Have your Cake (and Eat it too)
by Carbon65

Summary

This season, we have eight brand new bakers who will seize the day for eighteen brand new bakes. We’ll find out once and for all, who is the baking king of New York. And, that starts right now!

Someone high up decided it would be a good idea to bring together eight bakers, one chaperone with some dubiously legal guardianship responsibilities, two comedians with family problems, and a pair of judges and put them in a six week pressure cooker. What could possibly go wrong? Nothing.
...Except maybe family drama, old allegiances, possible new flames ("The blow torches are not for setting recipes on fire"), fallen cakes, and raw dough... on this season of The New York Bake Off.

Notes

This was inspired by way too many episodes of the Great British Baking Show on Netflix and the fact that I kind of accidentally fell back into the Newsies fandom this fall. This has been aided and abetted by unemployment. It comes with the support of several friends, some of them knowingly and some of them unknowingly. So, thank you all.

Assume this fic comes with blanket warnings for swearing, alcohol use (both of age and underage), food, and ableism. Additional warnings can be found at the start of each chapter.
Pre-Production

Chapter Notes

Warnings.

Swearing. I'm all for #LetCrutchieSayFuck2K18. So, if that's not your cup of tea, this may not be your fic.


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten Months Before Filming

“It’s time, Kelly.” Jack looks up to see his roommate, Roger, holding out a computer. “It’s time to go back to New York.”

“But…” Jack begins to object. His is racing.

He came out to New Mexico knowing nothing about it, except what he’d read in books. He had a masters in social work. He was getting burned out in the city, it was all too close to home. He was working the same streets and the same group homes where he’d lived as a child, and he just couldn’t keep doing it. The state of New Mexico was hiring. The state of New Mexico always needed social workers.

He moved to Santa Fe on faith. He took his newly minted drivers license; a car he bought for $1000; a backseat worth of brake fluid, oil, and coolant; and everything he owned and set out on a grand adventure. New Mexico was amazing. New Mexico was nothing like New York. New Mexico was terrible. New Mexico broke his belief that the problems he’d seen in the System in New York were part of living in a city. Poverty is universal. It doesn't matter if your buildings are made of steel or bricks or clay.

“It’s time to go back, Kelly.” Roger repeats. “It’s not that I don’t like you around, but I’m tired of you whining about the lack of ‘Real Chinese’.” He puts the last in air quotes.

Roger is from New York. Roger should understand. Roger spends half his life on Skype with Mark, his former roommate. Roger is going back soon, too.

“They don’t have real Chinese food, here!” Jack sighs, re-hashing the old argument. “Panda Express is the best Chinese in Albuquerque, and Panda Express ain’t Chinese food, it’s American chicken nuggets with rice and soy sauce.”

“Yeah, but that’s not why you’re miserable.” Damn Roger, on point.

“I’s not miserable.”

“You are definitely miserable. You’re moody. Well, moodier than usual.” Roger pushes the laptop toward him.

Jack gives a non verbal “fuck you” and goes back his paperwork. He fucking hates paperwork.
“Look, just go home. Apply for that damn baking show you’re always watching. They’re taking people from New York. And then, you can always come back.” Roger keeps pushing. Because even though Roger can’t solve his own problems, Roger is apparently committed to solving Jack’s. “I know you miss Manhattan.”

“Fine.” Jack carefully sets the file folders aside, with a bit more force than he’d intended and picks up the laptop.

There, up on the screen, are an application for the New York State Department of Child Welfare, and the application for the Great New York Bake Off.

Jack stares at the tabs for a good five minutes before he makes up his mind. His fingers fly over keys.

Roger ignores the tears that are totally not in his roommate’s eyes, and goes up to pack his things. He’ll give his two weeks, and they’ll drive back in his car. Jack’s won’t make it across the country. If Roger is lucky, he and Jack will be able to move in with Mark when they get back home.

**One Week before Filming**

“I swear to God, Romeo, if I have to eat one more cupcake, I’m going to figure out how to disconnect the gas!” Mike plops down in the paisley armchair in the kitchen. “I don’t know why you keep tweaking the recipe. It was fine the first ten times.”

“Because I want it to be perfect,” Romeo insists. He pushes a bowl of frosting toward Mike. “This-”

“Im gonna puke if you keep feeding me this stuff.” Mike obediently takes the spoon. “We should get a pizza.”

“That’s week after next,” Romeo says.

“Good. You make awesome pizza.” Mike stops Romeo before he can open his mouth. “This is awesome. Chocolatey. Less... less powder chocolate taste, not like last time. But, like, chocolate, chocolate.”

Mike hates chocolate things because they all “taste powdery”. Mike might have a super power. Or be a supertaster. But, he’s a weird supertaster. He can’t stand mac’n’cheese or most chocolate, but he’ll eat olives and capers and things Romeo had never heard of before they became friends.

“I used melted chocolate, instead of cocoa powder,” Romeo explains. “I think it leads to a more homogenous frosting. Cause, chocolate is more nonpolar, so it goes better with the fat.”

“I’m pretty sure the cocoa was nonpolar enough, you were just getting colloids.” Mike argues back, taking another spoonful of frosting.

“Nerds!” Romeo’s roommate, Tommy Boy calls through from the living room, where he’s playing… something. “Can you not go five minutes without talking about chemistry?”

Mike and Romeo look at each other. “Nope!”

“Well, can you go back to the lab?”

Mike glances at his watch. “Shit, I, I do have to go back.” He leans in to hug Romeo. “You’re going to kick ass. At this and your exam.”
“Don’t mention orals,” Romeo moans. “I’ll get you my proposal, as soon as…”

“Yeah, yeah, you got more important things to do than to finish qualifying for your PhD. Like, win a baking contest on national television.” Mike pulls on his coat. “See ya, Tommy.”

“See ya, Nerd!” Tommy doesn’t bother lifting his hand from the remote. He sticks out his tongue in concentration.

Romeo looks longingly at his friend leaving, and then studies the pile of academic papers strewn across the kitchen table. “Mike’s right,” He mutters. “I’m never gonna win.”

“Bullshit,” Tommy calls. “That’s a quarter. You’se a goddamn baker. And, you’se gonna kick ass at your exam. Now, you wanna to bring me some of that frosting and tell me all about atmospheric sulfide chemistry?”

Eight-ish Months Before Filming

The application process is surreal. Not like a Salvador Dali painting: it would be hard to bake in a melting oven filled with a rotating head of John the Baptist. Or Daniel the prophet, as the case may be. Except in surrealist art, Daniel would probably be surrounded by those fluffy cats from motivational posters.

No, this is surreal like something that you’ve been wishing for and imagining for days, weeks, months, without an actual frame of reference. And then, the thing happens, and you just bob along. People are listening to him, like he’s an expert. The production crew ask him questions, let him make decisions. And, it makes him feel like he’s an adult.

Les has always felt a little bit left out in his family. He’s so much younger than his brother and his sister, and they were already a unit when he came along. Eight or nine years is a long time. Sarah left for college before he’d finished elementary school. She’d gone to school upstate, in a magical land called Buffalo, which, as far as Les could tell, was just this side of the arctic circle, and entirely populated by peppy, coffee-fueled college students. David had stayed closer to home, going to school out on Long Island. But, he’d been out before Les hit middle school.

It’s hard, too, because they leave such big shoes to fill. Sarah… Sarah is brilliant and witty and just this side of famous. Out in public, she’s this face and this voice. She tells stories people want to hear. He’s seen bootlegs of her stand up on Youtube, mentions of her kid brother. Sarah Keating is an amazing comedian, she has a bright future.

And then, there’s Sarah Jacobs. And, at home, his sister is all about their family. She’s close with David, close with their mother (although maybe they weren’t always so close). Sarah and Mayer have always been a team. But Sarah and Les? They don’t have enough in common, or enough shared history, to begin to talk. With David, with their parents, Sarah has a background she can draw upon even if they’re in different places now. She and Les are practical strangers who share half their DNA and occasionally a dinner table.

It’s not like it’s any easier to live to up David’s example, either, though. The trouble with David is that he’s just so damn good. If he were a character in a roleplaying game, David would be lawful good. (Not that Les will ever admit that he played Dungeons and Dragons, but he did flip through the dusty books his mom left in his room.) David is just… genuinely nice. Except when he’s a troll. And, even then, he’s the gentlest sort of troll to the point that people aren’t sure what’s happening. He’s honest, for one thing. And principled. He follows rules. Actually, a piece of David’s problem is that he follows rules no one else seems to know about. Sometimes, those rules he follows come into direct conflict with the rules everyone else seems to know about. Les wonders if part of David’s anxiety is that constant conflict between the rules he knows are right.
and the rules everyone else seems to live by. But, in a weird way, that makes David untouchable, too. Because with David, you're always fighting with these ideas you don't seem to know exist.

With Sarah and David so much older, Les thinks it should have been easier to build his own niche. And, in some ways it was. He needed to fill in the negative spaces. He’s not clever, not funny, not honest, not nerdy, not good. He’s ambitious. He wants to be at the center of things. But, everywhere in the neighborhood, he’s the youngest Jacobs kid. Or Sarah Jacob’s little brother. \((\text{Have you seen her yearbook picture? She was so hot!}) \text{ Or David Jacob’s little brother. (Les, David never would have failed algebra!})\)

Maybe that’s why he applies to be on this show in the first place. He wants to prove he could be someone in a world where no one knows who his older brother and his older sister are. He’s been baking at home for a while, since Sarah left for school. First, he worked alongside his mother, but as he got older, he started to bake on his own. He’s been saving for driver's ed, one cake at a time.

After the first season, which he and Esther watched obsessively, he finds the webpage and fills out the long application. He describes a few of his favorite recipes. He writes about himself, about his family, about why he started baking. He may have embroidered on the truth, a bit. But, he is applying for reality TV! You have to be interesting to be on reality TV. And, the most interesting thing about Les Jacobs, other than his baking, is his ability to fence. He blames David for that one. He was seven: he thought his older brother was cool.

It turns out the hardest part of the first round of application is convincing his parents that he should be allowed to apply. Because he’s a minor, and only able to give ascent, they have to sign and consent for him. They all have to agree to maintain confidentiality, if he is selected. The contract is clear: they can only discuss the application and audition with people who have signed the confidentiality agreement. That paperwork manages to exclude Sarah.

His parents decided to tell David, even though he finally moved out and got his own apartment. \((\text{Even if David's place is in Jersey.}) \text{ Because David is responsible. Because David has always been responsible. David was more responsible at six than Les is at sixteen. (Although Les is more trustworthy in the kitchen. David almost lit his dorm on fire with microwave popcorn.) And so, David will be the one to accompany Les to filming, if the impossible should happen and Les be selected. The whole agreement is made with a sort of giddy energy that frustrates Les: the probability of Les making it onto the show seems the same as the probability he’ll win the lottery.\)

...And then, the impossible does happen. And, suddenly, Les and David are taking the subway to Grand Central, and then the Amtrak train toward New Haven, balancing trays of cupcakes, boxes of cookies, and on one very memorable trip, a waffle iron. The one thing Les will say about public transit in New York is that no one even bats an eyelid. He loves his city.

David takes him to the technical tests, too: driving a ZipCar out to Staten Island. David is a terrible driver. David is still a better driver than Sarah. Their parents made David get his license, because “he’d need it someday”. For Les, it felt like “someday” was code for “someday you will die” and apparently not “some day you will go to Staten Island”, but he’s really not sure there is a difference.

And then, they wait. And once again, he approaches the show the way he’s watched Christian kids approach Christmas. There is all this build up in his mind about what might happen, but he had no frame of reference, no idea what it might actually be like to compete.

And then, the call comes.
And suddenly, everything that he imagined crashes into his life, and it is just… happening.

He starts planning his bakes, iterating on recipes with the team. He starts collecting ingredients. People show up at his house to film him doing his homework and baking with his mom, and playing video games with David.

And now… now it’s almost time. He’s back in the car with David, gripping the Oh-Shit-handle. And, he's not sure if he's nauseous because of his older brother's driving or because he's so excited to be competing.

**Ten Years Before Filming**

The butcher block kitchen table feels empty with just the two of them. It used to be a tight squeeze with four, but now… Katherine would given anything to be sandwiched between her sister and her mother, knocking elbows and accidentally sipping out of their water glasses. There would be glass plates under the candles to catch the drips, but Katherine’s fingers would still be covered in waxy tips, built up when her mother was looking away. The salad would be balanced in the middle, somehow managing to be just out of reach and just in the way. Instead, the candles are dusty, and the salad bowl sits in one of the empty places at the table.

It’s been a long time since they’ve sat together. Katherine’s father is busy with work. His career as a celebrity baker is finally picking: he’s been on a talk show circuit recently to promote his third book. Even when he is in the city, he’s still building his reputation. Dad is in talks with several television networks to join or start a new baking show with him as either host or judge.

Katherine has been busy, too. She started high school last year, and she lives half in fear and half in anticipation of the day she leaves for college. The adults in her life seem to be obsessed with the road to college. Because, if you Go to a Good High School and Take the Right Classes and Get Good Grades, you will Go to a Good College. And, if you Go to a Good College, you will Get A Good Job and Make A Lot of Money and Find the Man of Your Dreams and Get Married and Have 2.5 Children and Be Happy. It feels like such a Big Damn Decision, and like if she makes the wrong choice, she will fall off the Mario-Kart Rainbow road track of what is supposed to be her life and and she will plummet into an abyss. Katherine doesn’t like the idea of The Right Track. There are so many parts that seem like an anathema… she doesn’t think there is a Man of Your Dreams for her, and she doesn’t want 2.5 children. At least, she can’t imagine wanting them now. At the same time, the abyss scares her, too. She doesn’t like Not Knowing. Katherine Ethyl Pulitzer likes answers. And so, Katherine has been busy with homework and tutoring and her carefully selected extracurriculars: tennis; *The Banner*, her school’s paper; and the Beauties, probably, which is an improv troupe she’s starting with Darcy and a couple of girls.

Katherine sips water from the stemmed water glasses they only use on special occasions, which is basically whenever she and her father eat together, now. He has a glass of wine by his plate, and the light of the candles reflect against the deep red. The color reminds Katherine of blood. The wine, the candles, the glasses: they’re all a reminder of everything she’s lost. But, she’s a Pulitzer, and she’s her father’s daughter. And so, they are doing what they do best, and pretending. Tonight, they are pretending that everything is fine. They are pretending that Katherine’s sixteenth birthday is a happy day.

Somehow, though, even though they’re both pretending as hard as they can, using every last bit of acting experience they possess, the day does not feel happy. The cake in Katherine’s mouth tastes ashy as she tries to make conversation, telling her father about her idea to do sketch comedy, “Like Saturday Night Live.”

“No daughter of mine will do comedy!” Katherine’s father raises his voice when he’s angry, when
he’s frustrated, when he’s had a long day. But, when he’s dead serious, like now, his voice is like ice. “No daughter of mine…”

Katherine feels her gut clench, and her eyes burn with tears. Again. She swallows against a sensation she doesn’t like. She doesn’t cry, not anymore. Her father doesn’t cry, so she doesn’t cry. Pulitzers don’t cry.

“It will look good on my college applications: it makes me look well rounded and creative, Mr. Day says so.”

“What does Mr. Day know about comedy?” Her father challenges. “Mr. Day has never done anything but teach high school english, and maybe moonlight on weekends. Comedy is hard, Katherine. Comedy is cruel. You will not be a comedian, and that’s the end of it.”

She opens her mouth, closes it again. There’s no use arguing with her father. There’s no use getting into a screaming match, no use either of them leaving the apartment angry, no use risking that. Because Katherine knows that she couldn’t lose another parent. Not right now. So, no, there’s no use arguing. Because tomorrow, her father will be off being Joe Pulitzer™, and Katherine will go back to signing her own permission slips again.

**Five Weeks before Filming**

“I learned from my Nana.”

The interview portion of the application scared Blink a bit. Not because he wanted to lie, exactly, but because he didn’t necessarily want people’s responses when they learned the truth. The year he learned to bake is the Year that Didn’t Exist. It’s a liminal space in his childhood when everyone else seemed to grow and he seemed to stay in this holding pattern. He doesn’t like to talk about that time. And so, when the TV producers ask him about it, he tells the sort of half truth that Nana hated: the kind so full of lies of omission, they’re more swiss cheese than recollection.

“She tried, one year, to homeschool me.”

She was forced to homeschool him. The school wouldn’t take him, and Nan didn’t have the time, the energy, or the personality to go fight with them. She worked two jobs and she was raising her daughter’s six children.

“I was… well, I was a young kid. I liked to read, but I hated math.”

Nana would take him to the public library, when she had time, or send him with Frankie, when she wasn’t in the mood. And, when he was too sick to go out of the house, or in the hospital for weeks at a time, she’d send Frankie by himself, and he’d bring back books that were too old or too young, or that Blink had read before a million times. It didn’t matter. For history, geography, and social studies, Nana’d bring home old newspapers, or ask the neighbors for them. Damn-it-Johnny and The marathon man subscribed to a lot of good papers, and were usually willing to give them away, once they’d finished reading them.

Math, though? Math was hard. Long division sucked. Adding fractions was stupid.

“She wasn’t good at math, wasn’t sure how to teach me math, but she was a great baker and a good cook.”

She might not have been able to help him with algebra, but Nana knew practical math. She could stretch a dollar from here to the moon and back. She could work miracles like Jesus: she could feed
half the neighbor off a pot of soup and two loaves of bread. She knew how to manage the complex problem of Blink, his four brothers, his sister, his brother’s girlfriend, his sister’s girlfriend, his brother’s baby mama, two great grandchildren, and his uncle in their little apartment.

“She read at the library that cooking was like chemistry, where you could lick the spoon. So, she figured it was a good way to teach me science.”

He’d been awesome at chemistry in high school. He’d never achieved accidentally spontaneous combustion, unlike some of his former classmates. Intentional spontaneous combustion? He’ll take the fifth. And, there were 100% completely holes in the curtains before he and Mush had tried to throw out that acid.

“And, clearly, the experiment in home schooling failed.”

And school had let him back in. It had sucked to go back, to have to repeat a grade (because even though his Nana had “home schooled” him, he’d ended up behind). And, given all the things that had changed during that year of forced homeschooling, it had probably been good he’d taken the extra year. And, as an added bonus, his classmates didn’t remember what he was like when he had two eyes. Although, maybe that was a drawback as well. It’s hard for him to say.

“But, I really liked baking, so I just kept doing it.”

**Three Months Before Filming**

Blue is the one who answers the call, which is maybe a good thing and maybe a bad thing. If he’d been on his own, Spot knows he might not have answered it at all. He has caller ID, he can screen his phone calls.

But, Blue and Sling are there, and even though Spot’s usually the leader, sometimes they decide that he’s getting in his own way. When this happens, Blue tends to call it making “executive decisions”. Spot isn’t entirely sure where Blue picked up the phrase, he just knows that when it’s uttered, something will happen.

Like the time Blue made the executive decision they were getting his little sister ready for prom, because three gay - okay, two gay and one… Spot - men in their twenties had to be better able to figure it out than a sixteen year old year old. Spot had ended up with body glitter all over his hands, which translated to body glitter everywhere. And, they’d spent the weekend taking care of a puking prom princess, after she got “food poisoning from Benny Hannas”.

On the other hand, Blue’s executive decisions aren’t always bad. A few months ago, he’d packed Spot and Sling up into his beat up old Honda, along with backpacks and a cooler. He’d decided they "needed a mystery trip", and then proceeded to clear it with all three of their jobs. (And wasn’t that a minor miracle in and of itself. Or else, he'd called in sick for all three of them. Blue could be devious.) Neither Spot nor Sling knew where they were going. Blue even hid it on the GPS. (This was partially because he’d gotten really good at hiding directions due to his off-hours job as a Lyft driver, and partially because he let Sling DJ, because Sling has better music.) And then, they’d ended up at this really cool historic house that had belonged to Franklin D Roosevelt. Because Blue is a nerd, and he’d decided the best place they could go would be a museum. And, even though Spot hasn’t ever admitted it to Blue, it was pretty cool.

“Yes, he’s here. Let me get him for you.” Blue’s words sound distant over the thrumming in his head.

So, he talks to the producer. And to Kath, one of the co-hosts, and he can barely remember the
conversation because it’s all such a blur.

He’s going to be in the Bake Off. Fuck.

He, Sean Conlon, foster kid from Brooklyn, who started baking as part of an at risk youth diversion program after a run in with the law, he’s going to be in the Bake Off.

What is his life? What in the fucking hell?

“So, are you going to do it?” Blue asks, after he and Spot and Sling are done jumping around the apartment because Mrs. Moscowitz downstairs banged on the floor, again. “You have to do it.”

“I don’t know.” Spot finds himself fiddling with the tassels on a throw blanket they found at the Savers. “Everyone will find out I bake.”

“Spot, spotty my man, everyone already knows. You’se like the fucking PTA mom in your crew. Our tupperware - we’s three men living in an apartment in New York and we have fucking tupperware, our fucking tupperware has labels on it so people will return it.” Sling extricates the remote controller from under the couch.

Spot swallows his pride and admits his real fear. “It could all go wrong. They could do the Food Network thing, ya know, make me look like some sob story.”


Eighteen months before filming

“Anthony, you need a break. You’re sitting in a corner of the office, your hands are shaking, and you can’t stop giggling. Seriously, when is the last time you slept?”

It’s bad when you can’t recognize your coworker’s face. Admittedly, they sort of all blur together: white men who come to work in gray suits and white shirts with conservative ties and perfectly groomed hair and end the day with a five o’clock shadow in their shirt sleeves, sweaty pits showing. And, the worst part is Anthony “Racetrack” Higgins is just like the rest of them.

He’s been chasing numbers on NIKAY for the past three days, subsisting on a steady diet of redbull, coffee, and adderall. The numbers on his computer screen have gotten fuzzier and fuzzier until, finally, they all blur together. That’s when he decided to take a nap.

It’s just apparently a problem that he decided to take a nap under his desk, on the trading floor. And he’d hit his head when he’d woken up, the idea for another computer model in his head. And, now, his boss’s admin is looking down at him and telling him to go home.

“You’re no good to anyone like this. Com’on, up and at ‘em.”

He struggles to his feet. He is handed his bag.

“How did you get to work this morning, erm yesterday… whenever you came in?”

“Walked,” he supplies. Because he likes to get exercise, and as a New Yorker, walking seems one fo the best ways to do it. He goes and jogs in Central Park, sometimes. But, he likes being out in the city, seeing the people.
“I’m calling you a car.” The assistant - Ben, that’s his name - Ben the admin decides. “And, you’re taking the day off. You got the models, Mr. Hearst is happy with them. So, now, go home. It’s Friday. Take the rest of the day and the weekend, and for the love of God, get some sleep.”

He feels nauseated and the light around him seems to permeate every cell from his eyes along his optic nerve and into his brain. The sounds of the horns on the street are a physical assault. He doesn’t admit it, but he’s glad to be driven home.

This apartment is quiet. The benefit of the kind of work he does is that it pays well. It means that, for the first time in his life, he can afford to live in a building with a doorman.

He drops his things by the door, leaving his jacket, shoes and laptop bag in an untidy heap. He pulls off his socks, worn so long they’re feeling crusty, and makes his way toward the bedroom.

A hot shower makes everything better. Maybe if congressional sessions were held under the hot spray of a shower, the Senate could actually get something done. A hot shower and clean underwear for the first time in days? Magical.

He puts on sweats, lays on his bed, but he can’t sleep. His mind is racing and he’s wired on caffeine. He needs to crash, desperately, but he’s beyond too tired.

His mind catalogues his options. He’s got cigarettes in his nightstand, but he’s mostly a social smoker. They’re for when he’s out and it’s late and he’s been drinking and he, just… sometimes, he just needs a cigarette. There’s some Ativan, and maybe some Xanax up in the bathroom cupboard. The bottle doesn’t have his name on it, but that’s okay. He can take one, and maybe that will shut him down. Except that given how much adderall he’s had the past few days? Weeping at the bodega isn’t a good look on anyway, particularly a stock broker in their mid 20s. Weed? Shit. He needs to talk to Morris, his dealer. Ibuprofen for his headache is about all he thinks he can manage at this point without completely fucking something up. And, given how tired he already is, the amount of alcohol he needs to sleep will just fuck him up more when he wakes up in a few hours bleary and hungover and hypoglycemic and hungry.

He takes one of the cigarettes anyway, and climbs out onto the fire escape to smoke. Today, the city feels like an assault, and he stubbs out his cigarette, half smoked, in the coffee can of sand he uses as an ashtray.

He goes back to laying in bed, his mind too busy doing nothing to fall asleep. And so, he turns on the TV, and finds a soothing channel to watch.

There’s some reality show about competitive baking. It’s not one of those shows where the competitors try to stab each other in the back. (He does like Alton Brown playing evil mastermind, but that’s too much work today.) Instead, there are two comedians joking with a friendly group of bakers at some vineyard in Sonoma. It’s delightfully refreshing.

He wakes up groggy far earlier than he would have liked, the TV still on, and stumbles to his feet. He’s still out of it, still coming down from the kind of caffeine high that makes his heart beat out of his chest. He’s not hungry, yet, but the hunger response will probably come, soon. It’s fleeting these days, when he works too much. He needs to eat, anyway. He’ll be more stable, feel Human if he has actual calories to function.

The baking show is still on TV. More conscious, and more refreshed, he focuses on the set of eight new bakers, duking it out for… seriously? They get a cake plate? That’s the prize? It’s mesmerizing enough that he almost forgets to order his burrito. And, apparently, it’s influencing
his food choices, because a piece of chocolate cake follows shortly thereafter.

He spends the rest of his weekend enthralled by the show. He answers a few emails, checks the foreign markets, but mostly he watches TV all day Saturday.

And then, on Sunday, after mass, he goes to the big grocery store around the corner, and buys supplies. He needs a lot. It’s been a while since he baked, and his scale, his stand mixer, his food processor, and his pans are at his parent’s house. It’s not worth the trip over there to retrieve the supplies: he’s feeling solid enough to be an anonymous patron at the grocery store, but not solid enough to stand up to his mother’s interrogation about whether or not he’s met a nice girl yet, and why he never comes round for dinner. (No, and because he works 16 hour days six days a week.) So, he settles for measuring cups, and a single cookie tray and a simple recipe. He does his math on the back of a take out menu in pen.

They’re still the best damn cookies he’s had in ages.

**Three Weeks Before Filming**

2:57 pm **Kath**: We need to talk.

Sarah Keating stares at her phone with apprehension. There's a period in that text. A period. She's about to get fired. She's had this job for exactly three days, and she's going to get fired.

Getting fired would be bad, because this is the first real job she's had in months, other than the occasional stand up gig, a few appearances as a guest on topical news quiz shows, and that favor she did her parents where she worked a Bat Mitzvah. You do not say no to your mother when she asks about Passover, and you do not say no to your mother to work at a Bat Mitzvah. It's just bad policy.

The rest of the time... retail is soul sucking. It's good for new material, new material she can't really talk about with getting fired from her day job. But, it's good for material. Lots of chances to observe people. Unlike her brothers, Sarah tries to look on the bright side of her death.

2:58 **Sarah**: I'm at the tent doing promo shots with Joe and Medda

2:58 **Sarah**: I'll be back soon

It's stretching the truth a little bit, but not a lot. She is at the tent, doing work. She and Hannah are going through the list of recipes again, and talking about what might go wrong. Kath already has three seasons under her belt, but this is Sarah's first time hosting.

Hannah and Jeff, the executive producer, want her to sound knowledgeable. She needs to be able to ask the right questions, and asking the right questions mean knowing how to pronounce "choux". (Shoe, by the way, like what you wear on your feet.)

Hannah is working through the contestants alphabetically: Louis Balletti, Sean "Spot" Conlon, Elizabeth Small. When she gets to the Js, though, Sarah's heart sinks.

Les Jacobs.

Who is, more than likely, her baby brother. Which might have been the thing her parents had been calling about, now that she thinks back to it.
Professionally, she is Sarah Anne Keating. In reality, she is Sarah Miriam Jacobs. This is terrible. At best, Les will be kicked out of the competition (difficult for them to do, given that it's only three weeks before the show is set to film, and they're still ironing out details with Charlie Morris, but still not impossible). At worst, she will be fired, and then black balled, and then she'll have to move back in with her parents, and teach after school drama at her old middle school school. Sarah is afraid of middle schoolers year olds. Sarah was afraid of middle schoolers year olds when she was in middle school.

Kath must be texting because she found out about Sarah and Les. Actually, Kath knows Sarah's real last name. Kath has met Sarah's family. They've been casually, or less casually involved in an on-again, off-again relationship for months now.

Sarah ignores her phone buzzing on the table as Hannah continues to describe Les' interests, none of which his big sister was remotely aware he was interested in.

Her phone starts to vibrate with a call.

"Do you need to get that?" Hannah sounds annoyed.

Sarah flips over the phone to look at the screen. "It's Katherine."

Hannah sighs, and checks her own phone. "It's after three, and we still need to do a sponge cake test today. We'll meet again, tonight, at seven."

Sarah checks her schedule. "I can't, I'm out for a family thing at five." She may be working weekends for the foreseeable future, but Shabbat is important to her mother. That, and she needs to confront Les about the show.

Hannah nods. "Monday, then. Email Ele to set up a time. And, I'll send you some notes."

Sarah grabs her purse, and almost runs back to the trailer she shares with Katherine. Her heart is back to pounding in a way that has nothing to do with her jog across the backlot. (She does cardio three days a week, thank you very much.) Unfortunately, it's also hard to practice those breathing exercises she used to tease David about so much when they were kids, but do actually kind of work for anxiety.

"I have something to tell you." Kath's words come out rushed and breathy, and her face is pale and blotchy. "You know how Plummer is my professional name?"

Sarah nods. They'd had the conversation about family, legal and professional names a while ago.

"Well, they hired my dad on as a judge. Joseph Pulitzer." Katherine says the name without any inflection. John Doe. Joseph Pulitzer. Like it's a name that has no meaning, and not a man she lived with for her entire childhood. Sarah may fight with her mom, and may disagree with her dad, but she can't imagine the sort of home that leaves you emotionally blank when referring to your parents.

"So, what does that mean?"

"It means that I have to be a g-damn professional. It means we need to be fucking professionals. It's only another eight weeks, with the promos and the show. I can do anything for eight weeks."

"Except bees."

"Except bees."
Sarah sighs. “I, umm… may have a confession, too. You know my brother?”

“Your twin, the nerd?” Katherine likes David. He’s sweet.

“One, he’s not my twin, and two, my other brother.”

“The younger one? I never met him. He had mono last year.”

Yeah, Sarah remembers the mono. It had made for some awkward conversations. When David had gotten it in high school, he’d sworn up and down that you could get it from sharing water bottles (and theater nerd Dave swapped way more water bottles than he swapped spit with anyone). When Les showed up tired, with swollen lymph nodes, David was less proactive about claiming benign origins.

“Well, he’s in the competition.”

“Fuck.” Kath has always had a talent for summarizing things succinctly. Fuck, indeed.

Three Weeks Before Filming

Charlie “Crutchie” Morris surveys the warehouse in wonderment. It’s a hive of activity. There are people running all over: some with cameras or sound equipment, some with baking implements, some with God knows what, and at least one person with coffee. It’s not quite what he imagined a film set would look like, but it’s not really the film set, yet. That will be at a big house in the Hamptons.

The whole idea of spending six weeks in the Hamptons baking makes him nervous: he’s a poor kid who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in Jersey. The Hamptons feels both bucolic and entirely too fancy. It’s like summers by the Jersey shore, if the Jersey shore was a white tie dinner. He’s been down to the shore a few times, and the only time he’s appreciated it was during the off season, when everyone had gone home, and it’s quiet. There was something peaceful about standing in the face of a raging ocean, and knowing that you’re just far enough out of reach to be safe from harm.

He’s come a few weeks early, to work with the production team and finalize any accommodations they’re going to make. He’s nervous about what’s going to happen. First, because it’s the production team of a major reality TV show that millions of people watch. It’s a major reality tv show that picked him to come compete. Because he’s a good baker, and partially, he likes to think, because he has personality. At least, that’s what they told him at his screen test. But, he’s also nervous because he’s used to dealing with with people who have very different opinion about what constitutions both “reasonable” and “accommodation”. Crutchie has spent so much time in counselor’s offices, principal’s offices, disability services offices, professors’ offices, doctor’s offices, insurance offices: any type of office where they’re supposed to help him participate fully in school and instead spent their time leaving him stymied. You want someone to help you write and fight a 504 plan? Charlie Morris is your guy.

He’s here to meet the producers to make sure his baking set up is reasonable for his needs. They’ve already spent hours on the phone, discussing details he never expected to need to go over, including TV appropriate clothing. But, this “detail” is one of the most important things. It will make or break his ability to stay in the show. If he needs to… if this doesn’t go right… he’s not a quitter, but damn it, sometimes not quitting means fighting for yourself in the first place. He’s optimistic that this will work. He’s optimist these people, who have already invested a lot of time in him, will decide that this accommodation is just another part of having him on the show.
He finds a parking spot for his van amid the production team’s fleet of sprinters. His beat up silver car, with its galaxy of stickers in the back window and dings on the bumpers looks out of place. He hums the “One of these things is not like the other” theme from *Sesame Street* and admires the sprinter vans. With their doors open, they remind him of a spy TV show: wires and cameras and mikes everywhere.

He’s met at the door by a PA called Andy. Andy explains that he’s a production assistant as they walk through the warehouse maze. Perhaps walk is too charitable a term. Andy seems to run ahead, then realize Crutchie isn’t following at the same pace, and then stop to wait. It’s hard to navigate the crowded warehouse on crutches, especially because there are tripping hazards everywhere. Andy picks up his feet to navigate over the covered wires and weird little half steps, but they take a bit longer for Crutchie.

Meeting with the production team is doubtless one of the most official, most nerve wracking experiences of his life. There are six people at the table: Ivan, the head of photography; Hannah, the head of food economics; Chris, an assistant director; Marti, the lightning director; Max, the prop guy, and Miss Medda Larkin, herself. Crutchie is pretty sure he melts into his chair after Medda shakes his hand. She’s amazing. He’s been cooking out of her books for years, trying her recipes one after another.

The discussion starts off on the right foot. Crutchie quickly summarizes a plan he, Hannah, Chris, and Max have been working on since he agreed to be on the show. He passes out packets he and Albert had assembled last night. It goes into details, more details about his health history than he’d prefer to provide, but this is reality television, and the psychologist reminded him several times that reality television is not a place for people who need privacy.

Still, there are questions.

“I still don’t understand why you can’t just cook in a regular kitchen, like you did at the audition and the B roll. The camera angles are going to be hard.” Ivan flips his pen, bitterly. “You did fine.”

Crutchie grinds his teeth. He knew this would be one of the questions they’d ask, and he has to be careful how he answers. It’s not too late from them to drop him from the season, and simply run the show with fewer contestants. Or, they could always bring up a contestant from somewhere else. It would be hard to get someone up to speed fast enough, but it was possible.

“But because,” he explains, “at home, my kitchen is set up for me. The counters are the right height, and I can space out chairs around the kitchen. Plus, I have a wall oven.” Actually, he has two wall ovens: one high enough that he can use it when he’s on crutches without trying to bend over, and the other low enough that it’s comfortably accessible in his wheelchair.

They’d gotten super lucky when they’d rented their place. It had been improbable to find an accessible rental near the city, and yet, Finch had worked some kind of real estate magic, and there they were. Crutchie has sometimes wondered if Finch sold his soul at the crossroads in exchange for their lease. For a good Catholic boy, Finch is far too comfortable with the supernatural. Or, maybe, Finch is exactly comfortable enough with the supernatural for a good Catholic boy. Finch is just fuzzy on what constitute theologically acceptable ghosts.

“That doesn’t explain the commercial kitchen,” Ivan argues. “You did fine in the commercial kitchen.”

Crutchie sighs, because he knows this was going to be one of the questions they’d ask. He had auditioned in the commercial kitchen. It had been hard. Harder, he imagines, than for most other people. He’d spent a large portion of the technical bake trying to keep his balance while
simultaneously making Baked Alaska and talking to the camera. The camera crew was actually less annoying than his roommates, Albert, Finch, Elmer, Henry, and Buttons, and way more interested in his baking, so that at least had been easy. The night after the audition, though, he’d gone home and dug out one of the pain pills he has but never takes. He doesn’t cry, not often, but the combination of fatigue, of the pain, and the emotional vulnerability that he gets on opioids left him sobbing like a baby. But, that’s an answer he can’t give.

“I…” he lets the sentence trail off. “I clearly did well enough. But, I think that if I use my wheelchair, I will be able to do better.” He smiles, trying to be sweet as unsalted butter. He hates this, standing up to other people to get things he shouldn’t have to fight for. He’s come to peace with his body being his body, his disability making him who he is. The pain sucks. The fatigue sucks. But, the fact that the world isn’t built for him, is built with a myriad of tiny obstacles? That sucks more, because it’s a constant, niggling suck that he is constantly fighting.

In the end, with Hannah, Medda, Max, and Marti on his side, Ivan agrees to a screen test. So, he goes back to his car, switches over to his wheelchair, and goes to the “set” part of the warehouse.

It’s a little bit magical to see the eight identical work stations, each set up with a slab of butcher block wood, with a range at one end and a sink at the other. They come complete with stand mixers, knife blocks, jars of tools, and he assumes, baking pans tucked away somewhere. Max beckons him over to a corner, to show a ninth workstation. It’s not perfect, not like his kitchen at home. But, the fake cabinet doors have been removed, and the butcher block counter top is at a height where he can work.

Medda - God bless Medda - Medda insists they do a screen test. “Joe and I are the same height, and Kath and, is it Darcy?”

“Sarah,” someone supplies.

“Katherine and Sarah are shorter.”

Ivan grumbles, but everyone else seems convinced. They’re going to let him compete.

Good, now he can focus on the real fight: practicing his building skills for the first showstopper challenge.

**One Day before Filming**

Elizabeth Small drops her backpack and her suitcase on the floor, and stares at her hotel room. She pinches herself. She’s not actually here. This can’t be happening. This is all a dream. In a few minutes, she’s going to wake up in her bed to Dog the cat sitting on her chest and Sniper breathing hot morning breath in her face, and she’s going to have to get up and go into work and deal with… deal with shit.

So, nope. This is not happening.

Except, that it is.

Smalls has been preparing for this for weeks. Hell, she’s been preparing for her whole lie.

And, it all seems like an accident. If she and Sniper hadn’t gone to the library to hide out and make out in high school, when they totally weren’t skipping class, then she probably wouldn’t have walked out with that book on baking. And then, like, they had the book. And, the home ec room was empty.

It’s not like they burned down the school. The fire department totally showed up as a precaution.
She flops onto the big white duvet of the hotel bed, and stares at the schedule that she’d been given at the front desk. “Three o’clock, check in. Four o’clock, promotional photos. Five-thirty, tour the set. Seven o’clock, dinner with the group. More like four o’clock nap and get caught up on Game of Thrones.”

At five until four, she brushes her teeth and goes down to the lobby. It’s pretty obvious which motley group she’s supposed to be part of. They’re clustered around a set of chairs. Well, most of them are standing. One dramatic asshole has draped himself over the chairs.

As she walks closer, she picks out little threads of the wall of conversation.

“... be a Pats fan? I’m pretty sure that’s sacrilege.”
“... I don’t care what you say, 1989...”
“... not that smart. Stubborn. My friend... ”

A harried woman in a half zip from the production company comes over. “I’m Kara.” She shifts the clipboard to her left hand, and sticks out her hand to shake. “And you’re… Elizabeth?”

“Call me Smalls.” Smalls has never felt like an Elizabeth. When she was a little girl, she was Lizzy. She’d stopped that as soon as she could talk.

“Smalls,” Kara notes, scribbling something on the clipboard. “You’re second to last. We’re just waiting for… Les?”

A nervous guy in a button down and khakis walks over with a teenage kid in jeans and white Adidas.

“I’m Les. And this is David.” The teen thumbs toward button down. “He’s older.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Smalls mutters to herself.

Kara makes two more checks on her list. “That’s everyone, then.” Her voice shifts, pitching up closer to a teacher’s. “Alright, lady and gentlemen, our bus is outside. So, let’s go.”

There’s a general scramble as rag-tag collection of boys move toward the exit. Sunglasses (even though it’s early April and daylight savings time hasn’t quite hit yet, so it will be dark by five-thirty), baseball hats and jackets, are collected and phones, wallets, a deck of cards, and a copy of Beauty Queens by Libba Bray disappear into pockets and bags.

Most of the boys head off quickly, but a few hang back with one of the boys who are seated. One might be Jacky-boy Kelly, but Jack Kelly is supposed to be off in Colorado, or New Mexico, or Utah: one of those western states where they don’t have good bagels.

She feels guilty as she watches the other boy slowly rise. He pushes himself off the chair with care, using one hand to reach for the pair of forearm crutches by his side. She wants to watch, wants to ask questions, wants to look away to give him privacy. And, she’s not really sure which to follow. She knows nothing about this guy, other than that apparently he’s here to compete in the Bake Off, and that he use crutches. She doesn’t even know his name. And, she wants to know intimate details. Which, she suspects is probably as shitty as when people ask things like, “No, but where are your parents really from?” (The Bronx, both of them. Oh, you mean before? Well, Mom’s Jamaican) and “Can I touch your hair?” (No. Fuck you.) She resolves to be less shitty. Immediately. She’s just not quite sure how. Yesterday.

Somehow, Kara the production assistant manages to heard the bakers toward the bus. They meld into a continuous stream that blocks other people from cutting through, but still strings itself out
into a five minute parade.

Outside, there’s a minibus waiting, with another production assistant waiting inside. He holds up another clipboard, and he’s checking off names, too. “Elizabeth?”

“Call me Smalls,” she orders, boarding the bus and settling into a set in the back. She puts her backpack beside her to stop anyone else from trying to sit there.

The rest of the group file slowly onto the bus. Some faces are familiar, some are new. She thinks she sees Jack Kelly, but it can’t be…

A hand with a bunch of “HELLO, My Name Is” stickers and a sharpie appear in her face. “Here.”

Smalls would recognize that Brooklyn growl anywhere. But, no, it can’t be. She glances up to see Spot Conlon leaning over the seat in front of her.

“What the fuck, Conlon?” Smalls accepts the pile of labels, and prints “Smalls” on them in her best block print.

“I don’t want you assholes knowing my real name.” Spot hams looking concerned. “By the way, tell Sniper that Sling needs to talk to her.”

“Sniper may have mentioned something to that effect.” She doesn’t know what beef her girlfriend has with Sling, one of Spot’s close friends, but it’s nasty. It’s some old feud based on territory and long forgotten childhood slights or inherited fights. Plus, there’s the whole NYPD, Fire Department rivalry. Smalls and Spot are generally more friendly. They have to be.

“When’d you start baking?” She changes the subject.

Spot glares. “Nope, not right now. We’re going to eat, sleep, and breath cake for the next two fucking days. Tell me about…” The bus starts moving. “Fuck.”

“Nope.” She fishes in her backpack for earbuds.

Kara starts announcements over a built in PA system. Apparently they’re not supposed to use the toilets in the house in the Hamptons where they’re filming. There are strategically located Port-a-Johns around the property, and they’d better use those. Smalls and Spot exchange looks, but they manage not to start laughing.

The group photograph continues to be organized chaos. The boys are pushing back and forth and pummeling each other. Smalls finds herself somewhere in the middle of the pile as she meets the other competitors. Most are new. But, she recognizes a few.

“Oy, Jack, back from the Land of Enchantment?” Smalls goes over and slaps him on the back. “Didja get to be a real cowboy?”

Jack shrugs. “Went horseback riding, camping, and I started rock climbing.”


“I didn’t even know you knew the word, ‘lumbersexual’, Spotty.” Jack shoots back. “But, you do live in Brooklyn, second only to Portland, Oregon and San Francisco for hipsters.”

“So, you climbed a lot of shit?” Smalls prompts, in a half hearted attempt to avoid a class
Conlon/Jack Kelly swinging contest. The question is usually whether their egos, their dicks, or their fists will be swinging. There are stories from Sniper about what’s happened between Spot Conlon and Jack Kelly in the past.

It’s probably a good thing they’re called over to take the picture in the garden, because based on the expressions on Jack and Spot’s faces, anything could happen.

After the photo, they get split off to tour the backlot where the production team works. Jacky Boy pairs off with the kid, Les, and his big brother, David. Spot pairs off with Charlie and Louis. Louis looks vaguely familiar, but Smalls can’t quite place him. Smalls gets picked last, so she rides with Anthony and Romeo. Anthony has one of Spot’s name tags on his shirt, and it says “Hello, my name is RACETRACK HIGGINS”. There’s another one on his back that says, “Hello, my name is I OWE SPOT $5”.

They drive by the production office, the director’s office, the photography vans. Kara makes a point to show them where the Port-a-Johns are. Anthony, Romeo, sitting up front, gives Kara a million watt smile. Anthony “Racetrack - I owe Spot $5” Higgins makes a sarcastic comment. Smalls laughs, and settles into her seat.

The last stop on their tour is where they’ll spend their “free time” onset. Smalls is pretty sure she’ll be reminded of a quote from one of her favorite young adult authors: Free time, I’ve heard of that. ... It's what you get when you die and the gods reward you for a life spent working from dawn until midnight. Tamora Pierce is a goddamn genius, and Smalls will fight anyone who tells her otherwise. Preferable with Alana’s Lightening.

There’s a double wide trailer with a rickety ramp up to the door. She assumes it’s the right place, based on the piece of hot pink printer paper taped to the door which reads, “Green Room”, with several additional colors written and crossed out in black sharpie. At the bottom, someone has taken a gold sharpie and labeled the space, “Rainbow Room”.

Inside, the rainbow room feels like the waiting room for a doctor’s office. There a couple of chairs along the walls, and a couch. There are power strips plugged into most of the available outlets, and a few chargers plugged in already. A coffee table from Ikea is piled high with magazines so old they were probably recycled from one of the doctor’s offices in the area. The selection consists of Men’s Health, Highlights, outdated People, outdated Time, outdated Newsweek, and weirdly enough, six months of Cooking Light from two years ago. There are a line of desks with makeup mirrors along one wall. The fridge in the corner is stocked with bottle waters, and a couple of those foil juice packs.

It feels a bit crowded with all nine of them, but Smalls is sure it will feel empty when it’s just her and the other two competitors in the finale.

When Les’s brother, (“Hello my name is DAVID DAVEY WALKING MOUTH DAVID”) settles onto the couch, it coughs up a pile of what Smalls really hopes is dust as it tries to swallow him.

“I’m pretty sure that couch has been here since the Bush administration,” Kara comments off hand.

David winces.

“The first one,” Kara specifies.

Anthony “I owe Spot $5” Higgins pokes the couch with a finger. “I’m pretty sure that’s half human.”
David jumps up, off the couch, shaking himself.

Anthony “I owe Spot $5” Higgins catches sight of his back in the mirror, and pulls this sticker off. He holds the sticker carefully, and then sticks it to the edge of a mirror.

Louis frowns up at the sticker. “Reminder?”

“Memento of the last time I’ll owe Spot money.” Racetrack Higgins shoots back.

Spot snorts. “Keep telling yourself that, Race. Keep telling yourself.”

Kara and her partner in crime drive them to the restaurant. “Get to know each other, just, you know, don’t talk about tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, Kara.” Romeo’s voice is warm. “We’ll be good.”

“Keep your receipts. Your itemized receipts,” Kara emphasizes. “You can drink, but it needs to be on a separate tab. There’s a bus back at 9:30, and remember your call is at eight and you need to be bright and cheerful.”

The nine of them crowd around the table, talking and laughing. Not everyone heeds Kara’s advice. (Smalls included. But, they have the barrel aged stout she’s obsessed with. And, they’re paying for dinner. She and Sniper can pay for a drink. Even a $8 beer.)

“To the next six weeks,” Spot gestures with his beer. “May I beat all your asses.”

“Here here,” Louis raises his cocktail, across the table. His “Hello, my name is” sticker says KID BLINK. Smalls finally places him. He’s another member of Sniper’s extended network from her dark, tragic, past.

Next to her, Charlie laughs and raises a glass of lemonade. Under his bangs, she can read a sticker in a handwriting she hasn’t seen before. So, probably his, and not Spot fucking with them all. “Hello, my name is CRUTCHIE.”

Crutchie draws her into conversation, telling her about his psychology degree and his roommates. “Because, like, living with those guys, how can I not want to understand more about how people work?”

In exchange, she tells him about some of the animal escapades she’s seen as a vet tech. People in New York love their dogs. And their cats. And their rats. He laughs as she talks about Vasarian, the angry baby bearded dragon lizard.

Then, the food comes, and the conversation shifts. Smalls sort of hates big dinners in loud restaurants, where she ends up sitting in-between conversations. She focuses on her roast brussel sprouts and her second beer and catches snatches around her.

“Can’t believe you’re…”

“…a good chance at the playoffs. I love…”

“… boys in that class. And, look at us…”

It’s overwhelming, and she’s tired. She settles into the bus near the front, sharing her seat with the gregarious Romeo chattering at Louis about hockey. And, a hockey-related comic he’s obsessed with. And comics he’s obsessed with. Romeo is a night owl.

She gets back to her room, sets her alarm, and crawls into bed. She’s glad she’s tired, otherwise,
she’d be up half the night with nerves. Instead, she calls Sniper, sets her alarm, and she’s out before her head hits the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Sling and Blue are the OCs of the very talented readeatsleeprepeat, and used with her permission. Her Sprace series, Boring without you, where she introduces Sling and Blue is fantastic, and raison d’être made me cry because it was basically emotional whiplash in a story.

Umm... caveats.

I have never been on a film set. There was that one time I was supposed to go be an extra, and then that weekend, I won a trip to the ICU at my local hospital instead of a trip to LA.
That was a fun weekend.
My friend did, very nicely, get Curt Mega and Dominic Barnes to call me and tell me they were sorry I was feeling like crap. So, that was cool. But, it means I’m making this up from several references, including Blood Drips Heavily on Newsies Square, which… just… watch it.

I don't have a visual or mobility disability, so if I've made mistakes, please tell me! (Also spelling, formatting, or like, existential.) In that same spirit, please tell me if I've done something you like, too!
Cake Week

Chapter Summary

In which Romeo learns a very valuable lesson about floral flavors, Joe selects a passive aggressive technical bake, and the showstopper challenge almost causes death by chocolate.

Katherine's take on cake week.

Chapter Notes

I asked a friend to beta this. She said she might be able to do it in history.
...She teaches high school.
Also, history got busy, so this is un beta'd.

Unlike the first chapter, each "episode" will be written from the perspective of a contestant or host. I love Kath, but she's a process girl. So, this week follows the traditional show format. (If you're a food person and like delightful British people making tasty food, the original show is on Netflix.

Warnings

Kath continues to have canonically family issues.

Ableism continues as a theme, specifically with regard to Crutchie. There are passing mentions of alcohol, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and marijuana. Because apparently a lot of chocolate cakes are improved by adding or soaking them in liquors and Blink is involved in shady business. Also, the entire story is about a baking show, so, umm... yeah. Lots and lots of food?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This season, we have eight brand new bakers who will seize the day for eighteen challenging bakes. We'll find out once and for all, who is the baking king of New York. And, that starts right now!

The Signature Challenge

“Welcome everyone to the tent. I know you’ve been preparing, practicing, profiterole-ing, probably for months. The wait is finally over, and now is the time to seize the day. All you have to do is bake and impress our judges, Medda and Joe.” Kath opens the first day of baking with her prescribed monologue.

The contestants have already met each other. (She hopes production set up a dinner for them last
night: it makes for better chemistry and camaraderie throughout the season). They’ve been through their one hour orientation with Hannah, who runs the kitchen. And, now, she’s opening the season. There are cameras everywhere, filming the individual contestants as they wait and watch.

Sarah picks up the carefully crafted dialogue. “For your first signature challenge, Joe and Medda want you to make a two dozen decorated cupcakes. They can be any two flavors you want: chocolate, vanilla, lemon, strawberry... There just need to be twenty four of them, and they need to be decorated. You’ll have two and a half hours. So, for the first time, on your mark…”

“Get ready!” Kath sounds perky.

“Bake!” They announce, together.

The tent falls into organized chaos as the bakers start their preparations. The bakers start lining their pans. Romeo has little cups decorated with flowers. A few - Louis and Elizabeth, who introduced herself as Smalls - are going without liners. Katherine hasn’t decided if this is a good strategy or a bad one. Luckily, it doesn’t matter. Katherine is a terrible baker, much to her father’s disappointment. However, after years of living with him, she is a brilliant comedian: better known than he ever was from his days on the festival circuit.

Our first baker is Sean. Sean lives in Brooklyn, and works as an emergency medical technician with a local fire house. Sean’s coworkers love eating his baking between calls. Sean is drawing inspiration for his cupcakes from his love of something that gets him through his job: coffee and chocolate. He’ll be making a mocha cupcake, dipped in chocolate ganache and garnished with a chocolate covered coffee bean. For his second cupcake, he’ll make a chocolate chiffon cupcake with a pipped vanilla buttercream.

Katherine catches Sarah’s eye, and they start moving around the perimeter of the tent, still observing. Jack Kelly is spooning his flour into cups, Les Jacobs is just dumping from the container. Anthony Higgins is perhaps the most interesting, though. He’s methodically weighing out his ingredients, noting the weight on his recipe sheet. Kath decides to ask him about that later, although she’s sure the producers will interview him about it as well.

Sarah taps Kath’s shoulder, and points at the bakers and the judges. “Going in,” she mouths. They’re still miked, so they can’t talk to each other.

Kath nods, and settles back into her seat to watch and listen. She’ll trade out with Sarah, soon, but she wants the younger woman to get exposure.

She watches as they head over to Jack Kelly, first. Jack’s a little bit of an enigma. He’s loud, and a little bit brash. He’s doing something a bit dangerous in the first round, and Joe and Medda know it.

“So, what are you baking, honey?” Medda is always more gentle than Katherine’s father.

Jack continues crushing his graham crackers with his rolling pin. “It’s a play on a S’more. So, I’m doing a graham cracker crust, and then I’m going to add a chocolate cupcake. I’ll top it with a seven minute frosting. And then, I’m making a cowboy coffee cupcake, with espresso.” Kath notices the pot of coffee brewing on the stove.

Joe makes a disapproving face, and Kath isn’t sure if that’s because he hate marshmallows more than life itself, or if its because he’s concerned about the ”cowboy coffee”. Joe is neither a marshmallow person, nor is he a fan of anything coarser than a grind for a french press. Joe's hatred of marshmallows is a poorly kept secret on set, and Kath wonders how Jack convinced the
producers to let him continue with an idea that would drive her father crazy. Whatever he did, she
gives him mad props for it: Joseph Pulitzer is a hard man to defy.

“What inspired you?” Joe asks, his voice remaining neutral. Once again, his stage career comes
through.

Jack smiles, his first real smile in the competition. It’s not the cocky grin of a boy. It’s reflective,
introspective, and painfully longing. “I spent some time out west, working in New Mexico. We
used to do camping in the summer, and I wanted to capture that experience in a cupcake.”

Joe and Medda thank Jack, and continue on their way, off to terrifying interrogate discuss baking with

*At sixteen, high school student Les is our youngest baker in the tent. But, that doesn't stop him from
using big flavors. Today, he’ll be making two fall favorites: an apple cinnamon cupcake with a
caramel topping and a gingerbread cupcake topped with whipped cream and candied ginger.*

Sarah motions for Kath to trade out shadowing Joe and Medda as they approach Les and Romeo.
Kath is working hard to keep Sarah as far away from Les for as long as possible. Sarah had come to
her in the middle of last week and they’d had one of those terrible discussions about how weird
their families were. Kath is here, hosting with her father who she swore she’d never work with
again. At least Kath had forewarning: she’d liked old Teddy, but after the blood clot, she’d
understood why he wanted to spend time with his family.

Sarah had found out about Les competing around the same time she’d learned the name of the rest
of the competitors. Kath doesn’t like to judge other people’s families (She who is without sin cast
the first stone), but she’s met Sarah’s parents. Esther and Mayer are, as far as she can tell,
delightful. Sarah's biggest complaints about them seemed to revolve around the fact that they
sometimes loved her too aggressively, they were concerned about
[376] the fact that she dropped out of
college to pursue a career in comedy, and the fact that they trusted David - but not Sarah - to drive.
(Actually, Kath might disagree with Esther and Mayer on this one: Kath does not trust either of the
Jacobs siblings to drive. Kath does not trust them with bumper cars. Never again.) Sarah is close
with her parents. So, Kath isn’t entirely sure how Sarah didn’t know. But, she swears she didn’t,
and Kath trusts her. And now, Kath needs to protect both her cohost and the kid. And, the best way
to do that is to keep the two of them apart for as long as possible.

Les handles Joe and Medda efficiently, treating them like judges in a science fair. (And, maybe she
says that because it’s the best high school analogy she can offer.) He walks them through his
cupcake flavors, and promises Joe well distributed fruit. You should always promise Joe well
distributed fruit. Les also has the good grace to offer Kath and Medda a taste of his molasses before
they continue on to Romeo.

Romeo was quite charming during his screen test. He has a good smile, but might overplay the
flirting. His bold sense of style also caught the producer’s eye. Kath has already admired his red
and blue argyle socks.

The Romeo with Joe and Medda is not the Romeo who she’s met in the tent. He’s starting to look
vaguely frantic. He’s got one cupcake batter in the bowl of his stand mixer - a filipino chiffon cake
called mamon. And, he’s chopping pistachios for his second batter, a lurid green concoction. The
problem is that he’s already cut fingers at least twice, based on the fresh bandages and plastic
gloves he’s wearing.

She catches up with her father mid conversation. “Rose? It can be quite soapy if you’re not
careful.”
“I’ll use it sparingly,” Romeo promises, earnestly.

Joe frowns. Floral flavors like rose are always a gamble. They smell lovely, but there’s a difference between smelling lovely and ending up with a dessert that tastes like soap. If Kath were competing, she would steer clear of all floral flavors. There are so many other options. She has higher hopes for Romeo’s other cupcake: the mamon topped with coconut cream and fresh mango.

*Charlie is an inventive baker from Newark. His five roommates are always impressed with what he makes. Today, he’s trying two of summertime favorites: a lemon-thyme cupcake with piped lemon buttercream, and a strawberry shortcake inspired cupcake with a strawberry topping.*

Across the tent, Sarah calls the time. “Fifteen minutes to impress Medda and Joe with your cakes! Just fifteen minutes, left.”

Kath skips over to her co host, letting the camera follow her. Sarah smiles broadly. They approach Anthony Higgins, and his now empty bowl of frosting, with predatory grins.

“I bet Jack over there that you’d come after frosting. He said you’d steal Spot’s ganache.” Tony hands them the bowl, and Sarah takes the spatula.

Kath lets her face take on a mischievous smile. “What happens if we take both?”

“Then Blink wins the pool.” Tony begins piping on his cupcakes, creating a gentle swirl on each one.

“Blink?” Sarah prompts. At this point, the discussion can’t go on camera: betting isn’t exactly legal, and the studio can’t exactly admit that the contestants bet on the outcome of little things.

“Louis.” Tony finishes off his cupcake with a flourish, and then tests his pastry bag, again. He drops it on the scale, and makes a note for himself.

He suddenly seems to recognize the ring of incredulous faces. “It’s how he introduced himself!”

Kath makes a quick exit, going over to steal Spot’s ganache, and to chat with Louis about nicknames. She swears, if this is some sort of thing that Tony’s pulling to be intentionally cruel, or that production put in place to stir up drama, she’ll walk off and she’ll take Sarah with her. They can see if there’s a season to air after that!

But, time is passing quickly. Before Kath can go talk to Louis, Andy, one of the PAs, waves her to the front. Kath hurries up, hoping she doesn’t still have ganache on her nose. Andy throws her a towel, and rubs at his face. Right. “Alright bakers, five minutes, five minutes remaining in your first signature challenge!”

It’s amazing how five minutes is both the blink of an eye, and an eternity.

Louis is sprinkling matcha powder around the edge of his cupcake.

Les is trying to swirl caramel.

Anthony might be blessing his cupcakes or sifting coffee powder over them. Possibly both.

Jack has a tiny blow torch out that he’s using to toast the side of his frosting. Kath can hear him telling a camera how much fun it is.

Smalls looks frantic, rolling the sides of her cupcakes in sugar. They clearly didn't come out of the
pan as neatly as she might have liked. To her credit, she hasn’t cried, which is more than Kath can say for many competitors in the same situation.

Spot is using tweezers to move chocolate covered coffee beans from a wire cooling rack, chocolate pooled underneath, to the top of each cupcake. He looks vaguely menacing. He screen tested well, but Kath makes a note to have a conversation with him about glaring if no one else does.

Romeo candied flower petals, and he’s placing the white petals on top of his pale purple cupcakes.

Charlie is leaning forward in his chair, drizzling a strawberry compote over the top of the beautiful white cupcakes.

And then, suddenly, everything is done.

The bakers step away, and the cleaning crew rushes in to tidy each of the benches, while the camera crew rushes in to take the “food porn” shots. Kath isn’t allowed to refer to them that way, publically. But, she makes notes about it in the comedy notebook she keeps in her hotel room. Maybe, someday, when she retires, she’ll write a book about the high stakes world of competitive baking.

The competitors rush out the tent in mass, rather than the slow trickle that had happened during the bake. Anthony races off with what looks like a vape pen. Charlie goes to stretch his legs, pulling his crutches out of his somewhat disreputable van. Jack disappears off… somewhere. Kath, herself, goes to find the bathroom. She, Smalls, and Romeo climb into a golf cart with a production assistant.

The judging is one of the most import and and lengthiest pieces of the process. Kath hates watching the bakers being judged. And, she hates being in the room with her father as he gets more and more judgemental.

Everyone has to be present, and they start the process by pulling numbers at random. For better or for worse, Les Jacobs is first.

Medda and Joe make their way over to Les, Kath following. She and Sarah alternate who does the on camera tasting. Joe frowns down at the cupcakes, while Medda smiles. They like to play good cop, bad cop. Joe is always the bad cop. In Kath’s opinion, Joe has always been the bad cop. At the least, he was the bad cop in her childhood when he hadn’t copped out on his parenting responsibilities.

Joe demonstrates his judging protocol. He’s as precise about baking as he is about everything in his life. Precision and moderation, those are his life philosophies. He cuts the cupcake in half, to check the quality of the crumb. He uses his fork to separate off the topping, and then takes both the cupcake and the frosting separately. Then, he tries the complete bite. Medda eats the other half, savoring the flavor with her eyes closed. Kath claims her quarters, one of the best parts of her job.

Les’s apple cupcakes are uneven, and a little bit underbaked. The fruit was too wet for the cake batter, and all sank to the bottom. In contrast, his caramel is too brown. His gingerbread, on the other hand: it’s sticky and sweet, and dense, and oh god. Kath wants to take the tray, and run away to some magically secluded island or tower where she can eat gingerbread and whipped cream in peace. And no, Joe, she does not need to stop eating a whole cupcake. (She does back away when Hannah comes to claim the treats, shooting her an evil look.)

Small’s cupcakes have too much booze to them. The idea of the margarita is good, but the cake is too soaked in tequila. Piña colada feels like an odd cupcake flavor, and it’s over baked. The rum
syrup doesn’t cover the dryness. The paleo whipped coconut cream frosting is a little bit flavorless, but it looks nice. Kath gives Smalls points for originality, and for being daring with her ingredients.

Jack’s cowboy coffee cupcakes hold true to the original drink: too sweet and too grainy for anyone’s tastes. His S’mores are brilliant, though: the graham cracker forming a strong base for the brownie, and then topped with what must be the best marshmallow she’s ever tasted. Seriously, Kath wonders, why didn’t she and Sarah steal Jack’s frosting? Oh, right, because he’d leered and asked if she was a “smart girl”.

They continue on down the line: Joe is wary of the green color in Louis’ matcha cupcakes. He asks, at least twice, if it’s natural. The competitor reassures him, and Joe can’t find the bitter note from a dye to complain about. Kath suspects this is because Joe is stuck in the mud. He is a black, drip coffee man who hasn’t been in a coffee shop in fifteen years.

Tony Higgin’s Italian buttercream is rich, but his chocolate cake is dry.

Sean “My name is Spot” Conlon’s chocolate covered coffee beans are brilliant, and the coffee flavor in his cupcake is enough to give a jolt. Kath can see Jack eyeing the back of Spot’s head, comparing his own failures with the other man’s success.

Charlie has an infectious smile, and a deft hand at baking. His sunny, citrusy cupcakes match his cheerful disposition. Medda likes the surprise of a little bit of lemon thyme in the batter. His vanilla cupcakes with vanilla frosting are technically good, and would be a bit boring, except his strawberry sauce is so good. Perhaps he should have used a pound cake, instead of a sponge, because the pound cake might have had more structural integrity.

And then, they get to Romeo. Kath has been worried about him throughout the round. His tears have tried, but blood is seeping through the bandage on his left thumb. His eyes are fearful, but he bucks up and gives her and Medda the biggest smile he can manage. He’s a charmer. She has no doubt that the title, “Romeo” comes from somewhere.

Unfortunately, his cupcakes are not so charming. Romeo’s mamon chiffon cupcakes are a mixed batch. Some are small and burned in the oven. Others are too big and nearly raw. They have good flavor, and the fresh mango fans are attractive, but they have problems.

Romeo also made the classic rose-flavor blunder: they taste like soap. And, his attempts at candied flower petals didn’t work at all. Joe had a coughing fit when he tried the pansy, and Medda made a face.

Romeo holds it together until they’re going to the back to the backlot for lunch. Even then, the tears are well hidden. Kath is walking by him, and she quickly catches up. They make the rest of the trip as she talks to Romeo in a slow and reassuring voice. "You got here because you’re a good baker. It’s your first day, everyone makes mistakes on their first day."

Jack comes over to join them at lunch. He brings a plate of cupcakes, settling them in front of Romeo. "You have to try what you’ve baked. You have to be the judge of your own work." He’s gentle, rather than cocky, trying to calm Romeo rather than flirt with Kath.

She likes this Jack Kelly a lot better.

**Technical Challenge**

“Alright all my bright competitors, it’s time for your first technical challenge. It’s one of Joe’s
recipes, today, so you know it will be devilish. That means that Medda, and Joe, it’s time for you to leave.” Sarah shoo’s them off, playfully. The goal of this exercise is to see how the bakers fare when they don’t have direction or know the recipe.

Kath takes over. “For today’s technical challenge, Joe and Medda want you to prepare a… sunshine cake! You have two hours.”

“On your mark!”

“Get set!”

“Bake!” Katherine and Sarah say in unison. The bakers whip back the cloth, revealing the ingredients for the cake.

Kaths hands twitch to take over a bench - maybe from Romeo, who seems to be having a bad day, already. She cooks, but she doesn’t bake. There never was a reason when she was a little girl, not when she had a father who had left comedy to pursue cooking on television. So, no, she can’t make a cake.

Except for this.

When the recipe appeared in Joe’s second cookbook, The World Bakes Cakes, it was called “Katherine Cake”. They’d make it together every year on her birthday, his steady hands guiding her small ones. When she separates eggs, she can almost hear his words, telling her how to use the shells to retain the yolks without breaking them.

At some point, either today or tomorrow, the producers will sit down and interview Medda and Joe about the challenges. They’ll film a segment with the two experts tasting the sunshine cake Joe has prepared. It will be a tall, slightly tapered cake with a hole in the middle, sitting on top of a red sauce. The sides of the cake will be a pale, golden brown where they’re not covered in white icing, and the top will be covered with rainbow sprinkles. Medda will probably say it’s delicious, and Joe will smile knowingly. At some point, someone (Hannah - the food producer who is basically a goddess and might be Kath’s favorite person in the world bar one - and maybe Medda) will probably box up the remainder of that cake, freeze it, and then leave it in a cooler in her dressing room. Her birthday is on Tuesday.

Kath looks around the tent, watching the bakers worked with their stripped down recipe. It doesn’t have quantities, temperatures, or consistencies. She doesn’t think it’s hard, but she also grew up with this bake. She and Sarah hang back. They won’t step in until further into the challenge, when the producers send them out. Right now is not a time to distract the bakers.

They all go through the recipes (good). Tony Higgin’s pencil comes from behind his ear, and he starts making notes. Most of them separate their eggs. (Smalls does not. Smalls is going to have a rough day.) Les uses his hands. Spot, standing behind him, makes a face, and pulls out three bowls.

Romeo beckons a producer over, with a dejected look. “I got yolk in my bowl.” He shows the faint glimmer of gold amid the sea of clear whites. “Four eggs in. Time to start over.”

Kath notices that Jack isn’t preheating the oven. He’s also in the process of lining his tube pan with butter and flour. Romeo considers it, and then does the same thing.

Smalls starts swearing, having realized she hasn’t pre-heated the over, either. Her pan is already lined. She continues to dump in flour, beating it impatiently. Her batter already looks deflated to Kath.
Anthony, Charlie, and Louis seem to be doing well. Anthony is shaking his flour onto a piece of wax paper, using a tin can with a handle attached to the side. Sifting flour isn’t important for most recipes, but it makes a difference here.

Charlie has his egg whites beating, and he’s in the process of folding in the flour, slowly.

Les is the first with his cake in the oven, but most of the rest follow quickly. Even Romeo has caught up.

The cakes come out both slower and faster than Kath would have advised. Some of the bakers had their ovens too hot, leaving a dark crust, but an under baked middle. Others have the temperature right, but are pulling their cakes prematurely.

Once again, Smalls and Romeo are in trouble. Romeo has his cake cooling in the wrong direction: with the bottom of the pan against the wire rack.

Tony, Jack, and Les have all started on their sauces. Kath wishes she could go in and steal the raspberry sauce that’s being made. But, if she tasted it, she knows her face would give something away. She glances at Sarah, and ducks out for a minute.

The gardens are a good place to go hide out, and Kath needs a few more minutes. She stares dormant rose bushes, still covered with white protective domes. With her father, she feels like a captive rosebush under one of the white cones.

Katherine hurries away from the roses. Rose... Lavender... Rosemary. Rosemary is wild, and astringent, and strong. Even with Sarah’s black thumb, and Kath’s inability to remember to water anything (herself included), there’s still a healthy rosemary bush on the fire escape of Sarah’s little studio. Katherine isn’t some hot house rose, who needs to be protected. Katherine is rosemary: she’s strong and powerful and useful.

Kath definitely doesn’t have to reapply her mascara as she ducks back into the tent. No, she hasn’t been crying. Not at all. She stands next to Sarah, so the camera can capture them together.

“Five minutes to find the sun!” It’s good that this is Sarah’s line, since Kath isn’t sure she can trust her voice.

The bakers rush to finish things. Charlie dips his finger into the raspberry sauce, smiling as he pours it into a bowl. Jack’s icing is too thick, and he’s spilled the sprinkles all over his bench. Romeo is looking around, comparing the size of his cake to those around him. He looks slightly green.

“Alright, time is up on your first technical challenge! Bring your cakes up to the altar, and place them behind your picture!” Kath’s voice is cheerful and steady. The smile is pasted on her face. Damn her father, classical training is helpful, no matter what you’re doing.

Charlie beckons her over. He’s as sunny as the cake is supposed to be, but his voice is hesitant. “Can you…?”

Charlie is independent. Kath remembers getting notes about his meeting with the producers. He’s also smart enough to not want a lap full of raspberry sauce, if it sloshes.

Kath scoops up the cake plate with a smile. (She totally doesn’t slosh sauce on herself in the process. She just… spritzed her wrist with raspberry sauce. Yep. That happened.) “Happy to.”

The photographers come in, while the kitchen staff comes in to clean up. The rest of the production
team (and a few of the contestants) carry in the high back chairs.

Charlie bites his lip, and looks up at the chairs. He and members of the production team have a quick, whispered conference. Part of Kath wants to eavesdrop, but she gets pulled into helping to order the bakers on their chairs. Finally, Charlie settles on the end, a pair of forearm crutches balanced between his knees. There had been a PA who was sent over to take them off stage, but Charlie’s expression had changed to thunderous so quickly that the PA had scurried off.

Kath and Sarah stand solemnly behind Joe and Medda as they go through the baker’s cakes.

The judges go through, pointing out flaws. This person greased their pan, so the cake didn’t rise properly (Smalls, Romeo, and Jack). Another didn’t get their eggs whipped high enough (Louis). The raspberry sauces are grainy, the icing is too thick, the icing is too thin, even the sprinkles are poorly distributed on some.

Joe and Medda go through and rank the bakers. Smalls comes in last, which causes Romeo to breath out a sigh of relief, until his name is called next. Then, Jack, Louis, Les, Anthony. When Charlie’s name is called for number two, he goes from picking at the rubber handles of his crutches to squeezing them. The smile he’s been wearing looks a little bit more relaxed: more natural and less feral. That leaves Spot in first.

When Hannah’s minion takes the cakes back to the green room, Katherine makes a point to take a piece of Louis’s. She cuts off the icing. She hasn’t liked it since she was a little girl: too sickly sweet. But, she bathes her piece in the raspberry sauce around the bottom of the caking. She pours the liquid berries onto her place, and her cake, until the cheap paper plate ia almost soaked through. And then, she goes and hides in her trailer.

The sunshine cake is as light and fluffy as she remembers, but her tears make vanilla sponge strangely salty.

**Showstopper Challenge**

It can be hard to find energy on the second day of the bake off, but Katherine musters everything she has. It’s important to be peppy through out. The three cups of very strong black tea she’s had to drink help. The competitors look some mixture of nervous and tired. She doesn’t envy the production assistants who have the difficult challenge of herding the bakers into the tent, and away from the coffee carafe.

Sarah opens the morning’s festivities. “Bakers, welcome to your first show stopper challenge! Today, Joe and Medda want you to make a chocolate celebration cake in four hours. It needs to be at least two layers, with a delicious filling in between. The cake should be decorated beautifully with a chocolate decoration. Oh, and everything should be edible!”

They open the round with their signature line.

“Ready…”

“Get set…”

“Bake!”

And, the competitors are off.

Kath circles the tent, looking for signs of trouble. She has a few competitors who she’s watching closely. When they got in this morning, Anthony Higgins was looking pale and spacy, rather than
bombastic. But, after coffee, his color is better, and he looks ready for the day. Maybe he’s just not a morning person. Then, there’s Les. Sarah said that Dave had texted her to say that Les fell asleep in the bus back to the hotel last night. And then, Dave had had to wake Les up so he could work on a project for US history on child labor in the 1880s and 1890s, because being on TV doesn’t excuse Les from high school. She knows both Anthony and Romeo have complicated designs, and those concern her, too. Hard bakes are well and good when you’re working in your familiar kitchen, with your familiar tools and your familiar counter space. They’re not so good when you’re working in the tent.

All around, the competitors are starting to make their batters. Most are doing one flavor, but a few are being brave and making multiple types of batter for their cakes. Jack has a chocolate and an orange batter he’s starting. They use a similar base, but he’s making them in separate batches. Anthony Higgins is promising a chocolate and vanilla checkerboard cake. And then, there’s Romeo. He’s not only mixing flavors, he’s mixing textures. He has a flourless chocolate cake that he’ll use for one layer, and then a Saint James’ cake, made mostly form almonds, for the other.

Kath reads through the description of Romeo’s signature cake twice, before she goes and finds a member of the production staff. She wants to know who the hell okayed his plan. Because, on the one hand, it is technically possible for a home cook to pull together a complicated, layered cake with two different recipes. On the other hand, its extremely unlikely under these conditions, unless the baker has four hands and a time turner. Romeo is already down a thumb and two fingers from mishaps yesterday.

Kara, in the pantry, says that Kenny, the director okayed the decision. “Asshole,” the assistant mutters under her breath.

For his showstopper challenge, Anthony is making a cake inspired by one of his great loves: games. He’ll have a three layer checkerboard cake, made from yellow and chocolate cake, and filled with buttercream and orange jam. He’ll ice the cake in orange-flavored buttercream, and top it with a chocolate chess piece and a chocolate playing card.

Kath is back on rounds with Medda and Joe. She follows them over to Charlie’s station, where he’s hard at work. He’s also started a genoise sponge. He’s got about half a dozen bowls of ingredients spread over his bench, already carefully measured. He seems to have his sponge under control (maybe more so than Smalls, who has just told Sarah she needs to start over). Kath worries that Charlie has bitten off more than he can chew with a chocolate collar and chocolate ruffles on top.

That said, Kath wonders if may the production team didn’t bite off more than they could chew with Charlie. She’s heard about the meeting he had with the production team, where he’d stood his ground with Ivan, Kenny, and Joe. Kath can’t remember the last person who has held their own again that unholy trio. Charlie had calmly schooled them on the American with Disabilities act, and layed out what “reasonable accommodation” would look like. Charlie doesn’t know it, but the meeting almost lost him his place in the competition. Kenny and Ivan had argued that it would be easier if they didn’t have to build a new bench for Charlie. The camera angles would be all wrong. They didn’t have time to figure out accommodation.

It had been Medda who came to Charlie’s rescue. She’d been there for his screen test, where he’d done better than 90% of the contestants they’d screened. His technical bake had been just this side of perfect. And, as he pointed out, he’d done it balanced on a pair of crutches. Medda had announced that Charlie Morris deserved the same chance to compete, full stop. Medda is lovely, but Medda is also not a woman who should ever be crossed.

As a result, Joe is being sulky and nasty. He’s coiled tightly: critical and lashing out. He asks whether Charlie will be making his own Creme Patissiere, and then criticizes the number of
complicated steps Charlie is taking. He asks whether the grand marnier syrup will be too strong, and then reminds Charlie that he doesn’t like alcohol.

And then, there’s the unairable bits, where Joe complains to Charlie about camera angles, and how he’s throwing the entire show off. The last is perhaps not unexpected: Joe is constantly aware of the way things look on film and the way that shapes public perception. Camera angles are different when you’re interacting with a competitor who is working at a different height bench. Joe used that as an excuse for not talk with Charlie on camera when Medda had mentioned it last night. Someone seems to have chastised him for it, though, and now, he’s taking that frustration out on the bakers.

(Kath and Sarah and Medda all think about camera angles, too, which is why they had a discussion with Ivan and the photography team last week. Joe was too busy: he was at his monthly appointment with Nunzio, his barber.)

After the judges walk away, she catches Charlie gritting his teeth as he folds clarified butter into his batter.

“Joe’s a jerk,” she says under her breath.

Charlie sighs dramatically enough that his bangs to float up, and then smiles. “Yeah, Is can tell. Doesn’t mean it’s not shitty.” He brightens. “But, Medda thinks I can do it.”

“Kath!” A production assistant interrupts to move her on and join Medda and Joe in their conversation with Les. It’s just as well, because she might have told him just how awesome Medda thinks he is.

Elizabeth is trying her spin on a classic american German chocolate cake. She’ll sandwich a creamy coconut and brown sugar pudding between two layers of rich chocolate cake flavored with dutch processed cocoa. In homage to The Bronx, where Elizabeth lives with her girlfriend, Ángelica, the cake will be decorated with chocolate cutouts of famous buildings from the borough.

At ninety minutes into the bake, most of the cakes are either emerging from the ovens, or the camera crews are hovering. They want to get shots of the contestants taking their cakes out of their oven. Already, they have plenty of film of the contestants just waiting. There was a charming shot of Les lying on his back, head tilted up to watch his cake from the underside.

Romeo and Louis “Blink” are the only two bakers who plan to put additional things in the oven. Romeo remade his almond cake, he didn’t like the initial batter. Now, it’s finally going in his 350º oven.

Louis, on the other hand, is putting meringues in. “For my magic mushrooms.” If Anthony’s smile is charming, and Sean’s glare is intimidating, Blink’s splits the difference as a little bit scary. It’s the kind of smile that suggests he’s tried (maybe sold?) other types of magic mushrooms. It would not be appropriate to ask that question on national television, at least not where someone could hear it. When Kath was younger, and perhaps less professional, she used to whisper that sort of thing to her scene partner, to see if she could get them to crack. Except, this seems less like “crack” and more like “arrested for crack”.

With their cakes cooling, most of the other bakers are working on their fillings.

Anthony Higgins is testing the color of red buttercream he made earlier. “Too dark,” he complains.

“A bit of a gamble?” Kath prompts. Anthony is making a game-themed cake. He’s got a checkerboard interior. He’ll decorate it with a chocolate playing card, and chocolate chess piece.
“Oh, I got a hot tip.” Anthony is a charmer, the kind of boy who has a smile as sweet as butter. “I’m betting I’ll be star baker this week. The red is snappy with the black and the white.”

Kath has some trouble reconciling the Tony who is there in front of her, grinning, with a baker who is making a checkerboard cake. His voice is loud and his actions are loud. But, his hands are deft and everything Kath has seen from him thus far has been precise. This is a hard bake, but he seems to have his time management skills perfected here.

Kath claims a spoonful of buttercream before she continues on to talk with other bakers. She hopes she doesn’t dye her tongue red. (That much dye will probably dye her tongue red.)

Kath catches Sarah circling the other side of the tent out of the corner of her eye. Spot is slowly, carefully, adding honey he has heated to a mixture of eggs. He looks nervous, like he’s waiting for them to curdle. Sarah has gone over to investigate, and she’s talking him through the process. She’s taken some of his honey to sample. For the first time, Spot looks vaguely relaxed on camera. (Kath again wonders how he got on, given that he’s constantly glaring.) She makes a note of the honey, to go investigate later.

Kath heads back to Louis “I told them to call me Blink, everyone calls me Blink” Ballatti. His cake is rolled in a tight spiral of parchment paper. He’s starting a chestnut puree for his filling. “Normally, I’d crack the chestnuts myself,” he confides to Katherine. “My brother Freddie and I, we knew it was almost Christmas time cause my Nana, she’d drag us into the kitchen and make us peel chestnuts. We’d be listening to Michael Buble and Frank Sinatra, and Bobby Dean, ‘cause she said their voices was dreamy, and we’d be burning out fingers off. The jar is easier. Expensive, but I don’t burn myself.”

Jack is a social worker, originally from Manhattan. Today, Jack is making a twist on a retro black forest cake. Instead of the traditional cherry flavor, Jack will use a creme de cassis syrup to add a berry flavor, and fill his cake with whipped cream and a mix of blackberries and raspberries.

By the three hour mark, most of the cakes are stacked, and at least dirty iced, and are awaiting decorations. Kath and Sarah are prowling the tent to check for bakers who are in trouble, and for those who are in a position to be slightly distracted.

Several bakers are working on the finicky process of tempering chocolate. They’re melting it in a double boiler, trying to get the chocolate to a goldilocks temperature where it gets magically shiny. A few degrees too high or too low, and their chocolate will be wrong. There are already a few people who were unhappy with their initial tempering efforts.

Blink is working two double boilers, one with white chocolate and the other with dark chocolate. He’s whisking with both hands, carefully breaking up the little pieces over so often. But, he takes a moment to flex for Kath and the cameras. It’s a funny moment, except that as he turns back to the stove, his left whisk ends up in the right double boiler, contaminating the white chocolate with the dark. Louis uses some unairable language, and moves to throw the white chocolate away.

Kath is starting to worry about Romeo… again. Or, more honestly, Kath has been concerned about Romeo throughout this bake, but as the time limit draws here, her concern grows. His chocolate has seized once, already, and he’s getting nervous. Oh, on camera, he’s all confidence. “I’ve never made a chocolate collar before,” he had admitted to the camera, with his flirty smile. “But, I figure there’s a first time for everything.”

Kath draws two conclusions from this. First, the person who assigned a female PA to question Romeo was smart. Second, Romeo is either a liar or cocky enough to be stupid.

Once the cute PA is gone and it’s just Kath and Romeo, his face falls. “I can’t do it.” The words
are quiet, and they’re desperate. “I can’t get the cake done.”

Kath opens her arms, so he can slot against her shoulder, if he’s so inclined. He comes and leans against her. She can feel his shaking breath as he tries to compose himself.

“You’re here. That means you’re already a good baker,” she reassures him. “And, now, you need to focus. What have you done and what do you need to do next?”

He takes a minute to think and swipe at his eyes, his body still pressed against hers. “I have the cakes cooling, they’re stacked with the mouse. I need to finish my collar, and then make some truffles. I want truffles around the base of my cake.” He goes on to list his tasks in order, his shoulders relax and his countenance grows lighter. Romeo is a person who needs a list and a process. This is good, Kath and Sarah can work with that.

Kath squeezes Romeo’s shoulders the way her big sister, Lucy, used to squeeze Kath’s, when Lucy was still…

Once she’s sure that Romeo will be alright, Kath moves up to chat with Spot. Spon Conlon has his chocolate disks in the freezer, and he’s making marzipan. Because he’s going to mold and paint marzipan bees. Because Spot Conlon keeps bees. Because bees are badass, and Brooklyn bees make the best honey in all of New York State, and maybe the whole world. He has bees because his roommate, Blue - who is a nerd - made an executive decision that they needed to keep bees a couple years ago. Not because they’re hipsters - fuck gentrification - but because bees are awesome and disappearing and as a responsible citizen, Blue thinks bee keeping is important.

Spot is normally kind of scary. He continues to glare at the camera. Spot is a lot less scary when he’s talking about his bees or his roommates.

Today, Louis is making a family favorite. His buche de noel is based on a recipe that’s been in his family for four generations. The rolled chocolate sponge will be filled with a chestnut buttercream, covered in ganache, and decorated with chocolate leaves and meringue mushrooms.

Before Kath knows it, the producers are motioning Sarah and her to the front to start counting down the remaining time.

Romeo is scrambling to get his cakes out of the refrigerator so he can wrap it. Romeo might be successful, and have a beautiful finished show piece. Or, his cake might collapse into a puddle of poorly set mouse. The possibilities seem equally to Kath and the production team, who hover close to capture any drama.

Jack pipes chocolate-flavored whipped cream swirls and carefully places a raspberry on each swirl. Absentmindedly, he reaches across his bench to where his creme de cassis syrup and his water bottle are sitting. There’s a production assistant running around, reminding the bakers to drink water. A dehydrated baker collapsing would make for excellent drama on TV, but would make for a terrible weekend for everyone in the tent.

Except, that Jack is so focused on his berries and piping that he picks up the wrong cup. He takes a sip, and keeps baking, seemingly unaware that he’s drinking his alcohol-infused syrup.

Race is balancing his chocolate playing card against the molded chess piece he’s made. The black king and jack of spades, Kath notes absentmindedly. He’s been quiet and focused, using his scale and this trusty pencil. It’s a weird contrast between the playful personality between bakes.

Louis is down to the wire, frantically dipping a few of his meringue mushroom caps into his tempered chocolate, before placing them beside his christmas log. They join a chocolate holly and
ivy that he made, and small layer of chocolate maple leaves. There might be a chocolate marijuana leaf on his bench, too, when Kath goes over to investigate. It might be there. It might also be a leggy maple leaf. Louis is a hockey fan. He did say that one of his best christmas gifts was the year his Grandma took him to see the Maple Leafs play the Rangers. It’s probably an homage to that.

Les is the first to successfully get his chocolate collar wrapped around his cake. He’s adding the chocolate leaves with a care and precision that other sixteen year olds use to paint models. He may have learned that from his other brother: David probably had models in his childhood bedroom. David definitely has models, high on the bookshelf in his current bedroom. Kath saw them when she, Sarah, and Dave met up for drinks last year.

Smalls is arranging animals around the edge of her cake. They look vaguely camelid. Kath suspects llamas. Sarah goes over to investigate, laughing as Smalls tells her they’re goats.

“Alright bakers, time to finish your bake and alpaca everything up. Time’s up!”

Kath thinks the announcement startles her as much as it startles the bakers. The move back, panting as though they’ve run a race. And, to some degree, they have. Several of the bakers do an impromptu jog around the tent, a cool down lap if you will. Les paces in the corner, brows furrowed and eyes downcast. David Jacobs, who has been hanging around with the PAs all day, goes over and says something inaudible to him.

And then, the cameras come back on, the contestants get reigned in, and the judging commences.

Romeo gets drawn first this time, which is likely a blessing. He didn’t get his chocolate wrapper on, so his cake is iced in buttercream. It looks rushed. His fragile mouse has, up until now, been held together by the cold weather, a wish, a prayer, and not being handled. Of course, the act of moving the cake, and its mouse, cause the later to collapse into a pool of chocolate goo. Joe eyes it, warily. Medda takes the knife, and cuts into the leaning tower of over-ambitious cake. It squelches, a sound Kath really hopes someone captured. If they didn’t, tumblr will probably gif it and caption it anyway.

Romeo looks nervous during the judging, and Medda reassures him. “It’s messy, but we ultimately judge on taste.”

Except that… poor Romeo’s cakes don’t have great texture. They’re both dense, and they’re the kind of rich that makes your eyes want to roll back in your head because it’s so intense. Joe and Medda go on to talk with Romeo about his flavor combinations, the way each of the cakes taste (or don’t taste) on their own, and provide constructive criticism. Kath knows that sometimes Joe forgets the “constructive” part, and it just feels like an attack.

The judges move on to Charlie. This time, he asks Sarah to carry his cake up to the judging table. Joe frowns, and makes some snide comment about how it’s not Sarah’s fault if Charlie’s cake collapses. The change in Charlie’s expression is almost imperceptible: a furrowing of his brow so small that Kath isn’t sure she saw what she saw.

Luckily, there is less to criticize about the cake. If he wasn’t quite such a ball of sunshine, Kath might have wondered if Charlie had sold a soul to finish the cake. A cake that wanted several more hours to chill and set was accomplished quickly and efficiently in an almost impossible four hours. And, each step has been done well. The sponge cakes are baked, and he’s done amazing chocolate work. Expect that Joe doesn’t like the “mouth feel” of the fresh strawberries. He actually uses the words, “mouth feel”, to describe the sensation.
Joe’s dislike of cakes with alcohol continues with Jack and Small’s cakes. He thinks Jack used too much creme de cassis syrup in his cake, and the only flavor he can get is blackberry. He doesn’t like coffee flavor the kahlúa imparted to Small’s chocolate sponge. Medda gives more positive reviews.

Les’ cake isn’t pretty enough: his chocolate wasn’t well tempered. His praline adds a nice crunch, but his sponge is overbaked.

Spot’s cake is remarkable. “I thought it was going to be too sweet,” Joe admits after taking a bite. “But, you’ve gotten an amazing balance.”

Spot grins - not smirks, not leers, not smiles - grins. “My girls do a good job.”

“Your girls?”

Spot’s grin gets feral. Because Kath can already tell that Spot has a dial that varies between of “intimidating” and “terrifying” with the very rare display of something more genuine. “My attack bees.”

Oh God, he actually said that on television. Because he’s Spot Conlon, and he thinks he can get away with it. Kath spends the rest of the judging focused on not laughing, because, seriously, who mentions their attack bees on air?

**Final Judgement**

Sarah and Kath sit with Joe and Medda at a table covered in cake slices, discussing the various offerings. The bakers are off, being interviewed, and probably eating enough cake they’ll be sick. Kath watched as Jack lead Romeo off, hand around his shoulders. Les is walking close behind, trying to model his behavior on Jack’s. David trails after his brother. Charlie and Spot are headed back together, thick as thieves. Louis, Anthony, and Smalls have huddled together. Kath would rather be following the bakers to eat cake, than sit here, discussing their futures.

“Let’s start with the bottom, and then move onto something more positive.” Kath instructs.

“Romeo,” Joe says flatly. “He’s had a bad weekend. His cupcakes were, well, they were almost inedible. Tasted like soap. Raw, undercooked soap.”

“Second to last in the technical,” Sarah points out.

Medda sighs. “He was. And that show stopper. The idea was ambitious, but…”

“Execution was poor,” Joe agrees. This is being filmed, its likely to be broadcast, they have to make it sound good. Behind closed doors, Joe will let Medda know what he really thinks. “There were other people with ambitious cakes: Charlie, Anthony, Les, Louis. Most other people had more ambitious bakes, and they were more successful.”

“I don’t think Elizabeth was ambitious enough,” Medda opines. “Especially because it wasn’t executed well. Classic German Chocolate cake,”

“Not, in fact German,” Sarah interjects helpfully.

“An American classic,” Medda agrees. “And very tasty when done well. But, it was not done well.” She proceeds to dissect the individual flaws of the cake for several minutes, Joe joining her. The editors will cut together the sound bites, later.
“And, the top?” Sarah asks.

Medda glances at Joe. “I think Charlie has done astoundingly well. I didn’t expect his cake to come together as well as it did.”

“No,” Joe agrees, almost grudgingly. “That was far too ambitious for a home baker in the time limit. He’s lucky he pulled it off.” Joe seems to discount Charlie. “It answered what we were asking for. It was a chocolate cake. A really chocolatey, chocolate cake.”

“Sean was more creative?” Sarah prompts.

“Oh Honey, that honey…” Medda gestures toward the piece of cake. Some thoughtful producer has put the marzipan bee on top.

“The balance of flavors was good,” Joe agrees. “And his performance in the technical was impeccable.”

Kath and Sarah stand in front of the assembled bakers. Once again, they’re lined up on those high stools, awaiting a decision: Jack, Romeo, Les, Smalls, Louis, Anthony, Spot, and Charlie. They look nervous, and she doesn’t blame them. Romeo is biting his lip. Les is worrying at his fingernails. Jack is tracing a design on his jeans. Anthony plays with the pencil between his fingertips, flipping it back and forth. This is one of the hardest parts of each weekend. She’d like to keep them all here, if she could. She doesn’t always want to keep people.

Kath and Sarah take their positions at the front of the tent, with Joe and Medda positioned slightly behind and to the left.

“Well, lady and gentlemen, Joe and Medda have made their decision.” Sarah has the first half of the results. “It’s my pleasure to announce the star baker. This baker’s delicate use of flavors buzzed its way into our judges heart. Congratulations… Sean!”

Spot smiles again, a genuine smile. Charlie squeezes his hand, and Anthony squeezes his shoulder.

“Unfortunately, my news is bad.” Kath steps forward. “As you know, we can’t bring all of you with us into next week. The baker who will not be joining us next week is… Romeo.” She watches as his face collapses. And then, she and Sarah are there and pulling him into a hug. And, the other contestants are crowding around Romeo.

The cameras close in, getting the last shot.

**Sunshine Cake**

(Technical Challenge)

**Cake**

5 or 6 eggs, separated
3/4 c. water
1 1/3 c. sugar
1 3/4 c. sifted cake flour
1 t. Real vanilla extract
1/4 t. Cream of tartar
Pinch of salt

Preheat the oven to 325ºF.
Beat together the egg yolks, water and salt until foamy.
Gradually add the sugar.
Fold in cake flour and vanilla extract, slowly.
Beat egg whites with cream of tartar until foamy. Fold into batter.
Pour the batter into a tube pan, and bake for 1 hour.
Cool inverted on a wire rack.

Remove the cake from the pan with a sharp knife when fully cool.

The cake can be decorated with a light lemon icing (lemon juice, powdered sugar, milk) and sprinkles. Serve with the raspberry sauce (below).

Theoretically, this serves 12. As a meal, serves 1-4.
Leftover cake can be stored at room temperature under plastic wrap for up to 5 days.
Undecorated, wrapped cakes can be stored in the freezer for up to 2 months.

**Sauce**

1/2 c. sugar
1 c. water
1 pt. Raspberries
lemon juice

Combine the sugar, water, and raspberries in a saucepan and simmer. Adjust the balance of lemon, sugar, and berries to taste.
Puree into a thick sauce using a blender.

Leftover sauce should be stored in the refrigerator.

*Adapted from a family recipe.*

Chapter End Notes

Most of the recipes I've used here are combinations of existing recipes, or based on a composite of several sources. However, I'm not terribly creative, and so some cakes are based directly on single sources. Jack, Spot, and Les all make cakes from *The Cake Bible* by Rose Levy Bernbaum (ISBN:978-0-688-04402-6). Crutchie's cake is drawn from *Baking with Julia* by Dorie Greenspan (ISBN: 0-688-14667-0). Small's cake is based on the German Chocolate cake in *There's always room for more chocolate* (ISBN: 978-0-8478-4863-8). Additionally, I drew inspiration from these books and *The Best Recipe* (ISBN: 978-0-936184-38-8) and *Meringue* (ISBN: 978-1-4236-2581-0). Other recipes and recipe outlines were found on google and by flipping through old family recipes.

In a completely unrelated turn of events, I totally haven't raided the entire cake baking section of my local public Library!. Nope. Not me.

I am also shameless. I'm going to keep writing this, because it's an excellent excuse to say I did something while I wait for my visa to start my new job, but comments and kudos are always lovely. So, stop by, say "hi" if you've made it to this point, tell me about your day, or make suggestions about what kind of pizza each Newsie should make for Bread Week.
Chapter Summary

Part 1 in a two part Very Jacobs centric chapter. In this half, Les bakes some bread, David meets a nice boy, and Esther makes an appearance in text messages.

Or, David "baking is magic" Jacobs tries to get his head around the first day of Bread Week.

Chapter Notes

Tonight's episode comes in a two part format, and comes from a very different perspective than the first.

Warnings


This week, our seven remaining bakers will take on three challenges that rock them, roll them, and force them to take a new twist on bread. And, that starts right now, on the Great New York Bake off!

David will never admit it, but he hates driving. His parents are New Yorkers, born and bred. They’ve never lived anywhere but the city, but they wanted more opportunities for their children. And, they were convinced the ability to safely get behind the wheel of a two ton battering ram capable of hitting speeds well over 100 miles per hour was the answer was part of “more opportunities”. David would have been perfectly happy to take the MTA for the rest of his life, even if it was never on time. But, no, they insisted.

Therefore, he’s not so secretly grateful when Jack “Jackie Boy” Kelly offers to pick Les and him up and drive them out to the Hamptons for the second week of competition. It means not being on the freeway during rush hour. It means fewer carbon emissions into the environment. It means sharing a car with Jack Kelly.

Unfortunately, Jack has done most of his driving out in New Mexico, where he used to live. When Spot - his name couldn’t have really been “Spot”, despite the well utilized “Hello My Name Is” stickers, but David doesn't have anything better to go on, so he supposes he’ll have to call him Spot - when Spot asked Jack about where he’d been, Jack said New Mexico with this weird half-nostalgic sigh. David has never been to New Mexico. David has never left the east coast. Why would anyone want to go to a state that starts with “I” and produces corn? This is mostly irrelevant, except for the fact that people in New Mexico (and probably states that start with “I” and produce corn) do not drive the way people in New York drive. Jack does things like check his mirrors, use his turn signal, and leave more than half a car length between himself and the car in front of him.
He even slows down for motorists on the side of the road, rather than roaring past them at ninety-five miles an hour.
It’s weird to be in the front seat of someone’s car and not feel the need to use the passenger side brake.

As they make their way along the Long Island Express at a very reasonable pace, Les chatters to Jack about his life. Jack seems to have a way to draw out his younger companion, and to get him to talk about things David never would have thought to ask. Over the course of the drive, he learns his younger brother’s favorite author (John Krackow… David didn’t even know the kid liked nonfiction), the best thing to eat in New York (bacon burritos, shortly followed by the knishes their mother makes), and that Les quit the track team and has been hanging out after school at some girl’s apartment.

David tries to get information out of Jack, who just shrugs. “I work with kids a lot, you know. I like them. And, Les is a good’un.”
Ummm… okay?

David is glad to climb out of the car when they get to the hotel, and go up to hide in the room he and Les are sharing. Boys are confusing.
Les drops his sports bag in the closet, and bounces twice on the queen bed by the door. “Get ready, Dave! It’s going to be a good weekend.”

The Signature Challenge

Saturday morning comes way too early for a Saturday. Once again, the producers urged them to go to dinner, and so, once again, they were out way later than they should have been. Les enjoyed it, but Les is an extrovert. Introvert David found he liked the group, too, but it was intense.

As the competitors crowd around the craft services table to get coffee, David notices that “Hello my name is SPOT” also has “Hello my name is THE MOTHER FUCKING KING OF BROOKLYN”. David thinks he won star baker last week, so it’s probably fair. David made sure to arrive early enough to make and present Spot with another sticker: “Hello my name is DEAD IF I EVER OFFER LES MONEY TO DRINK BEER AGAIN”. (As a responsible guardian, David had confiscated the “I OWE LES $20” sticker from Spot’s back and thrown it in the trash. If money does change hands, it will go somewhere responsible. Like Les’ college fund. Or to pay for gas for this little adventure.)

Despite “Hello my name is RACE”’s insistence that he wasn’t going to owe anyone any more money, he has acquired two stickers since yesterday: “Hello my name is I OWE SPOT $10” and “I OWE BLINK $5”. Jack has been plastered with one of the later stickers as well. The promissory notes join the “I OWE SPOT $5” sticker already attached to the mirror, carefully amended in pink glitter pen with the name of the person who owes the money and the date the bill was issued.

As he’s looking at the mirror, Les shoves his shoulder and point. On the next mirror over, someone has taken a dry erase marker and written something.

```
my nyme is spot
and when I bak
i make a lot
of bad ass cayke
```
Spot grins his shit-eating grin, and shoots a picture of the unsigned poem. David joins him.

The production assistants - Simon and Kara - come to get them, so the camera crew can get a scenic shot of the now seven bakers walking down to the tent, with the massive mansion behind them. David pities their position running herd on the bakers. He wonders how much of the assignment is punishment for past transgressions. It’s hard enough for him to corral one slightly rambunctious sixteen year old; he can’t imagine trying to manage seven bakers who all have minds of their own.

He watches as the bakers cross the green field, a tight pack of people moving in formation. It’s drizzling, and its charitable to call the weather “spring”-like. They’re wrapped up in jackets and scarves. He suspects a few have chosen not to comb their hair, since there is an impressive collection of hats. David is bundled up in his winter jacket and has pulled on a toque he got in Canada last year. (He feels pretentious when he calls it that, but he also likes the way the word feels in his mouth.)

He and Charlie (“Hello my name is CRUTCHIE. YES YOU CAN CALL ME THAT.”) drive over in Charlie’s van. Crutchie is a better driver than Jack, which is to say that he drives with traffic at five miles over and signals after he’s started to merge lanes. His van is about twelve kinds of fantastic. The star stickers on the back window form real constellations: Cassiopeia, Orion, and Ursa Major pointing toward a bright blue star. Crutchie explains matter of factly that it’s the best way to transport his roommates, who don’t drive as a rule. David privately thinks Crutchie’s roommates are sane people from the tristate area, but as the dubious owner of a New York State driver’s license, there isn’t much he can say. Crutchie mentions he’s considering taking out the back entirely and converting it a camper so he and his roommate, Albert, can drive down to Orlando. That’s why he bought the van and had it converted. Albert is the only roommate who can drive, and he and Crutchie have never been to Florida. They’re gonna meet Mickey and get themselves some wands. David wants to tag along.

The production crew gets an amazing set of shots of the competitors putting on their aprons, which Les almost manages to ruin when he bursts out laughing as he unfolds his garment. (They’ll probably just cut him out in post production.) After they get their shot, Les slides over to David and sticks the “Hello my name is LES MISERABLES” on his older brother’s shirt.

The challenge today is to make a dozen identical rolls in three hours. Sarah and Kath make some joke about it being time to rock’n’roll, because half the time they make puns and half the time they make innuendos. David just has to sit and laugh because it’s his sister and her girlfriend, but, also, they’re really funny. Sarah has always been the haha kind of funny, and David was the weird kind of funny. (For the record, he was, but only he and Sarah are allowed to say so.)

As Les’ chaperone, 65% of his job is to be present and in case something goes wrong with the kid. This means he spends a lot of time sitting, watching. He spends a good quarter of his time worrying that someone will figure out that Sarah Jacobs is related to David and Les Jacobs and they will all get kicked out of the competition. Specifically, that Sarah will lose this job, and that Les will be asked to pay back whatever was spent to get him this far in the competition. Another 5% of the responsibility is making sure none of the baked goods are poisoned. Except the
chocolate ones. Because David kind of hates chocolate. Coffee is fine, but chocolate? Not so much his thing. That’s why it’s only 5% his responsibility to follow up on what Joe and Medda have done to ensure Les’ safety.

The final 5%? David is human. There are some very attractive people in the tent.

The dozen rolls start out normally enough. David, his parents, their neighbors, and of Les’ friends have eaten so many of his challah rolls in the past few weeks that David thinks he could make them in his sleep. (David cannot make them in his sleep. David once fucked up boxed brownie mix. David is pretty sure baking is witchcraft.)

David watches patiently as Les heats his milk and his butter together on the stove as he starts mixing flour. He checks to see if Les has it under control. Les claims he does, and shoos David away. To be honest, David isn’t sure he’d know what out of control was unless things were exploding, burning, or Les told him. His younger brother doesn’t like David watching him: he says it makes him nervous. So, David makes a lap of the tent.

Jack, stationed behind Les, is already kneading his bread on the table top. He’s got flour everywhere: on the board, on his apron, and up his arms to his shoulders. Jack’s black t-shirt has an art print in the center, half obscured by the apron. Across the top, there’s a small, scrubby pine outlined against a sky.

Smalls is working her dough, too. Sarah and Kath have come over to talk, asking about the process and making jokes about aggression. Smalls identifies it as aggression against the patriarchy. This delights Sarah and Kath no end, and both demand sticky high fives, since elbow bumps simply cannot capture the awesomeness that is Smalls. It doesn’t matter the three of them all have to go wash their hands, they do it anyway.

On the other side of the tent, the judges interrogate Crutchie about his loaf and his gluten content. He’s cheerful about answering their questions, but he’s also firm with the male judge, Pulitzer. Crutchie has his bread in a mixer, but he’s pulled off a ball to show them. Medda quirks an eyebrow, but Crutchie continues what he’s doing.

The judges and hosts continue through the tent, and honestly David has almost no idea what’s going on. He looks around, and wishes he could have his phone is the sub tent where he and the harried production assistants spend their time.

...Where he spends his time, because the production assistants are way too busy to actually sit in the tent and instead are engaged in activities like asking Smalls about something called the Window Pane stage or hauling in yet another carafe of coffee. In one brief lived moment of quiet - the eye of the production hurricane - Kara told him a horror story about The Time There Was No Coffee. Someone else - long disappeared from the production company - who had arranged food for one of Mr. Pulitzer’s events at a hotel. Pulitzer had shown up at the hotel, and all had been well during the first arranged break. During a meeting, he’d slipped out to get more coffee, only to discover the staff taking away the carafe. Pulitzer had impressed upon the staff that it didn’t matter what it cost, there would be coffee. It would be fresh and in constant supply. Then, he’d summarily fired the PA. So, Kara and Simon are very careful about making sure there is always coffee.

Most bread has to do something called “proofing” which Les tried to explain to David once in terms he’d understand. The only two classes David ever failed were seventh grade home ec and freshman biology, and so Les’ explanation went over his head. Practically, it means letting your bread sit in a special box while you sit around and do nothing, or go to the bathroom, or go find your phone, or pester people. They’ve got between half and hour and an hour, so there’s not really time to haul ass back to the production trailer, unless you’re Race, in which case, you have a quiet,
frantic conversation with Simon, who ferries you back in a golf cart.

Les goes with Smalls to get coffee, and David stands there waiting like a jackass, until Jack comes over and slaps him on the back. “How’s it going, Davey?”

He shrugs. “It goes.”

“It goes?” Echos Jack, incredulous. “Last week, you was talking a mile a minute about stuff. And this week, ‘it goes?’”

“Last week, you were asking me why I didn’t try your chocolate cake, and then you were shocked when I told you I didn’t like chocolate.”

“Yeah, well, there ain’t no chocolate this week, so you’se gonna try my bread?” Jack prompts. A timer sounds, and he looks down. “Shit, gotta run!”

The rest of the bakers stream into the tent shortly thereafter, and the production crews circle back in as the “proofed” bread start appearing. Jack, Blink, Smalls and Spot all pull out well risen lumps of dough - or at least what David assumes well risen lumps of dough should look like. They look kind of like Sarah’s knee when she was in basketball and sprained it so badly she was on crutches for a week: soft and pale and squishy.

Crutchie checks his drawer with a sigh, and pulls at his beanie. David can hear him telling a camera that his dough is under proofed.

Racer is five minutes behind the other guys, and he slips in quickly. His hands twitch a little bit as he pulls out his dough - risen over the sides of the bowl. He’s quick to punch the air out.

And then, there’s Les. David’s little brother is staring into his bowl, looking like he might cry. Les doesn’t cry - hasn’t cried - for years. David supposes he cried when he was a baby or a toddler, but even as a little boy, Les didn’t cry. David... David cries in private. He breaks down with his family. Les never does. David desperately wants to go stand with his brother, wants to tell Les that everything will be okay. He can’t. He hasn’t given permissions to be on camera. And, given how many cameras are circling, he can’t do it.

There’s nothing David can do, but Sarah and Kath don’t have the same kind of restrictions. Production snags Sarah, and sends her to Les. The older Jacobs exchange panicked looks over Les’ head, but there’s nothing they can do now. (Over Les’ head is metaphorical at his point: he’s been taller than Sarah for at least three years, and will likely surpass David soon.) David prays that this is Sarah Keating, and not Sarah Jacobs. Normally, he hates the way his sister has compartmentalized herself into being those two women. Right now, it feels like a promise of salvation.

He’s playing with his phone (which is forbidden, but he has it on absolutely silent) when the messages start coming through.

11:27 am Mom: David, honey, have you heard from Sarah recently? She hasn't texted me back, and it's been almost a week. Kath won't respond either.

David's parents are quite insistent that their children contact them regularly. Regularly means a twice a day heartbeat text, but at least a weekly phone conversation. There were points in college where they threatened to cut off Sarah's phone, and then her tuition because "For all we know, you've frozen to death in a ditch in Buffalo and someone else is impersonating you." Facetime and Skype have been a gift to keep his parents calm.
Except, David knows why Sarah hasn't been calling or texting for the past couple weeks. Communication with any of them - David, Les, or their parents - could be seen as cheating. Even if the text is something along the lines of “I'm not dead” and “Cell service isn’t good here, I’ll call and text when I can”.

Because, clearly, those are sinister ways for Sarah to communicate unknown information to Les.

He goes to text back, but his mom has already started again.

11:29 am **Mom**: I'm going to try calling Kath. Kath should know where she is. They are roommates. They probably have a calendar.

Kath and Sarah aren't exactly roommates. Or, David, at least, has never had quite as much inclination to kiss his roommate as Kath and Sarah do.

11:32 am **Me**: I'm sure they're fine

11:33 am **Me**: She's probably busy, work maybe

11:33 am **Me**: I talked to them yesterday. They're working a job and don't have a lot of service

The lie to make his mother feel better and back off for a while still feels uncomfortable, but he does it anyway. Because David loves his mother, but sometimes, there are things his mother doesn't need to know.

11:32 am **Mom**: If you see her again, tell her to call me...

David and Les have spent months trying to explain to their mom why "..." comes across as passive aggressive in text messages. They still haven't convinced her.

11:33 am **Mom**: And, tell Les we love him and good luck

David stares at his phone in confusion, then resigns himself to accepting this is one of those discussions that he can't win.

11:34 am **Me**: I love you too, Ma

11:35 am **Mom**: 😍❤️️ [bread emoji]

Between his mom, his sisters, his brother, and the impending consequences...

He feels his chest tightening, and his breath moving up until the air is caught just below his clavicles. He can feel his heartbeat in his wrists, but his hands are rapidly disappearing. He needs to leave. He’s getting angry.

David doesn’t like to admit it, but he was a kid with a temper. He punched his way into the principal's office almost enough times that he punched his way to a new school. Instead, he got in school suspension and little kid anger management from the school shrink. The thing that made the situation hard for the shrink was that there were no good reasons for him to be angry. The thing that made it hard for David was that there were a lot of good reasons for him to be angry: the shrink just didn’t see them. So, David kept getting angry, and then kept getting into fights, and it was a vicious cycle.

David still gets angry. He gets fucking furious. Like, lie on the floor and scream furious because he
can’t find any other way to get the feelings out. Like yell at his classmates in a group project to get their shit together and then do the project himself mad. Like decide to throw a fucking rally to fight the unfairness of the system mad. At least he hasn’t thrown a punch since he was ten years old.

He credits and blames his dad for his temper. Mayer has always been hot to anger. Esther simmers, and goes cold and quiet. Except with Sarah. But, both his sister and his mom say that’s different. Les simmers and ices people out, like their mom. But, David got his flashpan temper from his dad. And so, he got his suggested coping skills from his dad, after one of those special father-son talks that involved making him feel very grown up before hitting him with hard truths.

So, he does what his dad suggested as he feels his temper rising. He decides that he can walk away and things will be okay. And then, he can work out why he’s angry. And, even though that won’t solve the problem, it will make him feel more in control. It will give him space to “make good choices”. (He’s still not sure who thought it was a good idea to let his parents watch Mean Girls because they keep parroting it back incorrectly at the wrong times.)

And, that unbidden thought of his parents and Tina Fey and making good choices makes him chuckle. And, humor makes the anger a little easier to bear.

They’re already most of the way through the judging by the time he gets back - he must have been gone longer than he thought.

Joe and Medda are praising Smalls’ bread: it has a strong, bold flavor and a nice crumb. Baking with dark flour is hard: you can’t rely on color to determine when the bread is done. But, Smalls has timed it perfectly, and her dainty rolls are well risen and perfectly baked.

The judges move up to stand next to Jack. It seems odd that Smalls would be judged ahead of the guy in front of her, but he remembers that last week, they’d selected positions at random. Jack’s roll is simple: whole wheat and honey. Joe complains that the rolls are slightly underproofed, and Jack nods, accepting the criticism.

They descend on Les last. David feels his stomach clench. Sarah is the host accompanying this week: Kath did last week, and so it appears to be Sarah’s turn. He’s stationed close to Les, just out of the camera’s line of sight. From his position, he’s close enough to see his sister’s face. Sarah is a professional, her poker face is almost perfect. But, David has know her all of his life, and the vast majority of hers. Sarah wears her stress in the tiny muscles under her eyes. She’s schooled her jaw to hang loose, her eyebrows won’t furrow unless she lets them, but the tightness under her eyes says more to David than anything else could.

Les stands at his bench, looking nervous. He’s been looking nervous throughout the judging, but David doesn’t quite understand the scope of the problem until he looks down at Les’ bench. David knows what the challah rolls are supposed to look like. David has been eating challah almost his entire life, and so David knows how it’s supposed to look. And, even if it hadn’t been one of his first introduction to solid food, Les had been making the rolls nonstop.

At home, Les had rolled each piece of round, swollen dough out into a snake, and formed it into a knot. The rolls aren’t knotted today, they’re more like awkward deflated pretzels. At home, Les looks triumphant when he takes the bread out of the oven. Here, Les looks unsure and afraid: two expressions he rarely wears. Never the Les, the younger boy faces his fears. He grits his teeth and holds back the tears and Joe tears into the bread, and then won’t eat it. David can understand: with all the eggs, he won’t eat the raw bread, either.
It’s lucky that Les is the last, and that they break for lunch immediately afterward. Les comes running over, and David enfolds him in a hug. It’s not as good as what Esther would have given, because Esther’s hugs are the best. But, Esther is not here, and David is, and so the responsibility falls to him.

The camera crew is glaring, and so David releases his not so little brother, and whispers in his ear, “Go see Kath.”

Les swipes his eyes and his nose on the back of his hand, and goes back in the tent to follow the command. David wishes he could have sent Les to Sarah. But, they’re all careful about this situation: it’s too dangerous. Kath is comforting, but she doesn’t have Sarah’s training in going full Mama Bear. It’s a sight to behold: the intensity of his sister echoing the intensity of their mother. When Sarah is home, she yields to Esther, but David can’t imagine what it might be like with two sisters: the intensity of a pair of Jacobs women in stereo might be too close to a force of nature.

The bakers, hosts, and judges bundle back into their coats, and turn toward the production trailers and lunch. David showly ushers Les up the hill. He misses the days when his brother was young and smaller and David could flip him up into a piggyback ride. Instead, they start the long, cold trudge toward the Rainbow Room.

A hand on his elbow starts David. “What the --”

“Com’on.” Jack tugs him over. “Crutchie said he’d drive us. If we squeeze, we should all fit.”

“He has seats for four: the two in the front and the second row bench.” It would be irresponsible to put his younger brother in a car without a seatbelt.

Race hustles over, the cold rain standing out against his sweater. “The probability of hypothermia is way higher than the probability of an accident. Crutchie is a safe driver.”

Jack snorts.

“David?” Les gives him the puppy dog eyes. Les’ puppy dogs are hard to resist.

“Davey?” Jack has pretty good puppy dog eyes, too.

“Yeah, Davey?” Race does not have a good begging face.

David throws up his hands.

The inside of the van is crowded and smells a lot more like Human! than it did when he and Crutchie drove down that morning. David gets put in the front passenger’s seat, in deference to both his insistence on a seatbelt and his height. Smalls sits tailor style between the front seats, in a space where a weird fold-down cup holder is supposed to go. The space so narrow that her knees are almost level with David’s. She’s hooked her phone up to Crutchie’s tape deck and she’s playing a jazz cover of *Stacy’s Mom* by Fountains of Wayne. Les is pushed up against the driver’s side window on the bench; Jack had made a big show of buckling the younger boy in to comfort David. Les is smooshed because Jack and Blink are attempting to share a single seat. It’s so unsuccessful that eventually, Blink ends up laying across the other boy’s laps in a style reminiscent of a greek goddess. Spot and Race are behind David’s seat, sitting in the aisle.

“Dude,” Race’s voice is muffled by something, “move your fucking foot.”

“Get off your phone, asshole,” Spot shoots back.
There’s a quiet commotion, the noises covered by Jack, Blink and Les giggling. Smalls tucks up her knees more, and rotates herself in the tiny space so she can look back and see what’s happening.

Even Crutchie glances back, and then checks the side of the road. “Stop fighting, or you can get out and walk.”

“Don’t you have to stop the car first?” Les pips up.

“Nope, all them doors are electric,” the driver crows.

Even though they’re going less than 20 miles an hour on empty dirt roads and the house is still in sight, the back of the van gets quiet. No one - not even the producers - say anything when the eight of them emerge from the van like it’s some clown car.

Les sidles up to his brother in the general confusion and leans in close. David can feel fingers in his jacket pocket. “Sarah says you need to talk. Tonight.”

David’s breath catches in his throat, again.

**Technical Challenge**

Les is still somewhat clingy as they walk back from lunch. However, Les appears to be glued more closely to Jack than to David. He’s walking in the older boy’s shadow, asking questions at a mile a minute about New Mexico, Albuquerque, and Breaking Bad. Jack deflects the conversation from the show about drugs, and instead distracts Les with Roswell, and speculation about the number of national labs. David spends the walk hovering, and trying not to be jealous. He’s always been Les’ boring older brother, never worth hero worshiping.

Sarah and Kath get up in front of the tent, Joe and Medda alongside them. David notes that Kath stands as far away from Joe as she possibly can without anyone actually saying anything about it to her. He’s noticed that Kath avoids Joe much in the same way Sarah has been avoiding Les.

“Well, thank you for that sage advice,” Kath says. “And now..”

Joe and Medda take their leave to go off wherever they go. They probably have person trailers that don’t smell vaguely like mildew and stale bread.

“And now, competitors, Joe and Medda want you make… a loaf of cinnamon swirl bread! You
have four hours to make your twist on this classic!” Sarah’s voice carries over the tent.

Sarah can be quiet when they’re at home, but she can project over a room without a mike. David suspects she learned it back in middle school when their mom liked to volunteer them to run the daycare at their synagog. It counted as community service or something, and it meant that Esther had a few hours to talk with her friends with any of her children asking for attention. Devious, really. But then again, all of Les’ deviousness (and any that David might be keeping deep underwraps) came from their mother.

David finds a corner of the tent and settles himself down. He’s still, well, if he’s honest, he’s still sulking because Les likes Jack better. Les doesn’t exactly hero worship David, but David still gets big brother points. He’s an adult in Les’ life who isn’t a parent. It’s a little hard to watch Les latch onto someone else. Jack is so much more charismatic than David...

“Penny for your thoughts?” PA Simon settles on a folding chair next to David.

David starts. “Ummm…”

Simon cups his hands around a styrofoam cup of coffee. “This one is hard. It’s about time management and precision.”

“Huh?” David is feeling inarticulate. Maybe it’s the cold. Doesn’t cold slow your synapses?

“I went to culinary school,” Simon answers the question written on his face. “A few of us did. I don’t know how I ended up here - I guess I thought TV hours would be better than a kitchen.” He laughs quietly, a humorless huff. “But, Medda made us go through this: Me, Bootsie, an’ Ben.”

Simon looks around the tent and relaxes a bit into his seat, bringing the cup of coffee up to his lips. “I ain’t going to tell you anything before they do it, and its not like he’d listen to your baking advice if you did…” The PA considers. “So, I’m gonna tell you how to make this right.”

David cocks an eyebrow, an expression he’d spent more hours than he cares to admit trying to perfect.

Simon takes this for a ascent, and starts to explain the recipe to David.

Apparently, you have to start by making the almost custard that makes the bread. “Jack and Louis, they’re starting it too hot. They should be using their thermometers. There’s a reason we put the damn things on the benches.”

“You put shit on the benches so they’ll use it?” David is kind of surprised.

Simon rolls his eyes dramatically. “Obviously.”

Simon continues to narrate. Les isn’t starting his yeast in the right place. He should start it in the mixer, not in a bowl put to the side. It takes like fifteen minutes for the yeast to get activated when it goes into the liquid, anyway, so it’s fine. And dammit, the kid needs to be more careful with salt. Doesn’t he know that salt kills yeast? He won’t get any rise if he adds salt to his - wait, is he using salted butter?

“Does your brother not know the difference?” Simon demands.

“The… difference?” David asks. He vaguely knows there’s a difference between margarine and butter, but he doesn’t really know the difference in butters.

Jack is the only baker in the tent who isn’t using his mixer, and Simon comments on that, too. He thinks it’s too cold for the dough to proof well - every second Jack wastes with hand kneading is a second he could spend getting his bread proofed or baked. Besides, there had been testing, and the bread hook makes a better loaf.

David, at least, knows the term “bread hook”. The standing mixers in the tent remind him of the pale almond mixer his parents got as a wedding gift in 1986. Except the ones in the tent aren’t quite as chipped, and most of them still have their bread hooks. (Les had searched far and wide for a bread hook, until David found one on Amazon for $15 plus shipping. He gave to it Les as a “You survived Algebra II with the teacher who is older than dirt and does an amazing Professor Binns impression”). Most of the bakers have switched over from the broad white paddles they were using to combine their soft dough to the hooks.

“More slowly, more slowly,” Simon whispers into the second cup of coffee David has seen him drink that afternoon. “Wait, wait, wait. Don’t add too much flour. You can always add more, but you can’t take it out, dumbass. Tony, Tony, what the fuck, you’re always so precise. Hold back the fucking flour, Tony.”

Simon seems to relax as he gets his third cup of coffee and most of the loaves go back in the proofing drawer. “They’ve got a while,” he confides to David. “Probably longer than they think. And, I need to go help interview them and shit. You could go back to the green room, if you wanted.”

David shrugs. “I will if Les does.”

Simon excuses himself.

David is startled when, an hour or so later, someone whispers in his ear, “They haven’t let it proof enough. Com’on boys, you gotta let it sit longer.”

Across the tent, David can see Kath and Sarah talking to Louis. “Your dough balls, are they well, are you dough balls large enough?”

Simon snorts with laughter, but turns serious. “Listen, you can’t say anything. Ive got to go interview Elizabeth --

“Smalls,” David interrupts.

“Right, Smalls. I gotta go interview Smalls about how she feels about this morning, since she says she’s waiting.

Over the course of the next hour or so, the bakers start pulling their bread out of the proofing drawers. Simon continues muttering dire things about under proofed bread and how resting is required for proper gluten structure.

“Yes, yes, yes, Smalls. Yes, Smalls. Oh you beautiful girl, Smalls. Yes, use the milk now. No butter, yes!”

Apparently, the bakers are supposed to roll out their dough into an even rectangle, bush it with milk, and then add exactly one quarter cup of cinnamon sugar mixture. Then, they’re supposed to roll it up into a tight, tight spiral with a secure seam. That’s the technical term. Then, the bakers are supposed to drop it into the loaf pan for their second rise.
“You’re supposed to use less sugar, dumbass,” Simon whispers. “You’re gonna get separation. See Charlie, Charlie has it right. Do what Charlie is doing.”

Watching baking with Simon is a little bit like watching Sunday Night football with his dad: they both seem to view it as life and death. One of the main differences is that Simon is watching live, and so he could, in theory, intervene at any time. But, he won’t. In contrast, Mayer is convinced the coaches and quarterbacks on TV might actually listen, if he just yells loud enough.

“They’re putting out food,” Simon announces offhandedly on his way over to get his sixth coffee. “Like, real food. Salads and sandwiches and veggies and stuff. You know, food, not just bread. But, like, there isn’t that much bread. So, umm, yeah. Food. You should eat.”

“Won’t that ruin dinner?”

Simon huffs out a quiet laugh. “We’ve got another six hours, probably. You guy might have four. But, me? Kara? Six, maybe eight. Don’t work in production, Dave. The hours are killer.”

David heeds Simon’s advice and goes over to get a plate. He’s found as a quiet vegetarian it’s useful to be at the front of the line. There’s this weird tendency of people who eat meat to decide they’d just as soon eat vegetables. And then, suddenly, there’s no more vegetarian food, so there’s nothing for him to eat.

As David is reaching for a plate, he looks across the buffet line to see Sarah. She’s learned the same lesson, apparently. “Sorry,” he mutters. She shrugs.

He fixes a plate for Les, too. David figures it’s responsible guardian behavior. … Except that it’s usually Les who comes over to his apartment and suggests that adult men with law degrees probably should probably eat something other than peanut butter and jelly, mac’n’cheese, carrot sticks and cheap beer. Like maybe scrambled eggs, or cheese pizza.

Other competitors stream between the table of food, Crutchie’s van where half their phones are located, and the cluster of Port-a-Johns located behind the camera vans.

Race fiddles with his phone, and then decides he’s going to take a quick walk. Spot joins him. Blink pulls out a paperback book with a woman in a bikini and and a bandolier on the cover, and settles in to read. Simon pulls Smalls out into the garden for an interview, then Les.

And, finally, the competitors are checking their second rise, and Simon is back narrating.

“Overproofed.” He says about Louis’ loaf. “I dont know how he managed it, but damn it, someone got their dough to over proof in this weather. That’s got to be something of a record.”

“Why?” Once again, David is feeling like he missed something. Probably during all the biology classes he’s avoided since… ever.

“Yeast hates cold almost as much as we do,” Simon explains, not even bothering to sip his… David has lost count. He just throws it back. “They don’t grow properly when its fucking winter. Beer, bread, cheese, the yeast and bacteria all need a little heat. Which makes today a particularly shitty day to do this.”

The bread gets an egg wash, and then it goes in the oven. (“To make the crust shiny… what the fuck, Tony, where the fuck is your egg wash? It says, ‘Make an egg wash’ on your recipe. I wrote the damn thing.”)

David decides his least favorite thing about bread week is all the waiting. There isn’t much to do as
the loaves bake. Simon says they’re supposed to be in for at least half an hour, but the recipe
doesn’t have a baking time, and, there isn’t really time, anyway. Most of the competitors are
rushing their loaves, trying to squeeze out every last minute of the bake. David watches as a few
mess with their ovens, increasing the temperature to try to get the bread to bake faster.

Sarah and Kath come back as the time winds down. They’ve been hanging around the edges,
making a few jokes, and flitting in and out. But, now, they’re back to business, and the tent scurries
around them.

The end of the bake is eventful, less because of what’s actually happened and more because there’s
a change in the air when it’s over. There’s nothing more the competitors can do to change their
fate. It doesn’t stop them from being hopped up on nervous energy. Jack, Blink, and Smalls make
Les run around the tent with them a few times while the food photographers do their work.

Race gets his phone from Crutchie’s car, and starts fishing in his jacket pocket. He pulls out a
crumpled white packet with a red band around the top. He leans back against the wet galaxy on
Crutchie’s car, and fiddles with a lighter.

“David! Come help.” Simon finally demands payment for his explanations during filming.

“Yesir.” David goes over to help move the chairs and sticks nametags to the back of the seats. He
chuckles as he puts on the labels, but he’s a nerd.

Chapter End Notes

I basically owe half this chapter (including the technical challenge) to *The Best Recipe*
(ISBN: 978-0-936184-38-8) by the Cooks Illustrated Team. They tested the effect of
like 18 different variations on a recipe and then described them so I didn’t have to go
through and do them. I also read Eric Kastel’s *Artisan Baker* (ISBN 978-0-470-18260-
Kushner (ISBN: 1-61628-926-0) and *The Italian Baker* by Carol Fields (ISBN: 978-1-
60774-106-0). I’ll repost this list next week.

Also, sadly, it’s really hard to emoji on AO3. I had it working in my preview, but
couldn’t get it here without cutting off half the text. It kind of loses the visual effect,
but *sigh*.

Questions, Comments, Concerns, Existential Crisis, Literary or Memetic references, or
personal anecdotes all delight me, so please feel free to leave a comment if the spirit
moves you. Or, just, like, say "hi" to let me know you got this far?
Bread Week (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

A very Jacobs-centric chapter in which Sarah and her girlfriend drink classy pink wine; Les learns all sorts of useful things about biology and Shakespeare; David reads a young adult book; and some of the shit hits the fan.

Chapter Notes

Un-beta'd.

Warnings
Food. Foul Language. Adult alcohol use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday Night

David wants to fall into bed, or something, and he hasn’t been cooking or hamming for cameras for the past thirteen or so hours.

Les has no similar hang ups.

“David, we have to!” It is unbecoming for a sixteen year old to whine. Les does it anyway. “They invited me.”

“No. You’re going to read Romeo and Juliet and I’m going to go to bed. We have to be up at… six tomorrow.” This is being a responsible guardian, right? He’s saying no because Les needs to do his homework, not because David has finally put on sweats and taken out his contacts.

“But, it’s only like eight.” Les throws the footnoted Shakespeare aside and tucks his pencil behind his ear.

“Good, ‘cause we have to be up in like nine hours. So, you can tell me all about star crossed teenaged love, and then we can both go to sleep.” David flops on his bed, boots up his ancient laptop, and pulls up Netflix.

There’s a knock on the door. Les drops the book and scampers to open it. Jack Kelly is leaning in the door jam, trying to look cool. He’s still got the sticker he pulled off this chair: “Hello my name is JAVER. DO NOT FORGET MY NAME”.

“You, videogames.” Jack is trying to seem cool, a hard feat for a man who literally just fell into their room because Les opened the door. “And you, Davey? Drinks. We’re gonna go out tonight. Wed take the kid, but that wouldn’t be good. So, we’re going for drinks and the kids gonna play video games.”

Jack slips into more of a New York accent when he’s relaxed. His diction and contractions are
smoother when he’s talking on camera, or when he’s talking to David. It’s when he’s with the other competitors that the “I’se” come out.

“We?” David asks before he can stop himself.

“You, me, Crutchie, and Smalls,” Jack rattles off the names. The group sounds vaguely familiar. The top two from the competition, Jack who was the bottom, and… Les. He’s the Les stand in.

“Nope,” David shuffles into the beat up shower slides he usually wears to shower after racquetball games. “You,” he points to Les, “Romeo and Juliet Act III. Me, bed.” He indicates the location. “And, you, wherever the hell you’re supposed to be for the next nine or so hours that isn’t here.”

“Okay,” Jack agrees, slightly deflated. “Les can go do his english homework with Blink, Spot and Race. They’ll play videogames and --”

“But,” David opens his mouth to object.

“They’re all adults. And, I dunno… you can wear sweats if you want, but come talk to them.”

David throws up his hands in defeat, and goes to put on his jeans, again. Jack’s and Les voices are faintly muffled through the door, so he takes the opportunity to sit on the closed toilet and take stock of himself. This might be a good opportunity to talk to Sarah, if he can text her surreptitiously and they can find an out of the way meeting place.

David is surprised to find all six of the other competitors sprawled in … someone’s room. Spot (Grantaire) and Blink (Montparnasse) have game controllers in hand and are engaging in a very tense game of Mario Kart. Race (24601) is sprawled on the bed behind them, back to working at his very shiny laptop. They’ve all got slices of thick swirled cinnamon bread in their laps. Race is lazily unswirling his piece. Smalls and Crutchie are leaning against a wall near the door, talking quietly between themselves. Well, Smalls is talking. Crutchie has a piece of bread in his mouth and he’s balancing on one crutch while he uses his other hand to zip up his jacket.

“So, Davey, you seen that he’s in good hands, let’s go.” Jack shoos Les through the door. Crutchie and Smalls pick up their coats from the bed.

“Umm… yeah. No.” David looks around. “Not leaving my little brother with a stoner, a delinquent, and a umm… a Race.”

“Race is an excellent role model,” Spot argues from the bed. “He’s a stock broker.”

“What world do you live in where a stock broker is an excellent role model?” David shoots back. “Says the lawyer!” Les huffs, dropping on the bed.

“I’ll have you know I’m also a fully certified English teacher. I have my license, tags, vaccines, everything.” He grabs the book Les had pushed at David. “Ohh! Shakespeare! Romeo and Juliet. Have you gotten to the melodramatic dick joke at the end?”

“…Dick Joke?” Les takes his eyes off the TV to stare at Blink in amazement.

“Oh, kid.” Blink walks over to the bed. “Hey, Spot, save the game. I need to do some educating!”
“Dick joke?” Les repeats.

“You know ‘die’ was Elizabethian slang for organism, right?” Blink babbles right over Les’ question.

David looks around. “Still not leaving Les with Blink “Shakespeare is all a Dick Joke” Baletti and Spot Conlon.”

Spot drops his controller onto the bed, stands and stretches. “We’re not gonna do anything with him that you wouldn’t do.”

“Like pay him twenty dollars to drink a beer?” David seethes.

Les drops his controller. “Dude, David, it’s not like I haven’t had beer before. I’m sixteen, not six.”

“Yeah, well, Mom would kill me…”

“That’s why there are a lot of things we don’t tell Ma. Like me drinking beer, or you and that CD...:”

“That was one fucking time, Les. One time.”

“Yeah, right. ‘One fucking time.’ Just like the beer with Spot was one fucking time.”

David feels his voice rising, and he’s losing his temper. Les is losing his temper, too. It’s been a long time since they fought. There are days when David feels more like a parent than an older brother. But, he’s enough removed that he’s been able to be the adult in Les’ life who isn’t a parent but keeps the kid from doing anything stupid. He’s seen Les angry plenty. They just don’t fight all that often.

“Alright, boys,” Jack interrupts the escalating shouting match. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. Les, you’re gonna stay here with Spotty the dog, and Race, and Kid Blink. And, they’re gonna be gentlemen and good role models. No beer. No drugs.” Jack glares at Blink, who makes a point of looking away. “No funny stuff, except maybe John Mulaney. And Shakespeare… if Shakespeare can be funny. Les is gonna be a sixteen year old and hang out with a bunch of older boys and play video games. And, we’re gonna go out and get a drink like the fucking adults we are.”

“Damn right we will!” Blink calls back. “And, damn right you will. Now, fucking go. The sooner you go, the sooner you gets back. And, the sooner you gets back, the sooner I can go to bed and get my fucking beauty sleep.”

“Better get your ass to bed now, then, Kid, ‘cause you needs to be pricked on the finger by a magic fucking spindle to get enough beauty sleep.” Race mashes a few keys on his keyboard, and pushes it back.

“Look, I got your number. The kids got your cell number. The assholes over on the bed have got your fucking cell number.” Spot gesticulates in a way that takes in the assembled company of people who can contact David. “If there’s a problem, we’ll fucking call.”

“Plus, Dave, you know about Spot, right? Spot’s an EMT. He knows first aid and shit.” Les used to be so much shorter than David. When did he get so tall? And, how long has he been playing the little boy innocence?

Spot grins. “That’s right. I’m a trained fucking professional. Ain’t nothing gonna happen to the kid. And, we ain’t drinking tonight. Racer isn’t up to it.”
“I’se fine,” Race objects, sullenly. “You ain’t my Ma, and I’se fine.”

“Bullshit,” Spot shots back. “And you have that fucking model to finish… the fuck you call it, ‘Trump Brexit’?”

“May, the Wall, Trump, Brexit,” Race rattles off.

Spot just shakes his head. “Nerd.”

He turns to David. “Now, you needs to get going. You heard Blink. He needs his ‘beauty sleep.’” The air quotes are very convincing.

“Com’on Davey, you’ll like it. It’ll be fun.” Smalls and Jack frog march David out of the room before he can protest.

Through the closing door he’s pretty sure he can hear Les telling Spot that he better be ready with an Epi pen, because David is allergic to fun.

Jack calls an uber (“That way none of us have to be the DD if we don’t wanna”), and the four of them crowd in. The driver looks faintly put out as Crutchie settles into the car, but the combined fury of Jack, Smalls, and Crutchie himself keep her silent. They drive to the kind of upscale chain restaurant that has a decent list of beers on tap and a few overly expensive cocktails with brand name alcohol highlighted. It’s not the kind of place where David would drink at home. On the rare occasions he goes out, he likes bars that are just this side of dives and full of grouchy old men: the liquor is cheap, the beer is terrible, and no one asks him any questions.

The hostess settles them in a booth. Jack slides in first. Crutchie drops next to him. There’s an audible click and his right leg goes slack, and he pulls it into the booth. Smalls takes the corner opposite Crutchie. David is too nervous to relax into the faux leather. He nervously flicks open the menu in front of him.

Crutchie looks through the beer list, and then shoves it at Jack. “Here, asshole, for people who like bitterness and dislike fun.”

“I don’t know why beer is a manly drink, cocktails have more alcohol and are deceptively strong.”

“Do you drink beer?” Smalls demands of David.

“Uhhhh…?” David doesn’t mean to let his mouth hang open. What’s he supposed to say to that. “I guess? Sometimes.”

“Beer if it’s there?” Jack prompts.

David nods. It’s a good way to describe his approach.

Crutchie takes things a step back. “Do you want to drink tonight.”

David shrugs. “I’m tired. I’m not sure why I’m here, other than because Blink wanted an excuse to find dick jokes in Shakespeare.”

“So, do you want to drink?” Smalls sounds exasperated. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. No, seriously, like, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. No pressure or anything. But Crutchie and I gotta go buy the drinks, so whatcha having?”
“Coke?” David guesses. He doesn’t think he can deal with alcohol tonight. It’s been too much of a day. He’s not sure how the others are drinking, but apparently it works for them.

“Good boy.” Smalls turns to Jack and Crutchie. “Let me guess, same as last week for you, and… Jackie Boy. Do you want Not Beer?”

She nods, imperiously, and then shoves at David. “Com’on. I’m paying for the first round, and I can’t carry four glasses. So, you’re coming up to the bar with me.”

The bar is crowded, but perhaps that shouldn’t be a surprise for a Saturday night. Most of the patrons are tourists, come over from different parts of the Hamptons. Smalls elbows her way up to the bar and drops a $5 in the tip jar. She leans across the polished wood and tapping a debit card. The bartender comes over far more quickly than anyone would have served David.

Smalls orders with the confident assurance of someone who has done this many times. She hands a glass of soda to David, and balances the other three between her two hands. David suspects she could have gotten four, but…

And then he sees a very familiar brunette and a very familiar redhead. His stomach sinks. “You tricked me.”

“You need to talk to her,” Smalls says quietly enough that only he will hear it. “You need to sort this bullshit out.”

“What bullshit?”

“Don’t be coy. We ain’t stupid. I’se surprised no one at the network figured it out, but they’se not as good at making connections as Jackie-boy and me.” When she gloats, Smalls speaks more quickly, the words the words blurring and the final consonants swallowed in favor of moving on. “Go, talk to your sister, and get this shit sorted. And then, come back, ‘cause we did invite you cause we wanted to hang out.”

David slinks over to Sarah and Kath. They’re in a narrow corner booth, set for two instead of four. The remains of dinner are on the table, and there’s an empty wine glass next to both places. He knows he shouldn’t be doing this. He’s breaking all kinds of rules by doing this. Maybe maybe his parents could talk to Sarah about the competition. But David, who is there as Les’ chaperone? The possibility that something could be let slip is too great.

Kath looks up. “David.”

“Hi, Kath… Sarah.” His mouth feels dry. He takes a sip of his drink. The coke is sickly sweet against his tongue.

Kath stands quickly, picking up her bag. “Excuse me, I have some business I need to take care of.”

Sarah motions for David to sit. He gingerly sets his glass on the table, and lets his legs drop his body, praying that the motion puts his stomach back where it belongs.

“So…” Sarah is usually articulate. Normally, they’d be talking a mile a minute, words and stories overlapping in what others view as interruption but they find synchronous.

“So…” David echos back.

“When were you gonna tell me about Les?”
“We signed contracts…” It’s a poor excuse. David knows it’s a poor excuse. “I read the contracts. You could have sent me one.” Sarah looks hurt. “I’m his big sister. I like to know what the kid’s doing. How he’s doing…”

David bites back words he wants to say. That Sarah’s always so busy. That Sarah’s always gone. That maybe if she showed up for dinner on a regular basis, rather than just the big holidays, she’d know Les better. These are words he can’t say. Except something comes bursting out. “It’s a legal contract. And Dad didn’t want to risk anything…”

Their father is *just* back to work. He can’t work construction anymore, not with the pinched nerves in his back and a hand that won’t quite close. There was compensation, but it wasn’t enough. There was compensation, but the company sued, the company is still suing, because *Mayer* made a safety report two days before the accident, rather than fixing the crane. Because he was a crane operator, or something. And, if there’s anything else that’s wrong, legally, it could threaten everything…

“I know they’re careful, but you still should have told me. It sucked finding it out in a meeting with my boss. It fucking scared me, David. I need this job… It--”

“We gotta tell them.” David’s words cut his sister off. His throat is tight and his stomach is clenching. But, telling the production company and facing the consequences is Right. “At the end of the weekend.”

“At the end of the weekend,” Sarah agrees. “And, if they kick Les out… He’ll be furious.”

“We’ll figure it out,” David once again says over his sister. “You remember that time?”

“When he didn’t get that part in the school play and he refused to go to school for a week. Yeah, I remember…”

“What did we do to get such a stubborn brother?” David’s question is for the universe at large, not just his sister.

Kath appears with two glasses of wine before Sarah can answer, and leans in to kiss her girlfriend on the cheek.

David jumps up, vacating her seat.

“We should talk. You still got my number?” Sarah takes the drink with grace, and takes a sip. “I like this. What is it?”

Kath names the pink drink.

“Yeah, would you stop texting me dank memes and philosophical questions about Harry Potter when I’m supposed to be working?” David picks up his drink. “And, by the way, would it kill you to call or text Mom? She called me to make sure you weren’t dead.”

He starts to walk away, and then turns back. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” agrees Sarah.

“Tomorrow,” echos Kath.

“Tomorrow: the judgement day” hangs between them.

David feels his shoulders dropping as he walks back to the table with the competitors. He lets out a
breath he didn’t know he was holding. He doesn’t want to admit it, but part of him hopes Les will
do terribly tomorrow and be kicked out. It seems like the best outcome to an impossible situation.
It means Les can’t be mad, because he got kicked out fair and square, and the production company
has solved a serious problem.

He watches through the doorway. Crutchie and Jack are leaning together, and Smalls is laughing at
them. Once again, he feels his body tense.

He goes over, but before he can sit down, Smalls slides out of the booth.

“How’d it go?” Jack’s tone is ernst and comforting, the question quiet.

He shrugs and tries to keep his voice cool. “Okay, I think.”

“Good.” Crutchie gives him one of those gentle smiles that makes it feel like the sun is shining.

“What’s drinking?”

He shrugs.

“Coke,” Smalls supplies.

Jack raises his glass in cheers. It’s far emptier than David’s. He clinks his glass, anyway.

“Do you wanna try mine?” Crutchie pushes across a glass with the dregs of a golden liquid, but
David shakes his head. Right now, he wants water.

“Crutchie, another?” Smalls asks. He nods. “And water?”

“Water,” Jack agrees.

“We was just arguing about who’s the best doctor,” Crutchie says. “Do you what Doctor Who?”

David’s shoulders drop another inch. “Eccleston.” He prepares for the kind of argument he likes.

Showstopper Challenge

The second day dawns cold and misty gray. At least it’s not raining. That lightens David’s mood
more than he’d like to admit.

Les, on the other hand, is in the dumps. He didn’t do well at all yesterday, and David knows he’s
afraid he’ll be sent home.

He pulls Les aside as they board the bus. “Les, be courageous.”

Les makes a face, and rolls his eyes. If he were younger, he might bury his face in David’s wet
jacket.

“Les, Courage doesn’t erase fear. Courage is when you face your fear.” He hears his Dad’s voice
rising over his own, repeating the a family mantra.

Les shrugs, and pushes back. He bites his lip, and ducks his head, and David assumes that means
Thank you. Or else, My older brother is a dork. Or, possibly both.

He and Les take the mini bus to the green room, where they drink coffee. This morning, Spot owes
Les $5, Race owes Les $5 and Les owes Blink $20. The name tag notes “For dick jokes”. The PAs
come to get them. David and Simon exchange a look of solidarity.
The challenge is to make two types of pizza using two different doughs in… four hours. David decides he doesn’t like bread week because it seems to involve a lot of time spent waiting. So, he does what he’s been doing for the the last couple days, and settles in to watch. It’s boring.

Les is busy setting up his yeast. David notes that today he’s better about using the thermometer. He wonders if Blink suggested it. (Blink had come in third in the technical challenge, but poor showing in the signature due to his incorporation of cheese.) It looks like up and down the tent, other bakers are doing the same.

David wishes he had Simon next to him to explain the steps. He’d liked listening to the PA explain how to make cinnamon bread. After all this is over - after whatever happens to Les is done and no one is looking - he might try the recipe. If he can find good instructions (better than what was given). Or, if he can find Simon to help him.

David has some ideas about pizza dough, and what makes the process take so long. Jack, Crutchie, and Smalls had compared notes last night, talking quietly in the booth. It was hard for them not to talk about the competition, especially during a session they’d apparently designed to let them blow off steam and celebrate both victories and triumphs. With David there, more interloper than baker, it had been hard for them to get as deep into the discussion as they might have. Crutchie and Jack were, at least, vaguely aware of social custom. Smalls, on the other hand, gets into a topic and cycles back through it until she’s satisfied. It’s an odd thing to be on the outside of, especially because David has done the same thing.

So, he knows that pizza dough is a yeast bread, and yeast needs heat and food to grow. (He’s learned more about yeast in a weekend than he did in two weeks of biology.) And, unlike most bread dough, you have to add oil so it will be softer and easier to form. But, that makes it more complicated, too. Smalls was doing most of the talking at that point, and she was getting technical. Or drunk. Or both.

And, Crutchie had gotten up from the table mid way through the discussion and come back with a big glass of water that he set down in front of her. Because Crutchie is an angel, or a sarcastic little shit, depending on how you interpret his actions. “Smalls, Elizabeth, Hon, you’re going to be too wrecked tomorrow to help ‘your wee yeasties’ if you don’t drink some water. And then, we should go home.”

David sighs, and goes and gets himself another cup of coffee of the bitter lukewarm coffee with slightly curdled milk. Not because David likes scalded or curdled milk. He thinks it might have been a mistake from some custard this morning that made it into the wrong picture in the PA tent, but here he is.

The work pace stays steady for the first hour or so, while the bakers prepare their dough. Almost everyone has their bread hooks going, but a few split their loaves and knead by hand. Joe and Medda come around to ask people what they’re doing, and the cameras strategically catch shots of the contestants kneading their crusts as they talk to the judges.

The dough goes into the proofing boxes, and most of the contestants take a break. There’s a stampede over to the coffee carafe. Even Les joins in. David frowns, because coffee will probably stunt his growth. Like, physical growth, fine. Actually, it might support his emotional growth. All those anti coffee people are just full of shit. David goes over for his third cup of questionable bean water.

In between his interview with Kara and Simon and the carefully staged shot of Blink looking into the oven, he comes over to talk to David.
“Les is a good kid,” Blink tells him without preamble. “You an’ your folks must be really proud.”

“Umm… yeah? Thank you?”


“Maybe?”

Talking to Blink is weird because David knows everything he’s saying. Not just recognizing all the words and not being able to parse the phrase, like sometimes happened with his freshman roommate, who was a physics major. No, this is knowing all the phrases and having them make sense individual context, but not being able to eak out a clear meaning. It’s kind of like reading poetry, except without strict iamb. And David is ridiculously impressed with himself for coming up with the word “iamb”.

“You probably did, in high school or something.” Blinks seems to ignore David’s dazed response. “Ise gotta teach it next month, and Im trying to figure out my lessons. Mush says I might get suspended if I teach the Stanford Prison experiment - ya know the Stanford Prison Experiment?”

“Yep.” He isn’t sure what age group Blink teaches. He thinks he and Les did The Lord of the Flies in Ninth or Tenth Grade, so maybe high school. And he agrees with Mush. (Even though he hasn’t met Mush, David suspects he’s the more sensible husband.)

“So, I think Im gonna teach this, instead.” Blink thrusts a book at him. The cover has a girl’s midriff in a turquoise polka dot bikini wearing a Bandolier crossed with a Beauty Queens sash. “And, I want to get a second adult opinion. A real adult, you know what I mean? Mush doesn’t count. Mush reads more YA fiction than I do.” He pronounces the letters: wai-ayy.

“So, you think I should read the book?” David asks.

“I think you should read the book,” Blink confirms. “And I think I should probably go check my dough, ‘cause I don’t want it over risen. And ‘cause I need to go make sauce.”

David accept’s Blinks’ offer, gets another cup of coffee, and settles in to read about Miss New Hampshire, Miss Texas, and the Sparkle Ponies.

For the first time, David is surprised the challenge is up, and a little bit disappointed. The tent should smell incredible, but the combinations are a bit confusing. There’s a lot of garlic, oregano, and basil. Red wine, tomato, and cheese duke it out as scents in the air, and then there’s a strange mix of vegetables, fish, and meat. It’s weird. It’s enticing. David realizes he hasn’t had anything to eat that morning except for a yogurt cup in the green room and three cups of coffee.

It’s hard to wait for the food photographers to go around and take pictures of the competitors with their twin pies. Les’ tradition New York style cheese pizza and a greek pizza with pesto smell familiar and good. Jack’s got something that looks like taco meat on his, and next to that, what looks like chicken and onion.

As the food photographers finish their business and Kara hands out random numbers to the competitors, Simon comes over to talk to David. His face is serious. “We need you to stay after production ends, whatever happens with the judging.”

“Okay,” David agrees, because there is no other choice.
“You checked out of the hotel?”

“Yeah, this morning. Our stuff’s in the green room.”

“How’d you come up?”

“We drove,” David pauses to think about to Friday. Was it really only two days ago? “With Jack. He drove us.”

Simon nods, and bites his lip. “Okay, we’ll make arrangements, then. If you have to stay the night, is that okay?”

“Les has school in the morning, and I’ve got work” David provides the facts as calmly as he can. He lets the angry part detach itself and go off into the jungle where the big cats roam. “We need to go back tonight.”

“Okay,” Simon nods and makes a note on an iPad. “Okay. We’ll come find you after production’s done. Just… hang tight.”

David agrees.

And then, only after Simon’s gone, does he let himself have a brief moment of something. He’s not always good at naming his emotions, which perhaps exacerbated a problem most people don’t experience. He likes it when things are orderly. He likes it when things make sense. He likes it when people are kind and behave well. And, fuck, now he’s the one who isn’t being kind or behaving well, and he’s on the wrong side of everything. There will be Consequences and the Consequences will be bad. And, they’ll all suffer because he made a mistake. Sarah will lose her job and Les will get kicked out of the competition and they’ll both be blacklisted from work with Hearst Productions again and he’s responsible for not coming forward sooner.

It’s hard to watch the judging over the roiling thoughts in his head and the lead balloon in his stomach. He manages to conclude that Smalls and Race made awesome pizza, that Jack’s flavors are good, even if Joe thinks it didn’t translate.

David almost knows Les is going to do poorly, even before his younger brother goes through the judging. It’s been a hard day for Les and bread. Les is normally a good baker, he’s just not as good about time. At home, he bakes around algebra homework and what used to be track practice. There’s someone there to pick up the pieces, punch down the dough or shift it to the refrigerator. There are plans in place for timing. And, out here in this cold, rainy tent, it’s less of an option. You need to be multi tasking in a way that Les isn’t used to. You need to have everything planned, and know how you’ll handle each piece. Les could probably have faked his way through cookie week - Les makes a good cookie, and they’re less of a question of temperature and timing than baking - but this week is hard. And, Les’ face reflects David’s thoughts. He looks nervously at Joe and Medda as they cut into his pizzas. His face falls when they confirm his worst fears.

**Final Judgement**

After the bake, they get sent back to the Rainbow Room for lunch and interviews. They’ll all be held until after the decision to comment, but there’s follow up from yesterday, and questions and technicalities.

There’s also a butt load of pizza to eat. David secretly suspects that having the bakers do a pizza challenge gets the production company out of some of the catering costs. Then again, the production company does pay for the ingredients and the bakers’ time, so it’s still pretty expensive
Les is settled between Jack and Blink. The three of them talk a mile a minute about… David’s not actually sure. Weirder Shit? Odder Crap? Stranger Things? He might be a nerd, but he’s a bad nerd and he can’t follow everything. Smalls plods down in the circle, and David thinks he hears the name Sean Astin. Except he’s pretty sure Weirder Shit is a 1980s spin off horror thing and doesn’t involve Tolkien. If it did, he might have actually paid attention.

Spot and Race settle at a table next to him. Crutchie is off being interviewed by Simon. Race sighs. “Pizza.”

“You don’t gotta look so sad about it,” Spot shoots back. “Damn this is good.”

Race picks up a piece of his own pie - a flat sheet of meat sandwiched between two thin layers of dough and salted across the top. “I know. I hate pizza, fucking hate what it does to my blood sugar, but I make the best damn prosciutto pizza in the city of New York - possibly the entire fucking United States, and I’ll be fucked if I don’t eat it.”

“I can help with that,” David thinks he hears Spot mutter under his breath. “The last part, not the rest.”

David raises his eyebrow at Spot, who gives him a shit eating grin around a mouthful of pizza.

Race grins, takes a plastic knife, and cuts two thin slivers off his piece of pizza. He shoves one onto Spot’s plate.

Spot eats it slowly, watching Race’s expression.

“You want a bite?” Race holds out the other piece to David, his cheeks coloring as he breaks eye contact with Spot. “I know you didn’t get any…”

He blushes. “Nah, vegetarian.”


They lapse into conversation about music.

It seems like an eternity and a second before Simon comes to get them. David stands with the rest, swallowing his last sip of coffee and his trepidation. A lyric plays through his head as they climb into Crutchie’s van. “Tomorrow is the judgement day, tomorrow we discover what our G-d in Heaven has in store.”

Or, maybe, it’s just that Blink is musical theater trash and has decided they need to listen to a rousing chorus of Do you Hear the People Sing? in honor of bread week.

As the bakers pile out of Crutchie’s van clown car, someone catches David’s arm.

“Davey, I’ll uh, wait for you, after the judging? If you and Les need to do some filming, or whatever.” Jack rubs his hands on his jeans, nervously.

“We can get our own ride back,” David runs through the numbers in his head. He thinks they can get a train back, he’ll look at tickets… “They said we might need to stay late, for a production meeting or something.”
“Cause Les is a minor?” Jack asks, while simultaneously nodding toward Sarah.

David nods. “Some legal stuff came up that they want to talk about, it might take some time.”

“I can wait,” Jack offers.

“You don’t --”

“What else are you gonna do, take the train? You want to leave here at ten or one with a high school kid, and get into the city at, what? Two? With just enough time to shower, and get you and him to school? Nah, I’ll drive you.” Jack is adamant. “It ain't like I’ve got something better to do.”

“Don’t you like, have a job as a social worker, or something?” David is confused, walking with Jack as they go to line up.

“Not right now, Davey. I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

Simon leads David back to his folding chair in the tent as Joe, Medda, Sarah and Kath appear from their holding tank.

“Alright gentle people, we’ve come to the point in the week where, unfortunately, we have to say goodbye to someone.” Kath takes the first half of the script. “It is my pleasure to announce star baker this week. This person made the best beer we’ve ever eaten and put their own twist on a classic. Congratulations Elizabeth!”

It takes a moment for the name to register with Smalls, but then she’s up and smiling. Crutchie pats her on the back, encouragingly, and Race beams.

“And, it’s my unfortunate job to announce the baker who will be leaving us this week. And, sadly, this week, it will be Les.” Sarah does look truly sad as she says the word. “Com’er, Les, give us a hug.”

Sarah doesn’t wrap her arms around her little brother less like a TV host comforting a contestant who has just lost. She hugs him like a girl who bounced him as a baby and made her other brother swear to keep him safe. (She was nine and thought other people could keep you safe.) She hugs him like the big sister who painted his face using their mom’s lipstick and eyeliner when he was four because he wanted to be spiderman for Purim. She hugs him like she thinks that if she can hug him enough, maybe she can draw some of the sting of rejection into herself and take the bitter poison for him. She hugs him like a woman who is selfishly relieved at the outcome, and therefore most overcompensate as much as she can.

The others come close, and there’s a sort of dog pile of people and voices and sentiments. The cameras capture the shots as one by one, the other competitors come over to hug Les and maybe ruffle his hair. Medda makes a point to draw him in as well, and make him promise to continue baking. Even Joe shakes his hand for the cameras.

The PAs come in afterward to separate them out. They ask Crutchie, Jack, Smalls and Les to stay for interviews. The others are told they’re free to leave.

Spot catches David’s arm. “We need to talk to you back at the green room before we leave.”

“Why?” David is on edge and the word comes out sharper than he intended.

“Because we have to settle debts,” Spot explains. “We decided last week that we’d settle when someone leaves. And, you and Les are leaving, so it’s time to settle.”
“You’re not…”

“Dude, he’s what? Sixteen. Your brother is a good kid, but he’s had a sip of shitty beer before. Ain’t he ever drunk with your parents?” Spot shakes his head. “My old man… anyway. You seems like a nice family.”

David ignores the comment.

“The Rainbow Room,” Blink says, pressing a paper name tag into his hand. “You guys gotta come back before we all leave.”

David stares at their expectant faces. “We’ll try.” The promise hangs in the air.

The interview B roll takes a while, because filming always takes a while. David reached down absently and picks up Blinks paperback to read while he waits. He glances down at the bookmark already in the book - a receipt for dry cleaning four shirts at a place in lower Manhattan. He shrugs and he starts reading again, if for no other reason than because it distracts him from his feelings.

They get back to the Rainbow Room as it starts to get dark. The producers have milked every last ounce of the fading daylight to get their interviews in the garden. Daylight savings time will start soon, and David can’t wait. He hates coming home in the dark. He thinks the producers will appreciate it, too: they can film later, rather than rushing against the sunset and messing with the angles.

The seven contestants - now six remaining, he guesses - are all there. They’re starting to relax, and get ready for their trips back. Race has changed into track pants and pretty much everyone else is wearing different shirts. David is glad that he doesn’t have to wear the same thing both days of the baking weekend, even though he understands the reasons.

“Les!” Blink greets him with a smile, and open arms. “You know we’re going to miss you?”

Les nods, his eyes getting watery again.

“It’s okay, hey, it’s okay.” Spot hurries over. He’s clearly a guy who doesn’t like seeing people cry.

Les shrugs.

“Can I hug you?” Spot asks. When Les nods, Spot pulls him in for one of those manly, platonic side hugs. Spot’s voice gets fierce. “You know you did good, right? Ain’t nobody who can take that away from you. You’se what, fifteen? And you was here.”

Les nods again, eyes watery.

“And, it’s not like we’se just gonna disappear,” Jack interjects. “We’se got your number.”

“Hey, me too, asshole.” Blink thrusts a phone with a cracked screen at Les. “Don’t you forget about me!”

David is entirely unsure how Blink manages to teach high school. He cannot imagine how Blink is not teaching high school.

“You’se already in the group chat, right?” Crutchie asks, the voice of reason.

Les nods. “Yeah.”
“David?” Crutchie prompts.

“Group chat?” David doesn’t know anything about the group chat.

“Oh! Gimme your phone!” Blink sticks out his hand.

“Why don’t you send me an invitation?” David suggests. He’s not sure he trusts Blink with his phone. With his brother, apparently, but not with his unlocked phone. His secrets are more precious than his sibling. Which… might not actually be a good comparison.

Blink makes a vague sort of gesture which implies suit yourself, and fiddles with his phone.

An email notification pops up a few minutes later.

“One last thing,” Race announces, solemnly.


Spot pulls out a battered leather wallet, and produces a wrinkled $20. Race has one of those fluorescent wallets that David remembers getting as a party favor when he was little. He also puts $20 on the table. Blink goes over to a top hat that must have appeared David isn’t sure when, and counts out six ones and a dollar in quarters.

“Don’t spend it all in one place, kid,” Blink advises.

Les nods solemnly.

Simon comes the trailer to walk with them. He’s got an umbrella in one hand, and a flashlight in the other. The clouds have come down, and the rain has started again. Simon’s flashlight beam dances golden across the cluster of trailers, refracted in the rain. It water in the air makes everything colder, but it softens the lights. Without the rain, everything would look harsher. David’s glad it’s there. It feels apropos, like weather to walk to the gallows.

They get lead to another production trailer, this one less creatively labeled “CONFERENCE ROOM”.

Simons leads them up the stairs, and then leaves them at the door. “Coward” says David’s inner monologue. When he’s older and he’s writing his memoir about… being the older brother of a baking contestant on reality tv, because people will buy that… Anyway, when he’s older and writing his memoir, that’s how he’ll describe this moment. He may not mention how badly he wants to piss himself, though.

David and Les enter the conference room alone. There are about twelve people sitting around the table. He’s not sure if this will be twelve angry men, or the supreme court. He recognizes Joe, Medda, Kath, Sarah, and Hannah, the dragon queen of the kitchen. The others look vaguely familiar.

David and Les pull out chairs next to each other, the arms knocking awkwardly. There are too many chairs - too many people - in too small a space. David winces. He lets Les slide in first, and then he tries to settle.

“Are we all here?” The dark haired man with the ponytail and rumpled jean jacket looks up and down the table.
The broad silver haired man in the suit nods. “I think we are. Well then, let’s get started.” He clears his throat. “It’s come to our attention - that is, Journal Production - that you and she are related.” He points at Les and then at Sarah. “Did you, or did you not, Mr. Jacobs, sign paperwork that said you were not an employee of Journal Productions, nor did you have a close relationship with any employee of Journal Productions?”

David feels like he’s going to be sick. His stomach curls into a ball of lead, cold and clenched and unyielding. He feels it drop as far as it can go in his body, until he’s not sure he will get up because of the organ buried ten feet in the ground. He’s the lawyer, he’s supposed to have an answer.

“When did you hire her?” Kath asks, her voice a rubber band stretched taught.

Sarah looks at her girlfriend, admiration written on her face.

David fights the urge to let his mouth drop open.

Joe glares across the table at Kath.

“What?” The lawyer sputters.

Kath draws her face into a haughty look that could curdle milk, and repeats the words again, her voice punctuated with ice shards. “When did you hire Ms. Keating?”

The lawyer shuffles his paperwork, looking around.

“February,” one of the junior people with a laptop supplies. “We hired Ms. Keating in February.”

“February,” David manages to repeat, his voice steadier than his hands. “February of this year?”

“Yes,” the intern or secretary or production assistant supplies after a look. “February of this year.”

“So, about two months ago,” David repeats. He catches the glint in Katherine’s eyes.

“Yes, but I don’t see why this is relevant,” The lawyer huffs.

“And, I believe we signed the paperwork for Les in… August of last year?” It had been hot as the blazes, and the air conditioning had gone out. David remembers Les balancing the laptop on his knees and swearing. Esther had shaken her head with a sigh and told Les that he couldn’t swear if he was on TV, so he’d better clean up his language.

The lawyer flips through the contract, and nods. A furrow begins between his brows.

“And we had to submit a list of people who would be told, initially, if he was selected.” David had helped prepare the list, David had signed his name.

A vein twitches in the lawyer’s forehead.

“And Sarah isn’t on the list,” Les announces. The kid has a flare for the dramatic.

“I wasn’t hired until almost six months after Les and David signed the contract,” Sarah says. “And, I didn’t find out that Les would be competing until he arrived on set.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that!” The lawyer’s vein twitches.

Sarah shrugs. “You could have done your research, as well. You know I work under a stage name. Journal Productions writes my checks. You know my legal name is Sarah Jacobs.”
The lawyer continues to glare.

The man with the ponytail blows out a breath. It’s not quite a sigh, but David doesn’t have another word for it. It’s an exasperated sound. “Since we cannot establish fault, it seems the best solution moving forward would be to remove Mr. Jacobs from the competition, to avoid the perception of a conflict of interest. Fortunately, Mr. Jacobs has been eliminated.”

The director turns back to the production assistant with the laptop. “Let’s set up a meeting with PR, yes? Good. Weisel can handle this.”

David and Les are summarily dismissed, and they hurry back out into the dark rainy night. As the door closes, David swears he can hear the words, “Ms Pulitzer”, which is a can of worms he doesn’t begin to understand and doesn’t want to.

Instead, Simon arrives with a golf cart, this time, and ferries them back to the Rainbow Room, where Jack is waiting. David is tired and frustrated. Now that he’s no longer in the meeting, he can feel this body starting to shake for a different reason.

Simon smiles at him, shakes his hand. “Good to meet you, David.”

He smiles on the drive home, feeling the little square of paper in his pocket with the phone number.

David's cinnamon bread

1. Call Les. Determine if he's making cinnamon bread.  
2. If Les is making Cinnamon bread, go to Mom and Dad's to get some.  
3. If Les is not making cinnamon bread, then go to Trader Joes.  
4. Buy Betty Crocker cream cheese frosting if you're feeling fancy.  
5. Watch the toaster closely, cinnamon bread can light on fire.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the earlier mess. (And any continuing mess. I probably shouldn't be editing this.) I am a permanently exhausted pigeon and almost fell asleep in Panera. I wanted to get this posted both in the spirit of "finish shit February" and based on the fact that I now have a visa, a departure date, and am one bed and one couch lighter. So, you know...

There are no citations for this chapter because (a) David doesn't know how to bake anyway and (b) I didn't have any cookbooks.

But, anyway, if you have comments, questions, concerns, suggestions, helpful edits, stories, or... whatever, feel free to let me know. Seriously, it brightens my day ridiculously to get comments. I carry them around in my email and look at them when I feel sad or stressed, or whatever. Not that I'm intending to guilt trip you, just, like, thank you to everyone who has commented, and if you haven't, I promise, I don't bite?
Chapter Summary

In which people freak out over cookie cake, Spot steals juice from a baby, and Joe makes a face that could curdle curd.

Race’s perspective on the first day of cookie week.

Chapter Notes

It looks like the next set of chapters will probably be two-fers. Not that it kept this short. (We’re only like half way through, and so this was a logical split, I think.)

Warnings

This chapter is dedicated to Y the EMPERor. I’m sorry about that time we almost fell off a mountain together. I’m not actually sure why you were falling off the mountain, but I’m glad you didn’t

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony Higgins traces his fingers along the tops of the seats in the train compartment. 6… 7… 8… He taps his fingers against the cracked screen cover on his phone, deftly pulling up his ticket. He’s got 10B.

...One of these days, he needs to go over and get his screen cover fixed. He’d bought it because it was supposed to have a lifetime warranty, and because his coworker, Chad, had said they worked well. Chad had also bought a new phone the next month, upgrading again because “That phone was old technology. God did not intend Chad Stevens to have old technology.” God didn’t intend Chad Stevens to have financial sense, either.

Race finds his seat, and collapses into it. He places the brown leather messenger bag with his work laptop and his personal laptop on the seat next to him. He really just wants to sleep. He’d had a couple Rough Nights the past week, and those were combined with the kind of long days he should have left behind him in college. Damn it, he’s 26. He’s too damn old to be pulling all nighters.

“Higgins. Imagine meeting you here.”

He looks up to see Spot Conlon looking between his printed paper ticket and the seat next to Race.

“Fuck off,” Race mutters. “Go sit with someone else.”

“Aww, Racer, I’m hurt.” Spot dumps his bags in the seat next to Race’s. “And here I thought you liked my company. Anyway, I can’t move, there are too many commuters and if I move, you’ll just end up with one of them.”
“Will they shut up and let me sleep?” Race demands. “Or, are they gonna keep yapping like you?”

Spot makes a show of stowing his sports bag and backpack along with Race’s hated leather briefcase, and pulling out his battered phone. Earbuds go in, eyes slide into a half lidded expression reminiscent of a predator watching his territory. They stay there, side by side, for some indeterminate length of time: at least the distance to Babylon.

It’s Race who disturbs the peace. Well, not Race specifically. Race would like to sleep. Race’s phone, on the other hand, starts vibrating. When this refuses to rouse him, it plays increasingly loud trills, until Spot jostles him.

“Dude, phone alarm.”

Race struggles into consciousness and pushes off his headphones. “Ummm?

“Phone alarm,” Spot repeats, his voice taking on an edge. “Getting loud.”

Race squeezes his eyes shut against the circular halo closing over his vision. The afterimage goes purple against his retina, instead of golden. He does not want to deal with this. He just fucking wants to sleep.

He swipes at his phone, going through the necessary movements by muscle memory alone. He knows what the alert says. He can feel it in his hands, in his voice, and behind his eyes. “Can you grab my bag?”

When the bag is dumped unceremoniously in his lap, he starts pawing through it, cursing past him for his failure to Plan the Fuck Ahead, Anthony. He offers up an almost reflexive prayer for the intercession of Saint Anthony and Saint Jude. Someone or something must have been listening for prayers about lost things, or lost causes, or both, because his fingers close around a half eaten roll of Sweet Tarts rolling around in the bottom of his bag. He pulls them out, chokes down the remainder (almost literally), and then shoves his bag back at Spot.

Spots puts it up, above their head as the train rocks with their approach to the Bellport station. His voice is soft. “So, Racer, you don’t look so good.”

“Fuck off, Conlon,” he mutters, pulling the headphones up over his ears again. “I’m just tired.” Just tired and low and running on fumes.

“Why the fuck do I think you’re lying to me?” Spot demands. Spot Conlon: a man who goes from gentle to terrifying in minutes.

Race sighs, and turns up his music. “Cause you’re a fucking suspicious bastard.”

They make it as far as West Hampton before Race’s phone alarms, again. Really, it’s less that his phone is alarming again, and more that the piss poor excuse for sugar he found in his bag didn’t really make a difference.

“Spot, bag?” Race nudges his seatmate, who is nodding his head along with the beat.

It takes a minute or two, but eventually, Spot pulls the crusty earbud out of his ear. “Hmm?”

“Bag?” Race repeats.
“I ain’t doing this again, Racetrack m’boy.” Spot gets up, swaying with the moving train. The bag is dropped in Race’s lap, and then Spot’s ass is dropped unceremoniously in the seat next to him. “You need something, you can wait until we get to Montauk. It ain’t that much farther, just a few more stops.”

Race ignores him. He’s too busy digging through his stupid fucking briefcase, the one that cost as much as two weeks of groceries to feed his family when he was younger. He frantically pats down the pocket, tearing through the place where his shiny new laptop, his iPad, his chargers, a few stray pens, and that notebook he keeps around for the moments who he needs real paper for calculations... There’s plenty of the detritus that accumulates in a bag that you carry day to day. He could create a trail through the woods with the test strips at the bottom of his bag. He just doesn’t have any food.

“So, Spot, I need to get out.” He thinks his voice is steady. God help him, he needs his voice to be steady. He needs his hands to be steady.

“Nope. You’re just going to put that stupid bag up in the rack, and then ask me to take it down again in like, five minutes, so you can paw through it again.”

“Am not.” Tony is tempted to stick out his tongue like a six year old, rather than a twenty six year old.

“Fine,” Spot practically growls.

He climbs out into the aisle, letting Race out into the aisle. Once the taller boy is in the aisle, Spot quickly steals the window seat. He settles into the worn upholstered seat with a quiet thump, crosses his arms and glares at Race.

Race shrugs, and slides his bag up above their seats. He fishes at his wallet, and pulls it open. To make another one of those lovely, only-in-his-life kind of discoveries. He offers a second prayer to Saint Jude, and then quickly adds in St. Cajetan. Either of them would have been a more appropriate patron than Anthony. Jude in particular.

“Spot?”

His voice has started to shake. Of course his voice has started to shake. His phone has switched the way it’s alarming, too. He’s not just low, he’s getting into the range someone else has determined to be dangerous.

Spot looks up, his face twisting into yet another scowl. There have to be more words for that expression, because Spot has at least a hundred variants, but Race only has the one word. And, it’s not doing a sufficient job at explaining the intent. This one, No. 57, clearly reads something between annoyed and concerned.

“Yeah?” Spot’s voice is gruff.

He stares at his wallet, at his feet, at the floor, anywhere to not look at Spot. “I need to borrow a couple dollars.”

Spot sighs, shakes his head, and fishes in the pocket of his worn black jeans. He thrusts two wrinkled ones at Race. “You want to tell me what’s wrong?”

Race manages to take the money. He’s proud of himself. “Nothing’s wrong, I just need to get something to eat.”
“Tony?” Spot never calls him Tony.

“Hmm?”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

Spot’s wrong. He’s normally a good liar. His poker face isn’t half bad. He’s got a tell (everyone has a tell), but he’s good at controlling it. Hell, he’s better at probability than most people. He can track numbers, track what’s been out and what goes in. He can build the kind of complex mathematical models that predict the future and calculate a 22% tip on a $23.57 meal in his head ($28.75).

Except when the prospect of doing math seems too daunting because he can’t think straight.

He closes his eyes, after images closing across his vision into tiny pinpricks. The symptoms match the numbers of his phone. He sways with the train, slowed nerve responses and contracted muscles making the process even more awkward. He almost stumbles down the aisle, trying to see if there’s anything to eat on the train. (There is nothing available for him to eat on the train. Most of the things that were to eat on the train have already disappeared into the people who brought them.)

He’s too out of it to notice the dirty looks of the few remaining commuters. He collapses back into his seat.

“Tony,” Spot hisses. “What in the everloving fuck is wrong with you?”

He fumbles to unlock his phone, getting the combination on the third try, and closes the offending app. If he can’t see the number, it’s not really happening. If he can’t see the number, he’s not really having one of those post-lunch crash hypoglycemic episodes he has when he’s too tired to dose properly. And, he sure as hell isn’t low on the Long Island Rail next to Spot Conlon.

He just has to hang on.

It’s getting hot in the car, except not really. He’s cold and he’s sweating. He can feel it trickle between his shoulder blades. He’s shivering and sweating and he pulls off his coat, undoes his sleeves, anything to cool down his body and make the trickling down his spine go away.

“Tony, you’re going white. Like, gray.” Spot informs him.

He shrugs, and hopes the shaking stays out of the movement. He focuses on breathing. If he just keeps breathing, they’ll make it to the station. If he just keeps breathing, his blood sugar will stabilize eventually and maybe his body will figure out how to solve the problem itself. And maybe, if he focuses on his breathing, he can go back and whip past Race into shape so he actually remembers to pick up extra sugar for the train.

“It’s fine.”

Okay, how the fuck does his voice manage to wobble on two… three… goddamn it, syllables are stupid.

“Just tell me what the fuck you need, Tony, I swear to God.”

Spot is wearing Scowl No. 23. Or 15. Or maybe… okay, fuck, doing things like cataloguing expressions is starting to get beyond him. He needs to focus on important things, like staying conscious until they make it to Montauk station, and where the vending machines are located. And how the fuck one gets dollar bills into the vending machines at Montauk, because he swears to
God, who ever thought that putting money into vending machines should be hard was not diabetic.

“Just, how far are we?”

Spot spies the map. “An hour, dude.”

Race can hold it together for another hour. Race can fucking hold it together for another hour.

If he has to wait, he’s going to pass out. “Look… don’t be weirded out, but umm, do you have candy or anything?”

“Candy?” Spot sounds kind of incredulous. “Yeah, let me pull out the bag of special M&Ms that I bought with Joe’s face.”

“Look, man…” Race’s voice shakes again. He rubs his hand over the tattoo on his left wrist, half hidden by his awful gingham button down work shirt. He’s undone the cuffs, but hadn’t rolled up the sleeves, and so the caduceus and the word is partially obscured.


And then Spot gets up and walks to the end of the car where there’s a mom with two toddlers. His face goes soft, and a little bit apprehensive. He says something Race can’t hear, but seems to involve a lot of gesticulating. And, when Spot comes back, he’s carrying a juice box.

Spot sticks the straw in expertly, covering the hole with his thumb to get enough pressure. “What the fuck, Higgins, are you trying to get yourself killed? Why didn’t you tell anyone you were diabetic?”

Race is too busy sucking down the sickly sweet juice which might be fruit punch and might be strawberry-kiwi but is definitely not apple or cherry. Which is good, because he hates cherry. With his blood sugar in normal range, he wouldn’t touch these with a ten foot pole, but high or low? Even if it was the only choice around, he’d rather pass out than drink the cherry flavor.

“Cause it wasn’t relevant?”

“Yeah,” Spot mutters darkly. “Not relevant.”

*This week, the six remaining bakers tackle America's favorite sweet: cookies! They'll wow the judges with a cookie cake, tackle a french classic, and make an edible cookie box, up next!*

**The Signature Challenge**

Getting out of bed on Saturday morning is hard. Getting out of bed is always hard. Monday through Friday, his alarm goes off at five-thirty. He has to be into the office by seven thirty, it’s the only way to get a jump on the NYSE, and get caught up on the Nikkei, the Hang Sang, the Dax and the FTSE. (It took him an embarrassing two weeks of his first job to figure out that the London “footsie” was not some sort of questionable sexual harassment technique by the english guy down the hall.) He’s normally still working when the Asian Markets open, but he tries to be in bed by the time the Europeans start trading. (He hates the days that he goes to bed at three. Hates them.)

Today, his alarm goes off at six-thirty, which should feel like a blessing, but he’d rather sleep for another three or four hours.

He drags himself out of bed anyway, if for no other reason than to brush his teeth until the terrible
layer of morning slime across his tongue is gone. He showers, puts in contacts, and uses the layer of foundation he’d found. The producers had suggested the contestants might want to wear makeup, and Race appreciates how well it covers the bags under his eyes. He might start wearing it to work, too, if that doesn’t make him too much of a jackass.

He turns out his backpack to check his stash. (Just because he has to be an asshole at work doesn’t mean he has to be an asshole here.) Shorting acting insulin pen, back up short acting cartridge, long acting pen, test kit, syringe, pen needles, juice pouch, mints, granola bar, phone charger, eyelash glue, k-tape, extra CGM sensor, gum. He shoves in his wallet, phone, and backup charger. He thinks about it for a moment, and then throws in the crumpled pack of cigarettes from the bottom of his bag. Then, he pulls on a snapback, and heads out the door.

He makes it to the lobby just in time to see Spot leaving with Crutchie. He feels a pang in his chest. He knows what jealousy feels like, he just doesn’t like admitting the feeling to himself. It doesn’t matter, shouldn’t matter. He’s been avoiding Spot since last night. He’s the one who went and sat as far away from Spot as he could manage at their six person table. He’s the one who excused himself when he and Spot normally go for a nightcap. (And maybe, that was less to avoid Spot and more because he just fucking needed sleep, but the point stands.) So, he can’t fucking get jealous if he avoids Spot and then Spot fucking goes and hangs out with someone else.

He sulks anyway as he gets on the minibus with Jack, Blink, and Smalls. It’s hard to sulk, though, out with people he considers friends. He finds himself relaxing. The tension in his shoulders, built up with the strain of a week of working, slowly lessens its grip as he leans into the early morning camaraderie of five people on a bus who would all rather be asleep. The other bakers make him feel less alone, and he’s thankful beyond measure for that.

There’s coffee and tea and Redbull in the green room. He’s impersonating a function human being this week, so he decides he’ll drink coffee instead of knocking back half a dozen energy drinks. Steady hands, Anthony, steady hands would be good.

He goes and checks the mirror, looking for new debts. Blink owes Crutchie $15, which is surprising, because as far as he knows, Crutchie isn’t the type to gamble. But, Crutchie also owes Smalls $5, and Smalls hasn’t been gambling either. She’d explained that her girlfriend would leave her, which is something she’d like to avoid because her girlfriend is awesome.

Race brushes his fingers over the tags with his name: the debts to Spot, to Blink, and to Jack. He’s paid his debts to Les, but he still misses the kid. Not enough to text him, or to check the group text during the week when his job is pulling him into a lonely, spiraling hole, but enough that he’d be happy to pay the kid $100 to fumble his way through Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech while Spot howled and Blink threw popcorn.

Tapped to the frame of the next mirror over, he finds a poem. It’s been printed up on one of those colored sheets of paper the production team uses, and stuck into the frame.

Smalls reads out the words, a smile gradually growing across her face.

“Queen of ovens, baking bread,
"Fore her bow thy mortal head.
“Ought to make this her career,
“Rye flour, salt, yeast, and beer.
“Joe can nary find a fault.
“Well balanced blend, pop of salt.
“Going home to feed her girl,
“Cinnamon Spice, tight lil’ swirl.
“With Sniper, trouble they spell,  
“White Goat cheese, Chanterelle.  
“Best pizza this side of town,  
“Sweet onions caramelized brown.”

“I think it’s three syllables,” Blink offers offhandedly. “‘Car-mel’, not ‘car-a-mel’. Otherwise the rhythm doesn’t work.”

“Best pizza, this side of town,” Smalls repeats to get the rhyme. “Sweet onions car-mel-lized brown.”

“Rye flour, salt, yeast, and beer,  
“Cinnamon Spice, tight lil’ swirl,  
“Sweet onions caramelized brown.  
“White Goat cheese, Chanterelle  
“Well balanced blend, pop of salt,  
“‘Fore her bow thy mortal head  
“She will kick your ass with bread.”

She grins, plucks the poem from the mirror and tucks it into her pocket.

The tent is warmer this week than it was last week. He’s not sure how he feels about that: the key to a good cookie cake is chilling the dough. Working in a warmer room will make things harder.

“Lady and Gentlemen, welcome back to the tent!” Sarah’s amplified voice carries. The guy with the big fuzzy mike leans in close to catch her words.

“Not to freak you out or anything, but for your signature challenge, Joe and Medda want you to make a cookie cake.” Kath picks up the patter. “Think sugar, think chocolate chip, think thick and gooey and afternoons at the mall.”

“You have two hours to bake and decorate your cakes!” Sarah announces.

“On your mark!”

“Get set!”

“Bake!”

Race looks around his bench, and goes through his recipe. He’s making millionaire’s shortbread, which was one of those foods his mom liked to make for birthdays and bake sales. He’ll start with the base, which is short bread, obviously. While that bakes, he’ll make a caramel. And then, top the whole thing with chocolate, which he needs to temper.

He’s practiced each of the pieces on their own, but he hasn’t put it together under the time limit, yet. And, he definitely hasn’t tried to make the recipe under these conditions. He’d planned to work through the recipe on Tuesday, ...Wednesday, ...Thursday. But, there had been that announcement from the president on Monday night that lead to market instability all around the world and meant he’d spent a good eighteen hour day tweaking the projection models for his boss.
That had pushed back his regular work for Tuesday into Wednesday: another long day. Wednesday had been a Rough Night, where he woke up every ninety minutes to eat something before falling back asleep, still low. By Thursday night, he’d intended to bake, he really had. He just needed to lay down, for a little bit… just a few minutes. He’d woken up at six, still in his rumpled button down shirt, poker chip cufflinks and integral socks.

He tests the butter. It’s softer than he’d like, but he doesn’t have a lot of time to get it to that perfect temperature he likes at home. He weighs out the sugar, makes a note on his recipe. It’s easier to count carbohydrates by weight, and it has the added advantage of psyching out his opponents. People think you’re precise when you weigh your ingredients. The reality is that he’s kind of lazy. The sugar and the butter go into his mixer to cream, and he starts weighing out the flour, and adds a sprinkle of salt.

He’s pulling out a couple of oranges to zest when Joe and Medda descend on him. He’s not sure why they’re starting at the back today, but they’re starting with him. Kath is tagging along this week. He likes Kath. She seems more reserved than Sarah. More buttoned up, prim and proper. But, spending time with her in the tent, Kath’s eyes glisten with mischief and she makes cutting remarks more frequently than her co-host. Sarah is loud and strong, but Kath’s tongue and brains have been shaped into deadly weapons.

“So, Anthony, tell us about your bake?” Medda asks, angling herself at the perfect angle where the camera behind him can capture her face, and the camera behind her can capture his, but the two cameras miss each other.

“I’m making a millionaire’s shortbread,” he explains as he carefully grates orange peel. He’ll have to keep an eye on the camera and on peeling to make sure he doesn’t get the bitter white pith. “So, I’m making an orange shortbread base, and then a pomegranate molasses caramel.”

Kath holds up a glass bottle full of dark liquid. “Is this your molasses?”

He nods, “Yes.”

“Oh! May I taste some, honey, I haven’t tried it before?” Medda asks, curious.

Kath unscrews the lid and pours a little out into her finger. Medda does the same. She offers the bottle to Joe, who shakes his head.

“Do you think a millionaire shortbread is really a cookie cake?” He questions, laconically.

“Everyone else is doing a more traditional drop cookie.”

“This is excellent!” Medda exclaims before he can respond.

It’s good, it gives him a minute to compose himself. Race shrugs, letting himself ooze the bravado he wore like armor when he was younger. “I like my odds.”

“Well, may they be in your favor,” Kath says with a smile.

He knows he’s heard that phrasing somewhere, someplace in popular culture. But, if it’s not sports or music, Race doesn’t really pay attention. He likes the idea of deep, intellectual books. He likes the idea of complex, thought provoking TV shows. He keeps promising himself he’ll get caught up on Game of Thrones, eventually. But, there’s a big difference between liking the idea of intellectual media and consuming them. The last thing he watched that wasn’t sports, baking, or the Property Brothers was probably a How I met your Mother re-run.

He shakes himself as the train of terror moves onto Spot and goes back to making his shortbread.
Medda asks Spot about how he’ll manage the swirl in his brownies. Joe asks Spot if he thinks brownies qualify as cookies. Kath makes the kind of pained face off camera that suggests she’s used to dealing with Joe’s special brand of pedantry.

Race checks his time and then sticks his dough in the freezer to cool down. It makes for a better textured cookie.

Up at the front of the tent, he can see Crutchie wheel over the freezer with his dough. He pushes himself up out of the wheelchair, pulling the freezer open and sticking his dough inside. Race doesn’t understand why he uses the wheelchair - or crutches - if he can stand and walk without them. It seems like a way to get noticed for the wrong reasons. Race works hard to avoid being noticed for the wrong reasons.

With the dough chilling, he checks his time, and then he starts measuring out the ingredients for the caramel. The timing on the ingredients is tricky. If he was doing this in pieces like he normally does, he’d let the shortbread sit for a couple of hours before he’d start making the caramel. He doesn’t really have that option in two hours. But, if the timing if wrong, he’ll pour hot caramel on hot shortbread and it will all go to shit.

He hesitates a little bit as he juices his orange. The sweet, acidic juice creeps up into his nail bed where he’s been worrying at his cuticles again during meetings. It stings along the base of his thumbnails, where there are always seems to be a layer or two of skin missing.

He checks his time again, but it’s only been 10 minutes that the dough’s been in the freezer. He’ll give it another five before he goes and checks it, which he explains to the camera.

Then, he ducks out for the remaining few minutes to go check his blood sugar. He’s hoping he can catching that magical five minute ping interval on his constant glucose monitor. It can take “five minutes” for a number to register, which really means “up to five minutes, based on some algorithm you haven’t hacked yet.” If it doesn't detect soon, he’s either going to have to slip his phone into his bench (which he’s absolutely not supposed to do), or prick his finger, which he doesn’t want to do. It doesn’t matter because lady luck is with him this morning, and he registers quickly: 120 and holding steady. Good. It makes this easier.

He slides back into the tent, passing Jack, who is on his way to get some of the questionable coffee from the production tent. Race is starting to envy the competitors who were smart enough to take a more traditional approach. But, this is a game. And, Race’s philosophy for games has always been “Go Big or Go Home”. He doesn’t plan to go home today.

He pulls the dough from the freezer, and pats it out into the tin. It goes in the oven, and he sets his timer. That gets clipped to his belt, because… well, that’s a stupid question. Everyone knows you’re supposed to keep your timer with you, and it has a clip for your waist band. If the manufacturer didn’t intend you to wear it, they wouldn’t have put the clip on.

He checks the timer, and calls to Sarah for the official baking time.

She loops over to see him. “So, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t have time to pour the caramel over the shortbread. I’m… I’m kind of winging it.”

Sarah shakes her head and wags a finger, a playful scold. “Didn’t practice?”

“Not all together,” he admits. Not really at all. But, he’s made this recipe so many times before, he shouldn’t have needed to practice. Baking is like riding a bicycle. A really temperamental bicycle
that you have to handle very carefully.

“So…” Sarah prompts again.

“I think I’m going to make the caramel in another pan, and then put it on top of the shortbread as soon as it comes out of the oven.” He starts lining the round pan one of the production assistants - Boots? - brings over, adding parchment paper and unsalted butter. “Come back in a little bit, I think you’ll like it,” He advises, conspiratorially.

Sarah gives him a big grin, and goes off to pester Crutchie for a bite of his cookie dough.

He’s watching his molten sugar mixture, stirring it occasionally, when Spot comes over to check on him. Spots got his 8” round cake tin in the oven, and therefore, everyone else should be waiting on their bakes, too.

“Doing okay, Tony?” Spot asks, rubbing a hand on his apron. His voice is pitched low, so no one will hear. “Need anything to eat?”

“Fine, thanks.” Race shoots back through gritted teeth.

He really needs to find that letter he wrote for his grad school roommate and give it to Spot. The one that starts out, “Don’t worry, I’ve been doing this forever,” and includes any number of comforting platitudes sandwiched between the dire warnings about how to use glucagon and when to go to the emergency rooms verses call an ambulance verses trust his judgement.

Expect that no one seems to trust his judgement, or his experience. He’s been doing this for fifteen years. He’s made nearly every mistake in the book. Over dosing? Under dosing? Ketones? Persistent Hypoglycemia? Short acting instead of long? Forgetting insulin and having to get the old stuff at Walmart because he didn’t have a prescription and it was Easter? He’s done it all, mostly on his own. His parents engaged minimally, in so much as they treated his A1c like yet another grade that had to be within a certain range. When he’d gotten out on his own, he’d run wild for a year or two before deciding what he wanted (what he needed).

Spot shrugs, seeming to ignore the animosity. Or maybe, because its how Spot Conlon communicates, he doesn’t recognize annoyance for what it is. Race goes back to watching his sugar and his candy thermometer. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Spot getting a cup of coffee and some carrot sticks. ...Maybe that’s what he meant by something to eat?

Race gets to the right temperature more slowly than he would have liked, and lets the caramel boil. He knows enough to stand back, he’s gotten splashed a few times, and it hurts! He checks the temperature with his candy thermometer, trying to use the temperature and the color to gauge whether or not his caramel is cooked enough. He likes to go darker on these, where he adds the dairy later. He just hopes he doesn’t burn them. He doesn’t have time to make more.

He adds the milk and butter, swearing under his breath as the boiling sugar hits his skin. He adds the vanilla, and pours them quickly, setting the pan aside just as someone’s timer goes off. He fumbles at his waistband. He’s got ten more minutes, it’s okay. He checks his shortbread anyway. It needs maybe another five minutes, not the fifteen on his timer. Then, he starts chopping chocolate, getting his topping ready.

The thing about the tent during a bake like this is that it’s a fucking liminal space. Sort of like the midwest. Race has an Aunt who lost her mind and moved to Michigan, and they have to drive out
there for Thanksgiving. And like, yes, Blue Moon ice cream is superior to any other flavor they make anywhere else in the country (and quite possibly the world), but that does not justify the existence of things like lake effect snow, cornfields, and the “dutch” aisle in the magical Meijer’s grocery store. The middle of the country is fucking weird, okay?

The tent may actually occupy a pocket of an alternative dimension that needs to be studied further. Physicists will flock from universities near and far to analyze how a minute can simultaneously last forever, and yet an hour fly by in the blink of an eye. Race doesn’t understand the advanced physics, but suddenly, time is counting down and he’s stacking caramel and pouring chocolate and sending up prayers to Anthony, Elizabeth, and that things have gone well. Because, at this point, there’s nothing else he can do.

Time is up, and he jogs back out to get his forbidden phone from his fanny pack and check his blood sugar, again. His phone buzzes twice, letting him know he’s gone above his high limit. Not an emergency, then, but annoying and nasty over the long term. He’s okay with hitting 180 every so often now. It’s a hell of a lot safer than 50. He studies the graph: he can watch the gradual rise from stress, combined with that spike from when he tasted his caramel. Normally, he’s good, but, he’d had to make sure it tasted the way he expected. (It had, he’d done a good job.) He watches the angle, the numbers, and considers the prospects for the next couple of hours. He fishes out his pen and one of the pen needles that’s rolling around in the bottom of his bag for what has probably been for-fucking-ever and… yep. You can always tell the old needles because of the way they catch against your skin and you have to punch them through.

He gets a cup of coffee, adds the splash of milk he allotted himself, and goes to stand with Spot and Crutchie. Because Jack is off in the john or whatever (so he doesn’t actually want to know) and Louis is having a very impassioned discussion with someone on the other end of the phone (“Yes, we do need the pink and the green glitter.” … “No, no, I know the school colors. But, we need the pink for the heart, Frankie.” … “Ugh, fine. I’ll call Jamie!”). Smalls is standing alone, looking like she’ll eat the balls of anyone who gets close to her.

So, if he doesn’t want to be alone (and right now, he’s too tired for his thoughts), he needs to go join someone. ...Which means Spot. Which means he has to stop avoiding him.

“...don’t remember, how did you end up there?” Spot asks, fiddling with the key he’s wearing around his neck.

Crutchie laughs. “Cause I was a bad kid?”

Spot chuffs a quiet sound of amusement. “Yeah, right, you’re like someone fucker bottled liquid sunshine.”

“I was a little shit. I think… I dunno. I think there a sling shot, maybe.” Crutchie gives this sort of half shrug. “Or, you know, we could play a fun game where we don’t talk about my sealed juvenile record?”

Spot huffs, his face settling into Scowl No. 17, a chastised expression. “Or that,” he agrees.

“So, how the fuck did you think this one went?” Race feels the need to intrude on their conversation, to not just lurk awkwardly. If he doesn’t he’s going to have to process what Crutchie said and what Spot was implying. And… nope. Not right now.

Spot growls. “Won’t know until they cut into them what Joe thinks.”

“I’m sure they’re fine. They passed the toothpick test, right?” Crutchie offers quiet encouragement.
Because Crutchie is a supportive motherfucker, while Race is just bitter.

Probably why Spot likes him better. The thought comes unbidden. He squashes it down. Because it doesn’t fucking matter. He doesn’t have time for a boyfriend. ...And, he doesn’t know where that comes for either. Not because he doesn’t know he’s gay? But… because he doesn’t fucking have time for a boyfriend, he barely has time for himself. And, where the fuck would he meet someone who wasn’t a douchebag from work? You don’t shit where you eat. Bad policy, Anthony Edward. You dont fucking shit--

“Race?”

A voice breaks through the tumult in his head.

“Yeah?” The word tastes funny in mouth. Or the coffee does. Why the fuck did he think hazelnut coffee sounded good?

“We’re starting again.”

He nods numbly, follows Spot and Crutchie back to their benches, and listens as the judges call out their order. Spot is first, he’s last.

He stands behind his bench, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet and until one of the PAs gets sent over to tell him to “Fucking stop as long as the camera can see you. What the fuck, Anthony, why can’t you stand still and look nervous like everyone else?” So, he tries to stand and look nervous like everyone else.

Spot looks disappointed when Joe and Medda tell him his brownies are overcooked, but relaxes some when they confirm the swirl is nice.

Joe isn’t sure he likes the nutty crunch in Blink’s oatmeal cookie cake. Cookie cake is supposed to be soft and think, not crisp, lacy and crumbly. Race glances down at his pan, nervously.

Crutchie’s bake is almost flawless. Almost. Joe is a bastard who constantly seems to find something wrong. And this time, it’s a slightly acidic taste to the cookie. Medda stands her ground though, points out that because of the way a snickerdoodle gets mixed - cream of tartar and baking soda separate instead as the combined baking powder - it’s supposed to be slightly acidic like that. Joe sulks, and insists he doesn’t like the flavor. If Kath isn’t careful, her eyes will roll out of her head or the cameras will catch her.

Jack’s brownie cake is baked well, but frosting was never intended to be that shade of green. It doesn’t matter if it was mint or not. Also, it’s spelled “Congratulations”, not “Congrandulations”, particularly if this is for a theoretical baby shower.

As Joe and Medda go to terrify Smalls, he feels his heart beat pick up and his fingers twitch. Joe and Medda work to systematically destroy her. The peanut butter cookies are too salty. They’re overbaked on the edge and underbaked in the middle. There’s too much, no too little chocolate, and it doesn’t matter, because the peanut butter melts were a mistake. Oh, and blue frosting? It tastes like food dye.

Race watches as Small’s face crumples. At dinner last night, she’d been so hopeful. She was star last week, and even though she hates cookies, maybe some of that magic will stay with her. Besides, today’s recipe is special. It’s her girlfriend’s favorite, the only cookie she bakes on a regular basis because she has to bake it for their celebrations. It hurts to hear the criticism from across the tent when he has no emotional attachment to what Smalls made. He can’t imagine being
in her shoes.

He’s apparently not alone in his observation. Sarah’s mouth and eyes tighten. Kath’s face falters for just a moment, but she recovers that mask. Jack walks back and puts a hand on Small’s shoulder. The hand isn’t there to tell her it’s okay to cry, because now is not a time and place Smalls wants to cry. The hand is there to tell her that what just happened was bullshit that she didn’t deserve.

As Joe and Medda leave devastation in their wake, Race can feel the adrenaline shoot through him. His heart beats a frantic tattoo that echos in all sorts of weird places - his left ankle and his right wrist, and against his chest. His muscles are stiffening and constricting to protect him. He feels sweat down his back, and he’s not sure if that’s because he’s going low again or because he’s just so nervous. (Oh God, he can’t be going low again, he can’t be.) He closes his eyes, checks for the halos that are usually there before the pounding heart beat and the cold sweat. So far so good, probably just adrenaline. Because that isn’t enough.

“So, Anthony, I hear you’re trying to be a millionaire?” Kath asks, playful patter kept neutral to disguise a… something.

He smiles back, the expression not reaching his eyes. It feels more like a leer than a genuine smile. He’s selling something, he’s just not sure what it is, yet. “I hope so.”

Medda goes to cut a piece of the cake, lifting it out and holding it up to the camera. “We can see three distinct layers here.”

“Nice separation,” Joe agrees. He sounds neutral for a man who just destroyed someone.

Race feels himself deflate, like there was a breath he didn’t even know he’d taken. The layers are even distinct. It’s okay.

Medda and Joe cut their shortbread piece, and each take a bite.

“Oh, honey, that’s rich!” Medda exclaims. “You can really taste the orange in the shortbread, and the caramel. But, I think I could do without the chocolate.”

“The chocolate adds an odd, bitter note,” Joe agrees. “Which is disappointing, because it takes away from the bake overall. I’m just not sure this qualifies as a cookie cake.”

“You said you wanted a family sized cookie in a traditional round shape for a celebration.” Race feels the breath catch again. “This is my round cookie, for a celebration.”

“What is this celebrating?” The venom is creeping back into Joe’s voice.

Race grins big, a slick, predatory expression that will ruin the take as surely as the words he says next. “That one day, if we all work together, we’ll topple the billionaires.”

Joe and Medda thank him quickly, and move out of the tent.

Kath lingers a little bit longer. “You shouldn’t have said that. You shouldn’t have said that.”

Race sighs. “Yeah, but I’ve never been good at keeping my mouth shut.”

And then, he ducks out of the tent to go check his blood sugar again, and figure out what he’ll eat for real food before he starts sampling cookies. He’s been having this problem where, once he does the math, he knows exactly what’s in his bakes, so he can do something like predict what they’ll
make his blood sugar do.

(Which would be a good trick. Blood sugar is a far more complex problem and far less predictable than the stock markets. It’s influenced by all sorts of things, like what you’re eating now, what you ate yesterday, how much you’ve exercised, how stressed you are, the phase of the moon, the age of your insulin, the injection location, who the Rangers picked in the third round of the draft, and how much sleep you got, among other factors.) The problem is that the other bakers don’t keep such careful notes, probably because the other bakers didn’t start baking the same way he did. So, dosing is a lot harder. He has to find that careful line that keeps him from skyrocketing, and then hanging out high and slower and inarticulate all afternoon, or crashing until his hands and brain don’t work anymore, or worse yet, riding that kind of nightmare blood sugar roller coaster that leaves you drained.

**Technical Challenge**

They’re back in the tent, back at their benches, and it’s time for Race’s favorite part of the competition: the technical challenge. He likes solving problems and baking new things. But, there’s also the camaraderie that he’s missing in other parts of his life. Win or lose, they do it together.

...He still wants to win, though. He offers up a quiet prayer, whispered under his breath. *Hail Mary, full of grace*...It was the kind of thing they said all through high school before any competition: basketballs, debate, dance, it didn’t really matter. It was an all purpose prayer for intercession. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinner, now and at the hour of our death, amen. The last part, the tag-on, he mentally yells, because they always mentally yelled it, for maximal intimidation: *Our Lady, Queen of Victory, Pray for Us!*.

He and Blink have a bet going about what this will be, and he and Jack have another about who will beat the other. (Given Jackie Boy’s performance recently, Race has his suspicions.) Blink is betting on some sort of fancy little shaped cookie, like a tuile or a palmier. Race thinks they’ll do something closer to home: a biscotti, or maybe a fortune cookie. He and Blink exchange looks across the tent when the challenge was announced. The fuck is a french macaron?

He goes through the recipe, twice. They’re making twenty four cookies, which he guesses are sandwiches based on the directions further down. So, they need 48 cookies of some kind, and then a chocolate ganache and a lemon curd. The cookies are simple: almonds, powdered sugar, eggs, flavors and dyes. There’s no fat, which means the eggs have to be whipped well. And then, he needs to make a ganache and a buttercream frosting. This is going to be fun. Maybe.

He takes his almonds, and sets up his food processor. He does a couple of rounds of chopping before throwing them in and grinding them. If he needs flour, this is the best way to do it. He keeps blitzing the nuts, using the excuse to look around the tent.

Crutchie is up at the cake table, doing something that looks more like arts and crafts than baking. Jack is still chopping, Spot has left his nuts alone and is starting in on the eggs, and Smalls... Smalls is using a blender. Race tried something similar once, when he was fifteen and wanted to make peanut butter. Blenders are... expensive.

Race starts his eggs whipping, hoping that everything will go well. It doesn’t say how stiff to beat them, but he figures stiff peaks, because stiff peaks usually lead to fun things. He hears Spot tell the camera that he’s gone for stiff peaks. In front of them, Crutchie’s eggs are whipped but soft.

Race divides his eggs in half, adds yellow food dye and lemon extract to one side, and almond extract to the other. Then, he folds each half of the mixture into his blitzzed almonds and powdered
Okay, what the fuck? He knows he’s supposed to fucking pipe the cookies, and like, he’s seen some piped cookies, but they’re supposed to be round. So, does he use the star tip? The round tip? The squiggle tip? The instructions say to pipe, but they don’t say how. Joe doesn’t fuck around, and if he pipes it wrong, he’s sure Joe will be unhappy. At least he’s not the only one staring at the recipe in disbelief. Across the tent, he can hear Blink echoing his own thoughts.

And then, they’re supposed to rest the dough, which seems weird. But, the directions are the directions. The problem is that’s all it says: “Rest the cookies. Put in the oven at 325.” He has no idea how long.

Up at the front, Crutchie has tapped his sheet. Spot, behind him, shrugs and copies. “Charlie always knows what he’s doing,” Race overhears him telling the camera. “So, if Charlie is tapping his pan, I should probably tap mine.”

Race privately thinks the same thing. Charlie is so damn good at what he does. And, anyone (Joe) who disagrees is confused about how the world works.

Race decides he’ll wait while he works through the ganache and the curd. He has no idea how long to rest the cookies… ten minutes? Fifteen minutes? Half an hour? If he was refrigerating his dough, he’d stick it in the freezer for ten or fifteen minutes to get it to firm up. (Or an hour in the fridge, none of that “fifteen minutes in the fridge nonsense”. He makes cookies with butter, like a man. And, it really sucks trying to shape cookies as they melt.) So, he goes for fifteen minutes and starts chopping chocolate and juicing lemons.

The cookies go in the oven, and he kneels down in front to watch. He’s not sure how they’re supposed to look, but he guesses. It’s hard to see his swirls lose their definition, but maybe they’re supposed to? The cookies start to rise rise. He rotates the pans, cooks them another few minutes, and then rotates the pans.

“So, I see you’re cooling out of the oven?” Sarah asks, carefully dodging around the oven door. She and Kath had appeared like magic. He manages not to jump.

“They’re kind of like meringues,” he explains. “So, I figure if you’re supposed to cool them like meringues, with the oven door open.”

“You think you’re right?” Sarah asks, with a mysterious smile.

He shrugs, holds up his right hand. “Fingers crossed. Either Bl--Louis, Elizabeth and I are right, or else everyone is wrong.”

He knows what he’s doing is a bit dangerous: he’s got this hot oven door next to him, and he has to figure out how to work around it. Making meringues was a pain in the ass when he was living with his parents. He had to kick everyone out, or wait until they’re gone, and then slowly cool the cookies. His sister was too inclined to come in and filch cookies before they were done, and she’d burned herself too many times before he’d figured out the only way to prevent it was to bake when she wasn’t home. It… kinda sucked, but it was also kind of awesome. He controlled the music. Meringues are alt-rock cookies. Shortbread is Frank Sinatra, yeast bread is classic opera, pancakes are Disney music. Pie is Christmas Carols. It’s doesn’t matter if they’re making a blueberry pie in August, he’s listening to Silent Night, Mary, Did You Know and Jingle Bell Rock.

He doesn’t have much time, he starts on the ganache as the cookies cool. Heavy cream, double boiler, stir. Add chocolate. Don’t burn yourself on the oven. Simple, right? He starts a second pan
with the lemon curd, cooking it down, and then he throws it in the freezer to cool. Because if you’re supposed to chill for an hour in the fridge, you can go for fifteen minutes in the freezer, right?

He turns to Sarah, who is up pestering Spot for chocolate curls. “How much longer do we have?”

She glances at her watch, and looks across at a producer. “Fifteen minutes! Fifteen minutes left.”

Fuck.

He starts assembling the almond and chocolate cookies, noticing how different his cookie sizes are. The recipe says “uniform”. These don’t qualify, at all… which doubly sucks. Joe and Medda are expecting uniform cookies. But, uniform cookies make it easier to divide the recipe and get a good estimate of the carbs.

He can hear his mom’s voice in his head again, telling him about how he can’t bake if he can’t get good estimates for the carbs, because, really as a diabetic, he shouldn’t be eating sugar. He coats a cookie so forcefully with ganache that he cracks a cookie: anything to force the insidious lie out of his head. That, along with sugar giving you diabetes, are things he doesn’t want to think about. They’ll just make him angrier, and then he’ll destroy more cookies.

...Unfortunately, he doesn’t have any extra cookies, which is terrible, because he always makes extras. That way, you can have the ugly cookies to eat first. You always eat the ugly cookies first.

Sarah and Kath are counting down as he pulls his lemon curd out of the freezer. It isn’t as set as he’d like, but he’s not the only one. Smalls is just pulling her curd off the heat, not chilling it at all. She sticks the tip of her knife in, and goes to town on her macarons.

With thirty seconds left, he starts arranging his sloppy, terrible cookies. The ganache is melting out between the weird, puffy uneven sandwiches, and the curd hasn’t set. It and the ganache taste good, which might be a saving grace, but nothing looks pretty. He places them into the long, narrow boxes, managing to talk to the camera all the while.

And then… they’re done. It’s hard, his hands are still shaking and his heart is still pounding in his chest. But, he calms himself, and gets to work, helping with the clean up. Maybe if he does something with his hands, his brain will catch up. Station tidied, he carries his boxes up to the front and places them behind his picture.

Spot comes up beside him to their arms almost brush. “What the fuck did we just do, Higgins?”

“Make some macarons, I think?” He whispers back.

Spot makes a face, Scowl No. 81, which is somewhere between pained and confused. “I sure as hell hope so.” Then, he goes back to bring up Charlie’s cookies.

Race catches a PA, asks how long they have. He checks his phone. No signal. Okay, he’s just gotta wait five minutes. He shifts the phone into his jacket pocket, and goes to find the all important Port-a-Johns. Given how big a deal Kara, the PA, made about them on the first day, you’d think they would be something fancy. Maybe like one of those Japanese toilets than plays music while you tinkle and has glowing lights. They’re not.

He walks back to the tent, slowly, hoping his phone will sync. It doesn’t. Instead, he gets the wonderful and ever welcome “your sensor hates you and decided to break”. He tries to count back the number of weeks he’s been wearing this one. Long enough that he’s re-applied eyelash glue a couple times to keep it in place. Which… a couple of weeks? Not great, but not terrible.
He’s distracted as he goes back to the tent and lines up with the others. They’ve got him sitting with Smalls and Blink. Spot is in Small’s other side, and Jack to Blink’s right, with Crutchie on the end.

His cookies are between Jack and Crutchie’s, which makes him nervous. Crutchie’s boxes are filled perfectly. They look like something he’d buy at one of those fancy grocery stores or delis that the Chads, Alexes, Hunters, and Austins at work order their lunches from. Jack’s are nearly as pretty: small rounded tops and crisp lines of filling. But, there’s extra space in the box, where the cookies might be too small.

There’s a collective inhalation as the judging starts.

Blink is first. He can’t see around the sign to check how the cookies look, but Joe comments on how “you can see this person used a star tip. A waste of effort, they’re supposed to be round domes.”

Jack comes next, and Joe has very few complaints. The cookies are small, maybe the baker made too many or didn’t pick the right sized ring. The lemon curd should have sat longer in the fridge. Yeah, well, if Joe wanted the lemon curd to have more time, he should have thought of that before he decided they only needed an hour and a half. Jack looks relieved, his shoulder blades settling back along his spine instead of resting somewhere near his ears.

His eggs weren’t supposed to be whipped to stiff peaks. He used the wrong piping bag. He was supposed to trace circles on his parchment, or better yet, use the silicon mat the provided. It had guide circles, if he’d just looked. And then, nothing was cooled properly. Joe can tell, because the ganache and curd have melted into the part. They’re ugly, but at least they taste good.

Not the best thing that’s ever been said about his baking, but definitely not the worst. At least the flavor is there. And, ugly cookies still taste good. No, ugly cookies taste better, because they’re the ones you snatch while they’re still hot.

Charlie’s are technically perfect. They taste sublime. They could be sold in a french patisserie, and no one would know the difference between those and the professionally made ones. Crutchie stops playing with the rubber grips on his crutches - this weird habit he has whenever they’re up on the stupid high chairs - and lets his hands relax.

Smalls have multiple technical issues. They’re too big. They were put together too hot. They don’t have the right texture because they weren’t rested properly. They’re uneven sizes. And why, why, why, for the love of God, where they piped to stiff peaks and then shaped using the star tip?

Joe is practically frothing at the mouth when he’s done.

Smalls looks like she’s about to cry.

Spot’s last. He ranks well below Crutchie. (But today, Crutchie has achieved a whole different level.) But, he’s gotten the look right. He’s gotten the texture of the cookies right. His ganache is grainy, though, and his curd is too thin. But, the bake is good.

Race isn’t surprised at the results. Smalls is last. He expects to be fifth, but it’s Blink. So, maybe he beat Spot? He’d like to beat Spot.

He didn’t beat Spot.

Jack comes in second.

And, of course, Crutchie comes in first.

When Crutchie raises his hand to claim the professional cookies, Joe just manages not to wince. Medda, Sarah, and Kath all smile widely to cover for Joe being nasty, and they call congratulations to Charlie.
Hannah, who runs the kitchen and ingredients, come around to collect the cookies, and he makes a point to set aside a few of his own. Spot comes over, and places two napkin wrapped cookies on his bench. Race looks between the cookies, the phone he’s pulled out that’s still showing the “fuck you, your sensor failed” message. He’s got too options: he can either eat them now, and just say fuck it, or he can wait.

Fuck it. Fuck it completely. He doesn’t bother with the recipe. He can wait on the recipe. He’s going to eat a goddamn cookie. If there’s not a record, it doesn’t count, right? Particularly if he only eats two… four… six. Okay, he’s stopping at six.

Chapter End Notes

Saint Anthony of Padua -- The Patron Saint of Lost Things.
Saint Cajetan -- Patron Saint of Gamblers and Good Fortune.
Saint Jude -- The patron saint of lost causes
Saint Elizabeth, Saint Honoratus -- two of about a dozen patron saints of baking.

You can look at sources for this chapter here if you're interested. They're not really formal citations, but enjoy.

I know there are SO MANY diabetes references in this chapter that I should either breakdown or make Race explain later. (Probably the later). So, if there's stuff that you have particular questions about, please let me know?

Finally, Thank you so much to everyone who commented last week. AHHHH!!! I may not have expressed my gratitude properly, but it got me through a 15 hour drive through rural Nevada. Which... never drive through rural Nevada alone in the dark.

If you're so inclined, please let me know what you think about this chapter. Or how your day is going. Or what you think the boys should be baking...
Chapter Summary

In which Blink has bad taste in burritos, Crutchie's fortunes take a turn, and there is some uncertainty.

Chapter Notes

I upped the rating, since I've added recreational drug use to the story.

This chapter is dedicated to T for so many reasons. Mostly that he will never read this.

Warnings:

ableism, adult alcohol use, recreational drug use, religion, food, swearing, needles

They make a plan to meet up in Crutchie's room that night. Race isn't sure whether or not he's invited, because now it's just him and Spot who are the middle of the road, but he sure as hell doesn't want to be left out. He spends too many nights alone in his apartment, hunched over a screen. Or, out with the assholes he calls coworkers who are just kind of, well, assholes. They're... people, probably, but after more than two years of working together, they're strangers. So, he's not giving up the opportunity to spend time with people he actually likes, even if "spending time with" means letting Spot kick his ass at Mario Kart.

The benefit of being middle of the pack is that he's excused earlier than the other competitors. Because the bakes are shorter, they finish earlier than he'd expected: early enough for a nap before dinner, but not early enough for him to go to mass. He won't be able to go tomorrow: mass out here starts after his call time and they don't do Sunday evening; his parish back home does Sunday evening mass, but he won't be back then. It irks him a bit, because he might have made it, if he could drive. But, by the time he calls an Uber, they get out to him, and he gets there, it will cost him 20 minutes and he'll be that asshole who slides in during the homily. And so, he gives himself permission not to go. And even though he knows, his week feels weirdly empty without the routine. It's a little piece of quiet in his life, where he can be still and not be alone.

Instead, he goes back to his room, and opens up his work computer. He's been carefully avoiding checking email on his phone. He's been trying to avoid checking his texts. If he could get away with it, he probably wouldn't bring his phone to the set at all. But, in theory, he likes his job and in practice, he likes his paycheck, so that's less of an option.

He can deal with emails after the competition. He can probably deal with emails on the train back to the city: let Austin pull an all-nighter for once, instead of him. (He'll stay up with Austin, again. Austin will be an asshole who doesn't even say thank you, again. Monday will suck. Again.)

If it's a Real Emergency, his boss will text him. His boss gets to decide on the definition of Real
Emergency. His boss can be a Real Asshole who likes to play power games. So, Bob might just decide to call him in, anyway, even though it's Saturday, which he technically has off every week; he specifically put this weekend on the calendar as being unavailable and cleared it with both HR and his boss; they're in the middle of the eye of the current political shit storms; and Austin can tweak any of his models.

Thankfully, there are no text messages.

He does have an email from Austin, detailing some question about how a late April snow storm in Colorado and accompanying cold snap might influence beef futures.

He could log into the super computer remotely, pull up the model, adjust the parameters, and fire off the simulation. He could tell Austin to go fuck himself, that everyone knows Colorado gets weird weather in April and there's really too much drama around it. What he does do is fire off an email with suggestions about which model needs to be used and where to look for documentation. And then, he turns on Comedy Central.

It's dark. His mind and his tongue are in fuzzy cocoons from sleep. It's seven thirty, and he's not sure if that's morning or evening or something in between. Trevor Noah is telling a joke about tacos, not that it really helps orient him.

It takes a few minutes of blinking, flopping, and sighing before he determines that it's evening and he has plans. So, he gets out of bed, brushes his teeth, and attempts to smooth his hair into something that isn't bedhead.

Absent mindedly, he swipes his thumb across his locked phone to check his blood sugar, ignoring the string of messages on his lock screen.

Damn. There is no record of his blood sugar for the past three hours.

He fumbles the app open, and he's greeted by the three question marks he's been trying to avoid thinking about. He ransacks his luggage and then his backpack, looking for the back up sensor he's packed… somewhere. In his backpack. He's packed the back up sensor in his backpack. Damn, he's tired, or lost, or something.

He decides if he wants to shower before or shower after. He should clean his skin before he sticks a needle in. He should clean his skin afterward, since he's starting to get irritation from the adhesive wipe he uses. He doesn't do either, just swabs down the area with the sticky prep wipe, and then sticks on the sensor with resigned exhaustion.

It hurts like hell as it tries to push the needle through scar tissue. It always hurts when you try to punch through scar tissue.

In the privacy of his room, he tests his blood sugar, knowing he'll still have the two hour reboot. He did good with the macaroons, he's impressed.

He knows he's late to Crutchie's room as soon as Blink answers the door. "You're late," Blink says by way of greeting.

"I feel asleep," he mumbles, his brain still gauzy.
"Sure you did, Higgins." Spot stands up from his position on the queen bed further from the door.

The view of the other bed is hidden by the wall that separates the theoretical parts of the room: "sleeping" vs "scrambling around in a towel because you forgot where you put your fucking boxers when you got into the shower". Not that Race has ever done that.

Race follows Blink in. They're all there, arranged around the beds and on chairs.

Crutchie points at Jack with comically raised eyebrows. "Nobody tired tonight."

The two of them are together on the bed closer to the door, the one he couldn't see when he entered. Crutchie is sitting against the headboard, and Jack is curled against him, head resting on his shoulder. He's got his trademark baseball cap beside him, and Crutchie is absent-mindedly playing with Jack's hair. It's dark and wavy and wild. In the past three weeks, this is the first time Race has seen Jack's hair without a hat for longer than a few seconds.

Smalls looks up from her phone. She's a lump up in the one armchair in the room, probably texting her girlfriend. She's wrapped herself in a massive NYFD hoodie that swallows her hands so she has to keep pushing up the sleeves. To Race, without his glasses, she looks a little bit like a navy blue and gray Easter egg in the big chair.

"Sit down, sit down" Crutchie directs. "We're figuring out what the fuck we're doing tonight, since no one wants to go anywhere."

"Do I have to put on pants?" Smalls looks up from her phone for a minute. "Because I am do not go out in public, and I am not putting on pants. Pants, fucking prisons for your legs…"

"Aren't you wearing pants?" Jack asks, without opening his eyes.

Smalls flips Jack the bird. "If you want to make me leave the room, I will go back to my room, lock the door, and take off any and all pants."

"No!" Blink flops on top of Smalls, holding her in place. "No, no, no. If you're here, then we're losers together. If you leave, then I'm just a sad, lonely loser all on my own."

"Get off." Smalls appears to poke Blink in the ribs from under a pile of lanky blond boy. "Get off, asshole! You're already a sad, lonely loser."

Blink springs off and whirls dramatically. "Am not! I'm a loser here with Jack."

Jack shifts on the bed enough to flip Blink off, but not enough to dislodge Crutchie's arm.

"Race, come sit with me," Spot seems to be ignoring the chaos. "Blink… I dunno. Go sit somewhere."

"Pizza?" Crutchie asks, surveying the room.

"No. " Race is quick to veto.

Pizza will fuck him over. Pizza and beer? Fuck pizza and beer. It's a particularly challenging mathematical model that he is too damn tired to solve. It's a mathematical model that he thinks he solved once, on a blessed day his freshman year of college when the stars aligned and the fates smiled on him. The next time he'd tried it, he'd ended up waking up a few hours later with his blood sugar so high that when he started to drink the first liquid he found - a bottle of coke he'd stashed in the fridge for the low he was expecting - it had
frothed against his tongue, a sickening net of carbonation whipped into a frenzy by the sugar in his saliva or the coating of bacteria that had taken up residence there.

He'd really like to be able to sleep through the night, rather than waking up every so often to turn off his phone alarm and pee. He's spent nights with high blood sugar before because he is a champion at turning off phone alarms when he's half asleep, he's a champion at peeing half asleep, but he sucks ass at finding the wherewithal to dose at three o'clock in the morning.

Crutchie shrugs and goes back to his list. "There's a Barbeque, Mexican, Seafood place not that far from here."

"The fuck?" Jack blinks open his eyes, and reaches across Crutchie's body to pull the phone toward him.

"Barbeque, Mexican, Seafood," Crutchie repeats, evenly. "Like, five minutes away."

Blink goes over to lean across the light to look at the phone. He squints with his good eye, shakes his head, and walks over to the other side of the bed so Crutchie's hand is no longer is shadow. He squints, and sighs, and leans back into the corner of the wall between the bed and the bathroom.

"Do they deliver?" Small's voice emerges from her cocoon. "And, can we get booze delivery? How the fuck do people exist in a world where they don't deliver alcohol to your door? We should get drinks delivered."

"Beer?" Jack tries not to make a face.

The hood shakes. "Whiskey."

"Whiskey," Crutchie echoes with a smile.

"Whiskey," Spot agrees.

Race watches the plan coming together. Normally, he'd jump in the center of the discussion, but right now… he yawns.

"Do they deliver?" Spot asks, already fishing in his wallet.

"Pick up only," Crutchie announces. "And, someone has to go to the liquor store."

They make plans quickly. Crutchie calls in an order for what feels like a baffling combination of the restaurant's three main offerings. He takes a few minutes to explain something that sounds ungodly complicated that Blink insists will be worth the special order.

Jack, Smalls, and Race pull out their phones to send him money; Blink and Spot produce rumpled bills, which Crutchie unceremoniously pushes back into a pile in the center of the bed.

"Alright, who's going?" Jack demands, before pulling the brim of his cap over his face, and snuggling against Crutchie.

"I ain't putting on pants," Smalls repeats her thesis. "They're fucking prisons for your legs."

"Amen." Crutchie shifts against Jack. "Ise kinda pinned, you guys. I ain't exactly able to move."

"I can't drive," Blink says, flopping on the bed. "And, I ain't gonna make my first time at night."

"I can drive, but I don't got a car." Spot stows his worn brown leather wallet in the back pocket of
his faded black jeans.

Crutchie looks at the bedside table next to him. "I'd lend you my van, but you won't be able to drive it."

"Five dollars says I can!" Spot pulls his thin wallet back out, and glares into the area where the bills are kept. "I can drive a manual."

"Spot, you ever used hand controls before?" Crutchie's voice is gentle. "Yeah, I didn't think so." He jostles Jack. "Lend Spot your keys, he's gonna go get burritos."

Spot uses the cheap hotel ballpoint to scribble something on his forearm and sticks out his hand for Jack's keys.


It's a lame excuse, but Race doesn't argue.

It's quiet while Spot tests the lights and fiddles with the mirrors. It's quiet while Spot slowly backs out of the parking spot in front of the hotel. It's quiet while they drive out to the highway and the liquor store, except for that polite, slightly mechanical female voice telling them to "Turn Left in one thousand feet."

They stop outside the liquor store, and Spot cuts the engine. The inside of the car goes silent along with the darkening twilight of the April night.

"I umm..." Spot says into the quiet. Somehow, it's barely loud enough to cut through the echoing silence. "I umm... I, I learned to bake as part of a youth diversion program."

"Okay?" Race isn't sure why Spot is telling him this. It seems... personal. As far as Race can tell, Spot isn't a guy who lets other people in. He might seem friendly? personable? outgoing on the surface, despite all the scowls, but he seems to wear that outgoingness like armor.

Spot scowls, number thirty four: introspective and melancholy. The yellow light of the liquor store sign illuminates his profile, and the way his hands clutch the wheel. "We - Charlie and me - we were like, twelve and thirteen or something. I dunno who's older. It was important then... such a little detail, but so important when you're that age. Anyway, we both got sentenced."

"For what?" The words escape with Race's breath.

"Him, I dunno?" Spot grins, cocky. "Me? Stealing cars. They were gonna put me in the auto shop thingy, but..." he laughs, the sound quiet and bitter, "but the judge said she figured I didn't need to know more about cars. So, umm, baking."

"Im, umm, glad." Race finds his words and his tone strange. He's normally louder, more bombastic than this. He's all confidence and bluster. He sounds different to himself, and he's not sure why.

Spot huffs that humorless laugh again. "Yeah, getting arrested was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

A cellphone in the cup holder chimes, breaking the quiet. Spot scrambles for it, and checks the
screen. "Jackie says Blink wants a cocktail. Because Blink is a fucking drama queen."

"Then we better go and fucking get Blink his cocktail," Race agrees.

Showstopper Challenge

This morning, he's hit "acceptance" in the five stages of sleep deprivation. (He'll either be at sadness or bargaining tomorrow. He really hopes he doesn't cry on the subway. He hates the days that he cries. He'd much rather be late for work.)

He mechanically goes through the steps of getting ready, because it's still fucking TV. In the privacy of the hotel bathroom that's filled with the scent of frankincense and the water running over his head and his cup of shitty hotel coffee carefully placed outside the spray, he'll admit that he's a bit vain. But, only in the privacy of this sacred space. Only to himself. And, he hates himself for it.

He buys another cup of coffee from the little coffee shop in the hotel as they make their way over. This morning, Jack and Blink ride with Crutchie, which sort of surprises him. Blink and Crutchie had both been high last night - Blink overly dramatic and Crutchie looser and giggly - but definitely high. And, even though they were high, Crutchie sort of snapped at Blink.

Blink had been looking for a place to sit and eat his California burrito, which had sounded amazing until Race had tried it, too. Soggy french fries instead of rice are an abomination under the Lord and should be cast out as evil. Blink may need to go ask for penance for making Race try that. It was a textural nightmare.

Burrito monstrosity aside, the room was already full. Crutchie and Jack were on the other bed ("because we're not sleeping in our crumbs, that's disgusting"). Smalls had reclaimed her arm chair. Race collapsed into the desk chair to eat his massive burrito. (He'd seen the size of the things, decided Spot knew his secret anyway, and dosed as they rolled through a stop sign.) Spot looked around, shrugged, and then just… stood next to Race. And so, Blink was looking around. His eyes lit on Crutchie's wheelchair in the corner, and he started making a beeline over.

"Ain't nobody eating in my chair," Crutchie said, his voice sharp as a knife edge. "It's not just another damn chair."

"But…” Blink started to object, then thought better of it.

Race can sort of see Crutchie's argument. If he needs it… when he needs it?.. when he uses it…? Anyway, sitting in someone else's french fry bits sounds gross. But also super intimate. Which, okay fine. When Race had an insulin pump, he was constantly on edge when other people wanted to touch it. Fucking no, you may not play with his pancreas because you think it looks like fun. Its not some fucking game. He'd barely trusted his doctor to touch it when it was disconnected from his body.

"Why don't you get a chair from your room?" Crutchie made the suggestion as innocently as possible. "I know you're next door, Redneck woman."
Blink had blushed, and hurried out of the room as the air sharpened palpably.

So, maybe it's weird the two of them are climbing into the beat up galaxy van together. And maybe it's not. Crutchie is such a kind person; he's a goddamn ball of sunshine and a sarcastic asshole. And Race is finding that despite some early trepidations, he enjoys Crutchie's company.

The ride in the bus is quieter than it would have been in the van. Smalls is in the back, looking wan and tired. The circles under her eyes are probably giving race's a run for their money in terms of color. He and Spot sit across the aisle from each other. don't talk, they just ride in silence.

Race uses the time to do that thing that's like meditating where he rambles at God and waits for answer, and sometimes he gets them. Right now, a lot of the answer seems to have to do with Spot. Which… could be wishful thinking. God knows, he's let himself delude himself into thinking he was getting answers when he wasn't. That mysticism phase in high school didn't last long, but it was weird. At least he had the sense to be quiet about it. It would have gotten him beat up. Then again, so would admitting he actually invokes saints in daily life.

The tent is a hive of activity as the bakers get coffee and go through their set up with the production team. Race looks over his ingredients, and really fucking hopes this works. He's made the recipe for the gingerbread once. The cookies he baked… it's been a while. It's just his job. It doesn't leave a lot of time for anything but his job. And it's slowly killing him inside, little by little. It pays well, and he wants to be well positioned for the future. That he'll get his loans paid off in five years instead of ten is attractive beyond belief. So, maybe a job he hates and the struggle to get stuff done will be worth it in the end.

"All right competitors, today, Medda and Joe want you to make…" Sarah Keating's voice draws him out of his reverie. "An edible cookie box, and fill it with cookies made from a different type of dough."

"You have four hours to box up your masterpiece," Kath adds, helpfully. "On your mark… get set… bake!"

Even though he hasn't practiced this well, he has a plan for how things are supposed to go. Obviously, his plan might be half fantasy, but Racetrack Higgins is an optimist to the point of stupidity - just ask anyone who has ever seen him bet on horse racing. He's good at probability. It's just… He likes the idea of horses. In practice, though, they're kind of, um, big. And smelly. And they have minds of their own. Like, you get on a fucking horse, and it starts to sidle away and move. He's kind of scared driving a car will be the same way, which is part of the reason he's never tried for his license. That, and owning a car in New York is stupid expensive.

So, he starts weighing things out, because if he has all his ingredients laid out and weighed out and separated in front of his two mixers, he's less likely to run into problems.

Up, two benches in front of him, he can hear Crutchie explaining his plan for the bake. It sounds complicated. Race has never made homemade fortune cookies. Race never wants to make fortune cookies. He looked at up recipe once, and only once, when he was drunk and lonely on a Tuesday when Ben had, once again, kicked him out of the office because he hadn't slept in three days. For weeks later, his hand out flit over the mouse of its own volition and click back to that recipe, where you're basically folding and shaping hot cookie batter and just the perfect time, because oh no, fortune cookies aren't baked in that shape, no, they're folded while hot.

There's such a difference between this Crutchie and the Crutchie last night. Crutchie today is calm,
collected, charming, but in control. He's sunny in a pale yellow t-shirt and a jean jacket. He seems as aware of the cameras as Joe and Medda, he's a real professional. Race would watch a cooking show starring Crutchie: the kid is magnetic on and off camera, and he's baking circles around everyone else in the tent (and they all know it.)

Last night, though, he and Spot had gotten back from their adventure later than they'd planned. They'd gotten lost because Race navigates by spoken direction and Spot navigates by the map, and finally, they'd had to just turn the GPS back on because Spot was getting more and more irritated with Race telling him every turn.

When they'd finally gotten back, things were still subdued. Someone had pulled up *The Incredibles*. Smalls was curled up on the bed Spot had been sitting on, watching the movie with a kind of numb fascination. Race knew something else had to be going on, her reaction was beyond what he'd expect, even given Joe's jackassery. Blink is sprawled across the foot of the bed, playing candy crush absentmindedly and occasionally asking Smalls what was happening on the screen. Crutchie was back on the bed with Jack, wearing different pants and a slightly damp hoodie. He was giggling harder than he should have been at the asinine jokes, stage whispering things to Jack.

There had been a cloying smell in the room, sweet and sticky. He knows the smell all too well, it smells like people unwinding after graduate school parties and the cops busting in to arrest his friend. It smells like a night spent vomiting, because it turns out that he can't tolerate THC. The others, though… lines that had been etched into Crutchie's face since they met, lines that Race just assumed where part of who Crutchie was, had eased. The shape of his face and the skin around his mouth had changed, like his jaw had unclenched for the first time in three weeks. Race was pretty sure it wasn't just Jack's influence (although cuddling with Jack made the slight creases in Crutchie's forehead go away).

Race shakes his head a little bit, and focuses on the two stand mixers in front of him, where he's got butter creaming. He slows them, adding the flour he's weighted out for each recipe. He really fucking hopes that he's added the right amount of flour to each mixer for the right recipe. It's just, everything has to bake and cool and be assembled, and there's very little time. If he has to make something over, he knows he won't be able to finish everything.

He's still adding ingredients and his mixers are roaring, so he can't hear what Sarah and Kath are saying. But, they've found two packs of Sticky notes on Jack's bench. One goes on Jack's forehead. One goes on Kath's blazer. One goes on Sarah's back. Jack holds up his two plastic recipe sleeves, one yellow and one hot pink. He points to the mixers where he's matched the colors. It's smart.

Race wishes he'd thought of that, instead of trying to guess which ingredients go to which recipe.

Joe and Medda come over while he's in the process of kneading his cookie dough. It's what the recipe says, and it keeps the dough nice and pliable. "So, Anthony, tell us what you're making."

"I'm making a peanut butter cookie box, where I'm using peanut butter and avocado oil together as part of my fat. And homemade Oreos."

The production team stops them, and says, just this once, they need to do the take over again.

"So, Anthony, tell us what you're making."

"I'm making a peanut butter cookie box, where I'm using peanut butter and avocado oil together as part of my fat. And, homemade, um… chocolate, uh, sandwich cookies."

Medda twinkle in an all together amiable, comforting way. Some people twinkle in a way that's intended to be comforting, but is entirely saccharine and artificial. Albus Dumbledore twinkle

while he grooms you to be a child soldier. Medda Larkin twinkles with suppressed laughter at the ridiculousness of Race's unairable language.

Joe frowns. Because Joe always frowns. Because Joe is a dick.

"How are you getting the peanut butter flavor?" He asks, critically. Race suspects this goes beyond Joe's hatred of all flavors.

"I'm using peanut butter in place of about a third of the butter in my recipe." He holds himself steady and he manages not to wilt under Joe's glare.

"Interesting choice." Joe's comment is ominous. "Did you try it at home?"

"Yes. I had a few failures, but then I tried adding some oil to boost the fat content, and that really helped." He had tested the recipe before the competition started. He wasn't sure he'd make it this far, but he'd at least tried it a few times when he and his sister had made a holiday house. (They didn't call it a gingerbread house. Resa hates gingerbread.)

Joe sniffs. Because Joe always sniffs.

They talk more about his decorating plans (chocolate piping on the box), and about how he's making his cookies. (Dutch process cocoa, a little bit of coconut essence because it makes them taste more like Oreo chocolate sandwich cookies.)

He shows off his embossed rolling pin, which Medda likes a lot. She examines it closely, smiling to herself.

This one is new, but it reminds him of the one he'd grown up using. When he was a little boy, his crazy aunt in Michigan would bring these lemon and anise cookies with pretty little designs on top every year for Christmas. The had pillow soft bottoms and crispy hard tops. When you pulled the top off, they tasted like lemon and fat and goodness, and when you ate the bottom, or the whole cookie together, it tasted like anise. As a kid, he doesn't think he was supposed to like anise, but there was something special about the way it twisted across his tongue.

And then… and then… and then after he started baking because he was sick and tired of store-bought individually wrapped brownies when they had sweets at all, he asked his aunt for the recipe. Her neighbor sent it with the embossed rolling pin so he could make his own Springerle. The wooden embossing pin - almost as unpractical and delightful as a cookie dough that you left out overnight at room temperature - made him so happy. It's still there, at his parents, somewhere in the unfinished part of the basement that has become a shrine to Resa and his childhoods.

Kath, on the side of Medda away from Joe, leans in too. "Are those… ?"

"Stegosaurus and Tyrannosaurus Rex."

Because he has totally outgrown his Jurassic park phase. Com'on, he's twenty five. He's got a high paying job. He totally didn't specifically go looking for an embossed dinosaur rolling pin for his homemade Oreo chocolate sandwich cookies. That would be childish.

Or awesome.

He thanks Medda and Joe. He promises to be careful with the peanut butter. And the coconut extract. And the frosting ratio.
And finally, they've moved on to another competitor, and he can go back to concentrating on his recipe.

He gets the gingerbread into the oven first: it gives it time to cool, and lets him take his time cutting out the cookies. For the record, wafers for 30 sandwiches, plus extra so there are ugly cookies to eat, is a lot of fucking cookies. ("Anthony, you can only eat the ugly cookie. The pretty ones are for when the guests come over.")

It's good he's planned ahead, because it looks like some of the dinosaurs didn't emboss as nicely as he would have liked. He doesn't mind eating headless T-rexes or squashed stegosauruses, but Medda probably does. Race would prefer not to disappoint Medda. He's pretty sure that after she dies, she will be canonized as the patron saint of reality TV hosts. One of her miracles can be getting him through this with minimal drama.

Race starts cutting his cookies. In front of him, Spot is starting to get frustrated. His structural cookie - a homemade graham cracker, which Race thinks is daring - is failing for all the reasons Race thinks it could fail. Mainly that Spot decided to score it ala traditional graham crackers. Which just makes the problem worse.

The structural gingerbread the rest of them are making is strong and designed to hold up to five weeks of sitting out on the sideboard, children and adults slowly snitching pieces until your mother picks up the house and throws it out, right around Candlemas, claiming the damn thing is disgusting and it's getting too close to Lent. Not to use a specific example, or anything. Graham crackers are what you use to make milk carton "gingerbread" houses in school with that slightly off white sticky icing from a tub that tastes like plastic and decorate with spicy gum drops that taste like licorice and gel icing. There is clearly a superior answer in terms of structural cookies, or at least as the walls of a decorative holiday masterpiece.

Spot studies the first pan he's just pulled out, and then starts mixing up a new batch of dough. The others go in cut, but unscored, which Race thinks is probably better.

"Spot!" Crutchie calls back to him. "Ra-Anthony, can you come help me?" Race checks the timer clipped to his belt (4:57 minutes) and goes up. Between the three of them, they carefully ease Crutchie's massive bowl of structural cookie out of the oven. It smells amazing: like star anise, ginger, and cloves. It's a little bit dark, and it starts to crack as they shift it onto the cooling rack. It's hard to work with the hot dough which is still in a weird molten state. Race thinks it must be harder for Crutchie, since he has to trust the rest of them with his precious creation.

Race watches as Crutchie pulls himself up to standing, one hand casually leaning on the counter. Most of his weight rests on his left leg, the right a little bit stiff. He casually inspects his bake.

"Just because I probably can bench Smalls doesn't mean I do it all the time," he says quietly to Race when he catches him staring. "It would get tiring, and she'd probably kick me in the face. When this is all done, we should go to the gym together. I can always use another good Spot."

Spot barks so quietly that only the three of them can hear, squeezes Crutchie's bicep, and goes back to fighting with his graham crackers.

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and then adding in the sugar. At home, Race doubts that either his or Blink's families actually use pasteurized eggs. He wonders if Blink or his brothers ever got food poisoning when they were tasting the family eggnog. Then again, he wonders if Blink, whose family is very Italian, does eggnog.

Race's family is a weird mix, the definition of a white American mutt. His mom is Italian on her father's side and Basque on her mothers. His grandparents had met in Argentina, after the second world War, and then emigrated to New York just before his mom was born. His dad is mostly English and Irish (they think), but he could probably be anything. Maybe Race should get his parents one of those spit DNA tests he keeps seeing advertised on the internet. Might be interesting to actually know where they come from. Maybe he can bake an ancestry reveal cake. Like a baby reveal cake, but less... heteronormative.

Race has the sandwich halves of his cookies laid out basically wherever he can find space. He made have made a tactical error when he decided to do this. His box is sitting on his bench, waiting for the royal icing to set, and he's piping filling into his, homemade - fuck it - Oreos. They've got about hour minutes left, and so if he can get the rest of the way though these, he'll be in pretty good shape. Everyone seems like a little prayer of its own. Oh God, let this be good enough. Oh God, let me be good enough. Oh God, don't let them know I'm not good enough. Oh God, don't make me go back to before. Oh God, don't leave me all alone.

Around him, it seems like the other bakers in their own focused zones. Smalls has powdered sugar on her cheeks. When they were little, Race's sister, Resa, used to think you needed flour on your cheeks whenever you baked. Otherwise, the baking wouldn't happen, and you'd just have dough. Smalls is working something on her workspace, kneading it and muttering to herself.

Behind him, Blink is carefully putting together his cookie box, his hands steady and meticulous. His cookies, which aren't terribly attractive to look at, sit cooling at the other end of his bench. Blink is focused on his box, though. He's got stencils waiting for him, some food dye, and what might be edible glitter. His stove is heating, and he might be doing sugar work. For someone who failed yesterday, Blink is going all out today. Race isn't sure if he should be pleased, or concerned. He likes Blink, most of the time. But right now, given the choice between Race (or Spot or Crutchie) leaving, and Blink's ass going, Race knows who he would choose.

Up front, he hears swearing, and Sarah jumps back.

Crutchie is staring in dismay at the partially collapsed top of his half dome structural cookie. The one that he's already behind on decorating because the first one hadn't come out of the oven well. The one that Sarah Keating just put her elbow in.

His face falls, and he looks like he's about to start crying. And then, the swearing starts up. "Fuck. Holy fuck. Oh, holy fuck."

Crutchie looks like he might start crying. He turns to the camera crew. "I, umm, can I have a minute?"

They hesitate.
He bolts.

Sarah goes over to Kath, up near the front of the tent, out of the camera lines as well, and they confer quietly. Sarah keeps looking back, an expression of panic on her face, too.

And the rest of them? The rest of them keep baking, because there's not much else they can do.

Race looks down at his cookies, around the tent, and then slips out after him.

He finds Crutchie leaning against his van, breathing heavily. He's got one hand gripping the open door frame, and his right leg is jiggling. Race isn't sure what's wrong, what's to know and doesn't want to know, and it's probably none of his damn business, but… Race is pretty sure Crutchie's right leg doesn't move. Not normally.

"You okay?" Race calls across the gravel parking lot.

Crutchie raises one shoulder in a shrug, and eases into a sitting position in the back aisle of the van. He wipes at the tears.

"You gotta come back," Race calls, approaching slowly.

Crutchie looks up at him. "Why'd you come, you don't even like me."

Race huffs out a sound that should probably be a laugh. "Because we gotta finish this thing. And just think about what it took to get here. So, stow your seriosity, get your butt in gear, and go finish those fucking fortune cookies."

Crutchie nods, and lays back to stretch his back. Races lower spine is jealous at the audible crack.

"We can talk about feelings and shit later," Race amends. "But, now, you've got a good chance at winning this whole damn thing, and everybody knows it. You just gotta go back."

Crutchie rolls his body back up to a sitting position, so his t-shirt goes tight. He has damn good abs. "I'm gonna walk back," he decides. "You push my chair."

Race takes it as the sign of trust, and follows the other competitor back. They make good time, better than he might have expected. Charlie leans his crutches against the end of his bench, settles into the chair with a quiet grunt, and then goes to tell the camera that he's not sure he can do anything else to rescue the box, so he's going to make his fortune cookies and hope they're good enough.

Race goes back to sandwiching his Oreos.

They finish the round panting and shaking.

Race tucks his phone into his pocket before joining in the laps around the tent. One, two, three, four, five. Jack slows after three two walk with Crutchie.

Eeep! Eeep! …pause… Eeep! Eeeep! Deal with me!

Race jumps, and then curses, when his phone starts to alarm. Not only is his blood sugar below that level where he and his doctor agree was probably dangerous, it's slipping further. The morning's adrenaline and his guesses about how much tasting he'd be doing where off. Or
maybe he's still riding the after effects of last night's burrito and alcohol induced hypoglycemia. Or maybe it's both. It doesn't matter.

He stops running, and goes back to his backpack, looking for something. He's got a roll of candy, the kind that fractures into a million pieces and he chokes down. He fishes in his bag, finding them, fingers closing around the roll and thumb nail half piercing the paper as he counts down the tablets and then rips off the roll.

They taste like chalk in his mouth. At least they taste like cheap chalk. He knows plenty of people who pay way more to get almost the same damn thing in obnoxious, high profile, plastic cases. These, well, maybe he'll buy the rounded ones next time.

Spot comes over and hands him a bottle of water as he coughs more. He thanks Spot, his voice mostly stable, his hands mostly stable, his vision still normal and his brain at hopefully normal speed. (But, when relativity kicks in and your brain is running at not quite fast enough, it can be hard to tell.) He pushes up his t-shirt to rub his tattoo, and old, absent minded habit. And then, he offers quick words: Christopher, Cajean, Jude, pray for me. Maybe some of their luck and protection will rub off and no one will notice.

Something must be enough off though, because Spot slips off to go talk to the production crew. And, when they announce the order for the bakers to present their work, Race is last.

He chews through another two tablets and then finds a toothbrush to try and make his tongue less green.

The judging is tense and uncomfortable. It seems like no one has achieved that perfect bake. Jack and Spot both have good flavor in their gingerbread. But, it's clear that Jack lost track of his time and so his decoration is not as nice as it could be. Spot got his decoration, but one of his batches is clearly overbaked. Plus, Medda isn't sure the Brooklyn Bridge as an iconic landmark quite translates into cookie form.

Blink's regency jewelry box is a sight to behold. He has all four corners capped with little gold sugar work feet, and the top is brushed with edible gold glitter. Race thinks that if he saw it on a dresser, he wouldn't know it was edible. The problem is that the cookies inside aren't as nice as the outside box. They're tasty, alright, but they're kind of ugly. And, apparently, Joe doesn't like currents. Particularly not currents in rum. But, again, this is Joe. If the man can't find anything mean to say, he doesn't say anything at all.

On the other hand, there are issues with Spot's boxes and Small's. Spot's lacks structural integrity, and even Medda dings him for using graham crackers. They simply don't have the structural integrity of a dense cookie made without a leavening agent. Spot's fatal mistake was to use baking powder in his recipe.

Small's box is pretty: dome shaped like a modern ring box, and covered in a pale teal fondant with white piping around the sides. Because Smalls is a fucking amazing baker, she's gotten the box set up so you can open and close it, through a very clever fondant and marzipan hinge. The white cookies are arranged inside like the pillow, awaiting something precious to put inside. Medda is the one who carefully breaks off the structural cookies for herself and Joe, and she's the one who selects four of the white cookies, careful not to disturb the rest. No one has a problem with the appearance, despite previous poor performance. No, the problem is that Small's bake has no flavor. The structural cookie is sweet, and nothing else. The little wedding cookies are the same: dry balls
of powdered sugar with maybe a hint of… nut. They're not sure what kind of nut. Just… nut.

Once again, Smalls holds it together. Because Smalls is a fucking champion. Race wants to run
over and give her a hug. It's so clear what she's doing, so clear the message she's sending. He
wonders if she's going to ask this weekend, or wait until the episode airs. (The company will tell
them before the episode airs, right?) Either way, it's none of his damn business. It's just… it's really
fucking cute, okay?

He hopes Jack and Blink tell her that when they crowd up to her bench, and wait for her
acknowledgement. At the slightest nod, Blink wraps her in a bear hug, and Jack follows.

Crutchie is second to last, and he seems really nervous as he approaches the table. Medda and
Katherine come to help him carry his creation to the judging table. Joe stands back and makes
disapproving noises. Crutchie walks after them.

"So, what happened?" Medda asks, studying the dented, undecorated dome.

Sarah pops forward. "I umm, might have had something to do with that," she admits. "It's my elbow
print."

Medda accepts this, but Joe frowns. "If you'd planned better, you might have been able to re-bake
it."

Crutchie stares him down with the sweetest smile on his face, but he doesn't say anything.
Crutchie's shoulders shift ever so slightly as he adjusts his stance, a way to compensate for the way
his shoulders have tightened. He seems to let Joe's words wash over him. If it had been Race, he
would have been trying to fight the tide of vitriol, but Crutchie seems to float on it.

Medda says they should taste the ginger bread. It is amazing.

Then, they crack open the fortune cookies. Sarah pulls out the tag of her cookie with delight and
reads it out loud. "You will eat a delicious cookie."

"That remains to be seen," Joe mutters.

"Proud and defiant, slay your giant," Medda offers, also smiling. "You wrote these?"

Crutchie nods.

"They're lovely."

"Thank you."

By the time they come to Race, he can feel the tightness in his chest and he has to remind himself
to breathe. It's got to be the adrenaline from the competition, and not from a low, since the low
frankly wasn't that bad. He carries up his peanut butter box filled with his Oreos, and presents them
to Joe and Medda. They're styled to look like the original cookie box, and he thinks he's done an
okay job.

Medda studies it, and then breaks a corner off the lid of the structural "package" before handing
some to Joe. She smiles. He frowns.
"It's soft," he says. "I don't think the peanut butter worked."

"Not so soft," Medda counters. "Think, maybe. But, you got good flavor, especially given the texture."

They move onto the sandwich cookies. Joe can't find anything mean to say. Medda takes two. Sarah and Kath twist them apart, and marvel at how the frosting has solidified. (Fifteen minutes in the refrigerator and silica gel packets. Those things are awesome.)

Final Judgement

For the first time, the judging seems to take forever. It's not just because they're all a little bit on edge, it's because the judging is actually a slow process.

They go back to the green room, where craft services has set up whatever you call the weirdly timed meal around three pm when most people are craving a chocolate fix. The production crew lays out big metal sheet pans of pad thai, green curry and rice on the table.

Race swipes at his phone, and makes a decision about how he’s going to dose. He slips out of the trailer, careful not to let the door slam behind him. There’s no one around, so he slips his pen out and screws the needle into place. It doesn’t take that long to dose: a few seconds to unwrap the new needle, another few to dial up the priming dose. He pulls off the bigger cap and holds in out the side of his mouth while he slips the needle into his arm. Plunger down.

He’s holding the pen against the upper part of his arm, counting down the time around the plastic cap in his mouth, when hears the voice.

“Race?”

“There you are.” Crutchie is coming down from the trailer to talk with him. Fuck.

He pulls the needle out before the count finishes and spits the cap into his hand. Needle gets capped and shoved into his front pocket. He caps the pen and shoves it in his back pocket. Nothing to see here.

“Whatever it is, it’s fine.” Crutchie comes down to lean against the dirty trailer next to him. He stretches his leg with a grunt. “Fuck.”

“Why are you out here?” Race asks. “You don’t even like me.”

“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Anthony,” Crutchie says. “I need to pee.”

“So… I’m not stopping you,” Race says. “Go, pee.”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.” Crutchie grunts as he moves away from the trailer.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” He says. “I’m going back in.”
Crutchie nods. “Don’t eat all the Pad Thai.”

“Why not?”

“Because its my favorite, and I’ll be angry. You won’t like me when I’m angry.”

“Whatever you say, Banner. Whatever you say.”

An hour later, they’re still waiting and the production team starts calling them to do interviews.

Two hours after they returned the trailer, and the production team packs up and goes off to do whatever the production team does when they’re waiting for a decision.

Half an hour later, and they’re all playing extreme spoons in the green room. Kara, the perpetually exasperated babysitter, has declared it “okay as long as no one gets hurt.”

Jack looks wounded. “What makes you think we’d hurt ourselves?”

“Jack, your first week here, you almost had to get stitches because you hit the back of your head on the coffee table.” Kara is so done with this shit.

“We’ll be careful,” Blink promises.

Smalls nods, quietly, looking up form her phone.

It takes approximately seven minutes before Spot starts swearing that Jack stepped on his fingers and Blink offers to kiss it better.

It takes approximately eight minutes for Spot to offer to punch Blink.

It takes approximately eight and a half minutes for Kara to tell them that they’re not allowed to play spoons anymore.

Finally, finally, finally, someone comes to get them. They’re lead back to the set, tramping through the shadowy production lot to the tent with its flood lights. They settle onto their seats, and they wait.

Race is between Spot and Crutchie, he’s not sure why. Spot and Crutchie are friends, and he’s… he’s a random guy who started baking with them. It’s close enough that he can see Crutchie’s white knuckled grip on his crutches. Race can feel it too. He rubs his tattoo, feeling the raised lines, and he waits.

Sarah has the honor of announcing star baker this week. Kath has the unfortunate duty of telling them who will be leaving.

“The judges deliberated for a long time,” Sarah acknowledges, “but this week’s star baker is…”
Jack Kelly!

Race isn’t sure how he feels about Jack winning. He’s had a few technically good bakes. They just weren’t as good as Crutchie’s. And, honestly, if they were being fair, Crutchie’s were still better.

Crutchie is a magnanimous guy, though, and so he reaches down next to Jack and squeezes his hand. Race is a shit, and he’s a little bit jealous. Not of Jack and Crutchie specifically, more of the relationship in the abstract.

Kath holds her voice steady as she announces. “And, unfortunately, this week, the judges have decided that Elizabeth will be leaving us.”

Small’s face crumples as the group envelopes her. Kath and Sarah are there first, hiding her face from the cameras as they pull back. Blink comes next, then Jack and Race, Spot and Crutchie. They crowd around, shielding her, because there’s no fucking way anyone is going to see Elizabeth Small cry on camera.

They wait while Jack and Smalls do their short takes in the fading light, and the six of them drive back together in Crutchie’s van.

There’s a girl waiting for them in the green room. Her long hair brushes the middle of her back, and her pink nails drum on her leggings.

Smalls jumps up when she sees her. “Sniper! You’re not supposed to be here!”

Sniper smiles. “Kelly texted me, said I should come.”

“No!” Smalls wipes at her eyes. “I’m fine, I don’t need you.”

Sniper takes a step back. “I want to be here. Don’t we keep talking about a day in the Hamptons?”

“Not when it's fricking freezing!” Smalls insists. “Anyway…”

Sniper wraps Smalls in a hug. “You done?” She uses a perfectly manicured finger to wipe at Small’s tears.

There’s a small, affirmative sound. The two women leave together.

“Well…” Blink says, trying to fill the silence. “Feel free to call my husband any time you want, Jackie boy.”

The words don’t shift the mood, but they do galvanize them into action. They pack up their few remaining things: rolling up chargers, shoving cards and books into their bags, and snagging a few sandwich baggies more of cookies.

Then, the five of them walk out.

“Hey, Race, I know you took the train in,” Crutchie says. “Do you have a ticket back?”

He shakes his head.

“Good, I can drop you off in Manhattan on my way home.”

Chapter End Notes
The multitalented, amazing Sarsroses made beautiful fan art for this. I am so awe struck I'm not sure what else to say, other than to go praise him on Tumblr.

You can find recipe inspiration and source notes for this and all chapters in this google doc. I usually update it while I'm writing, so you can sometimes get a sneak peek for next chapter's recipes. I do want to note here that you can buy a dinosaur embossing rolling pin on Etsy. You can also buy a Brooklyn Bridge cookie cutter on Amazon or Etsy.

Saint Jude - Patron Saint of lost causes
Saint Cajetan -- Patron Saint of Gamblers and Good Fortune.
Saint Christopher - Patron Saint of travelers. Also good person to ask for general intercession and protection
Homily - The "sermon" given in a Roman Catholic Mass. It is recommended that this be less than eight minutes. (The best weekly masses are no more than an hour of formal prayer.) The homily comes after opening prayer and a series of three readings. If you show up during the homily, you've missed most of the first half of mass.

I apologize for the length of time its taken me to get to this chapter. For those who don't know, I recently made a trans-oceanic move to start a new job in a field tangentially related to my previous work. So, umm, in the like four weeks since I posted my last chapter, I have put basically everything I'm bringing from home into 2.5 suitcases and a backpack, flown for like 21 hours, made an 8 hour time change, moved to a city where I do not speak the primary language, and started a new job. I've also been dealing with housing and exploring the local medical system. So, really, its been a very busy time. Hopefully future updates will be more regular (I have some fun planned for Spot), but I apologize in advance if they're not. I think they'll probably also be more split weeks. I'm not sure how I went from 9K words for an episode to closer to 15K, but here we are, so...

Finally, out of deference to those of you who get hungry, next episode is pastry. And, if I haven't mentioned this recently, I'm so thankful for everyone who comments and leaves kudos. It makes me day. (It makes my week.)
Chapter Summary

In which Blink misses his boyfriend, Spot gets in an argument, and Sarah uses unairable language.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to C³, who hopefully will never read this dedication. Nevertheless, let this be a non-apology for San Diego, Los Angeles, Sequoia, Yosemite, Fresno, San Francisco, Weed, Crescent City, Josephine County, Portland, Seattle, and Benning County.


See the end of the chapter for more notes

VroomVroom: running late
VroomVroom: wont make dinner
VroomVroom: you should go without me

Smallsie: WTF Race? Again?

blink182: ur job sux

charlie baking: arent you an English teacher?

blink182: text speak is English send send fuck send

Les mis: you text like my dad
Les mis: not even david texts like my dad

davey: what are the kids doing these days? Clapping?

blink182: you are suck a cold man
blink182: duck. *old man

juliet: Its snapping david. You should get one. I'll send you lab pics.

cowboy: ewww. science

juliet:
[NDT science doesnt care]
The conversation continues on, a rolling log of insults and jokes, puns and promises. Spot shuts it, he can always catch up on the train. He looks at his watch and traffic. The ambulance is empty, they’re just off shift. If there’s a call, they will still have to take it, but he doesn’t think there will be a call. If all goes their way, they’ll make it back to the fire station in time for him to get his bag and make it to the train station for the 5:30 train to Montauk. He hopes things don’t go his way.

His roommates and crew mates have being giving his shit about his “twitterpatation” for a week. And, yes, Sling insists it’s a real word, it comes from Bambi. How and why his roommate knows this is not something Spot is interested in finding out.

The reality is… he had a crush. And, he’s not sure he feels about that. Spot Conlon doesn’t do crushes on real life people. There are beautiful humans out there - Michael B Jordan, Jeremy Jordan, Rosario Dawson - and he fantasizes about what it would be like to hang out with them, maybe get dinner, maybe watch Naruto or the Rangers or something. Maybe sneak a kiss, maybe just hang out. Spot has theoretical crushes on people he will never encounter, never have to figure out how to be intimate with. And, it’s better that way.

...And then there is the human disaster that is Racetrack Higgins. God, even his name is stupid.
Spot, at least, has an origin, and okay, maybe it’s a weird origin, but it’s terrifying and involves three headed dogs. Racetrack? Probably something stupid. Like the kid’s issues with probability and gambling.

But, Spot wants to spend time with him. He wants to touch Race, and probably more importantly, let Race touch him. Spot doesn’t do causal contact. He was tactile in his teens with people he trusted, but those were few and far between. He was afraid that if he let anyone touch him, especially any man, that they’d figure out he thought he was attracted to men. (He thought he was attracted to women, too, but mostly, he found the whole thing confusing and thought about parkour and dragons and broken hips.) And yes, he was a senior in high school when gay marriage became legal, but that didn't stop him from being afraid. And yes, he stood up for Blue and Sling. But, it’s different when it’s your best friends getting married to each other than when it’s the reality of thinking about letting someone else touch, move, manipulate, control… your body. Spot has a right to his autonomy, he has a right to feel safe. The problem is that the barrier is anything more than casual or professional contact.

He thinks he trusts Race, which is rare. Oh, he has other people he trusts: Sling and Blue, Crutchie, his fellow EMTs with his life and others, the fire crew they sometimes work with. But, there’s a difference between trusting them and trusting. There’s an intimacy in that kind of physicality that scares him.

So, he acts dumb. He flirts, or what passes for Spot Conlons febil attempts at flirting. He tells Race that his bakes are good. He save pieces of his bakes for him. He slides Race the recipes for his bakes so Race can do whatever the fuck he does with the recipes before he eats his own food, and avoid that frustrated, slightly afraid little wrinkle that comes from when Race eats someone else’s food. He glowers at people on the Long Island Rail until they switch seats with him. And, apparently, he lets Mo drive back to the station, despite the fact that Mo is the most cautious and scrupulous driver in their crew, and so having Mo drives makes sure that he’ll just miss the earlier train and have to ride out with Race.

“Thinking of your boy?” Rodriguez leers at him from across the gurney.

“What?” Spot starts.

Rodriquez nods, the line earrings tinkling with the motion. “Exactly.”

“Hey, Mo, step on it!” She calls through the front window. “Use the siren if you have to! Conlon wants to see his bae.”

Spot reaches across the gurney to swat at Rodriguez. “He ain’t my bae.”

He doesn’t have time to argue as they skid into the station. (Mo may be the most careful driver of the three of them, but they work in a profession where fast and careful driving is key to saving lives.) He huffs as he climbs out of the back of the ambulance, leaving Rodriguez and Mo to clean up. It didn’t matter: he’d covered for them on Tuesday and Wednesday.

His travel bag is in his locker so he can go directly to the station. He checks his watch, checks the MTS app, checks google, checks his bank account, checks the cost of an Uber. There’s a possibility he’ll make the earlier train, but it’s slim. He’ll wait for Race. He won’t admit it, but he’s maybe waiting for Race.

Cerberus: call went long. missed the train. dont wait dinner for me either.

Race almost misses the train, that’s how late he’s running. Spot can see him hurrying along the
length of the platform at Jamaica station, eyes both wide and weary. The Hemstead train was probably late, and if Race misses this connection, he won’t be able to leave until 9:30. Race doesn’t look like he’ll be able to stay awake tomorrow if he’s not in bed by 9:30.

Spot holds the door as his fellow competitor rushes into the train compartment.

“Thanks.” The word is an absent minded acknowledgement of a stranger’s generosity. It doesn’t mean anything. Spot clings to it.

He slings his sports bag over his shoulder, and joins the general rush to find a seat. Race has already found a place, his leather weekender and his leather briefcase up over his head. He’s sitting in an aisle seat, anxiously fiddling with his phone. Spot finds a set behind him, close enough to see the way Race swipes right every so often. Spot pulls out his phone and queues up a podcast, one eye watching Race’s phone, the other closed.

At Babylon, Races seatmate gets off, and Race shifts over to the window. He slumps against it, the hoodie he clearly put on over his work clothes shielding his face. He’s still clutching his phone for dear life, as though he’s afraid that if he lets go, something terrible will happen.

Spot creeps up across the aisle shortly after - at Bay Shore - and settles across the aisle from Race. He goes back to his podcast and listening for the alarm from last week. He trusts Race, he’s a damn adult, but it doesn’t mean he doesn’t pay attention.

Race stirs around West Hampton, groggy and shaken. He looks over at Spot, mutters something, and pulls his noise canceling headphones more securely over his ears. Spot waits, but Races phone doesn’t alarm and Race doesn’t need to eat.

Race still seems groggy when they get to Montauk, So Spot takes charge. He’s good at it. There’s a reason he’s the youngest person to run a solo ambulance crew in Brooklyn. There’s a reason he was his pool’s head lifeguard at seventeen, beating out more seasoned people. It’s not just his pretty face.

Spot swings both of the overnight bags onto his shoulder and hands Race his artificially distressed leather briefcase. Race reaches for his bag, but Spot swings it out of the way.

“No.” He keeps his voice firm, they way he did when he was talking to a wayway child at the pool who he’s caught running. He tries to rearrange his face into something friendly. He’s not sure whether or not he’s successful.

“Fuck you, Conlon,” Race spits while grabbing for the bag. “That’s my shit.”

Spot ignores him and heads toward the exit. Race tags after him, the leather briefcase hitting against his leg as he walks. Spot calls the car, he loads their bags into the trunk, he makes the necessary polite overtures to the driver.

Race follows obediently, meek. Spot wonders if it’s something beyond the nap. It doesn’t matter. It’s weird. He’s pretty sure Race isn’t supposed to be this quiet.

Races phone buzzes twice, and he swipes to dismiss the notification. Five minutes later, it buzzes again, and Race once again dismissed it as though he goes through the action in his sleep.

They get to the hotel, get out of the car, and this time Race is quick enough to grab his own bag. They check in quickly and efficiently, Spot providing his well worn and well abused credit card for incidentals and Race pulling out his own.
They walk toward the elevator together, and Spot stops Race. “Do you want dinner?”

“What?” Race turns to look at him. “I ate breakfast.”

Spot frowns and adjusts his tatic. “Good to know. Have you had dinner tonight?”

Race shakes his head.

“Meet me here in like… fifteen minutes.” Spot checks his watch.

Cowboy: Can I borrow your car?

Cerberus: I rode up with Crutchie

Cowboy: I rode up with Crutchie

Cerberus: What the fuck am I supposed to do for dinner, Jack?

Cowboy: Show up on time

He’s surprised, and pleased, when Race meets him in the lobby. Race has changed into joggers and a t-shirt, and he already looks more relaxed. Unfortunately, he doesn’t look any less dead. That means that it’s up to Spot to find a place to eat nearby that isn’t going to fuck up whatever meal plan Race has going. (Not pizza, if he remembers correctly, probably because Race has said it three times).

He doesn’t know. He could ask, but every other time he’s tried to ask Race for any information about his diabetes, Race has shied away and given glib, non-answers. Spot knows what an EMT knows, which is emergency medicine: what to do when the shit has hit the fan. He has no idea about day-to-day management of the chronic disease. He no way to know whether or not Race will ever explain. Maybe if they start dating.

It’s awkward, waiting with Race while he stares at the menu in confusion. “I don’t know what I want.”

Spot is hungry, so he orders himself a damn appetizer while they wait.

Rstarts perking up about four minutes after he takes a sip of his beer and eats his first wing.

He figures out how and what to order a few minutes after that.

They eat together companionably, talking about causal things: sports, stupid shit their friends have done, the weather.

They have a heated discussion about sports over a glass of whiskey: Race claims that football is superior almost everything else, but Spot insists that he’s not in a position to make that judgement, since he’s never seen a hockey game. And, everyone knows that hockey is better. For one thing, it’s not all commercials. For another, the crowd gets to throw a lot more things than in football.

Spot feels old as he swirls his glass and sips at it and listens to Race prattle on about his devotion to the cult of football.

And then, they’re finishing their drinks and the waitress asks if they want another. Race fumbles for his wallet and shakes his head. “Just the check please? And can I close my bar tab?”
And she brings the bill, he takes it before Spot can reach across the table and slides his card in. He signs the slip quickly, rolling his eyes upward to remember as he calculates the tip in his head. And then, they leave together.

Spot stays up way too late, analyzing the significance of less than $25 of alcohol.

Signature Challenge

As an EMT, Spot is used to physically, mentally, emotionally exhausting days. A weekend on the bake off is harder than a thirteen hour shift in a snowstorm. Still, there are things he does to take care of himself. He can’t afford to lose his tough-guy image, but he can’t afford to burn out, either. So, he takes care of himself in quiet ways that no one else will recognize.

He gets up early and goes down to the hotel pool to swim. The semi-heated outdoor pool is, umm… refreshing in the still chilly April morning. It matters less once he gets in the water, though. The pool isn’t regulation anything, it’s more designed for lounging than for serious swimming. Spot doesn’t care. Even though he’s been full time with the ambulance for three years, he still goes the Prospect Park Y to swim at least four days a week. Swimming is awesome: it’s like sensory deprivation while exercising. It reminds him that he’s a person.

He gets out, showers, and meets Crutchie in the lobby for breakfast promptly at seven. Thankfully, Crutchie has already had at least one cup of coffee. Crutchie without coffee is not someone Spot wants to interact with again. Spot is pretty sure that they met because of something Crutchie did one morning before he had coffee.

“Good night?” His friend greets him.

He shrugs. “Sports bar around the corner. You?”

“Aren’t you darling? Jack and I went back to my room.”

Spot bristles at being called “darling”. He suspects Crutchie picked the word on purpose, a reference to his height. Not that Crutchie has much ground to stand on.

“To fuck like rabbits?”

Crutchie looks at Spot over his mug. If this were one of those romance novels Jablonski keeps leaving in the back of the ambulance “in case it’s slow” and not real life, Crutchie would have waggled his eyebrows. But, Crutchie is not a story book character, and so he just looks at Spot meaningfully. “I don’t fuck like a rabbit,” he says, primly.

Crutchie pauses to take a bite of his hash browns, and Spot gulps his coffee.

“He thinks I should go do TV,” Crutchie admits, after chewing and swallowing.

“Who?” Spot asks, bacon strip about to go in his mouth. Their call is in twenty minutes, they have to leave in ten, and he paid an extra $2.50 for bacon. He’s going to finish his damn bacon.

“Jahh,” Crutchie says around another bite of potato. He swallows. “He said I should do my own cooking show.”

“You should do your own damn cooking show,” Spot says immediately. “You’d be awesome.”

“I told Albert,” Crutchie says shyly. “Albert and Finch. They told me to finish my degree and get a real job.”
Spot thinks he remembers Albert from some intervention or another during his youth. One of those “get all the poor foster kids together in a room and make them interact to socialize them properly” kind of events.

Spot considered himself pretty well socialized, thank you very much.

“I never went to college,” he says. “And I do okay.”

“You also work as a first responder in a city that still says they value first responders.” Crutchie’s voice goes hard.

He and Crutchie are too young to remember 9/11, but that doesn’t mean they don’t live with its ghosts. There’s so much about Crutchie’s past that Spot doesn’t know, so many reasons he might be bitter. Spot doesn’t qualify. What he knows about his parents isn’t much, and he doesn’t want to remember.

“There aren’t that many good jobs for a disabled guy.” Crutchie’s face creases with a frown. “They’ll never say that’s why they didn’t hire you, it’ll be because you didn’t have the qualifications or they found another candidate, or there wasn’t a way to make the accommodations ‘reasonable’.” He makes air quotes and huff out a breath.

“So… finish school?” Spot suggests during a pause between inhaling coffee and finishing breakfast.

Crutchie huffs again. “Jack’s out, been done for a while.” His voice is pitched low, and it sounds plaintiff. “What if he gets sick of his younger boyfriend who’s boring and still in school and decides to break up with me?”

Spot makes a valiant effort not to roll his eyes. He doesn’t think his effort is valiant enough.

“Do you know what Jackie Boy is doing right now with his fancy degrees?” He signals for the check.

Crutchie shakes his head, taking another fortifying drink of his third, or is it fourth, coffee.


Crutchie sighs and throws some cash into the black plastic folder. Spot does the same, doing math on his phone to double check the tip.

Spot glares at the hotel guests and staff who stare while Crutchie gets to his feet and his brace clicks to lock.

In the pressing silence of the dining room, a little boy at the buffet stage whispers to his mom, “How come he walks with those?”

Spot is braced for the mom’s answer, half tempted to soak a toddler on his friend’s behalf.

Crutchie, though, he’s charming. He smiles at the kid. “Cause i need ‘em. Sometimes that happens.”

“How?” The kid asks, with the tenacity of a small human who has just found someone to play his favorite game: Why?

The dining room is silent, breaths bated for the answer. Crutchie shrugs and leans in to stage whisper to the boy, “I can’t tell you the real story, cause it’s top secret, but my cover story is that it
happened fighting dinosaurs.”

The four year old nods with all the earnestness he can muster, and then refocuses his laser attention on the waffle iron. “How come we flipped it upside down.”

The magic words break the spell, and things start moving again. Noise comes back into the dining room. People start moving again. Spot lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Crutchie continues on his way with a smile. Spots spent time with him though, and when they were kids… yep, Crutchie’s face might not be trustworthy, but Crutchie’s hands don’t lie.

“Do you want a ride?” The question is casual enough to catch Spot off guard.

“Nah, I’ll wait for Race.”

Crutchie grins, the smile wide and genuine. “Sap.”

“Shuddup.” Spot makes a playful swipe at him.

Crutchie dodges, and goes to find Jack.

When Race comes down to the lobby, his lips are pale like paper, his skin is ashen and his eyes are dead. The most prominent color on his face is the green on his tongue and the blue of the circles under his eyes. His hair is still damp from the shower. Spot swears that Race has blown his hair dry every other week. (So has Spot, but he was swimming, so fuck off.) He looks like death warmed over.

“You okay?” Spot asks.

Race looks at him, eyes glassy and slightly unfocused. “Yes,” he lies.

“Crutchie already left, and I think we have to Uber.” Spot lets the words elide together, his heavy unavoidable accent coloring his words.

Race looks up, focusing finally. “Umm, okay.”

“Do you know if we're waiting for Blink?” Spot didn’t see Blink leave with Crutchie, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. He hasn’t seen Jack leave with Crutchie either.

Race pulls out his phone, presumably to text Blink. He swipes his thumb to the right, makes face, and then goes to unlock his phone. It takes him four unsuccessful tries.

Spot texts Blink in the interim.

Cerberus: Hey, did you get a ride with Crutchie?

blink182: No, I’m running late. Can you buy me live more minutes?

The advantage of waiting for Blink seems to be time to get Race… whatever the fuck he needs to actually be Race again.

“What do you need?” Spot used his EMT voice. It’s authoritative and gentle at the same time. He tries to make his EMT emergency face, too, but he can’t.

“I’m fine,” Race whines, then winces. “Really, I’m okay.”
Spot doesn’t believe him. Spot has seen this before, and it’s not okay. “

“Do you want something to eat?”

He’s willing to go get Race whatever the fuck he needs. An overly expensive coke from the gift shop? Spot will make it happen. Race says a lobster roll will fix this? Spot will go find him a lobster roll. Race needs dim sum from Chinatown? It’s a little late, but Spot suspects that if he called Washington and Jablonski and they broke a few traffic laws, he could get it here.

Race shakes his head, tired, and motions to his backpack. “I’m good. I jus’ ha’ som’thing.” He tried to glare. The fact that he immediately yawns ruins the effect.

“Coffee?” Spot offers.

“Fuck, yes.”

Spot goes over to get a mug of the free drip coffee from the lobby, keeping an eye on Race the entire time. He’s afraid if he lets the other boy out of his sight, he’ll faint or something. He catches Race’s glare.

Blink makes an appearance, sandy hair rumpled and dusty red shirt rumpled. “Ready?”

Spot shrugs.

Race - who appears to finally have gotten his phone unlocked through either sheer perseverance, coffee, or time - calls an Uber.

“Thanks for waiting,” Blink drops into the backseat across from Race.

Spot quietly grinds his teeth and settles into the front. His dentist has given him a night bite guard because he grinds his teeth so much. He wears it, when he remembers it. ...Which is why it’s currently in his bathroom drawer at home.

“Why were you late?” Race’s voice sounds steadier. Tired, but steadier.

Its Blinks turn to blanch. “I, umm… husband, my, umm… my Mush. My husband Mush called. And, umm, he’s really fucking cute. We got distracted.” The last gets said glibly, like the real meaning is supposed to be hidden behind innuendo. Like Blink would rather wrap himself in noise and show and motion than stop and let anyone really see him.

Race nods, still firing half cocked. “How come he’s called Mush?”

Blink is starting to look pained in the rearview. “Racer?” Spot meets his eyes in the mirror.

“Umm?”

“Shut up.”

Spot pulls a sharpie out of his back pocket and scrawls something on one of the last few “Hello My Name is” Stickers to stick on Race’s back, later. Then, he makes up another one for Blink.

The uber driver gives him side eye and turns up the music. Spot didn’t think he’d like something this brassy and 40s, it’s kind of cool. And, like the song says, “Anything Goes”. And, apparently, straight men are gigolos. So, it’s all good.
They get dropped off outside the production suite, because the Uber driver can’t actually see what they’re doing. Which means they’ve got a good ten minute walk. Spot looks between Blink and Race, nervously. Blink seems… Spot doesn’t know, he’s not that good at emotions. Race, at least, is dead on his feet, but he seems to be mostly back to being Race. They walk in together.

They’re making open topped pies today. There has to be something other than traditional pie crust on top. It feels weird to Spot, but lots of things that they’ve been asked to bake are kind of weird for Spot. It feels like pies should be all about the crusts perfect bottoms soaked in fruit, and shiny egg washed lattice tops, like what you see in those baking magazines Spot has totally never read at the public library while waiting for Sling to finish whatever he was reading in Shonon Jump. Sling had started when he was thirteen, and never turned back.

Sarah and Kath patter up front, and then they’re released to bake. Given Race’s love of horse racing (which he admitted to over dinner), Spot wonders if he compares their position to a bunch of jockeys at the starting gate. They’re all nervous and a little bit over caffeinated, chomping at the bit. Kath releases them, opening that starting gate. And, they’re off!

Spot’s doing a Dutch apple pie with a cheddar shortcrust pastry. It’s that almost savory, flaky, fatty picrust that most people think of when they think of pie. It’s also one of the only pie crust kind of things Spot knows how to make, and only because his friend, Rosie, is basic as fuck. Rosie is also kind of cheap. So while they have to have Sunday brunch a couple times a month, Spot makes quiche, which is Rosie’s favorite, or sticky buns (his favorite) or avocado toast (when they’re in a hurry) and Rosie does mimosas or Irish coffee or something. They day drink, mock each other, bemoan the gentrification of Brooklyn, and have serious philosophical discussions. It’s awesome.

He focuses on what he’s got going, and not what’s going on around him. They pre grated his cheese, which is a really good Vermont cheddar. He’d talked to Hannah about grating it himself, but she assured him that it was too time consuming. And, besides, it would make a lot of unnecessary noise. So, he gets the crust made in the food processor, because god, Spot loves a food processor. Seriously, who the fuck doesn’t think a bunch of whirling knives aren’t the best thing in the history of ever. So much faster than taking a chefs knife or pastry cutter to everything, but maybe a little bit less satisfying.

The production crew and judges decide to come talk to him while he’s peeling apples. He uses a knife and, just, takes the skin off with a single, long, round cut.

Kath comes over and picks up one of the peels, bouncing it.

“They’re perfect curls!” She swirls it in her hand. “I could make a whole fake apple out of this! Do you think Joe would fall for it?”

Joe’s brows crease as much as their Botox allows at Kath’s joke. She normally doesn’t interact with him, as far as Spot can tell, so this is a bit odd.

“So, Spot, tell us what you’re making today?” Joe asks, his voice oily.

Spot ignores his tone. “I’m making a Dutch apple pie. I’m doing a cheddar cheese crust and then a crumb kind of topping with nuts and brown sugar.”

“No flour in the topping?” Medda asks.

“I… umm, I usually make this as a crisp, without a crust. There’s a guy on my crew who has celiac
but loves apple pie. Gluten free pie crust?” He makes a face. “So, I got rid of the pie crust all together and just so fruit and topping, normally.”

Washington had almost kissed him when he’d shown up with the first crisp. It felt a little bit like a scene out of Brooklyn 99, with Washington playing Terry and Spot playing Boyle. (He would like to think he’s more Peralta, but he wasn’t in a position to argue while a large man cried on his shoulder in joy.)

“Crisps tend to be wet, sometimes, if you don’t bake them well,” Medda observes. “We’re looking for a dry, solid bottom.”

“Dry bottom crusts make the baking world go round,” Sarah sings with a devious grin, her words almost but not quite overlapping Medda’s.

“I’m going to add tapioca,” Spot says, quickly. “I practiced with and without, and the tapioca really helps.”

“Mmmm,” says Medda, disapprovingly. “Well, thank you Spot.”

And they walk away, he can hear Sarah quizzing Medda and Medda being inscrutable. He goes back to making pie crust and cutting apples.

Spot normally pays attention to his own bakes and tries to ignore the people around him, but it’s hard to ignore the dozens of eggs on Crutchie’s bench in front of him, or the smell of ginger wafting up from Race’s.

Spot pats his cooled dough into his pan, and covers it for a blind bake. The idea is to bake it without getting any color, which means covering the crust in foil and putting pie weights in. At home, he uses whatever dry beans were on sale in bulk when whoever went shopping went shopping bought them. (They eat a lot of rice and beans. And the ones you prepare from dry are better. Or cheaper. Or both.) Here, they have pretty ceramic beads, if he wants them. He uses a handful of beans.

He pats his apple slices dry, anything to get some of the moisture out. Maybe he should precook the filling. But he’s never done that before. And, it all worked in practice at home. Rosie threatened to sic her third grade class on his baking, and Jablonski told him he couldn’t bring in any more pie as long as Washington was on shift, so he took that as “it worked”.

He tests the temperature of his picrust, and decides it’s ready to fill. He slides in his apples, his tapioca, and covers the whole thing in a half in thick coating of butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, mixed with roughly chopped pecans, almonds, and walnuts. He covers the top with foil, and slides it into the oven to bake.

He’s going to serve the crisp with whipped cream, so he goes and finds a bowl to stick in the freezer. He’s not sure if the cold metal bowl is as true for whipped cream as it is for eggs, but he figures it’s not bad to try. And then, he goes and takes a break.

The others follow him into the oven. Race is sweating and running late. His eyes are slightly unfocused and he keeps getting his words crossed. Every time it happens he gets more and more flustered. His crust is dark brown, and he’s sweating a little bit. It’s made with ginger, and it smells amazing, but it might be over baked. He’s still got time, but Spot worries Race is cutting it close on their two hour and fifteen minute time limit. It’s not Spot’s problem, though. He goes and gets a cup of coffee.
Race’s pie goes in the oven, and he almost runs to get his bag. Which Spot assumes is where he has his phone. And, probably his blood sugar. Spot trails after, sipping his coffee.

Race picks up his phone, looks at the screen. He squeezes his eyes shut and holds his eyes closed for a few seconds. Checks his phone. Bounces. Turns to Spot.

“Can you get me a bottle of water?” The esses elide and the words are slightly garbled, as though he’s fighting something to get them out.

Race’s phone vibrates, and he grimly silences it. He pulls a little brown case from his backpack, hiding it with his body. He shoots Spot a furtive look. Spot goes to get the bottle of water.

Most of the bakes come out well, which pleases Spot. He knows this is technically a competition, but he hates to see anyone leave. They’re all his friends, they’re all good bakers. When this is over, they’re going to have to stay in touch. Maybe be like Rosie and have brunch.

And, even though he doesn’t bake a lot of pie, Spot is excited to try what everyone has made. Crutchie has a lemon meringue with stiff peaks toasted pale brown. Jack made a pecan pie, because “it’s the best nut”. Sarah had made a joke about that. Race had his pumpkin in the ginger crust. Blink did a dairy free chocolate custard “my boyfriend is obsessed with chocolate”. And then, there’s Spot’s own apple.

Spot and the others still wait for Joe’s verdict. He doesn’t want to admit it, but his heart is in his throat. At least the judges are good about discussing their criteria. For the custard pies - Crutchie, Blink, and Race - the expectation is that the custard be set, but not over cooked. Jack’s pie is not technically a custard pie, but it’s probably a variant on a chess pie, and that’s close enough.

And Spot… well, Spot was supposed to make a custard pie, too. Spot bristles, because he read the brief, carefully. He had a paralegal friend read the fucking brief. And, he and Hannah talked about his not doing a custard pie or a chess pie, and the brief. So, yes, Spot followed the fucking rules. And, Joe has no ground to say otherwise. Spot doesn’t care how they edit this fucking segment. Spot isn’t going to start cursing anyone out. ...Thirteen year old Spot might have. Twenty three year old Spot has a little bit more sense. He still argues back.

Spot systematically about eating something with vegetable and protein before starting in on the pies. He doesn’t do well if the only food he eats is sugar. He’ll get all buzzed and flighty. He has a reputation to maintain.

Also, Craft services makes really good grilled mushrooms. No one will eat mushrooms at home, and he’s too lazy to cook them for himself.

Race has been chugging water and frantically checking his phone all morning. He looks over craft services, looking longing, and then walks away from the picnic table where they’re eating lunch.

When Spot goes to check on him, he’s sacked out on the couch in the Green Room. The one that’s probably 85% human, and at least 15% of its donors are dead, if Kara is to be believed. No one has gone near that couch since her dire pronouncement. They’ve carried in folding chairs and sat in each others laps to avoid sitting on the couch. Okay, that was one time, and it was Blink in Les’ lap, and they were both laughing so hard by the end of it that they couldn’t breathe.
Spot isn’t sure if he should wake Race up. They have at least another half hour until their call, and so he could get another fifteen minutes or so of sleep. And, Race always looks like he needs sleep. On the other hand, Spot isn’t a doctor, but it may be possible to catch… something from laying on that couch. Maybe Kellis-Amberlee. Zombie Race sounds terrible.

Spot decides on the lesser of two evils and wakes him up.

**Technical Challenge**

After a signature challenge were everyone did well, Spot isn’t surprised when the technical challenge is something super difficult.

They’re supposed to make sfogliatelle. Which might just be italian for witch craft.

Spot has *seen* them before, peaking into a bakery window in Brooklyn when he was a little boy. They’re these big, delicate rounds of pastry where the paper thin layers stand away from the main body of the pastry. He’d tasted one, once, at a friend’s house. Sweet, delicate, and buttery on the outside and soft and fluffy and just a bit tart on the inside.

If he can fucking make these, he will be a god. Everyone else can go home, it doesn’t matter who wins if Spot Conlon can make his own goddamn sfogliatelle.

He goes through the recipe, checking amounts and ingredients and tools. It’s a laminated dough, and they’re supposed to laminate with a rolling pin. Which… fuck. Spot has read laminated dough recipes before. His favorite suggested that “violence was always the answer when making pastries”. He thinks the baking class where he and Crutchie met could have used a little bit more pastry dough and a bit less teaching them how to make frosting rosettes.

He carefully arranges his ingredients. In front of him, Crutchie is doing the same. Spot has noticed that Crutchie is always careful about where he puts his tools and his ingredients. The rest of them might leave something out of the way on their benches, or even might abandon it in a communal space. (Jack is particularly guilty). Crutchie doesn’t seem to ever do that. He’s constantly aware of his space, and what’s been places where.

The dough starts simple: flour, salt, water and honey. It mixes together nicely in the big standing mixture, until it’s soft and pliable. That goes into the fridge to get stiff.

Then, they move on to what Spot refers to as “beating the shit out of butter” when the TV cameras aren’t watching. He tests the temperature with his finger, trying to find something he thinks will work okay, and then flours the top.

He goes to work beating the butter into a big flat square with his rolling pin. Sarah comes over and makes some comment about beating his frustration out. He smiles at her (okay, he tries to smile at her), and makes his own kind of joke about it being a good stress reliever. And then, he goes back to beating his feelings into the butter.

He puts in his frustration about Joe in the last round. He’d (slam!) done (slam!) What (slam!) They (slam!) SAID (slam!)

He puts in his uncertainty about Race into the dough. Who the fuck does he think he is? Spot Conlon, foster kid, who would have dropped out of high school if his boss at the pool hadn’t bribed him with a promotion, an extra $2.50 an hour, and a promise of advanced training. Race? Race the human fucking disaster has a master’s degree. He was smart enough to get at least a partial scholarship to college. And major in Math. And then go do more school. And… and… and... And
oh God, he can’t possibly be interested in Spot.

And, even if he was… even if it were possible… if, in some alternative universe… if, if, if...
If, there was even a tiny chance that Race might be interested, he’s clearly not.

The butter goes into the freezer, full of all the emotions he can push into it.

It’s probably a good thing pastry week is in the second half of the season. Spot misses Smalls, Romeo, and Les, but he’s really glad there’s extra space in the kitchen. Sarah helped Crutchie move his dough back to what used to be Romeo’s place, and he’s in the process of stretching his dough while balanced on his crutches. It’s a slow process, but it’s a godman ballet. Seriously, someone should play some classical fucking music over Crutchie stretching his dough, because it’s a masterpiece. Nevermind that the kid is constantly shifting his weight between his left leg, the crutch at his elbow, the table, and, when he has no choice, his right.

Crutchie tests for the success of his stretching by sliding his recipe underneath.

Sarah comes over to lean across him. “Spah-ole-lee-a-teel-ee,” she reads carefully. “Five hundred grams flour, a teaspoon of salt, twenty five grams of honey and water.”

Crutchie nods, with a tired smile. “Thin enough to read through, I think that should be thin enough for good layers!” He pulls the plastic nitrile gloves from his back pocket and slips them onto his hands before he limps over to his chair and releases the brakes. Then, he goes up to his bench and gets the butter he’s been melting on low heat. He pulls the weighted apron that he uses as a hot pad out from the one shelf he has, and wheels his melted butter back to the paper thin pastry to start a new variant of the dance.

Race and Jack have opted for pasta machines. They cut their dough into fourths, and carefully roll it through. Race talks to the camera, explaining how his mom’s family is part italian, and growing up, homemade pasta was a Thing. How there were days that they got together and Made Pasta: his mother and grandfather directing the effort, his grandmother and aunt washing dishes, he dad and his uncles running herd on the pack of semi-feral cousins. That’s the way he describes his childhood to Kath and the camera: as the member of a pack of semi-feral cousins.

Spot’s childhood was probably a bit closer to semi-feral than Race’s, enough so that he could never joke about it quite so casually.

Blink, reliable Eye-tail-yon Blink, has beat the shit out of his butter. So, he’s going for a flat lamination like Spot. They work in cycles: take the chilled dough from the freezer, roll the fuck out of it, fold it into thirds, stick in the freezer to chill.

He and Blink pull their dough out one more time, roll it out into long strips, and roll it into a log like everyone else. At this point, all the dough is chilling, because it’s basically butter wrapped in flour and honey, and it will melt. Spot’s had dough melt on him before, when he was baking. It’s not so bad when your Snickerdoodles melt. It would probably be really bad if your pastry melted, though.

They start on the filling.

He reads the recipe, reads it again. It’s not a custard, not really. It’s creamy - probably the cheese - and tart from the candied citrus, but it’s not a custard. He doesn’t heat his eggs.
In front of him, Crutchie is back at his bench, straining ricotta. Behind him, he hears Race joking with Kath and Sarah about something. Race is making a custard. Crutchie is making a custard. Spot’s pretty sure the directions say not to make a custard, so he doesn’t.

Race curdles his eggs on the first attempt. Sweet scrambled eggs in cream are a potential hazard, but they suck. As he asks the production assistant for more eggs, Spot thinks he hears a quaver. It’s probably just frustration at failure.

Race isn’t Spot’s problem. Winning the competition, getting the recognition, and hopefully some prize money or sponsorship or something that will help him get into an undergraduate nursing program? That’s what Spot wants. And, the way to get there is through strained ricotta cheese. Which is way fucking more stressful that Spot ever imagined. His job is saving lives. He drives around New York City helping people who are sick and injured and shaken. He helped deliver a baby in the back room of a bodega a couple of months ago. Delivering a baby in the back room of a bodega while a cat sniffs at your ankles should feel like higher stakes over all than what well sieved ricotta looks like. And, somehow, Spot doesn’t know how to rank his priorities anymore.

In front of him, Crutchie is saying quiet things to the production assistant about extra strength ibuprofen and caffeine. Crutchie makes some joke about it turning him into Voldemort: it gives him a cursed half life.

Behind him, Race is trying again. “Third time’s the charm,” he says, s’es hissing noticeably and his tone unregulated. “Third time’s the charm.”

Spot goes and gets a cup of coffee with Blink.

“Do you ever think about what you’d be doing if you weren’t here?” Blink asks, pushing back the too long sleeves of his shirt. “Not in general, but right now?”

Spot shrugs. “I’d probably be on shift, or sleeping off a shift. Maybe watching a game. Why?”

“Mush called.” Blink lets out a huff of a breath. “He’s feeling… crappy. And, I just… I kinda wonder if I did a bad thing, being here.”

Spot shrugs, noncommittally. He doesn’t know what to say. He’d rather be here, competing, with these people who are rapidly becoming Not!People, than at home watching spring training. (Spot hates People. Except people who are Not!People, because they’re his people.)

“We stay… I stay… and they’ll find out secrets.” Blink sounds haunted. Something has him spooked. Maybe it’s the show, but Spot’s money is on Mush.

“Mush knows why you’re here, right?” Spot’s accent comes on heavier as his voice gets gentler. It somewhat ruins the effect. But, Blink is a New Yorker. He’s heard gruffer tones.

“Yeah,” Blink agrees, right eye down cast into his coffee and left still looking mostly ahead at Spot, “Yeah, he knows why I’m here. He told me to do it.”

“And, he’s got people to take care of him?” Spot asks. He’s not sure what’s wrong, but the way it’s got Blink spooked, it has to be pretty bad.

Blink shrugs. “Yeah, but I should be there.”

“But, you can’t,” Spot says. “It ain’t practical right now.”

“It ain’t.” Blink agrees, slowly.
“So, you gotta make a choice: either you can stay and fight for Mush, or you can give up.” Spot tries to sound encouraging.

Jablonski once told Spot he was bad at pep talks. Spot told Jablonski she could take her pep and shove it up her ass. Jablonski told him she was a high school cheerleader, and she’d already done that. Spot wasn’t sure whether or not to believe her.

Blink nods, slowly, bringing his eyes up to look at Spot. The left one has cocked back, into his head. It’s a bit disconcerting.

“Blink, say, I umm, I don’t know to tell you,” Spot starts, figuring he has a duty. “But, umm, your eye…”

“Fuck,” Blink rubs his hand across the left side of his face, trying to get it settled. “I need to get it polished, or something.” He raises an eyebrow at Spot.

Spot shakes his head. “No, now you’re looking down to the bottom right.”

“Fuck nuggets.” Blink hurries off to go find a mirror. Spot figures it’s an act of self protection.

The hour of chilling their butter dough is quickly coming to an end, and logs start emerging from the freezer. Spot, like most of the other contestants, cuts his in half. And puts part bake in fridge to stay cool. He cuts the remaining logs into sections, and he starts to shape the pastry into little baskets that he coats with melted butter. (Because while Paula Deen may have been a terrible human being, she was right about one thing: you need more butter).

He’s got six big, buttery disks when he goes to get the filling from the fridge. He put it in the back fridge, not the one he’s supposed to share with Crutchie, because... because he wanted an excuse to walk by Race.

Race is pale, that degree of gray that most people associate with fainting. His lips are starting to get a blueish tinge.

On his way back, the detached, professional part of his brain notes makes notes about what’s going on. He pushes them down. The show employs a whole group of medical professionals who are on hand in case of cuts, burns, and other minor emergencies. If this really is an emergency, they’re the ones contracted to handle it. It’s not his jurisdiction. He doesn’t want to play bullshit jurisdiction games with anyone, ever. He has trouble with bullshit jurisdictional games.

He motions over a PA, anyway. “It’s probably nothing,” he lies in an undertone, “but could you keep an eye on Tony?”

The PA rolls his eyes and nods.

Sarah and Kath call out a time check. They’re got an hour. Spot figures the pasties need at least 40 minutes to bake, so he’d better get them in the oven.

He cups each of his rounds in his right hand, forming something like a cone. He uses his left to scoop in big globs of the filling, sneaking a taste as he does so.

Kath comes over to investigate, and sticks her spoon into his bowl. “This is excellent.” Another clean spoon goes in. Kath and Sarah both carry tasting spoons inside their jackets at all times. There’s some belligerent PA, the one who has earned the ire of everyone, who is responsible for collecting the tasting spoons without ever being seen.
Spot places his last pastry on the baking sheet, and scoops up the bowl. “Yes, but I need it, still.”

He’s carrying it back to the refrigerator when he sees Race.

There’s a row of dough circles on the cutting board, and a small dish of cooling butter. The custard filling sits on the end of the bench, sweating a little in the heat of the tent. And Race… Race himself in sitting on the ground next to his oven, head leaning back against the brightly colored faux cabinet, eyes squeezed shut and hands shaking. His eyes are damp and there are tears running down his cheeks.

Fuck competition. Fuck the rules. Fuck time limits. Fuck jurisdiction and not interfering.

He places his bowl of filling on Races bench and sits down next to him.

“Race?” He asks. “Race, are you okay?”

Race looks up. “I d’nt think it wass supposed to be custard.”

“What?” Spot asks.

“Custard,” Race repeats. His hands shake, and he squeezes his eyes shut. “Also, terrible with fish fingers. …I wonder if the doctor will come.”

“Race, do you need something to eat?” He asks, worrying creasing his face.

Race turns glassy eyes away from Spot.

Spot looks up for something to give Race. He spies the honey, and a tasting spoon. He pours some on, filling the bowl. He has no idea how much sugar is in honey, just that it’s a good source. That, and something about rubbing it on gums in an emergency.

He offers the spoon to Race.

Race makes a face. “I’ll puke.” It’s the most coherent thing Spot has heard from him.

“Try, anyway.” He hands over the spoon.

It gets part way in before Race starts to gag and cough. Spot pulls back the spoon; Race leans over to wretch. A sickly pool of wet meringue ends up on the ground beside him.

Okay. No honey, then.

Spot turns go look for the PA who was supposed to be watching Race. The asshole is gone.

“Hey!” He turns to the camera crew. “Can one of you get a medic? And maybe not film this?”

A junior camera operator sprints off, but the rest stay, lenses focused on the two of them. Fuck. He doesn’t want this recorded, but more importantly, he doesn’t thing Race wants this recorded.

“Okay, okay,” he says, his own voice wobbling. It’s been a long time since he was this emotionally involved with a potential patient. He doesn’t treat his friends, if he can help it. It scares him.

First Aid isn’t coming, and Race is trying to get up, except he can’t. And, he’s pulling at his clothes, like he wants to pull off his button down. It’s warm in the tent, warm enough for butter to
melt, but definitely not wadn enough for Race to be wearing whatever is under his button down. He’s shivering and sweating.

Spot has a pretty good what’s going on. He can’t decide if that’s a good thing, or a bad one. Because if this is a hypoglycemic episode, a bad one, then that’s bad. But, it might be worse if it isn’t.

“It’s okay,” he repeats. He clears his throat, uses his EMT™ voice. “Keep your shirt on, okay?”

He stands up from his crouch and looks around the tent, and calls out over the noise of the tent. “Yo! I need your help.”

The other three competitors and two hosts hurry over.

“Where’s his backpack?” Spot asks quickly. “I need his fucking backpack.”

“My car,” Crutchie supplies.

Jack exchanges a look with his… whatever the fuck they are to each other. It’s none of Spots damn business. It’s not like he can figure out his own love life.

Crutchie tosses him the keys, and Jack takes of running.

“Charlie,” The name feels strange in his mouth. “I need you to be ready to call 911.”

Crutchie nods, grimly.

“And, umm,” Spot nods at his bench. “If shit hits the fan, you an’ Blink pull those when the timer goes off?” Don’t bake ‘em anymore, just pull the pan? I don’t think it’ll be a problem, but…”

Crutchie nods. “Sure, no problem, but you’re going to be getting them out of the oven, yourself. So will Race.” Spot isn’t so sure.

“Sarah, Kath?” He looks at the hosts. “Can you provide cover.”

They do a silent Rock Paper Scissors. “It would be my fucking pleasure to tell Tony how delightful his Oreos were last week,” Sarah says.

“Louis?” Blinks real name sounds wrong, but he can’t use something else right now. “Go back and keep baking so they still have a show, even if the rest gets fucked up.”

Blink opens his mouth to argue, then closes it again as Race says something unintelligible about time travel.

Spot sits down to do what he can, fastidiously avoiding the puddle of vomit. He doesn’t mind bodily fluids, but that doesn’t mean he wants them on his pants.

“Hey, can I touch you?” It’s time for a neuro next exam.

Race shakes his head, blearily. No. Sweat prickles on his forehead, and he’s shivering, but he keeps fumbling at his buttons.

“What’s your name?” Spot asks, starting with the low ball.

“Race.”
Spot can’t tell if it’s a guess. “What does your mother call you?”

“Race.” The word is sullen.

Better, but not good enough. “What did the nuns call you?”

“Ant’ny Edward.” Race pronounces the words carefully, as though he’s trying to talk around a tongue that has gone numb.

Spot doesn’t have Races full name, but Anthony Edward sounds a lot closer to Tony than Racetrack. If they were on a real call, he’d have someone find an ID. If it were a real call, he’d have back up, and not some team of Rent-a-Fuckos who are barely qualified to slap on a bandaid.

He looks up at Sarah, who is reciting a list of Nabisco products interspersed with expletives as she remembers some. She gives a half shrug. Good enough.

Name. Okay. “Hey, Race, how old are you?”

“Twen’ six.” More careful words. “Which is too old for these fucking games, Spot.”

So, he’s alert enough to know his age, and who Spot is, which is good news. The bad news is that he’s probably starting to approach belligerent. Belligerance is bad. If the cops show up first, belligerent can get you killed.

“Yep, but you’re sitting on the floor and you just threw up, so I have to ask you these questions.” He tries to sound calm and even, and not almost sick to his stomach.

Maybe there’s some sort of sick parallel universe where someone would see this behavior and call it cute. If this were a story, then maybe, just maybe, watching the guy he has a crush on in an altered state where he can barely control his thoughts and actions might be cute.

But, this is real life. This is Spots life, and Race’s life. And there’s nothing cute about the way Race is right now. It’s not sweet or child-like. It’s chilling.

“Okay, where are we?” Spot keeps going, praying that Jack will get back soon.

“On the floor,” Race mumbles, the words angry. “On the floor in a fucking kitchen, in a fucking tent, in the middle of fucking April.”

Umm… Spot decides it counts. He’s not happy. He knows he’s stalling. He’s already made up his mind, but it’s easier to lie to himself about what’s happening and keep going through protocol. He skips over the date and time. Race never seems to know the date, and he’s usually sketchy on the concept of time, if his ability to catch a train is anything to go by.

Jack comes running back, breathing hard, and presses Race’s backpack into Spot’s hands. Its an old style JanSport, the kind that hasn’t been popular in years. Spot wrenches the pockets open, looking for Race’s phone.

“That’s my bag!” Race almost yells, angrily.

Spot nods. “Yeah, just looking for your phone.”

Race snatches the bag out of his hands, and rifles through the pockets until he finds it. He runs his thumb across the screen cover, and looks down. He tries to enter his passcode. It’s something along the right side of the keypad, if the frantic numbers are anything to go by.
Another black mark in the category of Race’s neurological fitness. He finally gets it open, pulls up the green app with the white arrow around an orange circle. He stares at it. In the middle of the screen is a black circle. Upside down, Spot can read the words, “SIGNAL LOSS”.

“Who’s the president?” He asks.

The phone vibrates, and the circle goes red. “LOW” it reads, now. Spot doesn’t know what “LOW” means, other than too damn low. Race fumbles to dismiss the notification that pops up. He shoves his phone down.

And then, he looks for a production assistant. The asshole, the one whose name Spot has forgotten, the one who was supposed to be watching him, is standing there with a cup of coffee.

“I wasn’ tryin’ to cheat,” Race says with that whine in his voice. “Spot an’ Jack, they brought me the bag, see?”

The asshole nods, and moves closer. Race reaches against the counter, and tries to get to his feet. He manages just for a second.

His legs crumple. Race’s body goes slack.

Like the worst fucking comedy act, the show medics team shows up just as he’s about to hit the ground.

Spot catches Race, doing the best he can to stop his fall. His own heart pounds in his ears and the world spins off its axis as he holds the limp, cold, sweaty body in his hands. He takes a breath, then another. Then, one more. This is an emergency. He can fall apart afterward, when the patient is at the hospital and he’s at home. Right now, safety comes first.

Spot turns to the sea of concerned faces, watching them.

“You,” he points at random. “Help me get him into the recovery position.”

“You,” he indicates another. “Call 911. Tell them we’ve got a hypoglycemic emergency. His… thingy says low and he’s unconscious. He was confused before. Can’t keep down food. Tell them to send an ambulance, that there’s an EMT on scene who did preliminary evaluation.”

“You, can you do glucagon?” He asks of the crowd in general.

There are murmurs.

“Can you fucking do glucagon?” He demands, yelling.

The cameras press closer.

“We don’t have any,” the first aid fucko who’s probably supposed to be in charge says. “We can’t administer anything we don’t provide.”

“Lovely.” The snarled word manages to be sarcastic and grim, and hold all the anger and impotence Spot is feeling.

“Well then, Jackie Boy, will you do the honors? Red plastic case. And then, go bake your fucking pastry.”

There’s a hard object pressed into his hand, and he flips it open. Bottle of powder, syringe of water with a fucking big needle, little paper instructions. He pushes those out, looks at the drawings on
the top inside of the lid. They kind of remind him of furniture instructions from Ikea.

He uses his left hand to flip off the cap, just like in the pictures. He pulls of the syringe cap, and carefully lays it beside himself, then injects the water. He stares at the powder for a moment. The third picture says to hold it in a circle, but he doesn’t have fucking time for that. He can’t make bubbles, either, though. He rolls it between his palms, back and forth, back and forth.

Why the fuck is it taking so long for the fucking powder to go into solution?

There… there is goes. Okay. Okay.

He sticks the needle back in, pulls back the plunger all the way.

He stares at the syringe for a moment, trying to remember where to stick it. His racing brain doesn’t remember anything, but Blue to the Sky, Orange to the Thigh, and so he takes the big fucking needle, and sticks it into outside Race’s right leg, just below the hip.

And then, he pulls back the needle, slowly. Caps it.

And then, he rocks back on his heels.

He tries to remember how long it takes. He’s only been on one call where it got used. Some kid at an elementary school. Ten, maybe. Seizure in front of all of his classmates. They’d shown up… six or seven minutes after, and the kid had come to in the ambulance on the way to New York Presbyterian. So, maybe fifteen minutes in total.

Race is out, and even though he said Spot couldn’t touch him earlier, he takes a limp wrist and feels for a pulse. It’s fast and strong and desperate. But, it’s there.

He pulls up Race’s cell phone, slides his thumb across the screen like he’s seen Race do so often.

The dots - he’s not sure how long they represent - the dots show a plummet so steep it might as well be falling down an elevator shaft. The trace goes from the yellow three hundred at the left, and then makes a rapid descent. Spot imagines there are sheer cliffs that have a more gradual descent than Race’s blood sugar. And then, it hits red. And keeps crashing. And then, there isn’t anywhere else for it to go.

He lets his eyes flick to the circle in the center of the screen. “LOW”. The arrow right now is tilted down: a forty-five degree angle. Spot doesn’t know about this phone blood sugar witchcraft, but he’s pretty sure it’s not a good thing.

He slides back, presses the home button until the lock screen shows up, and then taps on the “Emergency” information.

He feels guilty, doing it.

It’s strange, because he does this every day for work. Asks people questions. Touches them. Opens their bags, their wallets, pats them down for jewellery. He’s check the emergency information on at least a hundred phones before. Quick, and clinical, and oh so very necessary.

Race’s profile has the bare minimum. That he’s type I diabetic, that he’s on two types of insulin, that in case of an emergency, someone should call Theresa Higgins.

Spot’s made those calls before, he doesn’t think he can do it today.
He checks Race’s pulse again, checks his breathing, and he waits. And, somewhere, off in the distance, he thinks he can hear the faint squall of a siren. And then the rumble of a truck.

And then, he has to get up off the ground because there’s a team of paramedics, and it’s time to transfer his patient.

Anthony Higgins, aged twenty six. Type I diabetic taking insulin. History of hypoglycemia, at least one episode in the past month that Spot knows about. Probably not a pump, but he’s not sure.

Started getting confused maybe… Spot looks at the camera crew who are still hovering.

“Forty five minutes ago,” someone supplies. “Around that third attempt at custard.”

Right, started getting confused about forty five minutes ago. Was confused, agitated, clumsy. Fell, ended up on the ground. No bruises or burns, just, fell.

Was confused, having… had trouble swallowing, maybe. Spot feels guilty as he says that. He probably should have administered the glucagon sooner.

He lost consciousness about… about ten minutes ago. It’s been… five minutes since they administered glucagon.

He watches numbly as the EMTs get Race onto the stretcher. He watches numbly as they take him to the ambulance. He watches numbly as they shut the doors. He watches numbly as they drive away.

“Spot.”

There’s a hand on his shoulder.

He shakes it away.

“Sean.”

They don’t use his name unless they mean business. No one uses his real name.

He ignores it.

“Sean Patrick Conlon.” Each word is flung with deadly aim like a knife.

He stirs, looks up. Crutchie and Sarah are there, looking at him.

“Spot, you gotta finish.”

He shakes his head. “Finish what?”

“Finish this thing so they have something better to show.” Crutchie’s voice carries a threat and a reminder.

Spot stirs himself.

Sarah and Kath are beside him. When did Kath come over? Spot’s normally aware of the people around him.

“Com’on,” Kath wraps a protective arm around his shoulder. She’s a few inches taller than he is.
Numbly, he lets her lead him back to his bench.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been debating whether or not to write this chapter for about a month. But, it's also a chapter that goes back to the original plans for this story. And literally wrote it’s self. I had no ida what I was doing. The muse would not leave me alone. I was going to do something different... but it’s a story I keep needing to read and write. So, I’m going to write it again, this time from a different perspective, to see if I can understand it.

Rosie is named for Rosie Corcoran, who was a Newsie during the 1899 strike and sold in Brooklyn. Kellis-Amberlee is the Zombie virus in the Newsflesh Trilogy by Mira Grant. Spot has a thing for scientifically accurate horror. You can find other sources for this chapter and recipe-related ramblings here

Please, please, please, let me know what you think. I’m a little bit terrified to post this chapter because I figure anyone who has gotten invested enough to get this far is probably not pleased. But, umm… yeah. Questions, concerns, critiques, complaints, or comments, let me know?
Pastry Week (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

In which Spot is running low on sleep, Crutchie is running low on spoons and Jack is running low on patience. Or, actions start to have consequences.

Chapter Notes

Warnings


A pronunciation note for this chapter: choux pastry sounds similar to the English word “shoe”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The hotel room feels gray.

Spot isn’t sure how everything feels so different from last week. Last week, they were subdued. This week, they are defeated. Or, maybe it’s just that Race isn’t here. And, somehow, that changes everything.

He’s still in a little bit of a daze.

The ambulance had come and gone and taken Race away.

Spot should have gone with him. He should have climbed in the back and insisted that they take him along. He should have lied, said he was Race’s boyfriend…

Except that would have been terrible in its own way.

They finished the bake, but it felt so anti-climatic in comparison to what had happened before. Spot managed to get the six remaining pastries made and into the oven. They were way too underdone to be safe, but at least he had twelve to present.

The other three got together somewhere during that blur, and put Race’s pastry into the oven. It wasn’t anywhere near a proper shape, and they can’t do much more that slide the circles Race had already cut onto a baking sheet, but it meant that he had something.

The judging went. Spot came in second to last, and he can’t really be bothered to care.

He went through the interview portion, not really answering questions, or if he did, not really knowing what he said.

He’s fucking tired. He’s so fucking tired. The adrenaline has left him raw and empty. They’d let
him go, sent him back to the hotel to get out of his vomit encrusted jeans. He’d known his pants were wet, but he hadn’t known why.

He goes through the motions of coming home after a long, terrible shift. The kind where you’re transporting a nineteen year old gunshot victim, or an old lady who just had a heart attack and her husband partner, or a survivor of one too many things gone wrong who decided they were tired of fighting.

You can’t let every call get to you, if you do, you’ll be entirely ineffective. But, there are some that you can’t help but feel. Because when you stop, you’re losing something worse that your effectiveness: you’re sacrificing your humanity.

He has a ritual for when his brain leaves him and his body goes tense and he doesn’t know what he wants.

He strips methodically in the bathroom, dropping his jeans in a puddle on top of his grubby tennis shoes, and his boxers briefs in the middle of those. His socks are a lump on the toilet, and his t-shirt goes on top of those. He’ll deal with them later. He’ll scoop them into a plastic bag and take them home and deal with them later.

He turns the shower all the way up tas hot as he can stand… and then a degree more, and he goes and he stands underneath it. The water runs, and he stands there.

And, when the tears come, he doesn’t stop them. He doesn’t try to hide them. He just lets himself cry.

He stands in the shower, crying, for a small infinity. And then, slowly, he reaches up for the bottle of crappy hotel shampoo and washes away the the gel and the fear. He takes the bar of soap and lathers up an armor against the feeling of Race falling into his arms.

And then… finally… when he feels like he’s not numb but there’s nothing left, he climbs out of the shower.

He dries himself, leaving that towel in a pile on the floor and then wrapping a fresh, scratchy one around his waist. He goes fishing in his sports bag, comes up with a clean pair of underwear and pulls them on mechanically.

He plugs in his phone. He has the malice of foresight to set an alarm. And then, he goes to YouTube to find some ASMR video where they talk in soft whispers and tap fingers against boxes to make a comforting clicking noise and remind him to breathe.

He feels… better when his alarm goes off. He still needs a full nights sleep, but it’s only seven, and if he goes to bed now, he’ll wake up hungry and panicky in the night, and that will suck.

So, he gets out of bed and pads barefoot across the scratchy carpet to his suitcase. He pulls out a t shirt and a big red GUARD hoodie that’s scratchy and worn on the inside from all the exposure to chlorine.

Pants, though…

He only has the one pair of jeans and the wet speedo drying on the towel bar. He sleeps in his underwear and little else. There was no need to bring more for a two day trip.
He goes back into the bathroom and pulls apart the small pile of clothes on the floor. His jeans are covered in enough vomit that they’re not wearable.

He needs… he can’t just stay here. There are a series of message notifications on his phone. And, he knows that this second wind won’t last long. If he doesn’t get himself moving now, he’s not going to be able to later.

It’s just…

He pulls up his phone and texts Crutchie.

7:12 pm Cerberus: I need a favor

7:14 pm charlie baking: No, you cannot drive my van

7:14 pm Cerberus: Not what I was asking, but fuck you anyway
7:14 pm Cerberus: I need a different favor

7:15 pm charlie baking: I dunno, Spotty. First you tell me to go fuck myself, then you want my help.

And then, Crutchie lets him sit there, hanging, with three ellipses taunting him.

7:17 pm charlie baking: Jack says I’m being an asshole
7:17 pm charlie baking: What do you need?

7:18 pm Cerberus: Can you lend me some pants?

A series of three dots appear, indicating that the person on the other end is typing. And then they disappear, and reappear, and disappear.

There’s a knock at his door.

He grabs at a still damp towel from the bathroom and wraps it around his waist.

He peers through the peephole in the door. “Jack?”

“Hey, asshole, let me in.” Jack holds up a pair of folded something. “Crutchie sent me.”

Spot opens the door, revealing himself in his full towel-clad glory.

Jack stifles a laugh, because Jack is a dick, and pushes the pile of clothes at Spot. “Figured I’d bring a couple pairs, cause we weren’t sure what would fit you. And, there’s a place in Sag Harbor that Crutchie found that’s open ‘til ten, if you want to do your laundry.”

“Thanks.”

Spot hadn’t thought that far ahead. He supposes he needs to do laundry, if he’s supposed to wear the same clothes on the show tomorrow. Maybe he should have asked Hannah. They wash the aprons everyday, so maybe they’d wash his clothes?

He’d rather hand his pants over to someone on the crew and let them laugh at him in whatever the fuck Jack just handed him if it means not going to the laundromat tonight. Laundromats are fucking weird, okay? He grew up in New York city, he knows the kind of people who haunt laundromats late at night, and he doesn’t have the stamina to deal with the Hampton’s version of that kind of bullshit.
His pants options aren’t great, but they aren’t terrible either. He pulls on a pair of black sweats - probably Crutchies, because he only has to roll the waistband once, finds his socks, and goes and pulls on his shoes. They’re mostly clean, but he wipes them with a little bit of toilet paper.

He shoves his room key in his … oh fuck. The problem with sweats is that they don’t have a back pocket. He shoves his roomkey in his pocket on one side, and his wallet on the other and hopes it doesn’t pull his pants down too much.

He goes down to Crutchie’s room. They put Crutchie in the same room as last week. There are about two “accessible” rooms in the hotel, and Crutchie had surveyed them all before deciding this way the best.

He knocks, and Jack opens the door.

Crutchie is sitting on the bed, his left leg tucked in close to his body and his right leg bent at just past a right angle. The pants are pushed up enough past his ankle that Spot can see a number of scars. Crutchie is massaging the leg, working his hand up into his pants leg, wincing as he goes. His foot starts to spasm, and Crutchie’s hands move down to knead the arch.

Spot’s phone buzzes. He’d switched it to silent that morning, and never turned the volume back on.

“Hello?”

There’s a faint beeping in the background, like the sound of a heart monitor.

“Umm… this is Race. Is this Spot?” Race sounds nervous, and something… but it’s more like an emotion than an emergency. It’s not like he’s speaking around a numb tongue or a brain that’s too focused on staying away to think about silly things like modulating volume, pitch, and tone.

“Yeah, hi Race.”

“Good. Phone decided to fuck up and drop everyone’s numbers this week. I kind of guessed. Scared the shit out of Smalls.”

Spot can imagine.

“So, umm… can you come spring me? I’m at Stony Brook.”

This is not what he’d expected. “You’re released?”

“Yes, no… it’s complicated. Come get me.”

Race hangs up the phone.

Spot looks around the room, still in a state of shock. Apparently the whole Nap until you have the inner strength to deal with whatever the world is throwing at you approach to life doesn’t work when it comes to Racetrack Higgins.

“That, umm… that was Race.” His voice sounds hollow.

“He’s okay?” Jack asks quickly.

Spot shrugs. “He sounded okay… tired, maybe.” As soon as Spot says it, he knows: that’s what was on the edge of his voice: exhaustion, and maybe hysteria. “He says we should come get him.”

Crutchie moves to pick up his phone with a groan. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He mutters. “Fuck, fuck,
fuckity, fucking fuck, fuck.” It’s almost a low, monotonous hum. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Jack looks concerned, makes a move toward the bathroom.

“No,” Crutchie says, glaring at Jack. “Nope, not tonight. If you want to be helpful, go see -- No, wait, fuck. Can’t do that. I have to drive your asses, because you left your fucking lights on.”

Spot starts to snicker. That’s why Jack got a ride with Crutchie?

Jack’s phone rings, interrupting the torrent of mockery Spot hasn’t quite started.

“Hello, Jack Kelly speaking?”

“Hey, Race… Yeah, no… we’re figuring it out. Had to find Spot some fucking pants. ...Aint like this is Long Island… well, yeah, but there ain’t random Targets out here.”

A longer pause.

“I aint sure. Yeah… I can check. But, umm… are you sure you’re supposed to be eating ‘em? Yeah, yeah, but it’ll take time. They might be gone.”

“Okay, yeah. Give us a bit. We’re a slow moving disaster.”

“Okay, you too, man. Yeah, see ya soon.”

Jack hangs up the phone, and turns back to the room. “He wants us to ‘hurry the fuck up’” he makes sarcastic air quotes, “and if we’ll bring him a turkey BLT with avocado instead of mayo and one of Crutchie’s sfogliatelle. He was very insistent that it be one of Crutchie’s. Even though he fucked up the filling.”

“I did not!” Crutchie insists.

Jack casts him a withering look. “It wasn’t supposed to be a custard. The eggs were supposed to be raw.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes please.”

“Guys!” Spot throws up his hands up. “Much as I like watching the two of you flirt, I think we needs to go get Race before he calls Crutchie!”

Crutchie nods, as he pulls the wheelchair toward himself and plops into it. Spot’s noticed that most weeks, Crutchie seems to prefer his crutches when they’re not baking. Almost as soon as the cameras are off (and sometimes before that, even), he’s up stretching his legs.

Crutchie’s foot starts spasming, again. His face is a mask of frustration as he goes looking for a sock and his tennis shoes. “Fuck this shit,” he mutters.

Then, he stops. He puts the shoe down. “You guys go without me,” he orders.

“But…” Spot starts to object.

Crutchie shoots him a look. “I just fucking want to go eat some food, maybe go to bed, maybe smoke. I do not want to go to a hospital, okay? I don’t fucking like hospitals. I’m fucking tired. I don’t want to drive, and I don’t want to deal with whatever fucking bullshit the universe is going to
come up when it comes to getting a ride to the fucking hospital at seven thirty, so… Just fucking go without me.”

Jack starts toward the bathroom again.

Crutchie shoots him a look that should freeze him in his tracks, if Jack was looking and not deciding what Crutchie needs for him. “No.” The word is as sharp as a shard of glass, and just as brittle. “My body, my choice. Can you go and fucking get Blink?”

Jack goes to get Blink.

Spot waits until Jack is safely out of the room. “Do you want me to take him with me?”

“Would you?” Crutchie looks sort of hopeful and sort of guilty. “He’s… he’s one of good ones, you know? But…” He reaches down to rub at his ankle, a furious gesture. “I ain’t feeling so hot, ain’t gonna be walking so good for a couple days. I really messed myself up. And, I don’t want Jack seeing that, not now.”

He doesn’t really have words. Doesn’t know how to ask Crutchie why he’s telling him this, or why he doesn’t talk to Jack about it. Doesn’t really know how to say thank you for not sending him in alone, but also for not crowding him.

“Yes, I’ll take Jackie with me,” he decides.

Spot will be relieved when they finally make it to the fucking hospital. It’s taking longer than he expected.

Jack isn’t pleased when Crutchie suggests he go with Spot. Jack is less pleased when Crutchie says he and Blink were going out behind the building to smoke. Jack is agitated when Spot pulls him toward the exit, forcing him to leave his boyfriend behind. Jack comes, anyway, because Jack is both an asshole and a good friend.

They have trouble getting a ride. To start, they’re pretty far out. So, Spot almost drops his phone. He likes Race a lot, but he’s not sure he likes him that much.

7:32 pm VroomVroom: Where the duck are you?

Spot calls the damn car.

They wait… wait… wait…

The car cancels.

The second one arrives, and they climb in before the driver can actually see the location. He’s not happy when he finds out they’re going to East Hampton. He’s less excited when he finds out they’re going to the hospital. He almost kicks them out when they take their free fucking stop - they’re paying full price, asshole, and this isn’t pool or whatever, so they get their free fucking stop - to pick up pastries.

It’s surprisingly easy to bribe an Uber driver with disks of puff pastry sprinkled with sugar, even if they in no way, shape, or form lived up to Joe Pulitzer’s exacting standards.

Spot spends the trip alternating between assuring Race that they’re coming, assuring Crutchie that Jack isn’t that mad, and assuring the driver that no, everything is fine, and they’ll find another ride back. Jack isn’t contagious. Unless being lovesick is contagious.
The driver breaks a few… guidelines to get them there. Spot is thankful enough to tip a few more dollars than he normally would have. He tries to tip well: rideshare drivers barely make minimum wage, sort of like waitstaff. This time, he doesn’t think about his bank account.

They get dropped at the main entrance, two somewhat ragged young men. Jack goes to get the visitor badges: he looks (Spot is loath to admit) a bit more respectable. He’s also probably panicking less than Spot right now. Probably.

8:35 pm Cerberus: We’re here>

8:35 pm VroomVroom: Good. I'm in the ER.
8:38 pm VroomVroom: Room 15.
8:39 pm VroomVroomPlease come

“He’s not in the system,” Jack comes back from the desk.

“Cause he hasn’t been admitted,” Spot explains. “He’s in the ER.”

They quickly walk out of the front door of the hospital and cut through some generic ornamental flower beds toward the door with the big red EMERGENCY sign.

They burst in through the doors, into the garish lights, uncomfortable chairs, and room full of people. Spot goes to talk to the nurse this time, shooing Jack away. Spot has experience with ER nurses. They’re a special brand of tough: people who spend their days dealing with everything from heart attacks and suicide attempts to colds and chronic homelessness. ER nurses are badasses.

He texts Race.

8:47 pm Cerberus: We’re outside, can you ask if they’ll let us come in?

8:38 pm VroomVroom: Ask at the front desk?

Spot sighs, and waits his turn behind an irate father. The way Spot is feeling right now, he’d like the punch the man. This is… not a good guy. And. Spot’s had the kind of day where punching homophobes sounds like a really good idea. Spot objects to homophobes in general, but he’s about to object to this asshole in particular in a strong way.

Thankfully, security shows up to take care of the man before Spot steps in. It was too damn close for his comfort. He’s this close to just punching the guy in the face. Punching the guy in the fact would probably feel great. Definitely better than standing her, powerless, while the man spews hate that Spot feels burning against his soul.

The nurse gives him a once over, and then asks for his ID. He presents it. “You here for Higgins?” She asks, laconically.

He nods, exhaling in a way that probably comes across as frustrated.

“I’ll get someone to bring you back,” she promises.

“I brought another friend.” Spot motions at Jack, who is perched on one of the ER chairs, watching Anderson Cooper studiously.

The nurse checks her lists. “That should be fine.”

Spot goes to pace by the door, he has too much nervous energy pent up inside him.
Race looks… better and worse.

He’s got color back in his lips and his cheeks, but he still looks pale against the pale gray-purple cover of the hospital gurney and the pale gray-green of the hospital gown. He’s not sweating, and although his hands are fiddling with the thin hospital blanket, it’s because he’s nervous or bored and not because they’re shaking in a way he can’t control. When he greets them, his voice is level and steady and calm, not pitchy or loud.

On the other hand, he is clearly exhausted. He’s sitting up away from the gurney, but in Spot’s professional opinion, he should be lying down. Race looks on the verge of tears, like anything will set him off. His eyes bright, not in the fever way, but in the intelligent, functioning fucking human being way. He’s not squeezing them shut against… Spots not actually sure, he just knows Race does it. A lot. But, they’re also rimmed with circles so dark they might be bruises. He looks wrecked, like he shouldn’t be awake. Spot suspects if they hadn’t just burst into the room, Race would be dozing. He’d started a little bit too much when they’d come in for anything else.

Race gives them a light lipped smile that is probably supposed to be reassuring, but really just looks like the expression of a man who is trying to keep together the last shreds of an illusion he thinks is covering his dignity. “Hi guys. Did you bring me a sandwich?”

Spot takes another minute, and studies the room with a clinical eye. He’s not a nurse, his job ends at the hospital door. But, he still wants a sense of how good or bad things are as Race asks to be “sprung”. They’ve got an IV line into his right elbow, and his left is wrapped in that stretchy bandage they use after blood draws and IVs. It’s bright purple. That’s probably the most colorful thing about Race right now, that stretchy purple wrap at his elbow. There are two empty bags of clear fluid hanging from his IV pole, a larger one and a smaller. The line’s still connected to his arm. They’ve got him on a set of chest leads, and his heart rate is on the TV overhead. It’s normal and steady.

“No sandwich,” Jack admits. “But we brought you something better.” He holds up the plate. Spot looks at the board, doesn’t see anything about not eating. He doesn’t know if they’ll let Race eat, or if he needs permission or something. You’re not supposed to eat in the ER until you see a doctor. You’re not supposed to eat in the ER until the doctor gives you permission. The chasm of knowledge he lacks feels big enough to swallow Race whole.

“Eh, maybe we should wait until the nurse comes?” He hedges.

Race glares at both of them. “I’m fine,” he says with all the dignity he can muster. He even manages to sit up. “I did the thing, and now I’m ready to go.”

“You did ‘the thing’.” Jack has been spending too much time with Crutchie. He’s getting too damn good at those verbal sarcastic air quotes that Charlie always does.

“You know, go low, pass out, get stuck with a big ass needle, wake up, throw up, go to the hospital, eat a sandwich. Now, we’re at the go home part.” The thing where Race gives both too much and not enough information is both annoying and worrying.

“Okay, so then, are we here to pick you up?” Spot tries to keep his voice even.

“Sort of.”

Race draws his knees up to his chest and tries to wrap his arms around them, protecting himself. As
he moves, Spot can see a greasy spot down the front of his hospital gown, and stray piece of pasta. Race makes a valiant effort to cover it, and himself. The problem is that the IV in his right arm stops him from moving, and he’s caught halfway there. He gives an involuntary whimper, and presses his fingernails into the skin before dropping his arm back to the blanket.

There’s clearly a lie, or at the very least a half truth, in here, somewhere, if Spot can just find it.

“Sort of?” Jack prompts. He’s playing bad cop, with Spot appreciates immensely. He doesn’t know if Crutchie said something, or if Jack’s just kind of… frustrated after the day they’ve all had.

Race scrubs his left hand across his face, winces, and looks away. “About that…”

“You’re not actually released, are you?” Spot supplies. “And you want us to take you, anyway?”

“Well, the ER doctor said she thought I was okay to go. She was going to release me from Emergency an hour ago.” Race explains far too quickly. “She just said I had to have... somewhere to go.”

“Somewhere to go?” Spot’s words are lyconic, even, hard as granite. The people who’ve known him the longest can tell you it’s a dangerous tone.

“They… ummm… they’re not sure they want me to... they want to make sure I’ve got a place.” There’s a wobble in his voice.

“You’re not homeless,” Jack agrees. Spot remembers that he’s worked as a social worker for at least a couple years: long enough to recognize the role the emergency room plays in healthcare for people without insurance and in social services. “You’ve got an apartment in the city, and a room here at the hotel.”

Race nods, miserably, but still doesn’t elaborate.

Spot realizes he’s been holding the pastry for a while, and puts it on the counter, between the sink and the glove boxes.

Race looks after it, longingly.

“Are you allowed to eat?” Spot hates asking the question, again. Spot feels like he has to ask the question.

Race shrugs. “Throw me my backpack.”

Jack tosses it underhand.

There’s a knock at the door.

Race immediately drops his knees, and sits up a little bit straighter in the bed. He takes a deep breath and draws every last shred of that cloak of self protection and control and bodily autonomy around himself like armor against the world.

“Come in,” Race calls, sounding as calm and in control as he can.

“Overnight?” Jack almost shouts.

Blink makes a move to shush him, but Jack dodges out of the way.
The condition of your release was having someone to monitor you overnight. Because…because apparently whatever… whatever the fuck today was is normal for you.”

Blink makes a grab for his yelling friend, trying to pull him down onto the corner of the bed. “Jesus, Jack, calm the fuck —”

Jack twists away. “You weren’t there,” he insists.

“Yeah, I was,” Blink says quietly, defeatedly. His hand curls protectively around his phone, “Just because… just… because… because…”

“You didn’t talk to the doctor…” Jack insists, still too loud. “You didn’t watch Anthony insist that it’s all fine, it’s all normal, that he has everything under control, that this happens multiple nights a week.”

“’snot normal,” Race says sleepily. “’snot. Ise never passed out before. And, I aint dead.”

The unsaid “yet” hangs painfully heavy in the air.

Race and Jack are standing across from each other, or doing something like standing. Race is leaning against the wall like it’s the only thing still keeping him vertical. He’s got his hands inside the pocket of his zip front sweatshirt, and the hospital bracelet on his left wrist has caught against the fabric.

Which… Spot would prefer him horizontal. Not in that way. Well, yes, maybe in that way? But, not right now. Preferably when they’re both rested and have some… Not right now. Right now, Spot would like everyone to figure out where the fuck they’re sleeping so he can, as Samuel L. Jackson so eloquently put it, Go The Fuck to Sleep.

“Look, we all had a long day,” Spot says, finally. He puts as much authority behind the words as he can find. “And, we’re going to have another long one, tomorrow. We can have this argument later, when we’re rested.”

He looks around him seriously. “Blink, Jack, you go back to your rooms. There ain’t really a discussion here, seeing as I got two beds, and nobody else does. So, go get some sleep. Don’t,” he looks pointedly at Jack, “go bothering Crutchie.”

“And you,” Spot glares at Race, “you can sleep in my other bed tonight. Ain’t it perfect that I have two.”

Race waits until the others have left, before pushing himself off the wall. “I’m gonna… I’m just… I’m gonna go to bed.”

“Here,” Spot repeats, insistently. “You’se gonna sleep here.”

It’s dark, and loud, and why the fuck is he awake?

...It’s not his alarm, not work, not either of his fucking housemates. So, what the fuck? And, how does he make it stop keening?

He blinks fully awake …Oh right. He turns on his phone, shines the flashlight onto Race’s face to wake him up.
Whispers his name.
Whispers it again.
Shakes the bed.
Shakes his shoulder.
Hands him the bottle of Sprite they’d bought for far too much at the hotel gift shop.
Waits as Race downs it.
He turns off his light, checks the time. It’s four thirty. They’ve done this twice already.

**Showstopper Challenge**

Spot wakes up to sunlight streaming in through the blinds and an empty bed. The only sign that Race was there at all are rumpled sheets and an empty Sprite bottle. For a minute, Spot wonders if the whole thing was a Cinderella-like pastry-induced dream. Maybe he’ll text Crutchie, apologize for being late, and go **gossip** talk about Crutchie’s night with Jack and Spots weird dream about Race, and how much better hockey is than baseball. (Spot is a hockey evangelist).

He pinches himself, because that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re in a dream and want to know if it’s real. It hurts, but if you’re choosing to pinch yourself, doesn’t your brain know and send that signal anyway? ...Then again, Spots recurring nightmare is about driving the ambulance and not being able to move his foot onto the break, and being aware they’re all going to die. Spot’s really not sure.

He gets up, ignoring the empty bed, and goes to the bathroom. It’s too late to swim: his phone, the clock, and the light all agree that it’s closer to their eight o’clock call time than he’d like.

He finds the pile of clothes from yesterday, kicked into a corner of the bathroom. His jean have dried, which is good. He still doesn’t want to wear them. Spot wishes he had his uniform pants here, instead of hanging in his locker at work. Except he couldn’t wear the bottom half of his uniform on TV, even if no one here noticed. He’s going to be buying rounds and rounds of drinks already, every time they mention to he works for New York EMS. He doesn’t need to get caught on air in uniform and make it worse.

He pulls on Crutchie’s sweatpants and a clean t-shirt because if they’re going to wash his clothes, they might as well wash all his clothes. And then, he goes downstairs with what he thinks are only the first round of consequences today.

“Hey,” Crutchie greets him dejectedly when Spot sits down at his table. “Have you seen the email from production?”

“Email from production?” Spot steals a piece of toast.

He doesn’t think he’ll have time for food, and he and Crutchie have the kind of relationship where they’re comfortable sticking their forks into each other’s plates before asking, “Can I eat this?”

“Came in this morning, around six?” Crutchie smacks at his hand.

“Fuck. I, um, I muted everything last night. Group chat notifications and email messages and
everything. The world could have been ending and I wouldn’t have known.”

Crutchie waits. When Spot reaches for his orange juice, he moves it out of the way.

“I spent my night waiting for an alarm to go off,” Spot says, finally. “Waiting, and worrying, and only letting myself half sleep because… because what if I didn’t hear it?”

Crutchie takes a sip of his coffee. “Did you get any sleep? Today was going to suck in general, but today will be awful without sleep.”

“Yeah,” Spot mutters, wishing he had some breakfast.

Crutchie signals at the waiter. He smiles, charmingly. “Can my friend get some coffee?”

Spot turns to Crutchie. “Do I have time?”

When Crutchie nods, Spot turns to the waiter quickly. “Could I get one of those southwestern scrambles, please?” Spot adds. “With avocado toast?”

“Basic, much?” Crutchie chortles as Spot accepts his coffee.

“Hey, avocado toast is excellent. It’s like… it’s like fucking plant butter okay?”

“Plant butter?” Crutchie laughs. “What the fuck, Spot? Your ‘plant butter’ is the reason you can’t afford a house.”

“Shut up.” Spot commands, his grin breaking all attempts at being serious.

They sit for a few moments, enjoying each other’s company and the wonder that is caffeine.

“So… email? And breakfast?” Spot asks, finally.

Crutchie shrugs. “They just said they were pushing back the call time to nine today, for a Production Meeting, capital letters implied.”

“Fuck,” Spot summarizes. “Do you think…”

Crutchie nods. “I don’t think it could be anything else. But, maybe it’s good. Means you can get more sleep.”

“Already up now,” Spot shrugs. “Might as well make the best of it and eat avocado.”

Crutchie laughs again, and then stops. Just… stops. For a second, his face flickers, and then it settles into something like what was there before. The laugh starts again, this time a little bit strained.

“How bad is it? One to ten?” Apparently Spot can’t help but fall into EMT mode.

He’s sleep deprived and on edge, and has been dealing with medical emergencies all day and all night. He’d really like to be able to turn it off, but his - fuck, what was the cheesey metaphor had his social worker used? - his lizard brain is on red alert, so everything is a crisis.

Crutchie is suddenly very focused on his eggs.

“How bad is it?” Spot repeats, trying to be gentle and firm. He’s not sure how well he succeeds in the gentle part. He usually has good emotional regulating, but he’s stressed, and tired, and worried
about Crutchie.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Crutchie’s voice goes hard. “Actually, fuck. I think maybe I’m done.”

He reaches under his wheelchair to get his wallet out of a pouch that’s there, and throws a couple wrinkled bills on the table. He hurries out the dining room, a cloud of anger and frustration buzzing around his head.

Spot watches him go, still at a loss. He’s still so tired. He’s so fucking tired. He stares into his cup of coffee, and then takes another long drink. Because when you’re emotionally frayed, caffeine is exactly what you need.

Spot isn’t sure what to expect when they get to the house where they’re filming. It’s not Kara-the-contestant-babysitter taking the bag of clothes he doesn’t remember packing off to be washed. It’s not being shown to the baking tent, still in his sweats, so he and the rest of the contestants can go over their ingredients with Hannah and talk through the oven. It’s not the very professional looking health aide the production company has very quickly hired to tail Race. It’s not the way Race and Crutchie are both working hard to avoid him, that Jack’s not speaking to him or Race, and Blink’s not speaking to anyone. It’s not that the tent feels hostile and lonely for the first time in the competition. It’s not air that feels so heavy with rain and anxiety that he’s sure that even the weather got the memo that today is supposed to be hard. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but it wasn’t this.

Spot feels like he hasn’t had enough time to ground himself, and time keeps slipping, and the world’s spinning faster and faster to throw him off. And, despite that, the competition commences.

Medda and Joe make a point to ask after Race’s health. He blushes, and doesn’t meet their eyes. He plays with the end of the tan bandage on his right wrist. Sarah and Kath give him enthusiastic hugs. Race returns them cautiously. The TV cameras draw close to film the moment.

Someone hands Spots his pants, and he puts them and his old t-shirt on before going to his station. He balls up the sweats to wash and give back to Crutchie later.

“All right bakers,” Sarah announces, “Get ready to put on your baking choux! Today, Medda and Joe want you to make a… croquembouche! It should be at least eight layers of pastry. Medda and Joe are expecting at least two types of filling.”

“So, on your marks, get ready, Bake!” Katherine calls.

Spot mechanically goes through the steps of preparing dough for profiteroles. He cooks his roux, flour and water and butter together. He adds the eggs and makes the dough, which is more like a batter, he thinks. He pours it into the piping bag and prepares the pans. He starts piping out his cream puffs.

It feels like the world around him is muffled. It feels like he’s muffled. He cares, he does. Somewhere, under all the emotion and the sleep deprivation, he cares about this thing. He just can’t seem to find it. He just… he’s exhausted. On a physical, emotional, spiritual, existential level, Spot Conlon is exhausted. It’s not dangerous, not yet, not if he takes care of it soon. But, he needs to make sure that he takes care of himself. Exhaustion into the marrow of your bones is how you end up burning out. Burnout does no one any good.
Under the feeling, there’s a part of him, that bit of competitive fire that burns. It sits like a devil on his shoulder and hopes the others in the other competitors are having a rough time, too. He’s pretty sure he’s not alone, though. He can see the tight set to Crutchie’s jaw. Crutchie keeps leaning down to massage his leg when he thinks no one is looking. He kneads at his thigh, or runs a hand along his the back of his calf, fingers digging into the muscles. He can practically hear Race’s teeth grinding as the minder periodically comes over and asks him questions or cajoles him to do things that Spot is about 80% sure are out of date, about 90% sure border on ableist, about 100% sure make Race crazy. Like, she just told Race he couldn’t taste his pastry cream because it wasn’t “snack time”. Spot is ready to punch her on Race’s behalf. And then, there’s Blink who keeps reaching for a phone that isn’t under the bench, because the production company still won’t let them have phones, even though Race’s is basically a life line.

They hit the midway point, and Spot is… behind. Not just behind where he’d like to be, but behind, behind. His recipe says he’s supposed to be stacking cream puffs, because that takes two hours, and he’d like time in case he fucks it up. His contingency plan says that he should at least be finished filling the cream puffs, and started tempering the chocolate for his ganache and heating the sugar for his caramels. And, in reality… he’s not quite finished filling his first set of profiteroles. He’s seriously debating whether or not he can say “fuck it” and just not fill the vanilla cream puffs with chocolate, but when he tasted one, they were pretty bland. They’re tasty: choux pastry is tasty. But, they’re not flavorful, and he would like them to be flavorful.

He peers around the tent, to see who else is trying to make the same judgement. Blink has something he’s working in a double boiler with what might be gelatin and might be gravy. He’s stirring it with his left hand, while the fingers of his right drum against the table. The production lights glint off the titanium ring he wears on his left hand.

Jack is chatting with Joe and Medda about something, hands fiddling with the pastry bag as he works. It looks like Jack’s got caramel on the stove, which is further along than Spot is. So, maybe he’ll be okay. Except that, of course, as soon as Spot dares to think that, the sky opens. Sugar and rain don’t really mix. Spot isn’t sure why, he just knows it doesn’t work. At least they’re all fucked together.

Crutchie keeps going in and out of the tent. Not to the bathroom. Not to his car. Just… out. And, even when he’s there, keeps digging his fingers into his calf, his thigh, his lower back. Spot doesn’t think he’s seen Crutchie touch the back of that leg in the three weeks they’ve been in competition. And, when he is there, Crutchie’s face is set in a hard mask.

Race is having his own set of issues. The health aide they’ve hired doesn’t know jack shit about diabetes. It’s becoming increasingly clear that she’s working on old assumptions. Spot’s getting coffee and carrot sticks while Race and the aide have a quiet argument in the catering tent.

“I don’t need you!” Race hisses. “I need my CGM. It’s way more reliable at telling my blood sugar than you are.”

“You wouldn’t need to worry so much if you’d just stick to your meal plan,” the health aide shoots back.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t need to worry so much if you didn’t insist that the thirty grams of carb in a slice of pizza were the same as the thirty grams of carb in a plate of beans and rice.” Race pauses. “Look, why don’t you just let me have my CGM and then you can go sit in the corner and watch youtube on your phone, or something?”
“Because you need to stick to your meal plan.” The aide insists.

Race lets out a long suffering sigh. “Look, Lady, I don't know what to tell you, cause you’re thicker than Les' bread was. But, umm, have you talked to my doctor? My CDE? Hell, have you talked to anyone at my endo’s office?”

The health aide seems to know she’s been insulted. She just doesn’t know how offended she should be. She ignores that, though. “No.”

“So, you haven’t talked to my doctor. Or my nurse. Or my nutritionist. You just tried to get me to inject four units of insulin because ‘it’s noon, and it says to take up to twenty units four times per day’.” Race’s voice pitches up, and rises. “But, you don’t actually know what that means. So, you’ll excuse me if I want the CGM my doctor ordered and to go back to baking.”

He turns on his heel and leaves the tent. Race: 1, aide 0.

Spot isn’t happy when he gets to the end of the bake, but he can hardly be bothered to care. His assembled tower is held together by a hope, a prayer, and a lot less sugar work than he’d like. But, he’s done, and that’s what counts, right? He remember Rosie’s motto from when she was in college and he was doing night classes from his EMT-A: B’s get degrees. He didn’t have the heart back then to point out that philosophy was a lot more comforting when you were teaching small children how to read, compared to saving lives, but the point stands. B’s get degrees, and hopefully don’t get you kicked off the bake off.

There is no victory lap this time. The five of them get shoō’d out of the kitchen, while the production crew cleans up. Blink, Jack, and Spot go back to help, because anything is better than sitting awkwardly in the craft services tent avoiding each other’s eyes. Race goes off in a corner and clutches his backpack. Crutchie disappears into the back of his van. No one says much. They line up, like lambs to the slaughter. The air in the tent is as heavy with emotion and rain. The competitive devil sitting on his shoulder is pleased: even if he fails, as long as someone else has failed more, he will stay. The much larger angel sitting on his other shoulder isn’t being so angelic: just like in the cartoons, it would like to go punch that devil in the face.

Jack’s idea of a tower of beignets is... interesting. Medda says “interesting” the way Spot’s teachers and social worker used to call his projects in high school “interesting”. Like the time he submitted a bikini-clad Pamela Anderson circa 90210 day as part of a project on the Odyssey and almost got kicked out of ninth grade english. If - and that was a big if - Jack had pulled it off, he might have gotten away with frying his dough instead of baking it, and not filling it. Otherwise, a more traditional yeast dough would have been better. His maple sugar caramel is tasty, but still an odd combination with the beignets tower.

They like Race’s idea of limoncello and raspberry cream is sweet and tart. He’s missed all the sugar work, which means he’s really just presenting a pile of cream puffs. Spot wonders how much of that is due to Race’s limited mobility. As far as Spot can tell, he’s still got the two bandages on the inside of his elbows, and the wrap gets tight he tries to bend them. Race fiddles with the hospital bracelet on his left wrist, which maybe production should have made him cut off before they started shooting. When the camera isn’t watching, Race shoots a dark look at the health aide, who is sitting quietly in the corner, reading a book with Fabio in a kilt on the cover. Medda is disappointed. Joe is getting hauty.

Blink comes third, twisting his ring and looking just beyond the judges. Spot suspects that some of
that is due do trouble with his eye, which is still occasionally going off in odd directions. Joe does not like the idea of a savory croquembouche, and he’s not sure why the contestants can’t just stick to classic flavors. (Never mind he’d just scolded Race for not being adventurous enough.) The consume or whatever was used to stick the pastries together has just left them soggy. Medda thinks the pesto cream is nice, but she would have liked a filling in the cheese shell. Maybe something sweet, like a quince paste. That’s a classic pairing: quince and cheese.

Spot is second to last, just before Crutchie. When he presents his tower, Joe rolls his eyes. Actually rolls his eyes. Spot knows they do a lot of chocolate and coffee, and that it’s a common pairing. But… it’s so damn good together. And, if Rodriguez is to be believed (and it’s usually good to believe Rodriguez), earth is the only planet with chocolate and a laser hair-dyer welding seventeen year old is the only thing standing between them and alien invasion to steal it. Medda looks sad as Spot admits that he’d wanted to finish, he just lost track of the time. He knows it’s an excuse. He knows that there’s going to be post film about how it’s late in the show for the competitors to be losing track of their time. He just can’t be bothered to care.

Crutchie doesn’t try to move his croquembouche, just nods to Jack who carries it up for him. Spot would have been happy to help, but he’s a little glad that Crutchie and Jack at least talked to each other after last night. He’s not sure they had a chance. Crutchie is stubborn, and Jack was running high on emotions, and neither of them were at their best. So, this is good.

Crutchie’s croquembouche is a bit more of a disappointment. Its small. It’s still got six of the eight layers, but the cream puffs are tiny. There’s sugar work, but it’s barely there. And, it’s a bit burned. Crutchie has still pulled out something that looks okay. Not quite his usual Pinterest worthy bakes, but okay. (Spot blames Mo’s wife for introducing him to Pinterest. But, Fatima was so excited for their baby shower.) The cream puffs are tasty, at least. His tropical flavors turned out well. Medda really likes the mango flavor with the passion fruit cream. She just wishes it wasn’t burnt.

Over all, Spot knows it’s been a bad week. He knows that no one has performed as well as they could have. He’s not sure what that means, though. Will he and Race be punished for what happened yesterday, or will someone take into account that he was busy saving someone’s life instead of baking? (Spot doesn’t have a ton of illusions about the usefulness of the production’s medical team when it comes to emergencies.)

So, he’ll see. They’ll see. There’s not much else to do.

Final Judgement

It’s a really good thing there’s a coffee table outside the green room. Because coffee is fucking awesome. Coffee keeps you moving when you’re about to fall over. Coffee lets you walk out of a tense room when you can’t stand it anymore. And, if you’re trapped in the room, coffee gives you something to hold so you don’t punch people. Plus, there’s always the added benefit that if you really do have to fight, coffee is a hot liquid to throw in someone’s face. Spot is generally less inclined toward violence than he was when he was fifteen, but oh God, sometimes it’s tempting.

Blink has gone off with his phone, again. From his place next to the coffee carafes, Spot can overhear the conversation. He’s not eavesdropping, not intentionally, but he can’t help himself.

“Yeah, it sucks.” Blink pauses, while the person on the other end answers. “I… I don’t know, Mush. Yeah, no, I don’t know. … Have you asked Pie Eater? Kids a genius in the paralegal department. He might know. … Well, he might know a lawyer, then. …Yeah, you’re fucking sympathetic, asshole.”

“… Yeah, yeah. No. Umm… I’ll try. No, not great. Joe didn’t like the concept, and Medda wanted
more flavor. ...Yeah, I know. I know. I’ll try. I love you. Yep, love you.” Blink hangs up the phone.

Spot is in danger of getting caught, and he starts to feel guilty again, but there’s no place to go hide. Crutchie and Jack are having a Talk in the Green Room. Race has been pulled off for interviews about yesterday morning that they didn’t get during lunch, and interviews about today that they all have to do. Spot is sure that he and Race will need to do a special round of questioning. But, he’s pretty sure Production will wait until after judging to make Race vulnerable. Because nothing says good TV like a man crying.

Blink slides his phone into his back pocket and siddles over. He signs, and tests the mostly full container of hot water. He digs through the selections of teas, come up with something in a pale green wrapper. Mint, Spot thinks, although he’s not really a tea person. Yep… Mint.

Blink wraps both his hands around the cup, hunching his shoulders and cradling it close to his face. “Fuck,” he says.

“Everything okay?” Spot asks, pretending he overheard nothing.

Blink sighs. “My husband’s boss is an asshole. Pulled him off coaching a club team, and told him he has to chaperone a dance. Mush an’ I, we don’t really do dances.”

There’s a lot more behind the words, a lot more behind the phone call. Spot doesn’t have the energy to try to pry it from Blink, and Blink doesn’t seem to have any more energy to talk about it. “I hope they come get me soon. I really want to get home earlier.”

“Tired?”

“Fuck yes, aren’t you?”

Spot shrugs. “I try to swing it so I’m either off or on desk duty the day on Mondays. Weekends are usually bad at work, and there’s always so much paperwork.”

He’d also worked as much as was legally allowable, wracking up double shifts, subbing in, and trading out vacation days so he could have three day blocks available for as long as the bake off lasted.

“Lucky,” Blink huffs into his tea. “I’ve got four periods of Twelfth Night, Act III; a discussion about sexuality, gender, and the Scarlet Pimpernel for my advanced placement kids; Tennyson for my regular placement seniors; and a GSA meeting tomorrow.”

Spot nods, and tries to look comforting. “That sounds like a long day?”

He’s not sure what you’re supposed to say to a person who willing decided to teach high school. Four years of high school was enough for Spot. Hell, three years of high school were almost too much for Spot, but he figured things would be better if he finished that fourth year.

Blink nods, and takes another long drink of his tea.

Kara the contestant babysitter extraordinaire comes back with Race and his baby sitter. “Okay, Blink, you’re up next.”

Kara is Spot’s favorite because she’s learned everyone’s nicknames, and makes a point of using them. Blink nods, and follows her out.
They’re sitting together in the green room, still waiting for a decision that seems like it’s taking longer than it should. Race’s phone vibrates with that trill that kept Spot up all night. The one that doesn’t seem to wake Race from a dead sleep, but sure disturbed Spot.

Race fumbles with it and silences the alarm. The room goes silent, too. It feels like the only sound on the production backlot is the eerie sound of the world waiting for a storm.

Race gets up, walks over to the fridge, checks for something. When he doesn’t find what he’s looking for, he rifflies through his backpack. He pulls out a roll of candy, and starts counting them off with his thumb. The other four boys in the tent sit there, watching intently, like he’s a wild animal who might get spooked.

It’s Jack who breaks the silence. His voice is tight, like he’s about to scream or cry. His voice has been tight since they left the hospital last night. His fists are clenched. “You gonna tell us what the fuck, Anthony? You said this didn’t happen all that often.”

Race swallows one of the candies without chewing, and starts in on another two. “Can this wait?”

“No!” Jack almost shounts again, pulling his hat off his head, and balling the cap of it in his fist.

“Yes,” Kara announces, entering the room. “It’s time for judging.”

Race looks so grateful for the reprieve as he continues to eat his carefully counted horde of candies.

They troop to the golf carts to go back to the tent. Crutchie doesn’t say anything about getting his car, just transfers from the seat of the wheelchair into the back of the golf cart and then disassembles his chair. Spot ends up sitting up front, leaning half twisted on the back of the seat to talk to Crutchie.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Crutchie insists. He’s got his leg up, and Spot would put money on Crutchie’s fingers kneading along his leg.

Spot shrugs. “If you need…”

“My roommate Albert is on his way,” Crutchie cuts him off, sharply. “He’s going to drive me back to the city.”

“How does Jack feel about that?” Spot asks in an undertone, hoping Kara won’t hear.

Kara just laughs. “You think I don’t know about that? We, well, Simon and Andy and I, we started taking bets on someone that first week. My money was on the two of you, but…”

“What?” Spot asks, temporarily distracted by the fact that the PAs are, as Rodriguez would put it, “shipping them”.

Kara shrugs, easing the golf cart over some rocky terrain. The last time they’d hit a bump, Crutchie had started swearing. Spot’s ears are burning from some of the creative combinations.

“We get bored, you’re our drama,” she says. “I know the cakes and everything are all dramatic and whatever, but like... I’ve been working on this show for four years, trying to get into a more senior producer’s spot so I can have a little more control over my life. And, once you’ve seen it once, you’ve seen it all. I’m kind of glad we didn’t walk in on you…”
Crutchie chuckles. “Give us some credit, we read the contract.”

“That makes you smarter than most, then.” Kara says, delivering them to the side of the tent.

Crutchie pops the wheels back on his chair, and settles into it. He wheels into the tent and then swallows. “Oh, fuck no.” He looks helplessly between Spot and Kara. “Oh, fuck no.”

“Oh fuck no, what?” Spot asks.

“Oh fuck no, I really don’t want to get up in the damn chairs,” Crutchie says. “Especially because as soon as they announce the judging, you’re all going to want me to get back down out of the damn chairs. And, ‘cause I did so good yesterday, you’se probably all thinking I don’t even need my crutches.”

Kara sighs. “We can put you in the middle,” she offers. “With Spot and Race on either side, since they’re most likely to be eliminated.”

“You know who’s being eliminated?” Spot asks, his heart quickening in spite of everything.

“Nope, that’s above my paygrade. It’s my job to get you all from place A to place B, make sure that you have the ingredients you need, and make sure that Christian doesn’t accidently almost kill any more competitors.” Kara says the last in a huff. Spot guesses she’s still mad about what happened to Race yesterday, too.

“...But we both tanked in the technical, given that Race didn’t finish and I…”

“Yeah,” Kara agrees. She looks back to Crutchie. “So, would the middle be okay, so they can support you? We can get your crutches?”

He huffs in an annoyed way. “So, the answer is, ‘walk or we’ll carry you?’ And since no one is going to carry me… Can’t you just get lower chairs? Won’t the shot still work if you put everyone lower?”

He wheels around the line of chairs slowly, considering. Kara trails after him.

The golf cart with Jack, Race, and Blink arrives. You can almost see the smoke coming out of Jack’s ears. Race stands away from him, fingers fiddling with his hospital bracelet and eyes still bright. Spot isn’t sure why it hasn’t been cut off, yet.

Kara calls Ivan, the director of photography over. There’s a hurried conference.

“Fine, why not?” Ivan huffs.

Kara hurries off to get a chair, and Spot helps them push the tall show chairs out of the way. Ivan screen tests while Joe and Medda arrive.

Blink fiddles with his phone, looking at the sky and then back at the screen. He’s probably checking the MTA app, and then texting Mush. Spot hasn’t checked, but depending on the delay, it could set him back four hours. Spot feels bad. He also wants to stick it to Joe.

Joe starts throwing a fit, because he swears it will mess with the composition. Ivan insists that no, it’s fine. Kath comes over, and has this quick, low conversation that Crutchie listens to, and makes Joe frown.

Spot and Christian lug in chairs and set them up, quickly, under Kara’s direction.
Race and Jack glare at each other from across the tent.

Storm clouds roll in across the island, and the wind gusts through the tent.

“And… this week… the person we will be sending home is,” Sarah says the words with weighty drama. Spot can feel them pressing down on him. He can feel a weight building.

“The person we’re sending home is… No one.”

Spot lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“Medda,” and Sarah puts just enough emphasis on the name that the competitors know who made the ultimate decision, “and Joe decided that it wasn’t fair to eliminate anyone this week because of the … extraordinary circumstances. So, we’ll see you all back, next week.”

They crowd together for a hug, anyway. Because even though Spot is holding his body taught against physical contact, that’s what you do.

Race, he can see Race out of the corner of eye, and he’s not sure what he’s seeing is real. He turns to study him. Race is crying. Not saying anything, just letting the tears run down his face. It makes Spot want to wrap an arm around him for real, and not just for show. Because as much as Spot doesn’t want other people touching him right now, he thinks he could stand choosing to touch Race. But, then, Kath goes over, and sets a hand on his back, and Spot loses his chance.

When they’re done and the crew is cleaning up, Kara takes them to a conference room. “You all look like you need to talk stuff out, and then, Spot, Race, we have to talk about yesterday.” The word might as well weight ten pounds as much as Spot’s gut drops.

Blink checks his phone. “Look, I know this is important. And, umm… I really want to talk about this. But, if I don’t get on this train, I’m not going to be home until eleven, and I really need to see my husband.”

Race nods. “Umm, text me or something, maybe? If you want to talk?” The words are tentative. “Otherwise, umm… I have your email, right?”

Blink nods, and shoulders his backpack.

“Okay,” Race says, quickly. “I’ll email you.”

“Thanks.”

And, Blink is gone. The wind pushes the door closed with a final sounding thump.

Race sinks back down into his seat, slouching and crossing his arms. Jack leans forward across from his, shoulders hunched and hands crossed. Spot jiggles his leg and hopes no one notices. Crutchie rubs his lower back near his right hip. They stare at each other in silence.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” Jack says, finally. “What in the ever loving fuck, Anthony?”

Race shrugs, the picture of someone who doesn’t care.

“Oh no, you don’t get to do that,” Jack insists, voice hard and desperate. “You don’t get to just act
like you don’t care. It don’t fucking work like that.”

Spot agrees with Jack. “You could have died.” He’s seen it before. It’s a part of the job he hates, but he’s seen it.

A call, about two years ago, some kid who lived in Williamsburg and went to Columbia. A night out drinking, the coroner thought. A night out with his friends, a low blood sugar, maybe a seizure, and he didn’t wake up. He was 19.

And then, there was that girl, just a few blocks away. Couldn’t have been more than six months ago. She’d turned twenty six, gone off her parents insurance. Her shitty job hadn’t paid for much, and the insulin she’d been rationing so carefully had run out. She’d made a mistake, Spot thinks. She’d made a mistake, as her blood sugar slowly crept higher and higher until she slipped into a coma, and then slipped away for good.

It’s impossible not to look across the table at Race, who is vibrant and full of life and oh, so damn stupid. It’s impossible not to look at him now and see the trembling, fumbling, feeble boy yesterday. It’s impossible not to see the man playing with fire. It’s impossible not to think about how the day could have ended so differently. It’s impossible not to think about how one mistake, whatever the fuck yesterday’s mistake was, could end so badly.

“You could have died,” Jack repeats, the words angry, then plaintive. “You could have died.”

Race shrugs again, his shoulders hunching as then settle back down. His left leg draws up toward his chest. He still hasn’t said anything.

“The doctor said…” Jack’s voice trails off.

“The doctor said it was fine,” Race reminds him, pushing back from the table and going to stand by the door. “The doctor said it was fine.”

The doctor did not say it was fine. The doctor had wanted to know what happened, and Race had been cagey. He’d finally admitted to worrying because he couldn’t bring the high down. So, maybe he double dosed? But, he was stuck, and he wasn’t coming down, and he swears he’d accounted for breakfast. Spot had wondered what breakfast he was referencing, but he wasn’t about it get into it with Race, then.

And then, the doctor had glanced at the twenty-four hour trace Race had shown her to prove that he was okay. She asked him about the lows, and he muttered some bullshit about escitalopram that the doctor had seemed to buy. Spot wasn’t sure he did, though. Then, she’d called Jack and Spot over. Which is when she informed them that if this trend continued, they needed to bring Race back. Because the emergency glucagon Spot had given him made his body dump all the sugar reserves in his liver, and if they can’t keep his blood sugar where it needs to be, then it might be easier to manage with a glucose IV.

Race takes a moment to compose himself, time to trade the sound of exhaustion and frustration and fear with a jovial tone. “Any way, why so serious? You’re star baker twice in a row, Jackie boy. Twice. The world is your erster.”

“Your what?”

“Your erster.”

“Race?” Spots asks, his voice strained. “Shut up and sit down. You scared the fuck out of us.”
Race drops into the chair near the door, perching on the edge so he can run if he needs to. He puts as much space as he can between himself, Spot and Jack. He pushes up his sleeves and tugs at the purple wrap on his right elbow, worrying the end. He doesn’t say anything.

“Look, Race, Tony…” Crutchie says, gently. “Look, we just want to help you.”

“I don’t want help,” Race snarls. “Least not, if help looks like this! I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, you have to do something.” Crutchie says, finally. “Cause, after this week, I think it’s gonna get hard. And, we gotta protect one another.”

“I’ll… I’ll think about it.” The fight seems to go out of Race. He just looks tired and empty again. “I’ll think about it,” he repeats.

In the pause after his words, there’s a gentle hiss and rattle outside. The rain has finally come.

“Good,” Crutchie says. And then he glances at Jack, who has opened his mouth to say something. “I’ll think about it, too. But, not tonight. I haven’t slept, and my leg…” he rubs his thigh.

“Anyway, Al’s coming. And… you two should go do the interviews. And Jack, you should go home. I’ll… I’ll call you.”

“What?” Jack asks, scowling.

Crutchie sighs. “Tomorrow, Jack. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? If you hurry, you can still catch the 5:35. Get home so you can sleep before your shift.”

Jack nods, betrayed, defeated. But, he goes.

And then, Crutchie, Race, and Spot sit across the table and look at each other. Spot tries to figure out what the other two are thinking. He wishes he could read their minds. But, in the end, he’s stuck with his own thoughts: How the fuck did we get here, and how the fuck do we get back to where we were?

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter and/or Passover! Lots of notes.

Cgm - constant glucose monitor. The device that tracks Race's blood sugar, measuring it every 5 minutes. Can be connected to a phone and/or a second receiver.

Cde - certified diabetes educator. A nurse practitioner with extra training to help diabetic patients with things like adjusting insulin doses, giving shots, or training on a new treatment system.

Endo - endocrinologist. A specialist who handles diabetes care. There’s a running joke that everyone lies to their endo, and all the endos know it.

Escitalopram is an antidepressant that can cause weird effects on blood sugar. Race uses it to cover for the fact that drinking whiskey with Spot likely caused an overnight low.

Spot references the audio book for Go the Fuck to Sleep, narrated by Samuel L.
Jackson. Jablonski’s books about the international chocolate cartel refer to the *Young Wizard* series by Diane Duane.

I’m not entirely sure whether or not release from the emergency room could be dependent on having someone to watch you. I assume in cases for things like head injuries, it probably plays a role. So, please give me artistic license. As always, there are a lot more notes, mostly dealing with food and geography, in the sources document.

Thanks to Charlie for his help with the “what’s worse?” game with this chapter.

If you’re reading this in the future, now would be a good time take a break. You’re at about 70,000 words. So, go get some water, take a walk, maybe do that thing you’re procrastinating about. Possibly go to sleep.

Finally, thank you to people who keep commenting. I love you. I love them. It makes me so happy. So, feel free to yell at me about any and all abuse I’ve put the boys through. Or, you know, your life. Or AKB’s abs. Or, really, anything.
…He’s already on LIBR when he realizes he’s forgotten it. Of course he’s already on LIBR. He can’t exactly go back: by the time he gets a train back to Manhattan, they’ll be closed and it won’t do him any good.

He calls his husband. “Hey, Mush, how are you?”

“Blink?”

“Umm?”

“What did you forget?”

He sighs, because of course his husband - his husband, something he doesn’t think either of them will ever get tired of saying - knows he forgot something.

“So, umm, you know how I was going to get my eye looked at, because it was bothering me?”

“Yeah?”

“And how I left it to get polished?”

“Umm-hmm”

“And how I forgot to pick it up on our way home from work yesterday because I got, ummm, distracted?”

In his defense, the distraction had been bake-off related. And shakespeare related. And Mush related. And so, how could he resist?

“And you forgot to pick up your eye,” Mush concludes tiredly. “Why can’t you wear the one you had at work this morning?”
“I… ummm…. I left it in my desk.”

It had been bothering him, too, rubbing up against his eyelid and irritating it. He It’s older, one he got in his late teens, while his face was still growing. And, he sort of hates it. It doesn’t quite match his other eye. Not in a good these intentionally don’t match kind of way, but in the something’s off and I don’t know why. When he was a kid - hell, even now - he thinks he’d be happier wearing an eye patch and being done with it. But, his Nana had made it clear that if she was going to pay for it, he was going to wear it. And, Mush says he likes his eyes. Both of them, Lou. With his prosthetic, it’s a use it or lose it senario.

And, he likes this eye, the one that got left at the shop. Mush had gotten it for him, as a wedding gift. Well, that’s not strictly true. Mush had used part of the wedding gift money to pay off the balance, so he could have it before the ceremony. It was the first time he’d had a custom one made, one that matches his real eye. And, he likes the way it looks. He likes the way it feels and the way it fits, most days.

But, in the end, the eye he had been wearing, his back up eye, had irritated him. So, he’d popped the shell out at the end of the day, and stuck it in the box in his desk with his backup contacts and backup glasses and back up sunglasses and decided to wear the back up eyepatch. He keeps back ups a lot of places. He has a tendency to forget things, and when you only need one contact and they come in pairs, it becomes easier to split your supply and have a few back ups. Mush had given him a box in one of his drawers where the stuff was supposed to go, and it mostly ended up there, anyway.

Occasionally, his students come across an eyepatch on his desk or a bottle of contact solution, but his seniors are used to it, and make up one of those ridiculous stories about how he lost his eye. Again. His current favorite involves a trained opossum, a sheet of letter paper, an electric tea kettle, and a bag of cheetos.

Mush sighs, the long suffering sigh of a partner who is good at logistics. Blink has always been a human disaster. Mush is precise, organized, and a total packrat. “Anything else?”

“Umm… I think I got more eye drops when I was at Mackie’s, but just in case… they should be in the bathroom cabinet, with my shit, but if I didn’t? And, I think, my glasses? The red ones? I don’t know if I have them. I’ve got my contacts, but, I think I forgot those. Oh, and the copy of The Importance of Being Earnest on my nightstand. The large print edition?”

There’s a pause while Mush writes down the list. “And…” Mush prompts.

“My amazing husband?”

“Sap.”

“I miss you. And, Smalls had Sniper come out. I mean, it was kind of a disaster: her train was late, and Smalls got eliminated. But, I think she was going to propose… she did make a Tiffany box full of wedding cookies.”

“We’re we ever so cheesy?”

“Mush?”

“Umm?”

“The kids ship us. Pretty sure that qualifies as cheesy.”

They make arrangements for Mush to pick up Blink’s eye, and the rest of the things he forgot. And
then get off the phone, because Blink’s seatmate is glaring. Well, he thinks shes glaring, but he’s intentionally put her on his left, so he can’t really see her.

He’s glad Mush is coming. He’s glad to have his husband, but he’s also glad that he’s not leaving Mush alone, again. His husband sounds happier, more stable, and less upset than he did last week, which is good. They’re close, they communicate, but they each have their own therapist and their own friends, and sometimes, they chose to deal with problems separately from each other. It’s not because they can’t handle them together, or they aren’t willing, but even in a relatively healthy marriage, there are things that are hard to talk about.

And, last week, Mush had been so on edge. It had started with the fire drill… well, it had probably started before that, but the fire drill was the catalyst. But, if Blink starts thinking about that, he’s either going to get angry or start crying and then he’s going to be blowing his nose all the way to Montauk.

Instead, he pulls out his tablet and sticks in his headphones. It’s been a long day, and he’s got a Royal Shakespeare reading of *Twelfth Night*. He loves that play, he loves this recording. Almost as much as he loves the printed words on the page.

First, though, he pulls up his emails and scrolls to the one he has bookmarked. He’s been saving it, nervous and not ready to deal with this yet. He’s good at compartmentalizing. He has to be good at compartmentalizing. And, given everything else going on with his students, his brothers, Mush, and Snyder, being a high school teacher in America, and being an American in general, he hasn’t had time or the energy to come back to what had happened with Racetrack Higgins last week.

Race had sent the email, like he’d promised. Blink doesn’t have high hopes. Race likes to talk. He talks a lot. He chatters and prattles and does everything he can to do to fill the empty air. He’s just really bad at talking about serious things. And so, maybe, if it’s in writing, it won’t be so hard.

FROM: TheRacetrackHiggins@gmail.com

TO: jackelly0692@gmail.com; kingofbrooklyn69@gmail.com; kidblink182@gmail.com; thecrutchmastergeneral@outlook.com

CC: thesmallone1997@gmail.com, romeolookingforjuliet@gmail.com, david.i.jacobs.1994@gmail.com

SUBJECT: Things I don’t want to talk about this anymore

It is 3:22 am. My blood sugar is “Low”, so this should be a fun email.
(Update: it’s 5:58 am. My blood sugar is like 51. I’m on the subway. It’s still going to be a fun email.)

Yeah, because that was a comforting way to open an email. He’s sure Jack was pissed, just reading the first sentence.

I’ve been diabetic for more than 15 years. I’m an adult, etcetera, etcetera. I’ve been managing on my own since I was 18. I’m writing this mostly because I never actually want to talk to you about it in person, if we can help it. So, here's a handy guide to avoid that uncomfortable situation.

The really short version of this email is as follows: if I’m not conscious, or don’t appear to be in this reality, call 911. If I can’t keep down liquids, give me a couple of plastic bags and take me to the emergency room. In
either case, please, for the love of God, make sure there are no TV cameras on me. Otherwise, I will ask for help if I need it. I appreciate what Spot did last week, it was the right answer. Thank you for making me not dead.

The email goes on to describe in the same honest but not helpful way the symptoms of low blood sugar, high blood sugar, and what to do. (Most of which Blink could have looked up on the internet, if he'd wanted to. It does reiterate that it takes a while for blood sugar to rise after hypoglycemia gets treated, which he files away for later. He hasn't had a student with type I diabetes, yet, but if he keeps teaching, it's only a matter of time before he or Mush do.

Blink reads the email through. Then, he reads it through again. He considers chucking his tablet across the train because he's frustrated about how bad it is, but then he would still be frustrated, and he wouldn’t have a working tablet anymore. It’s one of the reasons he loves print books: you can chuck them across a moving train, and as long as they don’t land in a pool of water, cause a pool of blood, or get ripped open, they’re still good to read. Tablets, on the other hand...

Blink doesn’t know what to do about Race. He’s had enough child psychology classes to know that there may not be that much he can do. He can’t force Race to communicate - to tell them what they need to know, or to make him listen to them. He can’t force Race to see that he’s being selfish: his refusal to take care of himself means that the rest of them are constantly on edge, waiting for the next emergency. He knows it must be tiring for Race, but it’s exhausting for everyone else. He’s not sure how Race lets people close. It must be hard to let people in, if you can’t trust them...

He’s glad there’s still an hour of waning daylight when he gets off the train. His night vision has been going more than he’d like to admit. Not that his night vision was ever great to begin with, but it’s gotten worse as he’s gotten older. He and Mush know it’s going to continue to get worse. The radiation, and maybe the chemo, did some damage. But, it’s over all a slow, gradual decline, but it’s marked by good days and bad days, and they’re preparing for it. Mush knows, there isn’t really a point in keeping secrets. They go to doctor’s appointments together: Mush a steady rock when Blink freaks out at the ophthalmologists, and Blink calm and collected when they go to see Mush’s people.

He gets a car to the hotel. He pulls up the group text on his phone, and starts from earlier in the day, having it read through. He closes his eyes, and leans back, listening.

“Siri, text Bakers: Just got in, what’s for dinner question mark send.”

His phone chirps back a response, and he hears it appear in the text log. At least his phone didn’t fuck it up. He’s spent hours training Siri to recognize “fuck” and he still ends up with aquatic bird emojis half the time.

The driver glances back, sees him in the rearview mirror with his shaggy hair and his eyepatch and the green military style jacket he’s about 80% sure is Mush’s. “My, umm, brother did a tour in Iraq,” he says, conversationally.

It feels like a complete non-sequitur to Blink, but he pulls out an earbud and nods. This text log is mostly just Romeo and Smalls arguing about who would win in a fist fight: Plato, Dwayne Johnson, Christopher Lee, or Buzz Aldrin. “Umm, okay?”

“Where did you…?”
Oh, fuck. The driver thinks he... “Umm, did two tours at NYU,” he says, still a little bit off guard. “We really kicked Retinoblastoma ass over there.”

Then, he puts back in his headphones to listen to David’s rant about the “Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson test”.

Mush doesn’t make it in time, so dinner ends up just being the five remaining contestants. It’s a weird place to pick up from after last week. There’s a tension in the air. He isn’t sure if it’s because of what happened last week, or because two of them have to go home, because there’s no extra episode and can only be three in the finale.

Jack and Crutchie seem to have worked something out. They’re sitting next to each other, grinning stupidly and trying to hold hands under the table.

Blink hasn’t been quite sure of those two. They started circling the first week. Smalls has reported in a private text that they were disgustingly adorable, and Crutchie has Game. Two weeks ago, when he’d been tired and wired on caffeine because he’d forgotten his medication and caffeine is a poor man’s substitute for Ritalin, he’s pretty sure they spent the night. They were, at least, cuddling a lot for people who weren’t close, and Jack did end up wearing Crutchie’s shirt home.

...And then last week, everything went to shit. Jack and Spot went to the hospital. He and Crutchie went behind the hotel to smoke and then lie about it. It’s not exactly legal in New York, what they’re doing. It’s definitely not legal that most of what he smokes is technically prescribed his neighbor, Jonnie, but… anyway. It’s complicated. And Johnnie mostly gets it for Mush, for those now wonderfully rare bad weeks where he’s bloated and can’t move from the cramps. But, so… Blink and Crutchie were out back, and, Crutchie has sighed, and sort of tried to justify what he was doing, why he didn’t want to use the painkillers he had. Blink figured it was none of his business, but he let Crutchie talk, anyway. They were both scared, both tired, and Crutchie was clearly in more pain than he was willing to let on. Which, given that he’d asked Jack to go get Blink so they could go smoke instead of letting Blink suggest it...

In contrast, Race and Jack are clearly still at odds. Race has put as much space as possible between himself at Jack, an impressive trick, since he’s also trying to avoid Spot. Blink suspects that Race wishes he’d just gotten a later train, to avoid eating with him. But, somehow, Race’s fortunes has shifted so he was out of work on time, for once. Or, maybe his luck was as bad as ever, and it just looked different this time.

Jack’s watching everything that Race is putting in his mouth, frown growing as they work their way through the appetizers. There’s sauteed brussel sprouts with pancetta, because this is the Hamptons and it’s classy as fuck; hummus and veggies, because Spot claims they need more vegetables and vegetables cooked with bacon don’t count; and tater tots, which Crutchie justified with some kind of school project. Blink needs to figure out how he does that, and assign more fried potato related projects to his students. It could be really fun… But, Jack watches Race. Race watches Jack. Spot looks away from the two of them, looks anywhere but at the two of them, and tries to engage Blink and Crutchie in a conversation about Hockey. Which… Blink doesn’t really care about hockey? Curling, Men’s Gymnastics, and intercollegiate quidditch are where it’s at, as far as Blink is concerned.

Things look like they’re going to get dicey, but Crutchie is a goddamn MVP.

They’re finishing up a first round of drinks - seltzer for Crutchie, who drove; raspberry lemonade for Blink because raspberry lemonade is awesome and people who say otherwise are just wrong;
water and dark beer for Spot, a lighter beer for Race, and a bomber of cider for Jack who didn’t seem to understand the concept of a bomber until the large bottle appeared in front of him.

Anyway, glasses are getting empty, and Race snags the beer list, looking for his next drink.

Jack leans in earnestly. “Is that a good idea?”

Races shoulders hunch. “Is what a good idea?”

“Beer!” Jack asks, too loudly.

Jack Kelly is a lightweight, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. When they’d gotten those burritos and drank beer and moscow mules in Crutchie’s room, Jack had been the first (although not the only) person to get tipsy. He’s a funny drunk, just more… intensely Jack. Like someone had taken the color and turned the saturation all the way up until it distorted him slightly. Jack with alcohol is louder and more protective, more bravado and less confidence. It’s a weird mix.

“You just drank a bomber of cider by yourself.” Race shrugs, and lifts up Jack’s bottle to test it. He sniffs it, and tips it back to take a sip. “A bomber of really tasty cider. So… yeah, no. You, you and your bomber…especially if you’re thinking about another bomber: no judgment. Yeah, no. Not happening.”

“Yeah, but…” Jack trails off to think for a minute. It’s not that Jack is slower, he’s just more… precise. Weirdly precise. Obviously precise. Blink knows the feeling. “Yeah, but, its not going to hurt me.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Jackie.” Crutchie leans across to take another tatertot. “But, both of you, lay off.” He pushes a glass of water at Jack.

Race pushes the menu at Spot. “How is what you’ve got? It’s this Imperial stout, right?”

Spot eyes Race warily, and then pushes his glass across the table for a sip.

Race tries it. “That’s, ummm, that’s…”

“Chewy,” Spot supplies with a grin.

Race nods, and orders something else.

Blink’s actually kind of amazed that they manage to make it through the rest of the meal without a major incident. He’s especially impressed with the way Crutchie seems to steer the conversation away from dangerous topics - food, the show, politics, religion, or their health - and toward better choices, like Queer Eye and the baby Hitler problem. Honestly, if Blink wasn’t happily married and Crutchie wasn’t macking on Jack, Blink might have bought him a drink and made out with him on the couch. But, those days are long over.

By the end of the meal, Blink’s happy to throw down his credit card into the communal pile, and call it a night. It will be good to leave the weird tension that’s crept in. It will be good to go back and sleep. It will be damn good to see his husband.

“Come to bed, and tell me what’s wrong,” Blink orders, patting the spot beside him.

Mush paces back from the bathroom, dental flossing hanging out of his mouth. He shoots Blink a
look that says all too clearly, *We are not the characters in some teeny-bopper movie.* It also says *it’s late and i don’t want to talk about it right now.* “What’s wrong is that you haven’t brushed your teeth, and I want to go to bed.”

Mush is shirtless, the light dusting of hair on his chest tracing down to a stomach that’s flat but not muscular, with a trail of dark hair into the waistband of his jeans. Blink knows it’s there, even though he can’t quite see it from this far away. The silvery pink scars under each pectoral are shiny only because Mush keeps rubbing scar cream into them long after they’ve faded beyond the point most people can see them -- let alone recognize them -- from across the room. In the low light, Blink can make out the spirals of the tattoos that wrap around his ribs. Mush swears it says “We are Star Stuff” in amino acids. On the left, over his heart, in Blinks angular block print, it says “Kid Blink and Mush Meyers.” From the bed, its two squiggles, but Blink knows what it is, and what it says. Under his shirt he has a line of raised skin and a matching tattoo, written in Mush’s loose scrawl.

“Hey, toss me the floss?” Blink isn’t sure he wants to get up, but damn it, he should brush his teeth.

Depending on how tonight goes, he wants kissing a line down his husband’s sternum, and trace that tattoo, repeating the words he promised to say forever and ever and ever, not because he needs to hear them or because Mush needs to hear them, but because they’re the kind of truth that deserves to be spoken. Depending on how tonight goes, he plans to fall asleep next to his husband, and possibly wake Mush up with his snoring. Or, both. Both could be good.

Mush comes over, to drop the blue dental floss in his lap, because Mush is not an asshole. Then, he slides a cold, damp hand along the back of Blink’s neck, because he is.

“NICK!” Blink squalls and clambers out of bed.

His husband laughs, at him, and not at Colbert. They’re old enough that they grew up watching him on Comedy Central. Once Colbert figured it out at CBS, they followed him over.

But, Mush’s tactics have gotten Blink out of bed, which was the goal.

Teeth and faces clean, eye patch off and contact removed, they settle into bed facing each other.

“I’m really glad you came,” Blink says, meaning every word.

Mush sighs. “Did you plan to forget your eye so I had to come?”

“No, it was just a happy accident.”

In the dim glow of the lamp, Blink thinks Mush is frowning, but his tone is relaxed. “Then, I guess I’m glad for that accident.”

He leans across the bed to kiss Blink softly on the lips. Mush is one of the best things that ever happened to him.

Tonight is quiet, relaxed. They trade lingering kisses and soft caresses. They cuddle, Mush wrapping himself around Blink like a human blanket. And then, they roll to their own sides of the bed and fall asleep.

It’s the best sleep Blink has had the entire competition.

**The Signature Challenge**
The damn alarm goes off way earlier than Blink would have liked. He teaches high school, he’d like to be able to sleep in until at least eight on the weekend. That just sounds luxurious.

He tries to move through the room by feel alone, fumbling his way to the bathroom.

Blink isn’t tidy by nature: he’s his own force of controlled chaos. But, even chaos needs to be able to make it to the bathroom in the dark without tripping on discarded boxers. At home, they have strategically placed laundry hampers in every room, including the kitchen. He’s used them all.

He gets ready, working methodically through the list that’s on a sticky note on the bathroom mirror at home. He was… embarrassed when Mush first came over to his apartment and found a check list tacked to his bulletin board that listed morning activities like, “Take a shower”, “Eye shit”, “Make your bed”, “Eat Something”, “Poop quickly, not contemplatively”, and “Take your pills”. It’s not that he really needs the list, he mostly has a routine that he follows. But, it’s nice to have the list, for the days his brain decides it’s not so process oriented and so he poops contemplatively and ends up late for work.

He gets himself together, using the little in-room coffee machine to start a cup of the black tea Mush likes while he gets ready. And then, he carries the little paper cup of coffee over to place it by his still sleep husband’s bedside.

“Lou?” The word is half garbled with sleep. Mush rolls over. “Umm?”

“Brought you tea,” Blink leans over to kiss him on the forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

“Nah, I’m up,” Mush says, easing himself up against the pillows. He takes the coffee and cups it between his hands.

“So, what are you going to do on your day off?” Blink asks, settling on the edge of the bed.

Mush yawns. “Was going to sleep in, but…”

Blink makes a face that says sorry, and gives the peace offering tea a pointed look.

“I think I’m gonna go get breakfast at one of those big fancy places and people watch. And then maybe I’ll come back up here and go for a run.” Mush looks contemplative.

Blink makes a face.

“Yeah, I’ve got it in my bag,” Mush says, rolling his eyes a little bit.

Mush had played midfield for his high school soccer team and run track. His senior year, he’d taken a bad fall in one of the final games of the soccer season and torn his ACL and LCL and probably a couple other ligaments. Surgery, rehabilitation, and a withdrawn scholarship offer from Bryn Mawr had landed Blink and Mush at the same university, something they’re both grateful for. The only downside to kismet is that if Mush is going to do serious running, he needs a knee brace.

“And then, I’ll probably take a nap and check if any of my students managed to break the universe this week, and maybe meet you for dinner.”

“Sounds like a good day, Nick.” Blink leans in for a quick kiss. “Text me if you need something?”

Mush nods, and draws the covers around himself. “It’s… I’m… I’m glad to be here. And, I’ll see you later. Kick cheesecake ass.”
Blink leaves smiling.

He waves at Spot and Crutchie, who are finishing up breakfast.

7:45 am **See Spot Run**: Crutchie’s asking if you want a ride.

7:46 am **Kid Blink**: Doesn’t that mean leaving race and Jackie boy alone
7:46 am **Kid Blink**: is that really a good idea

Spot and Crutchie are coming over and Blink would just as soon talk to them as keep texting. They’re hard to miss. Well, Crutchie is usually hard to miss. He’s moving a little more gingerly today than he has other weeks, and Spot matches his pace. But, Crutchie’s up, using those neon yellow crutches he’s got - because if you’re going to use them why the hell not get a color you like. Besides, they coordinate well with the bright pink SnapBack he’s wearing.

“Hey Blink,” Crutchie calls him as he gets closer.

“Hey yourself,” he calls back.

Spot’s scowl lightens a bit, and he raises the two paper cups of coffee he’s carrying in greeting.

“I just texted Jack, he’ll be down in a minute,” Crutchie says.

“If Jack’s riding with us, what’s Race doing?” Blink asks.

“He headed over early to appeal to production’s better nature.” Spot rolls his eyes.

“So, they’re still not sure whether they’re just pulling him out for ‘health reasons’?” Blink demands.

Crutchie nods. “That, and he just wants his damn phone or blood sugar thingy in the tent. Which… even if they edit it right, something will show up.”

“And, anything that shows, they’ll ask about, even if Race gets cut from press interviews.” Spot agrees. “And I ain’t pulling any punches, there. Race won’t take care of his blood sugar to take care of himself, but he’ll take care of his blood sugar to shut the damn thing up.”

Blink considers. “I don’t get it, he likes attention.”

It’s one of the reasons Blink finds Race annoying. He’s all noise and movement out of the corner of your eye when you’re trying to focus on something important. It’s the wrong kind of distracting.

“Yeah, but not that kind of attention.” Crutchie leads the way to his car. “Race is all about the right kind of attention.”

Crutchie unlocks the car, balancing on one crutch while he uses the ring of key he’s unhooked from his pants. There are electric locks inside, so once the door is unlocked, it’s fine. It’s just that the car isn’t new enough to have an electronic key. Blink can’t drive - not just hasn’t learned, but can’t - but if he could, he thinks he’d do better with a car that didn’t have an electronic key. He and Mush have made copies of their house keys for all his bags and his wallet, and he has a full backup set in his desk.

Before they did that, he’d managed to get locked out twice in a week, just by accident.
As far as Blink can tell, Crutchie is a good driver - a little bit aggressive, but you have to be when you drive in the tristate area. The ride over is quiet. Crutchie and Spot continue a quiet discussion about some point of city politics or another. Jack slurps his coffee and goes unfocused. Blink is also contemplative, waiting for his meds to kick in. Contemplatively driving is not as good as contemplative pooping, but it serves.

He’s worried about Mush and Snyder. He’s still not sure why Mush got pulled from coaching JV boys soccer in the fall, and freshman Science Olympiad in the spring. The JV kids did okay last season. They don’t have a great winning record, but they’re a JV soccer team from a math and science magnet school. Kids who want to be more competitive play varsity, or go to schools which are known for their sports teams. And, Blink knows the Science Olympiad kids weren’t bad either: at least a few of the pairs Mush coached made it to nationals, despite it being their first competition.

Blink doesn’t think the parents or students have an issue with Mush’s performance as a coach, either. His JV boys (current and former) call him Meyers with a tone of admiring disrespect. But, they pay attention when he tells them to do things. He gets asked to write college letters of recommendation, parents send thank you notes, kids send thank you notes. Their students trust him, in so much as they trust adults. Stuff at home, stuff with significant others, depression, sexuality, gender… Mush is the first teacher to pick up on a new name, ask a student about it, and add it to his class roll. Because it's important to him.

When there are issues - which, every teacher has - they get resolved. Mush has a good working relationship with the administration - Snyder excluded. He’s weathered most of the creative and difficult high schoolers and their parents can come up with to throw at him. But, Mush is a good teacher. He’s not terribly controversial, he doesn't rock the boat. He’s scrupulous about following the rules, even the ridiculous ones, as long as they don’t interfere with student health and safety.

Really, the only two controversial things about Mush are his sexuality and gender identity. But, it’s fucking 2018, and as much as they shouldn’t matter, they still do.

Blink checks the rainbow room before he slides his set of limericks in the mirror. He’s had fun trying out new poetic forms, and playing with some old classics. He loved last week’s sonnet. But, he just likes sonnets. He liked the “i lik the bred” form, though, too. He hopes it becomes codified into standard verse in a few years. He’s already made his seniors break it down as a literary form. He also has this theory that’s now limericks got started.

_There once was a boy named called Jack_
Whose Lobster claws Id buy by the rack,
His pie was chess, not cream
And his tower New Orlean
No wonder he’s top of the stack!

He’s not that proud of this set (he thinks Spot’s “i lik the bred” was the best), but he’s been distracted and stressed. He hasn’t really wanted to think about the bake off more than he had to.

He’s got poems for Spot, Crutchie, Race and himself in his bag, and he sticks those inside the mirror frame, too. He privately can’t wait to write one for Crutchie. He doesn’t understand how Crutchie hasn’t been star baker, yet. Jack is a good baker, there’s no doubt, but Crutchie is normally in a league of his own, last week notwithstanding. And, frankly, if Crutchie doesn’t win, it will either be because he’s in too much pain to be out of bed, let alone baking, or because Joe is a bastard. And, Blinks money is on Joe.
The round starts with an unfilmed announcement that Anthony will be allowed to have his cgm on his bench, and that he will be allowed to eat on camera. Because the rest of them totally don’t eat on camera all the time.

“All right, competitors, we know as New Yorkers, the city is the apple of your eye. But, today, you need to be the big cheese,” Kath says, smile in her voice.

Sarah grins. “That’s right, Medda and Joe want you to make a cheesecake. It needs to be at least twelve inches in diameter, and it needs to be tasty.”

“You’ve got three and a half hours,” Kath says excitedly. “On your mark,”

“Get set!” Sarah chimes in.

“Bake!” They both say together.

Blink double checks his recipe and his ingredient placement. He and Hannah lay out his ingredients and go through the lay out well before they start. Hannah doesn’t make a big deal out of it, just points out what and where everything is. The whole production staff is pretty good about that, actually. They assume the kitchen is unfamiliar, and you need to be shown how things work. (Whether or not you remember how to do them once you’ve been shown is your problem, but they’ll happily show you the first time.) Still, Blink likes to make sure he has everything laid out, and he knows where everything is before he starts work.

He starts with the cookies for the crust. Because of course in the bake off, it isn’t enough to just store bought graham crackers and hit them with a rolling pin. No, you need to make your own cookies to turn into crumbs. Blink’s doing a strawberry balsamic no bake cheesecake, so he figured he’d make a slightly herbal cookie as well. His crust will have rosemary. If he screws this up, his cheesecake is going to end up tasting like a confused summer dinner. He’d really like this to work.

He’d tested the recipe - of course he’d tested the recipe - with several people. He’d started with his brothers, then their colleagues, then his GSA kids. Well, he had been polling his GSA kids, until Snyder said faculty couldn’t feed students homemade baked goods for fear of allergies. Right now, Blink has one kid with an egg allergy and one who can’t be near shellfish. The cheesecake is egg free. They’re all careful, and he’s never had an issue, not in almost 10 years of teaching. But, testing the recipe at home and on his family and coworkers doesn’t mean anything about Medda and Joe, and that scares him.

So, he creams his butter and strips rosemary leaves off the stems and tries not to listen to Jack talking to Joe and Medda.

The trouble with his brain is that it’s not very good at ignoring that sort of thing. His brain is wired to process multiple inputs, the problem is they need to be the right inputs. He likes music, likes spoken word, likes the idea of a quiet library, likes the idea of the predictable din of a coffee shop. He gets distracted by songs he’s not expecting, so it’s always carefully curated playlists in the same, predictable order. He gets distracted by other people’s conversations: their voices and their words. He gets distracted by the idea that he might make a noise that might distract someone in the silence of the library. He gets distracted by the thought that he will finish his tea soon and then he will just be … occupying space in the coffee shop. He can get distracted by the presence of a stranger at his elbow, if he’s not expecting them to be there. It’s one of the reasons he secretly likes teaching high school: his brain can kick into a safe space when there’s a routine, and high school is really good at building routine and a space where he can concentrate. A tent with a varying number
of people, TV cameras, and a pair of hosts who go out of their way to distract him? Yeah… that’s an interesting problem.

He moves his cookies into the freezer to chill, and starts going through the ingredients for his filling.

“--ten anything?”

“What?” Blink jumps, started. “Sorry, what?”

“Blink, have you eaten anything?” Spot repeats the words.

He’s headed back to his bench a cup of coffee and a plate of carrot sticks because Spot Conlon seems to start attacking the crudite around ten am, and doesn’t let up until dinner.

It’s hard to be pulled out of the concentration fugue state that he’d finally achieved for something so pedestrian as food. Now that he’s out, he’s not entirely sure what he was so focused on. Picking strawberries and herbs, he thinks.

“Umm… nah. I’m fine. I had breakfast, and I’ll eat once the round is finished.” Mush had left out a breakfast bar with a note, “Eat the damn thing.” He’d eaten the damn thing.

Spot nods. “Okay.” He continues across the tent.

Blink is left staring at a life of strawberries and rosemary leaves and wondering what the fuck he was doing with them.

Cleaning has always been hard, because of that combination of distraction and hyperfocus. He can organize the bookshelf - okay, half organize the bookshelf - by alphabetizing everything by title, before he realizes he should have gone by author’s name and series order and deciding to sit down and read, because, fuck it, he’s going to have to start over anyway. But, first, he’s thirsty, and the kitchen sink is full of dishes and... And, anyway, he usually sets aside a day for cleaning, accepts that books are going to be out of place, and bounces around until everything is done. And then, he rewards himself with a good book; or an awesome movie; or a bubble bath and an eye mask and migraine meds.

Here, he does a weird form of that limited cleaning, because he’s got a fixed space. He likes a fixed space. He can solve a fixed space before he loses focus. So, he takes his dishes back to the butler’s pantry where Stephanie is patiently hand washing everything because Stephanie is basically a goddess. He wipes down his benchtop to get rid of the flour and butter and spilled whipped cream. He washes his hands, and polishes things dry with the dish towel. They have good dish towels here, not like fluffy wash clothes, but a little bit rougher and less absorbent. He wants dish towels like these at home. They probably cost as assload, though.

At almost the last minute possible, he goes and pulls his cake from the freezer and arranges his few carefully selected strawberry slices on top. A sprinkle of Rosemary around the edge, and then he uses a hot knife around the edge of the springform pan to slide the cheesecake out. He releases the pan, adds his final swirl of balsamic vinegar, and steps back, just as Kath calls time.

“All right gentlemen, let’s see how goods your cheesecakes are!”

God, Blink love terrible puns.
He gets drawn second, which means he gets to see what kind of mood Joe is in before he gets judged, but doesn’t suffer the end of Joe’s wrath. Medda gets annoyed, but she never shows it the way Joe does.

They start with Crutchie first this week. Blink braces himself. Crutchie has opted for one of those Japanese style cheesecakes: light and fluffy and huge. It looks amazing. Crutchie’s bakes usually look amazing, and this is no exception. It’s taller than any cheesecake Blink has ever seen, and has a perfect domed top. During the photograpy period, Blink had gone over to investigate. Crutchie created a stencil from one of those frilling lacy paper things that Nana’s nursing home likes to use under her coffee cup, and sprinkled powdered sugar over the top.

Joe and Medda admire the top, commenting on the color and the design. “Did you do it because it cracked?” Joe demands.

“No, I just think it’s pretty.” Crutchie’s tone is even and patient.

Joe does something that’s probably cutting into the cake.

“Look at the way it springs back,” Medda exclaims, doing something with her piece. Blink suspects she’s poking it. Blink would poke it. Hell, Blink probably will poke it, when he gets a piece. Blink always tries Crutchie’s stuff. It’s good. Except last week. But, no one had a good week last week.

“It’s less creamy than I was expecting,” Joe’s tone is flat. Joe’s face is probably disappointed. There are too many cameras around to see. “A lot lighter.”

“And fluffier,” Kath offers helpfully, because Kath enjoys tweaking Joe. Crutchie’s cheesecake was advertised as “light and fluffy”. They adjectives should have been a good thing, not a bad one.

Joe’s tone gets drier. “Yes, but I’m not sure it quite qualifies as a cheesecake.”

The judges continue to pull things apart, until they’ve finished the whole slice of cake and Blink is considering crying on Crutchie’s behalf. (Okay also possibly because he needs to go put in more artificial tears, but the point stands.)

They come back, and Joe is scowling. It ruins his normally impeccable looks, ever so slightly. He re-arranges his face into something slightly more neutral for the camera.

Blink is proud of his pale pink cheesecake. It could be prettier - but they also could have given him another twelve hours to chill it. Frankly, they could have all used extra time to chill their cheesecakes. Because of course dessert week has to come late in the season, as they’re passing from questionable true spring where it might be 40 and it might be 70 and who really knows, into that period of early summer. Race is wearing shorts. Jack is wearing shorts. Mush is… okay, Mush wears shorts as long as it’s above freezing and they’re not at work.

Joe cuts a piece of the cheesecake. It remains standing and doesn’t melt. Blink feels his shoulders relax a little bit.

Joe and Medda take their first bites, forks floating through the cake with very little resistance. There’s not supposed to be a lot of resistance. Crutchie’s cake probably has more weight than his does. They’re both supposed to be air.

“That’s so…,” Medda says, finally. “The rosemary and the vinegar give it a depth that I don’t think I expected from a strawberry cheesecake. It’s really an amazing bite.”
“Ummm,” Joe agrees, mouth full. He swallows.

Joe and Medda go on to critique the cake, some of the feedback good, some not so much.

“It’s got excellent flavor,” Joe concludes. “I’m just not sure about the texture. It’s not really cheesecakey.”

“It’s a no-bake cheesecake,” Blink tries to explain. “You bake the crust, and then…”

“Right,” Joe says curtly. “A no bake cheesecake. Well, thank you.”

He feels himself sag. He’d thought things were going well.

Blink isn’t sure he wants to eat when they break for lunch. He knows he should eat, in the theoretical construct of “food would be good”, but he has no appetite and no interest. He will go and make himself eat soon, because he knows he needs to, but there are other things that are more important than eating, other things that hold his attention.

He goes and gets his phone. There’s a new text. He tries to ignore it, but that red number is a niggling alert in his brain, and he’s not sure he can resist.

10:37 am Nick ICE: Well… crap
10:37 am Nick ICE: Screw brunch in the Hamptons
13:38 am Nick ICE: They wouldn’t let me in

Blink feels his blood rising. He knows Mush can fight his own battles. There has never been a question in his mind that Mush can fight his own battles. Okay, maybe there are questions about whether or not Mush can win the battles, but it’s not like Blink can make a difference when the fight is inside his husband’s head. Blink can promise and cajole and listen and support, but he can’t chase the thoughts away. If all it took was soaking someone, Blink would be out there with his knuckles bruised and bloodied, and his body aching. If only it were that simple…

He has to call Mush. He has to call Mush.

“Are you okay?” The words rush out, quick, and quiet, and almost panicked. “Tell me you’re okay? Do I need to come? I’ll come, Nick, if--”

“Lou,” Mush interrupts. His name is lyconic, and gentle, even and clear. It’s not that tone that Mush uses when he’s trying not to cry. Blink has heard that plenty in the past week. “Lou, it’s okay.”

“They can’t. It’s not... it’s not okay. It’s discrimination.” His adrenaline is running high, and the blood pounds in his veins.

“Did you read the rest of the texts?”

“No…”

“Lou, they kicked me out for wearing shorts. That’s literally the next line. The assholes have a dress code. For brunch. Who has a dress code for brunch that doesn’t allow shorts?” Mush is exasperated, but not hurt.
Blink’s hackles are still up, but he’s not sure who he’s frustrated with anymore. “I swear to God…”

“You don’t believe in God.”

“I swear to Raptor Jesus, Stephen Hawking’s Ghost, and Lord Byron…”

“Go eat lunch.” Mush orders. “We’ll talk about it later. I thought… I thought it would make you laugh. You know, the stereotype that I must dress well…”

“And you dress like a dumpster fire?”

“Yes, but half my clothes are yours.”

“What’s mine is yours, and what’s yours is yours,” Blink agrees, the anger slowly leaching out of him.

“Blink?”

“Hmm?”

“Go get a plate. We’ll talk… tonight. I’m going to go finish my pho, and then I’m going for a run. What are you eating?”

“Salad,” Blink grumbles. “And chicken…”

“Good. Go eat something and then kick ass.”

“I love you, too.”

**Technical Challenge**

“And, for today’s technical challenge, Joe and Medda want you to make… creme brulee. And, they want you to caramelize it in the oven. No blow torches!”

Blink groans inwardly. He adores creme brulee, but it’s a restaurant food. It’s not something you make at home, and definitely not something you try without a blow torch. And, okay, most of the reason it’s not something he’d make at home is because Mush has an… adversarial relationship with eggs. And with dairy. And, Blink loves his husband. He trusts his husband. He respects his husband. He really doesn’t like dealing with it when his husband turns his intestines into a slip n slide.

The instructions seem like they should be simple. Or, maybe, the instructions are too simple, and it’s all a trap:

1. Make a custard with the milk, eggs, and vanilla pod.
2. Bake at 325
3. Chill
4. Cover in sugar and place under broiler to brulee the top
5. Garnish with raspberries

Blink checks his ingredients and his tools, and starts setting things up. They’ve got six little ramekins, six big ramekins, six flat ramekins… it looks like someone mad a run on the white china section at TJ Maxx. There are a couple of shallow pans, and a knife. He suspects they’ll need a hot water bath, then. He’s only cooked a few things in a bain marie, he figures he’ll ask Mush about the theory later. But, he decides that’s what he’ll do.
He goes about making the custard, talking to the real live TV camera that’s next to him, and not the imaginary one that follows him around the kitchen back home. They ask him real interview questions that make sense, like whether he’s made a creme brulee before (no) and who he thinks will win. (Cr-Charlie. No question.) The PA in charge of asking him questions keeps him on track the way in which his imaginary interviewers never seem to. At least, though, he’s had practice having a conversation with… well, himself, while baking new recipes.

He starts by separating the eggs. He looks around furtively, a reflexive habit to make sure Mush isn’t there. Mush objects on principle to separating eggs by hand. Not because he’s ever gotten food poisoning from eggs that were separated by hand, but because the idea of the salmonella bacteria Miush is convinced live on the surfaces of all eggs everywhere may get into the eggs and survive the cooking process. Blink’s tried shell-to-shell separating, seeing if that will appease Mush. It seems to only frustrate him more, because now the salmonella on the outside of the egg will mix with the salmonella on the inside of the egg and will turn into a super salmonella and kill them all. Blink had ventured into the biology section of the library, his fingers lingering on the kind of books about plagues that he would have enjoyed when he was a teenager, until he found a book on Salmonella, and another on food safety. It hadn’t mattered what the books had said, though. Mush continued to insist on some plague of super salmonella, his eyes twinkling slightly as he did so. He bought Blink an egg separator, to help protect them both from the dreaded scourge. The problem is the egg separator is yellow and white, as though it makes sense to put a yellow and clear egg into a yellow and white separator. Blink hasn’t ever been able to get it to work, so he waits until Mush is gone for the evening, sneaks off to the grocery store, buys a dozen eggs, separates them, and freezes them. Mush either doesn’t know, or pretends to ignore it.

He transfers his gently cooked and whisked custard into the ramekins one by one, pours in the water, and settles them in the oven to bake. The directions don’t say how long or how hot (that would be useful), and so he slides the ramekins and bain marie into his preheated oven. He sets his timer for 30 minutes, and goes to get himself a cup of tea.

He thinks about calling Mush, but, Mush is probably off running in his stupid basketball shorts. He’s probably shirtless, because it’s warm and he wants to be. And, if Mush isn’t thinking about the bullshit with Synder and prom right now, Blink doesn’t want to bring it up during his mini vacation. In the Hamptons. With Cargo shorts. Okay… sometimes Blink questions Mush’s life choices.

But, the weight of it all seems too much. Mush has been churning on it for a week. Blink hopes he’s been talking to his therapist. They both have them, separate ones, because life is better when you have someone to bounce ideas off of. Blink goes less than he used to: his life has gotten stable and he can manage most of the things that made him spiral on his own. Once you know you need to eat, need to sleep, need take to take your medications, need to exercise and need to play it’s more about making it work in your life. Blink’s stable with all that. Maybe, at some point, he’ll be ready to deal with the next layer of bullshit he’s been suppressing for how ever long, but not right now. So, Blink goes once a month or so and Mush goes once a week or once every two weeks, and sometimes they do couples counseling because a neutral third party can help balance the person you’re fighting with in your head and the person sitting in front of you.

He doesn’t have the full story. He doesn’t know that he has the right to ask for the full story. If Mush offers it, it would be rude to refuse, but if Mush doesn’t, it would be equally rude to ask. But, he has ideas, scrapped together over the decade - God, has it really been a decade? - they’ve known each other.

Mush doesn’t do high school dances. Scratch that, Mush has trouble with dances, period. It was nigh impossible to get him to dance at their wedding. He’d eventually acquiesced that they could
have a dance floor, and danced with his mother and Blink’s Nana because it was so damn important to both of them. And, because it was a part of a wedding tradition that Mush felt he could claim. And, other than the electric slide - which his mom pulled him onto the dance floor to do because he’d always beg her to dance it when he was a kid - Mush didn’t step foot on the parque at any other point. He’d pushed a kiss into Blink’s cheek, and told him to go ahead. And then, he’d gone and greeted Nana’s friends.

So, no, Mush doesn’t like dances. Blink doesn’t think it’s for any Carrie-like reasons: Mush went to a nice suburban high school outside Chicago (although he’ll tell you it was Chicago, if you ask). The thing about Chicagoland that you don’t tell you is that it stretches for an hour or so outside the city limits: Gary, Indiana to Aurora, Illinois, and South from Jolliet up to Kenosha, Wisconsin. So, what Mush really means when he says he grew up in Chicago is that he grew up in a suburb just close to echo the feeling of the city without getting there. Mush’s high school had a football team, a functioning computer lab where the desktops took a jump drive, and post-Columbine zero tolerance policy. They had four dances a year, organized by each of the class years and chaperoned by the teachers.

Blink hadn’t know Mush in high school - they’d met in college at the kind of sloppy drunk party they’d both frequented. Blink had been dating one of the girls in Mush’s sorority, and Mush had been there with the friend of a friend of a friend. It had been an awesome party... they’d had a lot of awesome parties. But, if Mush was drowning in high school the way he had been by their senior year of college, he hid it under a layer of participation and extracurriculars. Including serving as junior class president. Which meant that organizing the homecoming dance and prom fell squarely on his shoulders.

His mom - whose greatest two faults are how deeply she loves her children and her questionable beliefs about how to make them happy - decided in her infinite wisdom that Mush’s problem was that he was shy, and simply needed to come out of his shell. Which Blink, personally, thinks is part of how Mush ended up nominated for prom court. Mush claims it’s because he was involved in too many things and you had to be part of a club to be nominated. Mrs Meyers treated the whole thing as an opportunity to boost Mush’s confidence the only way she could think of: a sparkly green dress, a pair of a strappy heels, and an updo.

Mush was elected part of Homecoming Court. He traded his jeans for the long sparkly dress, his converse for the strappy heels, his frizzy ponytail for something tendrils and enough hairspray to be a fire hazard. He rode around on the back of the vintage mustang convertible, channeling everyone of the teen movies he’d ever watched. And, in the middle of that field, flanked by two goal posts, they put a sparkly silver tiara on Mush’s Head, and crowned him homecoming queen. It’s all true, Blink has seen the pictures, back before Mush told his family. No one is sure what to do with all those old pictures of a character they didn’t know he was playing.

Beyond that, Blink doesn’t know. He doesn’t think there was any sort of physical altercation: that would have been something that got mentioned. And, even if Mush hadn’t wanted to talk about it, his parents would have said something. But, high school dances make Mush feel dysphoric like few other things these days. And Blink swears...

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The timer goes off, and he goes to the oven to check his custards. They’re not quite set, and so he sets it for another five minutes.

He glances over. Race is laying in front of his oven, hands behind his head, one knee bent, and the other leg crossed over the top. He’s clutching the little black monitor. Spot’s got his eye fixed on
Race, but he’s not saying anything. Jack’s watching, or Blink thinks Jack is watching, but he’s out of Blink’s line of sight.

They’re worried. They’re all worried. Now is when something terrible should hit, if last week is anything to go by.

The advantage of creme brûlée for a home cook appears to be the amount of down time. Once the custards are mostly set from baking them, they go into the fridge to chill. This means at least 20 minutes more of the contestants chilling.

The production assistants flit in and out, taking people off for interviews. Blink gets pulled by Kara’s male minion of the week. Corey, he thinks he said his name was.

“So, tell me about your cheesecake?” Corey prompts.

“I did a no bake strawberry cheesecake,” Blink explains. “With, umm, an herb shortbread crust. I put balsamic vinegar on top, kind of like a play on a salad?”

“Why no bake?” Corey prompts.

“‘Cause I like it better,” Blink supplies. “A no bake cheesecake is lighter and fluffier. The regular stuff?” He gives a half shrug. “Sometimes, it’s a little bit too much, especially in the summer. This recipe is better. It’s lighter, ya know? Lighter, and kind of summery.”

“But Joe didn’t like it?”

Blink lets out a harsh laugh. “Joe never seems to like anything any of us bake. At this point, I’ve just gotten used to it.”

They talk a little bit more about the way the round had gone, the places where he’d struggled or triumphed, and the decisions he’d made. Blink tries not to itch at the microphone clipped to his T-shirt. He’s hyper aware of it, hyper aware of how he sounds on the mic.

Corey finishes up the interview with a question. “So, how you think is going to win.”

Blink pauses, just long enough to make it seem natural and not rehearsed or prompted, but the words spill out. “Crutchie. If Crutchie doesn’t fucking win…” He’s not sure how to finish that sentence.

Corey nods. “Can we do that again, without the nicknames, or the swearing?”

“Charlie,” he repeats. “My money is on Charlie.”

According to the timer in his pocket, the custards have another ten minutes or so to chill. But, Race’s… thingy is vibrating. It’s a strong enough vibration as it moves against the wooden butcher block counter that it makes a few people in the tent jump.

Race hurries over to check the message. Jack hovers. Spot goes off, probably to find Race’s backpack, or something for him to eat, or both.

Race looks at the screen and swears quietly to himself. He looks over at whichever PA is standing next to him. “How much time do we have left?”
The PA checks his watch. “About forty five minutes.”

Race nods, and dismissed the notice.

Spot comes back, carrying the red backpack and a juice box. He holds them out.

“Thanks,” Race says, shoving both into the space under his bench. “But, umm, it’s fine. Really, it’s fine. It’s just a… its a reminder.”

Spot eyes him, but doesn’t say anything. Spot may or may not trust Race, but he has the good sense to try and hide it. Blink’s not sure he trusts Race, either, but Blink has enough discretion to know better than to say anything. Only Jack can’t manage to keep his emotions off his sleeves. He opens his mouth to say something, then bites it back. He gets up, walks out, and doesn’t come back until Race and Blink already have their broilers started, ready to brule their custards.


Kara - the woman who runs herd on the production assistants running herd on the contestants - pulls Crutchie over for a quiet conversation. While the constant food photography is happening, they confer.

The production assistants bring out the lower chairs, and they sit as they’re arranged. Crutchie’s on the end, the far left. Then, Race, Spot, Jack, and Blink. Blink’s thankful they put him with his right side out. It blocks off whatever bullshit is happening outside the tent. There’s nothing for him to see with the corner of that eye, so no motion for him to turn toward. Other times, it would make him nervous. But, he guesses he trusts the production staff not to screw him over entirely.

Joe’s face sours when comes out to see the five of them sitting at Crutchie’s level. Blink thinks it’s because of “camera angles”, because that’s Joe’s constant excuse reason. It’s like Joe blames them - blames them all - for existing. It’s like Joe blames them for not being on the impossible level of professional chefs. And, it’s like every time Joe knows that it’s Crutchie who bake the thing, he automatically discounts it. It will be interesting to see if he treats Race the same way. He certainly hasn’t been looking Race in the eye all that much recently. Studying him for signs of imminent collapse, is more like it. And, not the way Jack’s been doing it: concerned for Race’s safety. Not, Joe has been studying Race the way you’d study an animal in a zoo: nosiness, pure and simple.

They start with Jack’s custard. It’s good, but a bit under flavored. He should have added more vanilla, and perhaps toasted his sugar for longer. The crusts have a nice crunch, but they’re not toasty enough.

Spot’s needed more time under the broiler, as well. It’s still golden brown, not entirely dark and crisp on top.

Crutchie’s is almost technically perfect. Crutchie’s is almost always technically perfect. The sugar didn’t quite reach the rim of the custard, and so there are a few thin spots.

Blink’s is slightly overcooked. He should have started in a cold oven.

Race used the wrong sized ramekin.

The get counted off: Race, Blink, Jack, Crutchie, Spot.

It feels shitty, but not as shitty as he expected. He did a good job. His creme brulee tastes good. He
made fucking creme brulee that tasted good. He is basically a wizard.

They go to clean up, and he checks his phone for texts from Mush.

4:27 pm Nick ICE: ARG. Remind me again why I try to teach kids to multiply by one?
4:29 pm Nick ICE: Units my children, units. I shall assume your rates as elephants per year.

He laughs to himself. Mush loves his students. He also loves to complain.

As they’re getting in Crutchie’s van, getting ready to go back to the hotel, another text comes through.

6:49 pm Nick ICE: Welp. Im done. I love you, Blink. One of the kids just broke conservation of mass. I think the universe is shattered and we’re all going to die. I love you. I love you. I love you.

Chapter End Notes

A very important note about face casting for this fic. I have tried not to describe the characters to give you an opportunity to face cast whomever you like in each role. You want to imagine David play by David Moscow, Ben Fankhauser, or anyone else - Ben Platt, Mike Faist, Meryl Streep - be my guest. However, there are a set of characters who are somewhat more strictly cast. Assume Medda, Jack, and Crutchie come from the musical/Broadway live. Pick your favorite actor, but that’s who I’m working off of. That said, Blink, Mush and Synder are taken from the movie. Blink is, and will forever be, Trey Parker. (Unless they do a remake of the 1992 movie. I’m not sure Jeremy Jordan or I could take that.) It’s a little bit harder for me to justify using Aaron Lohr as Mush, since Mush is a trans man, but think someone who looks vaguely like Aaron Lohr and is badass enough to give a middle finger to the wardrobe department, cut off his pants, and run around in his undershirt because was too hot during filming.

The email Race writes may or may not be taken almost verbatim from emails exchanged with friends of mine.

Mush’s molecular tattoo is based on the tattoo of a good friend of mine, an astrochemist who studies greenhouse gasses and the way LBGTQ students learn in chemistry classrooms. He is a badass.

A bomber is a 22 oz (approximately 650 ml) bottle of beer. Most standard bottles in the US contain 12 oz (330 ml), and a pint pour is usually about 16oz (475 ml). It's possible to order a first bomber by accident. It's not possible to order a second accidently.

Sources for this chapter are, as always in the sources document.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE let me know if I’ve gotten something wrong - either in writing Mush as a trans man, or in writing a character with low vision, or anything else in general.

Or, you know... just let me know how your day was and your awesome news.
Chapter Summary

In which Mush wants Thai Food, Joe does not want melted ice cream, and Blink doesn’t know what he wants.
Oh, and there are finally blow torches.

Chapter Notes

Warnings
Also, I have a vague sense I should warn for something else, but I’m not quite sure what. So, maybe, I should just apologize.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he gets back to the room, Mush is conked out on the bed amid a pile of worksheets. Blink thinks about waking him up, but he looks so peaceful. So, he brushes back Mush’s dark curls and places a kiss on his forehead. Then, he heads into the bathroom for his own shower.

He takes a long time in the shower, thankful for the dark in the bathroom. He’s been aware of the pressure building behind his eyes. Pretty soon, the light is going to start lancing into his skull and every movement will echo up his neck and back down again. Maybe, just maybe, if luck is on his side and he takes something now, it will make the headache manageable. Maybe if he does that and wears glasses with tinted lenses and they go someplace dark.

Or, they could stay in tonight, order take out and pay a taxi driver way too much to bring them lo mien. Mush can grade and Blink can listen to essays and make notes on his voice recorder and it will be just like any Tuesday, except they’ll be at the hotel instead of stretched out across their tiny living room.

He comes out, scrubbing a towel through his own hair. He paws through his own suitcase - and then through Mush’s - for his faded red shirt, and a pair of tinted glasses. He’s successful on the first and semi successful on the other. He doesn’t want to ask Mush. He imagines being married to a man with ADHD is hard. And yes, half of making a marriage work is figuring out how to support each other where you’re weak. There’s a reason why Mush does the accounting and minor home repair and Blink cooks, mostly cleans, and deals with their apartment super. And, Mush is good at strategies. But, sometimes Blink feels like he’s asking Mush to pick up the pieces. ...Which is all to say that he can’t remember if he asked his husband to bring these specific pair of glasses he wants right now or if he forgot that he might want them. So, his options are sunglasses or nothing.

“Headache?” Mush asks, wrapping his arms around Blink from behind.

Blink makes a quiet noise. He’s not sure if he’s agreeing or disagreeing.
“We could stay in…” Mush offers, his breath tickling the back of Blink’s neck. “Watch HBO, make out like teenagers.”

It’s an excuse. *I can’t come out because my husband distracted me and not I can’t come out because it was too sunny today and blue light is making my head hurt.* Blink knows it is, and he appreciates it. Mush has been talking about meeting the bake-off contestants for a while. They have their own friends. Mush has his band, his running club, and a loosely connected support group. Blink has his D&D party and the Tuesday night trivia group, and it works. But, the contestants have been a big part of Blink’s life, and by extension, Mush’s. And, Mush had the distinct pleasure of dealing with Blink’s Wednesday night post-Race crying jag.

“It’s okay,” Blink says, pushing the glasses higher on his nose. “I took something, it’s okay.”

“The last time you said that, you ended up with a headache that was, and I quote, ‘So bad you thought you might not die.’” Mush brushes a line of kisses again Blink’s neck, holding him tenderly around the waist.

“Yeah, but I’m also not planning to go to a 90s themed rave in the lower east thirties tonight.” Blink goes to check for his wallet, which is… somewhere. “Seriously, remind me why we ever go out to dinner with Dutchy, Skittery, and Itey?”

“They’re your friends,” Mush sighs, and goes through his bag to find a shirt.

As they leave for the restaurant, they’re faced with a new problem: six people, one wheelchair, and no drivers. Jack and Spot have “made the executive decision” it will be easier if they take ride shares. Blink wonders how much of this is caused by the fact that Jack and Spot are the only two in the group who know they know how to drive. Mush knows - apparently, it’s hard to grow up in non-New York America and not learn - but after a look, neither of them say anything.

They call for two cars, Race ordering one and Jack the other. It’s a clear statement, whether or not they want to admit that. That leaves the other four to pick teams.

“I’d rather ride with Spot,” Crutchie says quickly. “No offense, but…”

Jack looks between the two of them. “And I’d rather ride with Blink,” Mush says, echoing Crutchie’s tone. “No offense, but…”

“Flip a coin,” Race says finally. “Heads Spot and Crutchie and I ride together, tails, they ride with Jack.”

“Why don’t you flip for us?” Blink demands.

“Because we need a seemingly impartial judge.” Race pulls a quarter from his pocket, and sends it flying. Mush retrieves it off the ground, and flips it again. He hides it, smacks it down on the back of his hand, and then shows off the result.

They will ride with Race.

Jacks driver comes first, a blue Subaru wagon. Crutchie wheels over to the car and the driver immediately begins arguing. “I’m not a wheelchair—“
“It will fit in your trunk,” Crutchie cuts him off, the words placating and well-rehearsed. His tone is even, calm, reasonable. “That’s all I need: to put this in your trunk. You take suitcases, right?”

“Yes…”

“Good. Let’s try, then.”

Crutchie lines up his chair with the edge of the car, and moves efficiently over to the passenger seat. He reaches back out past the open door, and pops the wheels off his chair, which he hands to Spot. “If it doesn’t fit, well call someone else and you’ll get the cancellation fee,” Crutchie promises, tiredly.

The chair fits. Jack and Spot climb in, and they start what is probably yet another awkward ride.

Race’s car arrives a few minutes later, and the three of them climb in: Mush in the front, and Blink and Race in the back.

“Anthony?” The driver checks.

Race nods. “Geoff?”

“Good, where are we going?”

“Umm…” Race pauses for a minute and looks over at Blink in a panic. Blink shakes his head. He knows they decided on something, but it’s like his brain is full of static when it comes to determining what was actually decided.

Mush helpfully supplies the name of the restaurant where they’re going. They settle back into the seat as the driver pulls away.

Race’s phone buzzes. Race’s backpack buzzes. Race pulls out his phone and the little handheld monitor he’s been carrying, and then rifflies through his bag for something. “Thank god,” he mutters.

“Everything okay?” Mush asks, using his teacher voice.

Race silences both, stares at the black monitor mournfully before turning it off. “It’s fine,” Race says, tightly. “Everything is fucking fine. Can you all just calm your fucking tits?”

“As opposed to my regular tits?” Blink asks, calmly. “Cause, Race, I just gotta say, I don’t get my fucking tits excited for just anyone.”

“Shut up,” Race says without venom, slouching into his seat. “Shut you, you’re not funny.”

“I’m hilarious,” Blink objects.

“Lou?” Mush says with just the slightest note of exasperation. “That was a dad joke.”

“So? I resemble that comment.”

Mush is probably rolling his eyes. Mush tends to roll his eyes at Blink. Sometimes, Blink wishes he had more muscles behind the prosthetic, so he was better at rolling his eyes. For some reason, his OT didn’t think that was a good use of their limited time together. Blink still disagrees.

“Dude, that was so bad,” Race groans.
Blink grins.

The restaurant is cute. It’s a little hole in the wall: a family owned place. It’s dimly light, with little candles on every table and the overhead lights turned down low. The walls are painted something dark: maybe blue, or red, or green, it’s hard to tell in the low light. There are gold decorations and lacquer panels and what are probably elephants.

On the one hand, he’s glad it’s dark. The headache that was gathering behind his eyes is still there, and he can feel the movements in his neck echoing up and down his spine. On the other hand, when his eyes decide to go on the fritz, dark doesn’t exactly help his ability to see clearly.

As they follow the host to the table, Mush slips his hand into Blink’s and leads him in. It’s half a protective gesture, to help him in the dark and half possessive. He feels three quick squeezes. Blink squeezes back, three times: I Love You.

They settle at the table. Race sits between Crutchie and Spot, Blink across from him. Jack is on Spot’s other side, and Mush is next to Blink. It’s not a bad arrangement, per se. Blink reaches under the table, and catches Mush’s hand again, quickly, to give it a series of quick squeezes.

He flips open the menu as Crutchie starts asking him about creme brûlée, and Spot objects.

“I’m so fucking sick of custard,” Spot growls. “I never want to see another fucking Bain Marie again.”

“Tell is how you really feel, Spot,” Crutchie prompts.

He shrugs, and takes an aggressive sip of his water.

Yes, it’s possible to sip aggressively. At least, it’s possible if you’re Spot Conlon. Blink still hasn’t figured out how the kid is both so damn charismatic and so damn scary at the same time.

“Well…” Crutchie manages to make the pause seem more pregnant.

Blink glances down at his menu. Yeah, no, not happening. The print is too damn small, the restaurant is too damn dark, and his head would like him to know that this isn’t a great idea, thank you very much.

He leans over to his husband. “What looks good?”

The phrase is coded, designed to sound casual. “What looks good” says “I can’t actually read the menu right now.” It’s something developed with trial and error. It’s a little bit scary, because it means that he’s trusting Mush to pick a list of five or six dishes on the menu that will probably be appealing to him.

They’ve got other coded phrases: “Hard day” means Mush has been dysphoric. The period leading up to dances are often full of Hard Days. “Morale improves”, shorthand for “The beatings will continue until morale improves”, which is pretty self explanatory. “Dish smasher” is a spoonerism taken just too far that seems to confuse their friends, but they stick with it.

“Ummm… they’re got a red curry I might try, and a couple good noodle dishes. I think the Pad See Ew and Pad Basil look good.” Mush lists off a set of options. Blink tries to hold on to them, banking them as well as he can. He’ll probably end up ordering the Pad Thai, because there’s always pad thai. It’s not that he doesn’t like it, sometimes, he’d just like to try something completely different.
“Seriously, you don’t need to keep bringing this up.” Race’s water glass hits the table a little bit too hard. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Mush gives Blink what is probably a meaningful look. It’s too dark to see, and the candles are bouncing the light at all sorts of odd angles.

Blink shakes his head, slightly. These are not his children.

“We have to talk about it sometime,” Crutchie objects. The words are gentle. The tone allows no room for resistance. “You didn’t want to talk about it last week, fine. We were all fucking tired.” If it were Blink, he would be looking at Jack, at the other end of the table. Jack has been… difficult.

“You didn’t want to talk about it on Monday, after you slept for fourteen hours at my house, almost terrified my roommate into calling your mother - his aunt - and what the fuck, Ant - and then ghosted off to work. So, yeah, no. We have to talk.”

“I don’t need a goddamn intervention.” Race looks around the table. “I know you’re all here because you care--”

“Except for me,” Mush interjects. “I’m just here for the Thai food.” He taps Blink’s thigh under the table, three rapid pulses.

“All right gentlemen, what can I get you to drink?” The waiter has impeccable timing.

Spot orders a couple of bottles of wine for the table, a discussion Blink had missed.

The waiter looks around the table. “I’m going to need IDs.”

There’s a quiet groan as everyone fishes out their wallets and hands over driver’s licenses and ID cards.

Blink waits until the waiter is safely away before turning back to the table. “I don’t know if I’m pissed or flattered.”

“Flattered,” Mush leans over to whisper in his ear. “You’re an old man, you should be pleased they’re still carding you.”

“I’m thirty one.” He indignantly tells the table at large. “I’ve been legally drinking for ten years.”

“And drinking for twenty?” Jack asks.

“Something like that…” he mutters. “So, umm, Iron Fist?”
Mush - because the man can’t help himself - gets into a long discussion with Jack and Spot about how they can make things easier for their kids. Well, all the kids in the city, really. Mush doesn’t really make a distinction between the two groups, even if other people do. But, Mush is also big on trying to save the world, one class, one student, one conversation at a time. Spot’s got his own perspectives: he’s passionate as well.

Race and Crutchie move from arguing about Marvel characters to sorting all their mutual acquaintances into Hogwarts houses as they work their way through a bottle of wine. (“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Albert is clearly a Slytherin.” “Nah, Al’s a Hufflepuff. Henry? Henry is a Slytherin.” “How can you…?” “Dude, he’s my cousin. I’ve known him since before we could talk.”) It’s the kind of friendly, happy argument that’s nice to overhear.

Blink joins Race and Crutchie to comment on people from the Bake Off (David is a Gryffindor, Crutchie is a Hufflepuff, Spot is a Slytherin in the best way possible.) His heart isn’t really in the conversation, though. He’s tired, the headache is building. He’s ready to go home, close his eyes, and listen to Mush read to him.

They start divvying up cars and passengers as they wait to pay the check. Mush, Jack, and Spot are still talking, a close knit group. Blink hates to ask them to stop solving the world’s problems. So, he can either cram into a car with the three of them, or the three of them can ride together and he can ride with Race and Crutchie.

Crutchie seems… well, a little bit nervous about the situation.

They’ve all seen him take apart his wheelchair, put it in the back of his van, and walk the few steps around the side to the driver’s seat. Blink hadn’t thought about it how would work in someone’s car. The problem, if it really is a problem, is that it takes time to breakdown, stow, and walk around a car. And, as Crutchie had admitted, most people don’t want you throwing your muddy wheelchair on the seat anymore than they want you putting your muddy shoes all over their dashboard. When the car shows up, the three of them go through the song and dance of being able to get into the car before it leaves without them.

They’re five minutes into their drive when Race’s phone chirps. At this point, Race’s phone chirping is less cause for alarm than it was a week ago, but it still has Blink on edge. But, for all he knows, it’s a snap from a friend or a text from his mom, or an email from work. “I know how to take care of myself” and “my phone where I track my blood sugar makes noise at random intervals” seem like contradictory statements.

Race swears, because Race swears a lot, and goes fishing through his backpack. It’s another habit that makes Blink nervous where Race is concerned. Ceremonial swearing and fishing in backpacks is not reassuring. Especially not when it’s followed by a slightly random pronouncement. “Anyone care if we stop at CVS?”

The driver is pleased to have them out of the car. Blink can tell based on the speed with which he pulls away.

Standing in the glowing red light of the pharmacy’s sign and looking into the garish lighting of the interior, Blink feels his headache magnifying. He reaches up and pulls the sunglasses down over his face.
Race hurries off toward the pharmacy section with a purpose, Crutchie ambles off toward the toy section. Blink has a choice: he can either go spy on Race, or he can hang around with Crutchie. And, really, what kind of choice is that?

They get side-tracked by the office supplies.

Hanging there, next to the post it notes and markers, is a cheap white plastic watercolor set. It looks like it’s maybe intended as a stocking stuffer or piñata prize. Blink had a few over the years: his early OT’s had bed convinced that if they just bribed him, he’d do what they wanted. So, they’d cajoled him with toys and candy. In the end, it turned out that computer games had been much better training, but it had taken a bit to determine that.

Crutchie leans forward in his chair to get her package, which his hanging just out of reach. “Grab that for me, will you? I want to get it for Jack.”

“Why?” Blink tosses the toy in his lap.

Crutchie grins, sardonically. “That man is an artist.” He pronounces it “ar-tee-st” in the most pretentious way possible.

Blinks just waits. When Crutchie thinks he’s being clever, he usually lets you in on the joke without you having to ask.

“Jack draws, like, all the time,” Crutchie explains. “I know he studied art, at least part of school. Don’t know the full story. So I figure…”

Crutchie is an asshole.

Not that Blink didn’t already know that. Most people think he’s full of sunshine, and he is. It’s just that it’s sun that glances off the steel of a razor wit. A lot of people only see the first, and they don’t know what they’re missing.

Crutchie considers additional supplies for Jack as Race comes over. He’s got one of those red shopping baskets. He holds up three rolls of… something medical. Tape? Bandages? Blink isn’t sure. Rolls ‘o’ wrap. “Pink, purple, or green? They’ve got black and tan, too, but I sort of hate the tan one.”

Blink doesn’t bother taking off his sunglasses. It’s a good enough approximation of color. “What for?”

Race’s right hand strays from where he’s got it hooked into his jeans up to something under his shirt. “My sensor is getting loose,” he says.

Crutchie nods, as though this has meaning. “So… under clothes.”

“Yes,” Race says, popping the p. “Under clothes.”

“The green,” Crutchie decides. “Get the green.”

Race nods, and hands his basket to Crutchie. He takes the other two rolls of tape, and heads back towards the pharmacy section.

“That was weird,” Blink complains.

“Says the guy who’s wearing sunglasses at CVS at ten pm,” Crutchie retorts.
“Touché.”

Blink trails after Crutchie and Race as they make their way up to the front of the line. He stares at the contents of Race’s basket with fascination. There’s a white box that looks vaguely medical, and a smaller box with similar packaging. A… meter or cheapy pedometer or heart monitor or something. The big roll of green. Nail scissors. What might be fake eyelashes. A cheap child’s art set and a pack of post-it notes. (Okay, the post-its are Blink’s. He can’t find his, and he needs some more.) A package of twizzlers, a box of granola bars, and seven rolls of fruit flavored mentos.

Back in Chicagoland, when they go for Christmas or the Massive Meyers’ Family-Reunion Lake-Michigan-is-a-Beach-Party-Extravaganza™, he and Mush play a game where they make up stories based on the contents of people’s shopping carts. Like, the man with two flats of Diet Coke, a giant box of kitty litter, a gallon of pickles, a three pack of Reddi Whip, a sheet cake that says, “Happy Trails, Debbie” and a box of 96 frozen fish sticks. Mush was convinced Debbie was a cat loving coworker. Blink was pretty sure that Debbie was a cat.

Except, that as Blink stares into the basket, he’s not sure what to assume about Race. Maybe that he’s an extreme guerilla artist who graffitis buildings using children’s paint. He was recently injured, and so he’s tracking the injury. Mush is better about picking out targets, Blink is better at spinning stories.

“What the fuck?” Race demands, as he sets his phone aside and starts pacing. “No, seriously, what the fuck, man?”

Their third rideshare of the night had slinked into the parking lot. They knew it had been Reilly - the bright yellow Impala was kind of a give away. And then, the car had skidded back out of the lot, going so fast it almost burned rubber.

“Race, it’s fine,” Crutchie says, putting too much emphasis on the word. “It’s fine.”

It’s not fine, but it’s not fine for so many reasons Blink doesn’t want to get into right now. Besides...

“Can you really blame him?” Crutchie asks. “You’ve got Mr. Shades-at-night peering into your white plastic bag, you were searching the planter. It probably looked like you two were going to throw up in his car.”

Crutchie doesn’t mention how he had waved and moved forward, and tried to get the driver’s attention, so he couldn’t act like they weren’t there, or he didn’t wait.

Race probably rolls his eyes. “Oh yeah, because that’s the only explanation. Three guys at CVS at ten thirty on a Saturday night. Must be wasted. Not, say, looking for a contact.”

Because yes. He’d rubbed his eye, and it had come out (because sometimes he gets lucky like that). It’s not so bad, being without his contact. It’s not like things were going so great vision wise before. He should really just switch back to glasses on bad days, he’s almost at the point where the prescription they can put in a contact isn’t strong enough. But, almost at and at are two very different places and he doesn’t want to admit that his vision can get too bad for contacts to work.

“So, how come he didn’t come over when you flagged him down?” Race demands. “Not okay.”
His voice rises, pitchy with emotion, or maybe the just the alcohol he’s had to drink. “It’s not fucking fine.”

Race ducks his head, looking at his phone screen and starts typing furiously. His thumbs flicker across the bottom half of the screen, seemingly hitting at random.

Crutchie shakes his head. “Tony? Let it go. Just... look. I’m going to call another car.”

“But...” Race objects, still typing furiously. “But...”

“But, it’s fine, and you’re going to let it go,” Crutchie says, sounding tired. “If your rich stockbroker ass wants to call the next one, great. Otherwise, I will. But, the longer we wait, the longer it will take to get back to the hotel, and the longer before I can fucking sleep. And, Race? I need my unbeauty sleep so the rest of you assholes can keep up.” He cracks a smile.

Race smiles back, stops typing, and starts working on something else. He nods, satisfied.

“Sam and their Accord are ten minutes out. Now, I’m going to—“

There’s a squawk from his phone, a loud, obnoxious sound.


Blink ventures across the sloping walkway in front of the glowing double doors of the store to find the tall looming shape (column?) next to Race and the low wall, the low ...brick wall where he’s sitting. He puts the bag between Race, and Crutchie and then feels his way past Race and pops himself up onto the ledge.

Race riffles through the plastic bag, pulling out the box he’d bought earlier, and prying it open. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He starts assembling little plastic pieces, sticking the bits of packaging back into the bag. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Even though he knows it will hurt, Blink pulls out his phone. He presses the button at the bottom. “Siri, turn on the flashlight.”

“Turning on your flashlight,” the pleasant, mechanical, vaguely-female voice tells him.

The screen pops up bright and painful. He can’t focus enough to see the picture he uses as his lock screen, but he knows what it is. For Halloween, he and Mush had dressed up as Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. They’re posing together, Mush as the scientists pointing Blink the monster at Skittery. Skittery is dressed at Martin Shkreli: pharma bro, HIV racketeer, disrespector of the Wu-Tang Clan, and all around human scum. Skittery is running, almost out of the frame so you can barely see the piles of cash sticking out of this orange prison jumpsuit.

Blink angles the bean of piercing white light into Race’s lap, creating harsh planes of brightness against the soft shadows.

More movements, more rustling, and then Race thrusts a package at Blink. “See if you can get these open, will you?”

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to ask the half-blind guy with one eye to open your scissors for you?”

“Aren’t you always half blind?” Crutchie shoots back, leaning across Race to take the package
from Blink. He’s decided to settle on the ledge, too, moving from his wheelchair to the low brick wall.

“Don’t you always complain when they make you get out of your wheelchair?”

Blink doesn’t know where the words come from until they’re out. They sound angrier than he wants them to.

Crutchie shrugs, probably, and starts working on the package. There’s a flash of silver: he’s probably got a pocket knife. “I wanted to sit here.” His tone is sharp.

Blink glances down pointed at Crutchie’s leg, which is why he catches the red on Race’s fingertip. “What the fuck, dude?”

Race presses his hand into the blackness of his lap and almost jumps off the ledge. “It’s nothing,” he says, hurriedly. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing.”

Blink’s hand catches against Race’s shoulder to try and stop him, but Race shies away, moving to where no one can touch him. He clutches his phone in one hand and the other goes to his chest in a reflexive gesture.

Blink closes his eyes, tell himself relax, to stop looking and just let it be dark. He counts to 10, asking the universe to grant him patience. He opens his eyes again, and takes a deep breath.

“Let’s start over,” he says, evenly. “I’m Louis, my friends call me Blink because I have one eye. I teach high school English and run a homebrew RPG. I don’t see well in the dark, I have a migraine, and my husband doesn’t like it when I play with scissors: he thinks I’ll trip and put out my other eye.”

It’s as tongue and cheek as he can make it. The words still have a bitter edge: an aftertaste not unlike that of a chemical dye.

“Nice to meet you,” Crutchie braces himself with his left arm and leans across the bench to shake his hand. “My name’s Charlie. I’m studying psychology, but I think maybe I should switch to business. Uh, I need something embarrassing enough to match Blink’s RPG, umm... I umm almost entered the duct tape prom thing, but it turns out you need to be really good with duct tape to do that, and, and I just go struck to myself.”

Blink flips him the bird. Critical Roll has made role playing cool again. Not that it ever wasn’t, before.

Crutchie responds with his 1000 watt shit-eating smile.

“Anyway, umm... I was in an accident a while ago and hurt my leg. And, I use mobility aids to help me get around.” Crutchie starts to sound defiant. “And I don’t want anybody questioning what I use or why. It’s my damn body, and it’s my damn choice.”

Both Blink and Crutchie turn to Race, who’s standing and facing them.

Race looks between the two of them, shoulders hunched.

Blink pushes up his sunglasses and raises his eyebrows at Race.

There’s a faint thump as Crutchie pats the brick between them.
“Hi?” He sounds so timid as he sits back down on the cool brick. “My name is… My friends… My sister is a shit and she calls me Racetrack because when she was seven, I told her I wanted to be a jockey... or a horse. Except, umm, people call me Race?”

“And?” Blink prompts.

“And, umm, I have diabetes and sometimes I don’t feel low blood sugars. But, umm, I think I just won the blood sugar game in hard mode. And, uhh, the car’s here.”

Blink jumps down first, and Race goes to gather his bag.

“Guys?” Crutchie looks at them. “Can I, uh, can I have a hand?”

Blink offers his arm to help steady Crutchie in his descent. Race goes over to talk to the driver to convince him to take them as passengers, because it is seriously eleven pm, and as much as bonding in the CVS parking lot is fun, Blink would much rather be at hotel, in bed, listening to Mush’s sleepy mutterings.

They get into the car: Crutchie again taking shotgun, Blink behind the driver so his good eye is facing the others, and Race in the back passenger seat.

“So, um, what did you mean, you won the blood sugar game?” Blink asks, hoping that Race won’t freak out.

Race settles into the seat, and the plastic bag rustles quietly. He uses the backlighting on his phone screen to do… something, and then sighs in relief. A few minutes later, there’s another sigh.

“I totally won the blood sugar game in hard mode,” Race announces, holding up his phone so the blue light makes Blink’s headache.

“That’s great, still don’t know what that means,” Blink says, dryly. He closes his eyes. He can imagine the non verbal cues for the rest of the conversations. And, if he’s wrong, well, it will just make the night more interesting.

“Tonight, umm, tonight was my reboot. It - my cgm that monitors my blood sugar - goes off line for like, two hours once a week. You’re supposed to change it or something.”

“Supposed to?” Crutchie asks, slightly horrified. He probably twists around in the seat to look back at Race. “Meaning you don’t?”

Race lets out a quiet huff that might be a mirthless laugh. “It’s not like an insulin infusion site or anything. It doesn’t get yellow or crusty after four days, and it’s not like it hurts.”

“You know what Race’s problem is,” Blink asks, sotto voce. “He says these horrifying things in the cockiest, most outrageous manner because he thinks that will distract us.”

“They’re not distracting us,” Crutchie agrees. “It doesn’t get yellow and crusty makes me feel so much better. Like, if it’s not a staph infection, it’s probably fine.”

“Hey, it doesn’t always get crusty. Sometimes, it’s just red.”

The driver glances in her rear view. “Kid, quit while you’re ahead. Go back to your ‘everything’s fine’ tap routine.”

“Seriously, Tony,” Crutchie agrees, nodding his head. “It doesn’t get yellow and crusty is not a
ringing endorsement.”

Race shrugs, and looks at his lap. “It is in my world. And, I’m sure someone has a horror story about the time their CGM site got infected so badly that it left a scar, but most of them are about how the wire pulled out, and now they have a little bit of random metal in their abdomen. Or a reaction where the adhesive in the tape makes them blister so they can’t use them any more. Which, you know, in the scheme of shit in our bodies…” He rubs at his stomach.

Blink manages not to reach over and smack him, the way his Nana threatened to do on occasion. She never had, though. Nana was tough as nails and she didn’t need corporal punishment to make her point.

“And, anyway,” Race continues, “three sensors cost about as much as my student loan payments for the month. So, fuck yeah, I’m going to reboot and leave it in.”

Either Races loans are small, the sensors are super expensive, or both. And as smart as Race is, Blink would put his money on the later options.

“Still don’t know how you won the game.” Blink repeats. And then waits a beat. “Fuck, I lost The Game.”

“Aww! Fuck you, me too!” Race replies.

“I hate you all,” The shadowy driver announces. “Me as well.”

“The Game?” Crutchie demands.

“You don’t want to know!” All three say in unison.

“Well then, I guess I won.”

“Yeah,” Blink agrees after a moment with a laugh. “By not knowing, I guess you won.”

In bed that night, eye mask pulled over his face, he thinks about the evening. Race had been more communicative, more open, about his diabetes than he’s ever been. Blink knows what it is to be vulnerable. Crutchie knows what it is to be vulnerable. Race just doesn’t wear the vulnerability quite so openly. Or maybe, his constant efforts to hide it are what make it more obvious than ever. And then, he remembers something else.

“Mush,” he whispers to his husband.

Mush is sitting up next to him, humming and reading something. Probably Diane Duane or Garth Nix, or maybe, Anne McCaffrey. When Mush is worried, he reads his old standbys. He runs his fingers through Blink’s hair, absentmindedly giving him scritches.

“Mush,” he repeats, more urgently.

“What?” Mush demands, the slight rustle of pages suggesting that maybe he set down his book.

“I just wanted to tell you that I love you,” Blink says. “And, umm, I lost the game tonight.”

“Louis Baletti, I hate you!” Mush howls.
Blink is already sticky with sweat when he arrives at the tent. His phone - and probably the local news - are warning that due to changes in the Atlantic off Maine and some weird quirk of weather over the Great Lakes and mid-Atlantic region, it will be a hot day. Already, a layer of humidity hangs in the air, promising another thunderstorm in the late evening or early morning.

Blink regrets his decisions to wear jeans yesterday. He’s glad for his loose t-shirt, but God, jeans in this weather will be bad.

He and Crutchie huddle together in the relatively cool production tent while Hannah and her team run equipment checks.

“How are you doing?” Crutchie asks, clutching a large iced coffee this chest like its his first born child.

Blink shrugs, raising his own mug of tea. “It’s amazing what six hours of sleep and a good pair of sunglasses will do.” He makes a point to push his up the bridge of his nose, so they’re tight against his face.

“Plus they make you look badass.” Crutchie points at his own (probably) knock off Ray Bans. He takes another long drink of his coffee, expression turning serious for a moment. “If they give you any shit…”

Blink nods. “I don’t expect any, but if I need help, I’ll let you know.”

Crutchie smiles. “It’s not that I enjoy getting in fights with people about accessibility shit.”

“It’s more you have to do it all the time, because no one else thinks about it,” Blink supplies. He’s maybe not as experienced at pushing for accommodation as Crutchie is, but he’s had his own set of challenges. He knows how to get the accommodations he needs quietly, and when to be vocal. He figures in some ways he’s lucky: technology makes a lot of things easier. Especially because the things that help him are things lots of other people use. Technology and post it notes. And, right now, he’ll start with the passive approach and then fight if he needs to. He thinks he has the doctor’s prescription, somewhere. His phone? He hopes so.

“Look, just…” Crutchie sketches opening a circle in the air.

“Yeah, thanks.” Blink says, and means it.

He and Crutchie stand together, taking long drinks of their respective beverages. They have a long day ahead of them. There’s the two hours of prep work that go into everyday: checking the ovens to make sure they’re consistent, checking the ingredients to make sure the special ones and the extras are on hand, checking the bakers to make sure they know how to use the equipment. And then, the bake itself will probably take them seven hours. And then judging on top of that. And final interviews. And…

So Blink might be napping during lunch and his prep period tomorrow. Weirder things have happened. Mush had a day recently where he’d missed lunch. He’d told his students, and one of them pulled a cheeseburger out of his bag. And offered it to Mush. Who… didn’t actually accept the backpack cheeseburger, but it’s the thought that counts, right?

“All right bakers! It’s time to explore the far flung wilderness of desserts and get inside with your wild side.” Sarah calls.
“All right contestants, you're going to run with the big dogs!” Kath agrees, a smile on her face.

Sarah continues, “Joe and Medda want you to make... Baked Alaska!”

“It needs to be filled with ice cream, be surrounded with cake, and covered in beautiful meringue,” Kath tells them brightly.

“We’re looking for a perfect contrast in temperature,” Medda says with a smile. “The side should still be cool and solid, but the outside should be toasted and tasty.”

“So, contestants, on your mark,”

“Get set,” Sarah calls.

“Bake!” They shout together.

Even though it’s early, the tent is already starting to feel hot. Blink pushes his sunglasses back into place, and goes to start making his ice cream. That’s his plan for the bake, if he can keep focused: get his ice cream made and at least somewhat molded into shape, then put together the cake and let that freeze, and finally, the meringue. He thinks he’s going to flambee the whole thing. It’s tropical themed, and the rum adds a nice touch. Plus, everyone likes playing with fire.

Blink starts with his sorbet. He figures that since he had to make it himself, he should start there first. He’s doing this for Mush - on Mush’s suggestion. More and more of his bakes have been inspired by his husband as the weeks go on.

Mush is terrible in the kitchen. Maybe he rejected baking as too traditionally feminine when he was younger. And, cooking requires more confidence in your own questionable choices. Mush has a zen-like serenity about big changes, but small things... Blink is brash and loud and non-confrontational. Mush is more circumspect, but also more inclined for a fight. Sorbet, though? Mush has an obsession. If they were back home in Hell’s Kitchen, he would be breaking out one of his three (3!) homemade sorbet makers today. They’d probably do something with the cranberries Blink froze at Thanksgiving with some orange and maybe vodka or triple sec. Mush is a pretty great mixologist, too.

The secret, Blink has learned, is two fold. First, find the best fruit you can. Blink can’t do much about what he has, but he tastes little bits. The mango is ripe and juicy, the pineapple refreshing, the lime tart. It’s good.

The second piece is sugar. You need a 20% sugar solution. At this point, Mush first gets distracted with 20% by weight or volume (and Blink didn’t write it down because of course he’d remember). And then, there’s the whole piece where Mush gets far too excited and starts explaining things in terms of crystal structure and freezing point depression. Blink nods along, but he doesn’t really understand fully. He tries: he’s not bad at chemistry and Mush is a good teacher. But, there are times when Mush goes off and starts talking technical. Of course, Blink has his moments: if there’s a new Elizabethan anything they have to go, and Blink can prattle for hours.

Across the tent, Blink can hear Race explaining something about his ice cream, which is supposed to come out a lurid blue color. He steals a glance at Medda and Joe as he strains his fruit. Joe looks absolutely revolted, the way Blink thinks he’d look if someone proposed making anchovy ice cream. (That had been Johnnie his neighbor. Johnnie likes anchovy paste on her pizza but doesn’t like the little bones. Johnnie is weird.)
It’s almost fun to watch Joe have an at the idea of blue ice cream. Especially when Race expands on the whimsical theme of his bake. (The name, “Shoot the moon” referencing a yo-yo trick Blink remembers learning when he was about 10. He cracked one eye and gave himself two black ones before his Nana not so gently suggested that yo-yo ticks were maybe not the best idea for someone with his kind of depth perception.)

Katherine is making a face. He’s not sure what the thing is between Katherine and Joe, only that there’s something not quite right. Not something sexual - he accidently caught Kath and Sarah making out in a rosebush and he was off calling Mush. No, this is the kind of weird that doesn’t quite make sense to him, like there’s a piece of context or history he’s missing. Sarah is mildly abrasive when it comes to Joe. Kath is… Kath is cooly professional. Except when she’s not. And then, it’s like she’s having a visceral reaction she just can’t stop. He remembers, vaguely, that Joe had… has a daughter who is maybe their age? Whose name started with C, or K, or maybe L. Wouldn’t it be wild if Kath Plumber was somehow related to Joseph Pulitzer?

The next time Blink decides to go on a baking show that’s filmed outside in the late spring, someone should remind him that he is an idiot. Preferably before he’s trying to cut a piece of gingerbread into something that will fit in a bowl. Because sweet undead Lord Byron, whatever possessed was clearly bent on his destruction.

He’s panting when he gets done putting his ice cream in the freezer. Panting! He wants to stand in front of the freezer with the door open and the cold blasting in his face. He misses walking around New York in January. Because it’s pushing 90 degrees, with 80% humidity, and he might start to melt soon. And, it’s May for fuck’s sake. May.

He gets the ice cream and cake monstrosity into the freezer, shuts the door with one more lingering look, and hurries out of the tent to get a bottle of cold water. Spot and Crutchie are hiding out in the shade as well.

“—shorts next week, if I get there.” Crutchie says to Spot. “Except they’d probably show off my wicked bruise.” And probably scars he doesn’t want to explain.

He’s not sure if Crutchie actually wants to wear shorts, though. It sounds like one of those far off fantasies. If I make it, I’ll do something crazy. Blink thinks Crutchie has a good chance of making it. If he’s honest, part of Blink would rather give Crutchie his place in the finale. There are plenty of things at home to deal with: Snyder, the dance, finals, graduation, Skittery’s School’s Out bash where he plays Alice Cooper on repeat until the neighbors complain, their upcoming anniversary…

“I wish I’d worn shorts today,” Spot says fervently.

Blink agrees. At this point, he’s wishing he’d stolen Mush’s shorts. They don’t wear the same size: that would be too convenient. But, Mush’s elastic waist basketball shorts would probably fit him. They’d make his ass look terrible. They make Mush’s ass look terrible, which is a shame because Mush has an awesome ass.

“I might have to make Finch take me shopping,” Crutchie sighs. “He’s just…”

“If Finch is the one I think he is, then... yeah.” Spot frowns, which by the way, doesn’t look that different from Spot scowling. “He’s a well dressed man.”

Crutchie presses the cold bottle of water against the back of his neck, “Yeah. And then Buttons will probably tailor them.”
“Buttons?” Spot reaches for another, presses it against his own neck.

“I think you met him,” Crutchie squints and tries to remember. “You met Henry, cause I think you and he got Race upstairs. And… Al, of course. But… maybe you didn’t meet Buttons?”

“I think I would have remembered a roommate named Buttons, but maybe not? Don’t you have like eight or something?”

“Only five.” Crutchie sighs. “‘Umm… You might have met him as Isaac? It’s usually how he introduces himself.”

“So… why Buttons?”

Crutchie takes a sip of his water. “We have to keep him out of fabric stores, though. He told Elmer he has a ‘button fetish’. Which, you know, not to kink shame or anything…”

“So, Buttons,” Spot agrees with a laugh.

He checks the timer on his belt. “Shit! I gotta go check my cake.” He sticks his water bottle in his back pocket, and pulls out four more.

He tosses one to Crutchie, and slaps Blink in the chest with another. “Drink,” he commands.

Crutchie makes a face.

“I am not,” Spot emphasizes, “playing EMT again this week. So, stay hydrated assholes.”

He stalks out.

Spot Conlon knows how to make an exit.

With ice cream and cake safely in the fridge and eggs already separated, Blink is kind of at loose ends. He left his book in his suitcase. He’s been interviewed and re-interviewed. And, four hours is a long time to wait for ice cream to (hopefully) get cold enough to bake.

When he checks his phone, he’s got three missed calls from Mush. That isn’t worrying. After the kind of night he had - complete with dramatic moaning and beta blockers - Mush will leave voice mails instead of texting. He could just text: Blinks phone will read messages to him, but he knows Blink likes the sound of his voice.

“Hey, Lou, it’s Nick.”

Mush always calls him Lou on the phone, like it’s some sort of talisman against… Blink isn’t sure. Maybe some kind of internalized homophobia that neither of them can put a name to.

“Just calling to check in. Thanks for the tea and letting me sleep. I’m gonna get breakfast and then check out, maybe go to the beach. What time should I meet you? Anyway, love you. Kick ass today!”

Blink grins. He thinks he’d like to join Mush on the beach. Since Mush had top surgery, they’d started going to the beach a lot more. (Nothing says, “honeymoon” like drainage bags, ice packs, and a bad reaction to morphine.) There are few things that sound better right now than sitting under an umbrella with opaque black sunglasses, enjoying the day, and being imaginatively judgemental. He’d still be hot, but at least he and Mush can be hot together. In every sense possible.
Blink grins at the thought.

He’s still grinning when he goes to the next message.

“Hey Lou, it’s Nick. Just checking in. I hope things are going okay. Umm… yeah. The beach in east Hampton is nice. I think I just saw Laura Osnes. We should go to Fire Island this summer. When, umm, when you get the chance, can you maybe check your email? I just... I got something from Snyder, and I want to run it by you? … Anyway, I love you. And, I know you’re gonna kick ass.”

Blink thinks about switching over to his email. But, his short term memory is, ummm... his short term memory takes the form of sticky notes or the moleskin journal he carries. If he flips over and gets distracted, he might forget to go back to the message. (Okay, so it’s unlikely with the red badge on the app, but weirder things have happened.)

“Hey Lou, it’s Nick.” Mush’s voice sounds tense. “I ummm... Sorry. I haven’t heard from you. Don’t know what you’re doing, you’re probably super busy and I don’t want to bug you, so, umm, sorry. But, umm, I uhh... I’m going to Target. And then, umm, I dunno know? Just... just let me know when you’re going to be done? And umm, anyway, I love you. Sorry.”

By the end of the message, Mush’s breathing has gotten shallow and breathy. By the end of the message, Blink can feel his heart in his throat.

Target is one of Mush’s safe places. One of the places where Mush goes when he thinks he might disassociate and doesn’t want to be alone. As long as he doesn’t drive, he’s mostly okay to get there. (And Blink thinks he’s probably driven half gone, too.) Target is big enough that you can be anonymous without being alone, predictable enough that once you’ve navigated a few, you can usually find what you’re looking for, and nice enough that it’s only slightly creepy to spend a few hours there when you’re panicky. And, if you zone out looking at notebooks or lamps or graphic tees, people mostly don’t bother you.

Not to mention it’s one it’s one of the few public places where Mush has felt safe peeing since early in his transition.

Blink’s impulsive side - the one that almost got him suspended when he stuck his eye in a bowl of peeled grapes when he was 16 - is currently telling him he should abandon the competition and go find Mush.

Fuck Medda and Joe. Fuck the competition. Fuck national television. Fuck the consequences.

That Blink runs - almost head long - into Kara.

“Blink! Can we get a shot of you looking at your ice cream? Maybe raising your sunglasses to check?” Kara directs.

He stops. Just stops. His train of thoughts is suddenly derailed, the worry and the competition and next week’s lesson plans all a jumbled up mess of wheels and cars and compartments that were never that clear to begin with.

He nods, wearily. He wants Mush somewhere safe and private as soon as possible. And then, he gets an idea.

“Kara...” He’s not sure if he can ask this. It may be too much. “Kara, umm, you know my husband is in town?”

He starts with the thing she’s probably heard through the rumor mill.
Kara nods. “It sounded like Spot was scary impressed. Of course, Spot is scary everything, so...”

Blink snorts. “Yeah. Umm, so my scary impressive husband is umm...”

He’s not sure how to explain the situation. There’s not a succinct way to explain all the factors at play, including - although not limited to - the upcoming dance; Mush being pulled from coaching; Target; his headache; and The Game. And, oh crap, he lost again.

He decides to go for a direct approach. “Mush is kind of having an anxiety attack, and kinda needs a safe place to go.”

Kara frowns. “And he checked out of the hotel?”

“Yeah,” Blink agrees. He glances at his watch. “It’s four.”

If he has to, Blink will figure out how to get another hotel room for Mush. It’s a little emergency, and he thinks they can swing it without making it a big emergency. Mush pays the bills. Mush is better at both remembering to pay them and accounting in general, but Blink has enough of a sense of their finances that he thinks an extra $200 won’t make them chose between electricity and food. He hopes. God, he’d never have done this calculus as a kid. Then, he knew an extra $200 was the difference between eating and buying medication, or paying water, electricity, and phone that month.

Kara nods, understandingly. “Well, you’re not allowed to have guests, and I’m not allowed to have guests. But, we can have consultants, if they sign a waiver at security. I’ll see what I can do.”

Blink scrawls Mush’s number on the back of a hot pink post it note, hands it to Kara.

“Now, can you go give Ivan his shot?”

Blink goes.

It’s intimidating, watching the photography crew take picture after picture of his baked Alaska as he feels the sweat trickling down his back and into his underwear. A few members of the camera crew have stripped off their shirts.

Luckily, maybe, their creations can go back in the freezer during judging. Given how long it can take, it’s nice that they can stop the ice cream from melting. But, it also increases the risk of refreezing and crystallization, which would be terrible.

Spot was drawn first. Crutchie is last. In the middle are the three of them who will probably be duking it out for third place.

Spot is flambéing his Baked Alaska, which is good because it means that Blink can see how it is done.

Spot lights off his limoncello, and waits. Thur alcohol burns merrily. Sarah smiles at the bottle: she’s had a sip or two during the baking. Spot’s choice is a gamble, Medda reminds them, but it looked like it paid off for him. He’s managed to get the perfect blend of not too sweet sponge cake, blueberry sorbet with mace and a lemon ice cream at the center. It’s sweet and complex and refreshing, and Medda might like another piece.

Jack has done a chocolate porter (Guinness) ice cream with a British style sponge that tastes ever
so slightly of Irish cream liquor. It’s sweet, but not overpowering. Medda thinks his ice cream would be perfect, if it wasn’t getting soupy. Joe thinks there is too much whiskey flavor. Joe thinks most things have too much flavor.

Blink has the middle spot: a decidedly uncomfortable position for him. His sorbet has been back in the freezer long enough that it might be getting those horrible sugar crystals. And, his meringue might be in bad shape as well. All he can do is hope.

It turns out lighting stuff on fire is fun. He already knew this. (Blink had some... he got into some trouble as a teenager. Attempts at homemade thermite rarely end well.) He’s just never had the opportunity to play with a kitchen torch before. It’s on his list of gadgets that he wants. Maybe if he asks nicely, Dr Spock and Dr Who and the spirit of Festivus will bring him one for winter Solstice. (Or, Mush will roll his eyes and fuss a bit and indulge his husbands ridiculous antics. Mush may not be religious anymore. He may not be spiritual. He has a lot of problems with the Christian church he grew up in. But, Mush rejects religion quietly and somewhat more respectfully than Blink. It’s a source of quiet, ongoing tension. Neither man has figured out how to cross the bridge.)

Medda and Joe are polite. His cake doesn’t have enough ginger. His sorbet is melting. So is he. But, the flambé had a nice effect, and his meringue has nice color.

The judges think Race’s bake is overwhelmingly sweet: unsurprising since he decided to wrap the bright blue ice cream in a vanilla sponge with homemade sprinkles. It’s a clear homage to his childhood; it just might have been better to do the homage during cake week, when Race wasn’t trying to balance out the sweetness of the merengue. Overall, a somewhat disappointing display.

Crutchie is last.

He supervises as Jack carefully retrieves his cake from the freezer, and then wheels along behind his creation.

Unlike the other cakes, it’s a low half dome. The effect when Joe cuts into the Baked Alaska is surprising and lovely. Crutchie has managed two flavors of ice cream, and the whole thing looks like an orange with brown pith instead of white.

Medda takes a bite, and savors it for a minute. “This is... This is so rich.”

Kath and Sarah are speechless, their forks doing all the talking that’s needed.

Even Joe seems to like the bake: he compliments Crutchie on the way he’s deftly handled the Grand Marnier liquor in the chocolate ice cream, the over all presentation and the balance of flavors.

“Mr. Morris, I think I’d like to shake your hand,” Joe says.

Crutchie flushes with pleasures. Or heat and sun.

“But,” Joe continues, because he’s a raging asshole, “I’d like to do it with you standing. You understand.”

Crutchie rolls his eyes, and doesn’t do anything. He just sits and stares.

“So...” Joe sounds impatient.

The entire tent seems to freeze, waiting to see what will happen. Crutchie squares his shoulders, but
doesn’t move. Aside from pulling himself up to look inside the freezer, Blink has mostly seen his chair this week. He’s not sure where Charlie’s crutches are, other than not here.

Katherine looks between the stand off, and makes a face. And then, she looks over at Joe. There’s some unspoken conversation that passes between the two of them: a language of looks and... something else.

And then, Kath marches over and shakes Crutchie hand. “That was the best damn Baked Alaska I’ve ever eaten,” she tells him.

Sarah comes next, a big grin on her face, and gives Crutchie a firm handshake.

Hannah comes after, leaning in for a warm word. She holds a plate with piece of Crutchie’s creation in her left hand.

The Blink exchanges a look with Race, who nods. They move forward together. Race taps on Spot’s bench, and he falls into line. Jack has already started to move forward.

The four other contestants converge on Crutchie, and take a moment to take a hasty bite of a plate someone (Kara? Blink hasn’t seen Kara in a while. Simon? Hannah herself?) has the malice of foresight to place near the front. And then, they each shake Charlie’s hand.

Jack first: an enthusiastic handshake, and a wink that says later.

Race next: a fist bump, and a few quiet words. A motion with the little back receiver clutched in his left hand. A grin.

Then, Spot. He claps Crutchie on the back, and leans in for a camera-ready side hug. “You killed it,” he scowls with pride. “Absolutely killed it.”

Blink is last. He goes up, pushes his sunglasses up and cocks an eyebrow. “Don’t like being told what to do?” He asks.

Crutchie shrugs. “Don’t like being told what I can and can’t do.”

Blink shakes is hand. “So, you’ll be pissed if I tell you that you can win this whole damn thing?”

“Oh, furious,” Crutchie grins. He pulls down his shades, giving Blink permission to do the same. It’s good. The memory of yesterday’s headache is still lingering in his body, and the sunglasses are his armor.

The crew sweeps in behind Blink, taking turns taking a bite of the Baked Alaska and shaking Crutchie’s hand.

Once they’ve gotten through nearly fifteen people (although no Kara), Joe throws up is hands. “Fine,” he growls.

He stalks over to shake Charlie’s hand. He even manages not to wipe it conspicuously on his pants afterward.

Crutchie... Crutchie waits until he’s off camera to do so. Because he’s a class act like that.

Final Judgement

There’s a moment when he’s sitting on the bench seat of Crutchie’s van, smashed up against the
driver’s side window, when it all starts to come crashing down. The adrenaline and the moment of
standing up to Pulitzer settles into a low, humming panic when he faces reality. It’s still that
adrenaline high he’s riding, but now that it’s quiet, his mind has time to wonder.

About two years after they’d met, on a night trudging through Central Park in search of something
inane, Mush had told him, “The things in you head are always worse than reality.” And, Mush is
right: his head is fearsome giants and the world is full of windmills. The problem is that sometimes, Don Quixote was right: windmills lie. He knows this, Mush knows this. And right now, he thinks they’ve got a few giants to tackle.

He’s... oh, he’s tired. Not like last week, or maybe still from last week. He’s not sure how long it
takes to recover from that kind of crisis, or if you ever get to truly recover. Maybe the experiences
just scab over and scar up, waiting for the next one to come. And, he’s fucking worried about his
husband. (Some Barney Stinson part of his brain insists is different from worrying about fucking
his husband. Which...)

When Crutchie pulls up outside the Rainbow Room, Blink practically leaps across Spot and Race
to get out of the car. They tumble out behind him: a tangle of swearing and sweaty limbs and
backpack straps. He ignores them.

He wants to be away from people when he calls Mush. There were no missed calls, no voicemail,
no texts. There might be an email: he’d forwarded Snyder’s message to Pie-Eater, but Blink turned
off email notifications on his phone a while ago. The red pop up notifications can and will distract
him until they’re gone.

He pulls out his phone fumbles it open, using his thumbprint instead of his code. He doesn’t have
time or patience for that. “Siri, call Mush.”

He holds the phone up to his ear, listening to the electronic ring. Mush is the coolest kid in 2008
and his Party in the USA custom ringtone.

Miley Cyrus throws her hands up.
Mush doesn’t answer.

The butterflies fly away.
Mush doesn’t answer.

Yeah, yeah, it’s a party in the —

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mush?”

“Yeah. Umm... hi Lou.” Mush sounds tired. He doesn’t have that edge of panic, yet, but it’s
probably just below the surface.

“Are you okay?” Blink can’t keep the slightly frantic note out of his voice.

This, this is maybe the thing that scares his most. He’s never admitted it, but Mush fading out and
just... the washed out watercolor of Mush that is this kind of anxiety attack scares him more than he
has words to articulate.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m okay.”

“Where are you?”
“Umm... I’m on set. Somebody called Kara called me? And told me to get an uber? And now I’m... somewhere.”

Where ever somewhere is, Mush isn’t panicking. Or, he isn’t actively panicking. And, Kara knows where he is. And, that means he’s probably safe.

“Do you want me to come?” Blink keeps his voice measured.

This isn’t about him. This isn’t about him. If Mush says no, he might ignore it and go anyway.

“No,” Mush says, quietly. “You’ve still got stuff to do, and I just... I wanna be alone? Sorry.”

Blink feels guilty. He knows that wasn’t Mush’s intention, but he doesn’t feel like asking for time alone is something to apologize for. He’s spent a lot of time trying to convince Mush he doesn’t have to apologize for anything.

Blink still wants to go be with him more than he can say. He can’t keep the tension out of his voice, when he acquises. “All right. Just... just text me if you need me? And I’ll come as soon as I’m done.”

“Okay,” Mush agrees, somewhat absent again. “Okay, I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Blink hangs up the phone and starts making plans.

One of the myriad of production assistants - there must be like 200 or something - come to get him for another interview.

He’s distracted, trying to answer questions about how he thinks his baked Alaska went.

In the back of his head, all through the interview, there’s a pounding voice: This is not what I want. This is not what I want. This is not what I want.

He has had a good run, he’s gotten further than he ever expected. But, he’s not sure whether or not he wants to go further. His heart... his heart is at home with his husband. And, as much as he enjoys it, he doesn’t need to be here.

But... but, he’s fought so hard to get to this point. And, he’s not sure he can give up the thought of being the best. He’s a damn adult; that doesn’t mean there isn’t a little kid inside him who wonders that if he could just prove he was... just prove it, then a miracle would happen, and...

But, he’s not sure it’s trading what he’s got now for some nebulous miracle that he might get some day.

He doesn’t have a good answer.

When he gets back to the Rainbow Room, Crutchie and Jack are off talking in a corner, and Race is sitting in a chair, staring absently at the wall. Blink would like to run out and scream, or go find Mush. Instead, he goes and sits with Race.
Blink plops down beside him. “Are you okay?”

Race shrugs, making an effort to hide the few extra milliseconds it takes to process that motion.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he says, voice a little unsteady. “I ate. I’m okay.”

Blink nods, and settles next to him, waiting.

“Have you talked to Spot?” He asks, after a while.

Race nods, then shakes his head and sighs. “I don’t know man, I don’t know.”

“You gotta talk to him,” Blink insists. “You have to talk: he saved your life.”

“But...” Race objects. “But, I don't want to talk to him about that. I don't want him to be that guy.”

Blinks phone rings. It’s an unknown number. He excuses himself.

“Hello, this is Louis speaking.”

“Hi Blink, it’s ummm... David. David Jacobs. I just... Jack said maybe I should call you?”

It’s always good to remember that the whole bake off tent is held up by the force of whispers on the set.

“Yeah, thanks.” He says. “So, I know you’re not on the clock, and you probably bill at a ridiculously high rate, but I’ve got a few legal questions for... someone. Starting with whether or not I even need a lawyer, and if I do, where I should look.”

“Okay, shoot,” David says.

So, Blink explains. About the teams and how Mush, and only Mush, has been removed from coaching. About the dance, and how despite having worked their contractually obligated two school events, how he’s still being asked. He mentions a suspicion that it’s because they’re queer.

And then, he brings up the latest email. The one that sent Mush panicking to Target.

David makes thoughtful noises throughout. “I know someone,” he says at the end of the recitation. “I’ll text you on Monday so you can set up an appointment.”

“Thanks,” Blink says fervently.

Then, he goes and calls Mush.

The five of them sit in a neat row, waiting for the judges. Blink’s been put in the middle, with Jack and Race to his left and Spot and Crutchie to his right. They sit, waiting for the firing squad and knowing two of them are going home.

It still seems a little bit like a dream to Blink. He’s not sure how he got here, not sure what he’s supposed to be doing, and he just keeps bobbing along. Like, this is life now. Or, this is part of life now. But, he feels like he needs to wake up and deal with everything else. It’s tearing him apart. Because he wants to stay. He doesn’t want to wake up. He doesn’t want to wake up. He doesn’t want --
“Pleasure to announce this week’s star baker,” Sarah says. “Congratulations, Spot!”

They clap, politely. There isn’t much more they can do, other than clap politely. It should have been Crutchie. Everyone knows it should have been Crutchie. Spot knows it should have been Crutchie, and he scowls over at the other man in a way that seems to convey “I’m sorry” and “What the fuck” and “That was seriously the best damned ice cream cake thingy I’ve ever eaten in my entire fucking life.”

Kath steps up, pulling herself away from trying to glare a hole in Joe’s head. If only she had the powers of Cyclops from X-men, it would be so much more effective. “It’s my unfortunate job to announce the bakers who will be going home this week. We’d like to keep you all, but we can only have three in the finale. So... Anthony, Louis, you won’t be joining us next week.”

There’s a crowd and noise and movement, but it feels like the air has gone out of things around him. He wanted this. He wants this. He doesn’t have the time, the energy, or the concentration to be able to give the competition his all. He’s been struggling with this for weeks. And now... now it’s over and he’s out, he doesn’t know how to feel.

He doesn’t cry. Which is good, because crying is messy. He goes through the motions he’s seen everyone else go through automatically, trying to figure out if he’s doing the right thing. Beside him, Race is looking pale and his eyes are shiny.

Kara takes one look at him. “If you stop now, are you going to be able to start again?”

He shrugs. He honestly doesn’t know himself.

“Then, let’s do the shell-shocked interview as quickly as possible,” she decides. “You think you can hold it together for another maybe… twenty, thirty minutes?”

He nods, and Kara goes to work with brisk professionalism.

He’s not sure how she knew. He just follows her numbly. Because if he doesn’t stay a little bit numb, he might just meltdown. Just because he’s an adult man doesn’t mean ADHD meltdowns aren’t a thing anymore. He’s just better and managing them, usually. Except this is far from usually. And, maybe that’s how.

Mush is dozing in one of the production trailers, the hand cupping his face tangled in his hair and the left clutching The Thief. Ahh. Mush is on a Megan Whalen Turner kick, Blink note absently.

Blink goes over and sits next to him, settling heavily into the chair. “Hey,” he says, quietly.

Mush looks up through the cloud of curls. “Hey.”

“So, umm, how are you?” Blink puts a hand on the table, steadily tapping his fingers. Tap, tap, tap. Pause. Tap, tap, tap. Pause.

“I’m... I dunno.” Mush says, with a sigh. He gives a world weary smile. “I'm not panicking right now, so that’s good. But, I really want to go home.”

“Yeah, me too.” Blink agrees. “I umm... I gotta tell you something.”
“You lost?” Mush asks, voice gentle. He reaches out, stills Blinks tapping hand and laces his fingers through his husband’s.

“That’s right,” Blink confirms with a sigh. “I lost, and… and I lost.”

Mush nods, and squeezes his hand, and lets out a breath, some of the tension falling away. Like Mush was afraid for him, or maybe afraid of the uncertainty. And, if there was any more room in Blink for emotions - if he wasn’t already more overwhelmed than he could handle because… because… because God, emotions aren’t meant to be felt quite so deeply. If there was any more room in Blink for emotions, he might feel guilty about the price his husband has paid these past five weeks when Blink has been gone and Mush has had to contend with everything on his own. Which… oh God.

The tears well up from somewhere deep inside him. And then, he’s crying. And Mush is crying. And, they cling to each other.

At home that night, when they’ve hit the point where they can almost stop clinging to each other and Mush has had a hot bath and Blink paced out his broken routine and overwhelmed emotions and neither of them has done anything they’ll regret more than getting snot everywhere, they climb into bed.

There are still so many things Blink knows he has to solve. So many things Blink knows they have to solve. The potential for lawyers and decisions about privacy, and everything. There are so many problems. It’s overwhelming. It might swallow him whole. But, now, he wants something else.

“Hey, Mush, do me a favor?”

“Yeah, Lou?” Mush rolls over to face him.

“Can you… would you…?” He pushes over the copy of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of being Earnest*. The one he’s been carrying all weekend. The one with the secret. “Would you read to me? I bookmarked where I left off, and I just… I can’t…”

He could, but he doesn’t want to. And, he needs this. He needs this so much.

Mush rolls his eyes, and he opens the book. He’s less of a fan of Wilde than Blink. But, he’s read the book a few times over. His long fingers trail across the pages, until they come to the place where Blink has stuck something inside, presumably to mark a scene. Blink has a habit of taking whatever’s at hand, and sticking it in. His Nana was a stickler for reading and not dog-earing pages.

Mush pulls the markers out, and then looks at them. Really looks at them. “Lou, what is this?”

It’s Blinks turn to roll over. “It’s umm… you can’t. We can’t. It’s a second honeymoon. I know we’re saving for Yellowstone and all, and it’s just two days in Delaware, but… I thought you’d like it.”

He’s shaking. Why the fuck is he shaking? He needs Mush to like this. He needs Mush to be okay. He desperately wants Mush to like this, to appreciate the meaning. He wants Mush to know.

“It’s the weekend fo the dance,” Mush says, looking hard at the bus tickets and hotel reservation.

“Yes,” Blink agrees. “And our third wedding anniversary.”
Mush leans over and kisses him, then makes a face. “Go brush your teeth, asshole. And then come back so I can kiss you properly.”

Blink - who probably needed to be told once, but doesn’t need to be told twice - goes and complies.

Chapter End Notes

First, sorry for the long delay. It's been an interesting month. I moved, my mom visited, and then I had a two week business trip without internet. So, half of this was written (and then deleted) in my notes app.

For those who use metric, 90F is just about 30C.

Truth is stranger than fiction. Shout out to the lovely, wonderful geschreibsel for (a) being generally awesome, (b) giving permission for her cheeseburger story, and (c) teaching high school chemistry. A good portion of the high school lore is inspired by my own teaching experiences, and several friends who teach middle and high school science.

I have a lot of other thoughts in my notes document, but you probably don't want them. As usual, extra sources are described here, including a description of The Game.

So, umm... I don't really know what to say, other than that the characters ran away from me and off into weird directions. Let me know how you feel, how you are, or if you're angry with me. I promise, it sort fo gets better? I think.
**Finale (part 1)**

**Chapter Summary**

In which Crutchie conquers Napoleon, Spot conquers some of the patriarchy, and Jack attempts to conquer his fears.

The long awaited first installment of the finale.

**Chapter Notes**

**Warnings**

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ETA: There's a brief PG 13-ish consensual sex scene in here. I would rate it safe for bus reading, as long as you're not reading it aloud.

(If you ARE reading this aloud on the bus - or other peoples sex scenes aloud on the bus - please, please, please LET ME KNOW.) Okay, sorry. I apologize for the late warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack looks between the train ticket in his hand and the departures board. He hitches his bag up on his shoulder. It’s a olive duffle he bought at the Army-Navy surplus store when Roger had insisted he needed something better to carry his clothes than a grocery store bag.

He’s leaving New York. Again. Even though he knows he’s here for a reason, he hates the city. It’s got too many bad memories, and too few good ones. In Santa Fe, he could pretend to be someone other than Jack F. Kelly. He’s off on his own again, on some grand adventure that can change his life. He’s holding tight to that printed ticket, and the crumpled wad of dollar bills in his pocket and all his hopes and dreams.

There’s a certain romance to the way he’s going: by train with a paper ticket. Even though the only reason he has a printed piece of paper is because he left his metro card in his jeans. And, he’s still wearing Roger’s ill-fitting sports jacket and a pair of new to him rumpled khakis and his threadbare Yankees baseball cap: interview clothes. He feels like a kid playing dress up, pretending to be an adult.

But, maybe today was the day, may this weekend is the weekend that changes his life and be becomes, like some fucking cliched butterfly shit. He doesn’t know what he’ll become, it will just be some flash of lightning, and a voice will come through the clouds like the goddamn Lion King, and he’ll know who and what he’s supposed to be. The kid who grew up devouring worn novels plucked from the $0.25 bin at the Goodwill needs a climax in his life. Double entendre intended.
So, he shoves his printed ticket into the pocket of his ill-fitting blazer and boards the train at Penn. He lets the romantic part of his brain take over the story, focus on the good details. The cabbie who looked like Teddy Roosevelt. The paper ticket in his hand. The fact that he’s getting on a train to go out of the city, where despite everything New York Sanitation tries to do, the smell of sewage lingers.

Except, part of him wishes he weren’t doing this alone. Part of him wishes… but, no. It doesn’t matter. Jack Kelly has done everything on his own. He’s been alone for a long time. He squares his shoulders, and catches his train.

Spot’s already there when he boards at Jamaica. Maybe it shouldn’t surprise him: Spot can drive, but he doesn’t have a car. Jack knows he’s been taking the train most weeks. Partially, because it’s convenient. And partially because a certain self-destructive stockbroker took the train, too. And Spot has been… interested in Race.

Jack mostly knew Spot by reputation before he showed up at the Bake Off. They’d grow up running in the same circles and knowing the same people. Mostly, it meant they were both kids in the system, constantly moved from place to place; foster family to foster family to group home and back. They’d traded beds in one of the tougher group homes, the one where Jack had been placed for a solid six months after they caught him tagging. Spray paint has always been one of his better mediums. But, he’d moved on when some family thought they could rehabilitate a teen runaway (and look how well that went) and Spot - younger and more impressionable than Jack - had taken his place.

Growing up that way had hardened both of them. Jack can see it in Spot, even if he doesn’t want to see it in himself. Spot Conlon has a reputation of a boy who pulled a few too many scams as a kid. Rumor has it he got himself arrested for carjacking at twelve. Now, he moves through the world with the lithe grace of a half feral cat who has decided to adopt a few humans - for some dumbass reason. Jack… if Jack were an animal, he’d be a rabbit. Fitting, really…

“Hey,” Spot grunts as Jack slumps into the seat next to him.

“Hey,” Jack replies, glumly. He feels drained, which is never a good position to be in, entering a bake-off weekend.

Spot studies him. “What happened Jacky-Boy? I’ve been hearing things from little birds. They been chirping in my ear, saying Jacky-boy’s gonna be staying in the city.”

Jack huffs out a laugh. “Birdies? You mean Blink?”

Spot grins. It’s not exactly a warm expression, but it’s also not so scary. “Yeah, Blink. An’... never mind. So, how’d it go?”

“It… it went.”

Jack’s not sure how to explain the interview. He thinks he got the job. Part of him hopes he got the job. It would be good to be working again, doing something meaningful for the kids in the city. On the other hand, it means being tied down here. And, he’s back to itching for a change. Being tied down here, it’s chafing at him. Not because he has anywhere else to go, but because anywhere has to be better than here. Because there’s gotta be someplace better than New York, where they’ve figured out how to make things work. Maybe in California, where the sun shines eleven months a year and there are cool breezes off the ocean and movie stars on every corner. Maybe… maybe California. New Mexico got it wrong; New York got it wrong; maybe Sacramento or LA or San
Dinner is quiet with just the three of them. They go to the hotel bar: O’Murphy’s. It’s not a bad place. The onion rings and good, the burgers are big, and Spot says have decent clams. The tables are close and crowded and Jack half hates it and half loves it. The press of people can be abrasive, but the restaurant is designed to feel homey. The hostess leads them to a back booth, Spot in front of Jack and Crutchie at the back. They pick their way slowly through the table, Crutchie lagging further and further behind.

They settle at the table. Jack skims the menu, and lets Crutchie and Spot’s conversation wash around him. They’re easier together than he is with either of them. He thinks they trust each other more easily than he does; he loves and hates their shared history, because it makes him feel a little bit like he’s locked out.

Of course, there are things he desperately doesn’t want to talk about, so he swirls his drink and watches the bubbles rise through the amber liquid. He’s glad Spot hasn’t brought up the interview. He’s not ready to talk about it. If he says something, he might jinx whatever chances he’s got.

Somehow, they move over to work horror stories. There are plenty of stories you can’t tell. But, there are always a few that are too funny not to: the tourists in Taos, for instance.

He was up there, trying to sort out yet another one of the issues between the state and Pueblo nation. It’s not his place, not his culture, and he knows that. But, damn it, the state of fucking New Mexico had assigned him to go up there and check. He left, still unsure how to square what the law was telling him to do with what he thought was in the best interest of the children. It’s a conflict that came up more often than he’d like to admit.

He’d gone to eat at his favorite place in Taos. It was one of those places where he could buy a few dozen frozen tamales from a man with a cooler, and get a plate of food that would keep him full all day. He was wrapping up his sopapilla to go when he saw them: White People™. The couple was clearly from out of town. They were American, middle of the country somewhere. Not the harsh tones of Brooklyn or the sing-song of the southwest. Someplace broad and flat and Loud.

“Hab-blas english?” The woman asked, putting a hard “H” on the first word.

Jack stared at them. They couldn’t be serious. It had to be a fucking fever dream. The waitress at the counter shot him a look. If this was a dream, it was a collective hallucination.

“Hab-blas In-glaze?” The woman repeated. “Ker-rar-o una taco.”

Jack’s spanish isn’t great - a decent portion of his vocabulary he picked up doing social work. Very little is appropriate for polite company. He’d like to go back to school and actually learn the language. That said, he was pretty sure the lady had either mispronounced quiero horribly, or misconjugated caer. Caer is one of the first verbs he learned, right after ir (to go), quedar (to stay),
querer (to want), tomar (to take), and dejar (to leave). He really hopes the woman fucked up caer, though, because he was ready to see the woman shit a taco. Hell, maybe if she did want one, she’d even eat it afterward.

Instead, he put on his best “dealing with Authority Figures You Should Respect” face, and stepped forward. “Ma’am,” he pulled off his hat and flattened his hair. “You do know you’re in the US, right?”

…Apparently US geography had not been included in the woman’s bible-based education. Nor had US history. Which is how Jack had ended up stuck in Taos for an extra hour, trying to explain these things to a pair of tourists from Kansas. At least they’d paid for his dinner. And his tamales.

Spot laughs. “Dude, what the fuck? I hate tourists. We had this group of Chinese tourists waiting in the lobby of some hotel. Some poor asshole had broken his hip, and we had to go pick him up. Do you know hard it is to move a gurney through a bunch of people who want to take your picture? Really fucking hard.”

Crutchie winces slightly and studies the iceberg lettuce of Spot’s side salad.

“Got any good tourist stories, Charlie?” Spot asks. Jack tries not to be jealous of Spot’s use of Crutchie’s name. He knows he shouldn’t have anything to be jealous of. Should doesn’t stop the green eyed monster.

“I had a couple from Toronto ask me if I was running the New York City Marathon,” Crutchie offers, tentatively. “In March.”

“What?” Spot and Jack ask together. The New York City Marathon is in November, usually. They shut down half of the city, and it sucks.

Crutchie shakes his head. “Maybe not entirely their fault. We were doing an experiment in Psych. You know, one of those shift their perception things.”

Yeah. That’s how Jack almost got arrested for ordering a pizza while sitting on the roof of the psych building. Admittedly, it was a bit more performance art than actual psychological observation, but it had been fun. He’d gotten a C- on the project, mostly because the teacher took off 5 points for every misspelled word.

“So, I was wearing a tutu, as, you know, one does, and taking care of shit in the city. And, this couple comes up to me. You know the type - in their sixties, on vacation, and very talkative. And, the woman looks at me, and goes, ‘You’re so inspiring, eh!’”

“She did not say, ‘eh’,” Jack complains. “No actual canadian says, ‘eh’.”

Jack has never met a Canadian. He doesn’t think. At least, not one born and raised in Canada. But, he’s seen a lot of Degrassi. And that one show on Disney Channel that they had to cancel after the two stars started dating and it got weird. Derek, or something.

“I swear to god, she said ‘eh’.”

Crutchie reaches across the table to take a sip of Jack’s cider. Jack swats his hand away. He doesn’t like it when people touch his food. He doesn't like anyone getting near his plate. It’s his food. If it’s a communal bowl, fine. But, if its his fucking food, that’s not okay.

Crutchie looks slightly hurt, and Spot pushes his glass across the table.
Swallowing, he continues. “And, I’m standing there, in my tutu, just staring at her. Because no. You do not get to call me inspiring for being in the city in a tutu. And then, she goes, ‘Good on you to run the marathon!’”

“What marathon?” Spot asks.

“I… I don’t know,” Crutchie with a laugh. “And, she never explained it. She just like… walked off with her husband. Who shook my hand, and went, ‘Congratulations, again.’ I don’t even…”

Jack doesn’t either.

After dinner, they go back to Crutchie’s room. They always go back to Crutchie’s room.

That first night, Crutchie had been the one to make the first move. Not that Jack had objected. He was more than happy to find he’d been reading the signals correctly. He’s more often attracted to women, he knows he signals most women send better than the ones that men do. He thought he was getting those signals, but it wasn’t until Crutchie had grabbed his hand on the way in from the bar. David had been lost in his thoughts, and Smalls had hurried to her room so she could “get some sleep”. There’d been some quiet words, a soft kiss that Jack had enjoyed very much, and a few more in Crutchie’s room.

After that, it had moved quickly, but only as an on-set thing. Maybe it’s a fling. Jack’s used to flings. Jack likes a girl… boy… partner once or twice, and then they move on or he moves on. There’s always someone nearby, who’s willing. And, it might only last a night, and then it leaves him empty and alone. It reminds him that love is just a fairytale marketed by Disney. It doesn’t exist outside of storybooks, movies and plays. So, they’ve been having fun these past four weeks. Flirting in the group chat, and via text and on set. And then, going back to Crutchie’s room for some fun before Jack goes back to his own room to sleep.

They sit together on the bed. Crutchie is doing his exercises. Jack recognizes them, but he doesn’t want to ask. After everything with the drugs, and the quick, sharp words Spot said to him in the car to pick up Race from the hospital… Jack doesn’t want to ask, in case he screws up again. He doesn’t want to hurt Crutchie more. He doesn’t want to hurt Crutchie at all. If he could, he’d like to take his friends pain, and just… swallow it. If he could take the world’s pain, he thinks he’d try to swallow it whole. Because maybe if he swallows it whole, it will swallow him with it, and then, there won’t be any more pain for anyone to deal with. And, he thinks that might be a fair exchange? It might be a more than fair exchange...

He settles on the bed, and grabs the remote. He thinks he should talk to Crutchie, say something about the interview, but he doesn’t know how to begin. What’s he supposed to say? Umm… Crutchie, you know how I’ve been looking for a job in New York? Which then probably turns into Ummm… Crutchie, what are we? And… fuck. Every time he’s tried that, something has gone wrong. Every single time he’s tried to get a straight answer about what a relationship was - romantic or otherwise - there’d been a lie somewhere. So, he doesn’t even want to ask.

Instead, he fiddles with the remote, flipping between channels, trying to figure out what Crutchie wants to watch. And, beside him, Crutchie just sits there, moving his foot and ankle in slow circles. He’s lost in his own thoughts, and a frown tugs at the corner of his mouth. Crutchie doesn’t frown often.

He’s not sure how to cheer Crutchie up, so after he finds something to make background noise, he leans over to distract him from his thoughts. He traces the line of Charlie’s jaw bone, hand moving
up to his ear to caress those spots that make him wild.

“Let me finish!” Crutchie smacks at him playfully. But, he’s smiling, again. Jack can’t see his eyes.

Jack laughs. “And then, when you’re all hot and sweaty, the real fun can begin?”

When he’s done, it’s Crutchie who starts kissing him. It’s Crutchie who strips Jack out of his t-shirt. It’s Crutchie who passes him the lube. It’s Jack who loves every minute of it.

Jack is finishing his, to be honest, very average breakfast burrito and watching the room. He’s already read the best part of the *New York Times*. The physical paper. Which he pays to get delivered every morning. Roger and Mark mock him for being a hipster, but Roger and Mark can suck it. He likes the paper. He likes knowing what’s going on in the world. He likes the feel of the pages between his fingers, and the way the ink rubs off on his skin. It’s one of the few good memories he has from being a teenager. The librarians wherever he’d ended up had always had newspapers for him, even those six months in the Refuge.

A shadow falls across the picture of Matteo Salvini, the Italian interior minister.

Jack glances up to see Spot. “What’s up?”

Spot, sort of. Although he’s not that tall. He turns around one of the seats, and drops down into it, hands drumming against the back of the chair. It’s the kind of intimidating, impressive display designed to Take Up Space.

“You know you could have sat with us, Kelly.” Spot tells him, voice gruff. “You don’t have to just… walk of shame, you know.”

Jack just stares at him. He’s not sure… “What?”

“You heard me,” Spot says. “You could have sat with us.”

“Yeah, no. I got that part, Spot. What about the second bit?”

“You don’t have to walk of shame,” Spot repeats. “It’s an asshole move to just, ghost out on Crutchie like that.”

“Isn’t that a little bit heteronormative and a lot more patriarchal?” Jack doesn’t know where the words come from. Probably Joanne. Or Maureen. Or Angel. Or, hell, even Benny their landlord when he’s not being a dick. Oh God, his mouth has been possessed by the voice of his roommate’s weird post-college friends. What the fuck, Jack?

“What?” Spot repeats. “Umm…”

Jack bursts into nervous laughter. Because oh God. He is not having this conversation with Spot Conlon. The Spot Conlon. The blade of Brooklyn. Spot Conlon did not just bring up Walk of Shaming with him.

They stare at each other for a minute, until Spot starts laughing too.
It turns out that Spot Conlon has the kind of smile that lights up a room, when he actually decides to smile. His laugh is infectious. Jack doesn’t know why it’s so rare.

“Look, Kelly. You can just… tomorrow… come to breakfast, ‘kay?”

“Okay,” he agrees, not really sure what he’s agreeing to. He likes his mornings alone with his paper. He could join Crutchie and Spot, if he wanted to. He would join Crutchie and Spot if he wanted to. But, he just doesn’t want to… right?

And then, something hits him in the face, like a brick wall. “Did you come over for some reason other than to talk to me about my sex life?”

Spot grins, predatory and feral. It’s so different from his genuine smile, his genuine laughter. It’s alarming.

“Yeah, I did, Jackie Boy.” He pauses, looks around. “Crutchie…”

“Crutchie should win.” The words tumble out of Jack’s mouth.

Spot nods, emphatically. “Crutchie should win.”

“So…” Jack says, not sure how to continue. “So…”

Spot looks up, and waves at someone. “So, Good talk,” he says, hurriedly. Crutchie is coming over, crutches hooked to the back of his wheelchair and smile plastered on his face.

Yep. Good talk. Why is everything suddenly less clear than before?

The first challenge is Millefeuille. Which Jack finds kind of intimidating. It’s theoretically easy: you make a puff pastry, slather it with raspberry jam, fill it with a chantilly cream, sandwich in perfect raspberries, and top with swirled fondant. It sounds like something any asshole on the street can do. Then again, Jack knows people who say multivariate calculus is easy: you just look at the change in one thing while holding everything else constant.

He starts in on the pastry layer, trying to make sure his eyes don’t skip a step while he goes through. He’s done this before, he doesn’t actually need to read each word to know what he’s supposed to be doing. Flour, salt, sugar, butter, and maybe some water.

He thinks maybe someone tried to teach him to make this when he was a little boy. He remembers hands cupping his own, and a woman’s voice talking about how important it was to mix the butter and the flour together. He can see the hands so clearly in his mind: palms light, the backs a few shades darker than his own. Dark read lines of flowers and vines ran up the fingers in fading patterns. The nails were red. Not nail polish red, but the same warm red as the art. He can see the hands so clearly, but he can’t tell you where or when or who. He just knows there were hands in a bowl and butter and flour.

He’s got his butter cold, he goes to pull it out of the fridge and get set up. The puff pastry is probably the hardest part, he thinks. If he can pull this off, the other pieces should be easy.

Jack is about to start working the first turn on his pastry when Joe, Medda, Sarah, Kath, and their entourage come over to interview him. He steels himself for a moment, and searches for Cowboy. He’s that part of Jack who was always good at controlling situations: charismatic, loud, smart, and funny. Jack likes to think Cowboy can be charming. (He likes to think Jack is charming, too. Actual
results may vary.) But, Cowboy is the kind of kid you need around when you want the teacher and your classmates to think you’re smart, even though you’re in 10th grade and can barely figure out what $x$ and $y$ are in your math homework, let alone how to solve for them. No, seriously, why was there so much reading in math? It's not like there weren’t already enough numbers at the party. Why bring in letters. And greek symbols. And pi? So... Cowboy. Jack closes his eyes, and lets them come over. And then, he smiles big and broad and lets the shell fall around him.

He explains about what he’s doing, how he’s trying to make a laminated pastry in the short time limit by using cold, shaved butter. The little fridge back in his apartment with Roger and Mark sucks, and half the food on top is always frozen, so he’s never really worried about the butter he’s using. Jack worries about it. Cowboy, though, waxes poetic about laminating dough and the pastry he’s making.

Sarah and Kath make jokes, smiling. He lets himself be charming, and flirts with them. And, they flirt back: a mutual acknowledgement that if things were different... if things were different, they would be different. Joe grills him, and Medda makes her own set of questions: just as challenging, but delivered in a more gentle tone.

And then, when he’s ready to put his pastry in the fridge to set up before he bakes it, he thanks them, and then lets them walk away.

And, when they’re gone and his dough is in the freezer, he ducks out of the tent for a minute to catch his breath. If he stops, the panic is going to close in and he’s going to lose everything. No, the answer is to keep moving, keep running so the tsunami of anxiety that comes when he’s back to just Jack can’t come crashing down. Instead, he settles into the shell that is Cowboy, and eavesdrops as Spot starts to talk Joe and Medda through his bake.

Jack starts in on preparing his jam while the pastry is resting, and he’s waiting for the butter to solidify. Raspberry, pomegranate juice, lemon juice, sugar and water. Jam is theoretically hard to fuck up. His college... friend? Acquaintance? What do you call the guy you ate lunch with for three years and then are friends on facebook but rarely speak in real life? His college-friend? Jojo could make jam. And, Jojo had single-handedly gotten both popcorn and Stoffers lasagne banned from his dorm floor’s microwave in the first six weeks of school.

He hasn’t managed to fuck up the jam in...

He’d screwed up the jam before his interview, yesterday. He’d been trying to get one final batch right, hoping that if he just practiced one more time, he’d be ready. Because practicing jam was better than practicing for the interview. And then, Tom had come in and said he needed to get his shit together. And, he’d tried, he really had.

Mimi and Tom had double checked his resume, again. Mimi just grinned when he’d raised an eyebrow. She was spelling bee champion of her middle school, before she dropped out, and he shouldn’t forget it.

Roger had lent him the ill fitting blazer.

Angel and Mark had dragged him to GoodWill for the khakis. Angel said the cargo pockets were giving him... well, Angel didn't really know, but they were terrible anyway and Jack needed new pants before he could go to the job interview.

Mark had brought him a tie with a note safety pinned to it that read, “You’re the man”.

Benny had tied his tie.

Joanne had re-tied his tie, because a windsor knot is a classic.
Maureen had kissed him on the cheek with a wink.

...And, he’d burned the jam. It had not felt like an auspicious start to the whole adventure. (He likes the word, auspicious. David had been using it, and he’d looked it up. It had taken him three tries in google to find it, but he likes it. It’s one of those long ago SAT words, maybe.)

So now, he’s waiting to hear back about the interview. And maybe the jam was an omen. Actually, no, fuck that. The jam was not an omen, because omens are fucking bullshit. You can’t predict the future, you can only worry about it.

So, Jack worries that he’s going to get this wrong, and Cowboy tastes the jam and smiles at the producers, and offers Sarah a taste.

Jack’s never quite sure what happens to time when he’s in the tent. Because some things seem to take forever, and yet, somehow, the time is up before he’s anywhere near where he wants to be. He’s proud of what he made. The millefeuille look nice, elegant, even. He’s gotten a good recipe, and made it his own.

They go through clean up quickly, everyone pitching in around the photography crew. The faster they go, the sooner they can get through judging and actually taste what everyone made! And, Crutchie’s bake in particular looks amazing. But, Crutchie’s bakes always look amazing. And no, Jack isn’t biased.

The judging starts with him, which is both good and bad. He’s still riding the impulsive, reckless adrenaline high that he put on at the beginning of the round, but he can feel the edges tatter. He tamps it back down, pastes a smile on his face, and gets ready to wow his teachers and distract his classmates. Or maybe, distract his classmates and wow his teachers. It really doesn’t matter which, as long as no one realizes the con he’s pulling on them all.

“Hiya Miss Medda,” He greets them, cheeky grin on his face. “Hi Joe.”

“Hello… Jack,” Joe says, tone just this side of civil. He seems to have it out for Crutchie, but Jack’s never been one of his favorite people, either. Jack feels like it’s really only been by the grace of other people’s catastrophes that he’s stayed in this long. If Race didn’t spend his entire life trying to self destruct, or Blink hadn’t wanted to go back with Mush quite so badly, Jack’s pretty sure either of them could have had this spot in the finale. But, he’s here instead.

Joe starts by examining the pastry. They’re not even enough. The topping isn’t the beautiful two lines of flared color that Joe is expecting. Jack tried to get that perfect lined swirl. He practiced at home, over and over again. But, in the tent, time was running short and he needed to get something done. It doesn’t look as nice as it did at home.

Joe uses his sharp knife to cut in Jack’s pastry, and he can hear the crack. It’s a reassuring sound. He and Medda taste. Cowboy smiles his cocky grin, and Jack leans back on his heels and… waits. He can feel the anxiety starting to catch at his throat, so he smiles at Kath and Sarah. And then at Medda.

And then, he asks Medda about his butter.

He explains he used cold butter, cut into thin little sheets. Medda nods. The layers weren’t distinct because his butter melted before it got into the oven. He either needed more time in the fridge for it to set up between rounds, or he should have used frozen butter. Cowboy nods, and thanks her for
the advice.

Jack curls up inside of Cowboy and tries to keep breathing.

He gets a few more critiques: the jam is nice with the unexpected hint of pomegranate. Joe thinks a pastry cream would have been better than a chantilly cream. (Jack doesn’t think Joe actually wants a pastry cream, Jack think Joe wanted him to make a pastry cream because Jack has struggled with them in the past. Jack thinks Joe is a dick.)

And then, it’s over. He takes his tray of sweets back to his bench to wait. And, that’s when he finally feels Cowboy start to fall away. He bites the inside of his cheek where he’s facing away from the camera, and balls his fists so the nails bite into his palms, and hopes that its enough to keep the roiling anxiety from bursting through his skin.

Joe and Medda start in on Spot. Spot did a chocolate hazelnut pastry mille feuille. It looks magical from where Jack is standing. Like thoses chocolate truffle balls and nutella had a delicious oragy in puff pastry and custard. Spot has glazed it in a perfect layer of chocolate ganache and decorated the top with toasted hazelnuts. Frankly, Jack can’t wait to try it…

He tries to anchor himself in that: anticipation to try Spot’s pastry, and not let himself drown in the swirling feeling of whatever just happened. He tries to focus on his breathing, and on things outside. He used to wear Cowboy for days as a kid. He used to wear him for months. So, how is it that now, he can only do it for a few hours before all the charisma collapses, and he’s left with just Jack who gasps for air and tries to make sense of the things his alter ego does.

Joe and Medda go see Crutchie last. He grins, the kind of smile that lights up a room and makes Jack want to sketch him, and pushes the plate of pastry toward them. There are three layers of puff pastry, separated by a layer of delicate… are those mushrooms? Those are definitely mushrooms. And then, spirals of piped goat cheese.

Crutchie explains his bake, and Joe makes a face as his knife passes through the crisp pastry. It’s a well known fact that Joe hates onions. Red onions in particular. And, here, Crutchie has the balls to make them into a jam and stick them in the middle of his savory mille feuille and serve them to Pulitzer.

But, the brief hadn’t specified a flavor: Jack knows because he checked. He’d thought about doing savory, but none of the recipes he’d found appealed to him. It seemed like most of the savory “mille-feuilles” were weird bastardizations of a dish that he was clearly an expert on. Like, somehow fancy avocado toast without any puff pastry was a “mille-feuille” as long as it was stacked. (When he’d been putting together his recipe, he’d had to go find someone that made a Napoleon to even taste one before he guessed. And, he’d read a hell of a lot of blogs. And yeah, tried several recipes. Roger had been… pleased. And then signed them both up for the gym.)

Joe tastes. Medda tastes. There’s that moment of silence that happens when Joe and Medda try to figure out what they’re going to say. Cowboy grows antsy and Jack’s nerves well up again, threatening to choke him with second hand anxiety. But, it’s enough to pull him out of the self flagellation and refocus.

“It’s… good.” Joe finally gets the words out past the mouthful of pastry.

Medda nods, and swallows. “So good,” she agrees.

And then, they go into their breakdown. It doesn’t matter. The look of relief on Crutchie’s face when Joe said those words was amazing. And, even though this is a competition, and he’s not just
going to… throw it, what he said to Spot this morning is true. He really does want to see Crutchie win.

**Technical Challenge**

Jack calms down some during lunch, and he’s ready by the time they walk into the technical. Or, as ready as he’ll be. He still feels that anxiety burning inside. But, he’d taken a walk off into the gardens and found a place to sit for a little bit. He likes places that are clean and green and pretty. There’s something safe about hiding out in the foliage when you’re anxious. Santa Fe hadn’t been green, but it had been pretty. In New Mexico, it was more about rocks and sky and sage than grass and trees. It had taken him a while to relax into it. And, he thinks, part of him always missed the green of central park. If he’s completely honest, when he wants to run away, that’s the place he pictures.

And now, they’re standing around, waiting for Crutchie. He and Jack had come back together early: Crutchie steering and driving and holding Jack’s hand and changing the radio station. Spot had waved them off, a smirk on his face. He’d been on the phone with someone, arguing or worrying about something: travel plans, maybe. Jack tries not to be jealous. He doesn’t have anyone to argue with about travel plans. Even though he’s in the finale, he doesn’t have anyone who will come support him.

Before Sarah and Kath can start the session and shoo Joe and Medda out of the tent, Crutchie pulls them and Kara - the production assistant - aside. He wants to know if they’re doing pastry. Not because he wants to cheat, but because if they’re not, he wants to do something with his leg.

Jack doesn’t entirely understand. He knows that Crutchie leaves every day of competition exhausted and in pain. Admittedly, most of them leave the Bake Off set exhausted. They’re doing twelve to fourteen hour days of intense baking on top of whatever else is going on in their lives. It isn’t easy. It’s not easy for anyone. And then, there’s Crutchie who ends up dragging himself home after the competition. And, it’s been getting steadily worse. And, Jack wishes he could do something to make it better. He’s tried doing research, seeing if he can find solutions that Crutchie can use. He’s tried offering to get Crutchie drugs. Like, legal, prescription drugs. And, when those don’t work, he’s gone and gotten Blink. He doesn’t know how to help without disappointing Crutchie. He’s trying, he is. And, he just wants to make things better.

Crutchie comes back, smiling and ready. Kara comes over and says something to him, and he waves her off.

When Jack raises an eyebrow at Spot, he shrugs. “Shoes, I think.”

And, yeah, Crutchie…may? have changed his shoes. Honestly, Jack doesn’t know. They’re tennis shoes. Black tennis shoes. Who the fuck cares?

Joe and Medda make their blessed appearances for Kath and Sarah to send them out. Medda gives lovely cryptic advice: “this should be a trip down memory lane”. And, that gets Jack’s heart beating. Because oh God, he is *not* ready to attempt any of their previous challenges again.

And then, Sarah and Kath announce that they’re going to be making a yellow cake with chocolate
icing. That sounds okay. And then, Jack flips over the recipe to read the directions.

Bake yellow cake at 350º
Stack layers and ice with chocolate frosting
Decorate with sprinkles.

He reads it through again, hoping that maybe his eyes have somehow managed to gloss over the steps on the page, and there’s more than these cryptic directions and less than two hours on the clock.

He looks through his ingredients, racking his brain for recipe instructions to make a “yellow cake”. He stares down his ingredients.

And then, he does what he always does, what he’s been doing for his whole life. He jumps in, head first, and hopes something works out in the end.

He starts with the cake, because the cake needs to be done first, right? You need to bake the cake and then cool it before you can ice stuff. So, he gets out his big stand mixer. He decides he’ll try it as a 1 2 3 4 cake. Because staring at the recipe, that’s all he can come up with.

So, he starts by measuring out his butter. Because that’s where you always start. Butter is first. Butter is one. Then, sugar, right? Two sugar, three flour? He thinks. He hopes. He spoons the flour into a cup and dumps it into a bowl. Sugar is two, he thinks. Two cups of sugar…

He gets the cakes in the oven. He knows he has a little bit, and so he goes for some water. It’s too hot now for coffee, in his opinion. When he gets over to the drink tent, Crutchie is there, combining coffee and ice to make something that looks… vaguely drinkable? Jack isn’t really a coffee person.

“Hey,” he greets Crutchie.

The other man looks up at him. “Hiya Jack, how’s it going?”

“Okay?” He shrugs. “Im not sure what the fuck?”

Crutchie nods, sagely. “Yep. ‘Bake a fucking yellow cake.’” He does those air quotes he likes, and places that emphasis on the words that’s designed to sound honest, but really just makes it all the more clear how much of a sarcastic shit he is. “That’s a helpful direction.”

Jack lets out a huff of air. “Yep.” He pops the p. And then he looks at the bottle in his hand. “Hey, kid, do you want some water?”

Crutchie just stares back at him, and raises his cup. “I’ve got coffee.”

“But…” Jack opens his mouth.

Crutchie waits, eyebrows raised. He doesn’t move, doesn’t do anything, just waits, the hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Jack doesn’t know what to do with him. “I’m going to go check my cake.”

Crutchie nods, approvingly. “Good. I’m going to finish my coffee and not judge you for diluting your caffeine with blood.”
“Thanks,” Jack says, turning to leave. He’s halfway to the tent when he turns back. “Wait… what?”

Jack’s hoping he got the chocolate buttercream right. It’s not as dark as he thinks it should be: more of a grey brown than the deep brown he’s seeing in his mind. He has this image of how his cake should look: like a button out of an etsy store. He wonders if anyone makes those buttons, yet. If they don’t, he should try.

Maybe, when this is all over, he’ll try sketching out more of the desserts. There’s part of him that wants to capture Spot’s Cookie Brooklyn Bridge, Romeo’s chocolate disaster, and Blink’s flaming baked Alaska. Hell, even something like this. He… he misses drawing. Baking is good, it feels like it’s filling a hole in his life, but he needs something else. He needs to find his pencils and start sketching again. Not that he was ever particularly good at it. He just… it makes him happy, okay? It makes him happy and it lets him be quiet, and those were both good things when he was a kid.

He knows they’re getting close to time, and he takes a quick look around the tent. Sarah has appropriated one of Crutchie’s beaters from the buttercream, and she and he are having a relaxed conversation on camera. His buttercream looks picture perfect: Dark and rich and silky. Jack’s looks more like Spot’s chocolate cream than it does Crutchie’s frosting.

Spot somehow managed to get flour everywhere during the baking process. He probably made a rookie mistake: started the mixer too soon and the flour explodes back out. Jack is… erm… familiar with the process. The thing, though, is that Spot is grinning to himself. Not his usual, scary, Spot Conlon is going to pan fry and eat your testicles grin. This is a genuine smile. Jack wonders how much of Spot is “Spot” and how much is this smiling man.

Jack studies his cake, and then grabs his sprinkles. It seems fitting that the first and last technical challenge are cakes with sprinkles: Joe’s birthday cake for his daughter and Medda’s birthday cake for her … friend. Jack may not be able to remember Medda’s exact recipe, but he remembers the context, okay? Joe’s cake was for his daughter, Katherine. And, Medda’s was for her group of friends: Andy, Scott, Frank and Eduardo. Medda had even made a point to mention that the cake made an excellent breakfast, if you were so inclined.

Jack doesn’t just bake, okay? He reads recipes and notes, too.

Judging goes… judging goes exactly the way Jack expected, if he’s honest. He knows that Crutchie and Spot are better bakers than he is. Jack knows this, deep down inside where ever he is. Deep down, the boy who grew up reading story books knows that this isn’t the story where he gets to be the hero. Not because he isn’t brave, but because he just isn’t… enough. Cowboy, on the other hand hasn’t quite figured this out. He puffs up his chest, throws his shoulders back, and stands his ground.

They line up, sitting in the chairs that are at a height closer to Crutchie’s wheelchair than the taller chairs they’d used earlier in the competition. Joe is still visibly annoyed at the change, the rest of the crew just rolls with it.

Medda and Joe try his cake first. Medda remarks on his frosting color: too light. He should have used more cocoa powder, because the frosting tastes light, too. And, because fo the whipped texture, it’s a little bit messy. It looks like something “rustic”. They’re not going for “rustic”, they’re going for semi pro. He could have done with something richer, and a little bit denser. The cake, on the other hand, is a little bit too dense. The pound cake interpretation wasn’t the best interpretation of “yellow cake”. Technically, it qualifies. Technically. Except this is a technical
challenge. It’s a tasty cake. They’re not contesting that it’s a tasty cake. It’s just not the yellow cake with chocolate frosting that Medda was looking for.

Crutchie is next: golden layers with a rich dark fudgy topping. It looks perfect. Apparently it tastes perfect. It’s nearly technically perfect. Literally the only thing that could have made it better is if the cake had been sandwiched with buttercream instead of the chocolate magic Crutchie had made. (That’s how Sarah referred to it: “Chocolate magic”. She’d also eaten a good portion of the bowl, so she should know.)

Spot is last. He’s back to his usual expression. It might just be that he has the worst case of resting bitch face that Jack has ever seen. He also makes an amazing cake. Not that Jack is surprised in the slightest. He’s done a buttercream: denser than Jack’s frosting, but not as dark and fudgy as Crutchie’s. It’s struck a balance that neither of them seemed to manage. But, his cake is just dry. The crumb is off, like maybe he didn’t sift his flour first? (Jack had seen him scooping out cups. Not spooning in, just going into the bin. So, no. Spot Conlon mid freak out had no sifted his flour.) And, it stayed in the oven just a titch too long: slightly over baked. A good cake, but oh… not good enough.

Jack is pleased with his second place finish. He and Spot were neck and neck, and it simply came down to the fact that his slightly wrong pound cake was still better baked than Spot’s more correct but less well executed cake. Jack feels like, heading into the finale, it’s anyone’s game. Okay… it’s Crutchie’s game. But, first runner up is anyone’s game.

The Bonus Bake

He, Spot, and Crutchie help clean the kitchen while the others get pulled out to do interviews. It’s still early, or it feels early. It’s approaching six, but the producers want to get as many of the reaction shots done as they can. No one wants to come back after they win or lose to talk to the camera about the way their technical bake went. They want to gloat over their win, or congratulate the winner and express polite disappointment. They don’t want to talk about whether they should have made buttercream or not.

Jack’s interviewed by one of the small army of PAs: Simon. It’s a bit odd. Simon normally works in the kitchen and sticks close to Hannah, who manages everything. Simon is the guy who tests the oven with victoria sponge. (Because even though this is the US, victoria sponge is still the best way to test the ovens. Plus, the crew mostly like it.) Simon is nice, but he’s more awkward than some of the other interviewers. Jack wants to take him aside, and ask him about his ambitions. Not just what he’s doing here, but where he wants to go. Not that Jack is particularly good at that talk. Oh, he’s been on the receiving end of it plenty of times, and look at where he’s ended up: twenty-six, under employed and scrambling to figure out if he’s doing what he really wants to be doing. Jack wants to ask anyway.

The sun is slanting far toward twilight when Kara comes to get them again. She plays navigator in Crutchie’s van, as they drive back to the tent for one more bake. It’s their second to last time, and Jack doesn’t know if he should be nervous or not. Tomorrow’s theme is a breakfast challenge. And so, they’re getting seventy five minutes tonight to prep anything they might need to prep. Since one of the challenges is a breakfast yeast bread, Jack assumes this is to allow an overnight rise. It’s a dramatic scene, he thinks: the three of them outlined against the growing shadows in the east.
Again, it’s something he might like to paint sometimes, if and when.

Jack tries not to worry about that as he starts pulling together the dough for his english muffins, half his mind on the recipe and half his mind on fake flirting with Kath. Katherine Plummer is not interested. He’s not interested right now. Cowboy and Kath the Comedian, though, they like playing off each other. It’s a fun game, and that’s all it is. It’s not he kind of game where anyone gets hurt, not like what he’s playing with Crutchie.

And… Jack doesn’t want to think about Crutchie right now. Because, if he thinks about Crutchie, he’ll think about Crutchie’s phone in the green room. He’d come back to get some “solid food” and Spot calls it before they came over to bake. Crutchie had been off, doing his own interview, or stretching his leg, or doing whatever one of the myriad of things that Charlie Morris does during his day without his phone. That, he’d left sitting plugged in. Where it vibrated every few seconds with new, incoming texts.

Jack checked the baker’s group text, on the off chance someone from the show was blowing up Crutchie’s phone. (And his by extension.) There were messages from Les, Blink, Mush, Smalls, and Romeo, letting them know they got in safely, and one from Race saying he was running late because “his model wasn’t done running and he was about to get SAS-sy.” But, those messages had come in a few hours before Jack had checked, back when they were still in the tent being judged and found wanting.

So, he assumes that it’s a message from Crutchie’s family. Or his friends. Who ever is coming to support him, tomorrow.

Jack doesn’t need to worry about that. Jack doesn’t have anyone coming for tomorrow.

He’d tried to invite Roger and Mark, figuring that a Craigslist roommate who was a sort of friend was still better than no one. But, a month ago, Roger and his band, Dildos and Curry Vindaloo, got a gig that they couldn’t pass up. And, Mark is their roadie and unofficial Youtube videographer. Because if you aren’t on youtube, you probably don’t exist. And, as much as Mark objects to the monetization of internet platforms, he also really likes the democratization it’s allowed. (Mark and Collins will sit and discuss this for hours if you let them. Hours.) Jack hadn’t asked anyone else: if your Craigslist roommate won’t come to see you, why would the group of extended friends you and your alter ego acquired by proxy come as well?

So, no. Tomorrow, Jack Kelly will be alone. As always.

Chapter End Notes

As the author, first, let me apologize for how long this has taken. Narratively, a few things have happened. First, my muse ran off with Crutchie, Spot, and Race and decided this chapter could not proceed until I wrote the day Spot and Race ended up at Crutchie’s house. (My version of Cowboy, who we’ll call Magpie, would like me to let you know that it’s called Pay the Piper.)

Many thanks to Claire, Charlie and Rosie for their help firing the head canons and figuring out details about Jack Kelly Certified Disaster™.

As usual, you can find a list of sources here, including the source of the hernia story.
Umm... business wise, I am planning two sort of reaction chapters after the finale which may or may not involve social media reactions or questions for the bakers. So, umm... if you have anything you've been dying to ask, let me know here or on Tumblr, or... I dunno. Send me a carrier pigeon or something. And, as always, let me know if you have comments, questions, concerns, desires, suggestions, or just need someone to scream at about cake, the 109th anniversary of the Newsboys Strike, or anything else.
Finale (part 2)

Chapter Summary

In which Jack makes mistakes, Spot makes breakfast plans, and Crutchie makes breakfast.

Or, the chapter that almost ended in a cliff-hanger.

Chapter Notes

Warnings

Swearing. Ableism. Food. Alcohol. You know the drill on these. There’s also some discussion of childhood food insecurity and parental incarceration.

It’s after nine when they get done baking, and Jack is dead on his feet. Crutchie offers to drive them back, an offer Jack almost refuses because exhaustion behind the wheel is almost as deadly as alcohol. At least, that’s what the New Mexican PSAs tried to impress upon him.

He figures the fight (which Crutchie will win because there are mountains that are easier to move than Charlie Morris) will take longer than just acquiescing. Because Crutchie will win either way. So, he climbs into the front seat of the van, and Spot drapes himself across the back. They’re halfway back when Crutchie’s phone starts ringing again. It sounds vaguely familiar, but Jack can’t place the tune.

Crutchie shoves the phone at him. “Pick up, it’s Finch.”

Jack takes the phone call. “Hello? Umm… this is Cru-Charlie Morris’ phone.”

What follows is quite possibly one of the weirdest conversations Jack has ever had. And something possessed him to minor in anthropology in college. And he regularly spends time with Tom Collins and Mimi Marquez.

“Umm… okay. Where’s Crutchie?”

“He’s… driving.”

“You sound uncertain.”

There’s another voice in the background. Half muffled. “Tell him that if he’s killed Crutchie and put his body in a ditch you’ll sick your mom on him, Finch.”

“El wants Crutchie to know that he worries whether he takes care of himself and makes good decisions about men.” Finch parrots, as though Jack hadn’t heard L.
“Umm…” Jack repeats. “Let me tell him.” He turns to Crutchie and repeats the gist of the message.

Crutchie nods, and rattles off information. There should be a room under Ls name, and one under Issac. Al has a room, but only if he actually fucking remembered to fax the doctor’s note. If Race didn’t take care of Henry, Henry is a grown ass’d adult, and rock paper scissors exists for a reason.

“And, Finch wants to know what he should do,” Jack prompts.

Crutchie sighs, as they navigate through the increasingly heavy Montauk vacation traffic. “Tell him that he can join the boys, or to use hotel points. His mom might have some…”

Jack nods, but somehow it’s Cowboy who relays the message. “Crutchie says yo’ mama so connected, that she knows Trump and Hilton, and can get you a hotel room anywhere.”

The other end of the phone goes quiet.

The car goes quiet. The air gets heavy and tense enough that Jack knows he fucked up, he’s just not sure how.

The air is tense as they park in the one handicap spot, and they get out of the car. Spot looks between the two of them, and then catches sight of someone across the lot. He hurries off, leaving Jack and Crutchie alone.

Crutchie gets his things and turns to Jack. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

The curt words sting.

Jack nods, and turns away. He goes around the building, and lets himself in through a side door. He’s not avoiding the lobby. No, not at all.

Showstopper Challenge

Jack’s not sure if he’s glad or not when his alarm finally goes off. He hasn’t slept much, and his head has been spinning with everything that’s happening. He’d like to stay in bed a while longer and not deal with anyone or anything else. Mornings suck.

He drags himself up anyway. When it’s time to get up, it’s time to get up.

He scrubs at his face, then shaves. Just not too close. Someone in production had told me he looks best with stubble. Not quite clean shaven, but definitely not with a beard. He’s not sure he cares. He definitely cares.

He pulls on yesterday’s clothes, runs his hands through his hair, and pulls his baseball cap low over his face. It’s new, without the time spent carefully curving the brim. It doesn’t feel quite like its his, but the rules say he can’t wear logos because the company doesn’t want to pay for licensing. So, he has his plain black hat that feels not quite right and not quite wrong. He wears it anyway, like a layer of protection.

He checks his phone before he heads downstairs. He’s got a copy of the New York Times (the Sunday Times no less) that he wants to read. To just be alone, and be quiet, and get himself ready.
And, maybe some of it is the fear that they’re going to be competing. That someone has to win and someone has to lose, and that whatever happens at the end of today, something will have happened. There’s a niggling fear in his stomach about that nebulous Thing. The one he doesn’t know if he wants, but he knows he wants to be asked. And, being asked means winning, right? And, if he wins, and he gets that Thing, then… if he gets that Thing, then maybe he won’t feel quite so empty and alone and afraid anymore.

The problem with the competition is that there have to be winners and losers. The Thing gets to happen to only one person, because only one person gets to win. And the rest of them will be left with the consolation prize of… the consolation prize of having met a bunch of interesting people and baking a bunch of things he never could have imagined making, and discovering part of himself he hadn’t known before. And, still, somehow, that pales in comparison to the Thing that he’ll get if he wins.

So, maybe he should just ignore the text from Spot and skip breakfast with the others. He should give into the part of him that’s screaming that they’re in competition, and that he needs to win. He tucks the paper under his arm, adjusts his cap one more time, and shoves his thin, worn leather wallet deeper into the pocket of his jeans.

As he goes into the dining room for breakfast, an errant part of him wonders if he can get a burger. They’re going to be doing breakfast all day. But, it’s the morning: time for breakfast food. He pays the $14.99 for the All You Can Eat buffet, and gets a plate.

Mush (Hello My Name Is The Real Mush Meyers) is the one who finds him in the rabbit warren of warning dishes.

“How’d you sleep Jack,” he asks, far too chipper for 7:15 am.


“Did you hear him?” Mush demands as he guides Jack back to the table. “I asked him how he slept, and he said, ‘On my back.’” He chuckles. And then, he gets that stupid grin. “And, how are you?”

Jack rolls his eyes. “Tired.”

“Hi tired, I’m Mush.” Again, the man is like an energizer bunny. Jack wonders how many cups of coffee he’s had.

Blink rolls his right eye, the left making a valiant attempt. “Nick, ‘s too early for Dad jokes. And you’re not a dad. Sit down, and let Jack eat his breakfast in…” Blink looks up and down the table, “chaos.”

Mush drops a piece of toast on Blinks plate, and settles a few seats down from his husband. And then, he reaches across the table to steal a piece of bacon.

Blink gives him a withering look.

Jack perches in one of the few open chairs and goes to work making himself a shittier than usual breakfast burrito out of a piece of quesadilla he found, eggs and bacon.

Blink hands him a sharpie and a name tag. “New people, so we’re playing again. You need more?”

Jack shakes his head. “Not unless we’re taking bets.”
“...So, you’re here alone?” Hello my Name is Les (Mis) asks, the concern coloring his words.

Jack shrugs, and takes a sudden interest in the exact construction of his very shitty burrito, dumping more hot sauce on his eggs.

Les gets the hint.

Instead of pestering Jack about his lack of friend, he starts pointing out everyone else. There’s Blink and Mush, obviously. Their friend, Skittery, is talking with Romeo (Hello, My Name is proto-Doctor) and Romeo’s friend (Hello, my name is Magic Mike.)

Down the table, David and Crutchie are fielding a crowd of people who are probably Crutchie’s roommate. Les points them out. Al or El is in the Obama campaign “Yes We Can” shirt (Hello, my name is Barack”) is munching toast and arguing with David. Next to him, two roommates (“Hello My Name Is Buttons” and “Hello, my Name is Henry (and I don’t like to have fun ever!)”) are talking with a girl who had to be Race’s sister. There is no mistaking those looks: they have the same eyes, the same set to their jaw, the same hand motions when they emphasized a particularly important point. It isn’t clear what they were discussing, just that it is intense. And, at the head of the table, the roommate Jack had met (the other “L” roommate, he thinks) is arguing with Crutchie.

Crutchie catches his eye and waves him over. He puts down his poor excuse for a burrito and walks down to meet him.

He passes Spot and his roommates - who look familiar, even if he can’t quite remember their names, Smalls, and her girlfriend, Sniper. Sniper is dressed up: short nails painted red, and her eyeliner sharpened to a point.

Maureen had been the one to explain to him just how much artistry that takes. They’d gotten drunk and maybe high on one of Collins brownies, and been sitting freezing on the roof of the building when Maureen had asked him about his types. She’d been the one who had held his hand while he rambled about boys and abs and girls and breasts and brown eyes lined in dark kohl and glitter everywhere. Maureen had been the first person he’d said the words to, the first actual human he told he was bi. And, Maureen was the first person who he told about Crutchie. Maureen had been the one to plan his maiden voyage into the New York social scene, and the one who’d coaxed him to wearing eyeliner on a subsequent visit, all the while lecturing him about performative femininity and double standard and body positivity. (Angel had been the one to actually buy it with him, then teach him how to use it. Maureen and Mimi had just laughed when he nearly poked himself in the eye. Angel is his favorite.)

So… yeah, he appreciates the artistry involved in Snipers eyeliner.

Thoughts of eyeliner fly out of his head as he approaches Crutchie and “Hello, my name is Aladdin.” Jack doesn’t get a chance to read the rest of the name tag until he gets closer: ”Let me show you a whole new world.”

“-- taking my van,” Crutchie says, quietly frustrated. “I hate your car, Al. I hate your car so much.”

“But, it’s fun!” Albert says, defensively. “And, there are only three of you.”

“You know what else is fun?” Crutchie mutters. “Games. Until someone gets hurt.”

“Then, it’s hilarious,” Albert agrees, quickly.

Crutchie raises an eyebrow, and the conversation turns silent, a rapid exchange of mouth movements, glances, and tiny changes in expression.
Aladdin throws up his hands. “Fine, I’ll ask if we can borrow the minibus, considering we’re the only fucking people here.”

Joe Biden’s head pops up. So does Henry’s and Button’s. “Quarter!” “Quarter!” The word overlaps, like those damn seagulls in Finding Nemo “Quarter!”

Al just rolls his eyes.

Crutchie nods. “Quarter.”

Breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day. Or the most daunting. It was also never really a thing when Jack was growing up. Probably not for Spot, or Crutchie, either. When he was small, when it was him and the mom he barely remembers, breakfast might have been leftovers, if there were any. And then, as a kid, there was only ever breakfast at school, if you got in early enough. He doesn’t think it was intentional for the most part, it’s just that there was always breakfast at school, so why bother eating it at home? As an adult, he still hasn’t quite figured out the appeal. He doesn’t mind a breakfast burrito, but when that’s not available, a Snickers bar and a Coke is usually good enough.

And now, they have to make five fucking baked things for breakfast: a cake, a yeast bread, a savory quick bread, a quiche, and viennoiserie. Two of which he may have had to look up when he’d gotten the brief. Because it’s too fucking much for the Bake Off team to just say, “something like a croissant”. He goes to the fridge to pull out his english muffins, and the laminated dough, so he can get started. They’ve only got four hours today, thanks to the time they got yesterday. And, if he’s going to make this work, he needs to make this work.

Yesterday, he wore Cowboy. Today… today he’s not sure who he needs to put on. Not Cowboy, at least not yet.

He fumbles apart his recipes, laying them out and going through the ingredients in front of him. He’s been through each once. He’s multitasked across them a few times, to the point that Mark kicked him out of the apartment because he was making it “dumpier than usual”. This was Mark for “Bohemian chaos is organized chaos” and “black doesn’t look as cool covered in flour”. Of course, Mark hadn’t complained as much about the pancakes, when they’d been placed in front of him, so Jack counted that as a win.

He shakes his head, tries to pull himself back together. Some distant part of his brain, the one that still hasn’t quite figured out what happened last night and doesn’t understand why he’s all alone on the playground, bouncing the basketball by himself shouts, “WILDCATS”. “Get your head in the game,” he mutters as he starts on his cheese filling.

Even though he’s in the zone, it’s hard to ignore Joe and Medda talking to Crutchie. He can’t quite hear everything over the sound of the mixers he’s got going in tandem, but he gets enough.

Jack thinks it’s risky. Riskier than he’d attempt. First, because they’ve already done pizza and so the pizza Crutchie bakes has to stand up not only to everything else, but to the ghost of pizzas pasts. And, because pizza isn’t really a breakfast food. Unless four am is breakfast time.

Which… Jack will, if necessary, but there had better be Coke. And then, he doesn’t want pizza. It’s also risky because for the breakfast pizza thing to translate, Crutchie has to get it cooled down so the cheese congeals well and the flavors meld, and it really does taste like it’s been sitting there
overnight, waiting to rescue your hungover ass. That’s the way Crutchie explained the recipe to him, at least.

Today, he’s telling Joe and Medda a story about it being one of his favorite things in high school and college. That there wasn’t always a lot of money, and pizza was cheap. And that he associates it with all sorts of good memories and adventures.

Jack wonders how much Crutchie is lying for the cameras. Oh, probably not about a $5 pizza being enough for three to four meals. Still more expensive than Cup of Noodles or Ramen, but it also wouldn’t have required a microwave or hot water.

Jack wonders how much of the pizza story is associated with good memories. When Jack and Crutchie talk about high school, the one time they talked about high school, Crutchie had been… Crutchie had been quieter and more evasive. He’d half murmured something about home school and tutors in the hospital and how lucky he was to have even finished. If Jack corners him later, Crutchie might tell Jack something like carry out pizza is infinitely better than hospital food. (Although that time Jack was nineteen and his appendix almost burst in Best Buy and he ended up in the hospital for four days on IV antibiotics, the hospital food hadn’t been so bad.) But, all Crutchie had said about high school in the end was that he was glad it was over, and something philosophical about being relieved those four years weren’t actually the best of his life.

Crutchie points out the ingredients as he works with them, laying out his flavors for Joe and Medda. His menu sounds way more cohesive than Jack’s does. Like he has a bigger theme than “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day”. (Debatable.) Plus, the way he explains it… Jack is pretty sure that this is Crutchie and that he’s happy.

Jack hip-checks the fridge closed and hurries back to his station. He’d really like to go get some water, but he’s not sure he has time. It feels hot for early May. It was a cold spring, but the weather finally hit the last couple weeks, and now… now it feels like July. Jack worries it’s going to be a long, hot summer. But, climate change in a hoax… He checks his recipe, his timer, and his watch. Nope. He’s behind. Not badly behind, but behind enough that three minutes to get water might screw up his ability to get everything done.

He feels his head start to spin for a moment, so he takes a few calming breaths. The kind of breaths he takes with his kid when he’s being “Mister K” when they both need to calm down and problem solve. They’re the kind of deep breaths he hated being told to take as a kid, because it always came with the directive, “Breathe deeply and you’ll feel better.” The direction always made the anger and the panic and the breath rise in his chest, until it was choking him. It turns out letting yourself breath on your own, or having someone model the behavior gently is way more relaxing than some asshole adult doing it. But, there’s no one else here to model it for him, so he needs to do it himself.

Okay, it’s okay. He’s going to be okay. The cake is in the oven behind him, back where Romeo used to bake. He’s got danish resting, his pastry in the oven, and it’s okay. He just needs to make his quiche filling next. And then, bake the quiche. Worry about the next step, Jack. Just worry about the next step.

He takes one more calming breath, and then goes to get the eggs.

Jack is seriously regretting the combination of English Muffins and pancakes. He’s really regretting the pancakes. It’s almost to the end of the bake, and he’s watching Crutchie and Spot start to plate. They’re not that much further along than he is, both still have but their bakes are in
the oven instead of needing to be cooked on a griddle.

He’s got the batter made, he’s got the oven warm so he can pop them in as soon as they’re done, he’s got his non-stick skillet ready. He checks the timer. He’s also got fifteen minutes, and nothing else is plated. He worries it will take him at least that long to get things ready, and damn it, he’s going to be ready and finished.

So, he checks his danish on the cooling rack: it looks good. He goes and gets the jam he’s going to use to glaze the pound cake, and starts a saucepan of that. He checks on his quiche, and on the english muffins.

He heats up his griddle. He flicks water across the surface, waiting for it to dance. Part of him remembers having to read *Little House on the Prairie* in elementary school. He’s still not sure why they had to read it: Laura Ingalls life in Oklahoma in the 1800s seemed further removed from his life growing up in New York City than did the books about the ancient Egyptians he sometimes read. At least the Egyptians had multi-story buildings and the ancient Egyptian version of Bodega cats. (Bodega cats were very important to young Jack. Bodega cats are very important to adult Jack. You can’t have a bodega without a cat, and where are you supposed to buy stuff at 3 am if you don’t have a bodega?) The thing he remembers from the book was how they used to make the water dance on the skillet: at the perfect temperature for pancakes, water flicked on the surface will boil and bounce back before it evaporates. Today, he gets the temperature perfect.

He starts his eggs poaching, simmering the water and getting it swirling.

He pours on his two pancakes, being careful not to let them touch. Today is as much about presentation as about taste. (Although taste is ridiculously important, too.) He watches the edges, nervously, waiting for the perfect moment to add his bacon. He keeps one eye nervously on the clock, willing the pancakes to be ready in time. Willing everything to come together. Hoping that he won’t fail here, too. That there’s something in his life that he has control over, even if its a damn pancake on a damn cooking show on a day that might change his life.

He tries to breath. And then, he remembers his fucking eggs. Because multitasking has always been one of his strong suits. Not.

He pulls out one of his eggs to check it, and he can feel it’s overdone. It’s supposed to be springy. It’s more like a hard boiled egg. Fuck.

And, something in the kitchen smells… crispy.
His pancakes are burning.
Fuck. Today, of all days.

He’d made a really good poached egg for Angel last week. Angel likes poached eggs with some lightly dressed asparagus because Angel is fucking fancy. (Angel has also looked Jack dead in the eyes and ate an entire bag of Takis while laughing, followed by a Little Debbie Oatmeal Pie chaser. Because Angel is a badass.) Why is it that he can make an awesome poached egg for Angel in their apartment with the shitty supermarket eggs, but he can’t do it here? Right. Because he’s an inconsistent failure. Or because Angel was just being nice to him and it really did kind of suck. The second seems more likely, but both are probably reasonable possibilities.

He needs… he needs the pancakes first. The eggs don’t matter as much as the pancakes. The pancakes need to be done first.

He cleans off the griddle. He checks the temperature, adds more butter, and pours another laddle in. And then, he watches closely.
The bacon goes in just as the pancakes start to rise and bubble, shortly before he flips them. And... they look good. He lets out a little sigh of relief. The pancakes look okay. His first two are okay. It might not be the end of the world, yet.

Three and four go smoothly enough that he considers starting an egg, again. He needs enough though. Probably eighteen. He forces himself into an assembly line mode: two pancakes onto the griddle. Watch them for a minute while you get the poaching liquid swirling. Pour the egg in. Add bacon, wait, flip. Pull the egg out, and transfer it to the warm water. Pull the pancakes off the griddle.

Repeat.

He’s just getting the last of his batter onto the griddle when Sarah and Kath start counting down. This... he’s not sure if this will make it.

He hasn’t gotten everything done. What if it’s not good enough for the judges? He still needs to pull the maple butter out of the fridge for plating. He’s supposed to be plating. If he doesn’t plate the food well, Joe will call him on it, accuse him of being lazy and careless. And, Jack doesn’t really care what Joe Pulitzer thinks of him, but he worries Medda will notice. And, Jack doesn’t want to disappoint Medda. She’s been a tough but fair critic, and he respects her for that.

Three minutes, and he pulls the quiche from the refrigerator. He hopes the bottom isn’t soggy, but there isn’t much he can do now. He eases it out of the pastry ring, thinking about how last time he’d done this. Collins had made snarky comments about “putting a ring on it” when the tart pan fell down Jack’s arm.

Two minutes, and he’s slicing the pound cake he’s glazed with current jam. Joanne was the one who introduced him to currents. He thinks he likes them.

Ninety seconds, and the danish is laid out on the plate, a sprig of rosemary alongside. He hadn’t thought rosemary would be a good flavor combination, but Maureen had been the one to hand it to him. Maureen doesn’t cook much: she can make exactly three things, but her lentils taste like a thanksgiving turkey because of the herbs she uses. She’d said the rosemary garnish would be pretty, and she was right.

A minute fifteen, and the english muffins start to get artfully arranged on the plate. Mark would call it rustic. Mark is a fucking hipster. Mark also definitely prefers Jack’s homemade english muffins to the ones he used to order off Amazon. They just taste better. No weird hipster vibes about it. (Mark may be an unintentional hipster, or he may be an intentional hipster in his constant quest to be an authentic artist, but he’s a fucking hipster either way.)

He pops three open, and adds the eggs he’s finally poached. The recipe he learned for Angel, because on bad days when the medication hits hard, it’s one of the few foods Angel will eat. The eggs he has today look good, like something that would make her happy.

Thirty seconds, and the pancakes come out of the oven. Pancakes were one of the first things he’d made for Roger, when they’d moved in together in New Mexico. It had kind of been an accident: Jack had been practicing for the camping trip he was leading, and Roger was back from his gig and hungry. It was about two in the morning, because Jack’s anxiety wasn’t about to let him sleep. If he didn’t have a good pancake, the kids weren’t going to like him. And, that was terrifying.

It had worked out: they’d ended up bonding over those ubiquitous 24 hour Greek diners with the best coffee in the whole world.

...And time is up.
Jack’s panting and shaking and not sure if he wants to throw up or get some water. Or maybe get some water and then throw up.

While the production crew finalizes the photography, Jack does to get his phone out of Crutchie’s van. He hears the crew calling him over, and he barely ahhs time to check the lock screen. It doesn’t matter, there’s a wall of message notifications.

2:35 pm Maureen
   Jack it Angel. Maureen’s three drinks in and we took away her phone...
2:26 pm Maureen
   Jack, babe, tell me the bake off wasn't today. You *promised* you'd ...
1:54 pm Mark
   [video attachment]
1:53 pm Roger
   Jack! Break a leg today. Newly renamed Huevos Racheros & Maya Angelou ...
12:52 pm Maureen
   I told him that there's no way your enough of an asshole to go do that ...
12:51 pm Maureen
   Collins says you might be at the bake off.

Jack doesn’t know what to do with them. As he scrolls down, there are more. More and more and more that he keeps sliding to clear from his screen, because he doesn’t have time to read them now. But, they’re texts from Mark, Roger, Mimi, Joanne, Collins, Angel, even Benny, Mark and Roger’s semi-estranged former roommate. Plus a string from Les, his coworker Diane, Bonnie, his manager...

He’s feeling… he’s feeling something and he doesn’t know what it is. He doesn’t know if he likes it. His stomach feels strange, bubbling and hopeful. He feels buoyant, and his face is moving without his control: his lips pulling up no matter how hard he tries to keep a stern or placid expression. He… he doesn’t know what to do. And so, he stares into the round of judging, he reminds himself he will be judged. And, after he’s judged, they’re all going to know that he’s lost, and then…

The buoyant feeling comes crashing down like a lead balloon, and all he’s left with is the nervous energy in his stomach and the PA calls them over to begin filming again.

Jack feels lucky when Spot and Crutchie both insist that he go first in the judging. His pancakes won’t keep nearly as well as the menus the others have prepared. The only way for it to be fair is for him to go first.

So, he and Spot, Sarah and Katherine carefully carry his dishes up to the table to be judged.

And then, he waits and he watches and he braces himself for the critique. He feels himself slip into Cowboy the way you an old, worn uniform hoodie from the lost and found over your head. It doesn’t quite fit, it doesn’t quite feel like him, it smells a little bit off. But, at the same time, it’s familiar and safe and lets you blend in.

Jack had thought about going to art school for a hot minute or two. Hell, Jack had taken a semester
of art classes. He thought he’d do okay, that he could hack it. Jack is an okay artist, probably above average. He liked art, he did better at it in school than most of his other classes. And, when they’d need to dump him someplace new, it was easier to set him down with an art book and a yellow #2 pencil and a thick stack of paper than it was to find something else to entertain him. Maybe he had a natural talent somewhere along the line, but practice makes perfect, and he got better. ...He got good enough that he thought maybe his art was okay.

...And then, he went to his first art class in college. He done the assignment. He doesn’t remember what it was, just that he’d worked hard and thought he’d done well.

He’d worked his way through the rest of the semester. Some assignments better than others, some worse. (Eyes and fingers. He doesn’t know why they’re so hard, but he’s always had trouble with eyes and with hands. Landscapes are good. Landscapes are easy. Faces… faces have multiple expressions but the eyes always look sad.) He’d gotten to the end of the semester, and his teacher said for the final they’d be doing a critique. She was a professor of architecture, and felt it was an important part of their education.

Jack… Jack had felt shattered. It wasn’t the intention: twenty five year old Jack can recognize things that eighteen year old Jack was terrified to know. Seven years removed, he can appreciate the kindness the teacher was doing them in going through and pointing out their flaws and challenging their practices. At the time… at the time, there was nothing that Jack could have imagined being worse. He’d gone home, uncomfortable and dissatisfied. He’d been angry, resentful, frustrated. He’d dropped out of the art program, gone into psych instead because it didn’t require that much math. And maybe a small part of him thought that if he did it right, he could live an artistic critique of the System that had raised him.

Now, he’s not so sure one man can stand against that system. He knows he’ll be chewed up and spit out, his life sucked out one day at a time.

And so, as he stands in front of Joe and Medda, he wills himself to take this gracefully. He wills himself to be okay with things not being okay. This critique isn’t the end of his world. This critique won’t be the end of his world. They don’t like the pancakes. Fuck. The apocalypse might be coming.

Joe and Medda work through Spot and Crutchie’s menus with the same systematic precision that they’d used on Jack’s. There was a rubric somewhere in their minds, written into the brief for the bake. And, each of them had taken risks.

Spot’s menu was probably the most conventional and the most eclectic. He’s got polish paczki, which he pronounces like, Poonch-key, whatever the original polish is. He’s made a delicate corn tortilla - which technically might not be a flat bread, but who the fuck cares when they’re folded into central american style empanadas? Joe criticizes the pastry shell on his quiche: it’s the same thing he made before, and its soggy. But, Medda finds Spot’s apple turnovers to be a high point. The problem is that none of the dishes quite make sense together. Oh sure, they all taste good. But, there’s something less cohesive about a menu that somehow attempts to bring together breakfast flavors from around the world. And just sort of sinks flat. Like, half a world tour or something. It’s individually pretty good. It’s mostly technically sound (except for that pastry shell.) Hell, Medda doesn’t think she’s tasted a better apple turnover. Sarah and Kath have been abnormally quiet, mouths full with coffee cake and empanada. That doesn’t mean that any of it makes sense.

Jack’s got more traditional flavors: his breakfast feels all American. It was just spottier on the execution. There’s not concensus about whether or not his failure to pull off eggs benedict is in his
favor or is a black mark. (Medda had argued the poached egg felt incomplete, Joe had suggested it was there to mask the flavor of the english muffins. Jack hadn’t sure which response was more frustrating.) The danish was tasty, but the braiding was clumsy. Jack had practiced that braid three or four times before coming to the tent, and it always came out looking good at home. Less so here, under pressure and in the hot sun. Joe might have been able to overlook his somewhat untraditional pound cake, if it wasn’t for the failure that is his pancakes. Pancakes are supposed to be eaten fresh off the griddle, preferably bypassing serving tray or chaffing dish. The fact that these pancakes have been sitting means they’ve lost flavor. And, the bacon that he’d thought was so brilliant has congealed into a combination of sweet and salty that just doesn’t fit the “quick bread” brief. So, His pancake mistake belongs in week two or three, and not he finale.

Crutchie has the best composed menu, over all. This dishes are well thought out, and thought through. They’re designed to play off and highlight the flavor profile across his dishes, and complement each other. His coffee cake is to die for: a moist and creamy cake, layered with tart fresh blueberries and topped with a streusel crumb. Medda and Joe both finish their pieces, which is a ringing endorsement in Jack’s book and makes him want to try a piece, too. It looks good enough he could probably even force it past the iron ring that’s encircled his stomach. His popovers are a high point, a stark quick bread contrast to the failure of Jack’s pancakes. And, while his croissants aren’t remarkable in comparison to, say, his cake or Spot’s turnovers, they’re excellent none the less. In fact, the only issue Crutchie seems to have is whether or not pizza qualifies as a breakfast food. Joe concedes that it’s good pizza, that the thin crust cooked hot balances beautifully with the herbaceous pesto, tart goat cheese and salty olives. It’s just that Joe isn’t convinced it’s a breakfast food. And that might be the thing that sinks Crutchie, in the end.

Final Judgement

The field where they’re supposed to be having their picnic breakfast is crowded. Jack can tell that from where he’s crammed in the backseat of Crutchie’s van between Kath and the driver’s side window. (Crutchie had replaced his normal two person bench seat with a three person bench seat, blocking off the back. Jack wonders why he hadn’t done it sooner, given the number of times Race had to sit in Spot’s lap. ...Oh, wait. Fuck. ...hopefully?)

Sarah is laughing and pushing her body against Kath’s, playing a two person version of corners. Sarah had explained the rules quickly when they’d gotten in the car: three people across the back, and you squish them up against a window by using the car’s momentum. He wants to play, he wants to pick up on the fun flirty nature of the game, but he can’t. Jack’s seen corners play out before. There were three boys up near Taos. The oldest was terrified, you could see it in his eyes. He was only ten years old, and he was there, telling the little ones, eight and seven, that it would be good and they’d play the game all the way down the mountain and into Albuquerque where their mom was being held on felony drug charges.

Even though it’s a short drive, Spot fiddles with the radio until he finds an Alt Rock station and turns it up. Crutchie laughs and says something that’s covered by the music, driving with one hand while sipping coffee with the other. Given that Crutchie drives with hand controls, Jack finds it mildly disturbing that he takes his hands off the wheel.

He opens his mouth, and Crutchie just laughs. “I rode with you, that one time. You drive like an old man.”

Jack remembers. It had been late at night, the first night they’d… anyway. It had been the first
night, and it had been late. They should have been going to bed, the next day was guaranteed to be a long day. (And, Murphy’s law would prove true.) Instead, Crutchie laughed and said that he wanted ice cream. So, Jack looked for a late night ice cream shop, and they settled on McDonalds and Jack drove them because… he doesn’t actually remember the reason. Just that he’d driven and Crutchie’s kisses had tasted sweet and salty with peanut butter cup kisses. Jack smiles, thinking about that night.

Crutchie pulls the van into the parking lot and looks around. “Where is everyone?”

Sarah and Kath shrug and climb out of the van, stretching and professional again. Kath fishes in her bag to find a lipstick and Sarah pats down her hair, self-consciously.

Jack squints across the field. “Over there, I think?” He points to the gathering on the grass, well away from any of the gravel paths or anything else.

Crutchie moves around to the front of the van, one hand resting on it and the left slightly away from his body for balance. He stares across the field in disbelief, letting out a weary sound somewhere between a sigh and a snort. He turns his gaze upward, head lolling back. “What in the ever loving fuck?”

Sarah and Kath glance over at the two of them: Crutchie leaning against the hood, and Jack staring out into the field.

“This isn’t going to work, is it?” Sarah asks, stating the obvious.

Crutchie shakes his head.

“We could carry you,” Jack offers in half-hearted attempt to make the sucky situation suck less. He’s really not sure what he’s supposed to do. Sure, he’s had a fantasy of carrying Crutchie but it involved less clothing, a shorter distance, and a bed. To be honest, mostly it’s a fantasy about wanting someone to climb him like a koala. …He likes to be touched, okay?

“Hey, ain’t nobody carrying me!” Crutchie insists, words fierce.

He frowns as the sprinter van with the crew and the remains of their breakfast bakes show up. Jack suspects the hampers will be lighter than when they left the tent. The crew gets paid. The baked goods aren’t really considered a “bonus” since they’re essential waste materials. The crew definitely consider baked goods part of their compensation.

Kara pops out of the drivers seat, and looks around. She sees Crutchie, leaning against the van. “Oh, fuck.”

Jack takes a moment to let Cowboy slip into place while the recent re-located wave of well-wishes engulf them. The film crew follows the three of them, as they exchange quick delighted hugs with former contestants and their friends.

Jack hangs back. He’s friendly with Race, Blink, and the others. He’s happy to see all of them again. (Happier now than he was at seven this morning.) But, no one came specifically for him. And, he feels… he feels unloved and unwanted and alone.

In the middle of his one man pity parade, his hand curls around his phone. And about the eighteen
text messages from Mark, Roger, Joanne, Maureen, Mimi… messages and well wishes and a voice mail that’s probably a signature Maureen Johnson Original Drunk Diatribe yelling at him for not inviting her. He didn’t, of course, because he was sure they wouldn’t come. Well, except for Mark and Roger, who he did invite and couldn’t come, proving him right.

The camera crew wants him to interact with someone though, so Les leads David and his parents over. “You can borrow my family,” he offers. “My brother’s a dork, and my parents are…” he looks for words to describe his family. “My parents?”

Jack smiles thanks and Cowboy makes introductions, shaking hands and kissing cheeks and genuinely trying to be charming. Les even shows Jack the little sign they’d made in support of him. No one else has signs supporting them…

When the crew is done getting their shots, there’s a general cheer and the hampers get opened up.

Crutchie’s roommate, Barack, almost cries when he sees Spot’s paczkis. He surprising Spot with the force of his hug, the kind that almost knocks Spot off balance. He starts talking a mile a minute about how it isn’t even Casimir Pulaski Day he didn’t think you could get ones this good outside of Chicago. And Spot laughs, and says that’s what one of the girls on his crew said, too, and he’s glad he likes them. Spot looks happy, but at the same time, he’s wearing that scared, pained scowl-smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

And, there aren’t enough of Crutchie’s popovers to go around, and so Blink and Mush end up sitting together, perched on one of the camp chairs as they feed each other. Their friend Skittery decides he wants in on the action, and so by the end of it, the three of them have collectively eaten two popovers and collapsed four chairs. Not one of them can stop giggling.

Race’s sister votes for Jack, though. She walks over, sticks out her hand, and introduces herself. And then she tells him that he will personally teach her brother to make his cheese danish (gesticulating with a slice of the pastry the whole time) because she swears to all things above the earth and underneath it, she needs more of this in her life. And, that if he doesn’t give Race the recipe, she’ll find out where he lives and come haunt him there.

Resa Higgins is terrifying. Jack kind of wants to spend more time with her, and ask her to sort out everything that’s wrong with his life.

The afternoon passess, slowly. They’re waiting. They’re all waiting. No one wants to leave, not even from a minute, not even to pee. They’re just all there, frozen in time trying to figure out what will happen next.

Jack finds himself talking with the Jacobs. Les and David’s parents remind him of someone… someone familiar. He just… can’t quite put his finger on whom. Some pair of story book parents from some fairy tale he read once upon a time before they told him that fairy tales were for girls. He’d like Chris Crutcher. But, he’d also like Gail Carson Levine and Karen Cushman. (Maybe not at the same time, but he’d liked them both, nevertheless.)

There’s a sudden hush that falls over the crowd, as the first few people spot the golf carts coming back.

One of the small army of PAs pops into existence by Jack’s elbow, excusing him away from the Jacobs to come stand near the front of the crowd. Jack follows, obediently, his stomach churning.

They production assistants line the three of them up across the asphalt of the driveway, so there’s
green field and glittering ocean behind them. Jack doesn’t think it was the way it was originally supposed to look, but Crutchie had said something to Kara to remind her that he couldn’t walk on grass, and here they are. Crutchie is sitting in one of the ubiquitous folding fabric camp chairs, crutches resting nearby. Jack’s chatting with Spot, conspicuously in view.

As Joe and Medda climb out of their golf carts, one of the roommates rests a hand on Crutchie’s shoulder. They’re far enough behind that Jack isn’t entirely sure who it is, but Jack’s vaguely jealous all over again. He wants… he wants…

“Gentlemen,” Sarah says, as she and Kath stride toward them across the cracked gray asphalt. It sounds ominous. Like the Thing that this weekend has been building up to is about to happen. And, it is. The Thing is coming, like some horror movie monster. The Thing is coming, whether Jack likes it or not.

And then, he sees the Thing. Hannah, the producer in charge of the kitchen, is the one who unwraps it: a glass cake stand with the show’s logo and the year etched on it. To be honest, it’s kind of an anti-climatic Thing. An important, valuable, anti-climatic Thing.

Medda takes it from Hannah with a quiet word. She and Joe walk over, flanked by Katherine and Sarah.

They look somber, or maybe just serious. It’s strange to see those expressions on Kath’s and Sarah’s faces. A little bit, sad, maybe.

“Gentlemen,” Sarah repeats, making sure she has everyone’s attention. “After long deliberation,” Sarah and Kath roll their eyes to make it clear how long, “Joe and Medda have picked a winner.”

“So, without further ado,” Kath continues, picking up seamlessly. She looks over at Joe, a challenge in her eyes. “The winner of the New York Bake Off is, Charlie!”

Jack feels himself go numb. A cocoon wraps itself around him. He claps, because that’s what you’re supposed to do. He smiles as Medda comes over to shake Crutchie’s hand, and hand him the big cake plate. It’s good its Medda holding it, because even the detached part of Jack can see the fury in Joe’s eyes. He keeps his gaze down when the male judge comes to shake his hand.

And then, there’s a tsunami of people surrounding Crutchie, the wave picking him up and carrying him off. And, Jack and Spot are left alone. Jack’s alone, and it’s kind of nice. It’s quiet.

He didn’t get the Thing.

Crutchie got the Thing.

What the fuck does that mean? And, why is he disappointed about a damn cake plate?

Spot comes over, flops down on the grass beside the camp chair Jack finds himself sitting in. “Hella season, Kelly,” he says, as though he’s talking about baseball.

Jack nods.

“Everything came together, like it was supposed to,” Spot continues.

Jack nods. Everything happened the way it was supposed to, the way they agreed it should. He hadn’t thrown anything, he’d baked his heart out. And Crutchie had won. Which… Crutchie was supposed to win, right? That’s what they’d said, yesterday? That Crutchie was supposed to win. So then, why does it feel so awful?
“Still, i kinda wish it was me,” Spot admits, quietly.

“Yeah,” Jack agrees. “Me, too.”

There’s a big dinner that night, for the cast and the crew, the hosts, the judges, and the contestants. They’re back to the original nine. Not like the guessed last night. Well, their original nine, plus Mush - who Blink had definitely probably introduced as his seeing eye human, and Race’s sister’s, and Crutchie’s roommates, and Les’ parents. The - oh God, seriously, how many of them are there, really - sit around in some big banquet hall the production company has rented out and eat okay pasta and talk.

It’s taken Jack a bit to come down. He’s been letting Cowboy take the reigns for so long that he needed time to be alone to sit and just be Jack. He loves that place he can go, where he’s alone but not lonely. Somewhere in between stuck in his head, and having his feet solidly on the ground. (Or as solidly on the ground as you can get when you’ve borrowed someone’s mustang, driven off to the woods and decided to haul your ass up a boulder in converse.) He’d let him come down, reign Cowboy in, and to steady himself to ride through the wave of angst and guilt.

And now, disappointment compartmentalized and the acknowledgement that today is not his day to become, and his role as a love interest to the hero comfortably understood, he can celebrate Crutchie’s win. Because damn, he deserves it. He deserves it completely. Jack doesn’t know how they got here, but they did.

So, he drinks to celebrate Crutchie, and eventually, to celebrate himself. Because damn it, he had a good season. He baked cakes and pastries that people wanted to eat. He made it all six episodes. He did good. At least, that’s what Maureen and Angel tell him when he texts them the update. They send him commiserating texts and at least one more day-drunk voicemail that is more hilarious than pathetic.

And, at the end of the night, Jack ends up going home with Crutchie.

They fall into bed, both of them naked. Crutchie turns off the lights, and Jack settles in close.

And, when they’re done, he waits… he waits for Crutchie to kick him out.

But, he doesn’t.

So, Jack settles in to sleep, exhaustion and emotion and carb-induced lethargy waring to take responsibility for his exhaustion.

The phone is ringing. Why is the phone ringing? Why does his head hurt so much, and why is the phone ringing.

“Phone,” someone beside him mutters. “Get -- damn phone.”

Jack reaches over to the bedside table sleepily, and swipes this thumb across the screen to stop the ringing. “’Ello?” He says, sleeping. “This is Jack Kelly.”

“Hello, Mr. Kelly,” A crisp voice says on the other end of the phone. “This is Ms. March, with New York Social Services. Is now a good time?”
“Yes, yes.” Jack says, scrambling to sit up in bed. “Yes, now is good.”

He leans over, and kisses Crutchie on the forehead, and then stumbles into the bathroom. At least the bathroom will be blessedly dark, unlike the single lance of sunlight that’s coming through the window to set off a headache.

“Well, Mr. Kelly,” Ms March continues. “I’d like to know if you’re available this afternoon to come in for your drug test? And then, we’d like to discuss start dates. Do you know when you might be available?”

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh. So now you know. Sort of. Mostly.
Im not totally sure how I feel about this chapter. But, if I keep poking at it, it's not going to get better than this, I don't think. Maybe I'll come back and edit tomorrow. But, there's fall out. There's more fall out. There's always fall out. And, Crutchie will be telling you about it as soon as I get that written. (Realistically, expect another month. I thought this would come faster, but umm, then I went to vacation to the states with my family and now I've got a couple big projects at work that need to be taken care of. But, I have Plans. Lots of Plans.)

Thank you to Elozable, PennySparrow, and whoever else's brains I knowingly and unknowing picked about this. Also to Sarsroses for the discussions of critique in architecture.

For those of you interested in the recipes featured in tonight's episode, the sources document has probably more details than you need. Suffice to say that I have read so many danish recipes recently. So. Many.

Im doing some social media for next chapter (wish me good luck with the HTML), so if you have questions or thoughts you want tweeted at the characters, let me know here, or tumblr, via carrier pigeon, or with gifs from a fully choreographed and professionally filmed musical about the 1899 newsboys strike. IDK.

And, as always, questions, comments, concerns, emotions, generally screaming, headcanons, are all welcome.
Chapter Summary

In which Mush eats pop tarts, Spot in pancakes, and Jack does not eat a burger. Or, Crutchie's brief ode to the New York diner, where he has all his emotional conversations. Or, or, what happened after the bake-off ended.

(Because you guys didn't think that was the resolution, did you?)

Chapter Notes

Warnings
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Food. Swearing. Alcohol use by adults.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Media Relations Meeting
(three weeks post production)

*NY Office of Child (@NYOCSF)*

OCFS seeks candidates with child welfare and/or child protective services experience to provide dynamic training to local district and voluntary agency staff.

From official New York Office of Child and Family Services (@NYSOFCFS twitter), 13 August 2018

It’s hasn’t even been three weeks, but it feels like it’s been so much longer. He settles into the chair across from Jack, nervously adjusting and re-adjusting his crutches. It feels so different here, in this little Greek diner, than it had in Montag. Like this is the real world, and that was some technicolor TV dream. It had been a vacation from their day-to-day lives. And here, it’s just… fuck. They’re not in that cocoon anymore. The honeymoon is over. It feels like it should be natural, like they should be able to pick up where they left off.

"Thanks, umm, for coming out to lunch with me." The words feel dry against his palate, like a mouthful of flour and nothing else.

But, really, what are you supposed to say to the guy, the first guy in forever who hasn’t been your one night stand? How do you talk to the first person in… you can’t remember the last one, who you left sleepover. Not *sleep*, well *sleep*, but also just sleep. The one who left in morning without saying goodbye, who never showed up to the last breakfast, who got on a train to somewhere that wasn’t with you?

He picks up his coffee cup nervously, cupping it between his hands and under his chin.
Jack gives him one of those half smiles, a quirk of his lips and a tilt of his head and just enough change in his features that you think maybe he’s okay. "Eating lunch alone kinda sucks, doesn’t it?"

"Much better with company." Charlie agrees. He puts his coffee cup down sharply, next to the manilla folder a C. MORRIS label. "Okay, and as lunch company, what the fuck just happened?"

Jack huffs out a quiet laugh. "Umm… I don’t know where to begin."

"Cliff’s notes? Or, you know, just the headlines."

"Dr. Wang saves man’s penis." Jack suggests, quickly. "No, I read that one in the Post."

Then, Jack takes a moment to stare into his Coke, wincing as he stirs it with his plastic straw. This place seems not to have heard, or maybe just doesn’t care, about the straw ban that’s overtaken other places. He takes a long drink, to get his composure. Charlie waits, because as much of an asshole as Jack can be, he’s also thoughtful and insightful and sometimes painfully uncertain.

"Local man insists pizza is breakfast food. Controversy ensues. More at eleven." Jack says in his best news anchor voice.

"One neat trick to a perfect chocolate collar."

"Spot the contestant the contestant who keeps killed bees!"

Jack starts to giggle. Yes, Jack Kelly can giggle. And, it’s fucking adorable.

"Local guy who accidentally wandered onto cooking show discovers that his sister is hosting."

Crutchie soberes as the words come out of his mouth.

"Do you really think it was an accident?" Jack fiddles with the paper off his napkin ring, rolling it and unrolling up. "I can’t imagine David doing it intentionally," he says, finally. "I… I can’t imagine David doing it intentional, but umm, I’m not sure, ya know, how it happens by accident."

Charlie isn’t sure either, but he trusts Les and David enough. But, there’s part of him that can’t believe it was an accident. It feels like the kind of thing that happens in secret. The word that comes to mind is collusion, but that might just be because of Elmer’s obsession with Ron Elving, Tamara Keith and the entirety of the NPR politics pod-squad.

...Except that Charlie doesn’t think it was intentional. David had explained it. Sarah had explained it. And, he trusts the two of them. He’s sure it could blow up; they know it could blow up.

Which… yes. "Does it matter, though?" Maybe that’s the bigger question. "Does it matter?"

Jack opens his mouth. Closes it again. Frowns. "I’m not going to tell anyone else." Because really, who else would he tell? "But, I’m saying it to you: it bothers me."

Charlie opens his mouth to—

"Can I get you a refill, Hon?" The waitress interrupts the conversation, holding up a black-handled coffee pot.

She’s a small, round woman in a white apron and a "#1 Grandma pin below her nametag. Joann is same vintage of the diner, which is proudly displaying it’s "40 years and counting!" sign. She’s got a head of mostly salt, salt and pepper hair, and a white moustache that’s better than anything Crutchie could grow in three days.
He’s too surprised by the interruption fully understand what’s happening, and he dumbly holds out his cup.

"Thanks," Jack supplies, placing a hand over his half full plastic cup of Coke.

"Do you need anything else?" Joann prompts.

"I’ll have a burger and fries," Jack decides quickly. "Lettuce and tomato on the side. And, umm… Cr-Charlie?"

"Can I have a Gyro?" His voice finally comes to him. "With fries?"

"Do you want tazaki for fifty cents extra?"

"Yes," Jack and Charlie say in unison.

"I’ll have that up in a jiffy." Joann and her coffee pot bustle away.

"So, what was the weirdest question in your interview packet?" Jack asks, his cocky grin half pasted on.

In a group, Crutchie likes this side of Jack. He’s a good leader: he can both motivate and district, depending on what the situation requires. This Jack could probably lead an army to the gates of hell and back, and they’d follow him because he’s confident and sure and cares. He’s not that far off from the loud, brash Jack who made a Yo Mama Joke to Finch. The same week Katya came back to town. But, he’s different.

The problem here is that they’re not in a group. They’re one-on-one, trying to have a conversation as equals. Charlie doesn’t need Jack to lead him, or to take care of him. He doesn’t need the stories Jack spins: promises of how things might be different somewhere else, whispers of miracle cures. He likes where he is. He likes who he is. He’s fought a long time to get to the point where he can accept himself, and there are days when Jack’s world throw that careful balance back into chaos.

"...Sorry, what?" He looks up, realizing Jack has said something.

Jack shrugs. "You looked a little lost. I just asked about your questions."

"Oh, umm…" He pushes the folder across the table, and then stops. "Jack?"

"Yeah?" Jack pauses, ink-stained fingers halfway to the folder.

"Ummm… Spot said… Blink said, umm… Did you get a job?"

He’s not sure why he asked. Because knowing means having to deal with it. Knowing means they have to act. And, Charlie is getting tired of waiting.

He’s also tired of feeling like he’s being lied to or avoiding. Because Jack’s new job is this thing that everyone else had apparently known about: Spot, Race, David… hell, even Blink’s friend, Skittery, knew about Jack’s job before he told Charlie. And he isn’t even sure that Jack likes Race all that much.

"Yes," Jack admits, rolling the napkin paper again. "Yeah, I did get offered a job here."
"And…?" He's not sure what he's asking.

*And, when were you going to tell me* sounds too much like one of those jealous, overbearing cliches. *And, do I matter?* is another one. He doesn’t know how to ask the question without making it feel like he’s asking something he shouldn’t be. Like he doesn’t trust Jack. Or maybe, more to the point, that Jack doesn’t trust him.

Jack shrugs, but refuses to look him in the eye. "I think I’m going to take it."

"Congratulations." The word bursts out forcefully, if not enthusiastically. When you’re not sure how to respond to news of a new baby, new job, new relationship, or new adventure, "Congratulations" usually works. People will then signal if it was actually appropriate, but it’s a good place to start.

Jack just sort of stares at him. "Yeah, thanks." His voice is empty.

Charlie takes a long, fortifying sip of his coffee. He’s trying to be happy for Jack. He is. So, why does he feel so betrayed that this is how he’s learning about it? "When do you start?"

"I umm… I had my first day last Thursday."

"Fuck. Just… Fuck."

Jack stares at some condensation that’s rolled off his coke and pooled on the table. He traces his finger through it, drawing some sort of pattern that the water fills in.

"Fuck," Charlie says, for a third time. "You had your first day last Thursday, and you didn’t tell me?"

He tries to keep the hurt out of his voice. He knows he fails.

Jack looks up and sighs. "I didn’t… Crutchie… I didn’t… I don’t…"

Charlie lets out his own sigh. He doesn’t know what to say either.

He doesn’t know why Jack did it, or maybe the better question is why he didn’t. But, Charlie has an answer to that, too. He just doesn't want to deal with the questions that brings up. Because if he asks that question, then they have to eventually answer the question of whether or not they want to be together long term. Which fundamentally becomes a question of whether or not they like each other, and how they like each other.

He likes Jack in a group. Likes him as an acquaintance. He likes watching him take on the role of impromptu leader, the way he and Spot seem to command a situation. He likes that Jack just fine, as long as he’s not running off his mouth to play rodeo clown. Its a fine line, but Jack mostly stays on right side of it. Which… as long as he does, it’s okay.

He knows he could love, or could grow to love Jack. But, Charlie is free and easy with his love. He always has been. Albert says his soft, open heart is his downfall. Albert also comes to him on the rare occasions he needs someone to reassure him that he’s loved. Sometimes that’s in the form of memes, and sometimes it’s soft words. Charlie loves his friends, he holds them close and he offers them smiles and favors and time. Love is a simple thing: Charlie loves Spot, he loves Race, there’s not reason he should not love Jack.

And, he’s in lust with Jack. He has been pretty much since the two of them met at that screen trial on Staten Island. Charlie’s wicked attracted to him. And, he has a track record of thinking with his
little brain over his big one, sometimes. He... he likes sex, okay? Sex with no strings and no obligations and no expectations beyond basic human decency and disability 101. And yes, some of that may be because there are plenty of guys who won’t call him back.

And oh God, Jack Kelly has a pretty body and a gentle touch and a wicked tongue.

The problem, with all these things, is that the sum of them together doesn’t quite add up. He can’t explain the math (it has never been his strong suit), but it doesn’t add up. And, he doesn’t think he can get all the pieces to synthesize into in love. And, maybe, Charlie is a romantic, but he’d like to date Mr Right and sleep with Mr Right Now. (And, maybe that just makes him a pragmatist.) He’s afraid there’s some missing catalyst that will take this thing from what might be a fun fling and turn it into a real relationship. A catalyst that he’s seen with Blink and Mush.

And so, Charlie turns back to Jack who he likes and loves and is in lust with, but might not be in love with. He realizes he might be missing a key ingredient: Jack, himself. And, Charlie isn’t sure where he stands with the other man. And, Jack can be hard to read. He’s a Jack of All Trades. Jack the liar. Jack who spins stories out of air and shadow, playing out every one of his fantasies come to life. Jack who speaks about a little house outside the city, with fresh air and a garden, and money to live on. Someplace where insurance is paid, and things are easy. Jack spins a good promise, all the while, the dancing sparks reflecting the fear in his eyes. Jack spins his world, knowing it can come crashing down at any moment. And so, Charlie isn’t sure which story Jack will tell him.

And, knowing that missing piece of his recipe, he knows which question he has to ask. "It’s just... you told your friends. Why didn’t you tell me? Am I not your friend?"

Jack’s face falls, all his hope and anxiety collapsing in on itself.

"Burger with fries and a side of tazaki?" The waitress, Joann, bustles over with impeccable timing.

Jack raises his hand, listlessly.

She slides the basket in front of him.

"...And, Gyro?"

Charlie nods, and smiles. His lips are tight and the expression doesn’t reach his eyes.

"Can I get you gentlemen anything else?" Joann asks.

Yeah. A time machine. So they can go back and do this over. So he can unsay what he’s said and Jack can undo what he’s done and they can start this right.

"Could I get more coffee?" He asks, lifting his half full cup.

Joann gives them a curt nod and hustles off.

"...I...I Christ. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to do this!" Jack bursts out. "I don’t know how to do a relationship. Not with a woman, and definitely not with a man. How the fuck was I supposed to know that you wanted to be told?"

And, there it is. The question Charlie isn’t sure he can answer. "Are we friends, Jack?"

Jack stares into his burger, his silence answer enough.

Charlie doesn’t know if Jack cares about him for anything more than his body. He doesn’t know if Jack has to think about the answer to the question, and if he does why.
Jack looks up from his burger, and stares at him for a moment. "I have to-- I can’t---." He fumbles with his wallet. "I’m sorry. I have to go."

He throws a $20 on the table, and rushes out.

And, Charlie is left staring at Jack’s untouched burger and his empty seat.

*CrutchMasterM (@crutchie)*

Boys are stupid. 🍔 or 🍔

*Elmer (@NewsNoMore)*

@crutchie 😞💔😞

**First Episode Viewing Party**

(ten weeks post production)

*Kath Plumber (@kathplumber)*

Tune in at 8/7 central to see our newest batch of bakers #NYBO

"Stupid fucking asshole." Charlie mutters to himself, circling the block again. He just needs an empty spot. Any empty spot. He can walk five or six blocks to Race’s apartment now, but he doesn’t want to, tonight. So, he just needs an empty spot…

"Language," Albert interjects. "In this family, we don’t swallow our curses."

"We enunciate them like fucking ladies," Charlie agrees, zooming in on the yellow curb.

He tucks the van into it, barely managing to avoid kissing the bumper in front of or behind him. He sort of hates street parking like this. He doesn’t have his wheelchair today, but if he did, he’s not sure if he’d be able to get it out. The cars are too tight, and there’s not enough room. Even with his parking pass, he hates parking in the city.

He’d tried to get them all to come out to his house. He’d cleared it with Finch and the others. (Mostly Finch. Al and El and Buttons don’t care as much, as long as having people other doesn’t inconvenience them, and Henry is always up for a party. Finch, though, likes his space. Finch wants to know who is coming to the house.) The majority of the other contestants had vetoed the idea. None of them want to spend hours traveling out there. And, Charlie can understand: it’s a lot of hours, if you sum them all up. It’s just that then, it’s his time spent traveling in. Small’s and Romeo’s homes were also out for similar reasons: Smalls lives up in the Bronx, and it’s a long trip, and Romeo is the fuck out on Long Island.

The Jacob’s place was out. It’s not big enough for all of them. And, although Mr and Mrs Jacobs were invited, they deferred. They were briefly added to the party planning group chat. And, either Les is diabolical enough to buy two burner phones and use them to text the group as his mom without David noticing, or they really did message Mrs. Jacobs. Given the number of cheerful emojis, Charlie is going with the later.

Jack and Blink both live in buildings without elevators. Or, Blink’s building has an elevator. It just isn’t working right now. Charlie *can* climb a flight of stairs, if he has to. He can also pull all nighters and live on nothing but gas station food, if he has to. He doesn’t want to.

…Which just left Spot’s place and Race’s. He’s not sure what silent negotiation went on behind the
scene, but they’ve ended up at Race’s building.

Al and Henry climb out, Henry carefully retrieving the tupperware container of pastries he’s been clutching in his lap the entire trip. Charlie thinks the only reason he hasn’t been eating them is because Henry - and the rest of he boys - have already consumed enough to satisfy their appetites.

He should get out and follow them. He needs to get out and follow them. It’s just… he hasn’t seen Jack since that day in the diner. He hasn’t seen him, hasn’t heard from him aside from what they both post in the group chat.

And, he’s not sure he’s ready to see Jack again. Because it means he has to deal with the fact Jack doesn’t want to be his friend. He was good enough to sleep with, good enough to sleep with. But, he wasn’t good enough to tell about Jack’s new job. And, despite the pint of cookie dough ice cream and the extra large jar of dilly beans that Henry got from his aunt because he knows their Charlie’s favorite, and the constant reassurances from Al and El and Finch that he’s a strong man who don’t need nobody, it still hurts. It hurts a lot.

*Tony* (@AnthonyNYBO)

The boys (and girls) are back together! #NYBO #BakingBFFs

The apartment is overflowing with people and food. In the living room, Race, Sniper, and Jack are arguing about how to hook up a TV to a computer monitor so they can display a tweet deck. Between the three of them, they have two master's degrees. The tangle of cords is alluding them. Henry, who occasionally hooks up TVs as part of his job as a cater waiter at one of the big convention centers, sits on the couch and heckles. Race’s sister takes one glance at the trio, shares long look with Henry and plops down on the couch next to him. The shopping bag she brought clinks slightly as it settles heavily on the floor. Resa’s heckles are the most creative thing Charlie has heard all day. And, he’s currently working returns.

Les, Blink, and Smalls are gathered together in another corner, trying to work something out on laptops, tablets, and phones. They’d all been sent new Twitter accounts last week, verified ones for the show. He’d taken the time to sign into his verified @charlieNYBO account at home, before coming. Apparently the others hadn’t been so prepared.

In the kitchen, there’s a spread rapidly coming together. Without the pressure of the tent, the bakers still feel the need to show off. Les has brought challah rolls in perfect little braids. Race made pizza, and it looks so damn good. Smalls has perfect little chocolate Guinness cupcakes. They’re awesome. He knows, he’s only eaten three. Spot brought some of his honey, and a big-ass green salad. He’s standing by the sink, slowly adding tap water to a jam jar with vinegar, tasting it with his finger ever so often. David’s by the stove, stirring his pot of soup.

Charlie perches on the counter, eating a bowl of the soup. It’s not quite weather appropriate: gazpacho would have been better, he thinks. But, it’s warm and filling with just the slightest hint of smoky heat. For a guy who claims he can’t cook, David’s soup is impressive.

"Yo, assholes, come in here," Henry calls from the living room. "The show is about to start."

Charlie isn’t sure he’s ready, but he slides to his feet anyway. He deposits the bowl of soup in the sink, and follows Al into the living room. One long look with Henry (who has played "get drunk Charlie off the floor" roulette before) and he’s got a seat on the couch, sandwiched between the arm of the couch and Mush.
The rest of the contestants have crowded in. Spot has claimed a massive bean bag for himself. It looks amazing, although completely out of place in this slick, impersonal, modern apartment. It looks like something that belongs in a college dorm room. Blink has settled on the floor, sitting between Mushes legs which the other man plays with his hair. Les stretches out on the floor, head in his hands, and Smalls quickly follows. The rest pile in, just as Sarah and Kath’s faces appear on TV. Race’s gaze makes a frantic circle around the room, rejecting the kitchen chairs that Al, David and Jack have dragged in and skipping over the cushions and pile on the floor.

"Ouff!" Spot grunts, as the beanbag beside him dips.

"I love New York," Sarah says, shifting her shoulders. "I always find the best things here."

Race swats playfully at Spot, missing his by a good few inches. "Shut up, it’s starting."

Lou Baletti (@LouNYBO)

.@RomeoNYBO: You fool! You fell victim to one of the classic blunders - the most famous of which is "never get involved in a land war in Asia" - but only slightly less well-known is this: "Never use floral flavors when baking for @JPulitzerBakes" #NYBO

It takes until the middle of the first commercial break for Charlie to get the hang of live tweeting. The set up they’ve got going helps, a little bit. The TV’s on one screen, and the scrolling tweetdeck on the other mean that they can both simultaneously watch the trainwreck of the first episode unfold and watch the trainwreck of the twitter response.

So far, they’ve introduced Romeo and his bakes. He’s a graduate student who enjoys baking in his free time to relieve stress. Romeo’s not with them tonight: he’s somewhere in an anonymous studio in the city where they’re going to film a post-show reaction and re-cap. he post-episode re-cap isn’t something Charlie has seen before: he normally watches online. It’s clear Romeo is watching, though, because an overhonest method retweet appears on his official account. Something about the postdoc running away to start a bakery.

Charlie wishes Romeo was here to talk about the B-roll, though. He probably does actually wear a lab coat. There are pictures of him on instagram in a lab coat and goggles, and he’s definitely sent snaps of it. On the other hand, he doesn’t need little sputters and gasps of outrage as they show Romeo pipetting colored water into dry ice. Because apparently that’s what Science™ looks like.

"At least they don’t have a model of DNA or any molecules in there," Mush mutters.

Blink tilts his head back to look up at his husband. "Nicky, this from the man who insisted he wasn’t a real scientist unless we got erlenmeyer flask shot glasses? Judgemental prick!"


Blink grins mischievously.

Smallsie (@ElizNYBO)

Always you use protection, right @LouNYBO? #CupcakeMistake #NYBO

There are moments of watching the episode that just bring up visceral feelings for Charlie. He’s not the only one wincing when Smalls tries to pull her cupcakes out of the tin without any liners.

"Smalls, seriously, what the fuck?" Sniper hisses beside her. "What the hell were you thinking?"
Smalls leans against Sniper’s chest, wrapping her flannel shirt closer across her tank top. "I was panicking, if you can’t tell," she complains. "Not all of us can be cool as cucumbers in the face of their own stupidity." She casts a pointed look at Blink.

Mush shakes his head, looking down at his husband. "Nah, we always use protection. Lou knows better than to forget."

"Damn skippy," Blink agrees, pointing to the TV to illustrate his point, as the cinematic version of himself uses little parchment paper tabs to pull his light green cupcake out.

Joseph Pulitzer(@JPulitzerBakes)

Try my easy and delicious Sunshine cake recipe from @HerstMedia’s The World Bakes Cakes. @MissMedda and I go through it in a special online video: tiny/hurst-sunshine #NYBO

Charlies and the rest of the boys almost laugh when they see Joe’s tweet pop up on the big screen.

"Did the fucker just tweet what I think he tweeted?" Les demands, getting up to point at it.

"Language!" David says.

Les just rolls his eyes. "Yes, Dad."

Charlie has to admit, though, the shot they show on TV is beautiful, and it makes the cake look simple. Also, damn it, he wants some. He would very much not like to deal with Joe any time soon, but he’d like some of that cake.

He reaches into his pockets for one of his poptarts. They’re better than any stupid technical challenge cake.

Mush seems to think so, too. "Where’d you get those?"

Charlie points toward the kitchen. "The white container with the blue plastic lid. There are strawberry, because strawberry are classic. And, cinnamon sugar because some people are heathens." He rolls his eyes, but Elmer’s right and it is tasty. "Oh, and umm, fresh blueberry."

He sighs, and pulls the second (okay third) out of his pocket, and hands it to Mush.

Mush’s eyes get huge.

Blink reaches back, and taps him on the leg. "Dude, you’re not supposed to…"

Mush sighs. "Can’t it be a cheat day?"

The go into silent conversation, the telepathy of a married couple.

Mush breaks it in half, and raises an eyebrow.

"You’re cleaning the bathroom," Blink says, accepting it. "And, you’re not allowed to complain."

Mush takes a bite, and grins blissfully. "Worth it, you asshole. So much better than the real thing."

He turns to Charlie. "I don’t know how you do it, but they taste amazing."

Charlie shrugs. "I can give you the recipe, if you want it."

Blink shakes his head. "I’m retiring from baking. We’re going gluten free."
Mush makes a face. "It’s not because we’re hipsters, or anything."

"I can probably make them gluten-free," he offers.

Mush leans over. "If I weren’t already happily married, I think I’d propose on the spot."

"Please don’t propose on the Spot," Race says, from where he’s doing something that might be an awkward snuggle with the other occupant of the beanbag. "You’d crush him."

"I resemble that comment!" Blink says, enthusiastically reaching down to pinch at his belly. He looks around. "Anyway, Mush isn’t proposing, on Spot or otherwise. Propositioning, maybe…"

Mush takes his cue, and leans over and kisses Charlie chastly on the cheek. And then reaches over and breaks off a piece of his poptart.

Charlie laughs, shaking his head.

He hears a door slam, and looks around. Jack is nowhere to be seen.

Semi-feral Pigeon(@semi-feral-pigeon)

Why does everyone always try to make chocolate collars? They’re like the kryptonite of cake week. #NoMoreCollars @charlieNYBO teach me your witchcraft. #NYBO

Charlie(@CharlieNYBO)

.@semi-feral-pigeon Have you tried tempering your chocolate under a full moon? Mine usually requires my own blood sacrifice. You’ll notice most of us have made them to the baking gods. #NoMoreCollars #BakingGodsArePowerful #NYBO

Charlie isn’t sure it will ever be fun to watch reality competition shows again. They’ve cut it nicely, so you don’t see the number of takes that went into that perfectly candid shot of someone watching the oven. (Thankfully, they didn’t ask him to be the one to lay out in front of an oven to watch the bake. It had been hilarious, though, when someone had zeroed in on Spot as the best candidate.) It’s a lie, behind the scenes. Of course, it’s also designed to produce maximum drama.

They’ve edited the episode so that he and Romeo get shown back-to-back frequently, drawing a stark contrast between their two attempts at similar cakes. And yeah, they’d both been ambitious. They’d both chosen something that a lot of people try - and fail in making. Charlie swears he does not want to make another chocolate collar ever again. But, the thing you don’t see on TV is the discussion he and Romeo had over drinks the night before, where Romeo talked about his thesis project and his upcoming oral examination. And, damn if that wasn’t more impressive than anything else they were doing. Charlie feels like he’s drowning, trying to finish a degree he knows he needs to get a minimum wage job, while Romeo seems to breeze through. So, maybe Romeo can’t make a chocolate collar. But, Charlie knows that he can’t begin to run a gas chromato-thingy, which Romeo troubleshooting over the phone Saturday night.

And, that’s what frustrates him, here. Romeo is so wonderfully smart, just awesome in general. They should be showing him off. If Charlie ever gets a show… Charlie doesn’t think he will, so it doesn’t matter right now.

Spot picks up on his change in mood. Because for all that Spot can be a moody bastard, he’s good at reading people. Maybe it was a learned skill, but he’s good at it. “What’s wrong, Morris?”

He shrugs, and raises his empty beer can to take a drink before responding. “Just think they gave
Romeo the short end of the stick.”

Smalls shakes her head. “It was a competition, Chuck.”

“Yeah, but it could just as easily have been me who went home, if my chocolate didn’t temper,” he argues. “It was luck.”

Smalls shrugs, leaning against Sniper. “Tempering chocolate is about skill, not luck,” she tells her girlfriend in sotto voce. His friends are dramatic as fuck. Someone should put them on TV.

Race, returning from the kitchen, drops a cold can of beer into Charlie’s lap, and one into Small’s outstretched hand.

“Tempering chocolate is witchcraft,” he announces, cracking open his own can and flopping onto Spot. “We do not speak of such evil, here.”

“But…” Les points at the TV.

Race raises his eyebrows, and makes the sign of the cross over himself: spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch.

“Witchcraft,” Resa mutters, crossing herself quickly.

Romeo (@RomeoNYBO)

So blessed to have been part of #NYBO. @MissMeddaLarkin and @JPulitzerBakes were amazing judges. Thank you both. @SarahKeatComedy and @kathplumber. Good luck to all my fellow contestants!

Somehow, Charlie finds himself the only person in the apartment with the trio of Rossis.

Al’s the first to leave. He said he’d come in, he came in because he’s the closest thing Charlie has to a brother, and they support each other. But, he has a two and a half hour trip home, and so he wants to get started early.

David and Les make their goodbyes shortly thereafter. Les is taking - or maybe retaking an algebra class. And, just like regular high school, summer school starts at 8 am. It’s the only way to avoid the heat in the old, un-air conditioned schools where classes are inevitably held. (Charlie and Al got stuck in the stifling elevator of one of those schools the July he was 17.) So, David and Les left so Les could “be in bed by 10”. (Charlie knows it’s David who goes to bed early.)

The rest hurry out soon after, making excuses as they go. Thursday night is just the cusp of the weekend, and it’s hard because they can’t stay out too late. So, they duck out in twos and threes, until no one is left.

And then, it’s Charlie sitting on the couch, watching the end of the after show and drinking a cold can of whatever’s close to hand. He feels weirdly numb, having watched Jack walk out without a backward glance. As though none of the rest of them matter to him. Through the empty miasma filling his head, Charlie can hear Race bickering and laughing with his sister and his cousin.

Charlie sighs. It doesn’t matter. Boys are stupid, him included. He’s still not entirely sure why he’s so hung up over this one.

He gets to his feet and and turns off the TV, and then makes his way slowly into the kitchen.
There’s too much post-party debris to make it easy, but there’s also something nice about seeing it there. Race’s apartment had been nearly sterile when they’d arrived, like the set of a TV show. It felt hollow and empty and nearly too perfect. Now, there’s life and imperfections, even if it comes in the form of landmines and tripping hazards. And, damn it, he thought he’d trained the rest better, but…

In the kitchen, the subtle, homey chaos continues. Resa is at the sink, washing a pile of dishes. Henry is going around with plastic containers and a large garbage bag, sorting through the remaining things around. Most people had the good grace to take their food home with them, but there are a few items left behind. Possibly as a thank you gift. Also, a lot of empty cups, cans, and bottles. Race says something, laughing, and flicks Henry with a dish towel, before picking up the battered dutch oven David had used to heat up his soup and rubbing the soft cloth on the inside.

“Charlie, Charlamagne,” Henry greet him, his eyes gleaming with glee and possibly gin. Charlie winces at his name. And once again curses his (presumably) history obsessed namer. The rapper didn’t come to prominence until well after Charlie’s birth.

“Yes, Henry?” He shifts subtly, stretching his leg and waiting.

Henry shrugs, the movement exaggerated to demonstrate sobriety and independent thought. “I’m going to stay here, tonight!”

Definitely gin.

Charlie nods. He’d half expected this, seeing Henry with his cousins. There’s clearly a lot that’s changed between when they used to be close and now. But, now, somehow, their homes are still open. “Do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?”

He’s got a doctor’s appointment tomorrow. A doctor’s appointment with X-rays. It’s a whole day thing; he’ll have to be back up at NYU for it by nine and then, he’ll probably be done about three, if he’s lucky.

He shrugs. “I won’t be done until early afternoon.”

Henry shrugs. “Resa and I might play tourist. Apparently we’re ‘relatives in town’ so Ant here has tomorrow off.”

“I needed some way to get off early!” Race protests. “And saying that I had family coming in was enough. They don’t know that you’re coming from Long Island and Jersey.”

“So, while he works,” Henry continues, ignoring the interruption, “we might go to the Statue of Liberty. Or Chinatown. Or something.”

Probably Chinatown. Henry is obsessed with soup dumplings. For good reason. Soup dumplings are the eighth wonder of the world.

“Yeah, I’ll pick you up.” Charlie nods, and goes to gather his clean tupperware from where it’s sitting on the counter. He studies it for a moment, and then looks around. “Can I borrow a shopping bag? It’s late, and I should head home.”

Race goes and pulls one out of the tiny pantry.

Henry looks at him, drunken horror dawning. “Wait, didn’t you tell Buttons you’d drive him in tomorrow if he can be a bit late?”

“Yeah?” Charlie feels like he should brace himself for something, he’s just not sure what’s coming
It’s Buttons the one who wakes up at the ass crack and is all cheerful?” Resa asks, as she drains the sink. “Like, obnoxiously cheerful for six am?”

Henry and Charlie nod in unison.

“And it’s what, two hours out now, and three hours back tomorrow, with the traffic?”

“Yes,” Henry confirms.

“And you’ve been drinking?”

Charlie shrugs. Some. A little. More than he should have. His head hasn’t been entirely clear since Jack left. Or really, since Jack arrived.

Resa shakes her head, shakes her hands, and looks between the two of them.

Henry seems to recognize the glint in her eye. “Charlie, your bag still under the back seat.”

It’s a rhetorical question, probably. Charlie trails after Henry as they go to the apartment door, and Henry fishes the keys out of his backpack.

He doesn’t know what else to do, so he sinks down onto the couch.

You know what I need more fo in my life? Old school slumber party games. What happened to painting our nails badly, ordering Pizza at 3 am, and staying up all night to play those stupid human games like pushing eachother off the Eiffel tower?

@pastrami4life Eating pizza, painting our nails badly, watching forbidden MTV, pushing eachother off the Eiffel tower and filling our heads with rocks and sand. What did you do?

@pastrami4life Nerd.

He’s sitting across from Resa, doing his stupid ankle adduction exercises, while she paints her toenails electric blue.

“I wait until I’m over here to do it,” she admits. “Because I know Tony likes to paint his nails, if I catch him in the right mood.”

Crutchie pushed his right foot onto the table. “You can paint mine, if you want.”
“Ohh!” Resa exclaims, crab walking over on her heels. “Fresh meat!” She pulls out some kind of clear polish. “Can I touch your foot?”

He hesitates for a moment, and then nods. He’s not sure about the protocol for his. Charlie grew up with brothers. Always bothers, never sisters. He was, of course, aware of the existence of girls. Sort of like he was aware of the existence of squirrels, police horses, and corgis. And, he had about as much use for squirrels and police horses as he did for girls - and less than he did for Corgis. Because… corgis. And, everyone had said an interest would materialize at some point. It never really did. So, while he grew up to interact with them regularly, he doesn’t understand the mysteries. He certainly doesn’t know how toenail painting works.

“So, which one is it?” She motions for him to shift forward, so he puts some weight on his foot, stabilizing his ankle and knee against his right arm.

“Which one is what?”

“Which boy?” Resa shakes the bottle of polish, exasperated.

“What boy what?” He’s starting to feel like a parrot. Resa want a pop tart?

Resa sighs. “I’m not being fair. I just missed…” She straightens her shoulders, and dips her brush back into the bottle. “It just seems like you’ve got a crush, or a something, with one of them. And, I was wondering who.”

He opens his mouth to protest.

“Hopefully not my brother,” She continues, talking to his third toe. “Hopefully, he’ll get his head out of his ass and realize he has it bad for Spot.”

“Are those separate events, or the same one?”

Resa laughs. “Both, neither.”

“Would it help if I said Spot has it bad, too? Like, really, really bad?”

“So, not my brother and not Spot…” She motions for his left foot. “Ummm… Jack?”

He doesn’t know what his face does, but she knows.

“Oh, fuck.”

They sit in silence for a few minutes, Resa focused on the tiny brush in her hands.

“I… I…” he starts, and then stares at the nail polish colors. “I think I like him, but he’s such an asshole!” The words come out with more force than he expected. “And, not like the good kind of asshole. I’m an asshole, you know? And Henry, Al, they’re my kind of assholes.”

Resa blows across his toenails, the air whistling quietly. “These need to dry for another minute or two, and then we’ll do color. And, yeah, I know what you mean.” Her voice sounds hollow, like she’s talking to someone who’s not there.

“I just don’t know if we’re compatible assholes,” he says, finally. “Well…”

She holds up three bottles. “Not that I’m not super interested, but, umm… glitter, galaxy, or hot pink?”
“Pink.” It’s the color of a pink fucking highlighter. Like there was any other choice?

“Won’t it clash?” Resa asks, shooting a look over at his bright green and orange tie-dye brace. The patterns are supposed to be for kids, but Ali hooked him up.

“It’s that the point?” He nudges the bottle toward her.

Resa gives the bottle a good shake. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

“Mope,” he tells her.

“You’re terrible at moping.” Henry sits down on the couch next to him, and looks over the selection. “Do you mind?”

Resa shrugs. “That athlete’s foot…”

“Given me credit, I’m twenty-nine, not nine.” Henry picks up the bottle of clear polish Resa has just abandoned and threads paper towels between his toes.

“Ohh!” Race plops down next to his sister, shirtless so the small white bandage on his stomach shows. “You brought the glitter.”

“This is just like when we were kids,” Henry tells Crutchie. “Dad or Auntie Carma would drop some of us off for ‘quality time’ at least once a month.” His tone and his air quotes (air quotes!) make it clear who “quality time” was intended to help.

“It’s been ages!” Resa says, pushing the glitter at her brother. “Do you want a base coat, or?”

“Nah.” He unscrews the top, dipping the brush expertly.


“And why wasn’t I invited?” Resa switches feet. “Hold that one still… did he say your name was Charlemagne?”

“Charlie,” he tells her, quickly. “But you can call me Crutchie.”

“Charlie,” she repeats. “Hold your foot still, otherwise it will smear.”

Henry shrugs. “He and Spot showed up on our doorstep half dead, and said they were staying.”

“And then the kitchen exploded.” Charlie offers, helpfully.

Resa squeezes her eyes shut, which is both a familiar expression from Race and a slightly scary thing when she’s holding a paintbrush of luridly pink nail polish over Charlie’s foot. “That… that made sense?” She complained. “It shouldn’t have made sense, you know, but it did?”

She dips the brush into the bottle, setting it down on the coffee table with an audible crack. “I hate you all.”

“We love you too.” Race replies, implacably.

Drama over, Resa returns to painting Charlie’s toenails. “So, if this was a planned thing, how come I wasn’t invited?”

“It wasn’t planned,” Henry reassures her. “Not planned at all.” He raises his eyebrows at Race and
Charlie, daring them to expand on it.

“You… you haven’t told her, have you?” He asks Race, horror slowly dawning on him. He’s got a pretty good poker face, but maybe not about this.

“Told me what?” Resa demands, leaning over to blow on his does again.

Race looks up from the process of blowing on his feet. “Nothing.” His voice is hard. “Nothing at all.”

Charlie looks between the two of them, trying to decide if he should pull off the bandaid for Race. “Better explain the nothing now,” he says, trying to keep the threat out of his tone. “It’s going to be on national TV in like, three weeks.”

Race sighs. “Right. Resa, ummm,” he fiddles with the bottle of nail polish in his hand. “Resa, I erm, might have gone low? Umm, on the show?”

“Oh God.” The words are quick and hard. “How bad, Tony? How bad?”

He shrugs. “They kinda umm called an ambulance,” he mutters.

Resa looks at him. “Wait, you it got so bad they called an ambulance and you didn’t tell me? Or mom? Oh God, Tony. What that the fucking hell?”

Race opens his mouth.

“Shut up,” she says, grabbing his arm. “We need to talk.” Resa thrusts a bottle of clear polish at Henry. “Top coat, finish out Charlie.”

Then, she pulls Race away, toward his room, both of them hobbling on the balls of their feet with their toes curled to keep them off the floor.

Charlie looks at Henry. What the fuck?

Henry shrugs, and touches the edge of his nail. “So, umm, do you want to fuck with Ant’s Netflix until the polish is dry?”

The Racetrack Higgins (@racetrackbae)

Friends don’t let friends drive drunk. Friends don’t let friends drive stoned. Hell, this is New York City. Let’s be honest, friends don’t let friends drive, period. Parking is too damn expensive.

**Morning Show Interview**
(thirteen weeks post production)

*Wake Up USA!* (@wakeusa)

Up Next: We’re welcoming the contestants and hosts from #NYBO! Send us your questions for the contestants.

It’s too damn early. Why in the fucking hell does no-coffee o’clock exist? Who decided this was a good idea? It’s so early Finch and Buttons are still in bed. And they both seem to think missing the sunrise each and every morning is a personal affront on their manhood. It’s so early he’s not sure his evening drugs have digested fully.

But, Charlie was the asshole who decided that he’d rather sleep at home, in his own bed, than
crash with someone in the city. He wasn’t going to sleep a lot either way, but at least at home, he can not-sleep a lot in his memory foam bed and wake up to coffee the way he likes it: hand ground and made in a pour over. When he stays at someone else’s place, he gets no sleep on their slowly deflating air mattress, and his first cup of coffee is from one of those little Starbucks Via packages.

The morning drive is peaceful. New York is the city that never sleeps, but it at least gets drowsy between three and four am. The lights glow golden against the deep blue of the sky, and the streets are quiet.

He likes driving. He’s naturally an extravert. He feels at home surrounded by the buzz of a popular coffee shop or the roar of a bar. There’s a reassuring comfort in the feeling of having others around. There are times, though, when he needs space to think. He wishes he could find the anonymity in coffee shops, bars, and whatever else people go to be Not!Alone. Blending in isn’t a problem he’s had for a while. And, crowds are infinitely harder to navigate in a wheelchair or on crutches than you think they should be.

So, when he needs that feeling of being alone, but not alone, he drives. He lets himself own the car, own his fear, own himself. He plays Beyonce and Gwen Stefani and P!nk and the Killers, because he can. He lets the noise wash over him. He lets the cars around him be companions. And, he relaxes into the drive.

Despite the two hour drive in, he still arrives at the call earlier than some people. He forgives Spot, though, when he hands him a coffee from one of those places in Brooklyn that roasts their own beans. Thanks to the big thermos, it’s still warm and fragrant.

Spot is Charlie’s favorite person, ever.

@wakeusa For the bakers: how did your friends/family/roommates/coworkers react to you getting to be on a baking show? #NYBO

The couch is… who the fuck designs these couches? It’s not comfortable, you can’t sit back against the backrest so you spend the whole interview sitting but like, active sitting, and smiling, and it’s terrible.

The producers had ushered the seven of them - Charlie, Spot, Les, Small, Sarah, Katherine, and Joe - out during a commercial break, or maybe when the weatherman was on. They try to take his crutches away, which… It was fun listening to Sarah Keating, of all people, give the man a dressing down.

So, now he’s got them carefully positioned to create a physical barrier between him and Joe. He’s not sure why he has to be seated next to Joe; he can practically feel the animosity rolling off the man. Although some of that may be directed at Kath, who is sitting on Joe’s other side, and flanked by Les.

He tries to focus on his breathing, and just keep going. This will be fine. Joe can’t kill with with his aura. Hopefully.

The interview starts with softball questions, asking them about what it was like to get on the show, and what the best and worst parts were. They ask Sarah and Kath and Joe about the contestants this year - and of course, they have to say nice things with the four of them sitting there. (Or, Joe has to be at least neutral. He can’t be nasty.) It’s kind of fun watching the game he’s playing to be
nasty to Charlie without stepping over an invisible line.

Then, Alexi Darling pulls out a stack of questions from twitter, and Charlie braces himself.

“Our first question comes from at-elozable, who wants to know if your friends refuse to bake things for you now, and if you’d eat them if they did?”

Charlie turns back, to look at the contestants behind him.

“My brother and sister tried to bake for me last week,” Les says. In the playback monitor, Charlie can see Sarah’s eye’s getting wide. Kath is suppressing a smile. Oh God, this is going to be good.

“Tried is the key word. David - that’s my brother - he wanted to make Challah, to prove, you know that anyone can do it. My sister, she went for something simpler, and she bought cinnamon bread. You thought my challah was bad? I’m never trusting my brother and sister again.”


“So, you’re still the head baker in the house?” Alexi prompts.

Les shakes his head. “Na, my Mama will always be the best baker in the family. Hands down.”

“You can argue with your mom,” Sarah agrees.

Charlie really hopes they cut to a close up of someone else, because the rest of the group looks suddenly more strained.

Alexi notices, and moves on. “Pluto, #1 Planet in my heart, asks, ‘What was your favorite bake?’”

They look at each other panicked. “Can we spoil for the third episodes,” Smalls asks, “Or in only the first two?”

“Let’s say… the first two,” Alexi specifies, clearly getting directions from her earpiece. “We’ll start with you, Sarah.”

“Small’s beer bread,” Sarah says, nodding at the girl next to her.

“Umm… favorite thing I’ve baked, or favorite thing that someone baked?” Smalls clarifies. “Uh, my favorite of mine was my my beer bread, and my favorite favorite was… I liked Les’ cupcakes.”

They continue down the line. Spot liked the cinnamon bread they baked. Les was a fan of Race’s pizza. Katherine liked Charlie’s cupcakes.

“Skip me,” Joe says. “You already know what I think.” He smiles. It might be an attempt at charming, but it comes across as predatory.

“I umm…” Charlie hates being last. “My favorite was… I thought Lou’s pretzels were good.” They had been, especially as a midnight snack before you sent off your sated booty call. Which… right now is not the time to get on that train of thought.

He tunes back in to hear the end of Alexi’s question: “-family on the show?”

The monitor shows the terror not in Sarah’s eyes, but in Kath’s. And fury in Joe’s. Charlie thought he could feel the hatred before, but now...

“Katherine is my daughter, and I’m so proud of the career she’s built.” Joe offers. Behind his back, Katherine’s hands ball into fists, knuckles going white. “She’s successful in her own right, I
wouldn’t have dreamed she’d go into baking. I’m happy to be working with her.”

Kath nods, and pastes a fake smile on her face. “Thanks.” The tone of her voice is sickly sweet.

“Did your dad help you get the job?” Alexi asks, leaning forward. Apparently she hasn’t outgrown her roots at Buzzline, which wasn’t much more than a gossip show. Except now, she gets to generate the gossip instead of just recirculate it.

Katherine straightens her spine, drawing herself up to her full height. It’s an impressive feat on a couch that was designed for slouching. “I joined the Bake Off team during out first season in Sonoma, and hosted there, Chicago, and LA.” Katherine’s voice has an edge, sharp enough to draw blood. “We had Teddy as our judge, there. But, unfortunately, he had to retire for family reasons. I didn’t find out Joe, my father, was doing the show, until just before he arrived.”

The words are telling. Maybe more telling than Katherine wants them to be.

“Your father?” Alexi asks, catching the bait and holding onto it. “Your father?”

“Yes.” Kath’s back is ramrod straight. Her hands are resting on her knees. “Yes, my father was hired three years after I started the job. I was not involved with the interview process, since I was in Saint Louis, working on a documentary about social media and mental health.” She stares straight into the camera, taking control of the interview, and continues in clipped tones. “I want to make it clear here, we don’t cheat. Sarah and I aren’t involved in casting decisions, until very late in the process. Most of that is the chemistry read, right at the end. We have an amazing team, headed by Hannah Khouri-Eriksson and Dominic Bale. I want to make it clear that I didn’t help hire Joe, or anyone else. That this isn’t a family business, not now and now ever.” Katherine is practically frothing at the mouth as she finishes. “Now, Alexi, are there other questions from Twitter we could answer?”

There are, thankfully, because otherwise, Charlie swears, there might have been a murder on national television.

Alexi seems to brush off the tension. She’s back to her usual perky self as she asks, “Does anyone have any secret talents other than badass baking skills?”

Hey NY, We’ve News for You (@news4you)

Sexist bullshit at its finest on @wakeusa today: assuming @kathplumber was hired because her dad is on the show. (She assures us it’s not the other way around.)

“I dunno how shee sayed so calm,” Spot says thickly, through a mouthful of pancake.

Charlie raises an eyebrow, critically.

Spot swallows. “I mean, I think I would have launched myself at Alexi. What the fuck kind of question was that, asking if Joe get her the job?”

“The kind that’s poorly researched.” He takes another swig of the diner coffee. “And, I think she was ready to. Hell, if they’d said that about you, or me, or Les, I think she might have launched herself at Alexi, ratings be damned.”

“That would… that would get ratings.”

“Yeah.” He stirs his coffee. “Although, I figure next week will get plenty of ratings.”
Spot stares glumly at his pancakes. “Yeah,” he tells his syrup.

“How have you talked to Race about it? At all?”

Spot shrugs and drags his fork across his plate, making brown zig-zags. “Has anyone talked to Race about it? We’ve talked about lots of other stuff, but not that. I don’t think he talks about that.”

“Oh?”

“Just... stuff.” Spots cheeks go pink.

“Just too guys, chillin’ on a bean bag, five feet apart ‘cause they’re not gay’ stuff?”

Spot’s ears start to go red. “Stuff,” he mumbles. “Just not that.”

Charlie lets him drink some coffee to get his composure. It turns out this is a bad choice.

Spot gets a calculating look on his face. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Charlie feins nonchalance. Probably badly.

“You, and you know... Jack.”

“There is no me and Jack.” He doesn’t mean for the words to come out that way. They’re not supposed to be so cold and hard and sharp. “There could be, but…”

“He’s head over heels for you.”

“He told you that, did he?”

Well... until he actually tells you, I don’t trust it.” Again the words sound angrier than he means them to. “Although maybe I just need him to tell me!”

“This about the job?”

“The job that everyone else knew about?” He thinks. “Yes. No. I don’t know?” He drops his head toward the table. He’s not quite dramatic enough to actually bang his head against it, but it’s a near thing. He probably would have done it at home. “I would again… maybe? Except I don’t know if I want to?”

Spot just waits.

“Jack... with Jack... I don’t know.” He swallows. “Can we go back to talking about you and Race?”

“You two are assholes.” Spot shakes his head. “So, how ‘bout them Mets?”

“You’re a Met’s fan?” Crutchie almost does a dramatic spit take. “I’m not sure we can be friends anymore.”

**CrutchmasterM (@crutchie)**

My friends are assholes.
I love them so much.
First, this chapter owes a huge debt of gratitude to PennySparrow and tuppenny who helped me with the tweets. If you have not read their works, you should 1000% go and do it. The general rec is YES, let me know if you want something more specific.

Thank you also to Charlie for his help with east coast dialogue.

Homemade poptarts are a real thing. Once again, my hat is off to Stella Parks. I’ve been sitting on the recipe for like 9 months, knowing I’d have to use it eventually. I was going to do it as part of breakfast week, but then it didn’t fit. So... here we are. You can find her regular and gluten free recipes on her blog, Bravetart. Because that’s the only reference for the week, that’s the only reference for the week.

I’m 90% sure I’m forgetting something, but I find Jack and Charlie both very hard to write. So, umm... questions, comments, critiques, concerns, information about your day, information about my day, suggestions to make this better, suggestion to make it worse, are all welcome!
Brian Denton Interview

Chapter Summary

In which Charlie flies for the first time, Race confesses his nightmare, and we have yet more evidence that Spot Conlon is a softy.

Or... you guys didn't think that I was just going to leave this hanging?

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure there are any new warnings for this chapter. There isn't really even a food warning. It's... almost downright tame.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Travel Day
(Five months post production)

The night before they leave, he’s nervous. He’s nervous for so many reasons. He’s never flown before. At least, not on a plane and not while conscious. There’s some debate about whether or not being thrown out of a car counts as flying. (For the sake of his sanity, Charlie is going to go with “no”.) And then, the emergency helicopter flight into the city is something he only vaguely remembers. He gets flashes, sometimes. Things that happened around the accident. But, he doesn’t really remember. And, he doesn’t like to think about it. The only reason it’s coming up now is because he’s nervous.

He goes through his bag. He looks for his phone, to make sure it’s charging. He checks and double checks, and tries to plan out every eventuality. Plan for the worst and hope for the best has become his life motto. Sometimes, he gets by on serendipity, and sometimes you have to help things along.

He sighs, checks his alarm, and goes out to see if Al is still up. Not that the flight leaves for another fourteen hours, just…

Henry is in the kitchen, doing something with a knife that involves flipping. Charlie likes in fingers where they are, thank you.

“Looking for Al?” The blade of the chef’s knife rotates 360 degrees, before Henry catches it and brings it down on the hapless carrot.

Charlie shrugs, and sticks a spoon in the pot of magic that Henry has going on the stove. Yes, it’s September in New Jersey and it’s hot. It’s also tomato season, and the best time to make pasta sauce is right in the middle of September. The first year, Finch had happily agreed to let Henry grow his tomato plants in pots on the back patio. He was less happy when Henry appeared with a small tray of basil and oregano plants from the farmers market, carefully schleptet in the back of Al’s car. (This was in those dark days before Charlie got his van.) Finch was downright frustrated when the still-unfinished kitchen filled up with onions and garlic and herbs and spices and tomatoes and a large canning pot appeared.
The second year, Finch told Henry in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t allowed to grow tomatoes on the back patio, in some sort of vain effort to forestall his newly renovated kitchen being taken over by tomato murder and lasagne. The second weekend of last September, Henry’s siblets - Frankie, Mar, and Pieter - appeared with several bushels of tomatoes, eight disposable aluminum freezer trays and enough lasagne noodles to that Buttons could have sewn them into a suit.

This year, Finch has agreed to let Henry make sauce - on the condition that there are no more uninvited guests or three am pasta making parties. Finch has his rules, but as someone who lives next to the kitchen, Charlie has his limits too. And, these extend to loud sibling arguments in mostly English punctuated by what might be… something related to german? and maybe Latin? at 3 am.

“Do you want me grab him for you?” Henry’s knife continues it’s careful assault on the carrot, breaking it down into perfect little pieces. You’d think someone who works in a kitchen doesn’t cook on his days off. And, mostly, Henry doesn’t. Except for when he does.

“He’s upstairs?”

Henry nods.

“Please.”

He can go upstairs. He can climb them, and they’ve got the stair lift. It’s just that it’s time consuming and the effort for Henry is so much lower than for him.

Henry hands him the knife. “I need the rest of the carrots, and then the celery.”

Charlie starts chopping.

He’s still working his way through the pile of carrots when Al and Henry come thundering back down stairs.

“What?” Al demands, pushing his dripping hair out of his eyes. “What do you need?”

“You’re going to drive me tomorrow, right?”

And, God, doesn’t he hate how scared he sounds. Even though he is. Because the stupid, superstitious part of his brain that’s afraid of being packed into a metal bullet, shrunk down and then fired out of a massive gun until the spring loaded wings release is at war with the part of him that says airplanes are held aloft by… being shrunk down and shot out of a magic gun. That’s a better explanation than the strength of the air. And, no, he hasn’t admitted this to Finch. He doesn’t need a math lecture. He needs something that makes him feel safe.

Al must recognize that look in his face. “Yeah, I’m gonna drive you. When do you leave?”

“Noon.” He’s got that ticket on his phone, he doesn’t need to double check it.

“And then two hours early for check in is ten.” Al counts calmly. “And two hours to Newark is eight.”

“Is that enough time?” He switches from carrots to the bunch of celery Henry has shoved at him.

Al rounds the counter, leaning against a cabinet by the sink so he can study his friend. “It’s enough time,” he promises. “It’s enough.”
Charlie feels like he has to believe him. Albert used his Nurse Voice. And Charlie either has to trust the Nurse Voice or not trust anyone. And so, Al has to be right. Otherwise, his whole life has been a lie.

Al gently punches his shoulder in a questionably affectionate gesture. “We’ll get you there in time. And then, I’ll drop your baby back here to wait for you.”

“Thank you,” he exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

JFK is big. Which is maybe inane to say. But, it’s also true. It’s one of those imposing cold war concrete monstrosities that looks like it was constructed to appear to be sturdy and reliable. Charlie just thinks it’s ugly. Or, that could be the $20 he hands to Al to cover the cost of short term parking. Maybe someday, if he goes through this enough, he’ll be ready to go into an airport terminal alone. Today, he wants to be accompanied by a man who swears he once saw the Jersey Devil. And then pissed himself with fear. (“Beer,” Al always repeats when Charlie tells the story. “I almost pissed myself with beer.” Al doesn’t drink.)

The check in area is large and white and loud. Sounds and light and surfaces seem to bounce off each other. People are rushing past him, like in the movies. It’s such a cliche. He kind of loves it. Someone knocks into him with their luggage.

Okay, maybe not so much.

He and Al hurry over to the check in counter, standing in the “special assistance” line. He could try one of the machines in front of the counter first, but given most everything else he’s experienced, it makes sense to just go talk to the nice person at the desk, first. Charlie tries to expect the best while planning for the worst. It seems to serves him well in life.

Check in… could be worse. This is yet another occasion where he vows that when he can pull together the $300+ fee for a name change ($250 in court fees, plus $2 for the name change, plus the cost of updating all his documents…) he’s going to do it. He knows a lot of people have a lot more serious reasons to want to change their names. But, Charlemagne Morris is just unnecessarily grandiose and pretentious. Like a solid gold toilet.

“Umm… hi?”

He looks up to see Race standing there, bolting mentos. He may have just swallowed one whole. He’s pale, and knowing Race, doing everything in his power to pretend not to be hypoglycemic. He’s got the strap of his Jansport twisted - because Race was cool in 2010 - and has a small black rolly suitcase.

“Hey, man.” Al goes over and gives Race one of those bro-hug-shake things. Race reciprocates, managing to knock over his suitcase in the process. Definitely low.

The desk clerk looks between them. “Checking in, Sir?”

Race shrugs, and waves his phone over his head while attempting to right his suitcase. “No, umm. I’ll plane my suitcase.”

“Okay.” Deborah gives Race a doubtful look. She turns back to Charlie, and starts handing him documents. “Here’s your ticket, with the baggage claim attached.” She flips it over to show him the sticker on the back of his boarding pass. “Your receipt for the checked bag.” He manages not to wince. “And, your pre-board card.”
“Can I get one for Tony?” He asks, quickly.

“What?”

“A, umm, pre-board card. Can I get a preboard card for my… my… ?”

“Your umm… nurse?” She fills in.

Al starts to shake his head, and back away. No, Charlie’s nurse friend isn’t flying today. He’s more than likely going to kidnap Charlie’s van, Elmer, and a somewhat reluctant Finch, and take them Jersey Devil hunting.

“Yeah, my, umm… nurse, Tony.” He repeats, motioning Race forward.

Race opens his mouth to object, but Charlie shakes his head. So, Race and Deborah manage to bring up his reservation and get him a pre-board card, too.

“And… just one more thing,” Deborah pauses, and he braces himself. “Let me call a wheelchair assistant, and we can check yours.”

He sits there, frozen for a moment. Do you have to give up your chair when you fly? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t think so. He looks over at the pool of bored looking porters with their wheelchairs. Their shitty folding wheelchairs that are designed for short term use. They’ll be hard enough for him to push, and so he’ll be stuck at the mercy of the porter. Hell, they probably don’t come without a porter. Who he probably has to pay. Or at least tip. And damn it, none of these things sound good.

“He should be able to keep his chair,” Race is fumbling with his phone, but his voice sounds steady.

“I’m going to keep my chair, thanks,” Charlie agrees. He’s desperately thankful to Race. “I can umm… leave it plane side?” He thinks that what it said online.

Deborah fumbles with the computer. “Yes,” she confirms, typing frantically and frowning. “Yes, yes, you can leave it.”

“Great.” Al’s tone is final. He picks up Charlie’s backpack, which has been leaning against the wheel of his chair, and slings it over his shoulder. He takes the handle of Race’s fallen suitcase. “Then, I’ll see you guys to security.”

Airports, as it turns out, are a lot like hospitals. There are a bunch of strangers confirming his age, his identity, trying to send him one place or another, asking him inappropriate questions and touching him clinically without permission. There’s something about the way people touch you when they view your body as an object. The dentist, the physical therapist, the x-ray tech, and apparently the TSA agent: they’re all trained to move through the job with an attitude that separates you as a person from your body as a thing, and they expect you to do the same. He… he doesn’t like it. He’s used to it, though.

Now, they’re sitting by the gate. He’s watching *Parks and Rec* on his phone. It’s the second season. He’s already seen the second season, but he and Al are watching *The Good Place* together because Henry couldn’t believe they hadn’t watched it already, and he said he wouldn’t cheat on Al. (Al is probably at home watching an episode. Because Albert DaSilva has almost no self control.)
Next to him, Race has his laptop out. His fingers fly over the keys in staccato bursts. He’s trying to pretend he’s not chewing on the end of a ballpoint pen. (Race not only chews on pens, he has preferences about which pens he chews. Except that he says he doesn’t. Chew pens or have a preference.) It mostly looks like a wall of computer code to Charlie, but what the hell does he know? He thought computer programmer’s wore black and worked behind terminals with falling numbers like the matrix. Racer mostly works out of a brightly colored text file with bright pink highlighting.

Every so often, a message notification pops up on the side of Race’s screen. They’re mostly work messages, or Charlie thinks they’re mostly work messages. There are too many three letter codes ticker tape codes for them to be anything else. Except for the ones labeled with SC. Those make Race light up with a stupid little grin. There’s one one person those can be form.

It’s weird to read the words that are there. Because, after all this time, its jarring. Spot says he doesn’t, and he probably doesn’t… they’ve been out together, and Charlie has seen at least five people try to pick up Spot, men and women. And, Spot hasn’t even noticed. Well, he knew they were there. He just didn’t know they were trying to get in his pants. Which is an important distinction.

Going out with Romeo, or Henry, or hell even Race, and especially with Blink and Mush, they all know what’s going on. And, they chose to play it in different ways. Romeo preens, and smiles and damn, the boy has a charming smile. And, he ends up taking someone home. Henry and Race joke. Race is pickier than his cousin, although whether that’s because he rarely goes out, because he’s into someone already, or just because he doesn’t seem to like sharing a room with people overnight, Charlie isn’t sure. Blink just tries to wingman everyone. He’s happily married to his husband, and neither of them have any interest outside of each other, but Blink likes the game, even if he’s not playing. And, with Spot, it’s clear he doesn’t know it’s a game. Or what he’s doing.

It was Blink who figured it out. Well, not just Blink who figured it out. But, Blink who keeps commenting on it, sending Charlie little messages every so often. See Spot. See Spot Crush? The first had read. Charlie totally hadn’t sent back a message that said, See Spot Crush. Spot has a crush. There also hadn’t been a message after the finale watch party they all did in the studio from Blink. He 100% never sent Charlie the message, See Spot Flirt. Flirt Spot, flirt. Flirt with Race.

So, Spot doesn’t normally notice. Except for Race, where he’s head over heels and a fish out of water, and its both cute and maddening to watch the two of them circle around each other.

He doesn’t mean to read over Race’s shoulder. There are plenty of things that he doesn’t mean to do, but they just happen. His brain has a mind of its own.

Spot
Promise me that you’re not going to do anything stupid

He watches as Race switches from what’s probably a piece of code to his texting program.

<

Racer
When do I ever do anything stupid?

Charlie snorts at that.

Race glances up at him, surprised.
“Umm.” He waves his phone. “Treat yo self.”

Race nods, like that answers the question. Because, it does. Mostly. Except that clip usually makes him want to piss himself laughing, rather than just chuckle. He and Race know each other, but not that well.

He goes back to pretending to watch his show and only half watching Race’s screen. There are no more messages from SC. There are, however, plenty of people to watch. There are a few road warriors: men with broad smiles and dad bods in polo shirts, khaki pants, and corporate monogrammed luggage. He’s heard the term before, but this is his first time observing the species in the wild. Most tap away at their laptops, but a few have found private corners to have not so private phone calls. Or, they travel in packs? Squads? Platoons? He knew a guy when he was in rehab who’d talked a lot about formation in the army. Daniel didn’t miss Iraq. He missed the bits of him he’d left there, though. And, he missed his squad. So, yeah, Road warriors were squads, like cheerleaders.

The is some sort of high school athletic team off in a corner. Or, maybe a middle school athletic team. He used to be good at guessing ages, but they’re some sort of place where they’re indiscriminately squidgy. Some are adults, and some are still children, and it’s hard to believe they all belong to the same group. But, they do: they have matching black hooded sweatshirts, with the LADY RANGERS emblazoned on them in bright pink text. There are a copious number of hair ribbons and braces. When did kids get so young?

He and Race haven’t moved into the reserved handicap seating area, where Deborah told them to wait for the plane, yet. There are a collection of older ladies sitting there, though. One is reading a Tom Clancy novel. The other is knitting, needles clacking. Its vaguely cliche, but she’s also got a great pattern involving what might be well placed blue rectangles but might also be Tardises. Age of the geek, baby.

A notification from SC pops up on Race’s screen, and he focuses there again.

Spot
You were texting me about things being explosive in the security line.
Racer
...
Spot
I don’t fly and I know that’s a stupid idea.
Racer
All I said was that I wanted to know what chemicals the explosive tests focus on. We got swabbed so much. SO MUCH. It took FOREVER. Although thought my pen was some sort of… I dont know. Ive never had my pen examined so closely before. Never.
Spot
Your pen? Like the one you write with
Racer
My Pen. Like my insulin.

That’s… new? Charlie isn’t sure he’s ever seen Race mention that before, but he’d done it in the security line. Probably. Charlie had been enjoying some quality time with the TSA while they determined that he did have that much metal in his skeleton and that his brace doesn’t come off easily. He’s not looking forward to security on his way back.
A phone rings, and he ignores it. Who is rude enough to leave their ringer on in the airport? Must be one of the elderly ladies in a turtleneck with an applique who’s showing off pictures of her grandchildren.

The phone continues ringing.

Race turns to glare at him. “Dude.”

He picks up his phone. Which is ringing. Because his headphones aren’t connected. Because you learn so much more when you listen.

“Uhh, oops.” He excuses himself. goes off into a private corner. “Hello, this is Charlie Morris.”

“Uh, Hello, Mr. Morris? This is Alexi Prescot, I’m a nurse with Dr. Sayles practice. Do you have a moment?”

“Yes, umm… Hi Alexi.” Charlie keeps himself from grinding his teeth. Yes, no, not really. He hates these phone calls. What’s the point?

“Good. I’d like to schedule an appointment for you with the doctor to go over your latest x-ray results.”

Of course he does. Charlie’s doctors seem to always want to talk about the results of his annual x-ray. That’s the thing they care about, because it’s the thing they can measure directly. The number of bad days he has, the sleepless nights, his ability to go through airport security without an issue, or buy groceries, or compete on a cooking show… those functional measurements don’t matter as much as the imaging.

“Dr Sayles is concerned, and would like to call tomorrow.”

“I’m not available tomorrow,” he says, quickly.

There’s a shuffle of papers. “Friday?”

“I’m traveling out of state, Monday afternoon would be the soonest.”

He’s got classes in the morning that he should probably attend. An intro to television, film, and theater class he probably should have taken in community college, but didn’t know he wanted until three months ago.

There’s another pause. “All right, I’ll let Dr. Sayle know. Expect a call from him on Monday afternoon, at the latest.”

“Thank you, Bye.” Charlie ends the conversation firmly. He’s not going to get into a fight right now with his doctor’s office. He’s not.

Charlie’s first bleary impression of California is sunshine and smog.

Charlie’s second impression of California is that it’s more relaxed in some ways than New York. Deplaning certainly feels like it takes longer than boarding. At JFK, he and Race had boarded first, which meant that the only people who watched Race struggle to get the wheels off his chair were Charlie, the flight attendants, the woman with the Tom Clancy Novel and the Tardis knitter, and the mother of a seven month old baby and a toddler on a leash. After that, people had streamed on
the plane while Race asked him about motion sickness. And then fished something that looked suspiciously like Dramamine, and told him to take some.

Charlie’s third impression of California is to thank whatever being is out there that the toilets are close to the gate. Even though he hasn’t had much to eat or drink since last night, he needs to pee. Badly. When he’d started shifting in his seat, uncomfortably, Racer had offered to help him to the bathroom. It was maybe… ten feet. And, honestly, he can mostly make it ten feet with the support of the seats, the walls, and maybe one of his crutches. But, he hadn’t wanted to. Because he’s proud. And because Race’s expression on his second trip back had said it all. So, yeah, the bathroom at LAX feels awesome.

He and Tony race to baggage claim. It doesn’t surprise him that he gets there first. Tony is trailing a suitcase that seems to get caught on every corner, and his phone is buzzing intermittently. Charlie’s on wheels that mostly don’t get caught. Although he can’t take the moving walkways easily (he’d like to try, someday, in an empty airport) and he had to take the elevator, back in with the mother and her toddler on the leash. The little girl studies him, blue eyes solemn. The two middle fingers of her left hand are firmly in her mouth. Her right arm holds a babydoll close across her chest. It’s not quite as well supported as her younger brother or sister, but she’s got it firmly. She pops her fingers out with a slightly wet sound, and rubs them on her pink overalls. “My name is Nan,” she announces, little voice high and clear.

“I’m umm, Charlie.” He says.

She looks at her baby. “Her name is Charleigh!” She announces.

He looks up at her mom for confirmation, and the slightly beleaguered woman shrugs, jostling the infant on her chest. He leans over, and puts out his hand to shake the dolls. “Nice to meet you, Nan, Charleigh.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Charlie.” Nan agrees. “And, I want you to meet my friend, Maggie.”

He looks at the mom. She sighs, and then laughs. “Not even three, and she’s embarrassed to be seen with me.”

He lets Maggie and her kids get off the elevator, first. Even though it means that Racer beats him to baggage claim.

It turns out not to matter, because even though they waited to get off the plane, the bags are only just spilling on the carousel when they arrive.

The group of teenage girls huddled down the conveyor belt from Race look only slightly worse for wear. A few of the purple hair ribbons have started to droop, and one or two of the girls are sitting in one of those sleepy piles that teenagers seem to form everywhere. A few others, though, are giggling paying attention. They’re jostling each other back and forth, daring each other to go do something. He really hopes it’s ride on the baggage carousel. Hell, he’s in his twenties and right now, taking a spin on the thing would make sense.

“Are you…” He looks up to see the two girls approaching, and another two behind them to egg them on.

“No, he’s not,” The other girl says behind her hands, like Charlie isn’t just sitting there in front of her.

“This is yours, right?” Racer comes back, carrying what he sincerely hopes is Finch’s borrowed
suitcase. It’s got the right tag, at least. It’s hard to miss Finch’s bird. The one shaped like a hand in particular.

“He is,” the one with braces whispers back, and fumbles with something.

The two of them come over. “Are you, ummm…” the girls cheeks flush, “Can we have your autograph?”

Race studies them, nonplused.

“You’re my second favorite, Charlie,” one of the girls gushes, holding out a mini sharpie from her backpack. Can you sign, ummm…” she pats down her pockets, looking for something for him to sign.

One of the other girls comes bouncing over to Race, okay to approach now that the others have made contact. “Where’s Louis?” She asks. The bands on her braces are the same shade of purple as her hair ribbon.

“Louis?” Race asks, confused. The mouse running in the back of his brain hits the treadmill and the light bulb comes on. “Probably at work. Why?”

“You two are my favorite. You’re so cute together.” Another girl with cornrows agrees. The girls all nod.

“Uhhh… thanks?” Race shakes Charlie a panicked look. He starts to blush.

Do the girls think he’s dating Blink? If so, this is probably news to him. It’s news to Charlie. It’s probably news to Spot, Blink, and Mush.

“Girls!” One of the chaperones has noticed the mass migration. Someone comes over to rescue them, leaving Charlie with a mini sharpie and a desire to ask his friends dangerous questions.

Talk Tonight! with Brian Denton

Charlie Morris and Anthony Higgins from the New York Bake Off

Charlie is starting to get nervous. He and Tony are waiting backstage, dressed in clothes that some stylist provided. He’s not sure if they were from Denton’s crew, or if the Bake Off team sent them. They are about to burst on stage through the magical doors onto Denton’s set, for their interview. He knows what it will look like, they went through the set earlier. They’d met Brian Denton, chatted to set them at ease. Not that Charlie thinks there’s anything easy about this situation. He feels like he’s about to walk out onto National television and bare his soul.

“And now, let’s welcome Charlie and Tony from this season’s Bake Off!” Their cue. They walk out together, Tony mindfully matching his pace, instead of charging ahead like in their rehearsals.

Denton bounds down the steps to shake their hands, his hair pushed back in a style reminiscent of his youth. He comes across as energetic, the same way he did when he was a young foreign war correspondent early in the invasion of Iraq. After an injury on live television, he’d been sent back stateside to figure out what to do next. He’d bounced around on different beats, doing a stint with Jon Stewart, then Trevor Noah before settling into his own show. It’s a mix of deep dives and long form interviews. And, Denton is the only host Charlie thinks he’d be willing to do this with.
There’s a subtle banister on the stairs, toward the back of the stage: a capitulation, maybe, to Denton’s injury or just the accessibility gods smiling on him. Charlie would have prefered a stage where he entered at the same level as the interview, but this is okay.

Denton lets them get to the stage, lets them get settled and then asks his opening question. “So, Charlie, I gotta ask first, you won?”

“Yes.”

“How did it feel?”

“It was a shock. I didn’t think I’d win!” He grins, he can’t help himself. It isn’t just modesty: he doesn’t know of anyone… or, he guesse anyone else, who hadn’t won a star baker and then won the show. Here, or anywhere else.

“We all knew,” Race admits, leaning toward Denton like he’s telling a secret. “After about the third week, we all knew that Charlie was going to win. By that point, most of the bakers are pretty good. You don’t feel like it, but you are. And, there was Charlie baking circles around all of us. I think he came in first on all but one technical challenge?”

Denton nods. “I know a lot of us were rooting for you as well, Charlie.”

He feels himself blush. “Thank you.”

Denton continues, ignoring his modesty. “How have things been now that the shows over?”

He shrugs. “Not that much has changed. Im in school, finishing my degree. I think the biggest difference is that I’m spoiled. When we were on the show, we had someone in the back who did all our dishes. For some reason, my roommates just think Im spoiled now.”

Denton chuckles. “Do you bribe them?”

Charlie shrugs. “Sometimes. I try to convince them to do it of ‘their own free will.’” He uses air quotes and a disarming smile. “Usually, ‘free will’ involves cookies.

“Do you find the same thing, Tony,” Denton asks Race, “That your friends and family want you to bake more?”

Race shakes his head. “Nah, my Mama, she’s the best baker in the family. Im good, but she’s so much better.”

“So, did you learn to bake from your mother?” Denton’s question is light, but Race still seems caught off guard.

“I… I, umm,” he looks panicked over at Charlie, who has no way to help him. “I learned to bake after I was diagnosed with diabetes.” The words seem like a confession.

Denton nods. “And, what about you, Charlie?”

He knows this is supposed to be a softball question, but he evades the way he has been every time he gets asked. “I learned in an after school program.”

That shuts Denton down for a moment. It had been in the statement that they’d submitted, but he guesses Denton wanted them to expand. Well… if Race has things he’s not going to talk about, Charlie does, too.
Denton accepts it, and moves on. “What’s it like to be the first disabled contestant on the Bake Off, Charlie?”

He pauses for a moment, pretending to give himself time to think. Mostly it’s to get his nerves together. “I think I’m probably the first visibly disabled competitor people have seen, but I’m probably not the first,” he says first. He wants to normalize this. It’s important to normalize it. “A lot of people have invisible disabilities or chronic illnesses, things like diabetes, or ADHD, things like that.” He doesn’t mention Blink. If Blink wanted to be here, he’d be here.

“Still…” Denton leaves it open.

He shrugs. “It was, umm, it could be hard. The production crewed worked with me a lot on accessibility for the show.” And, sometimes they actually listened. It hadn’t been perfect, but it had been better if they hadn’t been willing to work with him. “And, the hosts and my fellow contestants were helpful.”

Race grins. “I think we all helped each other.”

“Yeah, we did.”

“Oh the show, you use a wheelchair, but here…?” Denton doesn’t seem to know how to ask this question. Unfortunately, no one has known how to ask the question. Its something a lot of the reporters have tried for, and almost everyone has bungled. But, he’s here to answer some of these questions.

“Yeah, I usually use crutches.” He lifts them up, so they’re visible on camera. He shrugs. “But, for something like baking, it’s easier if I have my hands free. So, I used my wheelchair for the competition.”

He waits for Denton to ask more questions: about his injury, about what he can feel, about any one of the potentially embarrassing things people think is their business. He’s been giving the same standard set of answers over and over again, working hard to keep his tone relaxed. “Are you coming onto me” seems to work better with young female anchors, rather than seasoned reporters like Denton. Charlie’s sure Denton would handle it well, but he’s grateful he doesn’t have to deal with it.

They chat more, about the show in general, and about baking, and about what’s next. There are things that Charlie never expected to bring up, like backstage shenanigans and Blink’s poetry. Denton admires Blink’s poetry, which is good because everyone should appreciate Blink’s poetry. But, quickly enough, they get to part of the reason they’re here. Or, at least, part of the reason that Race is here.

“I think most people have seen the fourth episode by now, but here’s a clip for those who haven’t.” Denton pauses where they will doubtless cut in the clip that gets released on all the news shows: Race falling against Spot, and then Race’s feet as Spot professionally transfers him to the newly arrived team of EMTs. Charlie isn’t sure it was in the original show, but this footage looks good. Or, it’s the only part that the editors were able to salvage that wasn’t covered in Sarah Jacob’s increasingly creative explicatives. “So, Tony, do you want to tell us what happened?”

Race glances over at Charlie, panic in his eyes.

That seems to be the question. They’ve all been asked it. So, tell us what happened. When he’s asked, or Blink, or Jack, they all give variants on the same answer. That they were working on their bake because Sfogliatelle is really fucking hard, but they’d helped when Spot had asked for it.
If it’s Spot, he’ll say that he noticed there was a problem. That he had the training, and he’s glad he was able to help. And then, because he’s Spot Conlon, he looks into the camera and smiles either alarming or disarmingly - depending on his mood. If he’s in a good one, he’ll suggest to America that they can learn to save a life through a first aid or CPR course. And, across America, there are probably panties dropping, at least if those teenage girls in the airport were anything to go on.

And, Race? Race takes a deep breath, and he turns to the TV host. “I umm, I had a hypoglycemic episode.” He’s supposed to say, I was lucky that Spot was there to help me. And, I’m fine now, thanks for asking. Race has said it a million times before. It’s the song and dance that Charlie heard the day after, heard Race giving the producers the next week, heard him tell his sister, and has heard in all their TV interviews. It’s like Race thinks if he keeps repeating it, he might just believe it.

Instead, Race opens up, at least a little bit more. “I umm, I lived one of my worst nightmares on TV a few weeks ago. Not the one about showing up to an important meeting without pants,” He smooths his hands across his jeans. “But, the nightmare where I have really bad hypoglycemia and pass out from low blood sugar in the middle of something really important? Yeah, I think that just happened.”

Denton nods. “Had that happened before?”

“The passing out part, the national TV part, or the pants part?” Race shoots back, quickly.

Charlie manages not to roll his eyes. Whoever is paying attention should note that he did not roll his eyes, and he should get karmic points for that.

“Passing out,” Denton agrees. “I don’t want to know about pants.”

Race shakes his head. “No, that was the first and hopefully last time I’ve lost consciousness while hypoglycemic. And, I guess, I was lucky that it happened with someone who knew what to do there.”

Charlie notices that he says nothing about being low. Because Race has been low quite a bit more since he fainted. Charlie was “exploring” the studio an hour ago, trying to help a somewhat confused Race track down craft services and a Sprite.

“I umm… Sometimes it’s hard to feel my lows.” Race continues, the words rushing out.

Charlie isn’t sure how it’s hard to feel them - they become obvious when you know what you’re looking for. Race gets slow and tired and quiet. Not quiet in a thoughtful way, quiet in a confused way. Spot’s usually the one who notices, and he’s the one who pointed things out to Charlie - but Spot can read Race like a book.

“I’ve been diabetic for a long time, almost sixteen years, and my symptoms change over time. And, umm, it can also be really easy to confuse low symptoms with anxiety or excitement. The first time we did a technical challenge, I was sure my blood sugar was dropping, but I was just nervous.”

“It’s hard to bake against the clock,” Charlie agrees. “I think I almost wet myself, that first episode.”

“Pretty sure Romeo did,” Race says with his first real laugh.

Romeo hadn’t. Not really. Jack and Spot and Smalls had been being dumb at lunch, playing around with a can of LaCroix and tossing it back and forth. David had wholly disapproved, while Blink and Les egged them on. This would have all been fine, if Jack and Spot weren’t also assholes and...
hadn’t set down the fateful can to await its victim. Romeo.

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing we wear aprons on camera,” Charlie agrees. “And that we all learned to be real careful when Jack offered us a drink.”

“So, Jack was the prankster behind the scenes?” Denton prompts.

Charlie and Race exchange a look. “Umm, yeah. Jack, and Bl-- Louis, they were the ones who were alway pulling stuff. Spot’s… Spot’s funny. He’s probably kill me for saying that,” Charlie says.

Race nods. “Oh, he definitely will.”

“He doesn’t seem like that kind of guy.” Denton prompts.

“Which? The kind to be funny, the kind to care, or the kind to care about his reputation?”

“Uhh…” Denton looks like he’s not sure how to answer. This part might get cut. This part will definitely get cut. It takes a moment, but Denton refocuses. “So, what happened afterward?”

“Ummm…” Race turns to him. “I woke up in the ambulance disoriented and kind of terrified. They gave me some glucose, and then some food when I got to the hospital. They released me from the ER about… five or six hours later? So, I was able to go back and bake.”

Denton nods, looking understanding.

“Its… its just part of my life. It’s hard for me to separating being diabetic as an adult with being an adult. This is my day to day. I get up, I test my blood sugar, I go to work, I eat some food, take some insulin, hold onto my phone like a millennial cliche.” He lets out huff that might be a half chuckle.

“Your blood sugar is on your phone, though,” Charlie clarifies when Denton looks blank.

Denton shoots him a thankful look, and waits.

“Yeah, yeah it is,” Race agrees.

He fiddles with the phone case, before sliding his thumb across the screen in a practiced, almost thoughtless gesture. A swipe to the right, and there are the last three hours, if you know how to look. He’s talked Spot and Charlie through it once. There’s a narrow band of white, the range Race apparently targets. One hundred, he’d explained. A concentration, not a percentage.

“I have a sensor that monitors measures my blood sugar every five minutes and connects to my phone via bluetooth. When out of range my phone alarms to let me know, if I’m not sure about what I’m feeling, or I’m asleep, or something.” Or ignoring it. Or working. Or trying to convince Spot it isn’t a big deal. And, hadn’t brunch the next week with Spot and his friend Rosie been super fun after that.

“So, then, why didn’t it alarm when you were competing?” Denton’s question is a bit more intense. His journalistic senses must be tingling.

“Uhh…” Race blushes enough that it almost hides his panic. “There was an issue with the bluetooth connection to my phone, and my back up receiver wasn’t charged. It was a perfect storm of everything that could have gone wrong in the worst way possible.”
Charlie manages to keep his poker face. “An issue”, like that his phone was locked up in the van because the production team had banned them on set, even on vibrate.

Denton nods. “And, have things gotten better?”

Race shrugs, and plays with the piping along the border of the pillow. It’s another detail Charlie wouldn’t have noticed, but living with Buttons you pick up weird ass knowledge. “So things are better and some things are worse. I think the worst is that this wasn’t the way I wanted most people to learn I’m diabetic. My boss kinda knew, but this threw it in his face. And, my neighbor won’t stop looking at me like I’m going to keel over at any second.” He pitches his voice up to call, “I promise I’m not going to keel over in the lobby while getting my mail, Mr. Moskowitz.”

Denton nods. “Anything else you want to address?”

“Ummm… I just want to remind everyone that the most interesting thing that happened at the bake off was Charlie kicking ass and not my shitty pancreas. Wait… can I say that on air?”

Denton nods.

“So, you should stop asking me about it, and ask him more about it.”

Denton smiles, and hides a bit of a laugh. He turns to Charlie, and asks, “So, tell me more about kicking ass.”

Three Phone Calls
(Five and a half months post production)

Charlie doesn’t want to admit it, but he’s happy to be home. He’s been moving slowly since he got back from California. He doesn’t want to admit how much more slowly, and how much it’s been hurting. He’s been using his wheelchair more, lying to Al about needing to carry more things to campus. He’s been spending more of his time at home in bed with his heat packs and occasionally drugs. He doesn’t want to admit that things are worse. Because they’re not. They can’t be. It’s nothing but some jetlag, a spoon debt, and the pain of sitting in the same position for fourteen hours over the course of seventy two. It’s fine.

He’s lying on the couch, watching Netflix and trying to convince himself of that when his phone rings. He lunges across the couch in a fit of athleticism that causes his hip to twingle, and sets off a spasm in his leg. Because that’s normal.

“Hey, what’s up Race?”

“Hi, umm…” Race sounds nervous. Which, admittedly, Charlie sees more of than most people but isn’t actually all that common. Race doesn’t do nervous, unless it’s something about Spot, his parents, diabetes, or spiders. Race really doesn’t do spiders. “I ummm… I need a favor.”

Charlie braces himself. That’s a potentially loaded phrase. He wonders what stupid thing Race has gotten himself into this time. “Yeah?”

“Spot… Spot says…” Charlie imagines Race gesticulating, his movements short and taut. “Spot says he won’t sleep with me again if I don’t find someone else to listen for my blood sugar,” he finally spits out.

“Wait, what?”

Race’s breath is harsh against the speaker. “Spot said to ask you if you could watch my blood sugar
for me, overnight.”

Charlie’s mind if filled with questions. “How, why?”

“Because Spot’s a worrier.” Race says. “And, umm, I might have had a rough night last Saturday.”

“Didn’t you have sauce night with your family on Saturday?”

The silence on the phone is telling.

Henry had come home mildly buzzed from sauce night with a container of his Aunt’s - who is probably Race’s mom - famous pickled green beans. He’d mentioned in passing that he’d seen Race, and more firmly that these were the only beans he’d get until Christmas, so they’d better not eat them all in one sitting.

“So, umm… after you took Spot to have sauce, you took him home, and…”

Race is not forthcoming.

“Knowing you, you took him to sauce, and then you took him home and painted his toenails black, like his soul.”

“What does that say about my soul?”

“That you’re fabulous?” Charlie suggests, picturing the disco nail polish. The pink on his big toe is chipped, and he’s been holding out on asking Henry for polish remover. But, he should probably do it, soon. Or else, he’ll have to buy some.

“So, ummm, yeah. After I was ‘painting Spot’s toe nails’, and he put on his fireman jammies, my, umm, my cgm kept going off. And, he kinda got out of his, umm, sleeping bag, and yelled at me.”

“His ‘sleeping bag’?”

“Shut up Morris. I’m asking you something serious. Spot says that he doesn’t trust me on my own, and that I need more back up. And, he wants to date me, so he’s not going to do it.”

That… Charlie sort of understands. Race is so damn independent, and Spot is so damn protective. He makes a note to text Spot. “So, what do you need me to do?”

“You need to install an app on your phone. And, umm, if you’re around a couple nights a week, you just call me if it goes too low. I’ll add your number to my Do Not Disturb override list. Stupid apple still has that thing where you can get phone numbers through the night thingy, but not apps.”

“Would I be the only one?” He feels like he needs to know what he’s signing up for.

“No. I was going to ask Henry. And, umm… Resa, umm… Resa might be moving to Munich for a year.”

Charlie has no idea what to do with that.

“And, umm… maybe Jack.” Race says it quickly, almost in an undertone. “With him going to California and all.”

Charlie had no idea that Jack was going to California. He’s sort of mad that Jack didn’t tell him that himself, but Jack Kelly hasn’t been big on telling him about big life changes, either. So, maybe he shouldn’t be so surprised.
“Yeah, sure.” He agrees.

“Great! And, umm… thanks, Charlie. Can I text you a time? I have to go and…”

“Sure, talk to you soon.”

As Race hangs up, he starts his show again, and starts texting Spot. He wants details.

Charlie is in the processing of setting up the CGM app for Race when an unknown number comes through his phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Charlie Morris?”

“Umm, yeah, Hi.” He hates answering his phone. He knows there’s probably some professional, polite way you’re supposed to answer your phone, but the person on the other end is lucky they didn’t get a joke response. Albert has been pranking him by calling from random numbers in the tristate area in an ever escalating Albert-esque quest to find, photograph, and call from all the payphones in the city.

“Hi, Mr Morris, this is Maybell Stubbs and Sebastian Kelly. We’re executive producers with Hearst Media. And, we’d like to talk to you about working with us to develop a new show.”

He’s stunned for a moment. “Wha-- umm, Ms Stubbs, Mr Kelly, could you repeat that for me?”

Ms Maybell Stubbs repeats what she’s said in almost the same words.

In the meantime, Charlie drags his laptop from his nightstand, where it’s sitting next to his empty non-water bottle, his half full water bottle, and a few open bottles of pills that should probably not be open. He googles them, and yes, they are actually producers with Hearst Media.

Ms Maybell is talking about how the network is interested in targeting a younger millennial demographic. About how he’s tested well on the Bake Off, and they’d like to know if he has ideas.

“This, umm, this is a shock,” he admits. “Do you have a show in mind for me, or would I be developing my own?” He thinks that’s the right question to ask.

“We have something in mind, but we’d like to see what you come up with. Would you be able to come work with someone on our team about a pilot this week?”

“Let me check my calender,” he says, just to give himself a moment to cover. And to check his exam schedule. “I think so.”

They work through the details, where he should go and who he should meet. The whole thing is a blur of effervescence in his tummy. It’s more that champagne feeling of “Is this thing really happening?” than the fearful butterflies of anxiety.

“Good, we look forward to working with you, Mr. Morris.”

“Thank you so much.”

He’s proud of himself. He waits a good ten seconds after they hang up before he screams into his
pillow. There’s nothing else he can do, he’s got too much emotion.

He thinks he’s being quiet, but the muffled shriek brings pounding feet from upstairs. “Charlie?”

“Finch! I got a pilot!” He cries, almost falling out of bed before he grabs his crutches. “I got a fucking pilot!”

“A pilot?”

“They want me to make a tv show.”

It turns out that even if you are the impetus for an impromptu Tuesday evening party, and you don’t have work in the morning, you still have to clean. Henry is muttering dark things about TV stars and fame going to your head while he picks Silly string out of the couch cushions. Elmer is vacuuming, and Charlie is by the sink, washing dishes. Despite what he told Denton, he still does a lot of dishes.

Their phones are in a collective pile in the middle of the table. Elmer is playing DJ because no one else in the house listens to quite as much Stan Rogers as he does. And, while post party clean up to a song about a witch having sex with a centaur is interesting, it’s definitely not something he would have listened to if it hadn’t been for Elmer. Which is not to say that he exactly minds folk ballads. Except when he thinks about them. And then, they can be kind of depressing.

One of the phones start to ring, and he turns to check whose. He pauses Elmer’s music, which is echoing throughout the house. (One of the benefits of the old victorian Finch rented is the acoustics.) If he doesn’t turn it off, he’s not sure he’ll be able to hear the person on the other end of the phone.

Well, he’s not sure he’ll be able to hear his doctor. He hadn’t heard back from his orthopedic office after he got back from LA, and he didn't mind. He knows what they’ll say, he knows what they’ve been saying. He’ll pick up, and Dr Sayle will greet him, and ask after his health. And, Charlie will respond with a similar inquiry.

And then, Dr. Sayle will say, “I know we’ve talked about this, but you need a surgery.”

And Charlie will grind his teeth and feel his stomach clench and try not to go through all the reasons that statement scares him.

There are the financial reasons, of course. Hip replacement is a major surgery, and he’s not sure how its covered under Medicare in New Jersey. It’s going to be expensive, no matter what: the cost of the surgery, and the follow up, and the time off work. He doesn’t have a stable job, and his hourly position won’t give him time off. New Jersey is at will, so they can and will fire him.

But, there are the deeper, darker reasons that he can’t explain easily. The halfway hazy memories of when he first woke up after the accident with both his legs in traction and his arm in a cast. Wiggling his toes defiantly to show the doctors that yes, he still could. And then, two years later, his junior year, that growing pain, and then the surgery. And, waking up a second time and not being able to move. A follow up surgery which only made the numbness worse.

He doesn’t want to do this, not yet. Not ever, but that’s not a possibility. So, at least not yet.

“I know, but I want to wait a while,” he tells the doctor.
“You’ve got AVN.” At least his doctor is direct.

“I know.”
He knows the bone in his right hip is dying. It’s been doing that for a while. It’s why it hurts. Why he will, eventually, need a hip replacement. Just, not yet.

“In the left, Charlie,” Dr Sayles says. “You’ve got AVN in your left hip as well.”

It’s amazing how one phone call can change everything so quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh. Umm, tell me what you think, please? I don't have sources for this, just the image of the people from Next Food Network Star making this call. But, umm, questions, comments, concerns, critiques, adventures, or whatever, please feel free to come talk to me?
Chapter Summary

In which Medda's dogs betray her, Charlie recounts the exploits of the former contestants, and things may be okay.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Very few. Umm... maybe food?

She can hear the chorus barking before she even opens the door. It’s been a long day, but Bowery and Beauty, her dogs, are always happy to see her. They love her, on the mostly reasonable condition that they get out to exercise twice a day and they’re not abandoned with their pet sitter for too long. When that happens, they go off and sulk under her bed, pointedly ignoring her.

“Hiya Medda!” A cheerful voice calls over the clamor of canine greetings. It’s owner is normally slow to appear, but he comes all the same.

However, today, Bowery decides that he’s being too slow and she scampers off to make sure he’s okay. Bowery has some shepard in her, Medda likes to think. It certain explains her tendency to herd, organize, and count. She needs to know here all her people are at any given time.

Medda follows the little dog down the hallway and into her well lit living room. It’s airy, with skylights to let in the bright afternoon sun. Medda likes things light and airy at home: she works all day in a dark studio, and she wants to come home to light when there is some to be had. So, her living room is large and airy, with a pale yellow couch (covered in a pale yellow slipcover, because she realized shortly after she got the couch that an almost white couch was a mistake), pale wood floors, and cheerful yellow curtains. On that couch is sprawled a … she supposes “young man” is the technical term. “Boy” doesn’t really qualify, although she’s old enough to be his mother. And, “Young Adult” has weird contations. No, he’s a full adult: a few months shy of thirty if her math is right. He’s covered in a quilt Medda’s cousin Delilah made. One of the at least seven quilts Delilah has given Medda over the years. Its draped in such a way she can tell he had his ankle propped up on the couch before she came in, and he’s slid back guiltily so she wouldn’t know.

He’s leaning against the arm of the couch, talking animatedly to someone on his computer. “-thing he’d pull.”

He glances up, and grins at her, making a one finger wait gesture at the screen. “Medda just got home.”

“Hi Medda!” There’s an overlap of male voices, and when Charlie turns the tablet toward her, she sees Spot Conlon and Tony Higgins, faces crowded close together.
“Hi boys,” Medda greets the collective at large. Bowery - who is the only other non-male in the room - growls and leans against Charlie’s couch. “How are you?” She adds a beat later.

Tony grins. “Good! Just telling Cru-Charlie about my new job and our new apartment.”

Medda notes that word, “our”. She shoots Charlie a questioning look. He gives her a “later” gesture, under the computer. Good. Because she wants to know when that became a thing.

Spot grunts, and leans in toward the camera. “Racer finally left his job!”

“Not really,” the other man mutters, blushing. “Just... something better came along.”

Spot snorts, and mutters, “nerd”. Tony doesn’t argue.

“Well… nice to see you boys,” Medda gets up, ready to leave.

“Nice to see ya too, Medda,” Spot says, quickly. “We gotta be going.” There’s a scuffle off screen. “Talk to you again soon, Charlie. And, uhh, you should come see our place.”

“Yeah, I’ll try.” Charlie says, voice guarded. “See ya!”

He shoves the phone back into the couch, and pulls his wheelchair closer. He shifts, getting ready to transfer.

“How’d it go today, Charlie?” She asks, sinking into one of the chairs. Beauty turns herself around three times and settles next to Medda’s feet. Medda scratches the dog, absentmindedly, and Beauty leans into her.

He settles back, cautiously. And he nods toward the wheelchair. “Today was…” She watches him. Under the blanket, she can tell his leg is moving, she just not sure which one. “Today wasn’t easy,” he offers, finally. There’s a smile on his mouth and in his voice, but his eyes are tired.

As far as she can tell, nothing about Charlie’s current situation is easy. Which is, somehow, is why he’d ended up with her.

After the end of the New York season of the bake off, they’d mostly gone their separate ways. She’d gone back to her dogs and her daytime baking show. Aside from the press coverage that came after the show, where she’d appeared with the contestants, they’d faded out of her life. And then, three years ago, she’d been at a big network gala and she’d run into Charlie again. This time, he was there as a host of a moderately successful netflix series. He’d been taller than she’d expected: walking the carpet with a pair of bright yellow crutches. When he’d been on the show, he’d spent all the time they were filming in his wheelchair, with Joe goading him when he chose to use it and when he chose not to. After that, they’d met up occasionally for more of those sessions, they’d ended up competing together on one of those big charity cooking shows, and they’d done well together. They were friendly.

She still hadn’t expected to be hosting him for nearly two months.

But, she’d gotten a phone call a few weeks ago from an unknown number with a New York Area code. “Hi, Miss Medda? This is Patrick Volkov Cortez. I think you know my parents. My father is Sebastian Cortez.”

And, oh God. He couldn’t be. She knew Sebastian Cortez. In multiple ways. And, Sebastian Cortez didn’t have any children. He had more money than sense, but he didn’t have any children. And
then, the other name the young man had said registered. Volkov. Katya Volkov was another name from Medda’s past who she didn’t want to remember. Katya Volkov had the maternal instincts of a sea turtle. Medda can’t possibly imagine a child from the two people she knows most likely to win a, “Never going to procreate award.”

“My umm, my mom said you owed her a favor,” Patrick had continued, as though this was a perfectly ordinary conversation about a perfectly ordinary woman and a perfectly ordinary favor.

And, yes, Medda does - did - owe Katya Volkov a favor, which she has regretted for the last twenty years. But, she’d expected Katya herself to call in that favor, not this boy who might or might not be Katya’s fictitious son.


She must have made some sort of sound of assent, because he tumbled onward.

“He’s… he’s about to get kicked out his nursing home, and he needs a place to stay.”

She might have repeated that.

“Charlie had his hip replaced a couple of weeks ago,” Patrick tries explains. “And, he… what did he actually do?” Someone on the other end of the phone must supply an explanation, because Patrick sighs, exasperatedly. “Anyway, he’s only been there for two days, and the director says he has to leave. And, he can’t come home because he can’t drive yet and he has to be at NYU for physical therapy most of the day.”

This all made sense to Medda. She still had questions, though. Mostly where she comes into it.

“Because you have an accessible kitchen, so you probably also have an accessible bedroom. We saw it. On celebrity homes of New York… shut up, nobody cares about how much better MTV cribs was.”

She sort of does, but not enough to say so.

“So, anyway, I was wondering if you would do Charlie, and me, and therefore Katya, the favor of hosting him for maybe a month. Just until they clear him to drive again.”

And, she had agreed. Because hosting Charlie Morris was a lot less scary than some of the things Katya Volkov could have asked for. And, Medda knows that you do not refuse to pay back a favor owed to Katya Volkov. Especially not when… Patrick had been a disturbing revelation.

Charlie had arrived ten days ago, accompanied by a young man with his mother’s eyes and his father’s hands, a sarcastic boy with a skateboard, Spot Conlon, and an adaptive seat for the toilet. He’d settled into life at Medda’s quickly. He made friends with Bowery, who is, in point of fact, a shameless flirt and a cuddle slut. They do say dogs take after their owners… He’d even tamed the recalcitrant Beauty, who really is her mother’s baby.

And, Medda isn’t sure she wants to admit it, but she likes him around. She never wanted children. She’s happily an aunt and a godmother, but the advantage to that is being able to hand them back. Samuel and Ezekiel are good boys, but at fourteen and seventeen, they are also too much for her. Two days into their five day trip, she was ready to tear her hair out. Charlie is easy, though.

“Today wasn’t easy,” Charlie offers. There’s a smile on his mouth and in his voice, but his eyes are tired.
“What happened?” She asks.

“My PT and surgeon said I’m not ‘progressing fast enough’ and that they think I need some more time before I go back to work.”

Medda nods. Her mental schedule tells her he’s supposed to still be at physical therapy, not home draped across her couch.

“But, uhh, I need to get episode proposals back out in the next two weeks. I need to get the test kitchen going, and the researchers scouting locations and guests. And, I need to do more, because Kara’s on maternity leave.”

Medda thinks she remembers Kara as a PA on the Bake Off during Charlie’s season. (Although, she’s admittedly terrible at names. She would recognize Kara if she saw a picture. But, Kara as a name? Might as well be an actress or comic book character as PA.) Apparently, she’s gone on to be Charlie’s producer. Medda gives her credit, she’s clearly done a brilliant job.

“When is the season supposed to be filmed?”

“Two months,” he sighs. “But, there’s no way my PT will clear me to go back to work full time.”

“How many do you have done?” Medda assumes he’s smart enough to have a few back pocket episodes. Everyone has a few back pocket episodes: the ones that you haven't gotten to make, but would like to, or that didn't fit in your season, or the recipes you keep wanting to make but are always slightly seasonally inappropriate.

He shrugs. “I’ve got three and a half already done. And then, I thought maybe I’d do one on surgery and hospital food. Meet with a dietician, and see how it works and stuff. Maybe talk about my surgery.”

Medda makes a face. “How would that fit with your normal show?” She prompts.

She’s a TV producer, and a good one. She’s produced quite a few more shows than she’s been in; when she first started cooking, it was hard for a black woman to get in front of the camera. A few white women had broken that glass ceiling. Julia Childs was, and will forever be, A Legend. But, there had to be someone behind that bumper crop of Martha Stewart knock-offs in the early aughts. She’d finally gotten her break on-screen break in 2010, fighting her way through other producers to show that she could cook, too. But, she’s a producer, and she holds onto her skill set.

Charlie shrugs. “Uhhh…”

“Your thing is breaking down really recipes into simple steps,” she reminds him, as though he’s forgotten the premise for his show in the four weeks he’s been in recovery. “So, what’s the recipe and what are the steps?”

“Uhh…”

While he thinks, she’s trying to figure it out herself. He could… maybe invite a physical therapist to a grocery store with him? He often brings someone to the grocery store with him? But that seems a little bit too obvious, and not his style.

“I… I’m not sure,” he admits. “So, maybe scrap that for now?”

“Nah, we’re brainstorming honey. What else?”
“I wanted to do three meals: one protein with a roast chicken.” Charlie’s done a few episodes where he’s done three ways to make an interesting meal around a single protein. “Like, maybe how to roast a chicken on the first day,” he continues.

Medda pulls a pen and paper out of her notebook and starts jotting.

“With the option of rotisserie, of course, because those things are convenient. And then, tacos, maybe? Or like, a taco salad with shredded chicken? And chicken soup. ...Or... umm... chicken pot pie?”

“That’s a long episode and a turkey-sized chicken,” Medda mutters to herself as she writes the notes. “Why not do them separately?” She suggests. “A chicken pot pie is damn good, and pretty easy to make at home. And, you make good pastry.”

He grins. “I thought you thought Jackie did it better,” he admits, fingers tracing the edge of the quilt where Lilah sewed race cars. Medda liked Lilah’s quilts before she decided to get creative.

“Nah,” she admits. “It was... it is...”

“Complicated,” Charlie finishes, frowning a little bit, and then shifting on the couch. “So, umm, yeah. Chicken pot pie. Maybe do it three ways: beginner, intermediate, and advanced.” He glances at her, shyly. “I umm, I also wanted to ask you if you’d come to a cinnamon bread three ways thing? I thought of it this weekend when Les Jacobs called me.”

“You still talk to Les?” She’s lost track of the youngest contestant from that season, the same way she’s lost track of everyone else. She remembers the sixteen year old trying to be mature in the crowd of young men, and the fact that his eyes popped out of his head when he saw the girls in production in their tank tops. It was like he’d never seen a half naked woman before...

Charlie nods. “Yeah, he’s in cooking school, thinking about going to pastry school. He called me to complain that his brother Davey came to stay and ruined his best pan because Davey can’t figure out french toast.”

Medda remembers less about Davey, other than that he was Les’ adult guardian on set.

“And, I’ve been wanting to do a cinnamon bread episode for ages, but I never had the chance to ask for your permission.”

She... actually, it kind of sounds like fun. After binge watching two seasons of his show before he moved in, she has a healthy respect for the way the show is structured. It’s a simple cooking show, breaking down the recipes into something more closely resembling a youtube tutorial than the type of cooking show she’s used to. Charlie, and often some guest, go to the store and buy ingredients. They go through a dish - or a set of dishes - that answer a very specific problem: How to make them, or make variants. How and where to cut corners, or add embellishments. And then, sometimes, he does something wild. He likes to take something that seems simple and homemade, and show three ways to do it and get a good result: three ways to do poundcake, for instance, with the easiest being a good brand to buy and then adding a homemade glaze, the middle beings doctoring a box mix, and the hardest making it from scratch. He also has one episode - one wild card episode - that harkens back to the bake off where he does something crazy. Makes fondant potatoes and decorates a gingerbread Monty Python scene, for example. (That had been the third season, though, the one she’d watched while Charlie was lying in his room, drugged to the gills and probably straight from the hospital. Patrick Volkov Cortez got his truth bending skills for both sides of the family.)
An idea pops into her head, something that feels wild and delightful. Something she wants to do, badly. “What about a reunion episode,” she asks, slowly.

“A reunion episode?”

“Yeah, like you and the other contestants, there years later.”

“A ‘Where are they now?’” He sounds skeptical. “We all know where they are now: on my show!”

Medda considers for a moment.

“And, anyway, I doubt anyone would do it!” He says, with a huff. It might be that he’s in pain, but he might also just be afraid. Of what, she’s not sure. “Spot and Race are tangled up in each other, and their new jobs, and their new apartment… I don’t know if they’d agree. They’ll probably be the next to get married, after Smalls.”

“Wait, Smalls got married?” Medda asks, surprised.

She knows the contestants sometimes keep in touch. She knows they keep going in their lives. But… it’s still weird to think about. Weird to think about Les in pastry school, weird to see Spot and Race so close and talking to Charlie, weird to think that Smalls got married.

“That was a nice wedding,” Charlie admits. “I thought the cake was particularly well executed.”

Medda raises her eyebrow.

“It was a collaboration!” He says, quickly. “Race, Spot, and I did a tier, each. Umm… and I think Blink did some of the appetizers. And, Smalls baked the bread.”

Of course she did.

“Anyway, Romeo’s too far away, and Blink’s too busy, what with the new baby...” Charlie continues.

Medda pretends not to notice that Jack is never mentioned.

“What?” She demands, her brain catching up and registering the full weight of the sentence.

“Well,” Charlie says, reasonable, “Blink and Mush just adopted their baby, what, three weeks ago?”

“Louis has a baby?”

Charlie digs out his phone, and flips through the photos. “He’s besotted. Well, they both are. Blink’s just more dramatic about it.”

He holds out the phone for her to see, and she squints at the image, before pushing it back from her face and sighing. Reading glasses in place, she studies the little family. Louis, she recognizes, his hair ruffled and one eye focused on the camera behind glasses with thick plastic frames. He’s got one arm around a teenage girl with long pink hair and too much smudge eye makeup, and the other around a short man with curly hair who’s cradling a soft yellow bundle. The man - who has to be his husband - looks slightlyterrified and very much in love.

“But, Lou’s off now, for a couple of months, while they sort out parenting. Paternity leave, I guess? And, anyway, I think he’s really busy with Miss Izzy.”

Medda raises her eyebrows. “When are you going to see him?”

Charlie shoots a pointed look at the wheelchair next to the couch, where a bottle of water and a bottle of pills are sitting. “He lives in Hell’s Kitchen, and I’m still not driving.”

She bites back the urge to suggest he takes the subway, remembering a rant about that a couple of days ago. And a few episodes ago. Medda takes the subway everywhere: when its on time, it’s far more convenient than driving, and faster than walking. Charlie had reminded her that few of the subway stations in New York were accessible, and that they only qualified when everything was working. Which was basically never. And then he’d asked the last time she’d called ahead to see if a subway station was open.

“So, have them over here,” She suggests. “Have them over, and ask him if he’d be willing to do a reunion episode.” She makes a note on her pad. “What about Romeo?”

“Atlanta,” Charlie huffs out. “No idea why the hell you’d go to Atlanta, but… he’s at Georgia Tech. Doing something… chemistry-ee?”

“Chemistry-ee? Like you have no idea?”

“Exactly.” He has the good grace to look slightly embarrassed. “But, now that he’s done tweeting about getting his wizard robes, he’s mostly into tweeting things about being a baker who lost his mind and ran away to do a postdoc. And, of course, it’s Romeo, so cat pictures.”

Medda hadn’t know any of those things about Romeo. She’s still not sure what she knows about Romeo. He… he’s a wizard?

“Would he do it, do you think?”


“I don’t think you’d have to go there. He could come here.” She makes a note about budgeting B-roll in Atlanta and airfare.

Charlie looks relieved. “I think he’s the only one who’s really left, I think.” He frowns.

“Well, maybe you should call him? And the others?” She suggests. “Just… just ask them.”

He shrugs. “If they do it, I think I still need you, and Joe, and Sarah and Kath. You know, to round things out.” There’s a pause, then, and his voice sound smaller when he speaks. “And, Joe will never do it.”

Joe… Medda agrees that Joe was never Charlie’s biggest fan. Joe had been the one who’d blocked him from getting Star Baker over and over again. Joe and Medda had argued so long before they crowned the winner that season. And, it’s possible… maybe… not at all… that Charlie’s name hadn’t been the one written on the slip of paper in the envelope and that Sarah and Katherine had gone rogue. It’s possible, but not likely.

In the throws of the season, Medda had asked Joe why. They’d been in the middle of one of those epic deliberations, the kind that lasted hours and hours. And, Medda had just kind of snapped, and demanded to know why Joe wouldn’t support Charlie’s doing well. And, Joe had looked at her, and with a voice as hard as diamond, he’d asked her if she knew what had happened to his wife.
She’d said yes, hadn’t Kate and Lucy died in a car crash. And, he’d nodded, his face and body closed to protect himself from talking about the pain that lurked there. Hit and Run, he’d said. Gang related. And Charlie had been with the gang, or the gang members. His juvenile records might be sealed, but the police report from his accident wasn’t. Joe was savage in his feelings there was just dessert in one of the boys who killed his wife and daughter dying in a car crash, and the other in prison for the manslaughter of his own brother. But, that clearly wasn’t enough, since Charlie should have gone to prison, too. Or something. At the very least, Joe was firm that he didn’t deserve other good things. His cooking talent didn’t matter, it paled in comparison to his past sins. 

Medda had never known what to do with that knowledge.

“Kath and Sarah would probably do it,” Medda says. “They occasionally drop into my DMs on twitter to find out if we’re going to put together another season, because they miss baked goods as part of their compensation package. And, I’ll be there.”


“Let me deal with Joe. …But, I think you’re forgetting someone else. Jack.”

Charlie’s face clouds, a hundred shades of longing, of anger, and regret flashing across it. “I… I’m not really in contact with Jack.”

“Good thing I found him, then.”

“Where?” The word comes quickly.

“He… I think he moved out to California for a while, to ‘find himself’, whatever that means.” She finds herself doing air quotes. She has no idea where she got the habit. “And, while he was out there, I guess he started writing and illustrating children’s books. He said something about therapy, and a way to work through he’s feelings… maybe learn to communicate better. So, I think he’s back in town. And, you should call him. At least for this… if I get Joe, you need to get Jack.”

Charlie frowns, but doesn’t say anything. Bowery get up, nudging her head against his hand, and he scratches her, absentmindedly.

“I… I can try,” He says, finally. “If I can get Jack to agree, I guess I’ll do it.”

“Good!” Medda says, forcefully enough to startle Beauty.

Beauty takes the opportunity to shoot both of them dark looks and flounces out of the room to go den under Medda’s bed.

“And, why don’t you invite Louis and his husband and his baby over for Sunday dinner this week? That way, you don’t have to take the subway, and I get to meet the baby.”

“Okay.” Charlie agrees with a tentative smile. “And, umm, Thanks Miss Medda.”

“Anytime Honey, any time.”

Chapter End Notes

And that’s all she wrote.
Okay, maybe not so much. But, I think it's the end of this story. There's some room to come in and clean up bits around the edges: space for a few one-shots and all that. But, I think the main body of this work is done.

I want to thank everyone who's helped me with this. My parents, who let me stay with them during the period of brief un-employement (aka burnout recovery) and supported my cookbook stealing. Several friends - both new and old - who supported me with this. You know who you are, and I love you and thank you so much. Because seriously, this wouldn't be what it is without your help, encouragement, and amazing fics. ...And my local grocery stores for supplying me with all sorts of baked goods that I needed for "inspiration".

So, yeah, umm... Thank you for reading this. Thanks if you commented already, thanks in advance if you want to comment now. And, umm, yeah. Thanks for joining me on this adventure about trust, intimacy, and cake.

Oh, and um... I just remembered. This was suggested as the intro to Charlie's show. Not sure its quite right, but I like it! And, This definitely resembles a video he might have made... or the sort of spirit of his show.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!