, even Jack had begun to egg the two on. "C'mon, Racer," He whined, Crutchie hobbling over to slobber all over Race's lap. "He talks about you all the time. Just ask him out already."

Jack's attempts were futile, they had this discussion at least once a week. The grocery talks were special. The most real relationship Race had ever had, and it wasn't even a genuine relationship. "I dunno, Cowboy. What if he finds something he doesn't like about me?" It was an excuse he used all the time. The look Jack shot him as he pet Crutchie said that he was not taking it this time.

"Look, I'm havin' a fourth of July party this weekend. Invite him," Jack reached over to scratch his dog behind the ears. "And you will make it clear that you want to show up together, not just the lame ass excuse where you tell him that I'm throwing a party and want to know if he's going. Spot knows I would text him if I wanted him to come solo."

"Fine. Fine," Race groaned, throwing his arms around the one-legged pup and burying his face in his fur. "I'll ask him tomorrow."

The next day came faster than Race had expected, maybe it was just the nerves. His entire shift was a jumbled mess. Race couldn't concentrate to save his life. All the usual times Spot would come in came and went. Odd, considering he promised to come in Tuesday night.

"It is Tuesday, right?" Race asked his register, even though it was clearly displaying 12:50, July 1st in bright white letters.

He sighed, going to grab the keys from Davey to lock up for the night, when the familiar hiss of the automatic doors sounded loudly throughout the store.

# A Black Eye

## Chapter Notes

This story went in a different than I had originally planned and I kinda wanna see how it pans out, would you guys be interested in having a couple more chapters? Please let me know!!

Also, I am so sorry for this taking so long to come out, I really wanted it to be something I could take pride in. Enjoy :)

Irate could not begin to describe the feeling that spread through Race as Spot strutted through those doors. A big black eye, a split lip, and six staples in the side of the head were among his friend's newest accessories. His classic summer outfit, a red striped muscle tee and black skinny jeans, had dirt and holes and blood littered all over.

"Sean!" Race shouted, deciding this matter was serious enough to grant use of his real name. "What the hell happened to you?" He didn't give Spot a chance to answer. Race had gently grabbed his chin and was tilting his face to better inspect the injuries; without second thought his hands were running down Spot's arms and chest to check for any hidden lesions. Thankfully there was no further damage.

There was a smug smirk cemented on Spot's features, even as he took Race's shaking hands in his own. Race knew that look, the sparkle in his eye, he had won whatever fight he had been in. Not that he would ever doubt it. "I's got into a disagreement with one of mine's ex's friend," Spot spoke with pride dripping from every word. "Obviously, I's won."

Race rolled his eyes, noting that their hands were still intertwined, but refused to look away from the bruise on Spot's left eye. He bit down on his lip, holding back a laugh that was bubbling in the back of his throat. "What?" Spot's left eyebrow quirked up, there was a small cut on it.

"Nothing, your nickname just fits even better with one black eye," Race said with a loud laugh. It was infectious, soon both of them were laughing themselves to tears. He gave a silent blessing for that, it meant all the damage done to Spot was just physical.

Albert interrupted their moment, handing Race his backpack with a knowing grin. "I already clocked you out. Go get him something to eat, he looks like hell," he said with a glance to Spot's current condition. At that comment Spot puffed out his chest and put on his best scowl but couldn't keep the serious vibe and the three began to laugh.

"C'mon, Spotty. I'll treat you to something nice," Race spoke quickly as he grabbed Spot's hand. It was a few minutes after midnight and there were few places open this late at night.

Somehow, they both knew where they were going to end up.

Race pulled into the Denny's parking lot. It had taken fifteen minutes for him to convince Spot to let him drive. The truck was practically Spot's child and he would rather crash it due to his wonky depth perception than let someone else care for it. Luckily, Race was his weak spot and easily persuaded him into letting him drive – meaning Spot paid for the food.

Ever the gentleman, Spot threw himself out of the car only to stumble over to Race's side of the car and open his door for him. They both entered the restaurant with goofy grins on their face; one looking like he had been through hell and the other still in his work uniform. An odd pairing, but they made it work.

A waitress seated them with a forced smile. Race decided he was going to leave an extra-large tip, he knew how tough it was to be in retail. She took their drink orders: a coffee for Spot – yes, at 12:45 at night – and chocolate milk for Race – yes, he was five. Bizarre, but they made it work. "I'll be right out with those drinks for ya," the lady said with obligatory enthusiasm and left.

"So, we never really got to talk about why you've some staples in your head," Race spoke without looking at Spot. He was too focused tearing the napkin in his lap to shreds, praying he hadn't made it awkward. The whole situation was rather unorthodox. Spot walking into the store before close, fresh out of the immediate care, only to end up at Denny's with Race like he wasn't just bleeding out. Quickly he added, "Not that we have to talk about it or anything."

There was a moments silence, Spot stared intently at the shredded napkin as he formulated a response. The lack of words brought perspiration to Race's upper lip and his hands shook slightly. He didn't want to mess this thing they had up. He was already risking it by talking to Spot outside of the store. Slowly more places were becoming their *thing* : the store, Spot's truck in front of Race's apartment, and now Denny's. Too much, too fast. That's what always killed relationships. Three places in three months, a place a month- too much, too fast.

Just as Spot opened his mouth to answer, the waitress interrupted. "Anything else I can get for y'all?" She asked, flipping open her little notepad. Neither of them had even opened the menu. Race could feel his heartbeat quicken. Their first unofficial date and he could already see it swirling down the drain. Goodbye happiness. Goodbye soulmate.

To his surprise, Spot knew exactly what to do. "I's is gonna have the All-American Slam," he ordered, without having so much as glanced at the menu tonight, "and he'll have the Choconana Pancake Breakfast." She wrote it down, took their untouched menus, and left them once more.

"Shut your mouth, Race. You'll catch flies," Spot chuckled as Race obliged. Another bout of silence. This was awkward, a bad idea, he never should have- "My ex's friend, the one that beat me up, was telling me about how he's in your culinary class," he had interrupted Race's train of thought, not that he minded. Though, it wouldn't kill him to be more specific. He was trying to obtain a culinary degree, using a term as vague as 'culinary class' wasn't narrowing anything down.



Upon seeing Race's blank face of confusion, Spot sighed and practically spit the name out with all the venom he could muster. "That bastard Oscar Delancey. You's probably know him, right?" All Race could do was nod. Oscar was a human headache that he couldn't be rid of. Every hallway he walked down in that school was Oscar, waiting for him, so that he could follow Race and question him on every detail of his life. Anything and everything just so it could be used against him later.

Spot continued with his story, "Well, I was plannin' on walkin' to the store, figured it's nice out so why not? Wish I's had driven instead cause I ran into Oscar right outside my neighborhood and he's is talkin' ta me 'bout ya, askin' bunch of weirdly personal questions. It was creepy, I'm tellin' ya. So, I's tells him to knock it off with this stalker shit and leave ya alone.

"Let me's tell you, he did not like to be bossed 'round. Takes a swing at me. Naturally, I's dodge it an' sweep out his legs. Bastard goes fallin' to the ground. I's was too busy takin' in the moment of knockin' him down that, and I's openly admit, got distracted and got socked right in the eye. Hurt like a bitch, can't remember the last time I's let someone get a punch on me. So, I's decide I's really gonna have to teach him a lesson, but before I's could throw my next punch he made the most vulgar comment about you. I swear, Antonio, I's was gonna kill him. Somethin' in me just snapped and I's was havin' an outta body experience. I's had my fists flying, gave him a proper soakin'. Once he realized he was losing bad, he smashed the side of my head on the brick wall outside my subdivision, sliced it right open, blood was everywhere. I's think that's what really freaked him, so he ran off. Thank God Henry was drivin' home and seen the whole thing go down. He helped me back ta the house, but we couldn't stop the bleeding. I's decided to drive myself down ta the immediate care and they stapled me right up, good as new. Though I really coulda stapled it up myself and saved a whole lotta money," Spot finished with a heart laugh.

Race was too stunned to respond. Here he was freaking out over asking for Spot's number, after countless nights of being parked in front of Race's apartments and just talking for hours on end or those stolen glances and flirtatious winks or the gentle brushing of shoulders as they walked to the car, and Spot was out there defending his honor. "Your first stop after leaving the immediate care wasn't to go get cleaned up or rest, it was to come and see me at the store?" Race blinked slowly, trying to savor this moment. Jack and Davey were right, Spot did like him. Hello happiness. Hello soulmate.

"Well, I's promised ya I's was comin' in and Spot Conlon don't back down from no promise. Plus, I's still don't got your number so it wasn't like I could text ya and let you's know I couldn't come visit." The words sent Race's blood pressure through the roof, he bit down on his lip to hold back the smile. He was fumbling for words, his phone, thoughts that didn't involve him being slammed up on the side of Spot's truck on their ride home. "Here," Race said with a wide smile and handed Spot his phone.

There was no denying the way that Spot's nose crinkled with delight, the corners of his eyes wrinkling in the way that only pure joy could do to a person. It was adorable, Race decided, how excited he had gotten over the mere act of entering his contact into Race's phone.

His crappy iPhone with too many cracks in the screen was slid back to him. Spot had entered his contact as “Spot Conlon: Brooklyn’s Badass” – which was quickly changed to “Spotty <3” despite the rather loud protests.

Their meals were brought out at 1:15 a.m. and were gone not even ten minutes later. Standing all day can take as much out of a person as “soakin” (the choice word Spot had so affectionally used to describe it) someone would. No words were exchanged while they ate. The din in the background was sufficient enough, though that did not stop Race from loudly exclaiming about how delicious everything was anytime he so much as saw the waitress in their general vicinity.

Whatever Spot had ordered him, the Choconana whatever, hit his sweet tooth right on the money. Of course, his vast culinary expertise noted areas to be improved. When he voiced these concerns to Spot all he got was a laugh and a, “Ya do realize we’re at Denny’s?” to which Race could only rub his neck sheepishly and laugh along with him.

The check came, Spot paid, and they left hand in hand. Something had changed. The phone number made it official, this *thing* that they had. Conversation flowed so easy the ride passed by in the blink of an eye. “Well, this is me.” Race leaned over and pressed his lips to Spot’s cheek. The same routine they’ve had every single time he was dropped off in front of his apartment building at 1:37 am.

Halfway up the steps to his building he remembered why he was even so excited about Spot coming into the store at all today. He turned, quickly booking it to Spot’s truck and knocking on his window. “What’s wrong?” Spot asked, voice laced with concern as the window rolled down.

“I’ve been meaning to ask if you wanted to come to Jack’s fourth of July party with me on Saturday?” He asked between pants, squinting to judge Spot’s reaction in the dark. His face was that careful blank slate, the one before he sees Race in the store and allows himself a bright smile.

“Togetha’? Like, a couple?” Spot’s words were carefully chosen, Race could tell by how long it took him to respond. It was too soon, he knew it was, he had tried to tell Jack. He had tried to tell everyone. No one listened, brushed him aside, everyone always did.

Quickly, he tried to minimize the damage. The amount of backpedaling he was doing was almost embarrassing. “No! I mean- I would like to, but if it’s too soon, I totally understand! I didn’t mean to come off so strong. Oh my god, I am so sorry,” He stumbled over his sentences, voice quavering.

“Racer,” Spot attempted and interruption, but Race kept freaking out. “Antonio!” Race went quiet, waiting patiently for Spot to speak. “I’s would love to go to Jackie’s party with ya, but I’s just want to take ya on a proper date first, before we’s go announcing our undying love-” Race rolled his eyes- “to our entire friend group.”

For the rest of that week, Race would be denying the sound he made when Spot had said that, something between a squeal and a cry of exuberance. “Of course! Is Thursday good? I can find someone to cover my shift- I’d feel terrible calling off and leaving Davey to scramble to-

When are you free? Where would we go- a business casual kind of place, no I can't afford that. Oh! I could cook-" He was rambling, and he knew it, but he just couldn't contain himself.

"Antonio." Spot was using his first name more and more, and Race had to admit that he really loved to hear his name on Spot's lips. "You's just send me a text when that crazy brain a' yours plans it all out three times ova." He unbuckled and leaned over, planting a small, welcomed kiss on Race's lips.

"Oh-okay," Race stuttered when they finally pulled apart, he couldn't hold back his smile. He didn't want to. Spot winked, speaking softly, "Get some sleep." Race nodded, smiling wide and responded with a quiet, "Don't go getting in anymore fights before our date, as handsome as you look with this black eye, I'd prefer not to see you all busted up."

They kissed goodnight, Race walked back up the steps to his apartment, turning to wave at Spot before going inside and covering his mouth to cover his cry of happiness.

Everything was falling into place. Finally.

# A text message

## Chapter Notes

This chapter was originally supposed to be the date, but it went in a different direction. Also some implications at Race's past relationships that I hadn't anticipated but ended up really loving. Hope you enjoy :)

Technology had never really been Race's thing. He would much rather read a book, bake, or go for a run than sit down and watch TV or switch between apps on his phone. Yet, every time he thought his phone so much as vibrated, Race was checking to see if it was Spot.

The first few times was cute. Race was smitten; he would gladly admit it when Albert would tease him. Seeing Spot's name pop up as a notification brought a pleasant tightness to his chest. He couldn't stop the smile from spreading as he typed out a witty response. Race was on cloud nine and nothing could snatch his head from the clouds, well nothing except Davey.

"Antonio Higgins if I see that phone out one more time I'm confiscating it and calling Sean myself to scold him," Davey said, arms crossed and foot impatiently tapping as he caught Race sneaking a glance at his phone for the tenth time in five minutes. Race could tell the threat was not empty as he had hoped, Davey did, after all, have to perform his responsibilities as manager.

Even though he was just doing his job, Race could not let an opportunity to tease the 'Walkin' Mouth.' He had to admit that Spot gave some damn accurate nicknames. Davey was by no means quiet, simply reserved, because once you got him talking there was no shutting him up and Race knew that if he didn't reassure his manager that he would no longer be checking his phone then he was in for one hell of a lecture.

"Davey, honey, I would like to personally apologize for impairing the quality of this fine establishment," Race said with an exaggerated sigh, "if it will help, I will shut the cash drawer so hard on my neck it breaks and only then will I feel a smidge- just a mere smidge-better about my careless behavior."

Davey's face betrayed no hint of amusement. For being a bad a liar as he was, he had an excellent poker face when it came to how he was truly feeling. Moments passed with Albert at the end of the belt per usual watching the drama unfold. Davey made a move to answer, but Race beat him to the punch. "I shall take thy phone and shatter it in millions of fragments if I have any chance of regaining yee trust o' wise manager of thee."

It seemed Race's attempt at Shakespeare had cracked that cold, authoritarian exterior and drawn a smile from Davey. "Don't let me catch you again, Race. I'm serious," was all he said and made a beeline for the back room.

There were still a few hours until close and the lack of customers on a Wednesday night was surprising, but not unwelcome. It gave Race a chance to finish his homework for that day as well as get ahead for tomorrow. If all went right, then Spot would end up staying the night and he wouldn't have any time to finish homework at all. Albert came over to help him on a few math problems. It was astounding how smart he actually was; if dancing and acting didn't work out then he could easily make some serious money as an accountant. Race had basic math skills, enough to help him double a recipe or convert to the metric system, but nowhere near as well as imaginary numbers. Why did anyone need something that didn't exist?

"You nervous for tomorrow?" Albert asked, leaning over and erasing half of the work Race just did, "You forgot to square both sides, dumbass."

He scoffed, squinting at the problem in anger. "When the hell did the square root even enter the problem?" He groaned and threw the work to the side as a customer mulled into his line.

"You're ignoring my question," Albert said before quickly turning to the customer with a polite smile and asking her how her day was going.

Race snorted softly, scanning the groceries quickly and typing in produce plu's with scary precision. "Of course, I'm nervous," Race said, interrupting his own conversation to ask, "Do you have a rewards number with us? No? Well you can get one by going to [FreshBet.com](http://FreshBet.com) and signing up with an email and phone number, so then every time you come in you can just pop your number in on the pin pad and any coupons you've clipped will come off at the end of the order. For everyone \$100 dollars you spend you'll be getting ten cents off of gas at all affiliated gas stations."

Neither he or the customer seemed entirely thrilled about the online couponing and rewards system the store had; quite honestly the only person Race knew who got excited over that was Spot and he rarely spent over \$10 dollars a week at the store. Still, he was the one who would tease Race by reciting the spiel or purposely pretending he no clue what the rewards number even was, just so Race had to go through and say it for the hundredth something time that shift alone.

With a sigh he finished the transaction and turned to help Albert bag the rest of the groceries. "I really like him Al," Race said, gently placing the eggs in a bag, they were fragile and had to be treated with care, "He's not like the others- Don't look at me like that, I'm serious."

"Have a nice day," Albert said with a smile as he placed the last of the groceries into the lady's cart. As soon as she was out of earshot he turned to glare at Race. "You've said that about every man you have ever dated. Even the dude who had said the vilest insult to Jack I have ever heard."

Race glared at him, but decided it was best to keep his mouth shut; after all, Albert did have a point, it seemed that he got overly attached to affection but they all knew this. He focused on his homework. Their tussle had not seemed to have any serious damage on their friendship seeing that Albert had no issues in pointing out flaws to Race and explaining problems to him over and over until he finally had some understanding.

As the night progressed, Albert's words kept gnawing at him. Race couldn't let it go. He would scold himself for even thinking about what someone else thought of him but found himself right back where he started. Was this thing with Spot all in his head? Certainly not, he had seen the way Spot looked at him yesterday. Still, was that all a front, made up to distract him from his crushing loneliness from living in the states without a family?

"Hey, Albert," Race spoke in a quiet voice as he packed away the last of his math homework, "Do you really think that what I have going with Spot isn't going to work out? Should I even go for it?" He stared at the register before him. The labelling on the buttons worn to smudges from constant use. Race had them all memorized, but to someone new looking at them, they might as well be ancient hieroglyphics.

His coworker scoffed at the accusation, choosing his next words carefully. He needed Race to know that he supported him and whatever choices he made regarding he and Spot, all while reminding him that Race's emotional state was of utmost importance.

"I just want you to be careful is all, Racer." Albert ran a hand down his face with a small groan. Why did the kid have to overthink everything? "We both know that you have the tendency to attach to someone quickly and that hasn't always worked out. Spot seems like a really 'swell fella-' they took a moment to giggle at Jack's favorite way to describe someone- "I've seen the way he looks at you when he's waiting in your line. As soon as he lays his eyes on you, that big macho man persona he has going on melts away.

"He smiles all the time when he looks at you, or even hears Davey say your name. Sometimes, instead of leaving right away, he mills about the store some more just to watch you get excited over kids coming through your line, so you can give them stickers, or when 'Love Shack' plays on the intercom and you do that stupid little jig at your register. He looks at you like you're the only person in the room. You're always in his spotlight, Racer. I'm sure everything will be okay with you two. I just think you should take it slow. Don't try to jump his bones tomorrow night. Make this one last."

Race's tired eyes flickered away from the screen, crinkling around the edges with his easy grin. "Does he really look at me like that?" He asked, and Albert laughed while he rolled his eyes, but nodded in reassurance. "Racer, he looks at you the way Davey looks at Jack when he paints."

All the breath was sucked out of his lungs at that statement. It was common knowledge that Davey and Jack had the strongest relationship out of everyone in their friend group, rivaled only by his sister's relationship with Katherine – Mrs. Jacobs had raised some good kids. They knew everything about one another. Davey could tell what was bothering Jack simply by the way he took a breath. Jack could say what his boyfriend was thinking, word for word.

As exciting as the idea of love that powerful was, it terrified Race. How could someone ever deserve someone like him? There was no way he could ever connect with anyone the way Davey and Jack had connected. Race was obnoxious, loud, and extremely clingy. He had managed to send every single romantic partner running for the hills.

Would Spot be just another name on his short list of ex's? If not, was he even ready for a new relationship. He was taking classes all summer to try and graduate in three years instead of

two, that way he could send money for his family to move here sooner. Spot would certainly despise him once he found out that Race was not ready, if he wasn't ready.

The register screen went blurry and Race blinked back tears. The stress of it all was too much. He wanted to go back to a few hours ago, where it was all new and exciting. The vibration of his phone in his pocket struck fear to his very core. Could he ever care for Spot the way Spot, supposedly, cared for him? Would Spot be understanding if it took him a while, if he wanted to take things slow as Albert had suggested?

A hand squeezed his shoulder. It was Davey, grinning ear to ear. "Jack texted me, he's hanging with Spot and says he won't shut up about your date tomorrow," he said. The cheerfulness in his voice was contagious. A grin couldn't help but spread on Race's own face. The anxious thoughts crept into the shadows of his mind. Gone, for now.

"Really?" Race asked, biting down on his lip in a failed attempt to look nonchalant about the whole ordeal. He felt like a 13-year-old in moments like these. Davey nodded, fishing his phone out of his pocket and showing the texts as proof.

One text from Jack, well it should have been one text but he had the tendency to split one large text into 17 little ones, particularly melted Race's heart. It read:

*"Dave, I wish I had introduced them sooner. He burst into my house this morning with a huge grin on his face. I haven't seen him this genuinely happy in years. Spot offered to make me pancakes. He burned them lmao. Love, you should have seen it. He was singing and flipping pancakes like back when we were in high school. And Racer was texting me all night. The kid deserves a little happiness, he's been working himself to death and I don't think I've seen him use this many emojis since he and JoJo dated."*

Race read and reread the texts, unable to keep himself from letting out a happy laugh. It wasn't in his imagination. It was real. What they had, this weird connection, was being noticed by others. Race wasn't just clinging onto some distant hope that they would work out like he had his other relationships. No, if even the most oblivious person in the world could notice and text his boyfriend about it, then it had to be real.

That's what Race kept telling himself as he dropped the grocery bags onto his kitchen counter. Spot had insisted on finally having a chance to taste Race's cooking for himself, which meant that he would also have a chance to see his apartment. That left Race with a small bud of anxiety. Where he lived was the embodiment of who he was.

His place was neat, if a little dusty from his lack of time spent there. The walls were a dirty beige and mostly bare. Jack had come over one night while Race was working and hung up a few of his paintings to liven up the place. They were from the impressionist section of his painting course and every single one of them were of Italy. There was a gondola lazily floating along a river between the tightly fitted houses, a messy, yet elegant, country landscape of a cozy villa, and one of the Colosseum. The latter was Jack's pride and joy, he had taken three weeks to make it as in style, yet historically accurate as possible. Race had cried when he saw them hanging on his wall, a slice of home given to him by his new home.

When he had first moved in, Elmer and Finch had come over and helped construct an absurd amount of IKEA furniture. All of them were from the clearance section and horrendously mismatched. The sofa was burnt orange, which Jack used as one of the main colors in his villa painting as a last attempt to connect some of the accessories. His coffee table was black, whereas the small table in his kitchen was white with brown chairs. Davey had bought him bowls and plates and cups from the dollar store, these were the only thing that truly matched in the house.

He smiled down at the ugly blue marbled counter while he set out all the produce to be washed. The apartment, while visually unappealing, was home. Race had opportunities to change the sofa in recent years but decided against it. What little he had had sentimental value, something he would never want to change.

There was no specific meal that Spot had requested, though pasta was instructed to be the main component. “C’mon, pasta is classic Italian cuisine,” Spot had said over the phone the night before, earning a soft snort of laughter from Race. “It’s not all pasta, we also have a lot of vegetables unlike you fried food Americans,” he had retorted.

In the end, Race had decided to include both by making a bake penne with roasted vegetables. He had woken up early and taken the subway to one of the various pop up farmers markets. There he was able to scrounge up some peppers, zucchini, summer squash, mushrooms and onions. If he had the time then he would have made some marinara sauce, but Spot was going to come over in two hours and his family recipe took about four hours to make.

He turned on a random classic rock station Spot had recommended on the crappy radio his older brother had given to him before he left Italy, and head banged along as he sliced up the vegetables. He popped the occasional portion in his mouth seeing that this wasn’t class and he could snack as he cooked. Once they were all cut up, he tossed them in olive oil, salt, pepper, and dried herbs (his own blend and secret ingredient) before laying them out on a baking sheet to roast when he put them in the oven.

Cooking had always calmed Race’s nerves, sending him off to a simpler mindset where he didn’t have student loans to worry about or a date to be anxious over or a family that was continents away. He popped open one of the store-bought pasta sauces and winced.

“Sorry Mamma, I don’t agree with it either, but I’m on a time crunch here.” Race had finished partially boiling the pasta and mixed it, along with the sauce and the vegetables, into a large casserole dish. “He hasn’t had homemade before, so it won’t taste bad to him, promise. Hopefully, you’ll be able to make some if you come to visit,” he finished with a soft sigh, calm composure crumbling. Tears pricked at his eyes.

No, no, no, now was not the time to start missing his family. The way they would fuss over him and make sure he was dressed nice and that his hair was slicked back neatly. How his mom would go over manners time and time again. “Do not burp at the table! No elbows up there, Antonio. Tuck in your shirt, my goodness,” she would scold but send him on his way with a reassuring kiss on the cheek nonetheless.



He popped the final product in the oven, coating it with cheese, and turned to wash some dishes. At this point he was openly sobbing. His family would love Spot, they would love to poke fun at him and force him into hugs or ask him embarrassing questions, hell they would even love to tell embarrassing stories about Race and he wouldn't mind because it was Spot they were telling them to. He trusted Spot.

God, he wanted this date to go well.

Race fumbled for his phone, calling the only person in America that was known to calm him down in moments like these: Specs. He and Jack were the first two people he had truly become close with upon moving to The States. There was no answer, so he settled on calling Jack instead.

Davey answered, not much a surprise but Race had wanted to keep as many people from knowing about this freak out as possible, so his crying only became louder. "Hey. Hey, Antonio, what's wrong?" Davey's voice was frantic on the other end of the line, he could hear two other voices in the background.

"I need to talk to Jack," Race wheezed, sitting down with his back against the warm oven and covering his mouth with his free hand to muffle his sobs, "Please." Davey muttered some reassurance and there was fumbling as the phone was passed off to Jack. "Racer, everything ok? You aren't hurt are ya, because I'm getting my shoes on right now to come over," he spoke with frantic concern, as if not really sure how to handle this situation, which is why Race typically settled for Specs in instances like these.

He was calm and thought things through when face with emotion, whereas Jack shut down and freaked out or got angry at his inability to help and end up making things worse. "No!" Race shouting the word seemed to make Jack's anxiousness worse and he began to repeat that he was coming over. "No, I'm not hurt, you don't have to come over. I'm just really nervous for this date and I tried to call Specs, but he didn't-"

"Wait a sec, Racer. Specs is here. His phone died earlier, and it's been charging in my room he probably just didn't hear it," he said, quickly handing off the phone to Specs.

Race started crying once more one he heard his friend's rich voice come through the phone. "Higgins I'm gonna need you's to take a deep breath for me," Specs said, waiting patiently for Race's crying to subside, "What's going on that's got you so upset, pal? I've heard you have a hot date comin' tonight, that's not something to be blubbering about."

A weak chuckle passed over Race's lips. This is what he needed, this is something only Specs could do to him. "I haven't had a hot date in such a long time and I got to thinking about how much my Mamma would love him. I miss them so much, Specs-" there was a ragged intake of oxygen- "I want this one to work out, so I can take him to meet them. I know it's soon, but I got this feeling about him, Specs."

He could just imagine his friend pushing up his glasses and nodding along as Race spoke, licking his lips before he responded, "I know you ain't have the best track record with relationships, Higgins, but how you're reacting to this one tells me that it'll last. Everything will go according to plan. Just make sure you take a deep breath every now and again and

take it slow. Talking about going to Italy to meet your parents on the first date might scare him off.”

“It didn’t scare you off,” Race said, and Specs hearty laughter lifted a heavy weight off his chest. The tears slowly dried. Everything was falling back into place. “Yeah, but that’s because I’ve always wanted to go to Italy. Plus, I had to see if your mom made lasagna half as good as you do,” Specs said as Race stood up, going back to washing dishes with the phone pressed between his shoulder and ear, “Just be yourself and everything will be okay, Higgins, I promise. I can practically smell whatever you’re making, so finish that up and he won’t be leaving you anytime soon.”

Race let out a loud laugh and could practically see Specs grinning on the other line. “Ok, ok. Thanks, Specs. Love you,” he said and got a ‘love you’ in response before the line went silent.

He finished washing the dishes and went to choose an outfit. Race had texted Katherine about ten outfits he could have worn before deciding on one of the combinations not even included in the string of messages. Trying to keep it casual he went for a blue button up in a French tuck in a nice pair of black jeans.

There was a knock at the door. It was showtime.

# A plate of pasta

## Chapter Notes

It's here! I kinda hate it, because it ended up being so short, but it also works?  
Please please let me know how you like it and any suggestions you have for future chapters? I have some ideas, but I want you guys to be involved as well!  
Enjoy :)

The door swung open, but not before Race tripped over his own feet and crashed to the ground with a loud 'ow.' To say that Spot cleaned up well would have been the understatement of the century. Race had only seen him in sweatshirts or those tacky muscle tank tops he claimed that he would "single-handedly bring back in style." Now, he was wearing khakis and a well-fitting green polo. Race could only imagine what he would look like in a tuxedo.

"You's gonna let me in or just stand there droolin' all over the place?" he asked, producing a small bundle of tulips from behind his back as Race moved aside to let him in. Spot stepped inside, and Race couldn't help but notice how his eyes immediately scanned the space or how his left eyebrow quirked up, signaling he just saw something surprising. When had he begun to observe the smallest of mannerisms?

"Hey, I'm just glad that we agreed to have this date at my place. I would be way too jealous of anyone looking at you to properly enjoy myself." Spot let out a laugh, the hand not holding the flowers immediately going to scratch at the back of his head. "Here, let me take those from you," Race spoke best he could with his bottom lip between his teeth.

He couldn't remember the last time one of his dates had bought him flowers. JoJo had done it at first but that was years ago, and it stopped after the first few dates. The only person he was ever with that would surprise him with flowers and give them to him on dates was Specs. He brought them to his nose, hiding his smile between the vibrant yellows, reds, and pinks. Both of those relationships, though they did not last, made Race so unbelievably happy; if Spot bringing flowers was any hint to what was to come, then he definitely wanted a part.

"Tulips?" Race asked, gesturing for Spot to follow him into the kitchen. His eyes flickered to the oven. Five minutes of small talk and awkward questions about the apartment before he could let the food do the talking.

It already was, if he was being honest, the smell was heavenly. Spot leaned down to look in the small window. "Hey! No peeking, you will get to see it when it's ready," Race scolded. The two share a small laugh and Spot straightened, holding his hands in the universal symbol of 'I meant no harm.'

He rooted under the sink for a vase, there was one his grandmother had sent over for Christmas many years ago that he could have sworn was shoved down there. "I's wanted ta buy ya some sunflowers," Spot said, leaning against the kitchen counter, checking out the view of Race half shoved under the sink, "Cowboy and Mouth shot that idea down pretty quick. Did ya know that there's a whole language of flowers? Each one has its own meanin'."

"Ah hah!" Race cheered triumphantly as he emerged, vase in hand. He had not expected Spot to be watching him so intently, or the smug grin on his face at Race's childish enthusiasm. They shared a gaze for a beat before Race looked anywhere but at Spot. "So, flower language huh? What do these mean?" He preoccupied himself with cutting the ends of the flowers and filling the vase with water.

"Love, cheerfulness, and friendship." Spot shrugged, moving over to help arrange the flowers; any excuse to be closer to Race the better. Their hands brushed, they had brushed hundreds of times before as they exchanged money over the register, but this time felt different. This felt more official, which in turn made it all the more awkward.

The close proximity caused a pinkness to creep up the back of Race's neck, one that only worsened when Spot caught him staring at the way his eyelashes brushed his cheekbones whenever he blinked or how his mouth would purse as he concentrated on trimming down the stems or the way the corner of his mouth quirked up as he stared back before they both quickly looked away. Race cleared his throat, trying to dislodge the anxiety, and spoke.

"You know, sunflowers are actually my favorite flowers." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Spot grinning, not a rare sight around Race, but it sent his heart beating a mile a minute either way.

"Are they now?" Spot asked, "Not just sayin' that ta make me's feel better?"

Race laughed and shook his head, being to arrange the bouquet with detailed precision. "No, I'm not. My family lives in Tuscany and they have fields of sunflowers. Most breathtaking thing you could see during the summer," he spoke with a pit in his chest, here he had thought that breakdown beforehand had purged all these feelings from his mind.

"I's was gonna say somethin' but it would've just sounded cheesy," Spot said with a small laugh, helping to turn the tulips and make everything appear more full.

"You have to tell me now."

"Nope, I's have a reputation ta uphold ya know."

A beat passed, the air heavy with mock seriousness. Spot was the first to crack as he broke into a grin followed closely by a short bark of laughter. "I's was gonna say that you's was the most breathtaking thing ya could see durin' the summa," he said, not bothering to hide his smile or his feelings apparently.

The timer on the oven went off before Race could respond. Saved by the bell and thank god because there was no way he would have been able to form a coherent sentence after seeing the look in Spot's eyes.

God, he just wanted to devour him and not just in a sexual way. Race wanted to know everything about Spot; his favorite song – not the one he told people was his favorite, but the one he was too embarrassed to tell people about, what side of the bed he slept on, what color his toothbrush was. It sounded weird, even to Race, but he couldn't help it. He wanted to know all the stupid little quirks that made Spot, well, Spot.

He tried not to be too distracted as he was pulling a piping hot meal out of the oven. The last thing he needed was some nice burns and a stained button down on the first date, though technically it would be their second, but who was counting? What would they tell their kids was their first date, Race thought as he set the pasta on the counter. Woah, when did that slip past his impulse control? He was taking this slow, that's what everyone kept reminding him, and good thing too because here he was first, no, second date thinking about having kids with Spot.

"That looks real tasty." Spot leaned over the casserole dish and took a deep breath. "Smells delicious too. Albert wasn't kiddin' when he said you's was a good cook."

Race rolled his eyes, shoving him lightly. "Oh, cut it with all the flattery. You haven't even tasted it yet," he laughed, placing the flowers in the middle of the island dividing his kitchen from his living/dining room. The thought of sitting on the couch and looking over to see the flowers for the next week brought a smile to his face, one he just couldn't seem to lose around Spot.

Even when he thought about how dinky his set-up for the date was, Race still had a smile on his face. Sure, the table cloth was slightly stained and the only candle he had for their "fancy" date was one of those three-wicks "Rose Water and Ivy" from Bath and Bodyworks when they had their classic \$10 off sale. The plates were slightly chipped – Elmer could be thanked for that, juggling and throwing were not the same thing, but who was he to listen – and the silverware was all bent – Jack had insisted on impressing Davey with his super strength and his "too much" gene kicked in, meaning Race had to adapt to holding spoons and forks because they were all curved.

"Go and sit down. I'll bring out our plates in one second," Race said and opened the cabinet, smile still ever present, to grab some of his chipped dishes. Spot was right about it smelling good. The aroma filled the entire apartment and Race's mouth was practically watering at the thought, not to toot his own horn but he was pretty damn good at making pasta.

"Do you want something to drink? I have beer, but I would really prefer you not have one if you're driving home," Race said, rooting around the fridge for a soda or something.

Spot shrugged, making his way to the table. "I'll have a water for now, maybe if all goes well I can have a beer later and not worry about going home." There was a tone to his voice, one that made Race go weak in the knees, but everyone was pressuring him to go slow. So, instead of flirting back, he let out a nervous laugh and focused on placing glasses of water on the table before going back to get the food.

"You, um, you've got a nice place. Sure of a hell bigger than mine," Spot said as he sat down, hence the awkward small talk. They had talked for hours upon hours at the store, why did it feel so awkward here?

Race began to dish out the pasta. How much was he supposed to give? What if Spot ended up not wanting it? What if he hated his cooking and then thought of Race as a failure? He caught off his own thoughts, letting out a small, "Ha, yeah." He cringed, what kind of lame ass response was that? "I was really blessed with getting a scholarship. Campus was nice but after two years of saving, I'm glad to just have my own space."

He went with his gut, dishing out enough to make a neat pile on the plate before bringing them out. Spot greeted him with a smile and as Race was setting down the plates got out of his own seat to pull out Race's flimsy IKEA chair.

"What a gentleman." Race watched eagerly as Spot sat down and truly settled in, napkin on his lap, whoever raised him certainly did it right. "Well?" he prompted, "You gonna try it?"

Why Race had ever had ever thought a date with this boy would be a good idea was beyond him. Upon sensing Race's excitement, Spot took as long as humanly possible to get a bite. He would make comments about how it, a slop of pasta and vegetables, looked to beautiful to eat and "compose himself" with some heavy breathing. All the joking was worth the buildup, because the look on his face when he finally took that bite should have been photographed.

"Holy fuck that is the best thing I's has ever put in my mouth," Spot said, causing Race to choke on the water he was drinking. He had always gotten high praise, but nothing to that extent.

"It's just pasta and vegetables, Spot," he spluttered.

"You's say that like it's no big deal. Some people's is horrible cooks, Race. Cowboy can't even make pancakes without burning them," Spot said between mouthfuls of food.

"I had to use store-bought sauce so all I really did was the vegetables-"

Spot cut him off, "Which is the best thing on the plate. Don't argue with me, cutie. You's is gonna lose every time." He ended the sentence with a wink, resulting in Race almost choking on something for a second time that night. If that got to be a habit, well then, he wasn't complaining.

The compliments seemed to wean off some of the awkwardness and the two fell into easy conversation. They talked about Italy, about Jack's paintings on the wall, why Race's cutlery was all bent, and why his plates were chipped. As time went on, his apprehension melted away. Spot laughed at every story, he wasn't disgusted as Race had worried. He had also cleaned his plate and went back for seconds.

Everything was going smooth, until it wasn't.

There was a knock on the door and the only person who should have been knocking on his door at all that night was sitting right across from him. Race let out a small groan. If it was who he thought it was then this was not going to end well at all.

"I gotta get that," Race said with a tight lip smile. Why did his front door have to be so visible from where they were eating? Why did he have to show up now? Shouldn't he be out

getting high?

Spot kept eating, but Race knew he was watching him. Watching him take a moment to compose along and take too long which prompted another knock from the unknown visitor on the other side of the door. Race, very obviously panicking, practically ripped the door open to stop the offending noise.

“Hiya, sweetheart. What’s for dinner?” Asked a male, a bit shorter than Spot but no where near as fit.

“Romeo, darling, I’m kind of in the middle of something right now. Can we please do this later?” Race sighed, running a hand over his face and pinching the bridge of his nose.

Romeo laughed, inviting himself in and heading to the kitchen. He grabbed a Tupperware and it was only then that he saw Spot.

“Hiya, hot stuff. Name’s Romeo, what do you say ‘bout coming over to my place later?” He sent a wink Spot’s way, met only with a look of pure disgust. “One-man kinda guy? Hey, I can respect that,” Romeo said. He wouldn’t shut up.

Race’s face was becoming redder by the minute, angry splotches forming on his neck. “Can you just hurry up? I specifically told you that I’m on a date tonight,” he couldn’t help from saying that with yet another groan.

There was no answer, other than the snap of the plastic lid. Romeo came over to give Race a big kiss on the cheek and then left, but not before saying, “Love you, baby!”

The door slammed as did Race’s eyes.

He couldn’t bear to look at Spot. When Romeo had called him sweetheart he had heard Spot practically grinding his teeth. The jealousy was cute in small doses, but Romeo had a flair for the dramatic and went overboard as always; leaving Race to face the wrath of an angry Spot Conlon.

“Mind tellin’ me what in the hell that was?” Spot asked. It was clear he was keeping his voice from cracking, the disappointment hurt worse than hours of screaming ever would have.

“I promise it was not what it looked like, at all,” Race tripped over his words and his feet, he had forgotten to open his eyes as he made his way over to the table, “He’s my neighbor from upstairs, and the vents in this building carry scents to the entire building. A while back I was practicing some of my recipes for class and he tracked down where the smells were coming from and now we have this thing-” wrong word, Spot’s eyes had flashed with a new anger- “Not like that! No, he just comes over and takes some food every time I’m cooking. We’ve been doing it for at least a year. Believe me, I would have told you if there was someone else. I really like you, only you.”

Race was rambling, he knew it and Spot knew it, but he couldn’t seem to stop. “Romeo is such a flirt. His mother’s skill for naming her kid was impeccable, but I promise he is no

threat-”

“Oh yeah? So then why was you’s flirting back? Callin’ him darling?”

“He’s just a friend. Please, believe me. He’s extra and that’s just what I call him. Anyway, I’m trying to set him with my friend, Specs. We can call him right now, he’ll vouch for me. Romeo and I are just friends who sometimes flirt because we’re both lonely but not each other’s type at all,” Race said. Tears threatened to spill over. He was one wrong move from losing Spot.

It was a stupid argument. There was no reason to be so upset, but Race had always been sensitive under that cocky guise. Plus, he wanted Spot in his life for a while. This was supposed to last longer than a few trips to the store.

“Please, believe me. I want you Spot. I cried on the phone to my best friend for like half an hour before you came over because I like you so much it scares me, you have to believe me.”

He was ready for Spot to stand up and storm out. He was ready for Spot to yell at him. He was ready for Spot to finish his meal in silence. As it would turn out, he had already finished his meal while Romeo was taking forever to fill his own dish. It would also turn out that he wasn’t mad, and if he was then he had an odd way of showing it.

Spot walked over and hugged Race. Not an awkward hug like tonight might have ended with. He pulled Race flush against him, face buried in his chest because he wasn’t tall enough to bury it in the crook of his neck. “I’s believe ya, Racer. I don’t know why I’s got so mad. I’m sorry, you’re allowed to have friends. I don’t want to be one of those people,” Spot’s muffled voice was music to his ears.

It was all okay. The date wasn’t a total bust, but hey it would be a good story to tell their kids. Race sighed and placed his chin on top of Spot’s head. He really needed to stop thinking like that.

“Hey, Race?” Spot asked, earning a small ‘hmm’ in response, “Can I’s kiss ya?”

The two leaned slightly away from one another to see better. Race’s eyes weren’t as bleary, and Spot had a sheepish smile on his face. “Just to show I’s really not mad,” he said with a wink and Race couldn’t help but laugh.

“You don’t have to ask.” He rolled his eyes, but the smile never went away.

“I like to ask,” Spot countered, grabbing Race’s chin and tilting his head down just enough so that he could brush his lips against his. It wasn’t a real kiss, but it might as well have been because any taste of Spot had him melting in the other’s arms.

Almost as if he could sense his effect on Race, Spot began to pull away, earning a whimper from Race. “No fair, that wasn’t even a real kiss,” he whined, holding on tightly so he couldn’t leave. Thankfully, that was not what Spot had planned to do.



Somehow, the memory of the event was blurry, Race ended up being slammed against the wall with Spot's hands in his hair. Their kissing was sloppy, teeth crashing together, eyes closed. It felt so right, his lips meshing perfectly with Race's; yet he felt so wrong.

"Spot," he groaned, opening his heavy-lidded eyes. Spot took the moan as positive feedback and moved to litter his jawbone with kisses before showing him why his nickname was Spot.

As much as he wanted to tell Spot to slow down, it just felt so good; he turned his head to the side to allow more access to his neck. Spot nibbled on his skin, sucking softly, then sealed the hickey with a kiss. The darkest was on his collarbone, surrounded by four little ones.

It was only when he felt his shirt being unbuttoned that he said something. "Stop," he said, more like croaked out from swollen lips. Spot immediately complied, backing up, and holding his hands up.

"I am so sorry, did I hurt you?" He asked, brows furrowing in concern. It was clear that he wanted to grab him and check Race for injury but was too scared.

"No, I love kissing you and that's just the thing. You're not a sex on the first date type of guy and I rush into things, which tends to blow up in my face- I just want to take things slow, savor the moment?" Race smiled at him, reaching out to grab his hand. Spot ran his thumb across Race's knuckles with a small smile.

"Savor? 'Cause you's a chef," he said, staring at Race with a stupid grin, "We's can take this as slow as you's need, but I's wanna keep kissing you if that's okay?"

He rolled his eyes, at both the joke and Spot's comment. What did he do to land a date with someone so wonderful? "Didn't I just say that I love kissing you?" Race asked, tugging him closer by his hand.

Their lips met again, Spot holding him tightly by the waist, he was falling hard. Imagine waking up every morning, rolling over, and getting to kiss these lips. Imagine walking into the mismatched living room and seeing him lounging on the couch in grey sweatpants. Imagine cooking in the kitchen and hearing the front door swing open to him walking in from a long day of classes. Just imagine.

He had to pull away and rest his forehead against Spot's, the memory made him smile too wide to keep kissing. "What?" Spot asked, and Race just shook his head softly and laughed. "What?" he repeated once more, joining in on the laughter.

"I'm just so happy right now," he said. So unbelievably happy. "Wanna cuddle on the couch and watch Disney movies?"

"I would not want to spend the night any other way."

"I'll grab you a beer and some pajamas, there's blankets in the closet," Race said, bumping his hip against Spot's hip and meeting his lips one last time before heading off to grab some clothes.

The night would end with Race falling asleep after the third movie, his head on Spot's lap. It was grossly domestic, the way that Spot led him to his room and hovered at the side of the bed, unsure of whether or not climbing in would push the boundaries.

Just as he was leaving Race's hand shot out and grabbed him. "Get in bed dork," he grumbled. Spot crawled in next to him, wrapping an arm around his waist, and pressing a kiss to his neck.

Race smiled in the darkness. Just imagine.

# A reassurance

## Chapter Notes

Ah! I am so sorry it has taken me so long to update. I have been incredibly busy with school (I graduate in 1 month ahhh!!) and have barely had time to write.

Anyway this is more of a filler chapter because some serious drama is about to go down. The 4th of July party was supposed to be in this chapter, but I didn't want that to be too rushed so we're splitting yet another chapter!

Also, this mentions some mental health issues regarding Jack that I would love to talk more about, so leave me a comment! I love hearing what you all have to say :))

Albert would not stop pestering Race. It was Friday night, a whole 24 hours following his date with Spot, he had already repeated the story roughly five times, but Albert would not let it go.

“You seriously almost broke up on the first date?” He asked, snorting and shoving boxes of Mac and Cheese into a plastic bag.

The customer’s patience was running as thin as Race’s was, if not more. They cleared their throat. The rest of the order was bagged in a sheepish silence; the store was rather busy, thankfully, because the two did not have a chance to talk until three hours later. Race should have known that Albert would not drop it but part of him was hoping against hope that he would.

“I thought you and Romeo dropped that thing you guys had months ago?” Albert draped his arm around Race’s shoulder, he smelled slightly of weed and coffee. No wonder he was pestering so much.

Race let out a small snort of laughter. “I thought you weren’t smoking as much over the summer and cut down to one coffee a week?” He countered, shoving his friend playfully.

“Didn’t you guys have a thing where you would blow him while he eats?” Albert smirked at Race’s distraught sigh. He was going to have to retell the story once more it seemed.

“It was casual. We were lonely,” Race said, pursing his lips. “Plus, I told him it had to stop, like, the week I met Spot. He comes over solely for a plate of whatever I’m cooking. Nothing more.”

Albert cocked an eyebrow, muttering some variation of “likely story.” Race groaned, slipping out from under his arm. “Oh c’mon! Sometimes we talk, and we flirt out of habit, but nothing intimate since I met Spot,” he said, frowning slightly at not being taken seriously.

“Well, that’s a relief.” A gruff voice said from behind them. The pair jumped; Albert letting out a rather unflattering shriek.

“Jack!” Race scolded, heaving with fear. “How much did you hear?”

The artist laughed, running a paint speckled hand through his greasy hair. It was clear he had been working for a few hours without a break. Race prayed he would just think this entire encounter as a vivid hallucination.

“Oh, just how you was fucking your neighbor.” Race spluttered, but Jack talked right over him. “Then the Racer I know kicked in and kicked him out once a real fella came into his life.”

Race let out a sigh of relief. If Jack was mad, then he would have had more to worry about than Spot’s mini freak out.

“Christ Jack, you look like you live on the streets,” Albert blurted, being silenced by a harsh glare from Race. He ran his gaze carefully over his best friend. He looked like shit, and that was being generous. Jack need a shower and a shave, maybe something to eat.

“Has Davey seen you at all this week?” He asked, picking at, what he hoped was, a dried paint stain. These clothes had been worn a few days in a row without a doubt. Though Race couldn’t truly be surprised. It was the week of his annual Fourth of July party and Jack definitely had the too much gene.

“No, he’s been here. I’ve been decorating.” The lopsided smile told Race everything he needed to know. When Jack got passionate about something, and he always got passionate about this party, he tended to fall into a severe case of tunnel vision. Everything had to be perfected, even if he spent days on the same little paper lantern.

“Davey!! Davey get out here! Hurry!” Albert screeched, his acting was improving. The worry in his tone had Davey come crashing out of the backroom, sliding across the tile flooring, and crashing into three customers.

“What! Who’s being robbed!?” He wheezed, nursing a bruised hip. “Jackie? What are you doing here?”

After Davey’s embarrassing display Jack really had no reason to blush as much as he was, but Race knew Jack hated people seeing him like that; more specifically, he hated Davey seeing him this way. “I was just- oh, um- buying some-” Jack stammered, preoccupying himself with a rouge thread on his jean jacket.

“Have you been eating?” Davey asked, placing his hand on Jack’s arm, and bending to meet his eye. There was a shrug and Davey bit his tongue to keep from nagging, instead settling on nodding. “Ok, that’s ok we’re working on that, right?”

Jack pursed his lips, gaze shifting to Race for help. Race did his best to not let any emotion betray him; pity would only piss Jack off. “I’ve been tryin’ but I ain’t – haven’t – had

anytime,” he said, scratching at the back of his neck and focusing his gaze back on Davey. “I’ve been working on making the decorations for the party.”

The two had been together for three years and Race knew they had been friends even longer, but Jack always came to Race for these issues. He refused to let Davey see him fall so low. He never called Davey when he was ripping his hair out over a painting or laying in bed for days because he couldn’t bring himself to stare at a blank canvas with no inspiration.

“It’s the first time you’ll actually get to come cause you ain’t workin’ and your folks aren’t dragging you to your family’s and I just wanted to make sure it was perfect.” The words fell from Jack’s lips in a frenzy. No one had a good response, though Albert let out a small noise of pity.

Race abandoned his post at his register, turning off his light, and coming over to stand next to Jack. “Jack, I thought we talked about this? Whenever you start feeling like you’re losing control, you call me.” Race ignored the look he got from Davey as he said this, some things Jack would never let Davey see.

Jack nodded. “You’re right. I was gonna, but days had already passed when I realized. It got-” he was interrupted by a shaky exhale- “It got real bad this time.”

He went back to picking at the string from earlier, much to Davey’s frustration.

“Antonio, I’m going to,” Davey fumbled for the right word but came up short. “Can I trust you to close up tonight and empty your drawer?”

Race nodded, knowing this must be the first time Davey has seen Jack this bad for him to break such a large rule it could cost him his job. “Yeah, for sure. Spot and I will see you guys tomorrow at the party, okay Jack?”

Jack didn’t respond, just let himself be dragged away by Davey, who was already beginning his exasperated speech on how Jack had nothing to be ashamed of and Davey would love him no matter what. They had that conversation a lot more, the more serious they became.

Albert let out a low whistle, “He’s been getting worse?”

Race shrugged; Albert had not been in their friend group long enough to see Jack at rock bottom, but this behavior was probably the lowest he had ever seen from cocky Jack Kelly. “He’s just been putting a lot of pressure on himself to be perfect for Davey. Jack just tends to take it to the extreme.”

The two didn’t bring it up after that and Albert stopped pestering about Race’s date the night before as well. It was almost as if he could feel the nerves radiating off of him; Jack had been improving so well and this put them three steps back. Usually he would have been able to communicate what was triggering the impulse to make everything perfect. Race just hoped it was the public setting. If not, then he would have to make another appointment with Jack’s therapist.

Closing time came and went. Albert stayed late to help, which Race was grateful for considering Davey had always done this, and he hadn't the slightest clue what to do. Spot was waiting for him when they left the store.

"Hey!" Race grinned, rushing over and throwing his arms around him. That would show Albert everything was fine. "I didn't know you were going to be here tonight," he said before planting a big kiss to Spot's forehead.

Albert snorted and huffed as he walked past. "I'm throwing up in my mouth as we speak, please get a room."

Spot threw his head back with a hearty laugh, his arms slid around Race's waist to pull him closer as he called out a sweet "fuck off" to Albert. "I's missed ya," Spot said, pushing himself up to capture Race's lips.

It took everything in Race's power not to moan. He had seen him not even ten hours earlier, but he had really missed kissing Spot. "I saw you this morning," Race teased, pulling away before the two could get carried away. There were still security cameras after all.

The smile on Spot's face made his heart melt. The way the corner of his eyes crinkled with delight and his freckled nose twitched with joy. "I's like wakin' up next to ya," he teased, tugging Race towards his truck.

"Slow down there, lover boy. That was our first date." Race chuckled, stopping him to place a flurry of kisses over his cheeks and nose. He had been wanting to do that since that first conversation they had, in the truck two parking spots down.

"Says the one showerin' me in kisses," Spot said, laughing once more and pushing Race off him. He made a show of being disgusted and wiping all the kisses off. "Ew, affection."

They stared at each other for a beat, then broke into childish giggles before resuming their walk. The two walked side by side, shoulders and fingers brushing until Spot built up the courage to interlock their fingers.

"Ew, affection," Race mocked but leaned over and kissed him anyway. He slowed his pace, not wanting to reach the car too fast. That would mean letting go of Spot's hand for a moment, and he was too selfish to let that happen.

"Is you's nervous?" Spot asked, titling his head back to look at the night sky. It was cloudy, blocking out the moon and the stars.

Race shook his head; he kept his gaze level choosing instead to stare at a car making its way lazily down the street. "No, I'm excited for all of my friends to meet you. I've been going on nonstop about you since the day I met you," Race said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." Race laughed, nudging Spot's shoulder with his. They reached the car all too fast. Their hands separated.

Spot's car was cleaner than when he last remembered. Jack had mentioned something about him being such a mess, but it seemed he was attempting to appear put together.

"I's is nervous," Spot said, biting down on his lip and turning the key in the ignition. The engine spluttered before finally roaring to life.

"I know."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Spot, I know you. Sure, we've only been official for a few days, but I know more about you than Jack does at this point," Race said with a sigh. "Or are you forgetting all those times you came in to visit me and we spent hours on end just talking?"

He didn't have a response to that. Race stared out the window, biting back an apology. It wasn't right of him to snap like that. Spot was nervous, he had every right to be, and Race treated that fear like it wasn't valid. He felt like an ass.

"I's really like you, Racer. It's just that- my last relationship didn't turn out too good and I's sometimes think it was my fault. You's deserve the best and I's am going to try my hardest to be the best for you," Spot said so quietly Race wasn't entirely sure it was meant to be heard.

"Spot, you already are the best thing I could ask for. I like you so much my heart hurts, okay? You have no reason to be nervous for tomorrow because I want everyone to see my boyfriend and how happy he makes me. I'm not ashamed to be with you and I hate that your asshole of an ex would make you feel like there's a reason to be." Race looked over at him, watching as Spot stared straight ahead.

He knew that he had an issue dealing with emotion, Jack had mentioned something about the foster care system putting him through therapy for that.

"He had anger issues as a kid, then almost entirely shut everyone out." Jack had said one night over the phone. "Emotions freak him out. For the longest time he was just blank faced and wouldn't talk."

"He's not like that now. What changed?" Race had asked.

He heard Jack sigh on the other end. There was the tapping of a paint brush three times, then three times once more, then three times more followed by a frustrated groan. "Jack, I promise the water is out of the brush. Let's focus on something else."

"Spot just got better. The therapist was almost as shocked as I was." There was the sound of more tapping. "He still doesn't do well with personally feeling things, but he can handle other people's emotions and even react with his own. I don't know how to explain it- the therapist used all her fancy-schmancy lingo."

Race could clearly see now what Jack had meant. Spot was struggling. He was forcing everything deep down inside of him, that much was obvious. Race felt even worse for brushing off Spot's anxiety earlier.

“Hey, Spot?” Race asked. His only response was a small hum, at least he hadn’t entirely retreated into himself. “Wanna stay the night again?”

Spot glanced over at him and grinned. “Really?”

Race laughed, what a dork. “Yes, really.”

Spot whooped, comfortable with himself once more. Race smiled fondly at his boyfriend, this wasn’t just any dork, it was his dork.



# A confession

## Chapter Notes

This one's long as an apology for me taking so long to update. The pacing seems off to me, but I've already rewrote it twice so this is the best it's gonna get.

I'm gonna be super busy these next two weeks so I won't be updating this till the end of May :(  
Hope you all enjoy!

It felt like something out of a cliché hallmark movie. The gentle sunrise cascading light through the cracks of the blinds, the sound of birds and busy city life that faded into background noise, and a cute boy snuggled in bed.

Race's eyes fluttered open in the morning for the first time in a long time. There was no stress of an alarm, no scrambling to dress himself, no screaming into a pillow because him homesickness hurt too much. Race was almost unfamiliar with this feeling. Peacefulness, tranquility, whatever it was called, he wanted to relish in it forever.

He lay flat on his back, left arm completely numbed from the weight of his companion on top of it. Race glanced down at Spot; the male had opted to use Race's chest as a pillow, a small pool of drool forming on his shirt, laying on the left half of him.

With the way his lips twitched while he slept, mouthing words to some vivid dream he must have been having, and shifting to cuddle closer to Race with a small sigh, he figured that Spot could be forgiven for drooling. After all, it just made him all the more human. All the more adorable.

"Hey, Spotty." Race attempted to move his left arm but, as suspected, could not. "Wake up, dork. You're on my arm and I have to piss."

Spot was not a deep sleeper, Race was, which is how he knew that there was no way in hell Spot could still be sleeping. He had quietly coughed last night, and Spot had sat straight up in bed; not being able to wake up with him talking in his ear was just unlikely.

"I know you're awake," Race said, placing a small kiss on his forehead and, using his free hand, ran his fingers through the tight curls atop his boyfriend's head. God he could get used to waking up like this.

"Mmm, I's sleepin'." Spot nuzzled his face against his chest, looking less like an emotionless jerk and more like a puppy by the second.

“Yeah and so is my arm. If you cut off my circulation any longer we might have to amputate it,” Race teased, still attempting to tug his arm out from under Spot. The movement only caused him to reposition himself so that, instead of laying on only his arm and leg, Spot was draped entirely across Race’s torso with his face tucked neatly away in the crook of Race’s neck.

“Comfy,” Spot whined, taking the time to wrap his arms around Race’s chest. At least his arm was free.

Checking the clock on his rickety bedside table Race saw that they still had a few hours before Jack’s party started. “Fine, but only for another hour.”

That seemed to satisfy Spot, who promptly began a tiny little snore. How cute, Race thought and ran his thin drinkers through his hair. His own eyes fluttered closed.

They had overslept by an hour. It was an angry honk from the busy world outside that woke them up. The sun was shining much more harshly through the window. Race was now being clutched to Spot’s chest. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been the little spoon, especially with such a large height difference. The image of Spot clinging to his back reminded him of a Koloa flashed in his mind and a bark of laughter escaped him.

“Be quiet,” Spot groaned, rubbing at his eyes and placing a small kiss on the nose of Race’s neck.

“Good morning to you too.” Race chuckled, rolling over to Eskimo kiss Spot. They laid side by side for a while, foreheads touching, and stared in each other’s eyes.

Spot trailed his fingertips over Race’s cheekbone. “We’s is only official for a few days and I’s is already wakin’ up in yer bed for the second time.”

Race laughed at this comment, leaning in and capturing his lips in a sweet kiss. Spot groaned quietly, cupping Race’s cheek, and kissing back with a gentle passion. The kiss was shorter than Race would have liked, but he knew that they would have ended up cuddling and kissing all day instead of getting ready. He should take off weekends more often.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Race said, and Spot quickly shook his head.

“No! No, I’s like wakin’ up next to yer cute face every mornin’.” Spot pressed a quick peck to his forehead.

“Yeah? I was the one doing all the waking up. You were to busy drooling on my chest.”

Spot let out an indignant gasp, rolling onto his back to stare at Race’s paint peeled ceiling. “It’s endearin’ and you’s know it.”

The two couldn’t even be bothered to fake seriousness. It was too early in the morning to hold back the laughter that wracked their bodies.

“If you get up in the next five minutes I’ll make pancakes.” Race leaned over to kiss Spot’s cheek before rolling out of bed.

He made a show of stretching, letting the loose collar of his t-shirt slip down his shoulder and expose the array of hickeys Spot gave him last night. Race could feel Spot's eyes following his every move.

The back of his neck was definitely red, but he couldn't care less. This feeling, this whole entire morning really, had eased Race's anxiety. Spot liked him, liked waking up next to him, liked the way he looked in the morning with greasy hair, and even liked kissing him with gross morning breath. And Race returned those feelings full heartedly.

"You got three minutes," Race said and waltzed out of the room, smiling to himself.

He made his way to the kitchen, nervously straightening out the paintings on the wall. Things had gotten a little too heated last night and some rearranging of the furniture was the result. He pushed the wobbly dining table back to its original position.

"Two minutes!" Race shouted. There was some fumbling and a small crash from the other room followed by a loud string of curse words. Spot had fallen out of bed, no doubt about it.

Holding back a laugh, Race opened up a cabinet and began rooting around for his boxed pancake mix. The sound of shuffled footsteps stopped next to him.

"Wow, you had a minute to spare I'm impressed," Race said and straightened out, placing the box of pancake mix on the counter. Spot's cocky grin fell.

"What's that?" He asked.

"Pancake mix," Race said. His face scrunched in confusion and Spot mimicked.

There was a frown. "Why?"

"I told you I was going to make pancakes."

Race watched as Spot shook his head, 'tsking' as he did so. "You's is literally in culinary school an' you's makin' pancakes from a box."

He couldn't help it. He busted out laughing. It was sweet really, that Spot believed he was the best chef out there, that he thought Race made everything from scratch. "I'm just as lazy as the average college student," he said.

The excuse wasn't to Spot's standards because he let out a small whine and crossed his arms. "But, but-" He couldn't even form a proper sentence the poor thing was so distressed.

"How 'bout this, we take off another Saturday and I can make you as many pancakes as you want."

Spot nodded eagerly, grinning widely. "Only if we's gets ta sleep in," he said and moved closer to hug Race around the waist.

The deal was sealed with a kiss. Many kisses, in fact. Race ended up sitting on the counter with his tongue so far down Spot's throat he completely lost track of time.

By the time they separated, with swollen lips and hickeys along Spot's collarbone, half an hour had passed. "Guess we's got a little carried away."

Race laughed and rested his forehead against Spot's. "Yeah, I guess we did," he said. They smiled at each other. Race laced their hands together. "We might wanna skip the pancakes and just get ready. We've got to leave for your house in twenty minutes anyway."

"Why can't we's just stay here all day?" Spot whined, sticking his bottom lip out in a pout. Race kissed him quickly and hopped off the counter.

"We will, but Jack put a lot of effort into this party and we have to be good friends."

"Fine."

It turns out, getting dressed for a backyard party was a lot harder when Spot was sitting in the next room. All those years of going stag, Race had developed an expected style. The wackiest Hawaiian shirt possible and Italian flag swim trunks. He would not be caught dead in those this year, which was ironic considering Spot owned five pairs of the same red and black striped tank top.

Clothes were piled on the floor, split into three categories: No, definitely not, and "why did I even think it was okay to buy?" He refused to let Spot come in and help, lest he see the absurd amount of Hawaiian shirts he owned. What could he say, he wore them well.

There was a knock on the door. "Racer can you's hurry it up. I's been waitin' for twenty minutes. It's just a party with all ya friends. Ain't no one to impress," Spot's voice was muffled, slightly frustrated, which only freaked Race out more.

"I just want to look nice," Race said. Not his best reasoning, but he could work with it. "If my boyfriend meets my friends looking 100 times better than me rather than, like, 10, then I will never hear the end of it." He silently applauded himself for the save.

"Can I's come in an' help you?" The question sent Race's heart rate through the roof. He spent the next minute and a half shoving his Hawaiian shirts under the bed.

"Yeah, sure," Race said. Why was he sweating? Spot spent the first few months of talking to him while he was wearing one of the ugliest work uniforms he had ever seen.

It took exactly 25 seconds for Spot to pick out Race's outfit. He decided on some khaki shorts and a navy button down with white polka dots. "Wear yer white vans too," Spot said and left.

It took three minutes for Race to dress and for the shock to leave his body. Upon first look, Race felt overdressed, but Spot had instructed him to leave the top few buttons undone. He looked ready to go yachting. It was chic, but casual. There was so much more to Spot than he knew. Race wanted to know everything.

When he left his room, Spot let out a low whistle. "You's should let me dress ya more often," He teased, grabbing Race by a belt loop and tugging him closer. They kissed for what must have been the thousandth time that morning, and all Race could do was curse himself for not

asking Spot out sooner. He could have been kissing him all these months instead of just flapping his lips.

They stopped at Spot's house on the way to the party. Race waited in the truck, listening to some trash music in his opinion, but it was Spot, so he couldn't be too picky; after all, he had the best boyfriend in the whole world. As expected, he returned within five minutes wearing that red and black striped tank top he looked so good in.

"I feel way too overdressed now," Race said once Spot got back into the driver's seat. He caught the briefest smile, wait that was a smirk, Spot was smirking at him. "You son a of a bitch! I can't believe you've got me overdressed to a party I've been going to for the past five years."

Spot cracked up, a genuine smile spreading across his face. "What? You look so hot right now," he said between laughter. "Like a Princeton drop out."

Race rolled his eyes but leaned over and gave Spot a kiss anyway. He liked kissing Spot. He liked having Spot picking out his clothes. "I like you so much," he blurted out. Another smirk, god save him there was no way they would make it to this party.

"I's like you's too, Race. That's why I's is going ta a party with you's being all horribly overdressed," Spot teased and shifted gears. They were on their way to their first event as a couple. A couple. This was terrifying.

"Why haven't I seen you at these parties before? You've known Jack longer than I have," Race said, staring out the window as the world whipped by. "I just feel like we should have met far before we did."

The trees and houses became a blur as the car accelerated. Spot had all but slammed on the gas, white knuckling the steering wheel, at the question. Race knew the feeling. It was like when people asked if he missed his family. He had to get away, but Spot couldn't out run these feelings, if anything he'd just get them killed.

"Spotty? It's a 25 and you're going 58 right now. I would like to get to the party, well, alive please." The comment seemed to ground the other, who removed his foot from the gas and took a shaky breath. He ran a hand through his hair. Once, twice, three times before even beginning an explanation.

"I's had a lot going on these past five years or so, I guess." Spot didn't elaborate, but the tension in the car was thick enough to slice into. Race had to ask, the curiosity was too much.

"Such as?"

It was like last night all over again. The blank face was back, glassy eyes as if in another world; quite a terrifying look for the driver to have. Race reached out and grabbed Spot's hand. He dragged his thumb across Spot's knuckles. A gentle reminder.

"Well, when Charlie—" he cleared his throat "When Charlie died I's couldn't bring myself ta show up. He's was just a kid an', I dunno. It just hurt too much ta be there havin' fun like

we's did every year an' not have him sittin' next ta me chuggin' a Pepsi wearin' some obnoxious sunglasses he found at the dolla' store."

Race nodded, squeezing his hand softly, and regretting even asking. Spot's gaze kept darting around the road. The hand Race was holding was trembling. Spot wasn't done, he took a deep breath and continued with his story.

"Then I's had met this guy we's called him Tommy Boy." The name alone made Spot cringe so hard the car swerved slightly to the left. It took a few moments for him to regain the ability to speak. "He's was real sweet, I's loved him from the first time I's laid my eyes on 'im."

"Spot, I can tell you don't want to talk about this. We don't have to have this conversation now. It can wait," Race said, but Spot shook his head. He was adamant. This story was being told and it was going to be told now.

"No, I's gotta let you's know. It's important an' I's honestly shoulda told ya sooner. Anyway, Tommy Boy was a looker an' he's was loaded too, but that's not why I's was so infatuated with him. Nah, he had this personality. He's was so charismatic. Anyone coulda fallen for 'im, no doubt about it.

"I's did, right away, and I's is ashamed to admit it now, but life's funny that way. We's started datin' in August around four years ago? I think, yeah it had ta be, which meant we's were together almost a year when Jack's party came around. Well a lot can happen to a relationship in a year. I's was already in a bad place, losing Charlie an' all, and Tommy Boy musta seen that 'cause he isolated me from everyone. I's wasn't allowed ta leave the house 'cept for class. I's didn't go to parties or visit Jack no more. I's was completely alone."

Race's heart split, his vision got blurry as his mind raced a mile a minute. He was close to crying, the only way he could think to respond to news like that. Jack had mentioned abuse from his birth parents, but nothing of Spot being in an abusive relationship; he couldn't catch a break. "I had no idea, Spot. When did you get out of it?"

"You's remember that day I's drove ya home cause it was rainin' so bad?" Race nodded, that had been a few months ago in April. It was one of the best memories he had of Spot. "Well it was like a couple days before that."

Race shifted his entire body in an attempt to look Spot in the eye. "You mean to tell me that you were in an abusive relationship for four years and no one noticed?"

This question didn't seem to faze Spot as bad as the other ones had. He could focus better, though the trembling was still ever present. "It's not that simple, Racer. I's didn't know he's was manipulating me, okay? I's hadn't been in any longer-term relationships before that. I's thought that's just how it went, that it's was normal for him to be callin' me a fag or whore every chance he got. It didn't fully hit me that I's was in a bad spot until he's started hittin' me.

"By then, I's was in too deep. He's had too much pull ova' me. I's was entirely financially reliant on him. I's had lost touch with everyone I's cared for. Anyone who did see me could only see a happy relationship. I's got good at covering up my bruises or those places he's

would put out his cigarette on. The whole time I's thought I's was in love with him. Hell, sometimes I's still think I was. That's why when he's would bring other men home and have the loudest sex in the world, it hurt more than when he's would grab me by the hair and slap me around."

It made sense now, why Spot had freaked out over Romeo and Race flirting. He had been hurt before in all ways: physically, mentally, emotionally. God, Race was so stupid for have not seen it early. He should have known, should have asked Jack to tell him more. That way he wouldn't have ever had to hurt Spot, even indirectly.

"Eventually I's got too borin' for him. Wouldn't struggle when he's was forcing me ta have sex. I's stopped runnin' back ta him after he would beat me. I's just kinda stopped all together and he found some other play thing, dumped me on the side of the road without another thought. My roommate, Henry, he's the one who really saved me. For the first time in years I's reached out an' told him what I's had been through. He and Jack both took real good care of me and then I's met you." Spot looked down at their intertwined fingers. "An' now I's know what a real relationship can feel like. It's hella lot better than those shitty tinder hookups I's had been tryin' ta get ova' my fear of findin' someone new."

Race couldn't form a response to that. How the hell was anyone supposed to respond to that? Instead, he brought Spot's hand to his mouth and brushed his knuckled against his lips in a small kiss. He stared at the freckles along his wrist, noticing that there were faint outlines of tiny burns. Harsh reminders.

No wonder Jack never brought it up. Between that and what happened to Charlie, it must have all felt like his fault. Then Race got the wind knocked out of him. The realization of this being Spot's first time back at the party, along with Davey finally being able to go, made this special. Made it important. Made Jack lose his shit and almost starve himself to death to make everything perfect. This went further than just Spot.

"If I ever meet this dick, I will kill him," Race said and Spot chuckled wryly.

"Jack had tried to, but Davey was the only thing keeping him from going to jail for me."

"I will rot in jail if it means I get a chance to murder that bastard that thought he could hurt the greatest thing on this Earth. I mean seriously, what kind of sick fuck takes advantage of someone who's grieving? What kind of twisted game is it to ruin someone's life." Race was becoming very angry, very fast. He had tears of disgust and hate flowing down his face.

He wiped at his nose, in an attempt to keep from snot dripping down his face as he began ugly crying. Part of him screamed that he was making it all about him. He felt dirty, wrong for crying at this, but he just couldn't believe someone could ever raise a hand against Spot; who, just a few hours ago, was drooling on his chest and getting overexcited at the mention of pancakes.

Spot glanced over, frowning softly. "Hey, don't you's go cryin' on me. I's lived through it an' look at me. I's ain't cryin'. Therapy has helped, a lot. I's not entirely better, but I's happy as can be since it happened. I's got my friends back, I's ain't failin' my classes no more, I's got Pickles, an' I's gots you. Life dealt me a shitty hand an' I's stuck it out."

That only made Race cry harder. They stopped talking after that, with Spot reversing roles and dragging his thumb across Race's knuckles. The car was filled with the sound of heart wrenching sobs and repeats of the same shitty pop songs.

Jack lived on the opposite side of town, giving Race plenty of time to calm down and them both plenty of time to lighten the mood. Ten minutes later, they were giggling at a dog with his head sticking out the window, tongue flapping in the breeze.

"I can't wait to see Crutchie." Spot smiled warmly at the dog in the car next to them. Race's heart flipped in his chest. How could someone so loving have gone through so much hardship? It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair at all.

His thoughts were interrupted by Fergie's trash version of the National Anthem, Specs ringtone. The randomness of it all had Spot and him laughing so hard, Race almost forgot to answer the phone.

"Hey, what's up we're almost there?" Race asked, still crying with laughter. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Spot smiling at him.

"Hurry up." His best friend whined loudly on the other end. Heavy base could be heard, it was clear someone had given Elmer the aux. "Jack let Elmo be in charge of music and I cannot take one more shitty EDM song without you here to knock back shots with me."

"We're on Jack's street now, I'll literally see you in a minute."

"Yay!" Race had to hold the phone away from his ear. "I have someone I want you to meet. We've been talking for a while and I figured since you were bringing your boyfriend, then you would want to meet what will hopefully be my boyfriend if the night goes well."

Race's world stuttered to a halt. His heart hurt for the second time that car ride. His best friend, his ex-boyfriend, had begun talking to someone, and Race hadn't even known? That hurt, but not as bad as the fact that he had not dated anyone since they broke up three years ago.

If he ever considered even considered putting himself out there again, Race was the first to know, and usually it was met with an adamant disapproval from Race. Dick move, he knew it, but Race couldn't imagine Specs with anyone but him, even if they did work better as friends.

"Oh." That's all Race could say. Jealousy spiked through him. Jealousy that shouldn't have been there because he knew his boyfriend- his boyfriend who just bared his soul to him- was sitting right next to him.

"Don't be like that, Higgins. I wanted to make sure he was for real. I know how you think no one deserves me-"

"That's usually because they don't," Race interrupted. His tone even caught Spot's attention.



“But I promise you’ll like him! Please, don’t be mad. I wanted to surprise you,” Specs said, voice so full of sincerity that Race had no choice but to forgive him.

“Fine. I’m not mad. Look, we just parked. Come meet us at the gate with your new man.”

“Ah! I’m so excited! Okay, love you!” Specs squealed into the phone.

Race rolled his eyes. “Love you too.” Their typical sign off.

Spot looked over at him, leg bouncing, hands fidgeting. “So this is it? We’s is gonna walk in there and we’s is officially official. I’s hope your friends like me,” he muttered, squinting at the house and chewing on his lip.

“Spotty, baby, they’re going to love you. Now, c’mon! Specs is waiting for us with this new guy he’s been talking to, so you’re not the only one in this position,” Race said, leaning over to peck him on the lips before, well, racing out of the car. He needed to get this awkward greeting over with, that way Spot would be able to relax and have some fun.

He grabbed Spot by the wrist, dragging him over to the back gate with an excited skip in his step. Specs was waiting, bouncing restlessly on the balls of his feet, and clutching the hand of someone who Race couldn’t make out quite yet.

“I can see why you two get along,” Spot teased, nudging Race playfully with his shoulder.

“We’re basically the same person and, since you like me, you’re bound to like him,” Race countered, grinning ear to ear.

The party was going to be great. It really was, but then he saw who Specs was holding hands with.

Romeo.

# A red solo cup

## Chapter Notes

This took me a couple days to write and edit because I figured if I was going to take a while to update, at least make it good. This is one of my longer chapters, as an apology for taking so long. Good news, I graduated high school which means it's summer time and now I can write more. :)

I'm debating on making this fic longer or just making a sequel. We're nearing the end already and I still haven't decided if it's going to have happy ending or not. Which would y'all rather read?

Hopefully you guys enjoy this chapter!! (I added as much as Davey as I could because he's literally my fav)

Romeo.

Of course it had to be the one person in the fucking world that Race would never want within a fifty-foot radius of his best friend.

“Higgins, this is Romeo,” Specs said, grinning wide and gesturing wildly with his free hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Race could see Spot’s eyebrows shoot up at the use of his last name. There was going to be so much to talk about on the drive home.

Romeo smirked at him, shooting a flirtatious wink in his direction. “We know each other,” Race scowled at the shorter individual as he spoke.

Spec’s grin faltered. “What?”

Was there an easy way to tell his ex/best friend that his boyfriend was sucking his dick for a good half a year up until a few months ago? Race sighed, he supposed not. Romeo beat him to it.

“We had a thing,” He said, cuddling up to a dejected Specs. “Don’t worry, babe, I’ve only got eyes for you.”

The two lovebirds exchanged whispers and giggles, hidden behind kisses. Race cleared his throat. Neither of them heard, nor cared. He could faintly hear Romeo talking about how he and Race used to be active but nothing else. That’s what it was, nothing.

Specs ate it up, accepting it as the whole truth, not even bothering to ask Race what his thoughts were. He leaned down to capture the shorter boy’s lips once more. It was ironic, how well they mirrored Race’s own relationship: Specs – insanely tall, bubbly, he and Race

were practically the same person and Romeo – short, well built from his gymnastic career, and emotionally cut off from the rest of the world, though that didn't seem to be the case now. Race's scowl only deepened. If this interaction had been a cartoon, steam surely would have been coming out his ears.

Spot was surprisingly calm during this whole ordeal. He moved only to tug Race closer by the waist, then left his hand there. Marking his territory. God, when had Race's life turned into a bad reality show?

What was pissing him off the most, was not that Romeo was acting like what they had was nothing, which it was. Totally, absolutely nothing and even if it was something, which it wasn't, Specs should have followed bro code. Wasn't it common knowledge that another dude's ex was off limits.

What was he thinking? They weren't exes. They never had a legitimate thing. No strings attached. Except for the fact that Race fell fast, and Race fell hard. Specs knew that, hell they had dated once in a blue moon. Specs knew everything about Race from his favorite color to the curve of his dick, and none of that seemed to matter now.

Specs and Romeo finally stopped that gross public display of affection, turning back towards a passive Spot and a fuming Race. "I don't believe I formally got to meet you!" Specs said, turning on the charm.

Race's anger melted away, for the most part, he couldn't be mad at his best friend for what he didn't know. Plus, he was so overexcited to meet Spot, like a goofy puppy being introduced to potential friends.

"Oh, right," Spot cleared his throat, tearing his eyes away from Race. "I'm Sean Conlon."

An awkward beat passed between them all. Not even Romeo had anything to say to that. What was really odd was how fast he managed to hide his accent. Here was Race's best friend, ex-lover standing next to and dating his neighbor as well as ex-fuck buddy and Spot was embarrassed by his Brooklyn accent? Race sighed, this first meeting was not at all how he had envisioned it.

"Specs, this is my boyfriend. We call him Spot. Don't call him Sean, hearing people call him Sean makes my skin crawl." Specs snorted, causing a grin to crack on Spot's face. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all. "Spot, this is my best friend. We call him Specs because he wears the biggest, coke bottle glasses you have ever seen *but* he insisted on wearing contacts today," Race finished, earning a childish mockery of that last sentence from his best friend.

Everything was back to normal. Suddenly, Race could breathe again. He was aware of the thumping bass from the party, Elmer's shitty EDM mix, no doubt. His relieved exhale must have been visible because Spot ran his thumb over his waist in the most comforting way.

Specs and Romeo lead the way further into the belly of the beast, but Race had other ideas. Once they were far enough away, he tugged Spot over to the back of the shed.

“Aye, what’s we’s doin’ ova here, when the party’s ova there?” Spot chuckled, back pressed against the splintered wood and peeling paint. Race shook his head with quiet laughter and bent down to kiss him.

All the anger towards Romeo was transferred in that kiss. It was too passionate for how gently he was cupping Spot’s face and there was no way he could hide it. Race didn’t have Spot’s walls built up. He wore his heart on his sleeve. The way he saw it if someone had an issue with how he felt, then they could leave. This was him, take it or leave it.

Spot kissed back, choosing to ignore Race’s conspicuous frustration and rather enjoyed the chance to have his boyfriend all over him.

“Ew, y’all need to get a roooooom!” Jack loudly announced to the entire neighborhood, bounding over to the two. “Hi, I’m drunk. You two need to catch up! Let’s go! Party is this way.”

“Fuck,” Spot whispered. Race buried his face into his neck, trying to stifle the laughter.

Jack was not taking that for an answer it seemed. Somehow, he managed to grab the two by the back of their shirts all while holding a full cup of god knows what in the same hand.

“The decorations look nice,” Race commented as they were marched through the thick of the party. People were mingling under a few canopy’s, eating barbeque and sipping beers. Others were swimming in the pool or having a mini rave over by the speakers. The patio doors were wide open, jacking up Jack’s AC bill no doubt, but who cared?

Certainly not Davey by the way he was corralling people out of the house. “Inside or outside, pick one. The only reason you would even need to be inside is to use the bathroom,” he nagged, narrowly avoiding Crutchie’s tail as he was shutting the door.

“Davey! David! Dave! Davester-” Jack was silenced by Davey’s hand over his mouth. Hero’s don’t always wear capes. Sometimes they wear obnoxious tank tops from Walmart that say ‘I want you to party’ complete with Uncle Sam holding a red solo cup as well as khaki shorts and the ugliest sandals Race has ever seen.

How Jack was even this far wasted into the party was a mystery, but it was clear that he had at least four shots of tequila by the way Davey’s veins were practically popping out of his neck. “Yes, love?” He sighed, reluctantly removing his hand away from Jack’s mouth before violently jerking it away. “Ew! Why’d you fucking lick me. That’s literally disgusting, Jackie.”

Spot’s shoulders shook in silent laughter. Whether it was at Davey’s reaction or Jack’s childish, Race honestly couldn’t tell.

“Dave, babe. Guess who I found making out against our shed” Jack asked, forcing the four to lean in uncomfortably close to one another.

He was whispering, which was a nice change of pace from when he had first laid eyes on Race and Spot. Why Race thought he was stay that way was beyond him, because Jack was

yelling again within three seconds. “Our best friends!” He screeched “You’re bad at guessing, babe. Thank god you’re hot.”

Davey rolled his eyes, pushing Jack off him with a laugh. “Go dance up on Elmer or something. Have him change this music.”

Jack obeyed, sashaying away, and blowing a kiss to Spot. The remaining three stood in a half-circle for a moment, savoring what little silence the party had to offer.

“How many drinks has he had?” Spot asked. He was smiling, showing genuine human emotion now that he was surrounded by friends.

Davey made a show of counting out each number on his fingers. “Let’s see, he said he had to have a few drinks in my honor and that just turned into him having all my drinks for me. Then he had to have a couple for himself. So, I’d say he’s at about a 0.07 blood alcohol count.”

Everyone had a laugh at Jack’s expense, watching as he drunkenly wrestled the aux cord away from Elmer. “Woo!” He screamed. “Let’s fucking party!”

A cheer went through the crowd as the shitty EDM music was replaced by Led Zeppelin. Davey watched his boyfriend with a bemused smile and took a small sip from his red solo cup. “You guys want anything to drink? I know you’re driving Spot, so I don’t want you having any alcohol. There’s lemonade or tea; I like to mix them and make an Arnold Palmer,” he said, ever the host.

“I’m good for right now,” Race said, and Spot nodded in agreement. “You’re not having anything to drink?”

Davey shook his head, bringing his Arnold Palmer back to his lips for a long sip, his eyes flickering back and forth from Race to Spot. Always lingering on Spot. Not the most subtle way to tell Race he didn’t want to talk about it in front of his boyfriend, but, being the good friend he was, he got rid of him.

“Can you go stop Jack from trying to push Crutchie down the pool slide?” Race asked, pulling the biggest puppy eyes on his boyfriend that he possibly could. Spot, man of many words, simply sighed, nodded, and gave Race a small kiss before joining Finch in dragging Jack and the three-legged dog off the rickety pool slide. “What’s so bad I had to send my boyfriend away?”

Davey shrugged, staring into his cup. “It’s just I started these new meds and I don’t know Spot that well, even though him and Jack are close I just- Only you and Jack know, and I want it to stay that way,” he said, only making eye contact with his lemonade and iced tea.

“Is it working?” Race asked, watching Spot tackle Jack into the pool. There was a cheer, followed by twenty sweaty gays jumping in after them. What a time to be alive.

Next to him, Davey took another long sip from his cup. He had never been a big partier nor a big drinker, but sometimes it was easier to deal with their friends after a glass of wine. “I

think so. I've been able to sleep a full eight hours now, but this is only temporary. My doctor and I are still trying to find an explanation for why I can't fucking sleep."

"Does she know you're dating Jack Kelly?" Race said, finally drawing a laugh from Davey. He smiled softly at the sound, that was better. The day was bound to end as good as the day started if he could make even the tensest David Jacobs laugh.

Or so he thought.

Specs and Romeo, similar to Davey, would not be able to list subtlety under their strengths. They tried their best to sneak into the house; however, Race was standing right by the sliding patio door and they were loudly fumbling inside.

Every muscle in his body was itching to follow, even as his mind screamed at him to leave them alone. He forgot how little self-control he actually had.

"Hey," he told Davey. "I'm actually going to go grab myself a glass of lemonade. Make sure Spot doesn't drown Jack?"

Race didn't stick around long enough to hear the amused response from Davey. All he could think about was Specs and Romeo. They were completely different people, what did they see in one another? Were they actually going to be a serious thing? Did they ever talk about him? Why did he even care?

Their laughter sounded from upstairs. Race followed as quietly as he could. Wouldn't it have just been simpler to talk to them, get his feelings out in the open? He snorted. Of course it would, but was anything he ever done considered the correct way to do something?

As he ascended the stairs, it was the familiarity of Jack's home that soothed his nerves. The crisp white walls, thanks to Davey's constant scrubbing; the loose railing, thanks to Race's attempt at sliding down it; the giant hole in the plaster behind one of Jack's paintings, thanks to Finch seeing a spider and quickly taking action.

Race knew this place like the back of his hand. Better than the back of his hand, actually, who even knows the exact details of their hand? He knew that the random table pushed against the wall of the hallway had a drawer, which Jack was told doesn't open, that really did. He knew that inside there was a ring, waiting for the day Davey would build up the courage to use it.

He knew the photos, orders, dates they there put up of the photos cascading along the wall as guests made their way up the stairs. Race knew that the room at the far left of the hall was Charlie's room and never to be messed with. He knew the way to Jack's room with his eyes closed.

Standing in front of it, he knew that there was a dick carved into the bottom left hand corner by Les and Charlie's initials next to it. This was as much his house as it was Jack's, so he had the right to barge into Jack's room and demand Specs and Romeo leave. Right?

The door to Jack's room was closed. Race stood outside, staring at it. They really had no clue how much their relationship was killing him. He could have just turned and went back

outside, with a glass of lemonade, continued his conversation with Davey, kissed his boyfriend, kicked ass at karaoke, played fetch with Crutchie. Hell he could be doing literally anything else than barging in on his best friend and fuck buddy, which was only going to end poorly for all of them.

Who cares? He was young, he had time to make mistakes. Race opened the door, racking his mind for an excuse to use. Romeo was kneeling next to the bed deepthroating Race's best friend.

"What the fuck?" Race cried out, the same time Specs let loose a loud moan.

Seeing that someone had burst into the room, Specs pushed Romeo off him and scrambled to put himself back in his swim trunks. Romeo, having no shame whatsoever, rocked back on his heels impatiently.

"You guys really can't stay at the party for more than an hour without boning each other," Race said, not even bothering to hide his anger.

"Says the one hiding from the party in Jack's room," Romeo retorted, face carefully blank. He knew Race had been following them, he was more observant than Specs. There was also the strong possibility that he knew Race had no excuse.

Luckily, watching Specs tuck his member back into his swim trunks gave Race the perfect excuse he needed. "Actually, I was coming to get a pair of swim trunks because I forgot mine." Specs was still struggling to figure out what was going on, flustered by Race's sudden entrance, even though Race had seen his dick more than anyone else at the party. When Romeo let out a cold bark of laughter, Race watched Specs go from embarrassed to confused.

Romeo rose to his whole 5' 4", radiating a strange aura of protectiveness that Race had never seen before. "Look, darling. I can see that you're jealous, but Specs is mine and you need to back off."

There was nervous laughter from Specs. "Honey, Race isn't jealous. He's just embarrassed he walked in on us." God, he was so thick sometimes.

The silence on Race's end tipped him off. He looked back and forth from him to Romeo with shock, unsure of who to side with. In the end, they all knew it wasn't going to be Race. "I'm sorry, I'm confused. Why would you be jealous?" Specs asked.

Bitter laughter. Not the best way to make his case, but it was all Race could get out. "Seriously? You seriously can't tell. God, you're an idiot sometimes, Specs. You think I'm going to be happy for you dating someone I only recently ended things with. Sure, you didn't know, but you could have told me who he was first. That way I could have told you who he was and then you could have ended it."

It was Specs turn for an indignant response, following the script of a generic reality tv show. "Ended it? You're the one who ended things with Romeo, why should I have to break up with him? Actually, why the hell are you throwing a bitch fit in the first place? This relationship is between me and Romeo--"

“Romeo and I,” said Romeo, casually picking at his black fingernail polish.

“What?” Specs and Race spoke in sync.

“Well, I figured if we were going to argue it should at least sound intelligent. The correct phrasing, dear, would be ‘Romeo and I.’”

Specs sighed, but obliged. “This relationship is between Romeo and I. There is no reason you’re feelings should be involved at all. I like him, he likes me. End of story.”

“But I know Romeo!” Race cried out. “He’s bad news. He doesn’t get attached, he doesn’t do feelings. Anything he’s ever done has been no strings attached. You’re going to fall for him, but he won’t care. He’ll move on.”

“What if I’m okay with no strings attached?” Specs was screaming back at him. “Have you ever thought that I’m allowed to make my own fucking decisions? I get you’re looking out for me, but not ever single guy needs to pass your thirty-page background test, Race.”

“Darling, you seem to care an awful lot about me corrupting your best friend.” It was pissing him off, how causal Romeo was taking all of this. That’s all he ever did. Casual. “I’ll have you know that Specs and I are about to become very serious. I took him out on a date. We saw a movie. I took him home, walked him to his door, gave him a kiss goodnight, and then went home. Please, tell me how that is corrupting him.”

Race glowered, stepping to tower over Romeo. “You never did that for me.”

“Did you ever consider that we agreed on a no strings attached. I had no reason to take you on a date, and, quite frankly, you’re annoying and I would never want to date you,” Romeo said, giving Race a solid push and watched him fall flat on his ass.

“I’s has half a mind to kill you’s where you’s stand.” It was a completely new voice with a thick Brooklyn accent.

Spot stood in the doorway of Jack’s room, dripping wet with a face made of stone.irate would have been an understatement. He had no frown, his brows weren’t even furrowed, but the look in his eyes could strike a man dead.

Tension filled the room. Romeo and Spot, surprisingly, would have been a fair fight. They were roughly the same height, well-built, and knew how to throw a punch, but Romeo didn’t have the immense rage Spot did for seeing his man getting pushed around, literally.

Race scrambled to his feet. “Hey, it’s no big deal. Spot, c’mon don’t start anything-”

“You’s got ta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me,” he hissed. ““Don’t fucking start anything?” You’s is the one comin’ in here an throwin’ yourself on them.” Race flinched, watching with disgust as Specs and Romeo slipped out. Of course, they never really cared anyway. No one cared about him. He knew it. No one actually cared. They had always just tolerated him because he was too much of a pussy to handle the truth.

“Spotty,” Race began.



“Don’t you’s ‘Spotty’ me. I’s would ask you ta explain yourself, but I’s gotta feelin’ that answers gonna be bullshit too.” Spot pushed past Race, careful not to move harsh enough to hurt him. He began rummaging through Jack’s drawers, much to Race’s confusion, until he found a shirt that suited his preferences.

He changed, undressing himself like no one else was in the room. If it were any other day, Race would have made some flirty comment. Today was not any other day. The tension in his back warned Race to keep his mouth shut.

Race had never been known for his impulse control. “You’re telling me that you wouldn’t be mad if your best friend started dating your fuck buddy?”

Spot shook his head. Unbelievable, Race almost wanted to laugh in his face. “Seriously? You wouldn’t be even a little mad? Especially since your fuck buddy had a sudden change of heart and is treating your best friend better than he had ever treated you?”

“I’s wouldn’t give a flyin’ fuck,” Spot said, voice dangerously mellow. “I’s would be happy that my friend is happy an’ that he’s bein’ treated like a fella should. I’s would see that I’s has a good thing goin’ now, with someone who makes me happy. I’s would get my head outta my ass an’ realize that the fuckin’ sun don’t revolve around me.

“I’s don’t get it, Race. I’s is so happy with you’s. Why is you so hung up on them’s relationship? Why can’t you’s be as content with what we have as I’s is?”

His mind was reeling. How dare he tear apart his entire argument. How dare Spot embarrass him in front of Jack’s shitty bedspread and tattered curtains. There was no way he could let Spot have the last word. Antonio Higgins always got the last word.

“You’re only happy in this relationship because it’s the only one where you haven’t got hit,” Race spat.

He regretted it as soon as he said it. The look on Spot’s face broke his heart. The carefully constructed walls came crashing down and, for once, Race saw who his boyfriend really was: a broken man with trust issues from a history of abuse. He couldn’t believe he had stooped so low.

“Sean, I didn’t mean it,” Race began, reaching out towards Spot. He drew his hand back, watching as Spot retreated away from it as if he expected to be hit. He couldn’t see Spot’s face, gauge his emotions. “I was angry. It was a shitty thing to say, please. I don’t mean it. I- I’m sorry. You know how much I love you.”

Wrong thing to say. Wrong way to admit his feelings, his love. Wrong time, wrong place, wrong thing to say, wrong argument, wrong everything. He wished they had never gotten out of bed. Everything felt so right this morning, only to come crashing down.

Spot turned around, staring Race in the eye. Whatever nerve Race had hit was gone, because his boyfriend was looking at him like he didn’t even exist. “You’s know what? I’s don’t think this is gonna work out afta’ all.”

Then he left. No, that wasn't the right word. Left was too quiet. Spot was anything but quiet in that moment, slamming the door and shaking Race right to his core. His legs were weak, wobbling like a newborn fawn.

"No." Race had meant for it to come out as a yell, but a croak was all he could manage. "Come back."

A sob was caught in his throat. Holy shit he had done a lot of crying these past few weeks. This behavior was becoming a new norm for Race. He had let everything good in his life slip right through his fingers. No, he had taken everything good in his life and strangled it. Sucked all the life and fun out of it with his jealousy and egoistical attitude.

Race was toxic. He realized that as the sob finally escaped him, and his knees gave out beneath him. The fall to the floor was short but painful. Race could feel his chest explode, rattling with sobs.

"Spot, please. No, no, no. You can't leave me." He should have been screaming it. He should have found Spot and clung to him as he repeated it. Instead, he whispered it into his hand. The words, the pleas, were only for him to hear.

Race cried for a while. The actual amount of time could have ranged anywhere from ten minutes to three hours. All he really knew was everything hurt. His eyes were swollen, his throat was swollen, his voice was hoarse, and he felt like he was missing a limb.

There was a soft knock on the door. Race ignored it, but whoever was on the other side was persistent. Still, Race ignored it.

"My knuckles are getting bruised from all this knocking, but I'm polite so I won't barge in until you've given me the all clear." Of course it had to be Davey. He was really the only level-headed friend they had anymore, minus maybe Albert when he wasn't high.

"Come in," Race said, hopefully loud enough because the words scratched at his throat. He deserved it. He deserved to be hit by a bus. He deserved the worst torture ever for saying what he did to Spot.

The door swung open slowly. Davey poked his head in, assessing the situation, and then came to sit next to Race. "You know, Spot is pretty upset," he said. "He came up to me two hours ago, screamed at me with his thick ass accent, and then stormed to his truck and left."

If Race had anymore tears saved up, he would have started crying again. "We got into a fight. I said something- I was a dick."

Davey nodded, taking in the sight of the blonde-haired boy. Judging by the look on his face, Race assumed he must have look as pathetic as he felt. Davey wrapped his arm around him. He didn't deserve to be hugged, but it felt nice to know that someone was still on his side. Even when they both knew he was the worst.

"I'd say you can stay the night, but this part is going on all night and you will not get any rest," Davey said, with a strained laugh. "Plus, Jack is ready to jump my bones at any minute,

so we really need this room.”

There was the twitch of a smile on Race’s lips. The fight with Spot was too sudden, maybe sleeping off the anger and the hurt would do some good for the both of them.

“Ok. I’ll take the hint and go.” Race made to stand up when it dawned on him. “Only thing is, I don’t have a way to get home.”

“I’ll drive you.”

That made Race laugh. So hard that he almost cried for an entirely new reason.

“What? I’m a good driver!” Davey defended himself, offended at the laughter.

“You don’t even have your license!” Race wheezed, doubled over in giggles.

Davey gasped, poking Race hard in the shoulder, but was smiling. “Neither do you! Either way, I have my permit. Once I get off these meds I will officially be safe to drive again.”

“Oh so now you want me getting into a car with you while you’re drugged out of your mind?” Race asked, face settling into its usual smile. This felt better. Hell, he was being to feel better.

His friend shrugged. “Well, I’m the only sober one still here. Unless you want my sister to drive you, but good luck getting Kath to remove her tongue from Sarah’s throat.”

Race gagged at the thought. “Please tell me they aren’t dry humping at each other like at New Year’s?”

“Actually, they’re in the pool this time, so I believe it would be wet humping,” he said, looking too proud of himself for that joke. Race groaned, how could he be both the mom friend and the dad friend all in one gangly body?

Davey ended up driving him home. The experience was terrifying to say the least. Once the first F-bomb dropped from Davey’s lips, Race was sure he would die. At least they got to his apartment in one piece.

They parked on the street, taking the time to enjoy the lack of bass and screaming drunks. Davey asked what exactly had happened in the bedroom and Race explained over the sound of smooth jazz that Davey had insisted would ‘soothe his nerves and his soul.’ Whatever the fuck that meant.

It was clear that Race was in the wrong. If Davey wasn’t such a book nerd, therapy would actually be a good career choice for him, because Race came out of the conversation with new ways to look at how he approached situations.

“I just don’t know how to fix it,” Race said, sighing and running a hand over his face. He fucked up big time. “Do I even try? I don’t think he would ever take me back after that shitty stunt.”

Whatever Davey was about to say was cut short by the sound of knocking on Race's car window. Four people stood outside in the pitch black, with hoods hiding their faces.

"Hey, get out the car!" One of them yelled. Davey made sure all the doors were locked. "That's cute. Think a couple of locks will stop us? We'll break the windows if we have to."

Race gulped, his hands shaking. He had been mugged before, it was a simple ordeal. Put up a bit of a fight, when the guy flashes a blade give him everything and run. He had never been mugged with someone as fragile as Davey, nor when a car was on the line. Granted, it was a shitty car that had maybe three months left of use, but it was still Davey's car.

"What do we do?" Davey whisper-yelled, looking pale as a ghost.

"Just give them what they want, and we can go to the police station later. Okay?" Race didn't wait for an agreement. He opened his car door and stepped out into the street.

It was roughly three o'clock in the morning. His neighborhood was dead asleep.

"Give me your wallet."

Race gave them his wallet.

"I like that watch you're wearing."

Davey gave up his watch.

"Car keys."

Davey, reluctantly, handed his car keys over to these thieves.

"We's got us a couple of pansies. Look at how easily. They're giving everything up," one of them, Race assumed he was the leader, said. He circled around the car. Predator and prey. Cat and mouse.

If Race was going to be a rat, he wasn't going down without a fight.

"Fuck you," he said to the group. "You're wasting my time." Race pushed past them, grabbing Davey by the wrist, and heading towards his apartment.

There was a sharp pain in his side. The rest was a blur.

When everything finally slowed down, Race was in a hospital bed.

# A hospital visit

## Chapter Notes

Hi! This one is kinda short (sorry!)

We're nearing the end of this fic :(

But! I wanna know, would you guys rather have me make a sequel continuing Race and Spot's love story ORRRRR have me make a story of Jack and Davey's relationship in this universe? (<---- in that one Crutchie's backstory would be explained in more detail) OR would you all just rather have me leave it at this fic? Let me know!! I have plans for all of these options and can't really decide on one.

Anyway, enjoy this chapter :))

What Race would give to have woken up in bed next to Spot. Quite honestly the list of what he wouldn't give would've been shorter.

The hospital bed was lumpy, the gown was itchy, and the food was as bad as TV sitcoms joked about. He supposed he was judging the place too harshly, though who could blame him after what he went through.

A total of fifty-four stitches littered about his torso, many that had to be redone - it wasn't his fault that they didn't hold up well against laughter. His stitches paired nicely with the yellowing bruises across his gut and the imprints of boots on his back. There were smaller cuts on his face where the attackers' rings sliced him, a spilt lip that stopped him from taking, and an eye so black it was swelled almost completely closed. To top it all off, he also had a mild concussion. That meant no browsing the few TV channels this hospital had. Race spent his time staring at walls.

A night to remember for sure.

He had been mugged before, the split lip was nothing new nor the black eye. Race had never been beaten to the point of unconsciousness before. Something to check off his bucket list, he supposed.

Figuring out the insurance was going to be the real nightmare. The hospital had taken it upon themselves to run some, rather expensive, tests and make sure Race wasn't bleeding internally. Saving his life and all that Jazz. Plus the ambulance ride to the hospital.

When Race had awoke with the rising of the sun, Davey was sitting next to him. He had burst into tears, muttering about how he couldn't pay for any of this. Davey had said nothing, merely pulled Race into his arms and cried with him.

“I thought you were going to die.”

His voice had seen better days, raw from the hours crying. A new stressor to tell his psychiatrist, no doubt. “We can worry about the bill later. I’m just so glad you’re alive.”

“Has Specs called and asked about me?” Race asked. Davey’s silence said it all. He stared at his hands, grooves imprinted from where he had hit the concrete. Specs was his best friend, he should have been the first one to call and see if he was alright.

No, that wasn’t entirely true. It should have been Spot, but that wasn’t likely. He could have died if one of the knife wounds had been any deeper it would have required surgery. He could have died, and Specs didn’t care.

“I called Jack in the ambulance. He’s coming as soon as visitor hours start. Finch and Elmer were passed out drunk last time he saw them, but we both know for sure that they’ll come in with the biggest teddy bear imaginable some point today. I called Albert to tell we would both be out from work a couple days and to not let the place burn down,” Davey explained. “He was beside himself. I actually had to PayPal fifty bucks to him so he wouldn’t call off.”

Race chuckled, settling back in the hospital bed. Albert was one of the best people he knew. It kind of stung though, that someone he knew for a couple of years cared more than someone he had known since he arrived in America eight years ago.

“I called Specs, texted him, and emailed him.”

“Very thorough,” Race teased.

Davey waved his comment away with a grumble. “He never answered. I called half an hour before you woke up and he answered. Once I told him everything he just got really quiet and I couldn’t get anything else out of him.”

The quietness from Race must have upset Davey, because he immediately went about the room fixing things. Pillows got fluffed, curtains were straightened out. Anything to make the room feel homier. Well, as homey as a hospital room could be.

It had been weird, waking up and having nurses rush in to check his responsiveness in a completely new place from what he last remembered. Race should have known he was going to wake up in a hospital. He had still been awake when they loaded him into the ambulance, cursed out the paramedic as she applied pressure to his lacerations - he hadn’t even realized he’d been slashed deep about 4 times until she had pressed down on the wounds - before finally succumbing to the effects of shock and the concussion. He just couldn’t remember. Race remembered the fight, but it took Davey’s nervous explanation for the puzzle pieces to click.

Race’s comment had pissed off the leader, especially with how he shoved past the gang members. One pulled out their switchblade. The others jumped him.

The original pain in his side, that slight burning sensation, had been a three-inch gash on his side. The one with the knife didn’t stop there. He gave Race another three-inch slash on his

lower gut as well as a two-inch cut right above his navel. They all required stitches, but the most alarming had been the one-inch puncture wound that had, luckily, been shallow.

While one of them was stabbing and slashing, the other three had their fists and feet as choice weapons. Davey was able to run, hide, and call the cops. Race went down like a sack of potatoes.

They smashed his head against the concrete, likely the cause of his concussion; punched him repeatedly in the face, explaining the split lip and black eye; kicked him, brushing on the back and abdomen; and left him for dead.

Not a single one had cared Davey had fled. The sirens had scared away any thought of tracking him down. They took the car. Davey and Race took an ambulance.

“You gave the paramedic quite a scare,” Davey said with a soft laugh. It was nice to hear him laugh, everything seemed less serious. “We all thought you were unconscious, but once she tried to stop the bleeding you sat straight up and started yelling curse words at her.”

Race laughed so hard one of his stitches snapped. He had to have a new nurse with shaky hands fix it. Not the best start to his morning.

Jack had come stumbling through the hospital door about an hour after Race woke up, carrying a bag jam packed with things. Spot was hot on his tail. He looked as though he maybe managed two hours of sleep, just enough to leave him with a pounding headache. Seeing how much he had drank last night, Race was surprised Jack’s hangover even allowed him to stand.

“What the fuck, Racer?” Jack was pacing, never a good sign. His hands were shaking. Once he saw Davey looking, they were shoved far down into his pockets. “Ya aren’t allowed to do that to me- I’s thought- That a call from Dave-”

Race felt guilty, knowing how hard the call must have been, knowing how hard being in this hospital must be, knowing how hard Jack was trying not to break. It wasn’t his fault, but Race would gladly take the blame. Give someone for Jack to take it out on besides himself.

“Don’t worry, Jack. I’m right as rain.” Race offered a crooked grin, as much as the split lip would allow.

Jack shot him a look but said nothing else. He busied himself with unloading the bag. A lot of it was junk, literal trash. Maybe Jack was still a little drunk. He kept digging. Trifling through everything as Race and Davey and Spot watched in silence. Down the hall a family was crying.

He produced a stuffed Panda Bear. Its fur was matted in some areas, the white a dirty grey in others. Charlie’s Bear.

“I thought he could give ya a lil’ bit o’ courage,” Jack said through deep breaths and held the bear out.

Holding it together was a lot harder than it looked. Race took the panda from him, clinging to it tightly. It still smelled like Charlie, there was no reason it shouldn't. The bear hadn't left its spot on Charlie's pillow in years.

Jack had always been one to break the rules, especially ones he had made. The only person who would ever cross Jack's wishes on who enters Charlie's room would be Jack himself. There was a strange comfort in that notion. For a mere moment, Race forgot he was in a hospital room.

Race smiled softly. "Thank you, so much."

The response he received was to be expected, seeing that he got no response at all. Jack had turned his attention to Davey. In the entire tussle between the gang members, Davey had received a slash to the forehead as he was ducking away to call for help.

"Ya hairline's gonna be a wreck, babe." Jack tussled his boyfriend's hair. The joke did little to hide the anxious way his fingers kept grazing the stitches.

Davey went along with it. He burst out into a loud laugh, which prompted a giggle out of Race. The two of them laughed and laughed and laughed. Jack and Spot let them have their lapse of sanity. They had had a trying night.

Davey was the first to recover, speaking over Race's persistent case of the giggles. "I thought you like a man with scars?"

The joke had fallen flat, with Jack's resolve crumbling faster than Race's notorious soufflé's – he was a chef, not a baker. Tears sprung to his friend's eyes and Race's heart began to hammer in his chest. If Jack fell back into those dark places, there would be no helping him out.

He shook the thought from his mind. Jack would not fall that far. Not if he could help it.

"Davey," Race interrupted. "Why don't you take Jack to down and get him a coffee? You two can talk privately."

"And a burger." All eyes turned to Spot. Race, in all honesty, had forgotten he had even entered the room at all. It was startling to see him as Davey would often describe him. Cold, emotionless, unfeeling. This wasn't his Spot. It was some distant stranger.

"For the hangover," Spot explained, after a lapse of uncomfortable silence.

What he was expecting after Jack and Davey had filed out of the room, Race didn't really know. Spot had not run to him in concern over his injuries, didn't ask if he was ok. He just stood by the doorway, staring at Race with an expression that he couldn't figure out.

The corner of his lips were not pulled down in his usual frown of frustration Spot would display whenever the team he was cheering for was losing (this frown usually turned into a lot of swearing if the Americans couldn't catch the ball in their twisted version of "football")



nor were they bent in that general discomfort scowl he got whenever Race would burn himself cooking. It was entirely passive.

His freckled brow wasn't burrowed in confusion at the state of his – well, they weren't exactly together anymore. Race flinched at the thought, remembering clearly what he had said. No wonder Spot wasn't concerned.

Why even bother showing up?

"Because, unlike you's, I's has a shred of decency for others." Turns out, Race had said that out loud.

He sighed, going to pinch the bridge of his nose but remembered the mass of bruises that was his face. "I guess I deserved that."

Spot snorted. "You's guess?" He crossed the room and pulled up a chair to Race's bedside. His disposition softened. "When Cowboy called me cryin' – I's got so scared, Racer. He said you's was in an ambulance an' Mouth had told 'im that you's was unconscious an' they's had pulled a knife out on ya."

He cleared his throat, trying to slyly wipe at a few tears that had slipped down his cheeks. Race saw him do it but felt it best not to bring it up. Seeing him cry for the first time was off putting as it was, making a joke about it would just resurface the tension between them.

"I's was thinkin' ta myself, 'Why's do I's even care?' Racer, I's thought I's was gonna lose ya. I don't know what I woulda done if I's had lost ya," Spot said, covering his mouth to muffle a loud cry. "What if I's had just stayed at the party 'til we's cooled our 'eads? We's coulda talked about everythin' an' stayed the night. I's wouldn't have to be lookin' at your pretty face all bruised up."

Whatever Spot said next was transformed into blubbering sobs. He held his head in his hands and cried, harder than Race had last night.

He blamed himself. Spot had probably been blaming anything that went wrong on himself for the past few years. It had been ingrained into him by that manipulative asshole he had been dating. Race's heart broke.

There was no way anyone could have seen this coming, no one except for Race. He had known that his neighborhood wasn't particularly safe. Earlier that week his neighbor had mentioned something about his car being broken into. Race should have known better. He should have payed attention for once in his life.

Well, he paid. Now Spot was carrying the blame.

He didn't trust himself to tell Spot it wasn't his fault. Race could hardly open his mouth without crying himself. Instead, he reached out and peeled one of Spot's hands from his face to hold in his own.

The action spoke louder than any reassurances Race might have been able to give. As Spot cried, Race played with his lover's fingers. Traced the lines on his palms. "Your knuckles are swollen," Race said, which only made Spot cry harder.

He brushed his lips over the scratches and bruises. They were fresh. Spot had taken his anger out on his wall probably. Race wanted to cry himself. For some reason tears wouldn't come. Maybe he had used them all up yesterday, between Spot breaking up with him and his pathetic sobs for his attackers to stop, he doubted there were tears to spare.

"I meant what I said yesterday," Race said, and cringed. Wrong way to put that. Everything he had been doing recently was wrong. Spot had been right to leave him. He shouldn't have even come to see Race in the hospital.

"Not about the relationship thing," he recovered. "I really am sorry for saying that. It was wrong. I meant what I said after that, when I said, 'I love you.' I know it might be too soon, hell it is too soon, but fuck it. I love you, Sean Conlon. And you love me too because you wouldn't be here crying if you didn't."

Spot stopped crying somewhere in that tangent. His face was slick with sadness and regret, but there was a small smile on his face anyway. "Really?"

Race laughed, the movement jolted him more than he had anticipated and there was a sharp strain on his stitches. Spot's hand squeezed his in comfort. Even through the pain he couldn't help but mirror Spot's grin. "Yes, really. I love you so much. I never, ever, should have said what I did, and I hope you can forgive me."

There was a moment's hesitation in Spot's response. Here it was, the sucker punch. Race could take it. He'd just gotten the shit beat out of him, he could take rejection from the one person in the world he was convinced was his soulmate.

"I'm sorry too."

Race started. He was not expecting that. "What?"

"I's said, 'I'm sorry too.'" Spot scratched at his neck with the hand that wasn't currently being crushed in Race's grip. "I's shoulda realized that you's allowed to have had feelin's for fella's other than me an' it wasn't right for me ta be yellin' at ya about it. I'll forgive you's if you's forgive me."

Jack's head poked into the room. "I think that's a compromise ya both can live with."

"I told you to let them have their moment!" Davey scolded, tugging his boyfriend back into the hallway. "I'm so sorry, please continue." He ducked out of the room Jack as they made their way down the hallway once more.

Spot anxiously awaited Race's reply. He was perched on the edge of his seat, eyes wide, and lip between his teeth. "Please, Racer. I's think that I's is in love with you's too. I's really love ya. Please, can you's forgive me?"

With tears in his eyes, Race nodded. “Yeah, I think I can. I forgive you.”

Spot leaned forward, as if to kiss Race, but stopped short at sight of his split lip. The excited smile that had spread across his face slipped a bit. “The doc said that you’s can’t have too much socialization ‘cause your big brain got knocked ‘round. I’s is gonna go entertain the other two for a bit. You’s should be good to go later an’ I’m gonna drive you’s home and we’s can lay in your bed an’ stare at walls together.”

Race smiled, lifting a hand to cup Spot’s cheek. “I’d like that.”

The smile came back. Spot pressed his lips softly to Race’s forehead and made to leave the room. He turned back once, as if to make sure that Race was still there, battered and bruised, but there.

“Hey, Spotty?” Race called out as he reached the doorway. Spot stopped but didn’t turn. “It wasn’t your fault.”

There was no response as Spot walked out, but Race could see a spring in his step. God, he loved him so much.

# A pancake breakfast

## Chapter Notes

Second to last chapter :(

This is kinda filler, setting up for the closing of Spot and Race's story (for now, don't worry these two dorks will be back)

I hope you all enjoy!!

Also I'm inserting a lil shameless self-promo here. If you guys like Book Of Mormon please go check out my McPricely fic "Vibrant Sunsets" I've been working really hard on it!

Dirty beige. His vision was consumed with it. Still, he stared. Doctor's orders. Race hated the color beige.

"I hate the color beige."

Spot's laughter, that brilliant sound, carried from the kitchen. "I's told ya, once the docta has cleared ya, we's can go out an' get buckets of paint."

Race blinked, all he saw was beige. For seven days all he's seen was beige.

Well, he was being too dramatic. The first day all he saw was beige, a blur of freckles, and wrinkled sheets. Slowly, he got to see more of the world, glimpses of his phone – kind messages from Davey, random memes from Jack, nothing from Specs, and a shit ton of emoji's from Albert; short conversations with Spot – some about nothing, some about everything, and some with those three simple words that made Race's heart flutter; a few episodes for Parks and Rec or The Office.

"What time is it?" Race whined, blinking angrily at that dirty beige wall. He rolled over onto his other side. Staring at the room around him. Spot's suitcase with clothes messily strewn around it. His dresser, with one knob broken off because of Charlie's antics. His closet, wide open with shoes and sweaters spilling out of it.

A smile found its way onto his lips, forcing the dimples to come out of hiding. He loved his room, messy as it was, it was his. His and Spot's. Not officially, but one day. Hopefully.

Henry had dropped the suitcase off last week. The smile only got wider. It had been a whole week. Race would have called it the honeymoon phase, but they were way past that. They meshed so well together.

“Not time for yer docta’s appointment yet.” Spot’s voice was accompanied by the smell of pancakes. Race’s stomach growled. “C’mon, breakfast’s ready.”

He pushed himself out of bed and padded into the kitchen. His boyfriend stood at the stove. Race leaned up against the counter, watching a Spot flipped the last pancake onto a plate. He turned with a grin, holding the two plates out, and jerked his head toward the table.

Spot matched the grin Race was wearing. He wore the goofy apron Emler had got him for Christmas all those years ago that proudly proclaimed, “I don’t need a recipe, I’m Italian.” It was so incredibly domestic that Race’s heart melted.

“First of all,” Race began. “You’re not Italian. Second, I don’t think a box mix pancake requires a recipe.”

They sat down, the smells of the pancakes drifting up the vents, up to Romeo’s apartment. Race didn’t want to think about that. He didn’t want to think about the laughter, so clearly Specs, that would sometimes make it’s way into his home. He didn’t want to think about the loud thumping he heard when the two were too busy, well, humping. He didn’t want to think about the clicks of tap shoes on his ceiling, Specs hidden talent.

“Racer? You’s okay?”

Race looked up from his plate. “Hmm?”

Across the table, Spot’s brows furrowed with concern. He looked ready to hop up from the table. “You’s zoned out. Is you’s head hurtin’? Do you’s need more meds? Should we call the docta? I’ll go grab my phone.”

He stood up, just as Race shot his hand out to grab him. It was like Spot knew he was going to do that because he caught Race’s hand in his own shaking one. This was how it had been the past week. In between the wonderful moments, those grossly domestic moments, were ones of panic. Race would forget a minor detail, where he left his sweatshirt, or he would complain about his face hurting, the black eyes were beginning to fade, and Spot would freak out.

“I’m fine. I was just thinking about Specs.” Race took a shaky breath and waited for Spot to sit down. Once he did, they resumed eating their pancakes in silence.

The pancakes were delicious, but Race could only taste the ways to improve the recipe (or lack thereof). Spot had done all the cooking and ordering take-out. He had somehow convinced the doctor that allowing Race to cook would be “too stressful” because he would occasionally redo recipes for hours on end.

Race was on strict orders to rest and stare at walls. He wasn’t supposed to strain his brain, not that he ever used it.

Spot watched him carefully as he shoved pancakes, absolutely drenched in syrup, into his mouth. He was such a child sometimes. “He’s a dick anyway.”

Race nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but he’s my best friend and I miss him.” He covered his unattractive whining behind a big bite of pancakes.

Specs hadn’t come to see him in the hospital, there were no messages from him, and the only people to have stopped by the house at all to see how Race was doing had been Albert and Finch. It was funny how one of Race’s oldest friends could drop him in an instant, but his most recent friend had ingrained himself into his life, going as far to date one of his close friends.

Unlike Romeo and Specs relationship, Race had no problems with Finch and Albert becoming official. Quite honestly, he would have set them up if they hadn’t beat him to it. He remembered the day the two first met. Albert was so flustered even his quick wit came out in weak stammers.

Race and Specs had facetimed for hours after; they had determined thirty different scenarios where they could trick the two into dating and seventy more possible conversations where Specs or Race could hit on Albert for Finch and vice versa.

He blinked the memories from his mind. Race’s pancakes had gotten soggy. He pushed the plate away.

“Racer.”

His eyes flickered up to look at Spot. “What?”

Spot reached out to grab his hand. He played with his fingers, like Race had done to him back at the hospital. “Give him time. If he’s as good a friend as you’s been ramblin’ ‘bout then I’s got no doubt in my mind he’s gonna see what a good fella he’s missin’ out on an’ come back to apologize,” Spot said with such sincerity that Race teared up.

God, he really did love this man.

He moved to sit on his lap. Spot pushed away from the table and let Race sit there, no questions asked. Race was grateful. The past couple of weeks had been a rollercoaster of emotions and having Spot there supporting him unconditionally helped tremendously.

The two sat there for a while, with Race’s face tucked away into Spot’s neck. He plays with the strap of the apron as Spot plays with his soft blond curls. “I love you,” he tells Spot.

“I know. I love you too,” Spot responds. Race can feel him smile against his cheek.

He glanced at the clock on the oven. Two hours until their appointment. Plenty of time to make out with his super-hot boyfriend.

They did just that, somehow making their way to the couch while their half-eaten plates of pancakes sat forgotten on the table.

Race straddled Spot and greedily attacked his lips. The kisses were hungry, nothing like the slow lazy kisses Spot liked to give in the mornings. Race was hungry, for attention, for love, for pancakes. He couldn’t tell. All his body was telling him was that he wanted more.

His thin pajama shorts did nothing to hide his growing erection as he ground down onto Spot. The groans of pleasuring coming from his boyfriend only egged him on. Race's tongue swept across Spot's lower lip and was immediately granted access.

He slowed his kisses, making sure to drag his teeth on Spot's lip and take it so agonizingly slow. Race was in control today. He was making the decisions. Focusing his attention away from Spot's lips, he began to trail kisses down his boyfriend's jaw, nipping his skin every now and again.

"Antonio," Spot groaned at the loss of contact. Hearing his full name leave his lips only made Race slip further into craving. He could hear how labored his breathing was becoming, how glassy his eyes must have looked, and how hard he was becoming.

Race left a dark hickey on Spot's neck. Too high up to be covered. Sean Conlon was his, now everyone and their mother would know. He took longer to make a second one. This one would be more personal, just for them, right on Spot's collarbone. He sucked slowly, nipping occasionally, and stared at Spot with his big doe eyes.

It was sealed with a gentle kiss.

As it had gone for the past week, Spot stopped him before he could leave another hickey on his collarbone. So much for being in control.

"Racer." Spot groaned, shifting and nudging him off of him. "You's said you's wanted ta take it slow. I's isn't goin' anywhere. We's don't have to rush into anythin', okay?"

Race groaned. He didn't want to take it slow anymore, all he wanted was Spot. He wanted him so bad. Before he could even open his mouth to speak, Spot had come up with a retort.

"But what? But you changed your mind?" Spot let out a soft snort of laughter and leaned over to press a small kiss to the hollow of Race's throat. He nibbled softly, causing Race to groan and tilt his head backwards. "Cowboy has told me how you's always rush into things. I's don't wanna rush anythin' with you's. When it feels right, we's can go as far as you's want, but, right now, I's thinks we's need to slow down.

"I's know you better than you's think. All this ain't cause ya love me. It's cause you's don't wanna think about what happened. Look, Specs will come 'round. If he doesn't then don't even give his sorry ass a second thought. You's got me an' Cowboy an' Mouth an' Al an' Elmo an' Bird Brains. Hell, you's even got Charlie lookin' down and rootin' for ya." Spot pressed another kiss to his neck, mumbling a few soft words into his skin. "We's gonna be here for you 'til the end."

"Even when I make you do the dishes?" Race asked with a small giggle.

Spot grinned at him. "Even when you make me do the dishes.

The doctor's office was scary, per usual. The wait was long. Kids were crying, people were sneezing, and some lady came in with blood slowly gushing from her eye and had the

audacity to act like it happened to everyone.

They were led out of the waiting room into a small room where he had to sit still in a machine, which was hard to do when he had so many thoughts and fears bouncing about in his head.

What if they found something really bad? Could Jack handle another loss? What if they found nothing when there really was something? How would Spot react? Would he leave him if Race wasn't okay? Could Race handle being sick? Could he handle being sick and alone? If he was sick would Specs come and see him? Would Specs even care?

Spot grabbed his hand on the walk about to the patient room and pressed a soft kiss to Race's temple. "Stop thinkin' so much," Spot whispered. "You's is gonna be a-okay."

Race had never liked the doctor, but when she came into the room declaring Race "a-okay," he absolutely loved her.

"Now, that doesn't mean go back to staring at your phone for eight hours," the doctor lectured. "If you start to get a headache go lay down for heaven's sake."

Spot laughed and slung his arm around Race as he led them out. "Don't you's worry, doc. I'll keep my eye on him."

"We're stopping at a hardware store," Race had declared before they had even step foot out of the building. "If I have to wake up to those dirty beige walls one more day I will go certifiably insane."

Spot's eyebrow shot up and his lips quirked into a sly smirk. "You's mean ta tell me that you's aren't already?"

Race couldn't help but laugh. He climbed into Spot's truck, reaching out to change the radio station as soon as Spot twisted the key, and rolled down the window.

"Hey! I's liked that station." Spot's vexed protests fell on deaf ears.

"So, I was thinking marron," Race said, shit-eating grin spreading over his face at Spot's reaction. "Something that screams sexy but sophisticated, ya know?"

Spot rolled his eyes and pulled out of the parking spot. He reached over to grab for Race's hand but was met in the middle.

When Race woke up the next morning, he didn't see a dirty beige wall. He saw Spot. His eyes flicked to the walls, matching the same shade of red as the tank top that Spot would always wear.

Sometimes he got so caught up in what he didn't have, that Race forgot to slow down and appreciate who he did have.

There was a soft buzzing on his nightstand. Race groaned and tore his gaze away from a peaceful Spot to grab at his phone. He rolled out of bed as quietly as he could and shuffled



out of the bedroom.

“Hello?”

“Higgins?” The voice on the other line was all too familiar. “Can we talk?”

# A meeting

## Chapter Notes

It's over. This is it. :(

I would just like to say: wow. This turned into more than I ever could have imagined. I never planned on this being more than three chapters, but hey people actually liked my writing. I mean I never expected to get 1 kudo and now I have over 100.

It really does mean the world to me :)

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Higgins? Hello?”

This was not how Race was imagining his last day before he went back to work to pan out. He had been lucky enough to have a week of paid vacation, but now that the doctor cleared him he had to get back to work. Soon. If not, he wouldn't have enough money to pay rent, buy groceries, or pay tuition. Not to mention the insane amount of debt he'd be in after his hospital bills were finalized. He refused to be smothered in debt and he refused to let Spot keep buying him food.

Today was the last day he got to be lazy. Last day he would have all the time in the world to lounge about on his ugly sofa in his ugly apartment. The final day to snuggle Spot for eight hours straight instead of standing and falling into that robotic pace of scanning item after item.

“Higgins? Hello? Can you hear me?” Specs voice rang loud and clear from the other line. How dare he even call. How dare he try to care after a week of Race being hurt. How dare he pretend to give a shit after parading around upstairs and not even bothering to pop down and check. How dare he.

Race had half a mind to hang up. “What?” The word was hoarse, he couldn't bring himself to say anything more nor could he find the will to hang up.

This was Specs he was talking about. His best friend, of his oldest friends, his ex-boyfriend, partner-in-crime, his go to for any problem he's ever had. Hell, even when they broke up Specs was there to comfort him. This was his brother.

Race thought of his siblings back in Italy. They had all been close, he imagined they still were; even in choosing to leave them and come to America, Race knew that they would always have his back. Italians were family oriented. That's why the mafia said *Cosa Nostra*.

He couldn't just abandon his brother as Specs had done to him.

“What do you want?” Race said again, closing the bedroom door behind him. He ended up on the sofa, staring at a black TV, and wishing he had the willpower to be selfish in this moment.

There was no answer. Maybe Specs had given up on him again. It wouldn’t surprise him.

Finally there was a shaky breath from Specs and a response. “I called because I want to talk to you,” Specs said.

Race snorted with laughter. He couldn’t help it. *Talk*. Specs really thought he could call and expect Race to be down for conversation after weeks of being ignored? There had been enough drama that Race knew he was a selfish, bull-headed bastard. He would do whatever he wanted.

And he really wanted his best friend back.

“Fine.”

“Really?” Specs genuinely sounded confused as if the possibility of Race not hating him was out of the question, which it was, but he didn’t need to know that. “Wow. Sorry, I’m still shocked you picked up.”

Spot stirred in the bedroom, groggily calling for his boyfriend. If he found out who Race was talking to, he would be pissed. They would be lucky if all he did was grab the phone and cuss him out.

“Look, I just wanted to say sorry.”

He heard his bedroom door creak open. “Racer?”

This phone call had to end.

“Over the phone. Really classy.” Race hadn’t meant for his tone to be so harsh, but the whisper came out more like a snarl. He could practically hear Specs flinch on the other end. Poor thing, he had always been scared of even the smallest dispute. Someone could pour soup on him and he would be the one apologizing.

“I know, I know.” Specs was scrambling, there was panic in his voice. This phone call held the state of their relationship in the balance. “Look, if will you just meet me at Starbucks?”

“Which one, Specs? There are like fifty in a ten-mile radius.” Race laughed, a genuine laugh. For just a second things felt like they were looking up.

Spot shuffled into the living room. He had the dazed look of sleep still on his face, hair sticking out in every which way. “Racer, who’s on the phone?”

He held up a finger and mouthed ‘one minute.’ This answer was satisfactory seeing as Spot shuffled into the bathroom without another word.

“I’ll text you the address. Meet me in an hour?” An hour was cutting it close, but it would give him the rest of the day to continue with his previously scheduled programming.

“Okay. Works for me.”

“Alright, Higgins. Love you.”

There was a lapse of silence. The reality of the situation finally set in. This was his best friend. He was fighting with his best friend, whom he had never once fought with before. This was their signature sign off, and, for once, Race didn't have an urge to say it back. He focused on the blank TV screen, trying to think about anything other than the crushing sadness he was feeling.

“Sorry, force of habit I guess,” Specs said after an awkward chuckle from the other line.

“Yeah, I know. See you in an hour.” He hung up quicker than the swear words that tumbled out of Elmer's mouth during a game of Mario Kart.

Race stared at that stupid black TV screen. It was almost as bad as a beige wall.

“Who's was on the phone?” Spot came and flopped on the couch, wrapping his arms around Race to bury his face in his neck.

There was no easy way to explain the billions of thoughts, fears, hopes, and dreams buzzing around his head. Race wanted to desperately to let go of everything and push them onto Spot in a rush of anxious rambles. That wouldn't be fair, though. Race was working, honestly working, on becoming more understanding of how his actions affect others; Spot was working hard on coping with his own emotions and learning how to not invalidate others' feelings.

The past week had been so peaceful. Sure, they slipped up and snapped at each other every once in a while, but no one was perfect. They had made a big step to improve one another and their relationship. If Race told Spot that he was going to meet Specs would he be mad? Would he blow up and storm out?

There were too many unknown variables, then again, Race figured all the time he had dove headfirst into the unfamiliar had worked out pretty well. He lived in America with a great group of friends, he had Spot, and he always ended up on his feet after a hindrance.

He ran his long, thin fingers through Spot's messy hair. Race took a deep breath and a chance. “I'm going to go meet Specs for coffee in an hour.”

Spot's head shot up, eyes narrow, and mouth curved into a deep frown. He already wasn't a morning person; this news probably wasn't helping. “Why?” He spoke with malice, not at Race's decision but at the fact that Race was willing to let himself be hurt at a chance to revive a friendship with someone who didn't deserve it.

“Because I need to give him a chance.” Race sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, and leaning his head back against the couch cushions. “I'm the adult and not letting him explain his would mean I stoop to his level.”

Gears turned behind Spot's eyes. Race could tell he was assessing the situation, the excuse, trying to find any flaws. "He didn't really give you's lot o' notice," he grumbled, pressing into Race's said with a huff.

Race laughed. "The sooner I get this done with, the sooner we can come home and cuddle all day."

"Well, shit. Why's aren't you's there right now." Spot grinned, playfully poking at Race's side.

They took extra time to themselves, relaxing on the couch for longer than they should have. In Race's mind, Specs would just have to forgive him for showing up a few minutes late. It was worth it, spending the time with Spot.

Race knew where and with whom his priorities should lie. Spot, Jack, Davey, Elmer, Finch, Albert, and Specs. Race was convinced it would be ok.

Everything would turn out alright in the end, it always did.

The bad thing about everything going to plan towards the beginning, meant it was all going to fall apart near the end.

Race had expected more from Specs.

After the rush to eat breakfast, shower, get ready, and drive over to Starbucks on time he sat at a table completely alone. Spot sat a few tables over, watching with a look of pity. Race wanted to crawl into a hole.

He should have saw this coming. He should have been an asshole and just hung up or, better yet, just have never answered at all. Race took a small sip from his Doppio Espresso, wishing that he was back home in Italy drinking real coffee.

It had been twenty minutes since Specs claimed he was on his way. This was there era of technology so Race checked to see how traffic was in the surrounding area. Clear as could be considering this was New York, which meant Specs was half an hour late.

Or Race was a fool for trusting him to show in the first place.

After an hour, Spot came over and asked if he wanted to leave. Race declined. It was out of Specs nature to behave this way unless something was really wrong. He ordered another poor excuse of a coffee and waited.

An hour and a half later and ten voicemails left unanswered he decided that he had been stood up. Just as Race was standing to throw his cup away and leave, Specs came stumbling in.

He looked like a hot mess. Shirt inside out, shoes on the wrong feet, swollen lips. Race knew the signs well enough. Usually he was the one stumbling in late after a hookup, Specs had always been the responsible one. Until Romeo.

Figures that Specs wouldn't have listened to his warning. Romeo was changing him for the worst. The friend he knew would have showed up at the hospital, would have cried when Davey called him, and he wouldn't have thought of even stepping foot in Race's apartment building without saying hello. The Specs he knew would have been fifteen minutes early but insist that he had just gotten there a few minutes before so Race didn't feel bad for making him wait.

"Race," Specs panted as he reached Race's table. "I am so sorry. Romeo was over, and one thing led to another. I didn't realize it was so late until-"

He walked away without hearing the rest of Spec's explanation. Partly because Race was mad and didn't want to say something he would regret; partly because he had tears rushing down his face and didn't want Specs to see.

Race got stood up, so Specs could get a quick fuck in. That's all Race meant to him. He was ranked lower than an orgasm from as asshole who cared more about his gold medals than anyone else's feelings. Race let out a bitter chuckle. Fuck Romeo.

His cup slammed into the trash can far more harshly than he intended, but Race didn't care. Let everyone in the Starbucks see how shitty of a friend Specs was. Let him feel embarrassed for once.

Race was still crying as he made his way over to the table Spot was, ever so patiently, waiting at.

"Aw, Racer," Spot said as he stood and wrapped his arm around his boyfriend. That's all he said, though Race couldn't blame him too much for not knowing how to comfort him. Neither of them had seen it coming. If they had, Spot would have had a speech prepared to rip Specs a new one.

"C'mon." Race brushed the back of his hand across his cheek. The tears kept falling. He was sick of it all. The fighting, the lies, the emotions, constantly feeling weak. Race didn't want to seem so sensitive all the time. All he wanted was to go. "Let's leave. I don't mean enough for him to show up on time, obviously."

He glanced over at the line. Specs had chosen to hyper-focus on the menu, even though anyone with mediocre vision could see he was really watching Race and Spot. "Hey, you's okay? Want ta sit for a minute?" Spot hooked a finger under his chin and gently redirected Race's gaze.

Race stared at his boyfriend; the freckled he spent hours counting over the past week, his seemingly permanently chapped lips that never seemed to heal no matter how much Chapstick Race would make him use, the concern in his deep brown eyes, solely reserved for Race, it was all there. Spot was always there. For him. Race loved him more in that moment than he ever could have. Trying to tell him that was impossible, he would never be able to find those words to communicate how much he loved Spot.

The thought choked him with a new emotion and more tears flooded to his eyes. Race almost laughed. He loved Specs and he loved Spot, but only one of them had ever made him close to

crying just because he loved him more than words could ever express.

“I don’t want him to see me crying and think I’m weak. I want to go home.” It was the only excuse he could think of. Bearing his soul to Spot in the middle of a crowded coffee shop would be too embarrassing to handle. Race needed out, these feelings were too much. Everything was too much.

Spot cupped his face. “If he thinks that you’s is weak for carin’ so much that you’s is cryin’ as you’s is tryin’ to walk away from him, then he’s not worth the effort.” He kissed Race so gently that his knees almost gave out and lead him out of the café. Race went to open the door to the outside but looked back to look at Specs one last time.

Specs had gotten his coffee and was sitting at a seat next to the window, watching the outside world with a forlorn look on his face. Race had never seen him so broken. It took everything in his power to turn away and open the door, but he couldn’t even manage that.

His hand hesitated over the door’s handle. If he left now, then Race was condemning his friendship. It would be the last time he and Specs would be in the same room on somewhat decent terms, if this encounter could even count as somewhat decent. After all, he hadn’t expected much and was still disappointed.

“You’s comin’?” Spot asked. He turned to face Race, chocolate eyes searching a pale face. They knew most things about one another to know what was coming next. Race didn’t even have to tell him. All Spot did was press a small kiss to his cheek, squeeze his hand, and tell him “I’ll be next door if you need me.”

Race made his way back to the table where Specs was nursing a cup of coffee and crying. He stood over him, arms crossed. “You have thirty minutes to explain yourself.”

Specs looked up. His eyes widened at Race’s presence but nodded enthusiastically regardless. “Of course. Higgins- Antonio, I am so sorry,” He babbled a poor excuse of an apology as Race sat down.

He glanced out the window and, out of the corner of his eyes, caught Spot watching them. It wasn’t until Race sat down and relaxed in the chair that he went off to do his own thing. Race smiled to himself as he shifted his attention back on Specs.

At least if this all failed he would have the one person that truly mattered.

Spot.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so so so much for reading. This has been an absolute whirlwind of emotions and it was my first major piece on Ao3. I have had so much writing it. Be sure

to check out my Prequel "Life is What You Make of It"telling Crutchie's story and getting a closer look on Jack and Davey's relationship!!

And don't worry. Race's story will pick up again after the Javid story ;)



## End Notes

As always comments/kudos are appreciated! Constructive criticism helps me improve as a writer and is always welcome. Any ideas you would like to see later in the fic are welcome as well :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!