A Storm Needs Lightning

by Blue_Gumdrop

Summary

Jackson Storm may be a cocky, arrogant, next-generation racer, but no one can deny he has skill. So why is Cruz Ramirez of all people passing him on the track in her bright yellow race car, with Lightning McQueen’s racing number painted on it. It takes Storm a minute to comprehend the fact that Lightning has given up his racing number, and now plans to quit racing. That does not sit well with him, not at all. Storm doesn’t know what he’s going to do next, all he knows is that he’s worked too hard and for too long to let Lightning quit that easily.
Storm freezes. He looks behind him in shock, expecting to see familiar red and gold paint. He doesn’t see that though, it’s not Lightning. It’s someone else, a racer in a yellow car. They’re yelling at him, Taunting him. Trying to make him lose the race. It’s Cruz Ramirez, he realizes, Lightning’s trainer. Her car is bright yellow, and in his rearview mirror Storm can see Lightning’s number crudely painted on the side. He thinks its a joke at first, that its a sick joke designed to make him lose focus. If it is, it’s working, because Cruz Ramirez is able to easily catch up to him. Storm only watches as the bright yellow car drives up next to him. Storm is too distracted to focus on her though. His eyes rake through the stands searching for him. For Lightning.

Storm’s trainer is screaming at him through the headset, telling him to focus. Storm pays him no attention. He spots Lightning standing in the crew pit, blond hair glinting in the sunlight. He’s not on the track racing, but instead he’s in the crew pit. Why would Lightning be there? Why would he be in the crew pit?! Is he helping Cruz? Storm is losing speed, his foot is sliding off the petal, his eyes are glued to Lightning. Storm’s mind is reeling, he is trying to come up with a reason for Cruz Ramirez to be on the track while Lightning is up in the stands. He can’t come up with a scenario he likes.

Storm is too lost in thought to be angry, to even be concerned about winning this race. The black and white checkered finish line comes into view quicker than he imagined, but he can’t bring himself to care. Winning is no longer on his mind, not even when he sees Cruz pass him. Normally he would be angry, try to regain speed and quickly advance. If the situation were different Storm could see himself forcing her to the outskirts of the track, making her car slam against the wall. But he doesn’t. He hears the crowd screaming, hears the racing announcer say Cruz has won. Storm is still behind her, he finishes second but does not even realize it.

The other racers cross the finish line. They move off the track, but Storm stays. Storm looks at Lightning. Even from this distance Storm can see his eyes. Lightning is smiling at Cruz, congratulating her. Storm feels numb. It shouldn’t be her out there. She didn’t deserve that win.

Eventually, he moves his car out of the stadium. Only because his trainer tells him to. He is on autopilot now. Moving his car only because it is so natural to him. When he exits he sees swarms of people waiting outside. Many of them are reporters, who immediately rush to his car.

They yell out questions to him.

“STORM, what happened?!”

“How could you lose?!!”

“You had a 96% chance of winning!”

Storm can’t think, he can’t respond. It’s too loud, there are too many people around him, blocking his exit.

Storm can’t take it. He finally moves, slamming his hand on the horn. The crowd is shocked, people yell, they curse, they stare at him with confusion written all over their faces. Then they all part just enough to make a path he can fit his car through. Storm slams his foot on the gas and leaves the stadium.

He can still hear his trainer yelling at him to come back, saying that he isn’t supposed to take his
car out of the stadium. Storm does not care. He rips his headset off, his helmet follows. He drives quickly. He needs to get away from the noise, from the people, from Cruz Ramirez basking in her victory. He can’t stand to think about her. About the smug smile she was wearing when Storm glanced at her. He needs to get off the streets. There are too many other people around, too many people watching him. He drives to his hotel, taking back roads whenever he can to avoid people.

His hotel is close to the Florida racetrack, and his racecar is much faster than the other cars outside of the stadium. Granted he probably shouldn’t be driving around in public with it, but Storm can’t bring himself to care about that now.

He hides his car in the parking garage downstairs, before stomping up the stairs to the lobby. He can feel the receptionist at the hotel desk staring at him, and he feels himself reaching the limit for what he can tolerate. “Stop staring at me!” He snaps, before closing the elevator door once he’s inside. Once he makes it to his hotel room he goes inside and slams the door shut behind him. His mind is running a million miles a minute and he can’t seem to focus on anything. He wants to scream. To break something. To march right up to Cruz Ramirez and tell her she didn’t deserve to win. Of course, he doesn’t end up doing any of these things.

He sits on his bed and turns on his tv, hands clenching at his sides. Footage of after the race is still going on and Storm watches intently. There are people interviewing Cruz and Lightning, reporters no doubt. Surely there to ask Lightning why he decided to let Cruz race for him.

Storm stares at Lightning’s face when he answers. Smiling brightly for the cameras like he always does. Lightning tells the reporters he is going to act as Cruz’s crew chief from now on. Storm freezes. It is unspoken but the fact is still there. Lightning can’t be her crew chief and a racer. There is a brief moment when Lightning looks as if he will change his mind, but Storm watches him glance at Cruz and then the look is gone.

Storm feels sick. Lightning is quitting? He can’t! He won’t, Storm thinks. The reporters stop questioning them and he watches as Lightning leaves the stadium. Storm is so angry. He is so confused. More than anything he is tired, and when he leans his head back towards the pillow and buries his head in his hands he realizes this. He wants to sleep if only to escape the nightmare that just happened. He can’t stay awake. Not when he has been racing for the last few hours. He stares up at the ceiling, but it soon fades to black, and sleep consumes him.

When Storm wakes up he sits up rigidly. What time is it? It is dark in his room, and he can’t see anything. He looks toward the window but sees no sunlight, so he guesses it is night time. He fumbles for his phone in the darkness, and the screen lights up. 1:32 am, great. Not surprising as he fell asleep in the middle of the day. Storm sees notifications pop up on his phone. Three missed calls from his trainer, one from his cousin. That one’s a surprise. Kelly rarely contacts him.

Then it hits Storm like a sack of bricks. Lightning. He goes on the internet searching desperately to see if it is true. Still hanging onto a thin thread of hope that what he found out a few hours ago is not really true, that Lightning was just kidding. That it was all just a joke, a highly elaborate one at that, but still a joke. Every interview he finds states the indisputable truth. Lightning McQueen is done racing professionally. He is going to act as Cruz Ramirez’s crew chief once the next racing season starts. Storm feels empty. He worked so hard, and for so long to become a racer. He waited so long for this, to race with Lightning. To have it taken away so quickly is crushing. Storm’s disappointment turns quickly to anger. Anger towards Cruz Ramirez for taking Lightning’s place. Anger towards Lightning for giving up. Anger towards himself for not doing anything about it.

Then he has an idea. It strikes him suddenly, and out of the blue. It is more impulsive than most of
his decisions, much more. But it quickly gains substance in his mind, fueled with the possibility of success. What if he were to convince Lightning to come back? Storm knows Lightning still wants to be a racer. If he could just talk to him, Storm is sure he could get through. He could remind Lightning of who he is! Lightning McQueen is a racer, Not a crew chief! Storm could explain that to him! Once he convinces Lightning everything else should be easy! Lightning would have no trouble getting his number back. No one would dare to deny him his place if he wanted it.

The plan is decided then before Storm has developed it completely. He fumbles around his hotel room, turning the lights on.

Storm grabs his phone, and it’s charger, shoving them into his pocket. He did not bring much else with him, as he was supposed to return to his apartment tonight. Storm grabs his wallet and keys on the way out the door and is holding his shoes in his hand. He feels giddy with excitement and hops around in the elevator on one foot trying to put his shoes on. Or it could be adrenaline after him not really sleeping enough.

He races past the front desk, dropping off his key, startling the receptionist. He bounds down the steps to the parking garage and finds his racecar. He gets inside quickly. Storm’s plan is kind of thrown together, but he is sure of it now. He will go to Lightning. Storm knows where Lightning lives, he’s mentioned it a few times in his career. Lightning lives in the Midwest, somewhere between New Mexico and Arizona, in a small town called Radiator Springs. Storm had never been there before, but it looked like now he was going to have the chance.

Storm debates driving his car to the airport and getting a plane. He knows that is what Lightning does when he finishes racing. Lightning flies to Radiator Springs and his truck driver brings his car back. Lightning has probably just got home since he flew. Storm considers his options. Flying would get him there quicker, but there was no guarantee on how he would get to Radiator Springs from whatever airport is closest to it, Storm doubts there is an airport in the town. Storm doesn’t even know if there is a flight at this time.

He decides on driving. In a normal car with normal stops, it would take roughly 30-35 hours. Storm is confident that in his racecar he can get there sooner, especially if he limits his stops. Storm puts his phone up on the dashboard and waits for his GPS to give directions on how to get to Radiator Springs. While it is loading he takes the time to quickly text Kelly. His cousin usually does not call unless it is an emergency, so she must be worried about him after seeing him on TV leave the stadium in his car. Storm has no intention of filling her in on his plan yet though, so he sends her a short message saying he is ok.

The GPS is done planning his route so Storm starts his car. He is going to get to Lightning. Nothing is going to stop him.

Storm is about 6 hours into his drive when he sees the sun start to rise. Damn, he thinks. The darkness has given him pretty good cover until now, and he has only passed a few cars on the road at this hour. Nighttime is also the best time for him to speed, as it's not as likely a cop will try to pull him over. Normally he wouldn’t speed this much but time is of the essence. Once it is daylight though he is sure someone is going to notice his racecar. Going 160 MPH down the interstate is sure to draw some attention. Storm slows down as he nears a convenience store, figuring he needs to use the restroom and get something to eat.

He ends up with two cans of red bull and a pop tart. The cashier raises his eyebrow questioningly, noticing his racing uniform and car outside. Storm gives the man a polite smile and pays for his things. He is back on the road quickly and takes a slightly longer route as to try and avoid more
people. As expected people still see him, and they have their phones out, recording videos or taking pictures. Storm ignores them and speeds up. He does not care about this making the news. He only cares about getting to Radiator Springs, about getting Lightning to change his mind.

Storm continues driving. Sure enough, it gets dark after another few hours and Storm guesses he is somewhere in Texas, but he isn’t sure. Storm starts to feel the first signs of tiredness when the sun starts to set the next day. It makes sense, as by now he’s driven roughly 18 hours. He downs another red bull and ignores it. He still has a long way to go. If he was younger Storm would barely be able to keep his eyes open, but he’s had plenty of experience driving for long stretches of time. Storm plays his music through the car speaker, it helps him to stay awake. It’s difficult to fall asleep when loud club music is blaring through his speaker. He drives another few hours. It’s 11 pm now. Storm’s been driving for 21 hours. He guesses he can make it to Radiator Springs in a few hours, but his eyes keep closing and he’s worried he won’t make it. Even red bull has its limits and Storm decides to take a little break. He pulls over to the side of the road and sleeps for an hour or so. As expected it wasn’t that easy to fall asleep sitting rigidly in the driver’s seat, and Storm is too tall to lay down in the back.

When he wakes up he sees another call from his trainer. Sooner or later he figures he’ll have to answer. Storm calls him. His trainer is a nice guy, but he gets exasperated whenever Storm doesn’t listen to him, which is actually quite often now that Storm thinks about it. After 2 rings, Tony answers. His voice is sluggish when he answers - he must be tired.

“Storm?” Tony asks questioningly.

“Yeah” Storm answers.

“What’s going on? Where are you?” he asks tiredly.

“I’m taking a vacation. You won’t hear from me for a few days.”

“Huh?! Wait! Storm! You have to practice! You have to come back and train! Next racing season starts in a few months and you need to be ready! You can’t just…”

Storm hangs up. He’s too tired and too irritated to deal with this right now.

Storm starts his car again and gets on the road. He’s still tired, but the nap helped him enough so that he is at least not closing his eyes every few seconds. Storm is close to Radiator Springs now. He’s driving through the barren desert in New Mexico, and he makes sure to check his gas because the last thing he needs is to be stranded here. As he continues driving Storm allows himself to reflect more on the race. Which doesn’t serve to make him feel better at all, It only agitates him more. Him being tired isn’t helping anything either.

Storm finds his ever-present anger returning again, He still can’t believe that he’s doing this. But if he doesn’t, what would that mean for Lightning? What would that mean for him? He waited so long to race with Lightning. It’s been his dream for as long as he can remember. Storm doesn’t know what he can say to Lightning to change things, but he is not going to let his entire purpose be stripped away from him so easily. Storm speeds up. He’s going fast in this desert wasteland, close to 180 Miles per hour. It isn’t as fast as he can go, but it’s incredibly dangerous and incredibly illegal outside of the racetrack. Storm doesn’t care. Every time he thinks of how easy it was for Lightning to just quit he fumes. Lightning McQueen is the world’s greatest racer! He’s still young! There’s still time for him to do so much more with his racing career!

Storm can feel himself frowning. He grips the steering wheel tighter. As he drives for another mile or so he sees a sign in the distance. Radiator Springs. This is it, he thinks. This is his chance. Storm
debates stopping to check his reflection in the mirror but decides against it.

He slows down once he gets closer to town and pulls over to the side of the road. The town is larger than he imagined, or at least it looks that way to him now. He grabs his phone and shoves it into his pocket before exiting his car. He looks around what he guesses is the center of town. The first thing he notices is that it’s hot outside. Storm is used to it, living in Florida, but it is still not that pleasant. Especially not when he’s wearing a full body black and blue racing uniform. The buildings surrounding him are not overly tall, they look like typical small town buildings. Storm spots two young men standing in front of a tire shop. He moves closer to them.

As he moves closer he sees a man in a firefighter’s uniform watering flowers between the tire shop and him. Storm calls out to him.

“Excuse me, sir! I’m looking for..”

The man yelps and literally runs off, leaving his watering can behind. Storm stares at him in shock. He doesn’t know what to think of that. Only that he’s never seen a firefighter scared of people before.

He hears laughter coming from the men sitting in front of the tire shop, and Storm turns toward them. The smaller one with black curly hair laughs, and the older one glances at him with a puzzled expression. Storm walks towards them.

The closer he gets he realizes he recognizes these two. The smaller man who’s laughing is Lightning’s pit crew. Normally a racer needs around four people to change the car’s tires and fill it with gas before the racer needs to get back to racing, but Storm has watched this guy change Lightning’s tires and fill up his gas tank just as fast as it takes four people. The taller man with brown hair calls out to him.

“Oh don’t mind Red, he just gets a little shy around strangers that’s all.” This man has a heavy Italian accent and Storm remembers that he is also a part of Lightning’s crew. Storm has seen this guy with Lightning before, he didn’t realize they all lived in the same town though.

“Oh,” Storm says stupidly.

The man introduces himself. “I’m Luigi and this is Guido,” he says gesturing to the smaller man. Luigi looks him up and down and then stares at his face for a minute.

“I’m Storm.”

Guido looks up at him with a frown. “Jackson Storm? The racer?” he asks.

Storm nods. Judging by the expressions on their faces, they are clearly not fans of him. Storm ignores it.

“Listen please help me. I need to find Lightning. Where is he?” Storm asks pleadingly.

Luigi and Guido look at him in shock before Guido answers.

“Go check Flo’s V8 Cafe. Lightning stops in there often” Guido says pointing towards the cafe.

Storm nods his head in thanks, then turns and runs toward it.

“Hey wait!” Luigi shouts. “Did you drive here from Florida?!”
Storm doesn’t respond. He runs faster. He is livid with Lightning for making him go through all this. Not to mention he's tired as hell. Storm can see him through the window. Blond head turned away from him as he sits at the bar.

Storm pushes the door open with a force that was definitely not needed and shouts

“LIGHTNING MCQUEEN!”
Chapter 2

Lightning whips around in confusion as he hears someone scream out his name. His breakfast is quickly forgotten in order to look at the man standing in the doorway, glaring at him angrily. Lightning looks at him, He’s not a local in town that’s for sure. Lightning has never seen him here, although he does seem familiar for some reason.

Everyone in Flo’s V8 Cafe is looking at this guy, which doesn’t surprise Lightning at all. It’s not often that complete strangers come charging into the Cafe screaming at him. Lightning studies his features. This man is tall, taller than Lightning. He has to be at least 6ft. The man has very vibrant eyes as Lightning can make out the intense grey from his seat at the bar. His black hair looks disheveled and the bags under his eyes make it seem like the man hasn’t slept for a long time. As he looks at the rest of his body Lightning notices he’s wearing a racing uniform. Oh, so he’s a racer. Lightning eyes the blue and black uniform which looks so familiar but Lightning just can’t remember where he’s seen it before. He must know this racer from somewhere...he just can’t quite place where. The man stands with his feet apart and his hands clenched at his sides. He seems incredibly angry for some reason, though Lightning has no idea why. Lightning can see a number in the upper corner of the man’s uniform. It’s the number 20. Lightning freezes. In a moment it all suddenly dawns on him.

“Storm?!” Lightning asks in bewilderment.

Storm shifts awkwardly as the attention is brought to the two of them. If everyone in Flo’s wasn’t looking at them a minute ago, they are now. Lightning stares at him in shock. What is he doing here? Why the hell is Jackson Storm in Radiator Springs of all places?

“What are you doing here?!” Lightning asks incredulously.

Storm crosses his arms petulantly. “I came to get you.” Storm responds, irritated.

Lightning’s mind feels like it’s going to implode. This situation is so surreal to him that he can’t believe it’s happening. Why would Jackson Storm come here to get him? What does he want? What gives him the right to barge in here and yell at Lightning? Hasn’t he humiliated him enough? What more could he possibly want?

“What?!” Lightning says in confusion.

“I came here to get you to be a racer again! I came to take you back! You can’t be done! You can’t just give up like that!” Storm yells.

That was too much for Lightning. Give up? He didn’t give up. Even if he did decide to quit, what makes Storm think he can talk to Lightning like that here? He stands up rapidly in his chair, facial expression morphing into one of pure anger.

“How dare you. How dare you come into my town, and yell at me! What gives you the right?!” Lightning yells back.

Storm looks baffled at this, like he didn’t expect Lightning to get so angry, but quickly regains composure. Lightning watches out of the corner of his eye as Luigi and Guido walk over from the tire shop and Guido gives him a mysterious smile. Lightning has no idea what he is even doing and doesn’t have the patience now to figure it out.

“I challenge you” Storm says voice quieter now.
“What?” Lightning asks.

“I challenge you to a race. If I win, you have to come back with me.”

Lightning stares at him again. He can’t be serious right now. Storm did not come here to Radiator Springs to humiliate him. He wouldn’t allow it. Lightning is not one to back away from a challenge though, and he will certainly not do that here in his hometown. He was too prideful for that.


Luigi and Guido walk in and have just caught the tail end of that conversation. The tension in the Cafe is so thick that it could be cut with a knife, and Luigi seems to register this based on the nervous glance he wears as he looks between Storm and Lightning.

Lightning walks briskly past Storm, to Luigi’s garage where Mack had just dropped off his car early this morning. He hears Storm following a few steps behind, but doesn’t turn to look at him. Luigi and Guido walk near them, and they are apparently going to attend this race as well. Lightning turns to Storm when they get to the garage.

“There’s a racetrack about 3 miles north of here, down that road there.” Lightning says pointing toward the road. He gets into his car wordlessly, shutting his door.

Storm nods and goes down the road to get his own car. Lightning grits his teeth in annoyance and starts his engine. Luigi and Guido get into the front and back seat of his car. Lightning doesn’t say anything to them, which is how they can tell he is angry. “Hey Lightning, are you ok?” Luigi asks, concerned.

“I’m fine!” Lightning says through gritted teeth.

“Sure you are.” Guido says, his voice laced with sarcasm.

Lightning grips the steering wheel tighter. “Maybe...maybe you should go easy on him Lightning. I think he drove all the way here from Florida.” Luigi says neutrally. Lightning says nothing. Storm has this coming.

They get to the track relatively quickly and Luigi and Guido exit his car. Lightning has to wait for Storm for a few seconds longer than he thought it would take him, making Lightning wonder if Storm had hesitated at all. He shakes that thought away and reminds himself that Storm challenged him. Lightning sees Storm’s car pull up next to his. He turns his head forward, toward the track.

He can win this. Lightning knows he can. This is his home turf. This is Radiator Springs. He can’t lose here. He won’t lose here.

Luigi goes out to the track to stand in front of them while Guido sits on the side wearing a neutral expression. Luigi draws a line in the sand and announces that they will each have one lap and that whoever makes it around the track first and passes the “finish line” will win. Lightning looks over at Storm to see him grinning. It is clear that Storm thinks this challenge is only about speed, which would technically give Storm an advantage. Lightning smirks. He knows that on a track like this, speed can be your worst enemy.

Luigi raises his hands in the air and begins the countdown. Both racers grip their steering wheels.

“Ready? 3....2....1....GO!”

Luigi shouts, moving his arms down as a signal for them to begin. Both racers slam their feet onto the gas pedal. Storm speeds up rapidly, gaining ground quickly. Storm surpasses him with a large
lead, but Lightning only smiles. He was right about Storm relying on his speed to win him this race. Storm increased his speed even more now that the finish line was only another a few seconds away, just one more turn to go. Storm was unaware though, that Lightning had been steadily slowing down.

Lightning watched as Storm drifted hard, probably expecting to be mere seconds from the finish line. Lightning watched as Storm made this same mistake Lightning had years ago as a rookie. He watched as Storm’s car veered off to the side, smashing through cactuses left and right. Lightning brings his focus back to the track and glides across the finish line easily. He allows himself a victory smile. Storm had not learned the same tricks he had racing along this track with Doc.

His triumph is short-lived though when he sees Luigi and Guido looking towards where Storm crashed with concerned expressions. Lightning stared at where Storm’s car had gone. He told himself Storm would be fine. When Lightning was in the same position years ago he had been fine, and his car had only suffered a few minor scratches. It is clear though when he gets closer to Storm’s car though, that is not the case. Storm’s car had gone much farther through the cactus patches than Lightning’s did, and it was clear the car smashed into a lot of them. Lightning’s conceit instantly turns to worry as he gets closer to the car.

“Storm?” He calls out.

There is no answer.

Lightning moves quickly to the driver’s side and pulls the door open. Storm’s head is slumped onto the steering wheel. Lightning has a moment of sheer panic and he reaches out to touch his shoulder.

“Storm?!” He asks.

Storm sits up rapidly, and Lightning sighs in relief. It looks like his head didn’t smash against the steering wheel like Lightning had feared. He moves away from the driver’s side so Storm can exit the car. Storm fumbles out of the car, and Lightning is relieved to see no bodily injury. Storm’s car, however, is another matter.

Lightning can see that the car has suffered a lot of external damage. Smashing into those Cactuses really made a lot of dents in his car and even ruined the paint job in some places. Storm walks around his car surveying the damage. Storm is clearly upset about his car, although he is trying not to let it show. Lightning instantly feels guilty. Storm’s car is a newer model, and its very clearly important to him.

Storm gets in the front seat again and tries to start the engine. It shudders but does not start. Storm tries again. The car doesn’t start.

“Are you okay?” Luigi says to Storm walking up to him.

“I’m fine.” Storm says bitterly.

“Your car isn’t starting?” Guido says looking at it.

Storm sighs. “No, it’s not.”

Guido gives Lightning a glare. Lightning shoots him an annoyed glance. It’s not like he asked for Storm to challenge him. It was humiliating enough to lose to Storm in front of millions of people, but to lose here in Radiator Springs would have been crushing.
Lightning moves towards Storm. He should probably apologize. Yes, it was Storm’s fault for being too cocky, but Lightning can sympathize with his beat-up car.

Lightning opens his mouth to say something when he’s interrupted by a loud voice with a heavy southern accent.

“McQueen is that you?!” He hears from behind him.

Lightning turns and can see his best friend Mater poking his head out of the driver’s side of his tow truck.

“Hey, Mater!” He greets. Mater’s friendly demeanor makes it near impossible for anyone to be angry around him.

Mater exits his truck and walks over to him. Mater’s brown curls are sticking out from underneath his hat, and he’s sporting a friendly grin.

Mater walks up to Storm’s car, surveying the damage. When Storm exits the vehicle, Mater offers him a hand.

“Well Hi there! I’m Mater!”

Storm examines the hand in front of him before offering his own and shaking it.

“I’m Storm. Nice to meet you.”

Lightning stares at them. So it seems Storm does possess the ability to be kind. Not everyone has the decency to be kind to Mater, so Lightning watches Storm carefully.

“I remember you! You were racing with Lightning and Cruz a few days ago!” Mater exclaims.

“I was.”

“Well, what are ya doing all the way out here! Shouldn’t you be training for a race?!”

“I probably should be.” Storm says. “But I’m not going back until I convince Lightning to come race again” Storm replies, turning his stare to Lightning.

“Not a chance!” Lightning says back. “As soon as your car gets fixed you’re out of here!”

Storm glares at him with a frown. Mater looks between the two of them, and then at Luigi and Guido doing their very best to pretend they aren’t listening intently. Mater places a hand on Lightning’s shoulder.

“Hey pal, calm down ok?” Lightning nods, Mater is right. He doesn’t need to keep getting angry over this. He just needs to get Storm out of Radiator Springs.

Mater drives his tow truck down closer to Storm’s race car. Once Mater is finished connecting his truck to it, he pulls Storm’s car out of the cactuses.

“We’ll have to bring your car into town to get it fixed Storm. You can ride with me in the tow truck” Mater says, still in a pleasant tone. Storm looks bewildered as if Mater speaking to him with kindness is unfathomable.

“Right, ok.” Storm says before walking over to Mater’s tow truck and getting into the back. Lightning glances at Mater walking to the driver’s side and decides he doesn’t want Storm to be
alone with Mater. Lightning wants to make sure Storm doesn’t say anything offensive. About Mater’s tow truck or Radiator Springs or even about Mater.

Lightning tosses his keys to Guido and tells him to take his racecar back. Guido nods and he hears Luigi protesting that he should be the one to drive. Lightning ignores their bickering and hops in the front seat of the tow truck next to Mater, seeing as Storm sat in the back on his own.

Mater starts his truck and they drive away from the desert racetrack. Lightning hopes the drive will be quick and silent, but Mater seems to be intentionally taking the long way back.

“Mater, why are you taking the long way?”

Mater pauses and quirks his eyebrows.

“Oh? This is the long way? I thought we were taking the scenic route so we could show our guest around.”

Lightning glares at him. Sometimes Mater was just too nice.

“So Storm! What brings you to good old Radiator Springs?” Mater exclaims loudly.

Storm looks and turns away from the window he was staring out of.

“Oh, I um…” Storm starts then Mater interjects.

“I heard you came running into Flo’s Cafe screaming like a crazy person.” Mater says but laughs after it to show it was all in good nature.

Lightning waits for Storm to say something snarky. Or tell Mater to be quiet. He doesn’t do either of those things though. Lightning looks in the mirror and sees Storm rubbing the back of his neck, eyes downcasted. Oh. Was he embarrassed? Lightning surveyed him again. He really was different than Lightning expected. Lightning knew he would be young, it would explain why he was so cocky and arrogant. He didn’t expect Storm to look the way he did though. He looked good. Not that he would tell him that, but It made sense the more he thought about it. Storm’s popularity had skyrocketed after he started as a racer. Lightning had never seen him without his helmet on, and he pictured Storm with a more villainous face. Right now though he just looked tired. Lightning noticed the heavy bags under his eyes. Was it true then? Did he really drive here all the way from Florida?

Storm’s grey eyes glance up at him and Lightning whips his head away, pretending like he wasn’t just staring at him. He catches Mater smirking from the corner of his eye.

The drive is silent for another minute or two before Mater breaks the silence. “You look pretty tired there pal. Been driving a long time?” Mater asks turning his head to look at Storm.

“Yeah, I have” Storm says, yawning after he says it.

Mater nods. Lightning notices they are finally arriving back in town. Thank God. Now they’ll just drop Storm’s car off at the shop in town, and he’ll be gone soon.

“Say, you look hungry.” Mater says looking at Storm. Lightning looks at Mater with his best Don’t you dare Mater face. In the end, it has no effect because Mater is immune to things like that.

“I’m not hungry.” Storm says, crossing his arms. Good, Lightning thinks. A second later his
stomach growls loudly, and Lightning and Mater both turn around to look at him. They both burst out laughing. Storm responds to this by hiding his face between his legs and putting his arms over his head. Lightning gets the feeling Storm hates being embarrassed. Or showing any type of weakness. It had already hurt his pride to crash his car Lightning suspected. Then again, Lightning used to be the same way. Mater and Lightning exit the vehicle still laughing slightly. They then go to Storm’s car and detach it from the tow truck.

Lightning looks at the car in admiration. It is extremely well made. Sleek, capable of great speed. Lightning wonders who bought it for him.

Mater and Lightning wheel it into the shop where Ramone emerges. He was not in the cafe this morning, but Lightning is sure his wife filled him in on everything that happened. Ramone steps outside and looks at Storm’s car. It seems he is admiring Storm’s car as well.

Lightning looks over to see Mater talking to Storm. Storm emerges with a faint red tint on his cheeks. Lightning can see Mater’s mouth moving but he can’t hear him. After a minute Mater walks over to Lightning with a suspicious looking grin, and Storm is reluctantly trailing a few feet behind him.

“Storm’s going to come eat with us. I think we could all use some food. You didn’t get to finish all your breakfast this morning right?”

“No. I didn’t. Because Someone came into Flo’s yelling like a maniac and challenged me to a race” Lightning furiously whispers. Mater smiles and throws his arm around Lightning. “Let’s go buddy.” He says steering them toward Flo’s.

When they enter there are thankfully not that many people inside. Radiator Springs is not a popular destination by any means, but somehow Flo’s cafe is the most crowded around breakfast time. Lightning is displeased with this situation, but when he turns to look at Storm, he does look rather hungry. Lightning supposes the least he can do if Storm actually drove here from Florida and wrecked his car was to eat lunch with him.

Once they all sit down at a table a waitress immediately comes to help them. She’s not Flo, and Lightning doesn’t really remember her name. Lightning knows all of the locals in town, so she must have moved here after Radiator Springs got more popularity.

She pauses to take their orders. Mater takes the liberty of ordering for all of them which Lightning is used to by now and Storm doesn’t have any objections to. The waitress walks back to the kitchen to get their drinks. They all sit at the table for a few minutes in silence before Storm announces that he’s going to the bathroom.

Once Storm is gone Lightning rounds on Mater. “Mater why did you invite him here? And what’s with you taking the long route back to Radiator Springs?”

“I was just being polite. He seems like he’s a friendly guy. Plus he was really hungry I mean you heard his stomach growl.” Mater says defending himself.

“Yeah I did Mater but that’s not the point. We don’t need to show him any courtesy. He’s not a guest here Mater. You didn’t race with him like I did. He’s arrogant and rude. He’s cocky. He’s brash. He’s…

“Coming over here right now!” Mater interjects quickly.

Lightning sees Storm emerge from the bathroom. He watches at Storm pauses for a moment before
pulling his phone out of his pocket and putting it up to his ear. Apparently, he’s talking to someone on the phone.

Mater leans over to whisper to him. “I wouldn’t be too hard on him Lightning. From what you just told me he sounds exactly like you did when you first got here.”

Lightning scowls at him. Mater laughs.

Storm walks over and rejoins them at the table. He placed his phone down on the table and reaches his hands up to rub his eyes. The waitress comes back with their drinks and Lightning watches as she looks at Storm a little longer than necessary.

She places Lightning and Mater’s drinks in front of them, and Lightning notices she hands it to Storm. Once he reaches to take it from her she brushes his fingers with her own and then apologizes sweetly.

She’s off a minute later saying she’ll be back with their meals soon. Storm looks at his hand like it’s been burned. Maybe he doesn’t like being touched. Lightning figured he’d be the type to enjoy attention from girls but Storm doesn’t look interested at all. If anything he looks offended she touched him.

Mater seemed to notice the interaction as well and raises his eyebrows at Lightning. Lightning shrugs back. He and Mater have learned after a few years of saying the wrong things to communicate silently. Especially if they were worried about saying something stupid in front of Sally.

Lightning turns back toward Storm when he hears the man’s phone vibrate. Storm picks it up, looks at the number and declines. Lightning wonders who called him. Another ten seconds later his phone rings again, and once again Storm declines it.

“Somebody really wants to talk to you.” Lightning says.

“It’s my trainer. He’s not pleased with my whereabouts.” Storm responds.

“Wonder why? It’s not like you should be preparing for a race or anything.” Lightning says with an edge of sarcasm.

“I’m not the only one who’s supposed to be preparing for a race” Storm snaps back quickly.

Lightning feels irritation building. Storm is pissing him off. Luckily the waitress has picked the right moment to intervene with their food as the atmosphere of the table instantly brightens. Mater ordered tons of food, which by the look of Storm’s hungry expression was a good idea.

Now that the food arrived the earlier tension disappeared. Lightning holds back a laugh as Storm tears into his burger. Jeez, he really must have been starving. Lightning didn’t really think they needed 3 orders of fries and onion rings but watching Storm devour the food in front of him changed his mind.

Once they had finished their meal everyone seemed to be in a brighter mood. Even Storm looked happier now that he had been fed. The three of them split the check and they now were waiting for the waitress to come and collect their tab. Lightning feels like this is a good time to talk about Storm’s car seeing as they are all pacified now.

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“It’s my trainer. He’s not pleased with my whereabouts.” Storm responds.

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“So Storm. Now that your car’s getting fixed up in the shop it should be done by the end of the day. Then you can go home.” Lightning says neutrally.
Storm narrows his eyes. Mater interjects. “Uh, actually Lightning I’m not sure it’ll be done that quickly. His car’s got some pretty new tech involved and Ramone just texted me that he’ll have to wait until the pieces get here before the car can be fixed.”

“Well, then he can just take the bus to a hotel. He can come back for the car once it’s ready.” Lightning says hotly.

“Uh, Lightning...that doesn’t seem very practical.” Mater replies.

“It doesn’t matter.” Storm adds. “Even if my car was fixed it wouldn’t matter. I already told you I’m not leaving till you come back with me.” Storm doesn’t say it angrily. More like a matter of fact. Like it is written in stone that Lightning will go back with him.

Lightning grits his teeth. “Well, you can’t stay here. There’s nowhere to stay. Sally’s not here to run the cozy cone.” Lightning argues.

Storm’s grey eyes are boring into his. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll sleep on a bench if I have to. But I’m not leaving.” He states loudly.

Lightning grits his teeth harder and stands up from the table.

“Do what you want.” Lightning says irritated.

He leaves after that, not wanting to be near Storm. Radiator Springs was his safe place. His home. Now that Storm was here Lightning felt on edge. He just wanted Storm to leave. Head back to his training center and race. Lightning doesn’t care. He just doesn’t want him here.

Lightning angrily stomps the short 5-minute walk to his house. Radiator Springs is a small town, and Lightning’s house is near the end of it. He walks inside and shuts the door behind him. Lightning is too angry to be around anyone right now, so he just lays down on the couch. The last thing he wants to do is snap at any of his friends so he figures it’s best to just calm down right now.

Lightning reassures himself. Storm said he wasn’t going to leave, but that was only his excessive pride. No way that Jackson Storm would stay here. He only wanted to get under Lightning’s skin. The only reason Storm probably wanted him to come back is so he could humiliate him all over again. Lightning sighed. Storm would be gone by nighttime. It would be too cold for him to stay, and his “doesn’t matter” attitude would wear out. He would take a bus to another town nearby and stay in a warm hotel room. He would wait a few days there doing whatever he felt like and then come back for his car later. Storm would realize it was a fruitless task and then he would be gone.

So will your chance to race again, a tiny part of him thought. He shook that thought away. No. He was still going to race...just not in the same way. Lightning didn’t need to be a professional racer anymore. It was just time for him to quit. A pang of sadness struck through him at that, but he ignored it. It was going to be hard but Lightning has his reasons. Besides, he was still going to race. He was still going to feel the wind on his skin and push himself farther than he thought he could. Just...without the professionalism.

Lightning needed something to take his mind off all this. He didn’t want to think about it. After flipping on the television Lightning was able to numb his mind for a few hours. He must have dozed off at some point because when he looked at his clock he looked up to see that it was 1 am. It wasn’t that surprising considering it was late afternoon when he, Mater and Storm had eaten lunch.

Storm. Lightning is sure he’s at a hotel right now. For some reason, a tiny pinch of worry
materializes in his gut. He thinks back to the fierce determination in Storm’s eyes and wonders if he actually left town. Lightning knows he will be thinking about it the rest of the night if he doesn’t go check now. With a sigh, he puts on his shoes and grabs a jacket. In Radiator Springs the daytime is usually hot but since the town is located near the mountains and canyons it can get very cool at night.

Lightning steps outside and confirms that it is indeed cooler than he thought. This makes Lightning walk a little faster into town. Radiator Springs is dark at this time of night, but there are street lamps on the road so Lightning knows where he is going. As Lightning nears closer to the center of town he finds himself checking the benches. Once he has checked out the benches Lightning is relieved. Until he sees what looks like a person lying in the grass on the side of the road.

Oh no, Lightning thinks as he walks closer to it, worry eating at his mind. Once Lightning gets closer he confirms that it is indeed Storm. His tall figure is curled up in the grass, probably because he was cold. Somehow Storm is sleeping though because when Lightning moves closer he can see his eyes are closed, and his chest is rising and falling slowly. How he managed to fall asleep here is beyond Lightning. He crouches down near him and places a hand on his shoulder.

“Storm?” Lightning says shaking him.

Storm doesn’t respond and for a minute Lightning panics, wondering if the cold had paralyzed him or something. He then thinks about how it’s not that cold outside. Storm must just be a heavy sleeper. Lightning says his name louder and shakes him again. This time Storm stirs slightly and Lightning watches as his eyes open. Storm looks at him for a moment and flinches away, startled. Lightning realizes that to him he probably looks like a black figure standing over him.

“Storm it’s me Lightning.” Lightning says softly.

“Lightning?” Storm murmurs softly before yawning. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming to get you.” Lightning mutters. “Here” Lightning says takes off his jacket and places it on Storm. Lightning may not particularly like him but Lightning is still a decent human being and he knows Storm is cold. “Thank you.” Storm murmurs sleepily.

“Come on. You can’t stay here.” Lightning says helping him up. “My house is this way. Let’s go.”

Lightning begins walking and turns to see that Storm is walking behind him, thankfully starting to wake up enough to recognize what is going on. After a few minutes of walking, they reach Lightning’s house and he and Storm enter. Storm still looks pretty cold even though he’s trying not to show it.

Lightning walks over to his bathroom in the hallway. Inside the bathroom, Lightning grabs a towel as well as shampoo and conditioner. Lightning turns around and passes them to Storm.

“Here. You should take a hot shower.”

“Thank you.” Storm said with a tone of voice that Lightning had not heard him use before. Thankful. It was nice to hear that. Lightning nods and steps away from the bathroom, allowing Storm to enter.

Lightning walks over to the kitchen. He’s pretty hungry and he thinks Storm will be when he gets out of the shower.

Lightning cooks something simple. He wraps two baked potatoes in foil and puts them in the oven. He pulls out chicken from his refrigerator and decides to make chicken cutlets, as they shouldn’t
take long. He dips them in eggs and flour, and lastly bread crumbs. Lightning decides to wait to pan sear them as it shouldn’t take too long and he wants them to be hot. He then waits a few minutes before deciding to check on Storm. When he gets closer to the bathroom door he hears music playing. Lightning discovers Storm likes to listen to music in the shower as he hears Storm’s songs alternate from pop to techno to some other very loud songs.

Lightning goes into his room and pulls out one of his larger T-shirts as Storm is taller than him and a long pair of pajama bottoms. He thankfully also has a plastic pack of boxers he never opened so he places those along with a pair of socks and everything else in front of the bathroom door. Lightning figures Storm doesn’t have any clothes to change into as he was still wearing his racing uniform when he first came in.

Storm takes a long shower, which is fine by Lightning. Sally used to do the same thing before they would eat dinner, which gave him better time to prepare.

Lightning goes to his room again and pulls off his clothing in exchange for pajamas. They are more comfortable and he doubts Storm will mind. On his way back to the kitchen Lightning notices the shower has finally shut off.

He hears the door open from the kitchen and Lightning guesses Storm has seen the clothes and is changing.

Lightning puts olive oil in the pan and lets it become hot before placing the cutlets in and listening to the sizzle of them meeting the pan. While they are cooking he grabs cups from his cabinet and fills them up with ice water. He gets silverware and napkins too, along with butter, salt and pepper for the baked potatoes. Lightning sets the table and he hears Storm exit the bathroom door.

Lightning looks up to see Storm timidly standing in the kitchen looking at him. For all Lightning has seen of Jackson Storm he certainly doesn’t seem like his cocky self now. Lightning then thinks about what he would do if it were him in Storm’s position. Truthfully Mater was right earlier today. Storm did act like he used to when he was a rookie. Arrogant. Cocky. Like he could take on the world and no one could stop him. Seeing him now though he didn’t look like that. He just looked nervous. Lightning’s T-shirt was surprisingly kind of big on Storm, and it made him look younger. Storm’s hair was still wet from the shower, and it curled slightly at the ends. Like this Storm looked softer, friendlier to Lightning. It occurred to Lightning that he might be shy.

“Sit down.” Lightning offers, keeping his tone of voice friendly. It is easier to do that now that Storm is not arguing with him. Lightning is a good natured person and even though he didn’t like the impression Storm gave off before, he wasn’t going to be rude to him here in his house. Especially after seeing how tired and nervous Storm looked while he was sitting at the table. Lightning busies himself with getting the baked potatoes and of the oven, and he notices Storm is looking around his house. Storm’s eyes linger on the wall where there are pictures of his races on the wall. He and Mater are in a lot of them. Posing together in front of Lightning’s car with some goofy expression before the race.

Lightning hands Storm a plate. “Thank you.” Storm says, and lightning sees a small smile on his face. Lightning pauses. He hasn’t seen Storm smile yet, but it looks good on him. Lightning can see now why the waitress in the diner was staring at him so much. Storm is good looking. Lightning thought that was the case, but he looks much better now that he’s showered and doesn’t have an angry scowl. They eat in relative silence, which is fine by Lightning. He doesn’t really know how any long conversation with Storm would go, so he sticks with short and polite. Once they finish eating Lightning clears the table. He motions for Storm to follow him down the hall. Lightning opens the door to his guest bedroom.
“You can stay here. It’s Sally’s. I mean my guest bedroom.” Lightning murmurs awkwardly.

Thankfully Storm doesn’t pry. He just thanks Lightning. Lightning nods and heads back down the hallway to his own room. Once he’s inside he sits on his bed and flops backwards onto it. At first, he thought Storm wasn’t serious about the whole convincing him to race again, but now…

Storm slept on the ground for crying out loud. He probably would have done the same thing the next night. Let’s add stubborn to the short list of adjectives that make up Storm. Lightning can’t help but wonder why he’s doing all this. Is it a ploy? Does he just want Lightning to come back so he can beat him? Lightning wouldn’t be surprised if Storm was paid by someone like Chick Hicks to convince him to come back, only to crush him into the ground.

But…Storm doesn’t seem like the type to do something like that. Brash and arrogant maybe…but not cruel. Not like that. Lightning rolls over and shoves his head into the pillow. What will he do? How will he convince Storm to leave? A small teeny part of Lightning’s brain broached the idea of going. What if he were to go with him? What if he tried again at racing? He could try harder! He could train better!

Lightning sighs. That won’t work. Besides, it’s for the best he doesn’t race anymore. At least, not professionally. Lightning pulled the covers up over himself. He didn’t want to think about this. He just wanted to sleep.

When Lightning wakes up, the sun is just beginning to rise. Lightning checks his alarm clock. 6:30 am. Well, he doesn’t feel that tired anyway. Lightning is usually a morning person, and he spent a long time sleeping yesterday, so it makes sense that he’s up now. Lightning stretches and walks out into the bathroom. He sees Storm’s racing uniform on the counter and figures he better wash it. After putting it in the washer, Lightning keeps himself busy with how early it is. Storm desperately needs a good night’s sleep so Lightning doubts he’s waking up anytime soon.

Lightning does chores. They are certainly not fun, but Lightning doesn’t really mind them. Since Sally left he lives here by himself, so there’s really never too much to clean. He does the dishes from last night and sweeps the floor. He debates vacuuming the carpets but decides against it because it might wake up Storm. Instead, he goes back into his room to change into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He probably shouldn’t be walking around in pajamas the whole day.

Lightning does a few other odd things around the house. He would start breakfast but decides to wait until Storm wakes up.

After another hour Storm wakes up, Lightning hears the door to the guest bedroom open. Storm looks better now. His hair looks kind of different because he slept on it. It looks curlier, like Lightning’s own hair. Lightning’s pajamas are a little big on him. He’s tall that’s for sure but lean. He still looks fit, just skinnier than Lightning expected. Lightning tells him he has a new toothbrush in the cabinet under the sink if he wants to use it. Storm nods and goes into the bathroom.

It dawns on Lightning that Storm will need more clothes. His racing uniform was being washed and he probably didn’t want to wear that around town. Lightning goes to his room to look for something. Since Storm is thinner than him, Lightning searches for a pair of pants that will fit. While he’s searching in the bottom of his drawer he finds a pair of black jeans. Lightning thinks they used to be skinny jeans but Lightning wore them enough when he was younger that they must be comfortable by now. He pulls them out. Lightning hasn’t worn these in a solid 10 years. He remembers wearing them when he was in his early 20s. His younger self probably thought he
looked cool wearing them. Lightning thinks they will be long enough for Storm.

“Storm.” Lightning calls out when he sees Storm walk down the hallway. Storm turns around, grey eyes landing on Lightning crouched down in front of his dresser. Storm walks into the room and Lightning notices he’s looking around.

He holds up the pants. “What do you think of these?”

“For me or for you?” Storm asks.

Lightning laughs. “Seriously?” Lightning then stands up and holds the pants out in front of Storm’s waist. They look like they’ll fit.

“Why not?” Storm asks him with a serious look on his face.

“Because I haven’t worn these in ten years. Imagine how they would look.”

Storm pauses for a minute like he’s actually thinking about it. “Good.” He says, flashing his teeth in a smile. Lightning rolls his eyes and hands Storm the pants. Along with a plain white T-shirt and another pair of socks. The pack of boxers he had given Storm last night should be enough to last for a while.

Lightning shakes his head. They shouldn’t need to last a while. Storm will be leaving soon, he tells himself. He remembers how obnoxious Storm was when they were racing. Lightning reminds himself Storm is also one of the reasons he quit. He just isn’t fast enough to keep up with the newer generations of racers.

Lightning shakes those thoughts away. Storm will leave once his car is fixed. Without Lightning. There’s no reason for Lightning to be cruel to him.

While Storm is in the bathroom Lightning goes into the kitchen to start breakfast. He cracks eggs into a bowl, whisking them while the pan heats up. He grabs 2 other pan’s from the cabinet underneath his stove. Storm enters the room and sits at the bar in Lightning’s kitchen. He watches intently as lightning chops up potatoes to go in one pan and lays strips of bacon in the other. While that was cooking Lightning pops a few pieces of bread in the toaster, along with grabbing silverware and plates and putting them in front of Storm. Storm seems to understand he was supposed to set the table as he gets up to do that. When Storm sits down at the counter again Lightning passes him a knife.

“I want you to know my cooking capabilities are very limited.”

Lightning laughs. “You’re only going to butter the bread. Think you can handle it?” He says placing the plate of toast in front of Storm.

“I’ll do my best.” Storm says grinning.

Lightning turns around to the stove again to flip the bacon. Storm does have a sense of humor afterall. Lightning prefers him like this.

Once Lightning finishes putting the food on different plates, he brings it to the table. Storm grabs the butter, salt and pepper from the counter too. Lightning grabs two cups and once he asks Storm if he likes apple juice, fills both cups up.

They both sit at the table and start eating. It’s quiet again. The silence is alright now though, it’s no longer as awkward. A few minutes after they start eating Lightning hears the doorbell ring. He gets
up to answer it. Once he pulls open the door he sees a familiar head of curly brown hair and a
signature grin.

“Hey, buddy” Mater greets as Lightning moves back to let him enter.

“Hey,” Lightning says grinning. Mater goes to sit down at the table and Lightning goes to the
kitchen to grab an extra plate and more silverware. Mater joining him for breakfast is pretty
common. Mater usually stops by 2 to 3 times a week, so it wasn’t surprising that he showed up.

Once Lightning comes back to the table he sees Mater glance at Storm.

“Hey! Looks like you didn’t have to spend the whole night outside after all!” Mater exclaims.

Lightning’s face turns to a frown and he turns to Mater.

“Mater. Did you know he was sleeping outside.” Lightning says, voice deadpan.

“I sure did!” Mater says, taking a bite of toast. Mater is usually unfazed by any type of anger or
irritation.

Lightning gives him a glare. “If you knew he was sleeping outside why didn’t you take him to your
house?!”

Mater gives him an innocent smile. “Your house is bigger.” Mater says getting up to pour himself
some apple juice.

Lightning turns to Storm to see that he is wearing a carefully neutral expression. Lightning sighs. It
was probably Mater’s attempt at getting Lightning to be friendly with Storm. Which regrettingly is
starting to work. Lightning distractes himself with the fact that Storm will leave soon. Lightning
won’t need to hear him arrogantly telling Lightning to “Enjoy his retirement.”

They all finish up breakfast, with Mater engaging Storm in conversation. Lightning clears the table
and throws away the trash. Mater suggests they should go into town, which Lightning was
planning on doing anyway. He needs to pick up his car from Luigi’s. He also wants to see how
progress is going on Storm’s car. If it’ll be fixed anytime soon.

They leave Lightning’s house and begin the short walk to town. It’s warm out today, and Lightning
wonders if Storm will be too hot in those pants. He takes a quick glance over at him, but he looks
fine to Lightning.

Once they make it into town, Mater insist on introducing Storm to the locals. Storm is very polite
when he’s talking to them, and Lightning can tell they find him charming. Sarge and Fillmore
enjoyed talking with him. Even Red gave Storm a timid smile from where he was watering plants.
This irritates Lightning. If Storm was able to be polite and kind then why did he act so arrogantly
when racing with Lightning? He was even obnoxious to Cruz. So Lightning can’t figure out his
personality at all.

After they spend a few hours with Mater to see the “sights” in Radiator Springs, they make their
way back to the center of town. Mater runs over to Luigi and Guido’s garage to talk to them for a
minute, and Lightning takes Storm to Ramone. He wants to see if Ramone has made any progress
on Storm’s car.

He sees Ramone from inside the shop. Bright tattoos peeking out from his arms.

“Hey, Ramone.” Lightning greets.
“Hey Lightning, oh and you must be Storm.” Ramone says, offering his hand.

Storm shakes it. “It’s nice to meet you.” Storm says politely.

Lightning feels his eye twitch. “So anyway Ramone. When do you think his car will be fixed?”

Ramone scratches his head. “It shouldn’t take me too much longer, probably another 2 days. His paint job is really something special so I wanted to make sure I fixed it up nice and good.

Lightning nods.

“Thank you.” Storm says kindly. Lightning feels his mouth twitching into a frown.

“Okay, thanks Ramone.” Lightning says to the man, bidding him farewell. Storm followed him. Once they were far enough away from people, Lightning turned to him.

“You can stay with me until your car is fixed. Then you’re leaving.” He says to Storm.

Storm nods. “Right. Once my car gets fixed we can drive back to the training center in Florida.”

Lightning frowns. “I’m not coming with you Storm.”

“Sure you are. You’re going to come back and be a racer again.”

“No, I’m not.” Lightning says, getting angrier.

“Yes, you are.” Storm says stubbornly.

“You lost the race Storm! You have to leave. That was the deal!” Lightning half shouted.

Storm protest loudly. “Only because you cheated!”

“I didn’t cheat!” Lightning says, voice rising.

“Yeah you did! You chose a track where you knew I’d spin out on!

“That was your own fault” Lightning says.

Lightning looks at Storm’s face. He watches as it changes from anger to defeat. Storm looks sadly at the ground and Lightning feels a pinch of guilt.

“I don’t understand…” Storm whispers. “I don’t understand why you can’t come back. I don’t understand why you left in the first place.”

Lightning doesn’t understand why Storm says that seeing as he wanted Lightning to leave racing not so long ago, but takes pity on him. Storm needs a reason so Lightning gives him one.

“Listen Storm,” Lightning says running a hand through his hair.

“I can’t be a racer anymore. My car just isn’t fast enough. I can’t beat the newer racers.”

Lightning looks at Storm. He expects Storm to reluctantly accept this news. So Lightning does a double take when he seems Storm grinning. His mouth is open wide, the smile is bigger than one Lightning has seen him make. It looked strange considering it’s the most emotion Storm has shown yet.

“That’s it? That’s all?!” Storm says, expression changing to a happy one.
Lightning didn’t have to expect to give another reason. Like how he doesn’t want to be humiliated again. Or the fact that he’s supposed to be Cruz’s crew chief. Or the fact that his racing ruined his relationship with Sally. That one hit Lightning the hardest, but he didn’t feel like sharing that with Storm.

“That’s not good enough for you?” Lightning asked, irritated.

“No no! I’m just glad that’s all there is!”

“Why’s that?” Lightning asks.

“Because that can be fixed!” Storm shouts in excitement.

Lightning looks at him in bewilderment. Before he had only seen Storm give off pretty much three basic emotions. Anger, pride and indifference. He guesses he’s seen a little bit of Storm’s kindness too, but that’s beside the point.

Watching Storm radiate such excitement was strange.

“What? Fixed? I don’t want to get a new car…” Lightning mutters, figuring Storm’s plan is to just get him a new car. Lightning could never. He wasn’t the same racer without his car. He could never trade it for some newer, high tech car. It wasn’t his style.

“You don’t need to!” Storm says, gripping Lightning’s shoulders.

It is the first time Storm has touched him. It’s a weird thing to think about but it’s what Lightning decided to focus on. Storm’s fingers are long and slender, and he is softly gripping Lightning’s shoulders. Lightning’s mind needs to get a grip. He brings himself back to the conversation.

“What are you talking about?” Lightning asked confused.

“I know someone who can make your car faster! He wouldn’t need to change anything significant about the car! All he would need to do is make some minor adjustments to the engine! Nothing on the exterior. The car would look completely the same! Then you could race again!” Storm shouts in excitement, talking more to himself than Lightning.

Lightning is so confused. He’s never heard of a way to make older race cars faster without changing the car completely. Storm is tugging on his arm now, pulling them towards Lightning’s car at Luigi’s garage.

“Come on! We’re going on a road trip!” he says to Lightning.
When Storm waited to hear Lightning’s reasons for not wanting to race he expected the worst. Like for Lightning to have some kind of terminal disease that would prevent him from racing. To Storm that’s the only thing he could think of that would have been enough to stop Lightning McQueen from racing. Actually the more he thinks about it he still pictures Lightning trying to race even if he DID have some kind of disease. Storm’s glad that’s not the case because he’s not sure what he could do about that. He can, however, do something about Lightning’s car.

Fixing Lightning’s car will be easy! All they have to do is drive to Nebraska. Storm knows exactly where they need to go. He knows someone that’ll be able to make Lightning’s car faster no problem! Then he can race again!

Storm turns around to see Lightning stumbling behind him, confused. Storm pulls him toward where Lightning’s car is parked, near Luigi’s garage. They’ll need to take Lightning’s car since Storm’s is getting fixed. They need to bring his car anyway if it’s going to be modified.

Storm turns to see Mater, Luigi and Guido standing in front of the tire shop. They all give him a curious expression, and Storm remembers that he’s grinning like a madman, pulling Lightning behind him. Storm let’s go of Lightning’s arm once they reach the shop.

“Hey, guys!” Mater greets.

“Hey,” Lightning says somewhat agitated.

Storm looks past them and sees Lightning’s car. Polished red and gold paint shining in the sun. The famous Rust-eze logo on the front and the signature Lightning bolts on the sides. Storm’s seen his car so many times. But he’s never really been this close to it. He’s never been inside of it. Storm turns to Guido. He was the one who drove Lightning’s car yesterday so he must have the keys.

“Guido give Lightning the keys.”

Guido complies, tossing the keys to Lightning.

“Hang on Storm.” Lightning says to him.

Storm doesn’t want to hold on. He wants to go now. Right now. The sooner they fix up Lightning’s car the better. Storm can see his plan falling into place perfectly now. He can do this.

“Why?! Let’s go now! It’ll only take a few hours!”

“We can’t just go now!” Lightning argues.

“Go where?” Mater interrupts. Which Storm is thankful for. If there’s anyone who could help him
out with this he bets its Mater. He’s very close with Lightning, and he’s surprisingly perceptive.

“We’re going to make Lightning’s car faster! I know someone who can fix the engine up, without changing the car’s design or original manufacturing.” Storm says.

They all stare at him in shock.

Luigi is the first to speak. “What are you waiting for?! This is your chance! Go get a faster car Lightning!”

Lightning pauses. “I can’t just pick up and go! I’ve got things to do. Besides, I already quit racing. I don’t need to go back!”

Lightning yells the last part a little forcefully. Whether he’s angry because he can’t race any more or angry because Storm is trying to force him he doesn’t know. He hopes it’s the first thing.

Mater looks at him. “The choice is yours, Buddy. But what would Doc think? If he was here, and heard you had a chance to race again, but turned it down...well gee I think he’d be mighty disappointed in you.”

Storm watches Lightning’s resolve crumple at the mention of Doc. Who is he? Storm wonders. He must be someone important to Lightning if it’s enough to make him change his mind. Lightning sighs, and he turns to get into his car. Storm follows quickly, getting into the passenger side with a wide grin. Mater notices this and shoots him a smile.

Storm puts their destination into his phone and waits for it to load. This is perfect! Things are going smoothly for once! Storm thought there was something else troubling Lightning, something much more personal than just the speed of his race car. Otherwise, why would he quit? He’s never seen Lightning give up in any race before, so why would he start now? He doesn’t know if Lightning told the whole truth, but fixing his car will be the first step in getting Lightning’s racing career back. It is clear to Storm after hearing Lightning talk about how he can’t compete with the younger racers because his car wasn’t fast enough, that Lightning is in a weird state of mind right now. Maybe it’s because so many people are constantly asking him about retirement. Constantly reminding him of how old he is. Storm hates that. He hates the idea of people telling Lightning he needs to retire. He’s not even old! Just older than most racecar drivers. That wouldn’t even be the case if all Lightning’s friends didn’t give up before he did. Storm remembers seeing older racers like Cal Weathers and Bobby Swift on the track, then just like that they were gone. He raced against them maybe one time before they quit. Then Lightning was the only older racer left. Maybe that’s part of the reason he wanted to quit too.

Storm refuses to let Lightning quit like this. He refuses to watch Lightning McQueen, the greatest racer in history give up on his dream. He can’t let Lightning quit like this. He doesn’t want to see Lightning stop just because people believe he’s too old to race. He’s not going to give up, he can practically feel Lightning’s desire to race again. To prove to the world he isn’t finished. Storm wants to see that. He wants to make that happen.

Finally, the GPS loads and Storm puts it in the cup holder so Lightning can see it.

“Where are we going?” Lightning asks, staring at the GPS, Probably noticing how far their destination is.

“Nebraska.”

“Nebraska?” Lightning says, confused.
Storm nods. “That’s where we’ll go to make your car faster.”

Lightning stares at Storm before sighing. Apparently, he’s realized that he has to go. Otherwise, Mater and the rest of his friends, along with Doc, would be disappointed in him. Storm doesn’t particularly like that they needed to guilt Lightning into doing this...but then again if it’s the only thing that will make Lightning go then Storm thinks it’s necessary. Lightning starts the car and they pull out of the garage. In the rearview mirror, Storm can see Lightning’s friends waving him goodbye. They really care about him.

Once they leave Radiator Springs, Storm glances over at Lightning. If he is displeased about the 10-hour drive, his face doesn’t show it. Storm only sees Lightning’s eyes focused on the road ahead of him and his hands resting steadily on the wheel.

At first, it threw Storm off to see Lightning dressed so casually. He’s used to him always wearing his red and gold racing uniform. Always greeting fans with a wide grin or racing with a determined smirk on his face. Not used to him wearing blue jeans and a faded T-shirt sitting in a restaurant. Then Storm realized that even when he’s dressed casually Lightning still looks like a racer. He still looks like If at any moment there was a sudden need to race, it wouldn’t even faze him. Storm bet someone could put Lightning in the middle of god knows where and he would still be able to find his way wherever he needed to go, so long as he had his car. Storm likes driving, he loves driving. But, when Lightning’s driving it doesn’t look like he needs to think about it. It comes as naturally to him as breathing does. Love is too simple of a term to describe what driving is for Lightning.

Storm glances away, he’s been staring too long. He waits a few moments before he starts looking around the car in order to find a port.

“What are you looking for?” Lightning says glancing at Storm from the corner of his eye.

“Your USB port.” Storm says looking through different compartments in the front of Lightning’s car in order to find it.

“Oh, I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a USB port in your car?” Storm asks in disbelief.

“I just never needed one.” Lightning answers.

“What?! How do you Navigate? Or listen to music in the car?” Storm questions.

“There’s a map in the glove compartment.” Lightning says, indifferent.

Storm pulls the map out of the glove compartment and stares at it. The text is very small and there’s no way Storm will be able to figure out the quickest way to get to Nebraska from it. How does he use this? Obviously, he doesn’t. He must know the roads around here like the back of his hand by now.

“Just pull over at the next convenience store we see. I’ll get a USB port and a charging cord once we stop.”

Lightning nods. While they continue driving Storm finds himself looking out the window. It’s still bright out, seeing as it’s late afternoon. Storm figures they’ll make it to Nebraska sometime tonight. 10 or 11pm.
Storm unconsciously plans out how things will go in the next few hours. Once they get to Charlie’s auto shop in Nebraska, Storm knows he’ll be able to figure out something in order to fix Lightning’s car. Storm’s known him all his life and he’s never seen Charlie get stumped by any type of car problem ever. The only real problem will be getting Lightning to agree to it, and to convince him to keep racing. For reasons Storm doesn’t understand, Lightning is reluctant to race again. Even though Storm knows he still wants to. So Storm will have to be smart about convincing him.

As they continue driving, he considers calling Charlie ahead of time to tell him of his visit but decides against it. Charlie likes to sleep in during the day, usually because he’s up all night tinkering with cars. Storm wants it to be a surprise anyway. He hasn’t seen Charlie in a while and Storm is just as excited to see him as he is to get Lightning’s car fixed. It’s strange to think about the fact that Lightning is going to meet Charlie. He’ll have to if he wants to get his car fixed. It’s still strange. Almost like Lightning’s going to meet a member of his family. Though Charlie isn’t related to him, Storm much prefers Lightning meets him rather than his actual family. And when he thinks about it, Storm’s met Lightning’s closest friends already. They seem more like a family though.

After a half hour or so they pull over to an empty gas station on the side of the road. Storm goes inside while Lightning fills up the car with gas. He quickly walks through the aisles scanning for a USB port and a cable. He grabs those and gets two bottles of water from the refrigerated section. On his way to the counter, Storm grabs a packet of sour gummy worms for himself. Sugar is his vice and he needs it to get through this. He gets a pack of pretzels for Lightning because he’s not sure what kind of snacks Lightning likes.

He places everything on the counter and watches as the middle-aged cashier raises an eyebrow at him.

“Roadtrip?” The man questions Storm before ringing his snacks up.

“Something like that”, he mutters. He grabs his bag from the counter and gets back into Lightning’s car. Lightning is waiting for him and Storm hands him a pack of pretzels along with a water. Lightning looks at them, surprised.

“...thank you,” He says and Storm nods.

Something Storm noticed with Lightning is how good-natured he was. Even if Lightning didn’t like him he was still so...nice to him. Overly nice. Very different from the rookie version of Lightning that Storm had seen plenty of. Storm had always seen him racing, but he looked different now. Lightning is more intense when he races. He looks intense before every race, not just the recent ones. Even when Lightning was still a rookie, that didn’t matter. He still challenged experienced racers with no hesitation. He was Lightning McQueen. The odds didn’t matter to him. He’s different now though.

It’s obvious that Lightning wasn’t going to keep the cocky and obnoxious attitude that he had as a rookie. Even though Storm actually liked him that way. He was obnoxious yes, but had every right to be. He was the youngest rookie ever to enter in a race for the piston cup. Lightning had been 18 when he entered. Storm had been 22 when he raced for his piston cup. That’s how old he was now.

Lightning was older now though, so it makes sense he acts differently. Age made him humbler. Or it could have been his friends. What Storm really doesn’t understand is why Lightning believes he’s too old to race. It baffles him completely. Lightning is only 35. He knows that for a fact.
Which admittedly is old for a race car driver but he’s Lightning McQueen! He could race until he was eighty and people wouldn’t care. Granted it doesn’t help that Lightning acts like he’s 50 rather than 35. Storm can’t believe he uses a map for directions. Or the fact that he doesn’t have a charging port in his car.

Speaking of that Storm looks around in Lightning’s car before finding the charging station for the port underneath a compartment by the gear shift. Storm connects it to his phone so the battery doesn’t die. They’ve only been driving for about 2 hours now, and they probably have another 8 to go.

Storm doesn’t mind. He likes being in the car with Lightning. Normally he likes to be the driver, but he likes when Lightning drives. Storm never thought he’d be this close to him. He never thought he would get to sit in the car with him. Or sleep at his house. Or talk to him. Really talk to him.

He’s wanted to talk to Lightning for so long. And when he thought it would never happen Storm used to try and convince himself that Lightning was different in person. That he wasn’t this amazing idol Storm had grown up wanting to be. That it might have been a show for the cameras. But Lightning is exactly how Storm pictured him. He’s the same kind-hearted, humble, incredible racer that Storm pictured.

If only Lightning actually liked him. Lightning had not been subtle at all about his feelings towards Storm. Which is another reason Storm wants to get Lightning back on the race track. Storm won’t accept that it was his fault that Lightning quit racing. He can’t be the reason. Or else he’d never forgive himself. Besides, he’s too selfish for that. Storm doesn’t want Lightning to hate him.

To be fair it didn’t seem like Lightning completely hated him. He had still been polite to Storm. He rescued him from sleeping on the grass. He had cooked for him and gave him clothes. He had even washed his uniform for him. So if Lightning doesn’t hate him completely that at least gives Storm some time to improve Lightning’s opinion of him.

The drive had been pretty silent so far, uncomfortably so. Storm wonders what he could say. It’s evident that Lightning is still displeased with the fact that Storm is here. So Storm doesn’t think he should talk about himself. Instead, he tries to bring up something Lightning will like talking about.

“Who’s Doc?” Storm asks him quietly, remembering how it was the mention of Doc that made Lightning decide to go with Storm on this trip.

Lightning looks startled at the question, and his blue eyes turn to rest on Storm’s. Lightning looks at him for a moment, studying his expression, then glances back toward the road.

“Doc was...well he was a lot of things to me. He was my friend. My mentor. My crew chief. Doc was the reason I became such a good racer. He’s the reason I belong in Radiator Springs. Doc gave me a place in life. He gave me a family. Doc Hudson was one of the greatest people I’ve ever met.” Lightning says smiling.

The name Hudson rings a bell in Storm’s mind.

“Doc Hudson...so you mean the Hudson Hornet! The racer?!”


“Of course I do! The Hudson Hornet was a fantastic racer! He won three piston cups! I knew he was your crew chief for a few years, I just never knew his first name.”
Lightning seems pleasantly surprised by this as he smiles.

Storm feels a surge of triumph. Finally, he’s said something to make Lightning like him.

It’s dark outside now and they stop once more with about an hour or so to go before they reach Charlie’s shop. Storm gets himself an energy drink at the gas station which Lightning raises his eyebrows at.

“So I still don’t understand what’s going to happen when we get to this place in Nebraska.” Lightning says, eyes focused on the road.

“We’re going to see Charlie. He’s going to fix your car. Then you can race again.”

Lightning nods. He looks displeased with the short answers. Or perhaps something else. That’s all the information Storm can give him though. He truthfully doesn’t know what Charlie will do to the car, only that he’ll do his best to fix it.

They sit in silence for the remaining hour, before Storm sees the familiar building come into view. Now Storm is excited.

Lightning pulls the car into a parking space and Storm practically jumps out of the car, rushing to the door. He’s yelling as he opens it, calling out to him.

“Charlie?! It’s me!”

Storm sees Lightning walking a few steps behind him glancing around. Then Storm watches as a familiar face steps into view. It’s Charlie. He still looks the same as Storm remembers. Dark hair covered with grey strands. A friendly easy going grin. He holds his arms open.

“Jackson!” He calls out.

Storm rushes over to him. He is not one to blatantly show affection, but this is Charlie. Charlie practically raised him. Storm hugs him and notices Lightning staring at them in surprise. Charlie ruffles Storm’s hair, and steps back to look at him. He then notices Lightning and turns his attention toward him.

“Well, I’ll be. Mr Lightning McQueen himself!” Charlie says, offering Lightning a broad smile.

“Nice to meet you!” Lightning says holding out his hand. Charlie grips it and shakes it.

“Of all the racers I’ve seen you certainly are a skilled one.”

Lightning smiles at this and says thank you. Storm can tell Lightning likes Charlie. Which makes sense, considering everyone likes Charlie.

Charlie turns his attention to Storm. “So Jackson, what brings you and Mr Lightning McQueen up to my neck of the woods,” he says knowingly. Storm does visit him occasionally but usually, Charlie will fly to Florida to come see him. Storm rarely comes unannounced, and whenever he does it’s because of car trouble.

“We’re here to make Lightning’s car faster.” Storm says.

Storm watches Lightning step forward. “I’m sorry Mister…”

“Charlie! Call me Charlie.” He says upbeat. Storm is thankful Charlie has a likeable personality, otherwise Lightning might get angrier than he is now. Storm can tell he’s angry just by looking at
him. He’s standing rigidly, maybe he’s offended that he needs to make his car faster.

“Charlie...I already told Storm I don’t want to get a new car. My car is special to me...I can’t race in another one. I don’t see how it’s possible to make my car faster. It’s not possible.” Lightning says, with a slightly strained voice.

“Well, sure it is!” Charlie says, completely ignoring Lightning’s certainty that it’s not possible.

Lightning blinks at him in confusion.

“Well, why, you should’ve seen Jackson’s car before we fixed it up. It was the most beat up thing I’d ever seen on wheels. But we fixed it up. Jackson came after school every day and worked on it. He made his car!” Charlie remarked, patting Storm on the back.

Storm felt pride rising in him. Charlie was always proud of him, but it felt nice to hear him talk about him like that, especially to Lightning.

Lightning blinks again and looks at Storm in confusion. Maybe he’s surprised Storm built his car.

Charlie interjects. “I’ll just take a look at your car so I can get a feel for the parts I’ll need to fix it up.”

With that, Charlie walks outside with some of his tools, leaving Storm and Lightning in the shop.

Storm turns toward Lightning to see that he looks rather tense. Actually, scratch that, he looks super tense. Like he’s going to pop. Suddenly he rounds on Storm, eyebrows furrowed and a frown on his face.

“I don’t understand you Storm!” Lightning yells.

Storm pauses. Jeez, that came out of nowhere. Normally Storm is good with comebacks but this really came out of the blue. Thankfully Charlie is far enough away not to hear them.

“What are you talking about?” Storm says, confused. He isn’t sure what he said to make Lightning so angry.

“I don’t understand you! Why are you doing this! Why are you trying so desperately to get me to race again! Is it just so you can humiliate me?! Huh?! Is that what you want? To make my car faster and make me believe I have a chance at winning so you can beat me all over again?! Do you hate me that much?!” Lightning yells, hands clenched at his sides.

Storm stands there frozen. He is unsure of what to say. Unsure what could possibly fix the situation, but Storm has never really been good with self-control. So he finds himself yelling right back.

“Seriously?! You think everything I’m doing is for my own gain! That I would help you become a racer again just to humiliate you! What kind of a person do you think I am Lightning!”

Lightning bristles at that. “I don’t know Storm! That’s what I’m trying to figure out! I’ve seen you be nice to Mater! To my friends in Radiator Springs! I’ve seen you show kindness so I know you’re capable of it. I’ve never seen you show me any courtesy! Is it just me you hate then?!” Lightning yells to him.

Storm’s heart seizes in his chest, and he reaches forward. Slender fingers wrap around Lightning’s arm.
“Come on!” Storm says pulling Lightning behind him. Storm leads them to the back door of the auto shop, and he can feel Lightning stumbling behind him. He releases Lightning’s arm but starts walking at a quick pace down the dirt road behind the shop. It won’t take long. Only a few minutes to get there.

Storm hears Lightning a few steps behind him, Demanding to know what it is they’re doing. Storm doesn’t answer, he just keeps walking.

After another few minutes of walking, they reach a small neighborhood.

“Storm! What are we doing here!?” Lightning whispers.

Storm doesn’t respond. He walks down the street. Towards the very last house on the road. The lights are off, and the house looks deserted. It’s a small house. Only one story.

Lightning walks a few paces behind him and says “Storm, I really don’t think we should be this close to other people’s houses.”

Storm doesn’t respond. He reaches down to worn doormat in front of the door and grabs the key from underneath. Still in the same place he left it.

Lightning is anxious behind him, murmuring that he shouldn’t be touching other people’s things.

Storm picks up the rusted key and puts it into the lock, turning it so that the door opens. He turns to Lightning then.

“You want to know why I want you to come back so badly? Why I want you to keep racing? Go inside. You’ll find out soon enough.”
Chapter 4

Lightning stands there in bewilderment. Why are they here? This house is small. It’s in poor condition too, like nobody’s taken care of it in a long time. Lightning doesn’t know what to make of it. He doesn’t know why they’re here. Who could possibly live here? He watches Storm open the door.

Is this his house? No, it can’t be. Lightning expected Storm to live in a mansion or something. Not here. Storm holds the door open and tells him to go inside. Lightning doesn’t know what to do. Storm seems angry, but more than that he seems...upset. Did Lightning hurt his feelings? Lighting ponders refusing to go inside, but Storm is insistent. Plus, now he’s curious to know what’s inside. He wants to see what could possibly be in here that would prove Storm’s reasoning for wanting him to race again.

The house is dark inside, all the lights are off. Lightning steps inside and Storm moves further into the house. Lightning steps in more, towards the center of the room. The living room, he thinks. Lightning’s foot hits something as he fumbles through the dark. He hears a metallic clang of something like a soda can. Storm turns on a light and the room is illuminated. The living room is small and cramped. There’s a beat-up looking recliner in the corner and an old TV on the other side of the room. Lightning looks down to see what he kicked and discovers it was an empty beer can. Upon closer examination, there are 6 or 7 others littered on the ground. Lightning has a bad feeling about this.

If this is Storm’s house...then why does it look like this? Lightning has so many questions. He wonders how long Storm lived here, in this musty house. He looks around rapidly, but everything looks bare to him. There are no pictures, no decorations. If not for the beer cans, Lightning would think this house was abandoned. He turns toward Storm, but his expression is unreadable.

“Why did you bring me here Storm?” Lightning asks.

“Follow me.” Storm says. Storm hits the light switch off again before turning down a hallway on the other side of the room. The hallway is small with only three doors in it. Lightning assumes Storm will stop eventually, but Storm is walking toward the door at the end of the hallway. Storm turns the knob open and steps inside into the darkness. Lightning follows.

Once they are both inside Storm shuts the door. Even in the pitch blackness Lightning can tell the room is small. Lightning fills a twinge of nervousness pool in his gut. He doesn’t like this. Storm moves past Lightning to hit another light switch on the wall, and once it turns on Lightning is in complete shock.

This tiny room is covered with well...him. There are posters with Lightning in his race car. There are framed newspapers on the walls with his wins printed in bold, there are printed photographs of races and more. Lightning can even see a little-framed piece of paper on the dresser with what looks like his signature.

He turns to Storm bewildered. He doesn’t know what to think at all. Lightning looks at Storm’s face to see him looking down at the ground with a faint tint of red on his cheeks.

Lightning watches as Storm takes in a breath then turns to him, grey eyes locked on his. Storm is shaking, his hands are clenched at his sides.

Storm opens his mouth.
Lightning opens his mouth in surprise. He’s pretty sure he looks like a fish gasping for water right now, but Storm doesn’t seem to notice. He’s too busy staring at Lightning with the most intense look he’s ever seen.

Lightning’s mind is rapidly thinking of what to say. He feels like he’s grasping at straws to come up with an appropriate response here. Apparently, he can’t even do that because the next words that come out of his mouth are

“W-what about when you t-told me to enjoy my retirement! If you’re such a big fan why were you so eager to get rid of me Storm!”

Storm’s face turns quickly to confusion, then realization.

“That wasn’t me!” Storm yells out quickly. “That was Danny!”

Lightning pauses. That wasn’t...Storm? Lightning tries to think back to when they had raced against each other. He remembers Storm passing him, but he remembers another car passing him too. A purple one. He could hear the words “enjoy your retirement!” Mockingly said to him. Lightning had been so focused then. So desperate to gain control of the race again, that he didn’t really think about it at the time. Lightning had just assumed Storm was the one to say it. Could it have really been someone else? Lightning is responding again before he really thinks about it.

“Well...what about all that other stuff you said! Like how it was so nice to finally beat me?! Or how you acted so cocky even though you were just starting as a racer?!”

The look on Storm’s face is certainly not one Lightning expected. He expected Storm’s face to be red with anger, but Storm doesn’t look angry. Storm looks embarrassed. Storm’s head is tilted down now, but Lightning can still see the bright red shade of his face now. Storm’s hands come up to his face and he groans into them.

“I...I never said those things to piss you off. I...I just wanted you to think I was a good racer. I wanted you to take me seriously.” Storm murmurs through his hands.

This hits Lightning like a sack of bricks. The more he thinks about it, the more everything makes sense. Storm’s cocky attitude was so similar to his own that it was almost disturbing. It makes sense though, that if Storm had grown up admiring him as a racer, he would want to prove himself. Lightning feels a tremendous punch of guilt hit him. If Storm really was just trying to impress him, then jeez Lightning was way crueller than he initially thought he was being.

Lightning’s impression of him was so wrong, Storm wasn’t a rich, obnoxious, young racer that had his car bought by him for his parents. Judging by his house, Storm wasn’t rich. Storm built his car. It wasn’t handed to him. He made it. Storm worked for it, maybe because it was his dream to be a racer. Maybe when Storm was younger he wanted to be a racer just like Lightning did.

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“Storm…” Lightning starts. “You don’t need to act like that to try and impress me.” He feels awkward saying it.

Storm nods and his face is still pink with embarrassment, eyes still downcasted at the floor. Lightning needs to make things better. He reaches out with his hand.

“Friends?” Lightning offers.
He watched as Storms looks at Lightning’s extended hand, and then up at his face. For a minute Storm looks at him like he’s surreal, but then he smiles. Storms hand reaches out to shake his own.

“Friends.” Storm says back, pink tint fading.

Lightning gives him a friendly grin.

They stand in Storm’s room awkwardly for a few more moments, before Lightning thinks they need something to ease the tension.

“Is that my autograph?” Lightning says, with a slight smirk directed at Storm.

Storms hand reaches up and smacks his face, and he groans into it. Lightning laughs.

The laughter is short lived though, because Lightning watches as Storm’s face twitches from embarrassment to concern. Lightning quiets down and sees that Storm is listening for something. Now that it’s quiet, he can hear the faint sound of tires crunching the gravel outside. Storm’s face morphs into one of slight panic, and he reaches up toward a window in his room. Storm pulls it open after a few tries, and luckily it looks big enough for them to fit through. Lightning watches Storm motion for him to climb out. On one hand, the lengths they are going to avoid whoever is in this car seems really extreme, on the other Storm seems determined not to encounter them.

Lightning thinks it’s best to trust Storm in this case. He doesn’t know what type of situation this is. Only that Storm looks extremely uncomfortable. Lightning climbs out the window and sees that Storm has shut off the lights in his room. This window leads to the backside of Storm’s house, so it is thankfully shielding them. Even so, Lightning can hear the front door open and watches as Storm exits the window quickly and gracefully. He must have done this before, Lightning thinks. Storm slides the window back into place quietly, and then he quickly walks over to the main road, putting distance between them and the house.

Lightning is curious about what just happened. Or rather, what had happened to make Storm so on edge, especially in his own house. It is clear though from one look at Storm’s face that he does not want to talk about it. So they spend the 10-minute walk back to the auto shop in silence.

Once they get back to the auto shop, Charlie is sitting at a stool inside. He has a piece of paper in his hand, but he looks at them when they enter. He gives Storm a look. Lightning can’t quite determine what it means, only that Charlie seems to know exactly where they just were.

“I’ve got good news. The car’s still in great condition for such an older model. I’m confident I can design a new mechanism for the engine. I actually have blueprints for a similar model so I can have the part ready in a few months.”

That baffles Lightning. Just how good Is this guy? Even a professional corporation would take at least half a year to come up with a good solution for his engine. That being said Storm’s car was significantly faster than the other next gen racers. If Charlie did help Storm create it no wonder Storm’s car is so impressive. Lightning’s surprised Storm introduced them. If Storm had a mechanic this good designing his cars, well he could be the fastest racer of all time. He’s shocked Storm doesn’t want to keep this information private. Then again, it’s not like Storm advertised it to the world. Storm has only told him, Lightning thinks.

“Thanks, Charlie! You’re the greatest!” Storm exclaims. He even gives Charlie another hug, which intrigues Lightning. Storm doesn’t seem like the type of person who likes contact.

Lightning moves forward to shake his hand again. He thanks him again, and offers to write him a
check now which Charlie politely refuses.

“Let’s make sure this actually works before you pay me anything,” Charlie says, laughing.

Lightning insists on writing a check anyway just in case Charlie should need it for anything. Racing is one of the most important things in Lightning’s life. If there’s anything he can do to make his car faster, just for the sake of giving it one last try, Lightning will do it.

Charlie eventually accepts it, after much negotiation. They talk for a while longer about Lightning’s car and Charlie talks to Storm privately for a few minutes. Lightning feels like he shouldn’t intrude as it’s obvious Charlie and Storm are like family to each other. By the time they’re finished it’s pretty late at night now, around 3 in the morning. Lightning feels pretty tired, but hunger is outweighing that for now.

After realizing how late it is Storm says goodbye to Charlie and promises to call him once in a while. Lightning says goodbye as well, and Charlie gives him a friendly smile as they leave. Once they get back into Lightning’s car, Lightning asks Storm if he’s hungry.

This time Storm says yes, so Lightning doesn’t have to wait to listen if his stomach will growl to see if he’s lying or not. After driving down the road a few miles, they come to a 24 hour diner. Storm seems to be full of energy while Lightning feels like he’s going to pass out when he gets to the booth and sits down.

An older woman takes their order, and later brings back a stack of chocolate chip pancakes for Storm and a waffle with bacon for Lightning. Normally having breakfast twice in the day is something Lightning wouldn’t do, but seeing as it’s 3 in the morning it feels closer to breakfast time anyway.

Lightning watches as Storm puts an unhealthy amount of syrup on his pancakes, then quirks his eyebrows up at Lightning when he catches him watching. Storm seems happier now. He’s not wearing the crazy grin that he had earlier in the day or the warm smile he had on his face when he saw Charlie, but he looks like he’s enjoying himself.

Lightning is glad for that. The silent car ride here was too awkward for his taste.

Once the waitress brings their check, Lightning’s eyes feel super sluggish. He wants to sleep in this booth, and that’s how he knows he’s tired.

Once they pay, the walk outside to the car. The air is chilly out, and all Lightning wants to do is collapse into his warm bed, and pull the covers over himself.

Storm glances at Lightning while he digs the keys out of his pocket.

“Lightning...If you want. I could drive.” Storm says softly.

Lightning ponders the idea. His car is special to him. Very special. Only his close friends have driven it before. Mack was the only driver he trusted to transport it. Lightning’s race car means a lot to him, but Storm knows that already. Storm probably feels the same way about his own car, especially since he was the one who built it. A few days ago, Lightning wouldn’t even entertain the idea of allowing Storm to be near his racecar. Right now though Lightning feels like he can trust Storm. If they are going to be friends then they have to trust each other. Plus, Lightning doesn’t feel like driving for another ten hours. He passes the keys to Storm.
“Okay. You drive.”

Storm’s uncertain expression quickly changes and he gives Lightning a grin.

“You got it.” Storm answered.

Lightning goes to the passenger's side, which feels kind of strange. He doesn’t mind though, Storm knows what he’s doing.

After Storm starts the car, Lightning presses his head against the back of the seat. He thinks Storm turns the heat up because he feels the cool air be replaced with warmth. After a few more seconds he can barely keep his eyes open, but Storm looks steady on the wheel. Lightning thinks he’ll be fine, so he lets himself recline against the seat and shut his eyes.

Lightning wakes up to something shaking his arm. Storm - he realizes when his eyes open a crack. Lightning is still tired, but he forces himself awake. He looks at the clock, it’s 10:00 am. He feels that the car isn’t moving, so there must be some kind of problem. Lightning looks around and realizes that the car is right outside of his garage.

“I need your garage code.” Storm says to him, taking his hand away now that he sees Lightning is awake.

“Its 0095” Lightning murmurs, still kind of disoriented. How did Storm get here so quickly? He must have been speeding like crazy to make it back in only seven hours. Lightning sees a can of red bull in his cup holder. Maybe that’s why Storm was so full of energy. He was amped up on energy drinks.

Lightning hears his garage door open and watches Storm get back into the car to pull it into the garage.

“Were you speeding?” Lightning asks Storm. Lightning will speed occasionally. He’s always liked going fast, but Storm must have been really speeding if they’re already at Lightning’s house.

“Only when nobody was around,” Storm says, giving him a sideways grin.

Lightning nods. They were driving at 3 am from Nebraska to Arizona on backroads. Lightning doubts they encountered that many people. Which most likely meant Storm was pushing 160 in his car. Highly illegal and dangerous, but Lightning didn’t really care. It’s not Lightning’s place to lecture Storm about slowing down, especially when sometimes Lightning will go that fast. Besides, Lightning was glad to be home.

Once Storm pulls his car inside Lightning drags himself out of the passenger's side. He just slept for seven hours, but his car wasn’t exactly built for sleeping in. Lightning yawns and notices Storm looking around his garage.

More specifically, Storm is looking at the Piston cups in his garage. The sunlight lights up his garage enough so that the gold trophies are clearly visible, and Storm walks up to them.

“It’s your Piston cups…” Storm mumbles, looking at them in amazement.

“Yeah…” Lightning mumbles awkwardly. Storm’s admiration for him, previously closeted is something new to Lightning. He’s had fans before, but not like Storm. Storm who at first gave off the cocky impression that he was far superior to Lightning, who now was standing in front of Lightning’s trophies in awe.
“Why aren’t they inside? Or displayed? You can barely see them in here” Storm says, frowning.

Storm said that like it was a grave sin that the trophies were out in the garage rather than in his house.

“I think that was the idea.” Lightning says.

Storm looks at him like the idea of not wanting to have his trophies displayed in a more visible location was unfathomable.

Lightning puts his hand behind his head and rubs his neck. “My um...girlfriend. Or she was my girlfriend. Uh...Sally didn’t want them in the house.”

Storm gives him a look like he can’t possibly believe the thought that there is anyone out there who wouldn’t want to see Lightning’s trophies. Lightning takes the opportunity to open the door to his house. He doesn’t really want to talk about this. Sally is a bit of a sore subject for him.

Lightning holds the door open for Storm and shuts the garage door. Lightning wants to go back to sleep, and he thinks Storm will want to eventually. He grabs more clothes for Storm and hands them to him in the hallway. Storm says thank you to him and Lightning nods. He hasn’t thought about what he’s going to do about racing again. Now that he knows his car has the potential to be faster...well that changes everything.

Lightning shuts the blinds in his room so it’s dark enough to sleep. He curls up under the covers and sighs when his back hits the soft mattress instead of the rigid seat of his car. Lightning decides all this thinking is a job for future Lightning, and he goes to sleep.

After Lightning sleeps for a few hours he wakes up in the middle of the day. The sun is shining through the cracks in his blinds on Lightning sees his phone resting on the table from when he left it earlier. He sees a call from Mater, another from Luigi. He calls them both and lets them know he made it back okay, and was just sleeping in. He figures Mater will decide to show up sooner or later to see about how getting Lightning’s car checked out went.

Lightning rouses himself from his bed after that and hops into the shower. Once he’s finished, he grabs a towel from the closet and wraps it around his waist. He forgot to bring clothes with him in the shower when he went in earlier. Normally Lightning will just get changed in his room anyway. He steps out of the bathroom and sees Storm sitting on the couch in the living room.

“Not tired yet?”

Storm turns around and he coughs a little bit. Lightning sees that he’s holding a glass of water so he guesses he startled Storm while he was drinking. His face looks kind of red to Lightning, probably because he can’t breathe.

Storm coughs again and hits himself on the chest. “No, I um. *cough* think I had too many Red Bull’s.”

Lightning nods. He didn’t think Storm had more than one but that explains why he’s not sleeping now.

Lightning walks back to his room to get changed, using his towel to dry his hair. Once he’s done he walks out into the living room and sits on the couch next to Storm.
Storm looks like he recovered from being startled earlier, as his face is no longer red from coughing.

“Are you okay?” He asks just to be sure.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Storm replies, nodding enthusiastically.

Storm almost seems more awkward around Lightning now. Then again if he idolized Lightning throughout his childhood, it’s probably weird for Storm to be sitting in Lightning’s house.

Now that Lightning thinks about it, Storm must have been thrilled to drive his car. Lightning is a racer after all, and Storm had most likely watched him race when he was younger.

A few seconds later Lightning hears the doorbell ring. He looks outside to see Mater, Luigi and Guido all waiting to be let in. Lightning opens the door.

Luigi and Mater are clearly eager to hear about how the trip went, and Guido just seems to be his usual self. Storm looks up as they enter. He looks tired now, with heavy bags under his eyes. Storm’s sleep schedule the past few days must have been completely off track.

After Lightning and Storm fill everyone in, they all seem ecstatic. Even Guido’s face lights up in a small smile once he hears the news that Lightning has the chance to race again. Everyone is sure about it...except for him. Lightning still isn’t sure. Even though Storm isn’t his rival, he’s still a pretty intense competitor. Not to mention the other next generation racers. Then there’s Cruz, who Lightning promised to be her crew chief.

Nobody can sense Lightning’s doubts. Not until Guido and Luigi go home and Storm decides he’s finally too tired to stay awake. Once Storm goes back into Sally’s old room, Mater glances at him.

They sit in comfortable silence for a few moments before Mater breaks it.

“Hey, buddy. I know everyone else is pretty excited about this. But what about you? How do you feel?”

Lightning is a little surprised by this. Sure he and Mater talk all the time. It’s rare for them to have a real heartfelt discussion though. Mater mostly jokes his way through things, and Lightning isn’t one to share personal information readily.

“I’m not sure Mater. I feel kind of conflicted about everything. I mean I quit racing already. It would look strange if I suddenly came back with a faster car. All the other racers are going to be so much younger than me...their cars will all be higher tech too. Not to mention there’s Cruz. I told her I would be her crew chief.

“How do you feel about it Lightning?” Mater asks him sincerely. It’s not often that Mater calls him Lightning. He usually calls him buddy or pal. Or McQueen. That’s how he knows Mater is being serious with him.

“Do you want to be a racer again?”, Mater asks.

“More than anything…” Lightning whispers.

Mater’s eyes soften and he puts a hand on Lightning’s shoulder.

“Then you should do it.” He says giving Lightning’s shoulder a squeeze.
“I know…I know I should try again but…should racing really be the most important thing in my life? I mean you saw how things turned out with Sally…”

“Listen Lightning. What happened with Sally wasn’t your fault. She wanted you to be someone you’re not.”

Lightning nods. Thinking about Sally makes his chest hurt.

“I’ll go. I’ll go back to the training center. I have to go anyway if I’m going to help Cruz.”

Mater nods. “Storm will be thrilled.” He says giving Lightning a smile.

Lightning rolls his eyes. “Come on pal. Dinner’s on me.” Mater says putting an arm around his shoulder and steering him out of the house. Storm doesn’t seem like he’ll wake up for a while so they leave him be.

He and Mater go to one of the more popular restaurants in Radiator Springs, up on the top of a canyon. Lightning remembers coming here with Sally quite often. He also remembers Mater inviting himself on a lot of their dates.

Luigi and Guido meet them there, and he fills them in on his decision.

“I’m glad you decided on doing this Lightning. Doc would be proud” Luigi says with an infectious smile.

“And we’re all coming with you.” Guido adds.

“What?! You guys don’t have to do that! I mean, who knows if I’ll even be able to get my spot back. Even if I do, I’m not sure when or where the next race will be…I’m not even sure I’ll be able to win and I…”

“Lightning. We’re coming with you.” Mater says, smiling at him.

“Yeah what’s a racer without his pit crew.” Guido says.

“And the manager of team Lightning!” Luigi chimes in.

“And his best friend!” Mater says, mouth forming into that signature Mater grin.

Lightning smiles at them all, and he feels so happy that everyone will be joining him once more. Even if this time he tries and fails. Even if this time there aren’t any crazy spies or explosions or obnoxious foreign racers. He knows they’ll always have his back. At the end of the day, what Lightning values more than anything else, is that he has such amazing friends.
Chapter 5

Storm ends up sleeping longer than he means to. He knows that because when he checks his phone on the bedside table, he notices what day it is. He’s slept for sixteen or so hours. He was just so tired. The sugar and caffeine rush came to a crashing halt after a while, and he could barely keep his eyes open.

He lays in bed for a minute before getting up. This is Storm’s second night sleeping here, and because he was so tired the other night he didn’t have that much time to explore. Storm takes the time to search the bedroom. He still can’t believe he’s inside Lightning’s house. It feels so strange being here, but he likes it. Lightning’s house is nice too. It’s big. He continues his innocent exploration of the room and turns toward the dresser on one side. He sees a picture frame inside one of the drawers when he opens it. Storm pulls it out to examine it and notices it’s covered in dust. When he wipes it off he sees Lightning standing next to some girl. In the picture, Lightning looks younger, like he’s in his mid-twenties. The girl next to him is pretty. She is not to Storm’s taste, but she is good looking. She’s smiling wide, and she has vibrant blue eyes. Not blue like Lightning’s, they don’t look as friendly. She’s got long brown hair, and she looks slim in the picture. Storm can see why Lightning liked her. Young Lightning has his arm around her and is beaming brightly at the camera. He sees writing on the bottom of the picture. “Me and Sally 2006.” 2006! He’s known her that long?

Storm feels a tendril of jealousy coil in his stomach. He shakes it away. After all, “Sally” isn’t here now. She and Lightning clearly aren’t on good terms if he shoved the picture of them together into a drawer so he didn’t have to look at it. Storm tries to keep the smile on his face at bay. He shouldn’t be happy that things didn’t work out between them, but he is. Besides, what kind of girlfriend was she if she didn’t even let Lightning keep his trophies in the house. His House.

Storm tucks the frame back into its original spot and shuts the drawer. Good timing too, because he hears a knock on the bedroom door. He watches Lightning open it and greet him. He hands Storm another set of clothes and tells him he can shower if wants to.

Once Lightning leaves, Storm showers quickly. He dresses in Lightning’s clothes again. He’s given Storm another pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt. He likes wearing Lightning’s clothes. They feel loose and comfortable on him, very different from his normal attire of tight pants and dark clothing. Storm brushes his teeth with Lightning’s spare toothbrush and sweeps a hand through his hair before going out to the kitchen.

Lightning is sitting at the kitchen table when Storm comes out, and he’s reading a newspaper. He smiles at Storm, Storm smiles back. Now that Lightning no longer despises him, things have been very pleasant.

Lightning has a glass of orange juice on the table, and he pours a glass for Storm.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Storm’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He sees another missed call from Tony. Great. He silences his phone. He’ll deal with that later. Lightning notices but doesn’t say anything.

He tells Storm they’ll need to go into town and check on his car. Storm nods, and a few minutes later they begin the walk into town. Radiator Springs is a smaller town than Storm is used to. It’s
not bad though. It gives off a friendly atmosphere. This is the type of town where everybody
knows everybody, and most of the locals seemed welcoming to him now.

Storm even sees the firefighter who ran from him a few days ago give him a shy wave. Storm
waves back. Lightning leads him back to the auto shop in the center of town. He thinks the man’s
name is Ramone, and he’s got an interesting hairstyle. His hair is dyed yellow, orange and red. It
looks like he tried to make it look like flames, but the tips are dyed purple. It’s an interesting look
for sure and Storm admires the fact that he can pull it off.

Once Storm surveys his race car he can see Ramone did an excellent job repairing all the nicks and
scratches his car’s paint job suffered from. It looks brand new to Storm. He gets into the car and
starts it, pleased to find out it's running smoothly again.

“Thank you so much.” Storm says, shaking Ramone’s hand. Storm’s car being damaged did
provide a convenient reason for him to stay in town, but Storm is glad it’s fixed. His race car is
very precious to him.

Storm ends up making a check out to Ramone to pay for his car, and Ramone says he’d be honored
to give Storm a fresh coat of paint whenever he wanted. He also tells Storm to contact him if he
ever wants to do something different with the design.

Storm agrees, and then he and Lightning leave the shop to head to the diner in Radiator Springs.
Apparently, this is one of Lightning’s favorite spots to go to. Once they’re inside Storm sees a lot
of familiar faces from the town. He also sees an older looking woman behind the counter. He
assumes this is Flo because the diner is named Flo’s V8 Cafe. Lightning tells him Flo is Ramone’s
wife.

She walks up and introduces herself to Storm, smiling politely at him. Storm smiles back. He’s
relieved the people in this town like him. He has a difficult time with good first impressions, that
much is obvious from how Lightning completely hated him. Flo takes their breakfast orders, and
this time they sit at the bar, instead of in a booth.

After a few minutes Mater joins them, giving Storm a friendly smile and clapping Lightning on the
back. Storm likes Mater. He’s more aware of things than Storm initially gave him credit for. He’ll
have to be cautious of what he says from now on. When Flo brings their food out, Storm digs into
his french toast and he puts whipped cream on top of it. He isn’t really paying attention to his
surroundings. He can hear the idle chatter of other customers in the diner, he can hear the TV in
the corner and he catches bits and pieces of the conversation Lightning and Mater are having. It
isn’t until Lightning taps him on the shoulder and tells him to look up at the TV that Storm notices
something is out of the ordinary.

Storm sees a reporter talking with Natalie certain.

“The whereabouts of Jackson Storm, the up and coming next generation racer are currently
unknown. After speaking with his trainer and numerous witnesses it’s been revealed that Storm
recklessly left the Florida 500 track after the race was finished. Numerous reports have come in
from people claiming they’ve seen Storm driving through the midwest in his race car, but it is
unknown whether this information is true. All we do know is that Storm better start training before
his next race, or things might not be looking good for this young racer.” With that, the program
ends, and Storm finds that most of the people in the diner are staring at him, including Mater and
Lightning.

“Storm?! You didn’t tell anyone where you were going?” Lightning asks, loudly.
Storm shrugs. “It didn’t seem important. The public doesn’t need to know where I am.”

Lightning groans and puts his head in his hand. “You could have at least told your trainer.”

Lightning is right. Storm should have at least let Tony know where he was going, but he didn’t want to. Storm wanted to come get Lightning on his own. He didn’t want all the craziness of the press figuring it out, and Tony wasn’t exactly the best at keeping his mouth shut.

“Well, you know what this means Lightning,” Mater says.

“What?”

“We’ll just have to get Storm back to Florida as soon as we can. We’ll actually have to get you both there Lightning, especially if you’re going to train too.”

Storm beams at him. “You’re going to come back?!”

Mater chimes in. “He sure is! Right buddy?”

Lightning hums in acknowledgement. “Yes, I’m going. I’m still not sure about being a racer again...but I’m going. We’ll see how things go. I need to talk with Cruz anyway.”

That answer isn’t perfect, but it’s sure as hell better than nothing. Now at least Lightning is not opposed to the idea of going back to Florida.

“We’re going too.” Storm hears from behind him. He turns around to see Luigi and Guido standing behind him. Their ability to appear seemingly out of nowhere is very puzzling to Storm. He’s also confused on how they know what’s going on even after only catching the endings of conversations.

Nevertheless, Storm is pleased. If Lightning’s friends are there with him, Storm knows he’ll be more compelled to race. Especially if they’re supporting him. Mater says he’s coming along too, which is even better. Storm likes this guy, and he thinks he can count on him to make sure Lightning gives racing another try. Not to mention Lightning will need a capable pit crew team once he starts racing again.

When the five of them finish eating they make plans to leave Radiator Springs tomorrow morning. It’s a little sudden to Storm but he’s not complaining. He’s just glad Lightning is actually going to come with him.

Once they get back to Lightning’s house Lightning makes arrangements with his truck driver Mack. Lightning tells Storm that Mack can take both of their cars down to Florida in his truck, and Storm and Lightning will drive down in Lightning’s other car. It’s not a race car, which means it won’t go nearly as fast. Storm doesn’t mind. He likes being in the car with Lightning. Luigi and Guido are apparently going to drive down in their own car and Mater is going to take his tow truck. Lightning informs him that Mater hates not having his tow truck and as a result, the rusty vehicle accompanies him everywhere.

Lightning spends the rest of the day packing various things into different suitcases. He packs rather light, but Storm figures Lightning has done this before. He knows what he’ll need. Besides, he can buy whatever he doesn’t bring in Florida. Storm takes the aux cord and the charging port out of Lightning’s racecar before they load it into Macks truck. He wants to show Lightning the joy of playing music in the car.
Once Lightning and Storm’s race cars have been safely secured inside Mac’s truck, Lightning and Storm spend the rest of the day planning for the trip to Florida. First, they load up the car with Lightning’s various belongings. Next Lightning communicates with the others about what routes to take and things like that. Lightning tells Storm he wants to leave early to drive as much as possible even though he has no intention of making it there with no sleep like Storm tried to do. Storm argues that he got a solid six or so hours combined and Lightning argues he’s not going to consume dangerous quantities of Redbull in order to get there faster.

Later on, Lightning cooks dinner for them. Storm wonders when he learned to do that. So far there does not seem to be anything Lightning isn’t good at. After they eat Storm insists they go to a convenience store to pick up road trip snacks. Lightning argues that junk food isn’t really good “Road trip” food but he eventually caves and drives them there because he needs gas. Lightning eyes Storm’s bag full of snacks suspiciously but doesn’t try to open it.

When they get back to Lightning’s house, Lightning hands Storm his folded racing uniform to make sure he doesn’t forget it. Lightning also gives him a bag to put some of his, and Lightning’s things inside for Storm to use.

Lightning retires to bed early because he plans on making it as far as they can tomorrow before he gets too tired. Storm accepts this and spends the next few hours in Lightning’s guest bedroom procrastinating on sleep. He texts his cousin Kelly, updating her on everything that happened. Storm doesn’t want her to worry about him as no doubt she’s been watching the news updates about his whereabouts. Storm also takes the opportunity to call his trainer and tell him he’ll be back in Florida in a few days and that he’ll get back to training as soon as he can.

After that Storm just spends some time listening to music and watching YouTube videos, he eventually falls asleep.

When Storm wakes up he sees that it’s 9am. He doesn’t know if he’s slept in past Lightning’s desired time to leave but he suspected Lightning would wake him up if he did. When Storm wakes up he finds another change of clothes waiting for him outside the door. He changes quickly, stopping in the bathroom to brush his teeth and tidy himself up. He makes the bed in the guest room before he leaves, and is careful to make sure he remembers all of his belongings.

When he enters the kitchen he sees Lightning sitting at the table drinking coffee. He glances up at Storm when he enters and holds a doughnut out to him.

“Ready to go?” Lightning asks.

Storm nods and takes the doughnut from him.

He’s surprised Lightning got doughnuts seeing as he doesn’t like junk food. Or maybe he does like it and has it every so often? Storm doesn’t know.

Lightning goes to make sure all the lights are off in his house and he double checks to make sure all the windows and doors are locked. Storm doesn’t think anyone will try to break into his house in this town, but it’s probably better to be safe than sorry. Lightning shuts the garage door after he pulls the car out of it and then they are ready to go.

Once Lightning starts driving and they leave behind the small town of Radiator Springs, Storm finds himself a little sad that they’re leaving. He likes it there, Storm hopes he’ll be able to go back someday. He imagines Lightning also feels sad about leaving, but at least some of his friends are
going to come with him to Florida. The sadness fades soon after that as the prospect of he and Lightning racing together again becomes more of a reality with each mile they drive.

He wants to know more about Lightning. He’s learned a lot about him from staying in his house. Storm wants to know more though. He never thought he’d get the opportunity to be this close to Lightning. Now that he is, he wants even more.

They drive for another few miles when Storm breaks the silence with “let’s play a game.”

Lightning raises who’s eyebrows quizzically for a minute, then says “I Spy?”

I Spy is an admittingly hard game to play in the desert. As there is really not much around them other than rocks and sand.

They have fun anyway, and both of them are decent at it.

After they spend a few hours playing various different car games Storm thinks it's about time he introduces Lightning to the AUX cord.

Lightning is older so Storm thinks his 80’s playlist is a good choice for now. When Storm sets up his phone to blast popular 80’s hits he can tell Lightning is surprised by how loud it is.

Lightning doesn’t try to turn it down or off though, so Storm thinks he likes it. He looks over at Lightning a few times when different songs come on and he can see him mouthing along with the words silently. Lightning’s speed goes up a little bit too, which is what Storm does when he’s driving and blaring music too.

They listen to music for hours before it gets dark outside. They’ve probably driven for 12 hours if Storm had to guess, and they stopped at a decent amount of convenience stores and fast food restaurants during that time.

They stop at another store when Lightning insists he can keep going if he drinks coffee. When they stop Storm gets an energy drink and a pack of starburst. Lightning laughs at him while he’s standing at the counter.

“What’s funny?” Storm huffs.

“You eat like a six year old. That’s like your fourth pack of candy today.”

“I need sugar. It keeps me awake.” He says back. If Lightning thinks four packs of candy is bad then he’d be shocked to find out how much junk food Storm actually consumes.

“That’s not healthy.” Lightning says wrinkling his nose.

“Says the coffee addict.”

“Hey! It’s not an addiction! I’ve just been driving a long time.” Lightning protests.

Storm gives him a sarcastic nod and he watches Lightning glare at him before deciding to just get back in his car.

They drive a few more hours and Storm sees on the GPS they’re roughly a quarter of the way through Texas. They left Radiator Springs early this morning, and now its late at night. Lightning’s been driving for around 15 hours. Eventually Lightning gets tired and Storm wonders if he’ll ask him to drive. Instead of this though he calls Mater from his cell phone saying they’re going to stop
at a hotel.

This is news to Storm. For some reason, the possibility of staying overnight at a hotel didn’t occur to him. Even though logically it made sense, Storm just thought they would keep driving. He hears Mater tell him that’s a good idea and he’ll do the same thing once he gets closer. Apparently Mater, Luigi and Guido are a few hours from where they are. That’s not surprising as Lightning had been speeding for most of the drive.

Stopping at a hotel does seem like a good idea though because Lightning’s eyes are starting to shut and he just finished his coffee.

Once they pull up to a random hotel in Texas, Lightning shuts off the car and grabs a backpack from it. Storm follows him into the Lobby and up to the front desk. Storm stands a few feet behind him as Lightning talks to the woman at the front desk.

Storm waits for Lightning to finish so he can get his own room. Once Lightning gets his key Storm walks up to the desk but hears Lightning say something to him.

“What are you doing?” He asks.

“I’m getting a room.” Storm states. That should be obvious.

“I already got us a room.” Lightning says.

Storm stares at him in confusion before giving him a jumbled response.

“O-oh...ok.”

Storm mentally kicks himself for the response he gave. Lightning doesn’t notice. He’s busy leaning against the elevator with his eyes shut as they wait for it to go to their floor. Storm wonders if Lightning even notices what he just did. He doubts Lightning gave the implications of them staying in the same room more than a second of thought. Not like Storm’s doing. Nervousness pooling in his mind. He was nervous to stay in Lightning’s house too, but that was different. There he wasn’t in the same bedroom as Lightning. When Lightning opens the door to their room Storm sees that there are two beds. He figured that would be the case, but he’s still way more on edge than he usually is. Lightning doesn’t notice though, he’s too tired to. Lightning goes to use the bathroom and change while Storm sits on the bed anxiously. He shouldn’t be anxious about this, Lightning certainly isn’t. Besides, it’s normal for two guys to share a room.

When Lightning comes out of the bathroom he hands Storm more clothing from his bag before flopping down on his bed. When Storm comes out of the bathroom after showering and changing Lightning is already asleep.

Storm lays in his bed and stares at the ceiling. Falling asleep right now is a futile task though. He can’t fall asleep when he’s listening to Lightning’s soft breathing. It’s not loud or anything, but it’s the only thing Storm can hear now.

He turns on his side to look at him. Storm never thought he would really be this close to him. All he ever wanted was to race next to him, but now that Lightning is this close, now that he knows him. Storm finds himself desiring more. He shouldn’t. He knows that. He knows that but he can’t stop his mind from conjuring up wild fantasies and desires that he shouldn’t think of. It’s not as easy to bury them down though. Not when Lightning is in the bed next to him.

He takes a deep breath in and shuts his eyes. It’s difficult to sleep at first, but he forces himself to.
When he wakes up Lightning is sitting up in his bed, and he’s looking at his phone. Storm didn’t notice at first, but it’s not a smartphone. It’s a flip phone, it looks like one an eighty year old man would have.

“What kind of phone is that?” He says, and Lightning turns his head toward him.

“Oh, I’m not sure. I think it’s a Samsung…”

Storm stares at him. He hasn’t seen anyone use a flip phone in years, he doesn’t know how Lightning makes do with it. Storm listens to music on his phone every day, he could never use a flip phone.

Lightning doesn’t seem bothered by it though. Storm knows he has enough money to buy a smartphone, so he must just not want one.

“Let’s go to breakfast.” Lightning says, offering him a smile.

When Storm looks at the clock on the table next to him he finds its closer to dinner than breakfast, but he gets up anyway. Last night they had driven well past the later hours of the night, and now they had slept in till late afternoon. Once he’s changed, he and Lightning walk downstairs to the lobby.

When they get there he can see Mater, Luigi and Guido sitting at a table.

Luigi looks dead tired, but Mater and Guido look full of energy. When they sit everyone greets them. Lightning immediately starts conversing with his friends and asks them how the drive was.

Guido responds that it would have been better if Luigi hadn’t been so adamant about them not breaking the speed limit.

Lightning laughs at them as they bicker, and Storm turns to see Mater take a sip of his apple juice and raise his eyebrows at Storm.

Storm raises them back and gives Mater a questioning glance.

Mater’s eyes move quickly. Resting on Storm then switching to Lightning then back to Storm. Storm might have missed it were he not staring right at him. Storm looks down quickly, pretending he doesn’t understand what Mater is doing.

That doesn’t work out well though, because when he risks taking a glance at Mater again, Mater is looking right at him. Mater gives him a smirk. He knows something. Storm feels his stomach knotting and heat beginning to pool in his cheeks. He turns away and thankfully Lightning engages Mater in a conversation. Storm takes the opportunity to get up and pour himself a bowl of cereal.

He needs to calm down. Stop overreacting. Mater doesn’t know anything. There’s nothing for him to know because Storm isn’t hiding anything. He puts milk in his cereal and sits down at the table. Mater leaves him alone for the rest of their “breakfast”, and before long everyone is making plans to get back on the road again.

He and Lightning go back upstairs to gather their things and they meet with everyone outside the hotel. This time they all have a plan to stop driving earlier in the night so everyone can get more rest.
Once they’re back in Lightning’s car on the road they listen to music for a while, before Storm wants to say something. He wants to have a conversation with Lightning. To hear more about his life. He starts with something simple. He doesn’t want to go too personal yet. He wants to respect Lightning’s privacy, ease into things slowly.

“How’d you learn to cook?” He asks.

Lightning looks up from driving. He looks surprised that Storm asked, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Now that they’re friends he’s been in a significantly brighter mood around him.

“Well, when I was just starting as a racer, I ate a lot of terrible food. Candy, cookies, chips, all sorts of unhealthy food because it was easy and cheap. I used to have a really bad TV in my first apartment. It had a total of three channels that weren’t filled with static. One of those was the cooking channel. So whenever I finished racing or training to race I would just go to my apartment and turn on the cooking channel. Then I would try to cook stuff.”

Storm listens intently. He likes hearing Lightning talk about his life. Lightning is so famous and successful now, that Storm forgets there was a time in his life where things weren’t easy for him. He admires Lightning for that. Not that many eighteen year olds are able to live completely on their own like Lightning did.

Lightning also informs him that many of his first attempts ended terribly. Like when he had tried to cook a chicken in the oven his first time it had blackened so badly that his entire apartment complex needed to evacuate because the smoke was so strong.

The conversation continues after that. Lightning asks things about him. Nothing too personal. They ask each other simple things. They talk about racing, about music, about cooking. It’s a nice conversation, and Storm doesn’t realize how long it actually ends up lasting until he sees it starts to get dark outside.

They stop somewhere to get coffee for Lightning and once they get back on the road again Lightning asks him another question.

“How long did you watch me race Storm?” It’s more personal than the questions have been so far, but Storm doesn’t even entertain the idea of not answering.

“Always. I watched you right from the beginning. I was five when I saw you race for the first time. You were younger then too. It wasn’t a big race either, not for the Piston Cup. It was an off season one, just for fun. Then when you raced against experienced racers and won, everyone could see your potential.”

Lightning nods and gives him a bright smile. “I remember that race! That was so long ago too! Back when I was just starting. Things were so different then...even my car looked different. I’m surprised you remember it being so young.”

Storm nods. He’s glad Lightning is pleased with his answer rather than creeped out. It must have been weird for him to see how much Storm worshipped him when he was younger. But Lightning doesn’t look like it bothers him at all. He actually looks happy that Storm remembers one of his first races.

The rest of the drive to the hotel is easy after that. Things are no longer awkward between them, which Storm is happy about.

When they arrive Storm help’s Lightning take in two of his bags for tonight. Once they check into
another room and crash on the beds they discover its much earlier than the time they went to bed last night. Storm isn’t tired yet, and by the looks of it, neither is Lightning. He turns on the TV and flips through the channels to find a movie they can watch.

They tune into that for a few hours, before Lightning gets a call from Mater saying he’s here. Storm and Lightning go downstairs to the Lobby to great him, and they are all hungry enough to decide to go out for food. Mater says Luigi and Guido are not that far behind him, so they can meet them wherever they decide to get dinner.

Once they pick a restaurant Storm spends a considerable amount of the dinner attempting not to look at Mater. Despite this, he gives Mater a brief glance and sees that he’s no longer wearing a smirk. Just a regular smile. It’s unsettling to Storm. Mater is much more perceptive than he thought at first. He says nothing though, and even when he and Storm are alone at the table for a few moments he still says nothing.

Lightning is in an upbeat mood as usual, which Storm likes. It’s refreshing to have him around. Storm likes being with him.

Later, when everyone finishes dinner they go back to the hotel. Lightning is not as tired tonight, so he showers before going to bed. When he emerges from the bathroom Storm can see his damp blond head start to curl. Lightning’s hair is nice. It’s blonde, but not too intense. It’s almost golden, like the colors on his uniform. It looks soft.

Lightning turns to him. He takes a deep breath before he speaks.

“Storm...I know you want me to race again. I want that too...it’s just...if things don’t work out I don’t want you to be upset.

Lightning speaks with an almost strained voice. Like he’s worried he will fail. Storm doesn’t like this. He wants to see the confident Lightning McQueen that no one could beat. Seeing him like this makes him more relatable, but Storm likes when he’s confident. That’s the Lightning he wants to race against.

“I won’t be upset, because I’ll have no reason to be. I know you can do it Lightning.

Lightning brightens visibly, and it’s clear Storm’s words will have a positive effect on him.

“Right. Right, I can do this.” Lightning says with a smile.

Storm knew he said the right thing. Lightning is a confident person. Age and other racers have brought his confidence levels down, but he’s still the same racer he always ways. Storm knows Lightning can do this.

With that, Lightning turns off the lights in the room. He falls to sleep minutes later, leaving Storm at peace with his thoughts and Lightning’s soft breathing.

Storm is not nervous. He knows exactly what to do. He will help Lightning get his racing number back. Tomorrow they will go to the training center. Lightning will talk with his sponsors and get his racing number back. Then, he and Storm will race against each other, just like he always
wanted.

...Originally the plan seemed perfect. But now Storm can feel himself asking, what then? He feels himself yearning. Unconsciously desiring more than he should. He wants to be more than a friend. He’s wanted that for a long time. He lets himself hold onto the desire in the back of his mind, but it will not distract him from his goal.

Lightning will race again.

Storm goes to sleep soon after.
Chapter 6

When Lightning wakes up he glances at the bed next to him and sees Storm sprawled out on it. Lightning can see his lanky figure curled up under the sheets. Storm’s turned towards Lightning, and his long black bangs are covering his face.

Storm likes to sleep. It’s Something Lightning’s discovered while he’s been with him. It makes sense considering Storm drinks energy drinks to stay up for unholy amounts of time until he pushes himself to the brink of exhaustion. He’s also young. Lightning doesn’t know how old he is, but when Lightning was younger he remembers sleeping for half the day if racing tired him out.

That being said he lets Storm sleep. They aren’t far from Florida at all now. It should only take them another two to three hours to get to the training center from here. Lightning changes his clothes once he goes into the bathroom. Storm is still sleeping heavily when he comes out so he leaves him be.

When Lightning walks down the hallway to the elevator he encounters Mater with his phone in his hand.

“Hey, Mater!”

“McQueen! How’d ya sleep?”

Lightning grins. Mater is enthusiastic as usual.

“Good.”

“How did Storm sleep?” Mater continues.

This throws him off a little, Mater could just ask Storm when he sees him later.

“Uh...good I think? He’s still sleeping now so I hope good.”

Mater nods.

They step into the elevator and head to the lobby. There they see Luigi and Guido eating breakfast.

“Hey guys!” Lightning says to his friends.

“Hi,” Luigi responds while Guido mumbles in acknowledgement. Guido’s eyes have heavy bags under them. He must have taken over driving in order to make up for all the miles they lost because Luigi actually obeyed the speed limit signs.

“Are you excited, buddy?” Mater asks, nudging him with his elbow.

Luigi and Guido lean forward intently, they look eager to hear his answer.

“Yeah!”

Lightning is more nervous than excited, but he doesn’t know what telling them will do. They’ll reassure him of course, but that won’t do much to ease his worry.

It might be difficult to get his number back. He’ll need to talk with his sponsors again, and he’ll need to talk to Mr Sterling and Cruz about training. He’s also nervous about what to do with Cruz.
He told her he’d be her crew chief. Hell, he told the whole world that on camera. For him to go back on his word...just because he wants to race again, would that be too selfish? No. He has to give this another try. His friends are all counting on him, not to mention Storm would have a fit if Lightning decided to just leave.

No, that won’t work anyway. Part of him is too excited by the prospect of racing professionally again to give it up. He’ll just have to see what happens.

Mater decides on bagels for breakfast today and grabs Lightning one from the counter. They’ve been eating a lot of breakfast this week, which isn’t that surprising. The amount of fast food everyone’s been eating is concerning though, they’ll need to go to the grocery store soon to have actual food.

Actually, now that Lightning thinks about it, he’ll need to talk with his friends about what they’re going to do about a living situation. If everything goes well with Lightning’s racing, they’ll all need a place to stay. They can’t just stay in a hotel the whole time. This isn’t a short trip. It’ll take months for Lightning to be prepared for next season. They’ll need an apartment or house to stay in.

He addresses that issue with his friends, and they decide that in the next few days they’ll need to survey some houses/apartments to live in if Lightning plans to stay in Florida. He feels a little guilty for having to take his friends away from Radiator Springs for so long. Then again, it’s not like any of his friends have any urgent reasons to go home anyway, like a girlfriend. Besides, Radiator Springs will always be there for them to return to.

“Hey Lightning, watch this,” Mater says suddenly.

Lightning watches in confusion as he sees Mater grab a bagel from the counter. This one is chocolate and looks like it has chocolate chips in it. Lightning watches as Mater throws it across the dining room.

The bagel sails across the room before thankfully someone catches it. When Lightning looks closer he sees that Storm has caught it, and is staring at Mater with both annoyance and confusion written on his face.

Storm walks over and joins them at the table.

“Nice catch,” Mater says, taking a bite out of his own bagel.

Lightning rounds on him. “Mater. I thought we agreed you weren’t allowed to throw food across the room in public establishments.”

“Yeah, didn’t you learn your lesson after last time?” Guido chimes in.

Storm looks at everyone in confusion. Lightning decides to fill him.

“One time we were all eating lunch out at a restaurant a few years ago. We weren’t in Radiator Springs where something like that wouldn’t mean anything because everyone knows Mater. I was coming back from the bathroom, and Mater decided it would be a good idea to throw a dinner roll at me. When I backed up to try and catch it, a waiter who was carrying all sorts of different food bumped into me.”

Mater laughs. “I remember that it was so funny!”

“It wasn’t funny to me Mater! I had chocolate pudding in my hair!”
Everyone at the table laughs, and Lightning narrows his eyes at them.

“Sounds to me like you’re a little clumsy.” Storm says to him, giving him a cheeky smile.

Lightning gives him a glare. “I am not clumsy.” He insists, which only makes Guido and Mater laugh more.

Storm raises his eyebrows. Lightning glares at him. He waits till they finish breakfast to get his revenge. Once everyone is finished and Storm has his back to Lightning, he takes the opportunity to grab one of the sugar packets from the table and throw it at the back of Storm’s head.

Mater and he burst out in laughter when Storm whips his head around to find the source of the impact. Storm gives Lightning a smirk, and Lightning starts to think maybe he shouldn’t have thrown it. Storm looks around him first, to make sure there are no hotel employees or other people around them. Then he grabs a sugar packet and throws it at Lightning. Lightning catches it swiftly, proving he is NOT clumsy and then turns to Mater who’s having a laughing fit a few feet from him. Lightning tosses it at Mater as payback.

While Mater is busy staring at Lightning in mock surprise, Storm is distracted laughing this time. Lightning launches another one at him. Never say he isn’t an opportunist. This time Storm catches it and instead of throwing it back like Lightning expects, Storm rips it open and pours the sugar in his mouth. Lightning stops throwing them then.

As they’re getting into the elevator Storm gives him a goofy grin. Almost one a little kid would give. It's nice to see that Storm acts like that. Not always so competitive or intense.

Storm’s in a good mood while they pack up their bags and head to Lightning’s car. Now they don’t have long to go to the training center at all. Just another 3 hours or so. Lightning can tell Storm is pleased about that. Once he starts the car and gets on the road Storm smiles. Lightning decides he’s right. It’s better to go into this with a positive attitude. To do the best he can.

He drives quickly, making the ride seem a lot shorter than three hours. Though, compared to the other times they’ve been in the car three hours is short. Soon enough Lightning is minutes away from the training center. The Lightning McQueen training center. Lightning assumes Storm wants them to go there. After all, Storm hasn’t told him about any other one. Lightning is apprehensive about joining the center with Mr Sterling as the owner, but if Cruz is still there he’s sure it’s ok.

The familiar building pops into view and Lightning parks his car in a space near the front. There are lots of cars around them. Lots of racers he supposes. The Lightning McQueen training center is right in front of him. The silver building gleaming in the sun. It feels strange that this whole racing center is dedicated to him. Rusty and Dusty wanted it to be that way but...it feels wrong. Wrong that they aren’t the ones sponsoring him anymore.

Lightning watches as Storm eagerly gets out of the car, he sure isn’t hiding his excitement this time around. Lightning follows him as he makes long strides toward the training center. Cruz crosses his mind. He hasn’t told her he’s coming, he hasn’t told her about his recent decision to try racing professionally again either.

When they first walk through the glass doors of the training center Lightning is surprised that Cruz is the first person he sees. She’s literally standing like 3 feet from the door. Did she see them
coming? No, because a second later he hears her yell,

“Lightning!!” and rush over to give him a hug. She’s beaming at him, giving him a bright smile.

“What are you doing here?!” She asks, surprised.

“I, um” Lightning begins before Storm interrupts on his behalf.

“He’s here to race” Storm says, flashing Cruz a smirk.

Lightning watches as Cruz’s happy features twist into anger. Of course Storm had to act like this right off the bat.

“What’s he doing here!” She whispers to him.

Lightning doesn’t really know how to explain that Storm forced his way into Lightning’s town and life and now they’re sorta friends.

“He’s um. Here to race?” Lightning replies.

Cruz’s face shifts from anger to betrayal.

“I mean what’s he doing here Lightning, at your training center.”

Lightning shifts awkwardly. This isn’t his training center. It’s not like he paid for it. He doesn’t have the right to tell anyone they can’t be here.

Just then, the man who does have the authority to tell people who can and can’t be here walks down the steps. Mr Sterling is wearing a silver suit, his hair is neatly combed and he exclaims a greeting to all of them.

“Lightning McQueen! You didn’t tell me you were coming by!”

Mr Sterling walks up to him and slaps him on the back. Lightning gives him a warm greeting back. It’s true that Lightning didn’t really know where he stood with Sterling after the disagreement between he and Cruz. There was also the whole him trying to exploit Lightning’s popularity for profit, but he’s willing to overlook that if Cruz is. When Lightning spares a glance at her, she looks happy Mr Sterling is here. Lightning guesses they were able to sort everything out and Sterling allowed Cruz to pursue her dream of being a racer. He’s glad for that. Cruz will finally have her chance to be a racer.

Sterling shifts his attention to Storm. He seems puzzled for a moment, but then a brilliant smile replaces it. Sterling reaches out to shake Storm’s hand with a little too much enthusiasm if you ask Lightning. Though Storm is currently one of the best racers in this country, it makes sense that Mr Sterling would want to be on good terms with him.

“Jackson Storm! It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person!”

Storm doesn’t say anything in response. He does, however, pull his hand away the second he’s able to. Though it didn’t seem like Mr Sterling took any offence. Cruz certainly looked offended though. When Lightning glanced over at her, she was staring at Storm with pure hatred. Lightning wonders why. I mean sure he disliked Storm at first too, but Lightning can’t really understand why she doesn’t like him. After all, it’s not like Storm ever said anything to her about retirement as far as Lightning knows.
“So,” Sterling continues, “What brings you here?”

“I’m interested in joining your training center.” Storm states.

That’s news to Lightning. Storm must like him more than he thought. Or maybe he’s doing it to make sure Lightning has no choice but to train for the next race.

“Really?!” Mr Sterling exclaims.

“What?!!” Cruz yells in disbelief.

“Yep.” Storm responds

“Well, You’re most certainly welcome to! Of course, I’ll need to speak with your trainer, but I’d love to have you join my training center.

“There’s one more thing.” Storm says.

“Of course! What’s that?”

Storm looks at Lightning.

“I want Lightning to race again. you’re his sponsor. You can make it happen.”

Sterling stares at him, pondering what Storm has just said. He turns to Lightning.

“Well...I can certainly make that happen. If that’s what you want Lightning.” Mr Sterling says, turning to look at him.

Lightning looks at Cruz. She looks hurt. Like he’s betrayed her. He turns to Storm. Storm smiles at him. It’s a small one, one to motivate him he thinks.

Lightning takes a deep breath. It hurts to see Cruz sad, but he knows how much more it will hurt to be sitting in the crew pit when he just knows he isn’t finished racing yet. He can’t lie to himself.

“I...I want to race again”

It’s silent for a minute. Nobody says a word.

“Well then, I’m off to make some phone calls,” Sterling says, waving them goodbye.

Cruz turns to him. She needs an explanation. Lightning needs to give her one.

“Cruz I...I’m sorry.”

She looks at him in confusion. “But...I thought you would be my crew chief.”

Lightning opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. He doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t know what he can say to fix things. Storm apparently does not share the same sentiment.

“Don’t do that.” Storm states, annoyed. Lightning turns around, but Storm is not looking at him.

Cruz does not back down from his glare, brown eyes quivering with irritation.

“Do what?!!” She spits back.
“Don’t make him feel bad for your problems. He wants to race again, and if you really care about him then you won’t make him feel bad that he can’t be your crew chief. It’s not his responsibility.”

Storm’s voice remains calm, but it’s easy to detect the clear anger in his voice.

Cruz’s eyebrows scrunch up and she frowns. Seeing her so agitated was not normal. Storm on the other hand usually looked that way. Lightning stood between the two and figured he needed to calm the situation before someone (Storm) escalated things too far.

“Oh, okay guys calm down.” He says raising his hands up to pacify them. Storm shifts in acknowledgement and Cruz looks down at her shoes.

Thankfully a few seconds later, Storm’s phone rings in his pocket and he begrudgingly leaves them alone to take the call.

Cruz stares at him now, clearly wondering what Storm is doing here.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you Storm would be here.”

“What is he doing here Lightning?” She asks softly.

At first, Lightning didn’t know. Up until this point, Storm had come with him to make sure Lightning would make it to the training center. Now though Lightning isn’t sure what his intentions are. They’re friends now, but Lightning didn’t realize Storm felt strongly enough about being his friend to leave his own training center - if that’s even why he did it.

Maybe there was another reason. Like maybe Sterling’s training center had more to offer in terms of technology. Though he doesn’t know if that’s right either, considering Storm has sponsors wealthy enough to provide him with the same equipment somewhere else.

In any case, Lightning doesn’t want to pry into it. It’s Storm’s choice. He doesn’t want to interfere with his decision.

“He wants to train here Cruz. I’m not sure why. But listen, he’s not as bad as he seems. I know initially he acted like an asshole but he’s just a little rough around the edges. Give him another chance, for me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner about wanting to race again. I still want to help you train, I just can’t be your crew chief anymore.”

Lightning pauses once he’s finished, he waits for Cruz’s reaction.

She says nothing for a moment, then gives him a small smile.

“If you want to race again then I’ll support you Lightning!” She says, brightness returning

“And...I guess I’ll try to get along with Storm too.”

Lightning grins.

“I missed you by the way, McQueen!” She says loudly, reaching out to hug him.

He returns it and sees Storm watching them.

Cruz breaks away and tells Lightning she has some things to do so she’ll see him later.

When she leaves, Lightning walks over to Storm who’s still on the phone with his trainer. He seems to be in the middle of explaining the situation to his trainer.
He can hear the other man’s confusion through the phone. Storm’s eyes widen with something the man says then promptly ends the call.

“What’s up?” Lightning asks him.

“That was my trainer.”

“Oh. Is he you know, okay with you coming here?”

“Yeah he is, that’s not the problem.” Storm says brow furrowed

“He wants me to be on a talk show tonight.”

“Oh?” Lightning says.

“With Chick Hicks.”

“Oh.” He says sympathetically.

Storm grimaces then glances at Lightning. He looks at him for a moment, then he grins and says enthusiastically

“Come with me!”

“What?!”

“Come with me tonight for the talk show! It’ll be perfect! This way we can show the world you’re not done racing! It’ll be fantastic. It’ll be the great return all of your fans are waiting for!”

Lightning shifts. “I don’t know Storm...I mean, announcing that with thousands of people watching... Not to mention I wasn’t invited.”

He grabs Lightning’s shoulder in his excitement.

“Come on! It'll be perfect! You don’t need an invitation to show up on a racing talk show! You’re Lightning McQueen! Plus...this would be a great way to stick it to Chick Hicks.” He says, grinning maliciously at the last part.

Lightning sighs. He isn’t sure about this. It feels too brash to just come onto the talk show and announce to the world he’s back. But...it would be nice to wipe that smug look off Chick Hicks face. Especially when he’s been talking shit about Lightning’s racing all season. That’s all he needs to push him towards this idea.

“Alright. I’ll do it.”
Lightning looks hesitant about tonight. Not quite nervous, because Lightning McQueen is never nervous. Or at least, Storm has never seen him nervous.

But right now with he looks a little...not like his usual self. That’s nothing to be worried about though. He’s Lightning. He’ll be fine. Besides, Lightning agreed to this. He must want to show the world he’s not done racing yet. Either that or he really wants to one-up Chick Hicks. Storm knows the two have a rivalry. They always have. Chick Hicks has been jealous of Lightning since the first day he stepped onto the track.

He takes his hands off Lightning’s shoulders after a minute. Holding them there for too long would be suspicious. So he shoves them into his pockets.

Lightning looks like he might say something to him, but before he can they hear a loud “MCQUEEN!” Come from the entrance.

Storm turns and sees Mater running up to them, Luigi and Guido in tow.

“How’d it go?!” Luigi asks.

Lightning fills the three of them in on everything that just happened.

“A talk show?” Guido asks, seemingly more interested in checking out the technology in the training center.

“Yes,” Storm responds.

“That’s a great idea!” Mater yells, making Luigi wince next to him and Guido stare at him like he’s a child.

Storm nods. Not that many people have called him buddy. And he’s only been slapped on the back by one or two people in his life.

Mater is just naturally friendly to everyone he supposes.

Storm’s trainer has no idea Lightning is coming with him tonight. No one does. Storm figures the initial plan was to talk with Chick Hicks about his racing skill. Or perhaps where he had disappeared to the last few days. Storm has no intention of telling the public that though. It’s his business.
No one will want to talk about that anyway. Not when Lightning McQueen shows up out of the blue uninvited. Storm can imagine the excitement of the audience. He’s eager for it himself too. He wants to see Lightning confidently racing like he always has. He wants the world to see that.

He knows Lightning wants that too. He’s too humble to say it. Too kind to ever want something selfish. Not like Storm, Who has selfish desires running through his mind all the time. Lightning loves racing though. He loves when his fans are cheering him on, he loves the thrill of racing, the challenge of it. He likes to win, but that is not the be all, end all for him. After all, it wasn’t Lightning’s loss that crushed his hopes of racing. It was his fans.

The same people that cheered for him the moment he stepped onto the track, but now were searching for someone else. Someone newer. Perhaps that’s why the world accepted it so easily when racers like Cal Weathers and Bobby Swift left. The world grew tired of their mediocrity. Even Lightning, who had been their treasure for so long, fell out of favor.

But not to Storm. Lightning could never fall out of his favor. It wasn’t possible. When people simply accepted Lightning’s retirement he did not. He could not.

He won’t let the world stomp on Lightning’s dream. On his dream. He’s waited far too long for it to be taken from him.

That’s why tonight needs to go smoothly.

He gives Lightning a friendly smile. A supportive one. One he’s not used to giving to anyone. But Lightning grins back at him, he seems to appreciate the gesture.

“Hey what are you guys going to wear?” Luigi interjects.

Storm ponders that. He didn’t quite think about that.

“Uh...a suit?” Lightning says.

“Naw, I think you guys should wear your racing uniforms! Ya know, to get your fans excited!” Mater says suddenly.

It’s a good idea. People will certainly be excited when Lightning strolls out onto the stage in his uniform. Storm likes it.

“That’s a good idea Mater.” He says.

Mater winks at him.

To Storm’s surprise, Mater is already holding both of their uniforms. He must have asked Lightning for the key to his car.

They change quickly in the training center locker rooms.

Storm deliberately faces away, but out of the corner of his eye, he catches glimpses of Lightning’s tan skin. Only brief glances. Lasting no more than a second, but Storm forces himself to look away and put his racing uniform on.

Once he’s gotten dressed he turns toward Lightning. Lightning’s uniform is a little snug. He’s had the same one since he started racing, although it doesn’t look worse for wear. It looks good on him. Storm can easily see his solid build beneath it.
He follows him out of the locker room and back to the entrance of the center, where Lightning’s friends are waiting.

Mater turns to him eagerly. “I can’t wait to see the show, guys!”

Luigi and Guido nod in agreement, just as excited. He glances toward Lightning. He’s smiling, but Storm can see his posture is rigid.

Storm wants to say something to him, but he doesn’t know what. If he asks if he’s nervous he might offend him, and that’s the last thing he wants to do. Besides, Lightning’s a grown man. Storm’s sure he’s capable of handling himself. If Storm were nervous and Lightning could tell, he would feel embarrassed for sure.

So Storm says nothing. Instead, he follows Lightning to the car. It’s dark outside now, and the interview is supposed to start in thirty minutes. Storm puts the address into his phone and Lightning just starts driving. Storm hopes the drive will help to ease Lightning’s mind. He wonders if it’s the possibility of so many people watching the interview that is making Lightning nervous. That can’t be it, right? Lightning has done so many interviews over the years. Plus when he’s racing there are millions of people watching him. Though when Storm thinks back on all the interviews he’s seen with Lightning in them, he can never say he looked comfortable. He answered all the questions about racing of course but tended to shy away from more personal ones. He never really looked like he enjoyed being on T.V.

Storm wonders if it was a bad idea to invite Lightning to come with him. No, it won’t be. It’s still the perfect opportunity for Lightning to show the world he isn’t quitting. That he won’t go down without a fight just because the world decided he’s too old. Well, Storm didn’t decide that. He would never decide that. Lightning could be racing professionally as an eighty year old and Storm would still be cheering him on. Internally of course.

After a few minutes, they make it to the address Storm’s trainer sent them. There are security guards waiting to escort them in, although Storm doesn’t see any fans around. They did come in through the back entrance though. The security guards say nothing about Lightning’s presence, although one does tell him they’re a big fan. Lightning smiles sheepishly and tells them thanks while Storm snickers in front of him.

“I don’t see why you’re laughing Storm. I remember seeing my autograph back in your room.” Lightning whispers.

Storm falls silent. He has no comeback for that.

Instead, he resorts to “accidentally” stepping on Lightning’s foot while they walk, and he can feel Lightning playfully jab him in the arm. They are stumbling through the hallway before a loud voice erupts close to them, emphasized by a microphone.

Lightning groans. It appears Chick Hicks is opening the interview right now. Storm takes a deep breath. They are behind the curtains now, where security directed them to wait until they are called out onto the set. Storm can’t see anything from where they are standing now, although he can certainly hear the irritating voice of Chick Hicks.

“HELLO, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the CHICK HICKS show! Where today we’ll be joined by some special guest! Not as special as me of course!”
The audience is silent at the last part.

“Anyway our first guest is racing analyst expert NATALIE CERTAIN!”

Storm frowned. Tony didn’t mention anything to him about Natalie Certain being at this interview. He turns to Lightning who looks equally as confused as Storm.

They don’t really have time to think about it, because the next thing he hears is Chick Hicks introducing him as the next special guest. Storm walks out onstage, and the audience roars with approval. He waits a minute for the audience to quiet down before addressing them.

“I hope you don’t mind I brought a guest with me.” Storm states, flashing the audience a smile. The audience cheers even louder as Lightning steps at on the stage and he can hear people screaming Lightning’s name.

Lightning smiles at all of them and Storm finds himself staring. Lightning is always the charmer, even if he doesn’t know it.

Storm forces his eyes back to Chick Hicks who looks irritated and Natalie Certain who only regards him with curiosity. After someone from backstage brings out another chair, the audience had finally quieted down enough for them to begin.

Chick Hicks is the first to break the silence unsurprisingly. From what Storm’s seen of the man he never stops talking.

“So happy you could come all the way from your newly retired life to make it on my show McQueen.”

Chick says. It’s not a question. It’s not how this interview was supposed to go at all, but somehow Storm thinks the fans will like it better that way.

Lightning takes a moment to respond, always keeping a good natured grin on his face. Years of interviews must have taught him that. Storm still needs to work on that himself. He mostly gives the audience a look of disinterest or a cocky smile, though some people like that, girls in particular.

“Yeah, Chick! I’m happy to be here! I wish I could have done something a bit more interesting with my retirement though. Maybe you could get me a job as your co-host?” Lightning says. The audience roars with laughter, and Chick’s face starts to turn red.

Chick continues. “Thank you for gracing us with your presence Mr. McQueen. Though I don’t see why you’re here. I thought the racing legend had finally died out.”

Lightning’s face gives off the slightest hint of irritation, but he still smiles for the camera. Storm, however, is not smiling. He thinks it’s high time his voice was heard at this stupid interview.

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong Chick.” Storm states, much to everyone’s surprise. Even Natalie Certain spares him a surprised look.

Storm continues. “Lightning’s not here to talk about his retirement.”

Storm turns to Lightning. This is his chance.

He watches as Lightning stills, choosing to turn his attention to the audience.

He waits a minute before speaking, and the entire audience has quieted down. Even Chick Hicks is
silent, begrudgingly waiting for Lightning to speak.

Lightning stands up, and Storm can hear a few members of the audience murmur in surprise. Lightning’s face has a look of determination, one that Storm has seen him wear many times while racing, but never like this.

He hesitates for another moment before speaking.

“I...I know that I told everyone that I was done racing professionally… “

The audience stills, it is so quiet. It’s never been this quiet during one of Chick Hicks talk shows. Everyone is silent as they wait for Lightning to continue.

“I know that but, I can’t give up racing. I don’t believe that it’s over for me, and so long as my fans are out there to support me I will race again!”

He speaks up for the last part, letting his words echo out to the audience.

It is madness after that. Fans are screaming his name, clapping and yelling in support. Storm smiles. He knew Lightning’s fans were still out there.

He sees the corners of Lightning’s lips turn up in a small smile before he sits down.

Chick raises his hands for the audience to be quiet, but it takes a few minutes before everyone has calmed down enough for him to continue speaking. Storm catches Natalie Certain staring at Lightning with a curious expression, eyes cold and calculating.

He has a bad feeling about her.

Chick Hicks looks angry, perturbed that Lightning has managed to steal the audience so effortlessly. Storm’s not surprised. Even after all these years, Chick Hicks is still jealous of Lightning.

It is Natalie Certain who speaks next, smooth voice echoing to the crowd.

“An admirable goal Mr. McQueen. I’ll be curious to see how you can achieve such a feat when racing against the higher tech of the newer race cars.”

Lightning stills, blue eyes locking onto her brown ones.

He opens his mouth to say something, but Chick Hicks beats him to it.

“Yeah! Slow your roll there McQueen. As much as everyone loved hearing your speech about how you can’t give up racing, it sounds like a lot of hot air to me. I mean we all saw your last race! We all watched you give your place to Cruz Ramirez because you just couldn’t win. Isn’t that right McQueen?”

He laughs when he says it, and Storm freezes when he hears some members of the audience laugh too. There are not many, but Storm searches for them in the crowd, giving them the most venomous look he can muster.

It’s not many people. Maybe only a handful in a crowd of hundreds, but it is enough, Storm realizes. Enough to shake Lightning’s confidence.
He looks toward Lightning and sees that he looks visibly paler. His expression does not change, as
to not give himself away to the audience. But Storm can see the first seeds of doubt appear in his
mind.

Storm considers punching Chick in the face. The audience would laugh he’s sure, and he thinks it
would gain him more popularity than he would lose, but he decides against it. Instead, he lays his
hands flat on his thighs to not curl them into fists.

He then debates if he should say something, but rules that out for now. He does not want to upstage
Lightning.

Lightning speaks then, voice steady. It would do no good to let them know they were getting to
him.

“It was not my intention to give up. I wanted Cruz Ramirez to have a chance to be a racer, so I gave
her the race to finish.”

Storm knows that. He knew that as soon as Lightning drove off the track during the Florida 500.
He knows Lightning is not a quitter, but not everyone knows that. Lightning is a racer who would
never simply give up because the odds were stacked against him, he wasn’t the type of person to
do that. Storm knew that before he even met him in person, but it might not look like that to
everyone.

To Storm, Lightning would always be the greatest racer. A legend on wheels, the fastest there was.

Except, he wasn’t technically the fastest anymore. But that didn’t matter! It’s not a racers speed
that makes them a racer. Storm knows that. Lightning knows that. But...do his fans?

Storm surveys the crowd again. There is a mixture of reactions he can see. Some people are staring
at Lightning in awe, to them he is the same racer he has always been, then there are those looking
at him with doubt, doubting his reason for quitting, and there are others of course. Fans looking at
him with confusion, or unreadable expressions.

Natalie Certain waits for him to finish before speaking again.

“Oh? I did not realize you were willing to do something so generous for Cruz Ramirez, even at the
sake of your own career.”

Lightning freezes. Storm watches silently as Lightning listens to Natalie Certain speak. His
shoulders seem to hunch in on themselves, making him look smaller.

It is so wrong. This is not like the Lightning he knows.

Natalie Certain does not stop. Not now that she knows she’s getting to Lightning. Manipulating the
situation in order to make the audience side with her. That is how she operates, Storm realizes.

She continues once she has rendered Lightning silent, a sly smile taking place on her lips.

“Though, perhaps it’s for the best that you gave Cruz Ramirez your racing spot. Times have
changed indeed Mr. McQueen.”

Lightning looks at her, eyebrows slightly downturned. He’s getting irritated.

She continues.
“I admire your determination in trying to race again, but to be honest you’re not in any position to win anymore.”

The crowd looks shocked, confused between the racing analyst expert and the champion of racing. Even Chick looks taken aback by her sudden demeanor. Lightning looks shocked by her statement, eyes no longer portraying anger.

Storm grits his teeth. He digs his hands into his legs as he sits there quietly. Natalie Certain is on a roll now, and she doesn’t have any intentions of stopping yet.

“Racing to put it quite simply, has advanced into a new Era. A racer like you could not possibly hope to win against the next generation racers. They are far too fast, the technology advanced beyond the old days of racing where simply anyone could enter a race.”

She pauses.

“You were a fabulous racer. But now it’s time to rest on your laurels and accept the fact that your time is up. The world won’t carry a torch for you forever, Mr. McQueen. Not when it’s found another racer to take your place.”

She looks at Storm as she says the last part, and Storm decides at that moment that he has never hated anyone more. He dislikes quite a lot of people, actually most people in general, but he has never been this filled with rage at a reporter.

All Storm can manage is a brief glance at Lightning. His dejected face and the slump of his shoulders are more than enough of a reason for Storm to take action.

He stands up rapidly, and hears the gasps from the audience. Up until this moment he has been mostly silent, but he will not listen to Natalie Certain put down Lightning for one more second. He stares at her, eyes cold in a menacing glare. For the first time tonight she looks uncomfortable.

He moves forward, towering over her.

“What would you know.”

He says it quietly, but everyone can hear the pure anger radiating from his voice. The crowd is completely silent, they have never seen this side of Storm before. They have seen him act cocky and indifferent up until now, but never truly angry.

She stares at him, mouth opening and closing like a fish. She scrambles for a response, and when she speaks it is broken. No longer backed by the confidence of her cruelty.

“I...I’m...a racing analyst...I know the statistics of the race...I know the chances he has at winning...and he can’t possibly...”

“You know nothing.” He says venomously.

She shrinks in her seat, losing the battle she started quite pitifully now.

Storm continues.

“I bet you’ve never even been in a racecar have you?” He says the last part mockingly, and she looks so shaken that she can’t even come up with an answer.

Storm is far from finished though. She wanted to break Lightning’s confidence, she had it coming.
“You don’t know anything. You sit in your seat on the sidelines and “analyze” the races. Pretending that the speed or the brand of the car is what makes all the difference in a race. Well, you’re so far from the truth it’s laughable.”

He turns to the audience then.

“It is not the car that makes the racer. Everyone who knows a thing about racing knows that. Lightning McQueen sits here, telling you that he wants to race again, and you think just because he doesn’t have a high tech car he can’t do it! Well, then I’ll give you all a valuable piece of advice. A racer’s speed does not determine his chance of winning!”

Storm yells the last part, wanting to convince the people who doubted Lightning are wrong. He turns back to look at Lightning, and Lightning is taken aback by Storm’s speech. His eyes are blown wide in surprise, but he doesn’t look sad anymore, so Storm will take it.

The audience absolutely loses it then, and Storm looks back to see them rushing towards the stage, security guards desperately trying to hold them back. They are screaming for Storm and Lightning, trying to get close to them. Some of the fans break through, and Storm feels like it’s a recreation of that scene from the Lion King where a stampede of wildebeest are rushing towards Mufasa and Simba.

One of the fans reaches up and grabs his leg. He is so surprised that he backs up quickly and stumbles.

He feels a palm catch him in an awkward trust fall and looks back to see Lightning, looking downright horrified at the fans rushing toward them. Many of them are trying to get to Lightning, and they’re getting awfully close.

A security guard grabs them by the arms and quickly escorts them off the stage and down the hallway. After making sure they aren’t followed he shows them back to the parking lot and advises them to get out as quick as they can.

Lightning just stares at him, and then back from where they came like he can’t fathom what just happened.

“What? Never had the fans go crazy like that? You’re Lightning McQueen! You must have had something like that happen before.” He says, half joking.

Lightning shakes his head. “I’ve had fans try to touch me before but that was just...insanity.”

Storm nods. If anything he should be the one surprised. Someone grabbed onto his leg for christ sake. He’s lucky he didn’t kick them off out of pure reflex. That’s all he needs. He can see the article now. Jackson Storm, up and coming racer brutally kicks fan for touching him.

“Let’s go before they find us.”

Lightning nods.

Before they can leave though, Storm spots three figures in the distance running toward them. He tenses, ready to fight off anyone who tries to touch him.

Lightning though, wears a puzzled expression as one of the figures slams into him. Storm gets ready to kick whoever this is off Lightning before he realizes he recognizes those brown curls.

“Mater!” Lightning exclaims. “You scared me!”
Mater laughs. “Great job buddy! It went great!”

“It did?” Lightning says, frowning.

“Of Course!” Luigi interjects. “The fans were going crazy in there! Everyone’s thrilled you’re going to race again.”

“I think that was more about Storm’s speech.” Lightning says laughing.

Mater turns to Storm and gives him a wide grin.

“And you Storm! Way to go buddy! That was amazing! Way to tell em how racers really are!” He yells, high fiving him.

Storm grins, Mater’s voice raising four octaves and possibly rendering him deaf isn’t enough to wipe the smile off his face now.

Luigi and Guido agree, commending Storm for what a great job he did.

Lightning smiles at him and Storm finds he doesn’t care about how he just yelled at Natalie Certain on national television. The media can paint whatever picture of him they want. Storm would yell at any reporter on earth if Lightning smiled at him like that.

They all stand around the parking lot for a while, laughing and talking before Mater decides that they really should leave before the fans figure out where they are. They part ways then, Luigi, Mater, and Guido run back toward the direction of their car, and Storm and Lightning quickly get inside Lightning’s car.

Once they leave the parking lot, they both let out a sigh of relief.

Storm steals a glance at Lightning, and he looks back to his normal self. Storm’s glad for that. He doesn’t ever want to see that dejected look again, it doesn’t suit him.

They sit in comfortable silence before Lighting breaks it.

“Where do you live?”

“Huh?” Storm responds, thrown off by the question.

“You have a place here in Orlando right? An apartment or something? Don’t you want me to take you there?”

Storm pauses, to be honest he didn’t give his apartment a second thought. The realization though, that he no longer has a reason to stay with Lightning hits him hard. It occurs to him now that he’s done what he set out to. He went to Radiator Springs and persuaded Lightning to come back, and he told the world about it. His original plan succeeded, but Storm isn’t feeling victorious right now.

He puts the address into a GPS for Lightning, the drive looking much shorter in comparison to the long drives across the country they’ve been making.

Storm feels a pang of sadness that reverberates through his entire being when he realizes that this could be it. The time he spent with Lightning could be quickly coming to an end, and now the only place he would see him would be on the track.

It feels cruel when he thinks about it. Cruel that fate would give him this chance, and that he was able to be a part of Lightning’s life, even for such a short time. The possibility of never sitting in
Lightning’s car again, causes his throat to clam up with dryness. He doesn’t want that, and all too soon they’re pulling up to his apartment complex.

Storm keeps his face emotionless. He doesn’t know what else he can do, only that he won’t embarrass himself by saying anything strange.

His feet feel like lead, and he has to force himself to move them. His hand rests on the handle, about to push it open when Lightning speaks.

“Hey, Storm?”

“Yeah?” He says, thankful his voice kept its natural tone.

“Tomorrow we’re going to search for a place to stay. We need a temporary place to live if I’m going to train and race here. And I figured since you live here already you could help us out. You know, show us the good places around town.” He says, grinning.

Storm brightens. “Yeah, I’ll show you guys around.” He says with a grin of his own.

Storm knows so little information about real estate it’s laughable, but the thought of saying no didn’t cross his mind for a second.

Lightning nods, “Well then I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“Yeah, see you then!”

Storm gets out of the car with his things then and shuts the door. When Lightning leaves, he walks up the steps to his apartment.

He grins like an idiot until he falls asleep that night.
Lightning’s drive back to his hotel from Storm’s apartment was strange. During the past few days, he’s gotten used to Storm’s company in the car.

The drive is short though, and he’s made much longer ones by himself before. The more he seems to think about things though, the stranger the whole situation becomes. A few days ago Storm was his competitor. A hot-headed, cocky young racer, who admittedly was very similar to himself. Now though...Storm was quickly becoming a close friend.

Despite the rocky start, Lightning liked having him around. Storm has an interesting personality and he’s obviously a great racer.

Storm’s still quite the enigma to Lightning though. He doesn’t know that much about him at all. He knows Storm likes eating lots of junk food and sleeping, but most younger people like that. It also occurs to him he doesn’t know how old Storm is, but if he had to guess he’d say early twenties. If that’s the case then there’s a big age difference between them, but there’s an age difference between most of Lightning's friends. A lot of the people he’s close with in Radiator Springs are older than him. Doc was older than him.

But Doc and Storm...are very different people. Doc was more like his mentor and Storm? Well, Lightning doesn’t think Storm thinks of him as a mentor. Lightning prefers it that way. He’s not ready to be anyone’s mentor. Although it did occur to him he was technically supposed to be Cruz’s mentor.

Storm doesn’t strike him as the type of guy who needs a mentor though. He has his own apartment, his own life. He hasn’t said anything about his family, although Lightning did see his house. And from what he saw...Lightning’s not sure Storm’s family even knows what’s going on in his life. Or if he wants them to.

It’s obvious though that Storm moved to Florida for a reason. He’ll ask him sooner or later. Right now he needs to get back to his friends at the hotel. They need to figure out a living situation soon.

He pulls into the parking lot of the hotel they’re staying at. Unsurprisingly, he sees Mater sitting on the curb outside.

“Hey, Mater!”

Mater flashes him a grin.

“Hey, McQueen! Back so soon? I figured you’d be at Storm’s awhile.”

Lightning frowns and glances at Mater with a puzzled expression.

“Why would I be there?”

Mater shakes his head. “Nevermind.”

“Okay?”

Lightning follows Mater upstairs to their room. Now that he thinks about it, this is the first time all trip he’s shared a room with his best friend.

He’s seen him every day, but he and Mater always share a room when they’re away. Mater looks
completely unoffended when he mentions it though, so Lightning figures it doesn’t bother him. Mater is rarely offended by such things. It takes a lot to make his best friend lose his cool.

Mater launches himself on one of the beds when he gets inside, and Lightning laughs. Mater hasn’t changed at all from when he first met him. It’s comforting. Lightning is about to get changed when Guido and Luigi burst through the door and throw themselves on Lightning’s bed.

“Hey! Do that in your own room!” Lightning says, which earns him a pillow to the face, courtesy of Guido.

Lightning retaliates by laying out across them and listens to Guido complain that he’s too heavy. Which Lightning disagrees with. He is most definitely not heavy. Though with Guido’s skinny frame, anyone could be heavy.

“So,” Luigi says from under Lightning “We need to figure where we’re staying right? Since Lightning’s training.”

“We don’t know I’m training Luigi.” Lightning mumbles, shifting off of them to sit upright on the bed.

“Oh please. Everyone can’t wait for you to make a comeback Lightning.”

“Yeah, and Storm can just give that evil glare to anyone who doesn’t like that idea.” Mater chimes in.

“What?” Luigi and Lightning ask simultaneously.

Mater then turns to Lightning and shows him a clip on his phone.

On it, he can see a video of the talk show they were just at last night. Jeez. The speed at which people upload things to the internet always amazes him.

In the clip, Lightning watches as he can hear some of the crowd laughing at his desire to race again. When it happened all Lightning could do was sit there and listen. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Storm would be angry about it.

Angry does not even begin to describe the menacing glare on Storm’s face as he stares into the crowd at whoever laughs. Lightning glances over at himself in the video and sees he’s completely unaware of Storm’s angry expression. Figures.

Lightning was a bit baffled by Storm’s behavior at the talk show. He hadn’t seen Storm get so angry before, except for when he challenged Lightning to a race right when he arrived in Radiator Springs. Even then, Storm’s facial expression was different. He didn’t look at Lightning with the same look he’s giving the crowd.

Storm’s angry speech during the talk show had come out of the blue, but Lightning was grateful for it. In the heat of the moment, it had saved him from an embarrassing defeat by Natalie Certain. She knew exactly what to say to make him nervous. To make him wonder if it was worth it to race again.

Then Storm stood up to defend him and all thoughts of quitting immediately fled his mind. He was no quitter. If Storm is this willing to fight for him to have another chance, Lightning can’t give up either.
No. He’s in this thing for the long run, like it or not.

“You know...in the beginning I wasn’t too sure about Storm. Seeing this though, he really cares about you Lightning.” Luigi says to him.

Lightning nods. It’s clear now that Storm does care about him. Even though Lightning’s only known him for a few days, he thinks he can trust him.

“I think you’re right Luigi. Actually, I invited Storm to come to look at houses with us tomorrow.”

“Yay!” Luigi and Guido say in sync, Mater laughing at them.

“Now get out of my bed, I want to sleep.” Lightning says, shooing them away.

They grumble and complain as they leave the room but it's evident the both of them are just as tired.

Mater grins at him once they leave.

“Way to go buddy! You’re well on your way to being the world’s greatest racer again!”

Lightning rolls his eyes while he’s changing into his pajamas.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, Mater.” He says, reaching over to turn off the light.

He falls asleep soon after.

When Lightning wakes, it’s due to the blaring loud country music coming from one side of the room. More specifically, Mater’s side of the room. That’s one thing he didn’t miss about sharing a room with Mater.

“Mater! Shut off your alarm!” He mutters, shoving his head under the pillow.

Mater usually sets his alarm early. For what reason Lightning still doesn’t know, but he’s always been an early bird as far as Lightning can remember.

Lightning has no problem getting up early, but there’s no reason for Take Me Home Country Roads to be playing at 6:00 am and jar him from his slumber. Especially when he’s been driving the past three days.

Mater grumbles and shuts it off, and Lightning pulls the blanket over his head in an effort to block out the sounds of Mater getting up and hopefully leaving the room for a few hours to give him time to sleep.

Eventually, when Lightning gets up again, he sees it’s now late morning. Mater is not in the room at all, but he’s probably close by.

Lightning figures he should give Storm a call.

He grabs his phone from the bedside table and calls him, Storm having put his number in a few
days ago.

It rings a few times before Lightning hears him answer.

“...Hello...?” Storm mumbles. He sounds like he just woke up.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Lightning?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I figured I’d give you a call because we’ll probably go drive around town soon to look at houses once Mater comes back.”

“Oh, this? It’s a binder full of available properties. I went to a realtor in the area to see what our options were. She gave me this binder so we can have a look around.”

“That’s a great idea Mater! I’m glad someone was thinking ahead.”

“Have you seen Guido or Luigi?” Lightning adds.

“Mhhh nope.”

Lightning knew what that meant. They were both still sleeping no doubt, so it was up to Lightning or Mater to go wake them up.


Lightning nods, and after three rounds it’s clear he has to go wake them up.

Lightning walks down the hall to their room, Mater had told him the number before he left.

He knocks against it once.

No answer.

He knocks again.

This time he gets a muffled “Be Quiet!” from the room. Guido no doubt.

After Lightning pounds on the door a considerable amount of time, Luigi answers it and invites him in.
“Guido get up! We’re looking for houses.” Luigi says to his friend.

“You’re annoying.” Guido mutters with no real bite to it, before grabbing his clothes and going into the bathroom to change.

When Lightning spares another glance at Luigi, he’s surprised to find his friend fully dressed. Clad in yellow of course.

“Storm’s coming with us right?”

“Yeah, I figured he could help us out.”

Luigi nods, and then Guido makes his way out of the bathroom. He’s got heavy bags under his eyes.

“Didn’t sleep much did you Guido?” Lightning asks as they make their way down to the Lobby.

“He was researching the racing center last night, and watching clips from the internet.”

“Oh yeah?” Lightning asks teasingly.

“Yeah. I was watching clips of you and Storm from the interview. The internet thinks you guys are best friends now.”

“What?!”

“Here look at this,” Guido says, passing him his phone.

The video of Storm defending Lightning last night at the Chick Hicks talk show is on the page, and the headline says…

“New Racer Jackson Storm defends Old Time Champ Lightning McQueen.”

He looks closer and sees an article trying to debunk the mystery of their friendship. It blows Lightning’s mind that the internet can catch on so quickly. Then again, it’s not like Storm was being subtle about his anger last night. Though Lightning was angry too. Natalie Certain knew how to get both of them angry, even if Storm’s response was unexpected.

“This is weird.” Lightning responds.

“Yeah Storm seems nice, but I doubt he’s your “close friend” like the article says,” Luigi mentions.

“No not that. It’s weird that the internet latched onto this so quickly. When Storm and I first met there was no article or anything. At least, not with both of us in it.”

“Well, that’s only natural buddy. It’s not often that a racer does something so selfless you know. The last time the internet reacted like this was when you got out of your car during the race for the Piston cup when you were a rookie and pushed The King of Dinoco across the racing line after his car was totaled.”

Mater says, appearing from the hallway.

Lightning nods. “I guess you have a point…”

Lightning remembers that race well. He had wanted to win badly. So very badly. He wanted to prove himself to his new friends in Radiator Springs. He wanted to prove himself to Doc, who
already had three Piston cups of his own. He wanted to wipe that smug grin off Chick Hicks face most of all, but something changed all that.

When he watched the King crash, It’s like he was moving on autopilot. He drove over to him without even thinking about it. Winning meant nothing like this. At that moment the most important thing was to make sure the King got to finish the race. He had raced for so long, for so many years. For him to not cross the finish line of what could be his last professional race was unthinkable.

So Lightning did what he needed to do. He drove behind the King’s car and gently pushed it past the finish line. It didn’t matter that Chick Hicks had just won the Piston Cup. Lightning didn’t care about that. His time in Radiator Springs had changed him, shown him what it meant to be a racer. A real racer. Looking back he doesn’t regret it. Sure it would have been nice to win the Piston Cup when he was eighteen, but it didn’t really make a difference. He had won the next year, and the look on Chicks face when he passed him in the last lap was enough to make waiting worth the while.

And now, something new was happening. Now it was about Storm. Now the press was all over the new racer. He was popular for sure, though Storm didn’t look like he enjoyed the attention. Not that Lightning enjoyed it. He’d prefer if the reporters would stay out of his personal life. That seemed to be one of the biggest things they would always ask him about.

At times it felt like the world was more interested in finding out if he had a girlfriend then asking about his racing career. Though that was to be expected. Fans wanted to know these things. Lightning was always reluctant to mention anything personal in his interviews. He rarely talked about Sally. Though it wasn’t that hard for fans to figure out they were together. In the beginning, Sally had always come to his races. She sat in the reserved section for his friends. It didn’t take long at all once they had started seeing each other for the world to figure it out.

In recent years though...Sally hasn’t been around. The reporters asked him, but he could never bring himself to say anything. Not about Sally. That was his life. His private life.

He couldn’t bring himself to talk about it. To talk about why she left. For the first few months, it killed him for her to not be there. To walk around Radiator Springs and not see her, to know that she was somewhere else. Possibly with someone else crushed him.

Mater and his friends had to build him back up. After she left he was like a shell of himself. He didn’t even feel like Lightning McQueen anymore. For the first time in so long, he felt like nothing. It had taken time for him to get back where he was.

Sally had been gone for two years now, and sometimes he still felt the rawness of it like it was yesterday. To be honest though. When Lightning met Storm...he didn’t think about Sally for a while. He was busy training, busy trying to figure out how he would beat Storm in a race.

That was when he was finally himself again. He was angry he wasn’t faster than Storm. Of course he was, he was too prideful not to be. Even though he had lost, he finally felt...alive again. Racing on the track was where he was meant to be.

Looking back now, he doesn’t know what he was thinking saying he was going to stop racing professionally. He knows it was for Cruz. To give her a chance at racing was worth more than his
own selfish desire to continue.

But even though he decided that... Storm was right in the end. He was Lightning McQueen, and he was no quitter. Now it was time to get back on track. It was time to race again. He owes that to himself and to Storm.

So the sooner they get a house here the better.

That being said Lightning gets into his car. Mater takes Shotgun, and Luigi and Guido decide to take their own car so they don’t need to cram into Lightning’s backseat with Storm.

Lightning drives the short distance to Storm’s apartment, having remembered how to get there from last night.

When he pulls up to the apartment complex, he grabs his phone to call Storm, but Mater nudges his elbow and points to the building. He sees Storm leaning back against the wall with his phone in hand. He’s dressed in tight looking jeans and a black T-shirt. He looks pretty recognizable from here, though without his racing uniform on he looks like a regular kid. Lightning shouldn’t say kid because it’s obvious Storm is older than eighteen. Or at least, Lightning thinks he’s older than eighteen.

Mater rolls down the window and waves to Storm who grins when he sees them and gets into the backseat.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” Lightning greets back.

“Howdy y'all! Let’s get this show on the road.” Mater says in one of the thickest country accents he can do.

Storm snickers in the backseat and after a second Lightning and Mater start cracking up too.

Their laughter is broken a few minutes later when Lightning hears a thump come from the window on Mater’s side.

The three of them look at the window in confusion before they see Guido in the driver’s side of the car next to them. Mater rolls down the window.

“Can we please go find a house so I can get some sleep already!” Guido yells at them.

Lightning glances back at Storm to see him wearing an amused grin.

“Sure thing Guido!” Lightning says.

“Don’t mind him, he just needs coffee or something,” Mater says to Storm.

Storm nods. “I know the feeling.” Lightning watches as he takes a sip from a Red Bull. He didn’t even see Storm holding it!

Lightning figures it’s best not to start an argument right now about why Storm shouldn’t be drinking so much Red Bull.

Instead Lightning asks Mater where they’re going first.

Mater says the address out loud so Storm can put it into his phone. They follow the GPS to a
neighborhood that’s probably fifteen minutes from the trainer center.

The first house they look at is just...not for them. Luigi and Guido both hate the kitchen. Mater is displeased with the lack of a pool.

Storm then informs him that contrary to his belief, not all houses in Florida have pools.

This goes on for a while. Each of the houses has one or two distinct things that they don’t like. They drive to houses all over the area and Lightning is convinced they must have driven in a large circle five times at this point.

They stop for lunch at a restaurant and in between sipping a large Dr. Pepper, Storm is trying to convince Mater to give up on the idea of a pool. A futile task if Lightning’s ever seen one.

Guido looks pacified now that he’s eaten something. He’s back to looking at Mater with a glare whenever he does or says anything particularly strange. Luigi busies himself by looking through the binder and trying to find a house they’ll actually like instead of going to every address in it.

Lightning tries to help him in between talking to Storm about building a pool. Or buying a cheap inflatable pool from the store.

Knowing Mater, he’d most likely be just as fine with an inflatable pool.

Whether or not it’s a good idea to buy a house based off that is the real question.

Eventually, after traveling what Lightning believes is the majority of Orlando, they find what could potentially be a good house for the four of them. It’s on the outskirts of the city, located closer to the Florida suburbs. It’s a relatively big house once they go inside, and it has everything they could want. More than four bedrooms, a nice kitchen and living room, three bathrooms, a patio, and a pool.

It’s a nice house, affordable for them. Though Lightning did have plenty of money to cover most of the house regardless of price. He’s been a professional racer for a long time now.

The house is in a good location too. It’s roughly twenty minutes from the training center. From what Lightning can tell it’s not that far from Storm’s house either.

After a general agreement that this house is the right one, Mater proceeds to call the real estate agent and enter a lengthy discussion with her.

Once he’s finished on the phone he turns to them. “Okay, guys well the realtor says as soon as we meet with her to sign the rental agreements and sort out the payment we can move in here.”

Lightning’s surprised things went relatively smoothly for them. Now all they need to do is finish the paperwork and they could probably move in as soon as tomorrow depending on how things go.

It’s late afternoon now, and it becomes apparent that now that the house has been sorted out, they don’t know what to do with themselves for the rest of the day.

Mater speaks up though, usually the one to break the silence. “Hey so now that we don’t have anything to do today...Why don’t we go check out your apartment!” Mater says looking at Storm.

“My apartment?” Storm repeats in confusion.

“Yeah! I’m curious what it’s like!” Mater continues.
Lightning frowns. “Mater, relax. We don’t need to see his apartment.” Of course Lightning’s curious too, but he doesn’t want to invite himself to Storm’s apartment.

Mater doesn’t look discouraged at all by Lightning’s comment. Instead, he looks at Storm, eager for an answer.

“Yeah, you guys can come over.” Storm says after a minute.

“Are you sure?” Lightning asks.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want to invade your privacy!” Guido says staring at Mater.

Mater smiles, completely unfazed.

“Yeah, it’s no problem.” Storm says again.

So the next thing they know the five of them are driving back to Storm’s apartment complex.

Once they get there Lightning realizes the complex is bigger than he expected. There are four floors, and Storm apparently lives on the top floor.

The hallways are very sleek and modern, and Lightning is unsurprised Storm decided to pick an apartment here.

Of course on the way up in the elevator Lightning is unsure of what he should be expecting. Though even from the outside of the room Lightning can tell when Storm slides his key into the door his apartment will be nothing like Lightning’s first apartment.

When Storm opens the door, the first thing Lightning sees is darkness. Even when Storm turns on the Light, there is still lots of black in his apartment.

Everything Lightning looks at is sleek and shiny. Storm seems to have a common theme going as most of the furniture Lightning sees in the living room is black. The apartment is more spacious than Lightning originally thought it would be, especially since he’s almost positive Storm lives here by himself.

The living room has a large flat screen TV on the wall, and Lightning can see a bunch of controllers and things beneath it. When Lightning turns toward the kitchen which Luigi and Guido are currently inspecting, he sees a lot of sleek new appliances, all seemingly black as well. Lightning can see a hallway connecting to his living room with more doors in it. On the other side of the living room there’s a large aquarium too, though from this far away Lightning can’t see what’s inside it.

“Wow! You’ve got a cool apartment Storm!” Guido murmurs as he’s looking at all the stuff in the kitchen.

“Thanks.” Storm says, looking a bit relieved at the comment.

Guido is right, Storm does have a nice apartment for his age.

Luigi and Guido, now apparently finished looking around, announce they have things to do and will catch up with them later. A bit surprising to Lightning as he has no idea what they would need to do, but it’s not uncommon for them to go off by themselves.
Soon enough they leave in their own car leaving Lightning, Storm, and Mater sitting in Storm’s living room. The silence is a little awkward, and Mater being himself wasn’t really doing anything to lighten the atmosphere.

Thankfully, Storm speaks up after a minute.

“So...you guys want to play a game?”

“Game?” Lightning asks in confusion. He doesn’t know what kind of game they could play inside. Well, other than a board game.

Lightning doesn’t think Storm’s ready for a board game with Mater yet. You need to clear a large chunk of time in advance, especially if they play monopoly.

“Yeah.” Storm says, getting up from his chair to rummage around in the bin he has underneath the TV. When he gets up, he’s holding three video game controllers. Although Lightning has never seen controllers like these.

Storm passes one to Lightning, and then to Mater.

“What are we playing?” Mater asks.

“I have a game you guys might like. It’s a racing game.”

Lightning studies the controller in his hands. It’s been a long time since he played a video game, but hey if it’s a racing game he should be able to figure it out.

Lightning watches as Storm puts a disc in whatever game system this is and looks up at the bright colors and loud music that appears a minute later.

“Mario Kart?” Mater reads aloud.

Lightning knows Mario. Or he at least knows the old versions of the game. The original one from the 1980s. He played those games when he was younger, but looking at this he knows it will be nothing like what he used to play.

This game involves a lot more choices. Storm explains to him that the car you choose can increase your speed depending on which one you pick. The irony isn’t lost on him.

After a few minutes of Storm explaining how the game works, Lightning finally thinks he’s grasping it.

Until they actually start to play.

As soon as the racing count down begins on the TV screen Lightning feels like he’s entered a different universe. Nothing makes any sense in this racing game. When he turns the controller his race car launches toward one direction quicker than he can stop it.

Storm and Mater are laughing at him as he complains about how a race car shouldn’t be stopped by a banana peel of all things.

They play a variety of different races, and just when Lightning finally thinks he’s getting the hang of it, they play a course where the race track is in space! Every time he turns his car it flies off the edge, and though Mater isn’t doing any better he’s still cracking up.

Then Lightning finally gets into first place, and he’s so close to the finish line. Then he sees
something appear above his car. It looks so strange to him, like a blue turtle shell with spikes on it? He’s about to ask Storm what he should do when the turtle shell slams down onto his car, kicking him out of first place.

Lightning stares at the screen in shock and yells out “This is insane!”

Mater and Storm absolutely lose it then and are laughing hysterically. Lightning is fuming about the stupid blue turtle shell while Mater is busy tearing up so much that he excuses himself and steps outside of the apartment for a minute.

Storm stops laughing after a minute, noticing Lightning’s annoyed expression.

“Hey, it’s just a game. It has nothing to do with real racing.”

Lightning nods. He knows that. Of course he knows that. Mario Kart is nothing like a real race at all, but he still can’t help the little twinge of doubt that roots itself in his mind. Even if Mario Kart is nothing like real racing...Racing is different now than it used to be. Natalie Certain’s words from the previous night echo in his mind.

If he were younger the words would not have bothered him at all. He would have laughed in Natalie Certain’s face. He would have shown up to the next race and won without a doubt. Now...he’s not a rookie anymore.

Lightning stares distantly at the controller in his hands, mind elsewhere.

Then he feels it pulled from his grasp. Startled, he looks up.

Storm’s grey eyes are staring at him, eyebrows creased with worry.

“Lightning?”

Lightning shakes himself out of it, face brightening.

“I’m fine.” He says

Storm looks at him for a moment without saying anything, though he doesn’t break eye contact.

“I know you are because you’re Lightning McQueen.”

Lightning smiles then, bordering on a laugh.

“Lightning, you shouldn’t let anyone else tell you what you can do. In the end, you’re the only one who gets to make that choice.”

Storm says these words to him firmly. Storm is much more observant than he thought, but right now he is grateful for it.

“Thank you Storm. That means a lot.”

Storm looks back at him, mouths turning up slowly into a smile.

“Don’t mention it.”

Lightning wants to say something else, but the words fall short on his lips. Storm is sitting close to him, and they haven’t broken eye contact yet. They just sit there in silence for a few seconds before Storm’s apartment door swings open, and Mater strolls through it with a bright grin.
“Hey buddy, guess what.”

“What?” Lightning asks. He almost forgot Mater was here.

“Luigi and Guido called and they need some help. Apparently they went to go talk to the realtor anyway, and said they need you there to sign the papers.”

“Oh great.” Lightning mutters, accepting Mater’s extended hand to help him up.

Mater then turns his attention to Storm, who’s looking up at him from the ground despite his tall figure. Lightning didn’t think about it before, but Storm must be taller than Mater.

“Hey Storm, tomorrow we could use some help moving in and all that. You should give us a hand.”

“Oh, um. Sure.” Storm says to Mater, still looking kind of baffled at Mater’s entrance.

Then Mater is motioning for Lightning to follow him outside. Lightning turns around to Storm.

“Uh, bye Storm, see you tomorrow. Thanks for having us!”

“Yeah, no problem.” Storm says, almost drowned out by Mater yelling his thanks from out the door.

Lightning doesn’t have much time to think about what just happened because Mater is suddenly asking him a ton of questions on their way down the steps. Stuff that Lightning doesn’t know the answer to.

“Wow Storm’s apartment is nice huh?!” Mater says.

“Yeah, it’s way nicer than my old one was.”

“He’s a nice guy! And that game was super fun! What was it called again? Mario Kart?”

“Mhm” Lightning hums in confirmation.

“Do you think he has a girlfriend?” Mater asks.

Lightning stops in his movement. The question caught him off guard. Truthfully he doesn’t know. Storm hasn’t mentioned anything about a girlfriend, and his apartment hardly looks like a girl lives there.

“I’m not sure Mater.”

The more he thinks about it, he really isn’t sure. Storm could get a girlfriend easily if he wanted to, no doubt about that. He’s handsome enough, and he’s a young, successful racer. What’s not to like about that?

He and Mater get into his car and drive quickly to the realtor’s office, per Luigi and Guido’s request.

He thinks about it for the drive over, though he’s not sure why. If Storm does have a girlfriend, it doesn’t really concern him. So he opts to not think about it.

When Mater and he walk into the realtor’s office and see a middle-aged woman at the counter with a bright smile.
“Hi there, you must be Mr. McQueen.” She says, reaching out her hand to shake his.

“Nice to meet you.”

“I’m a big fan of yours, Mr. McQueen.” She says, smiling.

“Oh, Um. Thank you!”

Ah, so that’s how Guido and Luigi were able to set up a meeting with her so quickly.

Once she turns away, Lightning glares at his friends. He hates when they use his name for stuff like this.

Of course he can’t really say no to them. They might be irritating but they’re still his friends.

“Mr. McQueen if you could just initial these forms here.”

Lightning shoots Guido a look as he raises his eyebrows toward the realtor and then back to Lightning.

Lightning rolls his eyes at him. It’s no surprise his friends have been not so subtly trying to get him to date someone again. Now Lightning understands that his friends don’t want him to be alone. After all, they had seen how rough he was the first few weeks without Sally.

It’s not that he’s against dating anyone. It’s just that he’s...waiting for the right person.

What’s most surprising is that Mater hasn’t done anything yet. Normally Mater will be the first one out of the three of his friends to harass Lightning about a love interest.

After his break up with Sally, Mater had actually gone up to some of the girls in Radiator Springs and asked if they would take his best friend on a date, much to Lightning’s chagrin.

Now though, Mater is just sitting there uninterested.

They finish signing all of the papers the realtor gives to them, and after about a half hour, all of their payments are approved. The realtor then gives Lightning a set of keys, flashing him a bright smile as she does so.

“It was such a pleasure meeting you and your friends, Mr. McQueen.”

“Thank you for all your help.” Lightning says politely.

Once they pass through the doors of the building, Luigi immediately turns to him.

“Lightning why didn’t you get her number? She was totally into you!”

Lightning sighs. “Luigi, as much as I appreciate you saying that, I’m really okay.”

Luigi groans. “Mater back me up here! She was nice! Pretty too!”

“I don’t think she’s Lightning’s type. Right pal?”

Lightning doesn’t know what Mater’s talking about. He doesn’t think he really ever had a “type” and even if he did...Lightning’s not sure he would tell Mater. Then if they ever saw anyone who fit the description Mater would immediately go talk to them. Regardless he’s thankful for Mater’s excuse.
“Yeah, she’s not my type.” Lightning says.

Luigi sighs but thankfully drops it.
When they look up at the sky, it’s dark, so they plan on staying in the hotel for one more night then moving in the next day.

After dinner in the hotel restaurant, Lightning is beat. He crashes on his bed in the hotel room.

After a minute Mater emerges from the doorway and flops onto his own bed.

Lightning’s eyes are closing and he’s about to sleep when Mater speaks.

“So earlier, I was just saying you had a type to get Luigi and Guido off your case.”

Lightning nods, “Yeah I figured.”

Mater pauses for a moment before speaking.

“So do you have a type?” Mater asks, voice quieter than usual.

It throws him off a little.

“So do you have a type?” Lightning repeats, uncertain about Mater’s question. They don’t usually talk about this stuff. They talk about racing and Radiator Springs and people, but not usually this.

“Yeah. Well, I just have never heard ya say if you had one before.”

Lightning thinks about it. He had never really given it much thought, choosing to date people based on their personality rather than what they looked like. Though if he had to choose…

“Well, I guess I like people with darker hair.”

“Darker hair?” Mater questions.

A pinch of awkwardness hit him in the gut. He didn’t expect to need to back up his claim, then again it’s Mater who he’s talking to here.

“Yeah I mean, I wouldn’t mind dating someone with light hair or anything. It’s just that my hair is blond so I’d prefer to date someone with brown or black hair.”

“Interesting.” Mater says back.

Lightning chooses not to keep the conversation going after that. It was already weird enough and Lightning’s not sure he wants to hear Mater describe his ideal type to him at the moment.

Instead, he chooses to sleep it off and tries not to think about what Mater could do with that information.
Chapter 9

Storm can’t recall the last time he felt this way. The more he thinks about it the more it solidifies in front of him.

It comes to him at a peculiar moment. It’s late at night, maybe one or two in the morning when he has the realization.

Even while Lightning was in his apartment he couldn’t keep the smile on his face at bay.

He knows he’s in too deep already, he knows that. Still though, he can’t help but have the slightest speck of hope that Lightning feels the same way.

If, the other man feels anything at all towards him.

Lightning had only just started treating him as a friend, and Storm had no intention of jeopardizing that. He makes up his mind then. He’ll play things by ear. He has no problem with waiting.

After all, he’s been waiting for years to race with Lightning, what’s a little more time to that?

Especially now, when his desire is so close he can almost reach it.

Right now though he doesn’t mind. Storm will let time take its course. Patience is a virtue, and Storm is willing to adopt it so long as he can get what he wants in the end.

Storm drifts off to sleep easily that night

He wakes up to the high pitched ring tone of his phone, set that way because it’s the only way he’ll wake up early in the morning.

Storm brings the phone to his ear.

“Hello?” He mumbles.

“Hey Storm, It’s Me.”

For a second Storm thinks it’s Lightning, and he feels a surge of warmth rush up to his face before he realizes the voice is too low. Instead of Lightning’s bright tone it’s deeper, and it sounds slightly aggravated with him. Must be his trainer.

“Hey, Tony.” Storm mumbles, shifting to sit upright on the bed.

“Don’t Hey Tony me. You’ve got a lot to explain to me Storm. Like why the hell you’ve been blowing off your training to go to Radiator Springs and pal around with Lightning McQueen. Or why you brought him on your interview with Chick Hicks.”

“Well, I did tell you I was going on vacation.”

Storm hears a sigh from the other end of the phone.

“Listen kid. I’m just trying to help you out, alright. You’re still a young racer. Yes, you’re popular, but in order to stay at the top, you need to be Training. Not driving to small towns way out in the
midwest to bring back a retired racer who’s training Cruz Ramirez, soon to be your biggest competition.”

Storm pauses a moment, clenching the phone in his hand.

“You see that’s where you’re wrong Tony. Lightning isn’t training my biggest competition. He is my biggest competition.”

Tony says nothing for a moment, then speaks.

“Look Storm, if it wasn’t for all the next gen racers taking over I’d believe you. I’ve watched McQueen race for years and I know he’s still got the passion and the fire for it. I know it’s ridiculous to say he’s too old when he’s what? In his mid thirties? I get it Storm, but the thing is, once the public decides a racer’s done, it’s practically set in stone.”

“Then I guess it’s up to me and Lightning to change that Tony because I’m not giving up. Now if you’d be so kind as to handle setting up my training at the Lightning McQueen racing center I’d appreciate it. Oh and set up a training plan for Lightning also.”

Storm hangs up in the middle of Tony protesting.

Oh well, he’d figure out something.

Storm rubs his eyes tiredly, well if he’s up now he might as well get up and get dressed. After all, early for him is afternoon for most people.

He gets dressed, wearing shorts and a T-shirt instead of his usual black jeans. He’s planning to go to the training center today. He’s been focused on other things recently, but he knows he needs to get back on his training plan to prepare for next season.

He gets in his car quickly, not his race car. That’s still being transported over with Mack. Though he’s pretty sure the cars are supposed to arrive here today, going by what Lightning told him.

Instead, he’s driving a black BMW that he saved up money for from all his racing. It can’t go nearly as fast as his custom race car but it’s a nice car all the same.

He drives it to Lightning’s house, unsurprised when he finds Mater sitting outside on the deck when he gets there.

“Hey Mater.” He greets.

“Howdy Storm.” Mater says, letting the thick country accent slide off his tongue.

Storm wonders if the accent is even real. If it is he must be exaggerating it a little bit right? No one has a voice that country.

Though after debating it, he decides not to ask. Storm does not want to be on Mater’s bad side.

“Is Lightning around?”

“Course he is. He’s inside the house.” Mater says giving him what looks like a smirk.

“Thanks.” Storm says brushing past him attempting to keep his face neutral.

Even if Lightning is completely oblivious to Storm’s feelings that doesn’t mean Mater is.
Storm walks into the house and is surprised to see it looks like a regular home.

Lightning and his friends wasted no time unpacking their things and making the house look lived in right away.

Storm sees dishes from breakfast already in the sink, and he doesn’t see any boxes or bags lying around. Making him think they’ve already unpacked everything.

Luigi is the first to notice him from his spot at the dining room table.

“Hi Storm.” He greets, which makes Lightning and Guido turn around from their seats.

“Hey, Storm! Come have a seat.” Lightning says.

He gives Storm a blinding smile, and Storm tries not to stare back at him for too long as he walks over to join them at the table.

“What brings you here?” Lightning asks.

Storm stares at him. Lightning’s curls are matted down to his head. Probably from him sleeping on them. The curls look pretty soft, he wonders if they are.

He has half a mind to reach across the table and touch them before he snaps himself back to reality.

“Well...I uh just got off the phone with my trainer a little while ago. He wants me to get back on my training schedule because I’ve been away for a few days.”

Lightning nods.

“You told him about your secret trip to Radiator Springs?” He says, a playful grin on his face.

“No way. It’s not his business. That’s between us.” Storm says firmly.

Lightning looks confused, then responds.

“Right! Wouldn’t want your fans to know you’ve been aiding your biggest competition huh Storm?”

No, he thinks. Storm quite frankly doesn’t care what his fans think about that, he didn’t do it for them.

He nods anyway.

“Well. I was also thinking that my trainer could make a training plan for you if you’re alright with it. I think it would help a lot. His plan is specialized to deal with the ins and outs of the new next generation racing.”

Lightning ponders it, looking deeply in thought.

“Well. Cruz already tried to show me some of the new techniques...and I couldn’t really get the hang of them.” Lightning says, rubbing the back of his neck.

Storm bites his tongue in order to not say something like how Cruz Ramirez is the least qualified person Lightning probably knows to train him on the new techniques. Hell, she’d never even been in a real race before the Florida 500. Storm has no earthly idea how she’d gotten the qualifications to be a racing trainer when she’s not even a real racer, but Storm neglects to mention that to
Lightning.

After a minute Lightning continues.

“...but if you think it’ll help, then I’ll give it another shot.”

Storm grins. “Great! I think it’s a good idea!”

Lightning nods.

“So. When do we start?” Lightning says to him.

Huh. Storm hadn’t gotten that far. Though by the urgency in Tony’s voice when Storm talked to him makes him think the sooner the better.

“Well...how about right now?”

“Now?” Lightning repeats.

“Why not?” Luigi chimes in.

“Yeah didn’t Mack drop the race cars off at the training center this morning anyway?” Guido adds.

Lightning nods.

“Then let’s go now.” Storm says.

“You can ride with me if you want.” Storm adds before he can stop himself. He doesn’t know why. Lightning has his own car and can certainly make the trip to the center alone.

“Yeah okay!” Lightning says, stopping Storm from overthinking.

Minutes later he and Lightning are in his BMW, driving down the road.

“Nice car.” Lightning says, admiring the vehicle.

Of course the race cars they own are far nicer, but that doesn’t mean they can’t appreciate a nice car when they see one.

“Thanks.”

The ride to the training center is short, and he and Lightning spend it talking about the hottest cars on the non racing market. Lightning’s a great conversationalist, and Storm is almost disappointed when they get to the training center.

When Storm parks he can see the training center is already more active than it was the other day. He sees way more cars in the parking lot today. He suspects more of the next generation racers decided to train here after learning Cruz Ramirez trained here.

They walk through the glass doors and see the giant 95 sitting there as a dedication to Lightning. Storm catches Lightning rolling his eyes at it.

“Aww come on, it’s made in your honor. Why don’t you like it?”

Lightning sighs. “It’s not that I don’t like it. Rusty and Dusty made this whole center to honor me but it just feels strange. It feels like I’m already done. I think Mr. Sterling wanted this to be more
Storm frowns. He looks around the training center. It is true that there is a lot of Lightning memorabilia in here. Storm has no issue with that himself, but if it makes Lightning uncomfortable he doesn’t like it.

“Don’t stress too much about it. You’re the one who decides when you’re done Lightning.”

Lightning nods.

They continue to walk further into the training center, away from the main doors and towards the different sections of the center. Storm doesn’t know his way around the center yet, but it’s apparently just as advanced as the private center he was training at before.

Storm is noticing the other racers now. Well, notice is a strong word because he doesn’t care about any of them. He’s not even sure what some of them look like without their helmets on. The same could be said for him he supposes.

He sees them in various stages of training. Most of the newer racers are on the simulators. There are some of them doing physical exercises though. Cardio, weight lifting. Hell some of them are biking.

Storm doesn’t know what biking has to do with training to be a race car driver, but hey he’s not going to correct anybody. If these racers are doing stuff like that they most likely don’t have a steady training schedule, meaning for him and Lightning it should be easy to crush the competition.

Speaking of Lightning he unfortunately seems to have found Cruz in the training center. Storm watches her eagerly come over to them, bright grin directed at Lightning. Storm narrows his eyes, he’s still a little bitter about how she almost ruined Lightning’s racing career forever, no matter what Lightning says.

“Hey Lightning!” She says.

“Hey, Cruz! How are you?” Lightning greets back with a smile.

“I’m good! I’m finally able to train instead of being the trainer!”

“That’s great! I’m happy for you Cruz!”

Storm glances around the training center. Partly because he’s trying to block out Cruz and also because their conversation has attracted the attention of lots of other racers in the room. Storm doesn’t recognize most of them, but it’s not like he pays attention to them anyway. Even so, he can still tell almost all of them are next gen racers.

He doesn’t see a single pro here other than Lightning.

He sees the other racers talking to each other. Whispering. Whether it’s about him or Lightning he can’t tell, but it’s annoying him regardless.

He tunes back into the conversation when he hears Cruz say something about how fast her times have been on the practice track outside the center.

“That’s great Cruz!”
“Thanks, Lightning! You should come watch me today, I’ll show you how it’s done, old man!”
She laughs after, indicating it was a joke.

Joke or no, Storm won’t stand for it. He opens his mouth to say something before Lightning flashes him a side glance. His eyes hold a clear message. Say nothing.

Storm huffs and crosses his arms. Cruz is oblivious to that of course. No surprise there.

Lightning answers anyway though. “Sure Cruz I’d love to see you race later!”

Cruz grins. “Bye Lightning! I’ll see you later!”

She didn’t say a word to Storm, maybe she’s pretending to not care about his presence? Storm couldn’t care less.

Lightning turns to him as if to say something but before he can he’s interrupted by a hand clapping down on his shoulder.

Lightning looks behind him in surprise, only to be greeted by Mr. Sterling wearing a pristine grey suit with equally grey hair combed back neatly on his head.

“Oh, there they are! My two favorite racers! Jackson Storm and Lightning McQueen.” Sterling announces loudly.

Lightning frowns, probably concerned Cruz or the other racers might hear. Storm on the other hand, decides to challenge him.

“Favorite? How can I be your favorite, you just met me.” Storm says sarcasm laced thick in his voice.

Storm doesn’t know much about this Sterling character, but he doesn’t like what he’s been told. His trainer told him Sterling was the one pushing Lightning to retire, so Storm’s playing his cards carefully for now.

Sterling laughs it off, flashing a brilliant smile with pearly white teeth. A business smile of course. Sterling can’t do anything to piss him off if he wants Storm to stay here. Which he most likely does as he’s making tons of profit off of Storm’s sponsors.

“Oh Storm! Here these are for you, your trainer had them faxed over.” Sterling says, handing him two sheets of paper.

“Thanks.”
Sterling smiles at the two of them, then turns to address the other racers.

“Keep up the good work everyone!” He calls out before heading upstairs.

The attention disperses away from them after that, and Lightning turns to him.

“What are those?” He asks, looking at the papers in Storm’s hands.

“These are our training schedules. One for you, and one for me.”

Storm hands him his. He doubts the schedules are any different. Maybe Lightning has a bit more time on the simulator to get used to it, other than that they should be identical.
“Your trainer sent these?” Lightning asks him, eyes scanning the paper.

“Mhm” Storm mumbles in confirmation.

Storm glances at the schedule. It doesn’t officially start until tomorrow, so it looks like they have a little free time at the moment.

“Hey, why don’t we go on a tour?” Storm says.

“You know your way around this place?”

“No, but you do don’t you?”

Lightning shrugs. “Well, I guess I know it better than you do.”

With that Lightning starts walking down the hallway, motioning for Storm to follow him.

The training center is huge, Storm realizes as they walk through it. There are multiple hallways and rooms in it leading to god knows where.

He and Lightning do a fair share of exploring and manage to find a weight room, yoga rooms, the cafeteria (which they stopped in to get lunch), an indoor pool, a second gym, a simulator room, multiple bathrooms and the outdoor track.

“Wow, this place is way bigger than I thought it was.” Lightning mumbles.

Storm frowns. He knows Lightning didn’t train here that much, preferring to go outside for real training. He finds it odd though that neither Cruz nor Mr. Sterling thought it would be a good idea to show Lightning the whole facility and not just the main gym near the entrance. He keeps that to himself though, not wanting to imply bad intentions on their part.

“Yeah, there’s nothing I love more than training to drive my race car in the pool.”

Lightning cracks up at his last comment, making a surge of pride rush through Storm because he managed to make him laugh. Lightning pauses then, glancing at his watch.

“Hey let’s go check the outdoor track. Cruz wanted me to watch her race there today.” Storm nods.

He has zero desire to watch Cruz race, but he’s not going to say no to going.

He follows Lightning down the hall to the door leading outside. The outside track is big, not quite the size of a real race track, but close enough. When Storm gets closer he sees his car parked in one of the garages lining the outside of the track, Lightning’s car right next to his. Mack must have dropped them off this morning.

He also sees Cruz driving around the track in her yellow car. Dinoco logo on the side of it. They must be her new sponsor along with Sterling.

Cruz is going fast, around 200 miles per hour around the track. Storm sees the numbers on the speed meter they have next to the finish line, so racers can keep track of their speed.

Cruz probably has a personal speed meter in her car though, considering its a newer model.

She pulls over to the side when she sees Lightning.

“Hey, Lightning! Did you see me?” She asks, like a child fishing for compliments.

“Yeah, I did! You were flying!”
Well. That’s an exaggeration if Storm’s ever seen one.

“I’d offer you to race too, but I don’t think you could keep up.” She says with a smirk. Her tone is playful, just enough for Lightning to know she’s kidding. Storm takes it for what it is. A jibe. At Lightning and his car.

“I’ll race with you.” Storm says, voice neutral.

“What?” Cruz asks, face frowning.

“I’ll. Race. You.” he repeats as if he’s talking to a toddler.

Cruz scoffs. “No thanks, Storm.”

She says, glaring at him. Lightning glances between the two of them, a concerned look on his face.

“Are you scared?” Storm says, smirking.

“I’m not scared! I beat you before remember!”

It’s true, she did beat him before. It’s not something she would need to bring up if she was confident in her racing abilities though.

“Then let’s race.” He states calmly. He watches Cruz narrow her eyes at him, then accept the challenge.

“Come on guys really?” Lightning says, trying to pacify them.

“Don’t worry Lightning, you can watch me beat him.” Cruz says, smiling at him.

Lightning nods reluctantly and goes to stand at the finish line. He’ll signal when the race starts.

Storm gets his car from the garage, it feels good to be back in his race car again.

He drives out to the track, taking his place next to Cruz.

Lightning stands in front of them between the cars.

“What? Three laps. On my signal.” he calls out to them.

Storm puts on his helmet.

“3...2...1...GO!” Lightning yells, throwing his hands down as the indicator for them to start.

They both hit the gas pedal hard. This will be a cakewalk. Lightning was smart when he challenged Storm to a race back in Radiator Springs. He knew that too much speed would be a disadvantage, but here on this track made specifically for racing, Storm knew he had it in the bag.

For the first lap, Cruz hugged the inside of the track. A smart move on her part. Storm would either need to draft her or pass her from the outside. He was capable of both, but he didn’t need to stoop to drafting like she had done during the Florida 500.

The second lap came up fast, and Storm was right next to her, despite his position on the outside. The third lap was right on the horizon, and Storm took the chance to speed up, the opposite of what he had done in the Florida 500. She’s around 5 seconds behind him when he finishes. Not bad for three laps, but Storm’s more interested in the annoyance on her face when she realizes she lost.
He wants to rub it in her face, but he refrains when he catches Lightning looking at him. Lightning glances at Cruz then, noting her annoyed face.

“Hey Cruz, are you alright?”

She snaps out of it then, reverting to normal.

“Oh yeah, I’m fine! Sorry I spaced out.”

Liar.

“Oh alright. You did great though, and it’ll be different during a real race. There will be plenty of laps to catch up.” Lightning says, reassuring her.

She nods. Storm walks over to her.

“Good match.” He even shakes her hand.

Lightning witnesses this and seems to relax. Noting Cruz looks happy again and Storm isn’t rubbing his victory in.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Lightning says to both of them.

“While you guys were racing, Luigi and Guido called and said they wanted to make a huge Italian dinner tonight to celebrate. You should come, both of you!”
Lightning looks between Storm and Cruz waiting for them to accept his proposition. Luigi and Guido insisted he invite Storm, so he’s got no choice either way.

Storm says yes anyway, so Lightning doesn’t need to worry about Luigi and Guido bringing the party to Storm’s house if he neglected to come. Now he’s just waiting on Cruz, who looks slightly irritated Storm said he’d be going.

That’s not good for Lightning. He’s friends with both of them and would prefer if they could get along. It’s mostly Storm who’s creating the problem with Cruz. He’s acting so cocky towards her. So eager to impress her with his racing skill. It’s kind of strange...almost as if, he likes her.

It would make sense if that were the case. Lightning remembers when he was a rookie and thought he was a hotshot, he talked to girls like that too. Before he realized what a jerk he was being. He never tried any of that when he was with Sally, but Storm’s still young. Maybe no one’s told him the best way to get a girl yet?

Cruz speaks, startling him from his train of thought.

“Sure Lightning! I’d love to come.”

“Alright great! I’ll see you tonight.”

With that, they part ways. Cruz going back inside.

Storm turns to him.

“So what’s the plan. Are we going back to your house?”

Lightning nods.

“Yeah, then we have to go to the store. They all want to go together.”

Storm smiles. “That should be interesting.”

Shopping with Guido, Luigi and Mater is certainly more than just interesting. Storm has no idea what he’s getting into.

Lightning’s mind wanders back to the race as they walk to Storm’s car. It doesn’t make sense. Storm has the faster car, He also has more experiencing racing than Cruz does. Thinking back to the Florida 500, Lightning wonders why he didn’t win. Since he wasn’t on the track with them, he couldn’t tell what was going on. He remembers Storm slowing down intentionally during the race...but why? Did he...want Cruz to win? No. That’s unlike him. Even if he did like Cruz there’s no way Storm would just let her win. That brings up the question then, why did he lose?

Lightning doesn’t want to bring it up, in case it bothers Storm he didn’t win.

They get in Storm’s BMW and start driving.

“Hey Lightning?”

Lightning looks up.
“Yeah?”

“When you were training, did you ever use that track outside?”

Lightning frowns. He didn’t think about it before, but he’s never seen that track. Originally he had never seen all of those other rooms in the center. He had just assumed they weren’t for racing and they were just storage or something. It is strange though, especially since he struggled with the simulator that Mr. Sterling didn’t mention the race track they had outside. Maybe it just wasn’t built yet.

“No, I never did.”

Storm nods.

The whole thing is a little strange when he thinks about it, but Mr. Sterling probably wanted him to learn to race like the next gen racers.

Before Lightning can dwell on it, they are back at the house.

Luigi and Mater immediately rush out to them.

“LET’S GO SHOPPING!” They yell, Guido following them.

Storm stares at them, probably not expecting their enthusiasm to go shopping. Lightning can see Guido holding a piece of paper that’s got around a hundred things written on it. They all push past him and get into his car.

“Well...I guess we’re taking my car then.” Storm mumbles.

Lightning laughs as he walks to the driver’s side. Mater, Luigi, and Guido have crammed into the back, Guido in the middle looking unhappy with his placement.

“You know we could take another car guys.” Lightning says to them.

“No way! It’s more fun this way.” Luigi says.

“Yeah, and if we take another car Storm might try to leave.” Mater adds.

Storm mumbles “I could still leave.” Just quiet enough for him to hear.

Lightning winks at him.

Storm stares at him, before turning back to the road.

“So, why would I want to leave?” Storm asks.

Lightning sighs in sympathy. “Because this will probably be a 3 hour production.”

“3 hours?!”

“You’ll see.”

Storm raises his eyebrows as if there’s no way a shopping trip for one night’s dinner would take that long.

Everything goes well for the first half hour. They reach the closest supermarket and all go inside. Guido and Luigi immediately disappear down one aisle, and Mater follows them. Leaving
Lightning and Storm behind.

“They’re like little kids.” Storm says in disbelief as he watches Luigi and Mater lift Guido up and put him into the cart, despite him cursing them out.

Lightning nods. He’s given up on trying to make his friends act like adults in the grocery store. He calls out to them.

“Guys don’t you dare tip another cart over!”

Luigi and Mater nod, and push the cart out of his line of vision. Probably so when they push the cart over Lightning won’t see it.

Lightning sighs. “Oh well. It’s best we just leave them to it. Why don’t we get your groceries since we’re here.”

“My groceries?” Storm repeats.

“Yeah, don’t you need to get any?”

Storm ponders it for a minute, then nods leaving to get another cart.

After they walk around the store for a half hour, Lightning’s starting to regret offering for Storm to get his groceries. It’s one thing knowing how much junk Storm’s eating, it’s another watching him toss it into the cart.

He surveys the contents. A case of Red Bull and Dr. Pepper. Various chips, candy, cookies, and pastries. He even watches as Storm looks at the Dinosaur chicken nuggets in the frozen section. Something a little kid would buy.

“You can’t be serious Storm.”

Storm grins. “I like chicken nuggets.” He says, completely serious.

“Like that’s even chicken in there. If you want to eat chicken nuggets then make your own, it’ll be healthier.”

Storm groans. “That’s too much work.”

Lightning won’t hear it though. He’s already tossing vegetable oil, eggs, flour, bread crumbs and chicken into the cart so Storm can make his own.

“I don’t even know how to make chicken nuggets Lightning.”

“Then I’ll make them for you.” He says, taking some of the worst of Storm’s candy and chips and putting them back on the shelves.

“Oh, you will huh?” Storm says, and Lightning catches his teeth showing in a smile.

Lightning nods. “Next time I’m over I will.”

“You’re going to come to my apartment?” Storm asks.

“Yeah...if I’m invited.” Lightning mutters, feeling embarrassed for inviting himself over out of the blue.
Lightning looks up at Storm, who’s grey eyes are staring right at him.

“You’re always invited.” Storm says, not breaking eye contact.

Lightning feels warmth rushing to his cheeks, “Thanks.”

Then Storm’s eyes move towards Lightning’s hand, staring at what he’s holding.

“Hey! Not my Gummy worms! I need those!”

Lightning rolls his eyes and tosses them back into the cart. After another twenty minutes, Luigi and Guido meet up with them at the register.

Lightning catches Storm glancing at their cart. It’s completely full.

“Jeez, do you think you got enough stuff?” Storm asks.

Luigi and Guido say no simultaneously. Storm frowns.

“What else do you need?” he asks.

Mater interjects. “Oh Storm. No one gave ya a heads up about how we do things. Luigi and Guido are very particular about what ingredients go into their Italian cuisine. See, right now this is all the stuff we need to make the dough for the pasta from scratch. We still need to get other stuff from the produce market, the butcher, and the liquor store, then they start cooking.”

Storm stares at him, eyes wide in disbelief.

“You can’t be serious.”

Lightning laughs.

He puts a hand on Storm’s shoulder in sympathy.

Storm makes no move to lean away from his hand, which Lightning notices though he isn’t sure why.

At the center, he certainly didn’t seem to enjoy shaking Mr. Sterling’s hand. Though he did shake hands with Cruz after the race. Maybe he doesn’t mind being touched by the people he likes?

Lightning can’t think on it, because his friends are demanding they hurry it up walking back to the car so they can keep moving and get all of their supplies.

The next few hours consist of Storm begrudgingly trailing behind them while Luigi and Guido flat out start to argue with various workers. Storm quite frankly looks like he’d be anywhere else when he hears Luigi argue with the vendor that he’s hiding the better quality tomatoes somewhere else.

Lightning doesn’t believe it at first, but then the Vendor, with a somewhat sheepish look on his face goes back into the store and comes out with a box. Inside the box, are tons of tomatoes that look much better than the ones on display.

Luigi pays him and takes about half the box. Lightning turns to Storm to see him staring in disbelief.

“How did you know that?” Storm asks Luigi.
Luigi looks quite proud of himself when he answers.

“Back in Italy, the vendors would pull the same tricks. If you wanted the best produce you’d need to push them around a bit.”

Guido glares at him. “That was your mother who did that and you know it!”

Mater and Storm laugh at that comment and Luigi’s face turns as red as the tomatoes he’s holding.

Of course Guido would know that. He and Luigi grew up together in Italy before coming here. Luigi can’t embellish any story while Guido’s present. Lightning’s witnessed his fair share of embarrassing moments for Luigi.

After one more stop they are finally heading back to the house, all groceries accounted for. Storm looks more exhausted after those 3 hours of shopping then he did after driving all night a few days ago when they came back from Nebraska.

When Lightning mentions this to him, Storm just pauses to make direct eye contact with him and then opens another can of Red Bull.

In the rearview mirror, Lightning can see Mater digging through some of the bags.

“Hey Storm, looks like you got some real healthy food back at the grocery store.” Mater says, sarcasm thick in his voice.

Mater then passes one of the bags to Luigi and Guido, who look disgusted at the contents.

“Seriously Storm? There’s so much candy in here!” Luigi yells.

Storm says nothing from the driver’s seat, just takes another sip of his drink.

Mater noticing this decides to speak up, “Maybe Storm should just come eat with us every night then.”

Storm immediately goes into a coughing fit, probably trying to swallow his drink instead of spitting it out. There’s a mixture of laughing and screaming coming from the backseat as Lightning realizes the car is swerving a bit due to Storm’s reaction.

On reflex, his hand shoots out to the steering wheel to straighten them out. Once everyone quiets down and Storm regains control over the wheel Lightning realizes his hand is covering Storm’s.

“Sorry.” He mutters and removes his hand.

Storm shakes his head, looking flustered from his coughing fit.

“It’s no problem.”

Lightning turns around to the backseat.

“Alright new rule. When people are drinking, we do NOT say something to startle them. Got it?”

Luigi and Guido nod, while Mater just gives him back an innocent look.

Thankfully, Storm just pulled into the driveway meaning there shouldn’t be anymore driving incidents. Well, for today at least.
Lightning and his friends bring the multiple bags from the shopping trip inside, which took them more than a few trips to accomplish.

It’s close to dinnertime now, but Lightning knows his friends will still need a long time to prepare dinner. Still, he thinks he should call Cruz and let her know.

Lightning puts his hand over his ear trying to block out the noises of pots and pans clanging together in the kitchen as he calls her.

After a few rings, Cruz picks up.

“Hey Lightning!”

“Hey, Cruz! How are you?”

“I’m good! Am I still coming over for dinner?” Cruz asks.

“Yeah of course! Luigi and Guido just got started so it probably won’t be ready for another hour but you’re welcome to come sooner.”

“Okay great! See you soon.”

Cruz hangs up and Lightning sends her the address.

After he’s finished he walks into the kitchen to see Luigi and Guido laying out what looks like every cooking appliance they own.

“Where are Mater and Storm?”

“They went to the living room.” Guido states, looking pretty occupied measuring out cups of flour.

Lightning nods, turning to leave his friends in the kitchen. They should handle dinner alone. It gets too chaotic with everyone cooking at once.

Mater and Storm are sitting on the couch in silence when Lightning walks in.

“Is Cruz coming?” Mater asks.

“Yeah, she is. I just talked to her.”

Mater nods, and when Lightning looks over at Storm his expression doesn’t change.

Lightning takes a seat in a chair opposite them.

“So.” Mater begins. “You like living in Florida, Storm?”

“Mmm. It’s alright. Though it’s not like I’m here year round.” Storm responds, brushing a hand through his hair.

Lightning frowns. He’s never asked if Storm raced internationally before. He just assumed since Storm was younger he stayed in the states. Though it occurs to him Storm could have the potential to race internationally with such a high racing speed.

“Have you raced internationally before Storm?” Lightning says.

Storm shakes his head. “No I’ve only raced in other states so far. I’d like to race internationally.”
Lightning nods. Racing internationally is something all racers should experience if they want to be successful. To prove yourself not only as a great racer in the states but to the whole world. Lightning had...an interesting time when he raced in the International Grand Prix a few years ago, though he could have done without the whole espionage thing Mater had somehow gotten himself into.

“OH, I remember that! Lightning you was racing against that Italian guy! Mr. San Francisco! Mater yells.

Storm’s face morphs into confusion.

“No Mater, that’s not his name. He’s Francesco Bernoulli remember?” Lightning corrects.

“Doesn’t ring a bell!” Mater responds.

Lightning rolls his eyes. “Well, it’s not like you were paying attention. You were too busy on your secret spy mission with your girlfriend.”

Mater coughs, actually looking startled for once.

“Well McQueen, you were too busy worrying your girlfriend would ditch you for Mr. San Francisco and his fancy-schmancy open-wheeled tires.” Mater throws back.

Lightning feels his face heating up. He wasn’t worrying about Francesco Bernoulli at the time. He was just...irritated by him.

“Wait a second.” Storm interjects. “Lightning’s girlfriend had a crush on Francesco Bernoulli?”

With that, Mater bursts out into laughter, and Lightning even hears Luigi and Guido laughing from the kitchen.

Lightning groans.

“Was she okay...You know like mentally?” Storm asks, prompting even more laughter from the Kitchen and Mater, who’s practically on the ground at this point.

Lightning’s face is burning. “What are you saying Storm?” He challenges. Even if he and Sally did break up, Lightning doesn’t want to hear anyone say anything rude about her.

Storm backs down immediately, speaking softer.

“That’s not what I meant Lightning. I just meant she’d have to be crazy to leave you for him. It’s her loss.”

If Lightning wasn’t red before he certainly was now. Storm’s compliment makes him burn with a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

An awkward silence follows again before a look of complete shock passes Storm’s face.

“WAIT. Mater, you have a girlfriend?!” Storm almost yells. It’s the loudest he’s ever been Lightning thinks.

Mater jolts up from the ground like he’s been electrocuted.

“I Don’t!” He denies.
Luigi pops his head out from the kitchen. “He totally does! And she’s a bombshell too.”

“She isn’t my girlfriend!” Mater insists, getting flustered.

This then prompts an argument between Luigi and Mater that Lightning tunes out of because he hears the doorbell ring. Oh god. Poor Cruz has no idea what craziness she’s about to witness.

Lightning won’t leave her stranded outside though, so he goes to get the door.

When he opens it he finds Cruz dressed in yellow clothing, no surprise there.

“Hey Cruz.”

“Hey Lightning!” She says, smiling until she starts to hear the high pitched yelling taking place behind them.

“Uh, what’s going on?”

Lightning sighs. “Come on in, you’ll see for yourself.”

Cruz follows him in and Lightning shuts the door behind her.

He tunes back in to hear Luigi screaming “How do you think Holly would feel about you denying her existence as your girlfriend?!”

Mater is yelling right back “She’s not my girlfriend she’s my PARTNER.”

Cruz is staring at the situation in shock while Storm looks like he’s struggling to contain his laughter.

“Who’s Holly?” Cruz asks in curiosity, thankfully making Luigi and Mater stop yelling.

“Mater’s girlfriend.” Luigi says.

“I already told you. She isn’t my girlfriend.” Mater states calmly.

Cruz frowns. “Why are you guys even fighting about this?”

“Don’t look at me, Storm brought it up.” Luigi says.

Cruz narrows her eyes at him. “Of course he did.”

Storm’s pleasant look fades quickly, replaced by a steely look of annoyance.

Oh god. Lightning better step in and fix things otherwise his friends will be at each other's throats in a few seconds. It won’t do Storm any good trying to impress Cruz if she hates him.

“All right guys everybody calm down okay? I brought it up. Storm only asked because he was curious. We’re all friends here and we’re all getting along alright?” Lightning says, trying to be the peacemaker.

Everybody nods.

Lightning is about to let out a breath of relief before he hears Guido scream

“LUIGI!!” from the kitchen.
They all rush to the kitchen, Lightning’s thinking the worst. Like the Kitchen’s on fire because they rarely hear Guido scream.

Once they enter the Kitchen he sees Guido standing at the stove trying to stir one pot and add ingredients to another. At first, he thinks Guido is mad Luigi left him to handle the cooking alone.

“What do you want Guido?” Luigi asks his friend.

Guido turns to him, looking hilarious in his oversized white apron.

“What is THIS!” Guido asks, holding a box of store-bought pasta.

Lightning stares at it, wondering why that possibly set Guido off.

Luigi though just rolls his eyes. “Oh calm down! It tastes fine! It takes too long to make the pasta from scratch. Besides everyone knows it’s the sauce that makes the dish.”

From Guido’s expression alone you would think Luigi had just told him to jump off a cliff.

A string of Italian curse words falls from Guido’s lips. Or at least Lightning thinks they are curse words judging from Luigi’s look of deep offense.

“You know what! I’m calling your mother. I wonder what she’d think of this store-bought pasta!” Guido yells, dashing for his phone.

Luigi’s face turns white.

“Don’t you dare call my Mama! Guido!” He shouts, then chases after him.

Mater has a little smirk on his face, no doubt relishing the fact Luigi’s about to get grilled by his mother.

Lightning’s only met Luigi’s family once or twice but they are very traditional Italians. He only hopes his mother doesn’t yell at Luigi for too long.

Cruz and Storm for once have a shared expression of surprise, and Lightning thinks it’s best to get out of the kitchen for now. So Luigi and Guido can finish dinner once they finish their screaming match upstairs.

Cruz is the first to speak. “Is it usually that um...crazy around here?”

Mater laughs. “Sure is! That’s how we Radiator Spring folk like it.”

She nods.

“So Cruz? How’s it feel to be a racer?” Mater asks, keeping up the conversation.

“It’s great Mater! It’s so nice being able to race! To really race and not to train. It’s much more fun.”

Lightning ponders it. He knew Cruz wasn’t happy as a trainer, he knew she wanted to be a racer. That was why he wanted her to finish the Florida 500 for him.

“It’s funny how being a trainer isn’t fun isn’t it?” Storm says from his chair, looking at Cruz.

“What’s funny about it?” Cruz retorts back.
God, Storm’s dying out here. Even his basic attempts to start a conversation aren’t working. Lightning needs to give him a lesson on how to talk to girls. Even if he doesn’t like Cruz it’s something he needs to learn.

“Relax Ramirez. I’ve never been a trainer so I wouldn’t know what it’s like. I’m just making conversation.” Storm says, throwing a glance at Lightning.

Cruz doesn’t look happy, but she doesn’t respond angrily back, which Lightning guesses is a step in the right direction? He doesn’t know. He treated girls the same way when he was younger, and even though it worked on some it just wasn’t right. It wasn’t until he changed his attitude that he had a chance with Sally. Even if that didn’t work out.

Lightning considers bringing up a subject they could all talk about without causing any conflict. Before he can though Luigi and Guido walk into the living room announcing that Dinner’s ready.

The dining room table is set with expensive china. Probably the china Luigi’s family sent over to him for his birthday. The amount of food they cooked is downright ridiculous for what six people? There are at least four different types of pasta Lightning can see, all cooked from scratch. There’s a huge pot of tomato sauce in front of him, possibly containing several dozen meatballs inside of it.

They all sit around the table and Mater mutters “Do you think we have enough?” Albeit sarcastically, it makes Guido frown and look over everything on the table.

“Dio Mio Guido. Will you just sit, there’s plenty.” Luigi says, yanking him down to sit. Lightning’s learned from the numerous times it’s been said around him that means oh my god.

Luigi and Guido waste no time serving everyone a huge portion of food after that, and Lightning watches Guido replace Storm’s Redbull with water.

“Hey, I was drinking that!” Storm protests.

“It ruins the taste. Drink water.”

Storm’s face shifts into a pouting look at the removal of his Red Bull.

“How is it?” Luigi asks after a minute, he and Guido both anticipating judgment on their food.

“It’s delicious as usual guys.” Lightning says, smiling at them.

Storm and Cruz nod in agreement and Storm adds that it’s probably the best Italian food he’s ever had, which Lightning knows made their day.

Dinner then devolves into them eating and the tension from earlier dissipates.

Luigi even offers Mater a half fledged apology. “Mater. I am sorry for insisting Holly is your girlfriend.”

“No problem.”

“Though I don’t know why you deny it instead of bragging, she’s a bombshell” Luigi whispers soft enough that only the people sitting right near him, AKA He and Storm hear.

Storm quirks his eyebrows up at Lightning, and Lightning gives him his best don’t start anything look.
Luckily Mater didn’t hear him, so they don’t need to rehash that argument.

After it’s clear everyone is finished eating they all clear the table and go to the living room. Mater flops down on the couch, and everyone else on the chairs or the floor around it.

“We should play a game!” Mater suggests after a minute.

“Monopoly!” Luigi shouts to which everyone responds with a harsh no. Monopoly with this crew will be a five hour ordeal. Lightning knows that first hand and he doubts Storm or Cruz will want to do that.

“Hey I’ve got an idea!” Mater says, sitting up from the couch.

“What is it?” Lightning asks.

“The other day I was on the interweb and I saw a quiz about McQueen! We should take it!”


Taking a quiz about himself seems like the opposite of fun, but Cruz is already interested.

“That sounds fun!” She says, solidifying the idea.

Mater starts sending the link to everybody, though Lightning isn’t even sure his phone can connect to the internet. Let alone support a quiz from a website.

It seems Storm has already thought about that though because he passes Lightning his phone.

“What will you use?” Lightning asks.

“My smartwatch.” Storm responds, tapping the square watch on his wrist Lightning didn’t even see before.

“That can connect to the internet?” Lightning asks, impressed.

“Technology is the future Lightning. Time for a phone upgrade.” Storm says, clapping him on the back.

Lightning likes his flip phone. It’s simple and he’s a bit old fashioned anyway, he’ll keep it for now.

Once everyone has the link to the quiz titled “How well do you know Lightning McQueen” they all start to take it.

Lightning has to say looking at some of these questions he’s got no idea what the right answer is. He can tell by looking at some of his friends they’re struggling just as much.

One of the questions asks what his first time was finishing a race. Time as in how quickly he finished the race. In the choices they do have the correct time for both his first race and the correct time for his first ever recorded race, so Lightning could see how a lot of people might get these questions wrong.

Unless the people taking this quiz were there for the race or paid extreme attention to a talk show Lightning was on as a rookie, there’s no way they could get these answers right. Lightning himself got a 90%, thinking it pretty ironic he couldn’t get a perfect score even when the quiz was about himself.
His friends finish, and by the looks of confusion and disappointment on their faces it’s clear the quiz was much harder for them then they anticipated.

“Relax guys, I’m not worried about the score. That quiz was hard! I don’t expect you to know that stuff. Hell, some of it I didn’t even remember.” Lightning says.

His friends look visibly relaxed at that.

“What did you guys score?” Cruz asks.

“I got a 60%” Mater replies.

“We got 50%” Luigi says gesturing to himself and Guido.

“What about you Cruz?” Lightning asks.

“I got an 80%” She says, smiling.

That’s pretty impressive, Lightning thinks. Though Cruz did say she grew up watching him. Then again so did Storm.

Speaking of which Cruz turns to Storm.

“What about you Storm? What did you get?” She asks.

The way she said it sounded weird. Not like typical happy Cruz. More like Cruz when she was drafting him during the Florida 500. Then she had been trying to get under his skin on purpose, to win the race. Now though, there’s no reason for it. Lightning thinks he’s just reading too much into it. If Storm’s going to act cocky towards Cruz then it’s no surprise she would act that way back. That’s how younger people are these days.

Storm says nothing in response, only turns his watch towards them to display the result. A 90%. For some reason, it’s surprising to him. It’s just a silly quiz online, but still. The idea that Storm knows him better than his other friends...or as well as himself definitely comes as a surprise.

“Nice one Storm!” Mater exclaims.

Luigi and Guido look impressed, but when he turns to Cruz she looks a little bit annoyed. Maybe she’s just upset about how Storm acted back during the Florida 500. After all, she hasn’t spent as much time with Storm the past few days as Lightning has, she hasn’t seen his personality other than on the Racetrack. Maybe she just needs to get to know him better.

Cruz stares at Storm, then turns to Lightning.

“Hey Lightning! I’ve got an idea! Why don’t we all go down to Fireball beach tomorrow? We could practice racing there!”

Lightning thinks it over. It’s not a bad idea. He would much rather take his car out for a spin on the beach first before the training center where everything he does is analyzed and recorded.

“Yeah sure Cruz! That sounds great.”

She nods. “Alright well I better head home, it’s getting kind of late. Thanks for dinner guys! See ya later!”

A chorus of goodbye’s echoes from the living room when she leaves and Lightning finds himself
distracted a bit.

He zones back in when he hears Storm saying he should probably go home too. Lightning hands him his phone.

“Thanks.” Storm says.

“Yeah, no problem. Are you joining us tomorrow at the beach?” Lightning asks, curious if Storm wants to race on the beach. Maybe he’d prefer to just stay at the training center.

“Sure I’ll go.” He says, so Lightning doesn’t have to question whether he wants to go any longer.

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow then.” Lightning says.

“Oh don’t forget your groceries!” He continues, grabbing the bags from the kitchen and passing them to Storm.

“Thanks, Lightning. See you tomorrow.”

Storm leaves and Lightning shuts the door behind him. He walks over to the couch and flops down beside Mater, Luigi and Guido having gone upstairs.

“Tired out pal?” Mater asks.

“Mmm” Lightning murmurs in agreement. It had been a pretty tiring day. Touring the racing center, shopping, stopping his friends from fighting and all that.

“It’s pretty interesting you know.” Mater says.

“What’s that?”

“That Storm did so well on the quiz.”

Lightning nods.

“I don’t think Miss Sally would have gotten a 90%”

That one makes Lightning laugh.

“Yeah right Mater. I’d be surprised if she got half right.” He says, the words trailing off bitterly.

Mater sighs. “She should have been better.”

“No. No, It’s not her fault. She shouldn’t have needed to know that stuff Mater. I shouldn’t have tried so hard to make her like racing. I shouldn’t have been gone all those seasons.”

“Lightning.” Mater says, moving to sit up on the couch at look at him.

“Listen to me Lightning. That wasn’t your fault, you couldn’t have controlled that. Sally was the one who grew tired of racing. It was her choice to leave.”

“I should have been better Mater.” Lightning whispers.

“Maybe if I just had the courage to stop racing then she’d still be around.”

Mater looks at him sadly.
“Come on Lightning. You wouldn’t be you without the racing. Someone who loves you, who really loves you won’t ask for you to give up racing. I know they’re out there, someone who’s gonna treat you better than Miss Sally did.”

Lightning nods. “I hope you’re right buddy.”

Mater nods. “Course I’m right. I’m always right. Besides, if Storm heard ya saying you wished you’d quit all those years ago he’d kick your sorry behind.”

Lightning laughs. “Yeah, I know.”

Then Mater saunters off upstairs, leaving Lightning on his own.

He doesn’t think about Sally again tonight. He just drifts off to sleep with Mater’s words of wisdom still echoing in his ears.
Chapter 11

When Storm wakes up to the harsh pitch of his alarm, he’s not annoyed for once. Normally he’ll hit the snooze button and choose to go late to wherever he was supposed to be.

Not today though, when he’ll gladly sacrifice a few hours of sleep to go to the beach with Lightning. Not just so he can see Lightning shirtless either. Though that is a bonus, he’s more excited that Lightning specifically asked him to go.

It’s almost unbelievable how now he’s just a member of the gang. And to think all he needed to do was make one seriously RedBull induced drive to Radiator Springs to do it. God, he should have done this forever ago.

Storm throws open the drawers of his dresser digging through it to find his swim trunks. He can’t remember the last time he went to the beach. Sure he lives in Florida, but he’s not going on fun trips to the beach. It’s constant training until he has to race again, most of the time.

From what he could tell last night though they are going to be racing on the beach, so Storm picked his car up last night.

After a few more seconds of digging through his rather large pile of mostly black clothing, he finds his swim trunks (black no surprise there) and puts them on.

He puts on a shirt too, and sandals. Since its early enough in the morning he doubts many people will see him driving. Though his racecar is more recognizable now, the few people he passes on the road will probably just chalk it up to typical Florida weirdness.

He hasn’t been to Fireball beach before, but he knows it’s less popular than the other Florida beaches. He thinks its private property, which explains why Cruz wants to race there.

Storm’s more or less happy with her presence there. On one hand, he doesn’t like her but on the other, the trip wouldn’t be happening without her.

She was pleasant enough last night, even if it’s evident she dislikes him. Storm knows Lightning likes her though, so he’s doing his best to not engage.

Thinking about Lightning liking people has Storm wondering about his last girlfriend. He’s pretty sure her name was Sally if the photo back at Lightning’s house in Radiator Springs was anything to go by.

Lightning hasn’t talked about her much, or at least not talked about her to Storm. Making him wonder what she was like. All Storm knows is that she didn’t want Lightning’s trophies in the house and that she used to live in Radiator Springs. Oh, and that she liked Francesco Bernoulli. Which is completely crazy in Storm’s opinion. She scored Lightning freaking McQueen then decided she had the hots for one of the biggest playboy Italian racers alive? Storm doesn’t get it at all. Though he can’t say he’s unhappy she’s gone.

He makes it to Fireball beach before he can relive all the excitement of last night.

When he parks his car up near the dunes he sees Lightning’s racecar in the distance. He realizes that Lightning’s racing right now alongside a yellow car. Cruz’s car, he remembers.

He watches as the red and yellow cars fly across the sand leaving a cloud of sand behind them. He sees a line in the sand drawn significantly close to where he’s standing which must be the finish
Both cars pass it at a similar time, but Storm can see Lightning’s car pass it a second before Cruz.
The cars come to a stop and Cruz and Lightning exit their Race cars.
“I beat you again Old Man!” Cruz says jokingly.
“Yeah yeah, sure you did Cruz.” Lightning says back.
Storm frowns. Lightning isn’t old.
Lightning turns and notices him.
“Hey, Storm!”
“Hi.” Storm responds.
Lightning looks good today. The sun reflecting off his hair makes it look more golden than blond.
Lightning’s also got a Red swimsuit and T-shirt on to match with his car.
He turns to Cruz. She narrows her eyes looking at him.
“Storm.” She greets.
“Cruz.” He responds.
Lightning glances further along the beach, spotting three figures walking over to them.
“Hey, guys I’ll be back in a sec.” Lightning says, walking off waving to the figures in the distance.
Storm’s assuming its Luigi, Guido, and Mater. Once Lightning leaves, Cruz turns to him.
“You’re here to train on the beach?” She asks, eyebrows raised.
“Sure why not? I like the beach.”
“I just figured you’d rather be racing at the center since you were so eager to transfer there.”
Storm would have to be an idiot to miss the irritation in her tone. Nevertheless, he’ll play along.
“Yes well, the Lightning McQueen training center does have some amazing technology available.”
He leans in closer, voice dropping with his next line.
“Funny how Lightning didn’t know about it.” He states, insinuation clear in his voice.
Cruz's face turns angry quickly after that. “What are you saying Storm?”
Storm shrugs his shoulders. “Nothing.”
Before Cruz can retort, Lightning and his friends appear a few steps away from them. Her face is
quick to revert to a smile. She meets his eyes and a look of silent agreement passes through them,
not in front of Lightning.
“Hey, guys! What are ya talking about over here?” Mater says, and Storm can see he, Luigi and
Guido are lugging beach carts and chairs behind them. Guess they plan to make a day of it.
Cruz smiles at him. “Not much Mater! Storm was just saying how he wanted to race me on the beach.”

Storm is careful not to let his face change. So that’s how she wants to play it.

“Really?” Mater asks, looking at Storm.

Storm nods. “Yeah.”

Lightning looks puzzled before he nods. “Well, we did come here to race. You and Cruz will drive to that pier in the distance then back. Here’s the finish line.” Lightning says pointing to the sand drawn line.

Storm nods.

He gets in his car and drives it down next to Cruz’s car.

Lightning stands between the two of them, arms raised. He gives them a countdown too.

“3...2...1...GO!” He yellow, throwing his arms down.

Storm slams his foot on the gas, ready to smoke her before he realizes his car isn’t moving. His wheels are digging into the sand but not moving. He sees Cruz already has a good lead on him and then lightens up on the gas a little bit in surprise. Then the car does start to move through the sand, quickly gaining speed. He sees Cruz in the distance already past the pier and making a U-turn to go back.

Storm grits his teeth and pushes harder against the gas pedal, making a very quick turn that could have easily sent him into the ocean if he spun out. He’s gaining good ground, but he realizes that there isn’t enough time to catch her. His mistake in the beginning cost him the race, and he watches as she passes the finish line.

Storm’s pissed. Regardless though he takes a deep breath before he gets out of his car.

Cruz throws him a smile as she gets out of her car. “Nice try.” She offers. It sounds nice and polite to anyone else who hears it, but it makes Storm bite his tongue to keep from saying anything.

She leaves then, as Storm sees her walk over to where Luigi and Guido are suntanning. Mater following suit.

Lightning walks up to him.

“Hey, get back in your car I want to show you something.”

Storm pauses for a second but complies. He gets back into the Driver’s seat and Lightning gets in the passenger’s side. It’s the first time Lightning’s been in his car, Storm thinks.

Lightning looks around the vehicle, admiring it Storm can tell.

He turns to him. “Have you ever drove in the sand before?” Lightning asks.

Storm shakes his head.

Lightning sighs. “Yeah, I figured. I don’t know why you wanted to race Cruz when you’ve never raced in the sand before.”
Storm says nothing.

“But anyway, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Lightning starts looking around his car then, carefully reading some of the labels and symbols on some of the buttons in his car that Storm himself has never even used.

“Here it is!” Lightning says, pointing to a blue button in the middle of storm’s dash. Upon closer inspection, there’s a wheel half buried in sand inked into the button.

Storm frowns at it. “What’s that?”

“This, Storm, is what you use whenever you race on the sand.”

Lightning continues. “When you race on the sand your wheels can’t get enough traction on the ground if you just step on the gas right away. You need to push this button first so that your wheels dig into the sand. The ground is softer, different than the track at the racing center or a real track. Ease into it first, then you’ll get it.”

That’s news to Storm. No trainer he’s ever had told him he would need to do that if he raced on the sand. He realizes after a minute though that none of his trainers have what Lightning’s had. Experience. Real experience for years of racing. Lightning’s raced on tracks around the globe, or course he knows what he’s doing.

“That’s probably why Cruz beat you. I already showed her how to race in the sand.” Lightning adds.

Storm nods. It made sense now, Cruz saying Storm wanted to race when it was really because she knew she had an advantage. He doesn’t tell Lightning that though.

“Well go on. Try it.” Lightning insists.

Storm grips the steering wheel. He pushes the button, giving it a few seconds. Even from his seat, he can feel the tires digging into the sand. Charlie thought of everything when he helped Storm build the car.

Now he tries the gas, and the car easily flies through the sand. He’s off to a much better start now that the tires didn’t get stuck. Storm stops the car once they get to the pier.

Lightning smiles. “See? Now you’ve got it.”

Storm feels a warm bubble rising in his chest. It’s nice to hear praise from Lightning. It’s not the constant cheering from his fans or the pay induced positivity of his trainers. It’s more personal, special because Storm knows Lightning is a great racer. He won’t just give any racer his approval, but Storm earned it now.

“Thanks, Lightning.” Storm says.

Lightning nods. “Your Race Car is pretty awesome you know. Most of the other newer cars I’ve seen are too flashy for me. Plus they end up not having a lot of essential things like the sand button built in. They’re made purely for the track. Yours though is something special.”

Storm feels his face get warmer at Lightning’s compliment. It’s nice to hear Lightning’s impressed with his car. It did take years for him and Charlie to finish it. Storm’s glad Lightning admires it.
“You want to drive it back?” Storm offers.

Lightning grins and a second later he and Storm are switching seats. Lightning’s face lights up as he looks at all the different gears and buttons in Storm’s car. It reminds him of a kid in a candy store, but he’s thrilled Lightning’s enjoying himself.

Lightning presses down on the gas, and he rolls the windows down so Storm can feel the wind whipping through his hair. It’s exhilarating, and Storm wishes he had done it sooner. Experiencing racing like this, with the winds whipping around him and Lightning’s blinding smile makes him feel a whole new level of excitement than when he’s racing on the track.

“This car can really fly!” Lightning yells to him over the wind.

Too soon, they make it back to where they started and Lightning parks Storm’s car near his own.

They exit the vehicle and Storm’s sees Luigi and Guido still suntanning where they were previously. Cruz sitting next to them.

Lightning greets them. “Hey guys.”

“Hey.” Luigi mutters from his position face down in the sand.

Cruz stares at Storm, then her eyes move to Lightning.

“Did you race?” She asks.

“No” Lightning answers. “I was just showing Storm how to race in the sand.”

She frowns. “You told him about that?”

Lightning stares at her, grin from before fading.

God, Storm wants to kick sand at her.

“Well, it’s not like it’s a big secret. Ask any old racer, they’d tell you the same thing I would. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t show him. Then he’d lose to you every time you raced on the beach.” Lightning responds.

Cruz purses her lips. “Fine.”

Lightning frowns, looking a little lost for what to do now.

Storm is having a difficult time doing nothing. He’s biting his tongue hard to distract himself. Cruz doesn’t have any right to act like Lightning’s advice is hers alone. He’s not her trainer, he’s her friend.

“Where’s Mater?” Lightning asks, thankfully switching the topic.

Luigi lifts his head up from the sand. “He said something about surfing?”

Storm’s never surfed in his entire life, he hopes Mater was only kidding.

Unfortunately, he sees Mater at the top of the sand dunes lugging multiple surfboards down the hill. Lightning runs off to help him and Storm begrudgingly follows suit.

Storm takes one of the boards from Mater.
“Where did you get these?” Storm asks, positive he didn’t see them earlier.

Mater throws him a side grin. “From the surf shop about a mile down the road. I’ve always wanted to try it, and there ain’t no ocean nearby Radiator Springs, so why not?”

Storm grimaces. Mater has a point, it is something Storm’s always been curious about. Growing up in Nebraska never presented many opportunities for him to go to the beach and surf.

Mater drags the boards over to Luigi and Guido, who’ve now set up the chairs they brought in a circle. Both men are shirtless, and when Storm gets closer he can see Luigi spraying himself with what he thinks is sunscreen until Guido starts talking.

“Ugh. Luigi keep that fake tanning spray away from me. I’d rather get my tan naturally.” Guido says, putting on a pair of dark shades.

“I’m telling you Guido, it’s not enough. You always look like a pale baby ghost even after you stay out in the sun all day.” Luigi mumbles.

“I do not.” Guido mutters, but Storm watches as he picks up the tanning spray and starts reading the labels on the back.

Mater, ignoring them, strips off his shirt and grabs a board. Then he heads toward the ocean. Lightning takes off his shirt too, and Storm makes himself look away at first. There’s too many people around them right now.

Lightning turns to face Cruz. “Are you coming in Cruz?”

“No thanks. I’ll race Storm again if he thinks he can handle the sand this time.”

Storm doesn’t take the bait this time. “No thanks, I think I’d rather surf.” He says, stripping off his shirt and tossing it aside. He grabs a board and follows Mater.

He doesn’t look back at Cruz, but he does hear Lightning a few steps behind him. Storm slows his gait so Lightning can catch up.

Lightning’s distracted looking ahead of him at the ocean, so Storm spares a brief glance over at him. The first thing he notices is Lightning’s abs. He’s seen them before for brief seconds, but that didn’t do them enough justice. Storm’s never seen abs that defined before on a racer Lightning’s age. Holy hell he doesn’t even look old. If people looked at him without knowing he was Lightning, Storm’s sure they would think he’s in his early twenties. His skin is so tan too. Storm doesn’t know how he managed to get such an even tan line when he wears T-shirts and jeans so often but damn Lightning looks good.

He rips his eyes away a second later, not wanting Lightning to see him staring at his chest.

When Storm turns his attention back to the water he sees Mater already in the ocean. He didn’t waste any time at all.

“I’ve never been surfing before.” Storm admits.

“You think I have? I live in Arizona.”

“I grew up in Nebraska!”

Lightning laughs. “Well, we can be bad at it together then.”
After a few minutes of being in the ocean, it’s evident that Storm and Lightning are not going to be bad at it together.

Because Lightning is crushing it. It’s completely unfair. He hasn’t fallen yet, while that seems to be the only thing Storm can do.

He and Mater watch as Lightning almost effortlessly stands up, making it look like he’s had years of experience surfing. Of course, he’d be amazing at it.

Mater suddenly pops his head out from underwater right near Storm, startling him.

“Hey!” Mater shouts.

Storm stares at him.

“Hey Storm, I’ve got an idea.”

He leans in and whispers in Storm’s ear.

When Lightning starts going out deeper to get another wave, Storm swims over to him.

“Hey, I thought you’ve never done this before!” Storm shouts, making Lightning glance over.

“I’m a fast learner.” Lightning says, smirking back at him.

Oh, now he’s in for it. Lightning stands up right when another wave is beginning to form, Storm moves closer for a better view.

He watches a look of complete shock pass on Lightning’s face as Mater pops out and grabs his foot. Lightning yelps and starts tilting to the side. Storm is too busy laughing to realize where Lightning’s falling. No, he doesn’t figure it out until Lightning falls right on top of him, and they both go under.

Storm guesses it’s instant karma that his mouth fills with salt water, and he comes up sputtering and coughing, hair covering his eyes.

He can hear Lightning yelling at Mater, but it doesn’t sound like he’s really mad.

Lightning turns to him, or at least Storm thinks he does. He can’t see past the dark of his hair covering his eyes.

“You alright Storm?” Lightning says, and Storm feels his hand brush Storm’s bangs aside so he can see.

Storm coughs. “I’m fine. Might have swallowed some salt water.”

“That’s what you get for conspiring with Mater.”

Storm narrows his eyes and splashes Lightning in retaliation.

Then an all-out war breaks out between the three of them for the next half hour or so. They pull each other off the boards, splash each other, and there was one horrifying moment where Mater was headed right for Storm as he finally stood up on the board, which ended up sending them both crashing into the sand.
They tire themselves out eventually and walk back to the shore, dragging the boards behind them.

Storm sits in one of the chairs and reclines it back, letting the sun warm his skin.

Lightning and Mater take a seat beside him and Storm hears Mater rustling around in what sounds like a cooler. Good, he needs a drink.

Storm can hear the metallic clink of bottles as Mater digs around in his bag.

“Want a beer Storm?” Mater asks.

It wasn’t the drink he was expecting, but he’ll take it.

“Yeah, sure I’ll have one.”

Mater passes it to him, and when Storm reaches out to take it he notices everyone is staring at him. Storm raises his eyebrows at them. “Can I help you?”

Lightning clears his throat. “How old are you again Storm?”

Storm smirks. “Just turned seventeen.” Then he cracks open the beer and takes a huge sip, making everyone else laugh at Lightning’s expression.

“You believed him Lightning!” Luigi says, continuing to crack up.

“Haha, very funny guys.” Lightning says, looking unamused.

Storm makes eye contact with him. “No, I’m twenty two really. I can drink.”

Lightning nods. “You had me worried I was friends with a seventeen year old Storm.”

“Yeah that 18 year age gap wouldn’t have been awkward at all” Cruz remarks, looking up from a magazine.

Storm pauses. 18 years. If he was seventeen an additional eighteen years would put Lightning at around 35 years old.

Since Storm’s twenty two, that puts their age gap at 13 years. That’s not a lot. Not to him. Would other people think it was a lot, he wonders. Would Lightning think it was a lot?

He looks over to Lightning, who takes a long sip of his drink then gives him a crooked smile.

No.

Storm doesn’t think so.

Even if Lightning’s not thinking about it like Storm’s thinking about it.

He’s the youngest out of everyone in the group, though Cruz doesn’t seem much older than he is. Lightning’s friends hardly act their age and Lightning doesn’t look old at all. So it’s not like he feels out of place being with them. It’s quite the opposite. Storm fits in more with Lightning and his friends better than most people his own age.

They all sit on the beach together for a while before Cruz leaves to go train, which Storm had no
issue with.

Instead, he sits in the circle with Lightning and his friends, drinking beer, eating snacks and letting the sun shine on him.

Mater passes him another beer and he feels a pleasant buzz running through his veins. He thinks it’s a mixture of the alcohol and genuine happiness.

Sitting with Lightning like this. Talking with him and laughing with him and his friends makes Storm wonder how he ever thought racing would be enough.

How he ever thought he would be fine with watching Lightning in the racecar next to him. Seeming so close but so far in reality.

Deciding to drive to Radiator Springs was the best idea he’s ever had.

Mater talks then, stopping Storm’s wandering mind.

“Alright y’all we better get this show on the road. Beach is getting dark soon and I’ve got to take the surfboards back.”

Lightning nods. “Yeah, we should head back.”

Luigi and Guido sigh in irritation. Storm can’t blame them.

He puts his shirt on over his now dry swim trunks and gets his keys.

Or at least tries to get his keys, because Lightning intercepts them.

“No way you’re driving. I have no idea what your tolerance is and the last thing your car needs is to get wrecked again. I’m driving you back.”

Lightning says firmly.

Lightning tosses Guido his own keys. “Guido drive my car back.”

Guido nods.

Storm sulks, and when they’re far enough away he whispers

“No way you’re driving. I have no idea what your tolerance is and the last thing your car needs is to get wrecked again. I’m driving you back.”

Lightning says firmly.

Lightning tosses Guido his own keys. “Guido drive my car back.”

Guido nods.

Storm sulks, and when they’re far enough away he whispers

“Admit it. You just wanted to drive my car again.” Storm teases.

Lightning firmly denies it, but the bottom of his mouth curves up in a smile so Storm knows he was partially right.

Lightning gets in the driver’s seat and Storm gets into the passenger’s side. It feels strange. No doubt Lightning felt the same way when Storm drove his car.

A Racer’s car is sacred to them, Storm’s the only one who’s ever drove his car before.

He has no doubts about it though. No worries letting Lightning drive his car.

He just leans back in the seat as Lightning drives.

“You’re the only person besides me who’s driven this car you know.” Storm says after a moment.
“Really?” Lightning asks, eyes reflecting surprise. Storm nods.

“Well, thanks for trusting me.”

“You trusted me.” Storm adds.

Lightning turns to glance at him, turning away to face the road.

He gets quieter.

“Sally never drove my car before. She never wanted to.” Lightning says, frowning like he didn’t mean to say it.

“Your girlfriend?” Storm asks quietly. He treads carefully here, not wanting to offend Lightning or make him stop talking.

“Well, ex girlfriend now.” Lightning says with a certain bitterness to it. Storm frowns. It feels wrong for Lightning to be bitter. He’s usually so happy, so confident.

“What happened?” Storm asks, curiosity overpowering the knowledge that he should be respectful.

“She...she didn’t. I didn’t want to give up racing.” Lightning corrects, blaming himself instead of her.

Lightning selfless that way. Of course he would take the blame.

Lightning continues. “I thought...I thought we’d get married you know.”

Storm digs his nails into the seat.

He takes a deep breath.

“It wouldn’t have been a good marriage then. Not if she didn’t want you to race. That’s who you are Lightning. Racing will always be a part of you.” Storm replies softly.

Lightning eyes are on the distance, and they reflect sadness in them.

He shakes it off after a moment.

“You’re right Storm. Sally and I just weren’t meant to be together. I guess nothing’s more important to us racers than racing.” Lightning says at the end, trying to ease the tension.

“Some things are.” Storm echoes, carefully choosing to look away. He doesn’t know if it’s the liquid courage from the beer that made him say that, but he knows he can’t look at Lightning. Everything would show in his eyes.

Lightning nods in agreement and Storm wishes for a moment he had another beer. Maybe that would have been enough for him to confess.

He bites his tongue, saving it for another day.

Instead, he drives to his house and gets out.

“You’re good to drive home right Storm?”
“Yeah, I’m good.” Storm nods.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”
Lightning leaves him then.

Storm starts his car and starts the drive back to his apartment.

He’s not worried. There will be a perfect time in the future for him to reveal how he feels. Right now, he's got all the time in the world.
Lightning doesn’t always sleep in, but today he knows he did because he can hear Guido yelling downstairs.

Normally Guido sleeps in the latest, but when Lightning looks over at the alarm clock by his bed he sees that it’s late morning. Meaning he did sleep in.

He goes downstairs quickly, trying to find the source of why Guido’s yelling.

He gets his answer after he walks into the kitchen to see Guido holding a phone to his ear, spatula in one hand and phone in the other as he’s trying to make pancakes and yell at whoever’s on the phone.

Lightning isn’t sure what’s going on until he hears Guido yell,

“I ALREADY TOLD YOU HE’S ASLEEP.”

Lightning grabs the phone away from him assuming whoever’s on the line wants to speak with him.

“Hello?” Lightning asks.

“Oh, Lightning. I knew I’d reach you eventually.”

The calm, collected voice identifies the caller as Mr. Sterling.

Lightning doesn’t know many other people that could listen to Guido scream at them and not lose their temper.

“Mr. Sterling?”

“Yes, that’s me. Sorry to bother you and your...friend Lightning but I just wanted to let you know I’m assigning a special trainer to help you on the simulator’s later.”

Lightning grimaces. The Simulator. He thought he was done with that already. It must be necessary for him to learn then if Mr. Sterling is assigning him a special trainer for it.

“Alright thank you, Mr. Sterling. I’ll be there shortly.”

Lightning hangs up, walking past Guido.

“Hey, I’m making pancakes!” He protests.

Luigi and Mater raise their eyes at him from the table.

“Sorry guys I’ve got to head out. I’ll catch up with you later.” Lightning says.
After a short trip, Lightning arrives in the training center.

When he walks into the main entrance he can see many young racers upstairs working out at the gym.

It’s not surprising. Racers need to be in good condition to handle racing. Not everything’s about the car.

He wonders if Storm’s here and has half a mind to go look for him when he hears someone introduce themselves.

“Hello, Mr. McQueen. I’ll be your personal trainer starting today.” A young man says to him.

Lightning gives him a glance over. He doesn’t look like somebody qualified to be his trainer. He looks young.

“Um, how old are you?” Lightning asks. He doesn’t want to be rude, but the last time he had a young trainer Lightning was the one doing the training. Though Cruz did help him the best she could.

His trainer laughs. “I’m 26 sir.”

Oh, so he’s around the same age as Cruz. It makes sense, considering most of the racers he’s seen here are young. No doubt Mr. Sterling wanted to hire young trainers to make it easier on them.

Because they understand next gen racing.

Not like him or Smokey, stuck in the racing of the past.

Lightning wonders what Doc would tell him if he was here. If there was ever a time he needed Doc’s advice...boy if this wasn’t it.

His trainer is young for sure, but it’s best to give him a chance. Storm’s four years younger than this guy, and he’s one of the best racers Lightning’s ever seen.

“If you’ll follow me this way Mr. McQueen.”

His trainer says.

Lightning follows him down the hallway. He’s a little confused. Last time he used the simulator near the main entrance.

“Hey, um what's your name?”

“My name is Brian sir.”

Lightning winces. He could do without the sir. He’s not that old right?

“Brian, why are we going back here? I thought the simulator was in the main gym near the entrance.”

Brian laughs, which Lightning thinks is strange because he didn’t say anything funny.

“That simulator is a tad too advanced for you Mr. McQueen. I was instructed to start you at a beginner’s level.”

Now that hurt. Lightning isn’t used to handling anything from a beginner’s level, let alone racing.
“We’ll begin over here.” Brian says, opening the door to a room containing a smaller simulator.

Lightning walks over, noting how this one looks similar to a video game. He’s supposed to sit in front of it and pretend to drive rather than actually driving.

It doesn’t make much sense to him, but that’s why he was assigned a trainer he guesses.

Lightning sits down in the chair, immediately frowning. The screen in front of him is meant to resemble the track, but it looks far from a real track. All the bright lights and icons on the screen are making him dizzy.

“Alright, Mr. McQueen. I want you to handle this just like you’re in a real race car.”

Brian starts the simulator and Lightning struggles right off the bat. He thought it would be easier this time around since he’s done it before, but apparently, his actual skill hasn’t improved.

He’s crashing into walls and other racers left and right, and somehow he accidentally drives off the track...again.

The icons on the screen tell him he’s running out of fuel, but instead of stopping in the pit like he would during a real race, the simulator tells him to push buttons.

He must look like he’s got no idea what to do with how he’s blindly pushing buttons to find the right ones and fumbling around the screen.

Eventually, he does so terribly that the simulator ends the race before he finishes.

“Most racers get the hang of this simulator rather quickly Mr. McQueen.”

Lightning feels his cheeks turn warm with embarrassment.

“You just need to think of it as real racing. That’s what’s holding you back. You aren’t treating the simulator for what it is.”

Lightning winces. He is trying to handle this like real racing, but it just isn’t making sense.

“Wow, I don’t know if I’ve ever heard anything as wrong as that.” Lightning hears from the door frame.

He whips his head around and sees Storm standing there.

He grins at him before he realizes Storm looks mad. He looks pissed, but not at him. Lightning follows Storm’s grey eyes to Brian, who looks considerably paler than before.

Storm’s arms are crossed, and he’s completely blocking the door. His height gives him quite the intimidating look and he gives Brian a fierce glare.

Brain stammers. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Storm states, not moving.

Lightning stands up.

“Storm, this is my personal trainer.”

Storm turns to glance at Lightning for a second, then turns back to Brian. Face colder than before.
“Oh, a personal trainer? Get lost. Lightning doesn’t need you.”

Brian looks like Storm just punched him in the gut, then regains his composure.

“Mr. Sterling assigned me as Lightning’s personal trainer.”

“Well, you can tell him Jackson Storm dismissed you from your duties. Now Get. Lost.” Storm says, firmly stating his last two words.

Brian leaves then, practically running out the door.

When he’s gone Lightning turns to Storm.

“What the hell was that Storm? He was training me!”

Storm turns to face him, grey eyes meeting his own.

“He was training you the wrong way Lightning.”

“What are you talking about?” Lightning asks.

Storm walks over to the simulator. “This isn’t anything like real racing.”

Lightning knew that. He knew that when he first sat down, but he listened to the trainer anyway.

Lightning sighs. “Yeah, I know. It wasn’t his fault though Storm. Mr. Sterling tried to help me but I’m just not good at the simulator. I never was.”

“That’s not true!” Storm insists, grabbing Lightning’s arm and pulling him over to the chair.

Lightning sits, or more like falls into the chair because Storm is so eager to have him sit on it.

Lightning frowns. “Storm…” he starts, but it’s clear Storm isn’t listening.

Storm’s hands land firmly on his shoulders, and Lightning stills beneath them. He leans past Lightning to set a race up for him on the simulator. From this distance, Lightning can smell his cologne. It’s nice, smells cool to him. Like winter or mint.

Storm leans back and puts his hands back on Lightning’s shoulders.

The race starts and Lightning begins to steer when Storm’s hands squeeze down.

“You’re too tense for starters.” Storm remarks, and Lightning realizes he’s right.

He’s never this tense during real racing. He must have been focusing too hard on trying to connect it to real racing.

Lightning takes a breath, trying to ease the tension in his body.

His car in the simulator is coming up on a turn, and Lightning readies himself to steer. He starts and probably gets only a quarter of the way through the motion before Storm squeezes his shoulder again, making him go still.

To his surprise, the car on the screen makes the turn perfectly. It doesn’t spin off the track like the last few times.

Lightning stares. “How did you…”
“It’s not like real racing at all Lightning. You’ve got to think of it more like a video game. When you steer in real life, you have to steer hard, otherwise, your car won’t make the turn in time. Here on the simulators though, even the slightest motion of a turn is enough for it to register.”

Lightning stares at the screen in awe. Storm’s right, and his simulator car easily glides on the track now.

For the next few races, Storm shows Lightning what to do on the simulator. When Lightning makes too harsh of a turn or motion Storm will squeeze his shoulder as an indicator to slow down.

And when his simulator car starts having icons appear on the screen, Storm shows Lightning exactly what buttons to push to get him more fuel, check his tire pressure, or anything else he might need.

After Lightning starts to get the hang of it, Storm removes his hands, letting Lightning race on his own.

He wins then, crossing the finish line of the simulator just like he would in a real race. He turns around, grinning like a madman at Storm.

“Storm! You’re a genius!”

Storm laughs. “I don’t know about that, but I have spent a lot of time on the simulator.”

Lightning grins. “Thanks for helping me.”

Storm nods. “Sure. Just for the record Lightning, no racer gets that on their first try.”

Lightning feels his face grow warm.

“You heard that?” Lightning asks, thinking back to when Brian told him most racers figure out the simulator pretty quickly.

Storm nods and Lightning wonders how long Storm stood outside before entering. He shakes it off though. He shouldn’t feel embarrassed. Storm wasn’t embarrassed yesterday when Lightning showed him how to race on the beach.

“Yeah well, he may have been right.” Lightning says.

Storm shakes his head. “No, he wasn’t. I’ve about had it with Mr. Sterling’s trainer’s.”

Lightning protests. “Hey come on, they do the best they can. Cruz wasn’t bad.”

It’s true that the trainer’s Lightning’s been offered so far had been...well less than helpful if he was being honest. Cruz did what she could, but his learning style had been different than what she tried to show him.

Storm says nothing to counter that, he does however add to it.

“The best they can isn’t good enough. You’ll be better off with this.” Storm adds, showing Lightning a copy of the training schedule Storm’s trainer made for them.

Looking at it, it already looks more efficient than what the other trainers planned for him.

“Well, let’s get started then.” Lightning says.
Storm shoots him a grin, and a few minutes later they’re both standing in the fitness center in workout clothes.

Lightning sees the other racers in here too, making him wonder what Sterling had been thinking. If everyone else was training this way, why wasn’t he?

He doesn’t waste time pondering it. Instead choosing to join Storm on the treadmill. The schedule is planned out to the T. A half hour of cardio to start, followed by weightlifting and other exercises.

Storm is on the treadmill next to him, but the amount of things he’s trying to do at once makes Lightning wonder how he’s staying focused.

In addition to running, Storm’s also listening to music and trying to have a conversation with him. Lightning turns over to ask Storm a question when he sees Storm throwing candy up in the air and catching it in his mouth. While he’s running.

“What are you doing?!” Lightning asks, question forgotten.

“Eating Skittles. Why, want one?” Storm asks, holding out the bag.

Lightning stares at him in disbelief.

“No, I don’t want one! Don’t eat those while you’re running you’ll choke!” Lightning yells.

Storm smiles. “You’re the one who’s choking. Why don’t you get your speed up?” Storm teases.

Lightning takes this as a challenge and makes the treadmill go faster than Storm’s.

Storm doesn’t change his own settings but instead starts throwing skittles at him.

“Hey!” Lightning yells, and Storm doesn’t waste the opportunity. He launches a skittle into Lightning’s mouth and starts cracking up. Lightning, too busy trying not to choke on the orange candy, stumbles on the treadmill and almost falls face first.

Storm laughs even louder, and Lightning opens his water bottle and sloshes the water at Storm in retaliation.

Storm stares at him in surprise as a streak of water hits him and makes his shirt wet.

He doesn’t say anything though, he just gets off the treadmill and switches to weight lifting. Lightning follows suit as he notices their cardio time is up.

He moves to weightlifting and notices he’s lifting a good 50 pounds more than Storm.

“Hey Storm, looking a little light over there.” Lightning teases, nodding to the amount on Storm’s bar.

Storm immediately adds more weight to it, and then when he tries to lift it back up can’t do it. Lightning is quick to stop laughing and help him lift it when he catches Storm’s face looking red with effort.

They have a truce after that and make their way to the cafeteria for a break.

The cafeteria is much nicer than Lightning expected. They’ve got personal chefs that will make
anything you ask for, so why is Lightning not surprised that he sees Storm eating chocolate cake.

“Why are you eating cake? They’ll make anything you ask for.” Lightning says, gesturing to his much healthier looking plate.

Storm scrunches his face. “That doesn’t taste as good.” Lightning rolls his eyes.

“Are you ever going to eat right?” He asks.

“I’ll eat healthy if you’re the one cooking.” Storm says, taking a bite of pure frosting.

Lightning winces at the taste of pure sugar.

“If that’s what it takes for you to eat right then I guess I’ll have to cook for you sometime.” Lightning says, half kidding.

“Sounds good to me.” Storm says, completely serious.

Lightning ponders saying something else before he looks up to see Cruz take a seat next to them.

“Hey, Cruz!” He greets.

“Hi, Lightning.”

She sits next to him, glancing over at Storm.

“Hello, Cruz.” Storm greets.

“Hey.” She responds, rather unenthusiastic if you ask Lightning. Storm’s face takes on a look of displeasure.

Maybe he’s upset Cruz isn’t more excited to see him. It would make sense if he liked her.

Cruz joins them for lunch and the table is very quiet. Actually, the whole cafeteria is quiet, even the other racers.

Until Lightning hears it.

A very feminine voice screech out “STORMMMMMMMM!!!”

Lightning looks over to see a flash of bright pink, slam into Storm in a backwards hug. Storm’s eyes are blown wide and he turns around opening his mouth to yell at the girl before a look of recognition passes his face.

Then he turns around with a look of disinterest.

When Lightning gets a better look at the girl he sees she has bright blonde hair with streaks of pink in it. She’s also wearing a fully pink racing uniform, with little stars and galaxies on it.

“Um. Who are you?” Lightning asks, looking at her in surprise.

He can’t believe this girl just hugged Storm, because from what Lightning’s seen Storm doesn’t like to be touched.

“Oh My Gosh! I’m sorry I should have introduced myself!!! My name’s Emily, and my racing
name is Pink Cosmos! But I’m better known as Storm’s best friend!!!

“She’s not my best friend.” Storm states, looking annoyed.

“Yeah he’s right...I’m his only friend!” Emily adds, to which Storm says nothing to.

Lightning invites her to sit with him, which she gladly accepts.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you Mr. McQueen! I heard you were coming to train here! I didn’t know Storm was coming too!”

Lightning stares at her. To be honest he’s in shock Storm knows somebody this friendly and bubbly. She seems like the type of person Storm would go out of his way to avoid. Let alone be best friends with.

“How do you know each other?” Lightning asks.

“Well!” She starts.

“Stop...I’ll tell them.” Storm interjects. “You’ll never stop talking if you tell the story.”

Emily doesn’t look upset at all about his interruption, making Lightning wonder if she’s the type of person to be so happy nothing could faze her. Which is the only way he could see her being able to be around Storm.

“We went to a racing academy together.” Storm mumbles.

“You went together?” Cruz asks, seeming to share Lightning’s disbelief that they’re friends.

“Well, we met at the academy! Storm was always alone because he looked at everybody with that scary glare of his, but he’s really nice underneath! One day my race car broke down in the rain and Storm helped me fix it!!! After he fixed it I said thank you and that I would treat him to coffee and he said leave me alone. We’ve been best friends ever since!!!”

Lightning has a very difficult time containing his laughter when he looks at Storm’s face. Judging by his expression everything she said is true.

“Sounds like you.” He says to Storm, and Storm responds by sticking his tongue out at him.

“What are you doing here?” Storm asks, turning to Emily.

“I’m going to start training here! Isn’t that great?!!!”

The look on Storm’s face was implication enough.

“I’m out of here. See you guys later.” Storm says, getting up and leaving.

Emily’s bright smile doesn’t falter as she says bye to him.

Lightning frowns, “Sorry about him.” He mutters. Someone really needs to explain to him how to talk to girls.

She shakes her head. “No, he’s always like that! But don’t let it fool you he does enjoy my company. Back at the academy, we would always hang out together!!”

Lightning nods. He believes Storm does enjoy her company. Otherwise, there’s no way he would
have let her hug him.

“Anyway! I just wanted to come say hi! I’ll catch you guys later!” Emily says, running off.

Leaving Lightning and Cruz wondering what just happened.

“That was bizarre.” Lightning states.

Cruz nods. “Yeah can’t believe he even has one friend. Poor girl should get away while she can.”

Lightning frowns. “Storm’s not that bad. He’s nice once you get to know him Cruz.” He says.

Lightning knew Cruz wasn’t exactly fond of Storm, but it almost sounds like she doesn’t like him at all.

Cruz rolls her eyes.

Lightning winces, thinking of Storm and how he might like her.

“Come on Cruz, you said you’d give him a chance.”

Cruz nods. “Yeah you’re right I’ll give him a chance.”

She says, smiling.

“Anyway, I’ll see you later Lightning.” She says, leaving the table.

Lightning figures he might as well leave too. His training schedule alternates between physical exercises and racing, so it’s not like he has to stay.

Instead, he walks through the training center and back to his car.

On the way he finds himself thinking about Storm.

Before he thought Storm might like Cruz. Now though he isn’t sure. Especially with this new girl. She and Storm knew each other before this, and Emily said they would hang out a lot. Maybe they were...together?

Lightning doesn’t think so. He doesn’t know though, and for some reason, a tiny part of him resents the idea of Storm dating either of them.

He shakes it off, figuring it was a brief moment of wanting Storm to have a nice girlfriend. Both of them are plenty nice though, so Lightning gets rid of the resentment.

After all, what reason does he have to resent that?
Chapter 13

Storm isn’t one to talk about his feelings. No, he bottles them up inside keeping them from everything and everyone. He’s usually good at hiding it too. It takes a very observant person to figure out Storm. And by the looks of this text message, it didn’t take long for someone to figure it out.

Storm wakes up greeted by the light of his phone, and a message.

He reads it.

“Lightning’s looking cute today.”

That’s all it says, with the smirking emoji next to it.

Shit.

Who could it be? Who figured him out?

He looks up at the name and lets out a sigh of relief when he sees it’s from Emily.

Loud and bubbly as she is she won’t say anything about this. Storm knows that.

Shut your mouth. He texts back and starts getting dressed to go to the training center. Judging by her text, Lightning’s already there.

Storm gets a late start today, and it’s already lunchtime by the time he gets to the center.

He makes his way to the cafeteria to find Lightning and Cruz sitting at a table.

He walks over and sits next to Lightning, wondering where Emily is.

“Where’s Pink Cosmos?” he asks, and he sees Lightning smile at the name. It’s a little ridiculous no matter how you look at it, though it does suit her personality well.

“She said something about getting coffee?” Lightning says looking around.

A few minutes later she does indeed walk in with coffee. It’s not from the center though. She went out to Starbucks to get it.

She sits down at the table and passes him a Caramel Frappuccino with extra whipped cream. Looks like she hasn’t forgotten his favorite drink.

Lightning stares at it.

“What is that?” He asks.

Storm smiles. “Try a sip.”

Lightning raises his eyebrow and takes the smallest sip of his drink.

He makes a face. “That is pure sugar.”

“That’s the idea.” Storm says grinning.

“Oh, I brought one for you too, and for you!” Emily says, handing Lightning and Cruz a coffee.
“Oh um, thank you.” Lightning says, staring at it.

Lightning makes a face at the coffee and Storm leans over to nudge his shoulder.

“That one should be normal.” Storm says with a playful grin.

Lightning rolls his eyes and takes a sip, and nods his head to confirm it is just regular coffee.

Its black coffee though so Lightning gets up to go get a packet of sugar.

“Lightning get me a cookie!” Storm calls out, watching Lightning shake his head at the request.

Cruz frowns.

“Is everything okay Cruz?” Emily asks, concern written on her face.

Cruz smiles. “Everything’s fine. I was just wondering if Storm’s capable of doing anything on his own.”

Storm’s teeth grit together. Cruz is turning out to be a real pain, and he’s got to be careful with her. Lightning is very close with her, all it would take is for Lightning to catch Storm do something mean to her, then he’s in for it.

Emily blinks, confusion written on her face.

Storm frowns. When he looks over he sees Lightning’s still preoccupied, which presents him with a good opportunity here. If Cruz is looking for him to be obnoxious, then oh boy he’ll be obnoxious.

He laughs. “Why would I need to do anything on my own? I’ve got it all. Rich sponsors, fancy car, fame, hell I’ve even got the woman who lives next door to cook for me.” Storm says cockily, adding that part in on a whim. It’s technically true, just not that way she’ll take it.

Cruz looks like she’s about to explode.

Storm doesn’t say anything else, instead, he takes a large sip of his drink just in time for when Lightning rejoins them.

“Hey guys what’s going on.” Lightning says, passing Storm a cookie.

Cruz frowns at the interaction.

“Oh not much. Storm was just telling us about the woman who lives next door to him and cooks for him.” Cruz says smiling.

Shit.

Karma’s a bitch, Storm thinks when he watches Lightning’s eyebrows crease together.

“Really? That’s nice of her.” Lightning remarks, ripping his sugar packet open.

God, now he’s done it.

He catches Emily throw him a glance that reads clear enough, nice one idiot.

He meets Cruz’s gaze and sees her raise her eyebrows as if to say your move Storm.

Oh it’s on.
Storm has half a mind to challenge her to another race right here, but he’s interrupted by someone joining the table.

Mr. Sterling, clad in a shiny grey suit, who takes a seat next to Cruz.

“How are my favorite racers doing today?” Mr. Sterling asks.

Storm fights the urge to be sarcastic.

“Good.” the three other racers say, while Storm levels Mr. Sterling with a glare.

He doesn’t notice though, seeming more interested in turning his attention toward Lightning.

“Lightning, Brian told me you were...displeased with the simulator training.” Mr. Sterling says.

Lightning opens his mouth to respond, but Storm beats him to it.

“Clearly he didn’t listen very well then, because I was the one displeased with the way he was training Lightning.”

Mr. Sterling turns to him, a pleasant look on his face despite the obvious anger in his eyes at being challenged.

“Ah, Storm. He did indeed tell me it was you who dismissed him, but with all due respect, you don’t have the authority to do that.”

Lightning looks nervously between them, Cruz and Emily both silent in their seats.

“You’re right of course Mr. Sterling. I don’t have the authority to do that, but believe me when I say I can tell the difference between a real trainer and a fraud.” Storm says, glancing at Cruz for the last part.

Mr. Sterling’s face remains calm, but Storm can see he’s angry. It’s not likely many people challenge him.

Lightning speaks up then. “Sorry Mr. Sterling, Storm didn’t mean to cause any problems. He just found an easier way to train me on the simulator without a trainer. We didn’t mean to insult anyone right Storm?”

Lightning says, kicking his foot.

Storm nods.

Mr. Sterling face shifts completely back to its happy look.

“Ah well, don’t worry about it Lightning. You should train whichever way you see fit. If Storm is so displeased with your training, perhaps he can oversee it instead”

Mr. Sterling turns to him, with an Icy glare in his eyes.

He leaves then, and Storm watches relief flicker over Lightning’s face.

He elbows Storm. “Cool it! He owns this place you know.” Lightning whispers.

“I thought it was your training center.” Storm teases.
Lightning raises an eyebrow. “It might be dedicated to me but it’s not mine. Now you’re stuck training me you know.”

Storm smiles. “Fine by me.”

Cruz clears her throat.

“You shouldn’t make Mr. Sterling angry Storm.”

Storm rolls his eyes. “Whatever.”

Cruz gets up and walks off leaving the three of them.

“Be nice to her.” Lightning warns.

“I’m very nice.” Storm says, taking a bite of his cookie.

He almost spits it out.

“Ew! This is raisin!”

Emily laughs.

“Oatmeal raisin.” Lightning corrects.

Storm pushes the cookie away and takes an extra large sip of his drink, making Lightning scrunch up his face.

“Alright, that’s enough sugar for you. You’re training me now remember? I don’t need you bouncing off the walls.”

Lightning stands up and Storm follows. It’s back to the training schedule for them.

Storm looks at the schedule, today instead of physical training they’re supposed to be racing. Real racing on the track instead of the simulators.

Lightning looks pleased about it, and Storm’s not complaining.

Until they get to the track and Storm sees Cruz’s bright yellow car on it.

Storm takes it back. He’d much rather be on the simulators.

She pulls off to the side for a pit stop and Lightning calls out to her.

“Hey, Cruz!” He says, despite seeing her a few minutes ago.

Cruz notices them and walks over.

“Are you guys going to race?” Cruz asks.

Lightning nods. “Yeah, we were going to do a few laps.”

“I wouldn’t bother Lightning. There’s no point in these short distance races when someone’s got a faster car than you.” Cruz looks at him.

Storm’s hands curl into fists. So what if his car is faster? That doesn’t mean he’s a better racer.
Lightning frowns, and he brings his hand up to rub the back of his head. Storm’s worried he’s hurt by that before he speaks.

“Well, I don’t think that’s entirely true Cruz. I mean you beat Storm in the Florida 500, and his car’s faster.”

Storm’s still pissed about that by the way. His first Piston Cup was so close and it was ripped away by Cruz. He never told Lightning about why he really lost the race, because I was so scared you were done racing forever, he thinks.

When he saw Lightning in the crew pit...out of his own car and talking to Cruz through his headset Storm was much too busy worrying about the implications of that than winning the race. Winning the Florida 500 hadn’t mattered to him at the time, not when he thought about how Lightning was forced from his place just like that. How after all those years of racing he was going to give it up.

Storm’s worked too hard to get Lightning back here, and he’s not about to let Cruz, or Mr. Sterling, or anyone else make Lightning doubt himself.

Cruz speaks up. “Yes, I did beat Storm before, but I’ve got a newer car Lightning. It’s much more suited to Today’s racing.”

Storm can feel his fingernails indenting his skin with how hard he’s forming a fist right now.

“I’ve got a proposition then.” Storm says, trying to keep his voice even.

Cruz turns to look at him. “Since you think my car’s so fast, I’ll take Lightning’s car.”

“So, I race in my car, and you race in Lightning’s?” Cruz asks.

“What makes you think you’re allowed to drive Lightning’s car?” Cruz asks, and for once something she said makes sense.

Storm turns to Lightning, frown on his face.

Shoot. He should have asked him first.

“Lightning I..” He starts before Lightning interrupts.

“No it’s alright. You can drive my car, I trust you.” Lightning says, holding out the keys.

Storm takes them and mentally kicks himself. Next time he needs to ask, not just assume. This is Lightning’s racecar, not a toy.

“You’re on Storm.” Cruz says going to her car.

Oh it’s on, alright.

Storm gets in Lightning’s car, admiring it as the strong engine roars to life when he starts it. Storm’s car is designed to be lighter, faster, quieter, but Lightning’s car is a thing of beauty. It’s exactly what a traditional race car should be, and Storm’s spent a good amount of his childhood wanting to drive this exact car.

He places his hands on the steering wheel in preparation. Before he’s only driven Lightning’s car off the track, which is very different from racing. He didn’t have to worry about speed or gas or any of that, but now he does.
Fortunately though, Cruz signals that they’ll do five laps around the track.

Oh, Storm sees what she’s doing. To be honest five laps is the perfect set up for her plan. Technically speaking Cruz’s car should be a little faster than Lightning’s, meaning if she got a large enough lead in the beginning, she’d have this race in the bag. Storm isn’t too keen on letting that happen.

This race is serious. If he loses in Lightning’s car, Storm won’t be the only one feeling that loss. He has to win this. He has to.

This time, they won’t need Lightning to announce the start of the race. They’ve got an automatic timer and countdown clock up on one of the stands next to the finish line. There should be cameras too, so there will be no confusion to who wins.

The timer counts down, and Storm watches it intensely. He’s fully focused right now, foot on the pedal just waiting for the clock to get to zero.

As soon as the number appears, Storm’s foot slams the gas pedal. He gains speed rapidly and takes a brief second to see Cruz practically next to him. Damn, he was hoping to have a better lead. Storm’s in the middle of the track now. He doesn’t want Cruz to take the inside, but he knows full well he’d need to speed up if she did.

Cruz comes dangerously close to the car, forcing Storm to move out of the way unless he wants to scratch up Lightning’s car. She continues moving past him to the inside of the track, and Storm realizes what a genius move it was.

He can’t risk getting too close, because he’s driving Lightning’s car. Lightning who just minutes before told him he trusted Storm enough to drive his car. Storm imagines Lightning’s face if he sees his race car scratched all along the side. It’s easy enough to fix, but Storm doesn’t want any damage coming to the car. Not at all.

Cursing, he steers the car further to the outside when Cruz threatens to scrape the car again, moving her car towards the middle.

Damn it, She’s playing him.

The second lap comes up quickly, and Cruz passes him completely now that she’s taken the inside route.

Every time he gets close she slows down and threatens to hit him.

He’s running out of options as the number of laps gets higher.

Then he thinks of something.

Storm speeds up taking the inside.

He watches Cruz notice him, and then all too predictably brake in front of him.

Missing her car by mere inches, Storm swerves to the side and speeds up, willing Lightning’s car to go faster.

Faster it goes, the car flies by, leaving Cruz a good distance behind.

Though when Storm looks to see how fast he’s going, he’s shocked to see the number above the
steering wheel.

196 Miles Per Hour.

Storm frowns, It’s fast alright, but not Lightning’s top speed. Storm’s watched Lightning go over 200 Miles Per Hour before, so why is it under that? Storm frowns and pushes down on the gas pedal. To his surprise, he’s pushing it down as far as it can go.

Storm doesn’t have time to dwell on it, because the finish line comes into view. Cruz is gaining on him, he realizes. Her car speeds up and is now only a few feet behind Lightning’s.

Storm presses harder on the pedal, but the speed stays the same.

He passes the finish line, winning by around a second.

He pulls the car off to the side and gets out. He catches Lightning grinning at him.

He gets out and watches Cruz look at him in frustration, before leaving angrily.

Lightning walks over.

“Hey nicely done. Though I wish Cruz wasn’t so upset by it.” He says, trailing off to see Cruz walking away.

“She’ll get over it.” Storm says, thinking of how she tried to purposely damage Lightning’s car.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Lightning says.

“Anyway. Here’s your keys back.” Storm says passing Lightning them.

“Did you want to race?” Lightning asks him, unsure.

Storm shakes his head, “No but I’d like to sit in the car while you race if you don’t mind.”

Lightning shrugs. “Fine by me.”

So Storm follows him to his car.

Once Lightning starts driving his suspicions are confirmed. Even when Lightning is pushing all the way down on the gas the numbers remain the same. 196.

Something isn’t right.

“Hey, um can’t your car go faster?” Storm asks.

Lightning shakes his head. “When it was newer it could go faster. I guess now it’s just too old.” Lightning says.

Storm stays silent. He doesn’t know everything about cars, but he does know some things about Race cars. As far as he knows, Race cars aren’t built to slowly lose speed over the years. Especially ones as well made as Lightning’s car. Race cars are built to last, or they just completely break down. There are usually no in betweens. Normally he would shake it off and think it’s nothing, but he can’t help the strange feeling in his gut that maybe something is wrong.

Storm keeps quiet for now, it wouldn’t do any good to worry Lightning. Especially if there was nothing wrong.
Lightning drives around the track a few times, and Storm notes his car is much better at drifting than his own. Though that’s already been proven by Lightning not spinning off the desert track when they raced in Radiator Springs.

Lightning calls it quits after a few more minutes and returns his car to its spot off the track.

Storm and Lightning leave the training center after that, Lightning calls out to him he’ll see him later.

Storm waste no time, he pulls out his phone and dials a number, waiting patiently for it to ring.

He holds his breath as he waits for the other person to answer, praying Charlie isn’t asleep right now.

After another two rings a familiar voice answers.

“Hello?”

Storm lets out a breath of relief. “Oh good, Charlie. Listen, how much longer before you make a new engine for Lightning?”

Storm asks, remembering how a few weeks ago he and Lightning drove to Nebraska wanting Charlie to make a new part for Lightning’s car.

Storm can practically hear Charlie’s concern through the phone. “Is everything alright?”

Storm nods. “Everything’s fine I just...I think something’s wrong with Lightning’s car. Maybe it’s the engine I’m not sure. The next racing season’s going to start soon and I just...look the sooner you can get here to check it out the better.”

Charlie’s silent for a moment. “Alright Jackson, I’ll get there as soon as I can. Try not to worry too much.”

Charlie hangs up, leaving Storm to his thoughts. He tries not to worry about it on the drive home. Things will work themselves out. He has no doubt Charlie will get here and figure out what’s wrong with Lightning’s car. He’s got nothing to worry about.
Chapter 14

Lightning, looking at his schedule for today realizes he doesn’t need to go in and train. Initially, he thought this schedule would be packed with exercise routines, racing, simulator training and more. So far that has been the case, but today the schedule is empty.

Not that he minds. Training is all well and good and everything, but he likes taking a break every now and then. Normally he’d be in Radiator Springs around this time of year since the next racing season doesn’t start for another few weeks.

The more he thinks about it, it’s probably better he’s training here in Florida. Don’t get him wrong, Lightning loves Radiator Springs...but when he’s there for extended periods it's easy for him to get distracted…

One year in the break between seasons Lightning can’t even remember racing. All he did with his free time was tip cows with Mater and hang out with the rest of his friends in Radiator Springs. They goofed off the whole time, and the only time Lightning was ever really racing was when they decided on a road trip and he refused to drive below a certain speed because otherwise, it would have taken the whole summer!

That was when things were easier though. When he didn’t have real competition, well, other than Cal and Bobby. Lightning still can’t understand why they left, but it’s not like he blames them. He tried to do the same thing if he was being honest. He had the same self doubting moments they had when they quit racing. Lightning would have been retired in Radiator Springs by now if not for Storm.

He tries to picture it. Him alone in Radiator Springs. Well, he wouldn’t technically be alone because he’d have all his friends. Still though, Lightning doesn’t know what to think of it.

“Hey Mater? What do you think life would be like if I did actually retire a few weeks ago?” Lightning says from his seat at the table. Mater’s sitting across from him, and they both have mugs of coffee and a box of donuts between them.

“Well, gee I don’t know buddy. Why are ya asking?”

Lightning shakes his head. “I’m not planning on it if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m just curious what I’d be doing now.”

“Probably tipping cows with me.” Mater says.

Lightning laughs. “Come on Mater we haven’t done that in years.”

Mater looks at him thoughtfully. “Well, I guess you’d be hanging out with us. Nothing special there. If you did retire, no doubt Luigi and Guido would be back home too.”

Lightning nods. It sounded nice in theory but, he wonders if he would be bored.

“You’d be bored outta your mind McQueen.” Mater says knowingly.

“I wouldn’t be bored.” Lightning says, more for the purpose of wanting to convince Mater otherwise.

“You kiddin me? You saw how bored Doc was when he wasn’t training you at least.”
Lightning nods reluctantly. Mater does have a point. Doc did seem pretty bored when he wasn’t training Lightning. He wonders if he’d feel the same way. If the only moments he’d ever feel truly alive was when he was coaching Cruz. If you know, he had decided to go down the retirement path a few weeks ago.

“Besides McQueen. You can’t quit now or Storm will drag you back to the race by your feet.” Mater says with a laugh.

He has a point. Lightning wouldn’t put it past Storm to physically force him back to racing if he needed to.

“Yeah, he probably would Mater.”

Mater pauses, leaning his head back against the couch.

“What do you think he’s up to now?” Mater asks

Lightning shrugs.

“I’m not sure, probably sleeping.” Lightning says looking at his watch.

“Oh.” Mater replies.

“We should do something.” Mater adds.

“Do something?” Lightning asks.

“Yeah.” Mater responds.

Lightning frowns and turns to see Luigi coming down the steps, Guido trailing behind him.

“What are we talking about?” Luigi asks from the table.

“I want to do something fun.” Mater responds.

“Like what?” Guido asks.

Mater ponders it for a minute, then a sly smile appears on his face. He leans over to whisper it to Luigi who nods enthusiastically, then whispers it to Guido.

Lightning stares at them. “Are you going to let me in on the secret?”

“Nope.” Mater says.

“What?!”

“It’ll be more fun as a surprise!” Mater says, and then the three of them are rushing upstairs to get changed leaving Lightning in his seat to wonder what they could possibly be so excited about.

Then suddenly three of his friends are rushing downstairs and into the car. Mater’s at the wheel, surprisingly. Even though they aren’t driving the Tow Truck.

Despite Lightning asking numerous times where they’re going, none of his friends are inclined to tell him.

Soon though, they pull up to a familiar building.
Storm’s Building.

“What are we doing at Storm’s building?”

“Well we can’t go without him, he’s part of the gang now!” Mater says.

That’s news to Lightning. He’s a little surprised Storm’s addition to the “gang.” Luigi, Guido and Mater are usually very selective on who joins their tight-knit grip, though he can’t say he minds that Storm’s a part of it now.

When Lightning looks around the car, none of his friends get out.

“Aren’t you going to go get him?” Lightning asks.

“You should do it.” Mater replies.

“Yeah, you’re closest with him!” Luigi adds.

Huh, Lightning wouldn’t say he’s closest with him exactly...but he’s technically spent the most time with Storm. He’s probably talked the most to him too.

Guess he is closest to him then.

Lightning sighs and gets out of the car to go inside. After takes the elevator and waits for it to get to the fourth floor, Lightning knocks on Storm’s door and patiently waits for him to answer. While he’s waiting he hears the door next to him open. Lightning turns around and sees an elderly looking woman holding a plate of cookies. Oh, she must be Storm’s neighbor.

She turns to walk over to Storm’s apartment door when she notices him.

“Hello.” Lightning greets politely.

“Oh! Hello, you must be a friend of Jackson’s.” The woman exclaims brightly in a sweet voice.

Jackson? He thinks. Oh, right that’s Storm’s real name.

Lightning nods.

“Oh how nice, Jackson’s such a nice boy. I’m so glad his friends are visiting him.”

She moves forward then and knocks louder on Storm’s door.

“Jackson! Come get the door your friend is out here waiting! I baked some Snickerdoodles for you!”

Lightning looks down at the cookies. She made those for Storm?

Wait a minute.

Lightning thinks back to yesterday at the training center when Cruz told him in a distinctly unhappy tone that Storm’s female neighbor cooks for him. Lightning was expecting...something different because of the way it was implied. Lightning thought Storm brought up his neighbor to make Cruz jealous, he certainly didn’t expect this sweet old lady who looks to be around eighty years old.

A slow smile curves on his face as he hears Storm coming to get the door. The door opens, and
when Storm glances at Lightning his grey eyes widen in surprise.

The old woman walks right inside, stepping past Storm.

Lightning raises his eyebrows and watches as a light red flushes Storm’s face. He invites Lightning inside, where he sees the old woman place the cookies onto the counter.

“Well I won’t stay long today Jackson, I’m sure your friend wants to go out and have fun!” The woman says smiling.

Storm’s face looks more embarrassed than Lightning’s ever seen it.

“Thanks, Mrs. C.” Storm says when she sees herself out.

The minute she leaves Lightning rounds on Storm with a smirk on his face.

“So,” He starts “That’s the woman who cooks for you?”

Storm’s face is thirteen different shades of red, but he busies himself with eating a cookie so he doesn’t have to answer.

Lightning continues his teasing, “You know, I think it’s very romantic.”

Storm starts choking on the cookie, face turning a darker tone of red.

“Shut up.” Storm says, getting a glass of water.

“No seriously, I didn’t peg you as the type of guy who likes older women.” Lightning adds, trying not to laugh.

Storm levels him with a glare. “Who said anything about liking older women?” He retorts.

Lightning pauses, he was only kidding. Storm probably just didn’t want him getting the wrong impression.

“Alright take it easy I’m just kidding.” Lightning responds.

Storm glances at him and takes another cookie, motioning for Lightning to take one too.

“Why are you here anyway?” Storm asks.

“Mater wants to do something fun, he wanted to get you since you’re a part of the gang now.” Lightning says, taking a bite of the cookie.

It’s delicious. Granted probably loaded with sugar and butter and all kinds of unhealthy stuff, but it might be the best cookie he’s ever eaten.

“So what are we doing?” Storm asks.

“I’m not sure, Mater wouldn’t tell me.”

Storm nods and grabs his wallet.

“Though maybe if you’re lucky, it’ll be the senior center, that way you can get a new girlfriend!”

Storm pushes him out the door.
By the time they make it down the stairs, (albeit with Storm trying to trip him) they agreed to a truce and Lightning promised he wouldn’t say anything to his friends about what just happened and promised not to make any more jokes about Storm’s potential love interest with the elderly.

“Hey, Storm!” Mater greets.

“Hi, Mater.” Storm responds getting into the car, all traces of his former embarrassment gone from his face.

Lightning tries asking where they’re going numerous times, although he’s met with no answers.

“Give it up McQueen.” Storm mutters from beside him.

Lightning sighs, Mater’s always been good at keeping secrets.

Fortunately, after another few minutes, they arrive at their destination.

Lightning looks outside and is met with...A Go-Kart place.

He looks over to see Storm as equally confused about the location.

“Mater, what are we doing here?” Lightning says.

Guido snickers and Luigi hits Mater.

“Told you he wouldn’t like it.”

Mater brushes his arm off feigning hurt from Luigi’s hit before turning around.

“Come on it’ll be fun!” He says.

Lightning’s face is unamused while Storm looks like he’s about to laugh.

“Mater! We’re professional Racers and you want us to go Go Karting?!”

“They have mini golf too!” Mater adds.

Storm laughs.

Lightning elbows him.

“You can’t be serious guys.” Lightning says. Imagine if someone saw them there, racing on Go Karts like little kids!

“I’m always serious buddy!” Mater says, getting out of the car, leaving them with no choice but to follow.

He turns to Storm who shrugs his shoulders and follows suit. Lightning joins them.

Walking around the Go Kart place, it luckily doesn’t look like there are too many people there.

Mater waste no time walking up to the ticket booth and buying tickets before Lightning can talk him out of it.

“Mater...”

“Come on McQueen it’ll be a blast! Besides, you’ll be great at it!”
Lightning sighs. The things he does for his friends. After complaining under his breath Lightning follows his friends to one of the Go Kart tracks. After Mater gives their tickets to the teenager working the ride, who gives them a weird glance, they pick their cars.

Lightning is drawn to a red one instantly, and he sees Storm choosing a black one near him. How fitting.

They look ridiculous right now, and Storm’s so tall that his knees are practically hitting his chest with how much he needs to bend them to reach the pedal.

Despite feeling ridiculous Lightning laughs. He’ll be the first to admit his friends are a little out there, but that’s what makes life so exciting.

Storm revs his engine, and the sound it makes is laughably quiet compared to their real cars, but Lightning revs his right back before the race starts, and he and Storm share a grin.

Lightning doesn’t really know when the race started, because there’s no indicator like on the real track. All he knows is that Mater slammed on the gas pedal before him, and now he’s in the lead.

Lightning hits his own gas pedal, and for some reason he expected the Kart to go just as fast as his racecar. He looks over to Storm to see a similar look of confusion on his face. That’s what years of racing does to your brain, he guesses.

After a few minutes on the track, Lightning and Storm quickly gain the lead. Lightning looks over to see Storm right beside him and then he watches as Storm, with a wry grin, swerves over to his car.

Lightning panics and on instinct moves his car out of the way, years of racing instinct forcing him to move the car despite knowing that a Go Kart hitting another Go Kart shouldn’t do any real damage.

Storm laughs and Lightning frowns, swerving back and bumping into his car. Storm and Lightning are too busy laughing and trying to push each other into the walls to see Luigi, Guido and Mater coming up quickly from behind.

Lightning doesn’t realize his friends are there before something soft and heavy hits him in the back of the head. He frowns in confusion before feeling water drench the top of his head. He’s looking around wondering if it started to rain before he sees one hit Storm.

Lightning sees the bright orange orb hit Storm on the shoulder, drenching his shirt. Storm looks at Lightning in confusion before they both look behind them and see Mater, Luigi and Guido each holding a bag of water balloons.

The three of them howl with laughter and Lightning yells out in protest

“Are you guys serious?!”

Mater answers by throwing another water balloon, making Lightning swerve his car out of the way.

“Did they really want to come here to throw water balloons at us?!” Storm yells, trying to evade one Luigi throws.

Lightning grimaces. Of course they did.

Lightning’s waiting for one of the employees to yell at them before he realizes there’s no one
around them. Of course that’s the case.

Storm speeds up, motioning for Lightning to follow. Lightning joins him and Storm looks behind
them to see Luigi, Mater and Guido only a few feet behind them.

“We need a strategy!” Storm yells, dodging another water balloon.

Lightning nods. “I’ve got a plan, just follow my lead!”

Lightning veers off to the left side of the track, watching as Storm took the hint and veered right.

Mater and Guido both veered right following Storm, and when Lightning looked behind him he
noticed Luigi was distracted staring at them.

Perfect.

Lightning slows down next to Luigi’s kart and reaches over to grab the bag of balloons.

Fortunately, he grabs the bag before Luigi sees him, unfortunately, Guido noticed what he was
doing at the last second and Lightning received a water balloon right to the face.

The lukewarm water completely drenches his face and shirt, leaving him to blindly steer for a
minute.

He blinks the water away, and Storm drives up next to him.

“Nice one Lightning!”

Lightning nods, trying to focus on driving with one hand and wiping the water out of his eye with
the other one.

Mater is relentless though and launches another at his face. Lightning shuts his eyes and braces for
the impact before seconds pass and nothing happens. He opens his eyes to see that Storm
intercepted it and launches it back at Mater with the speed that might make some baseball teams
want to recruit him as a pitcher.

Mater yells when the balloon makes contact with the back of his head.

“Way to go Storm!” Lightning yells out, and Storm looks back at him with a blinding grin.

Lightning passes him some more of the balloons, and then they retaliate.

The water balloon battle continues for another few laps until both sides realize they’ve run out of
ammunition. The employee, now finally back motions for them to drive off to the side and park the
Go Karts.

The victor is clear. Storm and Lightning are drenched from head to toe and Luigi, Mater and Guido
only appear to be minorly soaked.

“We won!” Mater says, high fiving his team.

“You guys had more people!” Lightning insists.

“And more balloons!” Storm adds.

“And the element of surprise!” Lightning continues.
Mater chuckles. “I think you’re both just sore losers.” Mater teases, leaving Lightning and Storm staring at them angrily.

“What should we do now?” Guido asks.

Lightning shrugs. “Well Storm and I were drenched thanks to your water balloons, so we can’t go anywhere.”

“We could go back to my apartment?” Storm suggests.

“Yeah!” Mater and his friends agree. Lightning sighs, he told them not to invite themselves places, though technically Storm did offer.

“Lightning?” Storm asks, looking at him.

“Yeah sure.” Lightning says. He’s not too keen on going over in his wet clothes, but he is having a good time and he doesn’t want it to be ruined.

They all pile in the car after that and drive to Storm’s apartment. After a few minutes of driving, they make it there and follow Storm up to his floor.

Storm invites them in, and Lightning’s friends waste no time making themselves comfortable on his couch.

“Lightning you want to change?” Lightning glances at Storm standing in the hallway. He really doesn’t want to stay in his wet clothing, and Storm’s worn his clothes before. Why not.

“Yeah okay.”

Lightning follows Storm down the hallway to his bedroom. Lightning pauses outside, not wanting to invade his privacy but Storm tells him to come in.

Storm’s digging through his closet when Lightning enters, so Lightning takes a look around. It’s not much different from the black them of his living room and kitchen. His bed is a king, and it’s made with a black comforter and blue pillows. His furniture in the bedroom follows the same color scheme as the rest of his apartment, and he’s got a large flatscreen TV in there too.

“Nice room.” Lightning comments.

“Thanks.” Storm says from the closet.

“Where’s all the Lightning McQueen merchandise?” Lightning asks teasingly, thinking of Storm’s childhood room. He expects Storm to get angry and deny it, but Storm goes over to one of his drawers and opens it revealing Lightning McQueen T-shirts, socks and even cups.

“God never wear that stuff when you’re with me.” Lightning says making Storm laugh.

“If I knew you hated it so much I probably never would have bought it.” Storm says back.

Lightning nods. He’s never been a fan of the whole exploiting him for popularity thing. It’s fine if his fans want some merchandise but...Lightning winces remembering Mr. Sterling’s plan to turn him into a brand and use his fame to get money for merchandise.

“Here.” Storm says, handing him a set of black clothing. Lightning takes his shirt off in Storm’s room, not thinking much of it. He does notice Storm leaving the room before he gets fully changed but shrugs it off thinking Storm wants to go check on them in the living room.
When he goes out into the living room he sees Mater, Luigi and Guido sitting at the table with Monopoly on the center of the table.

Oh Lord.

Storm walks from the kitchen to the living room.

“Why did you give Mater monopoly?!” Lightning demands.

“I didn’t, I don’t even own that game.” Storm responds.

“He brought it from home.” Guido mentions.

Of course Mater brought it with him. Why is Lightning not surprised.

“We can’t play monopoly it’ll take forever.” Lightning says.

“Please Lightninggg” his friends say.

Lightning shrugs. “It’s Storm’s call.”

Storm looks over at him. “I think...it could be fun.”

Lightning nods. “Alright we’ll play a round, but listen if it goes over five hours like last time I am leaving.”

Mater nods enthusiastically and sets up the game.

3 and a half hours later, they’ve got pizza boxes crowding the table and Lightning and Storm are completely dominating the game.

“You guys are cheating!” Mater says.

It’s true they’ve been playing a little differently than usual. Storm and Lightning have been trading properties with each other and refusing to give any to Mater, Luigi or Guido making for an interesting game.

“I think you guys are just being sore losers.” Storm adds, making Lightning grin. This was their way of payback for the Water balloons.

After a few more turns Mater, Luigi and Guido are bankrupt and forced from the game, leaving only Storm and Lightning still playing. They decide on calling it as both of them have a significant amount of properties and cash on the board. It would take too long for one of them to lose, so they decide they both win.

It’s much later now, and Lightning sees his friends yawning.

“I think we better call it a night guys.” Lightning says.

His friends nod and head down to the parking lot, thanking Storm for inviting them over.

Lightning helps Storm clean up the board game.

“Nice job stealing those water balloons today.” Storm says grinning.

“Just as nice as you nailing Mater in the head with one.” Lightning adds.
Once the board game is packed up Lightning tucks it under his arm and turns to go. Storm stares at him. Lightning remembers he’s wearing Storm’s clothes. “Oh um, I’ll get your clothes back to you tomorrow.” Lightning says. “Oh right, my um clothes. Don’t worry about it, it’s no problem.” Storm responds. Lightning nods. A ping of nervousness hits him. “Well, I’ll uh see you tomorrow.” “Yeah, see you tomorrow.” Storm says. Lightning walks down the stairs to the parking lot. He shakes away the nervousness. What’s wrong with him lately? Maybe he’s getting sick. Lightning doesn’t think about it. He goes down and meets his friends in the parking lot, ready to go home and sleep.
Storm is drained. Physically, mentally, he’d say emotionally too but isn’t quite there yet. He can’t say he expected Go Karting and a board game to be so exhausting but hey at least he had fun. And he was with Lightning.

He’s a part of the gang now. A small smile curls at the bottom of his lip. Things are good. Things are really good.

Storm can’t shake Lightning’s bright smile out of his mind. He can’t shake the warmth he felt when Lightning and he were working together as a team. It made Storm feel special, like they were a pair, granted the only reason it happened is because Mater decided to start a water balloon fight.

Storm wasn’t particularly pleased to have his skinny jeans drenched, but he has to admit Mater made the whole thing much more fun. Though at this point Lightning could tell Storm he wanted to go cloud watching and Storm would think it’s the most exciting thing he’s ever done. Though it’s not the clouds he’d be watching.

He walks down the hallway and into the bathroom, noticing how Lightning left his clothing behind. Oh well, he’d give it to him later.

He goes back out to the kitchen to have another cookie. God, he felt stupid when Lightning was teasing him today about his neighbor. No doubt he’d been expecting a gorgeous young woman, why wouldn’t he have? That’s exactly how Storm made the situation sound if only to irritate Cruz.

Today it had been close. It was on the tip of Storm’s tongue to tell Lightning he liked him, especially when Lightning started teasing him about liking older women. Which ironically couldn’t be further from the truth. Storm’s only ever had a desire to be with one person, ever since he was a teenager, said person happens not to be a woman.

Sure he’s had the occasional fling here and there, more for experience if nothing else. Back before he knew Lightning, really knew him he had unrealistic fantasies about meeting him and somehow being able to impress him.

Which of course would never actually happen except for in his...teenage dreams.

He’s glad though that none of that actually happened, because he would have crashed and burned. Even now, Lightning’s most likely oblivious to his feelings, he can’t imagine trying to convey it in one interaction like he’d always thought it would happen...in his well...fantasies.

No. This situation is more delicate. He needs to play it safer. Needed to be Lightning’s friend before he could be anything else.

He’s not out of the danger zone yet either. Just because he’s finally admitted to himself that he likes Lightning doesn’t mean Lightning will reciprocate. He has to do something about it though. He can’t just leave it alone like before and sleep his way through it because now he knows Lightning personally.

Now he’s with Lightning practically every day. He doesn’t want to move to quickly and freak him out, but it’s getting harder and harder to stay quiet. Especially when other people are starting to figure it out. It didn’t take Emily long at all, and Storm has a sneaking suspicion that Mater is onto him.
In fact, the only one who seems to be completely oblivious to it is Lightning. Which is both hilariously ironic and extremely frustrating.

How exactly should he go about this?

Oh hey, Lightning by the way, I’m incredibly attracted to you and have been since I was a teenager.

Yeah, cause that would work out well.

He can picture Lightning’s expression. He’d either break out into laughter thinking it was a joke or…

Well, Storm doesn’t necessarily want to picture what the second outcome could be.

There could be a third outcome, he thinks. If he plays his cards right.

Storm shakes his head, figuring out the best way to confess is a problem for another day.

He sleeps then, tired from the longest game of monopoly he’s ever played.

He wakes up to his alarm, unfortunately. He’s scheduled to train today, and there’s no way Tony would give them two days off in a row.

He can almost picture his trainer repeating “You’ve got to be ready for next season Storm” Over and over like a broken record. Oh well, his trainer’s a pain, but he does make a quality training schedule.

Storm makes the short drive to the training center and when he enters finds Lightning on the simulator. He’s in the main room this time, not in the separate training rooms in the back. Storm glances around the center. Many of the newer racers are watching Lightning. Before they weren’t concerned about him, he was an older racer, not prepared for next-gen racing.

Now that he knows the simulator though, Lightning could crush them. The newer racers don’t stand a chance compared to his legacy, and now they’re starting to realize that.

Storm fills a swell of pride in his chest. Good. He wants to see Lightning crush them. He wants to see them eat their words.

“Hey Lightning.” Storm says walking over to him, noting how many of the other racers watching pretended to look away or busy themselves.

“Hi Storm!” Lightning says, greeting him.

“Practicing on the simulator?” Storm asks.

Lightning nods. Storm looks past him to see the score. It’s good. Very good. Not quite as high as his own, but Lightning hasn’t had nearly the same amount of practice Storm’s had with it.

Point blank, it’s a lot of improvement for such a short time. Way better than some of the racers that have been practicing for months.

“Oh look there’s Mr. Sterling.” Lightning says.
Storm glances up to see the man up towards the second level of the facility, watching through the glass. He’s wearing a smile, but his eyes are cold and calculating. He’s not pleased.

But why? Lightning’s doing so well on the simulator. Wasn’t that what he wanted? Wasn’t that the reason why Mr. Sterling was reluctant to let Lightning race when he first started sponsoring him?

Something isn’t right. Storm can’t place it, but something strange is going on around here.

“Hey Lightning let’s go run or something.” Storm says. He wants Lightning out of Mr. Sterling’s sight. He wants those cold, calculating eyes as far away as possible.

“Hm? Oh okay.” Lightning says, following him down the hall.

Storm leads him outside. Normally he’d prefer to be doing cardio indoors on the treadmills, but he’d rather go somewhere else. Somewhere away from people.

Luckily the air isn’t too humid today, which Storm is thankful for. Florida’s climate can be a pain, especially for his hair. It takes more style and product than you’d think to get it to stay in place on his head. Not that he’d mention that to anyone.

“So how’d I do? On the simulator I mean.” Lightning says in between breaths while they run.

“You had a great score. Much higher than lots of the racers that have been training for months.” Storm responds.

Lightning nods. “Guess that’s why so many racers were giving me nasty glares then.” Lightning remarks.

Storm bites his tongue in annoyance. He hates how easily some of the racers are influenced. As soon as they see a threat they try to weed it out through something as petty as mean glares. They used to do it to him too, and only gave it up after months of trying and it having no effect on Storm’s racing ability.

He wonders if it’s different for Lightning though. Lightning is a sociable guy, he’s very friendly and cares what people think about him. Older racers were different too, friendlier with each other. Racers like Cal Weathers and Bobby Swift could banter with Lightning all day and there would be no ill will towards anyone, regardless of who won or lost.

It’s different now though. Lightning’s seen that firsthand. Even Cruz, who Lightning’s friends with, was upset when she lost.

Storm forgets sometimes that Lightning is just as observant about things related to racing as he is. Just because he’s lacking observational skills in a romantic sense doesn’t mean he doesn’t know what’s going on racing wise. No, he knows exactly what the other racers are doing. He’s not going to react in any way though, he’ll ignore them completely. Which is a much better way to handle it.

Eventually, they stop running because they’re both drenched in sweat. Storm and Lightning go to the locker room and shower. Storm makes a conscious effort to look away the whole time because he is a gentlemen thank you, and also they aren’t the only ones in here.

They head to the cafeteria after and find Emily sitting by herself, staring at a crowd of racers in the center of the room. She’s got a frown on her face, which is very unusual for her, but perks up when she sees them.

“Oh hey guys!” She remarks.
“Hi.” Lightning says, and Storm raises his hand in acknowledgment.

“What’s going on?” Lightning asks, staring toward the center of the room where the crowd is gathered.

Emily purses her lips. “Nothing important. You know we should probably head back upstairs! Get back to training and everything!”

Storm frowns. “We just got here.”

Emily opens her mouth to respond when Storm hears it.

A voice from the center of the room.

“Did you see his simulator score?” The voice echoed, in a demeaning tone.

Another voice answers. “I know. So embarrassing. My score was higher when I first came here!”

“You’d think the legendary champion racer would at least have a score in the high thousands.”

“My Grandma cold get a higher score than that!” Another says, and laughter follows.

The realization hits Storm like a sack of bricks. The crowd is full of people talking about Lightning.

Storm can feel the blood rising to his head, the hot white anger rushing over him. He glances over at Lightning expecting to see a similar response but Lightning looks completely calm. His face has no trace of anger or annoyance. Just his normal, neutral face. How is that possible? Storm feels like he’d be able to breathe fire right now if he tried, how could Lightning be so calm?

“What’s wrong with you?!” Storm demands.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Lightning asks in confusion.

“They’re talking about YOU!” Storm hisses and looks to see Emily wince.

Lightning shrugs. “Racers talk, Storm. It’s how it is.”

Storm shakes his head vehemently. He won’t stand for it.

The crowd it appears has finally noticed their presence, but none of them look ashamed. None of them attempt to offer Lightning an apology. One of them, Danny, Storm remembers, looks over and smirks.

“How the mighty have fallen.” He says.

Lightning actually looks like he’s going to start laughing of all things. While Storm’s trying not to explode. Fine. Since he’s not going to handle it, Storm will.

“Hey!” Storm shouts loudly, and it echoes through the cafeteria. The group parts to look at him.

Emily puts her head into her hands and Storm watches as Danny marches over, cronies following behind him.

Lightning doesn’t look like he’s going to laugh now. He looks at Storm, as if to say are you joking? Oh well. Storm’s not going to sit here and listen to this.
Danny Swervez marches right up to their table, looking down at him.

“There a problem, Storm?” He asks, saying his name laced with sarcasm.

“There is.” Storm says, voice dark and completely serious.

Danny laughs, like he’s making a joke.

Storm stands up then, rising to his full height and towering over Danny. His face gets less confident then, and Storm’s sure if he didn’t have his friends behind him he wouldn’t be acting so cocky.

He sees Lightning pinch the bridge of his nose and sigh.

“You trying to start something?!?” Danny says, moving closer to his face. Storm wishes he’d move back so he wouldn’t need to smell the strong cologne Danny seems to have doused his entire body with, but hey, at least he’s using it.

“Storm.” Lightning warns, and wraps a hand around his arm.

Storm doesn’t back down.

“You need to shut up Danny, before I make you.” Storm says, with every intent on keeping true to that promise if he needs to.

The cafeteria is filled with people echoing oooo like they’re back in middle school, but Storm welcomes it. It makes Danny’s face red with embarrassment.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve.” Danny replies coolly.

“Why shouldn’t I? I’ll wipe the floor with you.”

“Is that right?” Danny baits.

“Yeah, it is.” Storm says through gritted teeth.

“How about a challenge then?” Danny asks.

“Fine. I’ll race you any time. Name the place.” Storm adds.

“Storm!” Lightning warns again, but Storm isn’t paying attention.

“Oh I never said racing.” Danny said, voice smooth.

That bastard. He planned this.

“What then.” Storm says, teeth gritting harder against each other.

Danny pretends to think about it even though it’s obvious what he’ll choose. It’s what he and his cronies do every day in their free time at the center instead of real racing.

Danny curls his lip and smirks. “Volleyball. Pool. Twenty Minutes.” Danny says, and with that he leaves, the crowd following behind him.

Lightning smacks his head against the table.

“Storm you’ve got to be kidding me!”
Storm’s anger dissipates to a mild level.

“I didn’t know he would pick Volleyball!”

“He was clearly baiting you!” Lightning says.

“Well, I couldn’t just let them say all that about you Lightning!”

Lightning sighs. “You shouldn’t be fighting my battles Storm. I know how to handle things my own way, I’ve been doing it for years.”

Storm bites his lip, slight feeling of shame washing over him. He knows Lightning can fight his own battles but...he can’t help but get angry when he hears idiots like Danny belittling him.

“Now we have to go play volleyball in a pool.” Lightning says, and Storm does feel a little stupid for agreeing to the challenge before he knew what it was. He thought it would be a racing challenge, but of course, Danny wouldn’t pick that. He knew both Lightning and Storm were better racers so he had to pick something he had the advantage in. Which so happened to be volleyball.

“God it feels like I’m back in high school.” Lightning mutters

“I’m sorry Lightning.” Storm mutters, and Lightning glances up at him in surprise.

He waves it off. “Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter if we win or lose this thing. I don’t care about it Storm.”

Storm nods.

“Thanks, by the way.” Lightning adds.

Storm raises his eyebrows.

“For sticking up for me.” Lightning says, mouth curving in a smile.

A butterfly or warmth flutters up Storm’s chest.

Emily clears her throat.

“Oh, right we only have twenty minutes.” Lightning adds.

They walk off to the locker room.

“You know, I know I said I didn’t care win or lose...but I’d love to wipe the smirk off that guy’s face.” Lightning says.

Storm grins at him.

“Guess we’ll just have to win this thing then.”

Going in with the mindset of winning and actually winning are two very different things, he realizes when they’re standing in the locker room changing into the tight swim trunks provided. The fact that they’re black counts for something, but Storm might as well be wearing a speedo with how small they are on him.
Which is why he makes a conscious effort to keep his eyes on Lightning’s face.

“This is ridiculous. I feel like I’m in a teen movie.” Lightning says, pulling his swim trunks on. Storm nods.

Lightning’s on the phone a minute later explaining the situation to Mater. Storm can hear his continuous laughter through the phone.

“It is SO not funny Mater! Do you know the last time I played volleyball?” Lightning says into the phone.

God Storm totally forgot about that. He doesn’t think he’s played volleyball since it was required in his high school gym class, and he’s definitely never played in the water. This is not going to be good.

Lightning rolls his eyes at Mater shouting that he believes in Lightning through fits of laughter.

“I’m hanging up now.” Lightning says.

He turns to Storm.

“Guess we should head to the pool huh?” Lightning says.

Storm nods. He could think of a hundred things he’d rather be doing than going to the pool, preferably with Lightning.

The walk to the pool and when Storm goes inside he’s surprised by how big it is in there. The pool has its own set of bleachers, which there are a surprising number of people on.

“What the hell are they doing here?” Storm says, looking at the racers on the bleachers waiting in anticipation of the match, rather than training.

Lightning rolls his eyes. “They want to see us lose you know.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish.” Lightning remarks.

Storm’s teeth grit in irritation as he looks over across the pool deck and sees Danny Swervez and his friends around him.

Storm looks up again to see Cruz walking over to them, clad in a bathing suit.

“Hey Cruz!” Lightning greets.

“Hi Lightning!”

“What are you doing in a bathing suit? Did you come to join our team?”

Cruz bites her lip before speaking. “Well...actually Lightning, Danny asked me to join their team.”

She says, turning to look at Danny and his four friends. Having Cruz would give them their sixth player. They’d have enough to cover the whole court. While as of right now it’s only Storm and Lightning.

Storm’s in a confusing state right now. He doesn’t want her to join the team...but he doesn’t want
her to reject Lightning’s offer either.

Lightning nods, understanding as per usual.

“But I don’t agree with what they said about you! I’m just trying to be friendly with the other racers.” She says, with a smile.

Lightning tells her that’s good, and smiles when she rushes off to join the other team.

“Good riddance. We don’t need a weak link.” Storm adds.

Lightning turns around with a scowl on his face. “We’ve already got a weak link.” He says, poking Storm’s chest.

“Hey!” Storm protests.

Lightning looks at him. “Go easy on Cruz alright. She’s just trying to make friends.”

Storm resists the urge to roll his eyes but agrees. He needs to back off, for Lightning’s sake.

They both enter the pool watching Danny’s team do that on the other side and Storm is immediately struck by how cold it is.

“Shit it’s cold!” Storm remarks. He’s used to pools in Florida being heated. Or you know hot because they’re outside. This one though is unusually chilly.

He looks across the pool and it occurs to him now how large the volleyball “court” is.

Danny’s team, with six members, covers the pool well. He and Lightning only the other hand have a lot of ground to cover.

Danny, looking confident despite the ridiculous purple streak in his hair, swims up to the net on their side of the court, directly across from him.

Storm makes eye contact with Lightning to see him nod his head over to the side, and when Storm follows where Lightning motioned to look he sees an actual referee. This can’t get any more ridiculous.

The referee takes his place outside of the pool by the net, passing the volleyball to Danny’s team to start serving. He indicates to them that they’ll play three rounds. Apparently that’s the norm in volleyball.

Storm would like to say they did amazing right off the bat.

Unfortunately...that’s not the case.

From the moment the first serve came spiking down towards their side of the pool Storm and Lightning both looked at each other in confusion, questioning if the game actually started. Realizing it started at a similar time they both smacked into each other reaching for the ball and fell underwater.

The bleachers roar with laughter and Lightning comes up to the surface, hair matted down to his head with the water.

He gives Storm a look. Storm’s doing his best to keep his eyes on Lightning’s face.
The game goes on like this for a while, Danny and his team keep sending vicious spikes down to their side that they either can’t get to, or both try to get at the same time.

“This isn’t working.” Lightning mutters through gritted teeth as he sends the ball back over to Danny’s side. Storm echoes his frustration.

Storm can’t tell if it’s a blessing or a curse when the first game ends. On one hand, it’s over. On the other, they did terribly. Storm’s pretty sure they scored three points, if that. They have a few minutes before the next round.

Storm hears someone shout out, “Jeez you guys were horrible!”

Storm whips around ready to give them a piece of his mind because yeah they are horrible but he doesn’t want to hear that.

Storm stops in his tracks when he sees the person who shouted that out was Mater. Of course it was.

“That’s not helpful Mater!” Lightning says, and Mater shoots him a toothy grin. He’s flanked by Luigi and Guido on both sides, why is he not surprised.

Mater waves them over, and after sharing a look, Lightning and Storm both get out of the pool and walk over to the bleachers.

Mater levels them with a glare. “What’s going on out there guys? You should have this in the bag!” Mater exclaims.

“They’ve got more people than we do Mater!” Lightning protests.

“That’s never stopped you before Lightning.” Luigi says insightfully.

Lightning rolls his eyes. “This isn’t racing guys. I’m out of my element. So is Storm.” Lightning adds sparing him a glance.

Guido stifles a laugh, then Storm watches as he glances toward Danny’s team.

“What’s Cruz doing on his team?” Guido asks, eyebrows creased in confusion.

Mater snaps his fingers loudly.

“Guys listen! I’ve been watching you play and I’ve realized something. You both are too aggressive.” Mater says and Storm can’t shake the slight suspicion he’s talking about more than just the game.

Lightning nods, coming to a similar realization. It’s true, both of them have been handling this more individually. The natural instinct they have is to rely on themselves before other people, but they need to work together in order to pull this off.

Lightning nods and he and Storm spend the next few minutes creating a plan of action. They finish just in time, because the Ref indicates game two is about to start.
This time, they have a plan. When the ball comes to their side Storm hits it up, and Lightning spikes it back down. They alternate between setting and spiking. They follow a clear concise pattern that changes the game completely.

By the end of the second match, they just barely pull through with the win, making the score even.

Mater, Luigi and Guido are screaming in support. Danny’s team looks anything but pleased. They thought they had this in the bag before, but now it looks like they’ll have to earn it. Danny gives Storm a wicked glare and Storm rolls his eyes at him.

The third match is a battle all on its own. Storm and Lightning have to work for every point they earn. Storm’s muscles are aching and his eyes are burning with all the chlorine in them, but he pushes through it. When he looks over at Lightning he looks exerted also, but his face is determined. Storm thinks they’d both be sweating if they were anywhere but the pool right now.

The game drags on for what feels like forever. Danny’s team is relentless now, taking this seriously. Every time they send the ball over Storm and Lightning have to lunge to get it in time and when it smacks against his arm the force of it makes his skin turn red with impact.

Finally, the match is almost over. The score is tied. Lightning and Storm need two more points in order to win. They’re both breathing heavily with exhaustion now. Faces red with the effort. After a particularly long volley Lightning sets Storm up for a spike that he launches to the other side. Cruz tried to hit it back over but it fell short. Lightning thankfully didn’t say anything to him about it. Now they just need one more point to win.

Danny’s face screams anger when he spikes the serve over. Time passes slowly for a second, and Storm looks over to make eye contact with Lightning. A mutual look of agreement passes between them as Storm hits the ball up in the air.

Storm watches the way the muscles in Lightning’s arm ripple as he spikes the ball down with enough force that the resounding smack echoes through the pool.

Danny, face completely shocked, has little time to do much else besides brace himself for when the ball hits him smack in the face.

Lightning gives a small grin of satisfaction, but calls out an apology to him.

“Sorry about that! I figured since I’m so old the spike wouldn’t hurt. My bad!” Lightning says.

Mater is beside himself with laughter, and Storm can’t help but laugh too when Danny gives him a glare and exits the pool, humiliated.

Storm turns to Lightning. “You did it!”

“We did it!” Lightning shouts back and smacks his hand into Storm’s for a high five.

They both exit the pool to see Luigi, Mater, and Guido run up to them.

“That was amazing guys!” Luigi yells.

A flash of bright pink runs down from the bleachers and slaps him on the back.

“Nice job Storm! And you too Lightning that was so cool!” Emily exclaims bubbly.

Mater frowns in confusion. “Who are you?”
“She’s Storm’s friend.” Lightning adds.

Mater looks to him for confirmation and Storm nods, watching as a look of confusion clouds his eyes after looking between them. It is pretty strange she wants to be friends with him, but Storm never questioned it. It’s not like he had many others.

“We should celebrate!” Luigi shouts.

“How?” Lightning asks.

Storm watches as a not so innocent look takes over Mater’s features.

“Tonight we’re going out to the bars everyone!”
Lightning grins as Mater yells into his ear. Leave it for Mater to get excited about the bar of all things.

Though when he looks at his friends, they all share a similar look.

Even Storm’s friend Emily looks excited, though Lightning hasn’t seen her look anything but happy since he met her.

Storm has an amused grin on his face.

He and Lightning are still dressed in the swim trunks provided by the training center. A bit small if you ask Lightning, but he made them work. They look even smaller on Storm when Lightning glances over. He quickly moves his eyes away because that would be a little weird if Storm noticed him looking.

Both of them are drenched from the pool, making Storm’s hair look even darker and Lightning’s hair start to curl up.

Lightning makes his way over to Storm and away from his friends talking louder about getting drunk tonight.

“That was some game.” Storm remarks, a smile curving onto his face.

“Sure was.” Lightning grins back.

To be honest, he’s not sure how they were able to pull it off, but Lightning’s hoping they never have to do it again. He’s a racer, not a volleyball star.

“Hey, will you two hurry up and get changed so we can go?” Mater yells over to them, already eager to hit the bars.

Lightning shakes his head.

“Yeah Mater we’ll get right on it!”

He and Storm exit the pool to go to the locker room. As soon as they leave Lightning comes face to face with two figures. He stops right before he smacks into Mr. Sterling. With Cruz by his side?

“Oh um hi, Mr. Sterling. Hi Cruz!” Lightning greets, wondering why Mr. Sterling decided to show up now of all times.

“Oh hello Lightning.” My Sterling says, glancing at him and Storm from top to bottom.

Cruz is still in her bathing suit by his side, and she seems to have somewhat of a sheepish grin on her face.

“I was just telling Cruz how nice it is the racers are being so very productive in the training center.” Mr. Sterling says.

“Sorry, Mr. Sterling.” Cruz says nervously.

“Oh, not at all Cruz! Everyone should feel free to use whatever equipment they like here! By all
means, use the pool.” Sterling says.

Lightning glances at him with a frown. The way Mr. Sterling was speaking implied he was displeased. His face shifts then, as if he knows Lightning is noticing this.

“On another note! Since I have you three here together, I’d like to share a bit of information with you.”

“Information?” Storm asks, arms folded across his chest. His shirtless chest, Lightning realizes.

“Yes! I have some exciting news!”

Lightning ponders what it could be. The grin on Mr. Sterling’s face for some reason makes him a bit nervous. He’s expecting Mr. Sterling to say they’ve got some kind of brand new simulator or something. Oh goody.

“As I’m sure you all know, the international racing season will begin shortly after this year's local season.”

Lightning nods. There’s always an international season every few years, and judging by how there hasn’t been one in a while, he figured it was about time before a new one surfaced.

“Why bring that up now? International racing doesn’t start for a whole year.” Storm says, eyebrows furrowed.

“Ah, you’re right Storm. The international season doesn’t begin for some time. However, I spoke with several different sponsors around the world who agreed we should have a little get together before the local seasons start.”

“When would this be Mr. Sterling?” Lightning asks.

He’s been to plenty of sponsored racing events before. Most of the time though, the international ones take place in other places in the world. Italy, Tokyo, more...exotic locations.

“Well, I’ve managed to sort a few things out and it should be taking place in two days.”

“Two days?!” Lightning asks in bewilderment. That’s awfully quick.

“How can all those international racers be expected to get here in two days?” Storm asks, frowning.

Mr. Sterling laughs. “Ah, don’t worry about it Storm. You’ve never raced before internationally so I wouldn’t expect you to know about these things.”

Storm purses his lips. Lightning can almost see the gears in his head turning before he opens his mouth. Lightning beats him to it, feeling a surge of anger for some reason.

“Well, you’ve never been in any race, Mr. Sterling.” Lightning says before he can stop himself.

Mr. Sterling’s eyes widen in surprise and Cruz stares at him in bewilderment.

Mr. Sterling remains carefully composed, but Lightning can tell the last comment didn’t sit well with him. He wants to take it back, but he doesn’t want Mr. Sterling to belittle Storm either.

Thankfully, Mr. Sterling doesn’t respond angrily.
“Yes, that’s true Lightning, however, I can assure you that the racers and their sponsors will be able to travel here in two days. The event starts at 7, here at the training center. I expect all of you will be here.”

Mr. Sterling says, then walks away.

“Nice one.” Storm snickers from beside him.

Lightning elbows him when he sees Cruz look horrified at the comment.

“What’s wrong with you? He’s the owner of the training center!” Cruz says.

Storm shrugs. “He’s annoying.”

Lightning elbows him again. “Storm!” He whispers.

Cruz bites her lip nervously. “You guys should be careful. He’s still your boss.”

Storm rolls his eyes. “He’s not our boss. Not mine, and certainly not Lightning’s. Just because he owns the building doesn’t mean he owns us.”

His words ring truer than Lightning thought they would. Before he always listened to Mr. Sterling because Rusty and Dusty gave their sponsorship rights over to him, but when Lightning thinks about it...he never really wanted that to happen. He could sponsor himself if he wanted. Money wasn’t an issue for him like it was when he was younger. He didn’t have to listen to Mr. Sterling.

Cruz shakes her head, not wanting to hear that. He tries to change the subject.

“Hey Cruz, we’re going to head out for some drinks. Do you want to come?” Lightning asks warmly.

Cruz ponders it. It seems like she’s about to say yes when she shakes her head and says she better stay and train. Lightning frowns.

He wants to invite her again, maybe she just needs some time?

Reluctantly, Lightning follows Storm into the locker room. Cruz could always join them later if she wanted to.

Storm and Lightning get changed quickly. Not wanting to waste time because Mater insisted they hurry up.

“That was nice of you to stick it to Sterling for me.” Storm remarks.

“Yeah well, I’m sure you would have done the same.”

Storm nods and his grey eyes meet Lightning’s for a moment before he pulls a shirt over his head.

“Ready to go?” Lightning asks.

Storm nods.

Seconds later, they walk into the lobby of the training center where Mater, Luigi, Guido, and Emily were waiting. When Lightning looks outside he sees it’s just beginning to get dark. Wow, they must have been in the training center for a long time today.
“Let’s go get smashed!” Mater exclaims, making everyone laugh.

They pile into different cars.

Storm, Lightning, and Emily in one. Guido, Luigi and Mater in the other. When Storm puts in the address of the place they wanted to go he’s curious to see it’s a forty-minute drive away. It’s not a bad drive at all, especially for them, but Lightning wonders why he didn’t choose a closer one.

After they arrive though it quickly makes sense. Lightning thought this bar would be sort of a low key event considering Mater chose it. Apparently, he was dead wrong. When they pull into the parking lot Lightning sees that the bar is absolutely packed with people. There are tons of young kids looking around college age waiting to get in line too.

Emily perks up and leans forward from the front seat.

“Oh my gosh! I didn’t know we were coming here!” She exclaims.

“Me either.” Lightning says.

When he looks over at Storm he shares a similar confused look. This is sort of the opposite of what he’d expect Mater to choose.

They exit the car and see Luigi, Mater, and Guido pull into the space near them.

Mater grins at them eagerly.

Guido surveys their surroundings with a frown.

Before he can say anything Mater ushers them inside, and Lightning sees that it’s extremely crowded inside too.

It reminds him more of a club than a bar because there are hundreds of people dancing to loud music and blaring lights in the room.

Mater makes a beeline for the bar, leaving the rest of them standing there awkwardly.

Lightning glances over at Storm wondering if he’s having fun. Loud music and young people is something he could relate to better right?

Though if Storm’s deadpan stare is anything to go by he’s not having a good time.

Mater makes it back with a colorful array of drinks in his hand. Upon closer inspection, they are little shot glasses each a color of the rainbow.

That’s certainly different. Lightning doesn’t know if he’s ever seen colorful shots before. Only those fruity drinks Sally liked to order every now and again.

Each of them take a colored shot. Lightning’s got the red one, and he grins when he sees Storm take the blue one.

They all raise their glasses in sync and take a shot. It burns Lightning’s throat on the way down, and he’s thinking he better stick to beer.

“Hey, I’m gonna grab a beer!” Lightning shouts over the music.

It looks like Storm and Mater both heard him, so he turns and heads to the bar. Once he approaches
he sees a crowd of people surrounding the bar. He stands there waiting patiently when he feels someone bump into him.

Lightning frowns and looks up to see a man slightly taller than him reach out and steady himself on Lightning’s shoulder.

“Sorry about that!” The man says.

“No problem.”

He doesn’t think anything of it at first.

“Is this your first time here?” The man asks him.

Lightning frowns. How’d he know that?

“Oh, yeah, my friend wanted to come here.”

The man grins at him. “Is your friend as cute as you?”

Lightning stares at him, wondering if he just heard that right.

His mouth is open but he’s at a loss for words. What could he say back to that?

He spots Guido speed walking toward him from across the room. Guido loops his arm through Lightning’s and puts a hand on his chest. If Lightning’s brain were functioning like normal he’d be asking Guido if he hit his head or something.

“Beat it, pal.”

A red flush appears on the man’s face and he leaves quickly.

Guido rips his hand off Lightning’s chest the instant the man leaves and rolls his eyes in annoyance.


“I knew it was a mistake to let Mater pick where we went. Though to be fair I didn’t think he’d pick a gay bar.”

Gay bar? They were at a gay bar? Is that why the drinks were rainbow-colored? Was that why the guy approached him?!

“This is a gay bar?!” Lightning half yells in confusion.

Guido rolls his eyes and accepts a shot from the man behind him. He downs it in one gulp, staring back at Lightning.

“You couldn’t tell? Take a look at the crowd.” Guido says, and this time Lightning really looks at the people here.

He sees both genders, but now that he looks more closely, the women and men here are mostly separated. Lightning looks over at the people seated at the bar. He sees many pairs of two, but most of them are either both men or both women. Lightning’s first instinct would be to think that they’re just friends, but the way the couples were looking at each other looked like anything but friends.
The bartender passes Guido a drink. This one’s blue with some kind of purple foam on it.

“She’s got dark curly hair and sharp cheekbones.”

Guido turns to glance at the guy who sent him a drink.

He raises his eyebrows at Lightning and takes a sip.

Lightning had never really questioned any of his friends sexualities. He had always just assumed they were straight. Lightning had never looked at his friends in any sort of romantic way either, but looking at Guido he can see what men would like about him. He’s small for starters, his accent is nice, he’s got dark curly hair and sharp cheekbones.

God, what the hell is he saying? Is he losing his mind? Not that it would matter if Guido was gay, but Lightning’s never even seen him with a guy!

Lightning leaves Guido to go find the rest of his friends. He spots Luigi talking to an attractive blonde girl. Hopefully straight for his sake.

He yanks on Luigi’s arm, and his friend throws an annoyed glance his way.

“Can I help you Lightning?”

“Is Guido gay?!?” Lightning asks, not meaning to put his friend on the spot.

Luigi looks over at the bar to see Guido surrounded with a pile of drinks, picking the ones he wants.

Luigi laughs. “He’s bisexual if anything, Guido’s not one for commitment though. I’ll bet he’s just using them for drinks.”

Lightning nods. Guido’s never introduced them to a girlfriend or boyfriend before. Maybe he just wasn’t interested in anything long term.

“If anyone in here is gay it’s definitely S…*cough* S-Some of the guys here.” Luigi says, stuttering.

Lightning frowns. That didn’t sound like what he meant to say.

Before he can push it, a cold beer is pressed against the back of his hand. Lightning whips around and is relieved to see it’s just Storm, holding a beer out to him. Lightning accepts it gratefully.

“Thank god it’s you.” He mumbles, opening the beer.

Storm laughs.

“Been getting hit on?”

Lightning nods.

“Join the club.”

“How’d you know this was a gay bar?”

“It’s pretty obvious once you take a good look around.”
Lightning nods.

He sees a flash of bright pink emerge beside Storm, and recognizes Emily with her hand in another girl’s hand. She’s wearing all black and looks to be wearing the exact opposite of Emily’s wardrobe.

“Oh my gosh, guys! I’ve got the next round. These are called unicorn shots!”

Lightning looks toward the small shot glasses Emily and the girl are holding. The drinks are bright pink with white foam and what looks like glitter on them.

“I’ll pass.” Lightning says, watching with an amused glance as Storm drinks one and makes a face.

“Was that good?”

Storm shakes his head.

“Oh my god Storm! You know what Ash and I just saw?!”

“What?”

“DDR!”

Storm groans and Lightning gives a puzzled glance.

“Storm you have to do it!” Emily shouts.

“I’m not drunk enough for that.” Storm responds.

“What the hell is DDR?” Lightning asks.

Emily opens her mouth in a shocked expression.

“You’ve never heard of DDR?!”

“Dance Dance Revolution, the arcade game.” The girl standing next to Emily explains. Ash, Lightning thinks from when Emily mentioned her name a minute ago.

Dance Dance Revolution? Lightning’s seen it before in arcades. He can’t remember much about it, other than seeing people frantically stomp on the arrows near the ground of the machine.

“Storm’s the best at it!” Emily exclaims.

Lightning turns to Storm with his eyebrows raised. For some reason Storm’s the last person Lightning can picture dancing along to the music in an arcade game.

“I can’t picture you playing that.” Lightning says to him.

Storm rolls his eyes. “I only ever play when I’m drinking.”

“Are you good at it?” Lightning asks curiously.

“I’m alright…”

“He’s better than alright! Storm, you have to show Lightning!”

“Yeah, I’ll pass.” Storm says, looking much more interested in the empty shot glass he’s holding.
“Aw come on Storm. You’ve gotta show me now.” Lightning insists.

Storm looks at him pausing a few seconds then reluctantly nods.

“Yay!” Emily shouts, Ash looking mildly amused beside her.

“I need another drink.” Storm says wandering off toward the bar.

Lightning looks around and sees a familiar face in the crowd. At first, Lightning isn’t sure if it’s her, but that bright purple dress she’s wearing gives her away immediately.

He frowns and walks over to her, tapping her on the shoulder.

“Holley?!”

Holly whips around, brown hair almost hitting him in the face.

“Oh, hello Lightning,” She says, British accent polished as usual.

“What are you doing here?” He asks. Lightning’s glad to see her, and he’s sure Mater would be glad to see her too. Seeing Holley also meant the possibility of danger though. Lightning hasn’t forgotten about the whole espionage thing Mater had gotten them into somehow.

Holley bites her lip. “Well, I um. Happened to be nearby and I was wondering if Mater was around?”

The corners of Lightning’s lips curve into a smile. Oh. So that’s why she was here.

“Last I saw Mater he was by the bar.” Lightning informs her.

She thanks him and then quickly heads over, running her hand through her hair a few times.

Lightning grins. Mater would be happy later on.

“Who’s that.” Storm asks, another drink in hand.

“That’s Holley Shiftwell. She and Mater are pretty much together no matter how much he denies it.”

“She’s Mater’s girlfriend?!” Storm asks in disbelief.

Lightning laughs. Storm’s got a right to be surprised. Holly is good looking.

“I fucking knew it!” Luigi shouts from a few feet to Lightning’s right. Lightning glances over at his friend, obviously wasted. The girl from earlier is still attached to his hip.

“I knew she was his girlfriend.” Luigi insists.

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Mater screams back despite having his arm around her waist.

Storm raises his eyebrows.

“It’s complicated.” Lightning adds.

“Storm, Storm! Come on! You gotta play!” Emily shouts, definitely tipsy.

Storm sighs and follows Emily into another area of the bar, Lightning and Luigi following behind
“What’s going on?” Lightning hears from Luigi and Guido, the latter popping up next to them. Lightning looks at them almost laughing at the coordination of their question.

“We’re about to watch Storm play a game. Dance Dance Revolution?”

“Nice.” Guido slurs.

God, his friends weren’t kidding when they said they were going to get smashed.

Lightning and his friends go into the separate area of the bar, which is actually pretty cool now that Lightning’s seeing it. This whole room is themed like an arcade. There are classic games all over, even ones that Lightning knows. He sees Storm standing behind the two drunk girls currently playing the game.

Lightning thinks it’s pretty funny, to be honest. Neither of the players look to be doing a good job, although he’s not sure what he expected. Drunk people normally can’t even walk in a straight line. How can they be expected to have enough coordination to dance to the random arrows appearing on screen.

The song ends, and Storm takes his place on the panel by his feet. He slams back another shot before reaching towards the screen to pick a song. Lightning glances at the empty shot glass. How many has he had so far?

Storm picks a song. Lightning isn’t familiar with it, because once it starts the beat is so obviously an intense new song Lightning isn’t even sure what he’s listening to. It’s evident though, that Storm put the settings on hard because Lightning sees a flurry of arrows appear on screen.

He sees Luigi and Guido staring intensely at him, and Lightning can’t blame them.

Storm is, very surprisingly good at this game.

Lightning watches as he moves in time with the screen, tapping the arrows as quick as they appear. The way Storm’s moving is much more flexible than Lightning would have guessed.

A crowd starts to form around him, all of them cheering in support. The song gets faster, and just when Lightning thinks Storm is going to choke he does the opposite. Lightning sees two arrows appear in opposite directions and Storm turns around to spare a brief glance at Lightning, before he does something completely unexpected. He flips, like actually flips in the air, tucking his knees in with the jump, and then landing with both feet on the arrow panels.

The crowd loses it then, screaming in awe at Storm’s dancing skill.

“Woah! I didn’t know he could do that!” Luigi yells.

“Me either.” Lightning remarks. Though for some reason he’s not that surprised. In the time he’s known Storm, everything he thought he knew about him before he came to Radiator Springs turned out to be wrong. Storm was a complete surprise altogether.

“Did you see me do a flip?!” Storm says loudly once he stumbles over to Lightning, grin on his face.”

Lightning can smell the alcohol on his breath. He must have had quite a few drinks.
“I did see, it was pretty impressive Storm.”

Storm grins like a little kid, and Lightning knows he’s hit his limit for drinks.

“Storm that was so cool!” Luigi yells, in Lightning’s ear, unfortunately.

Lightning takes a step back, wondering when he became the only sober one.

He looks around for Mater and sees him from the corner of his eye leaving the bar with Holley. Holding hands.

Lightning would think it was adorable if Mater hadn’t just abandoned him with their drunk friends.

Speaking of which Storm, drunker than Lightning’s ever seen him stumbles into his shoulder.

“Lightning you are SO good at racing.” Storm says, matter of factly.

Lightning bites his cheek to keep from laughing.

“Is that right?” He asks, to which Storm vehemently nods his head.

Luigi appears by his side then, holding even more drinks and passing them out.

“Woah! No way guys you’ve had enough.” Lightning insists, taking the drinks away from him and setting them aside.

Luigi pouts and Lightning once again curses Mater silently for ditching him with all of their intoxicated friends.

“Listen, guys, I think it’s time to call it a night.”

His friends all make a face at the comment. Lightning sighs and herds them out of the bar, having to try particularly hard to get Guido away from a guy he was talking with, and it wasn’t Guido who wanted to stay.

After a few minutes, he herds his friends into the parking lot when he realizes they don’t have enough space in the car. They came here separately, and since Mater took their car to go off doing god knows what with Holly, that leaves them with only Storm’s car. There’s six of them now that Emily’s got a plus one somehow, and there’s no way they can all fit into Storm’s race car.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea!” Emily exclaims next to him, somehow becoming even more upbeat than usual. Maybe all the alcohol gave her a rush of positivity or adrenaline. Lightning isn’t sure.

“Ash can take me home! That way you guys can all ride in Storm’s car!”

Lightning frowns. Having Emily leave with a girl she just met isn’t exactly high on Lightning’s list of good ideas. Lightning would go with them, but Storm’s in no condition to drive his car. Lightning pinches the bridge of his nose. He wishes Storm were sober so he could ask what he should do. Lightning isn’t too keen on letting something happen to Storm’s friend. Guido, sensing that Lightning didn’t like the idea comes up with another plan.

“Hey, I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t Luigi and I ride with you guys too. You can drop us off after Emily.” Guido adds, addressing the two girls.

“That’s cool with me,” Ash replies.
She looks nice enough, and Lightning would feel much better if Luigi and Guido were there too, at least until Emily got home.

“Oh, good idea! Then Storm and Lightning can ride home together!” Emily says, then erupts into a fit of giggles.

Lightning raises a brow at the comment, he isn’t sure what about that sentence made her giggle, but hey, some people can’t handle their alcohol.

“Let me know when you guys make it back.” Lightning says to his friends.

“Come on Storm.” He adds, grabbing Storm by the arm and leading him to the car.

Storm gets in, thankfully having enough awareness to buckle his seatbelt. Lightning drives them to Storm’s apartment, seeing as there’s no way he could go home. Judging by how Storm was stumbling on his way to the car, Lightning doesn’t think he’ll be fit to drive any time soon.

The funny thing is that Storm’s a rather talkative drunk. On the ride home, he doesn’t stop talking. He tells Lightning his favorite races featuring him, which Lightning is admittingly flattered by. Most of his fans don’t remember his initial races when he was just a rookie, but Storm can recall them with no hesitation.

Storm also lists out his favorite candy bars and then prompts Lightning to lists his own, which ends up starting a heated debate about Lightning’s third choice.

“MnM’s do NOT count as a candy bar Lightninggg!” Storm insists.

“Why not??”

“They’re individual pieces, not a bar!”

Lightning rolls his eyes as Storm goes on to explain specifically why MnM’s or any candy like them for that matter cannot be considered a candy bar.

Lightning thinks it’s pretty amusing. It’s certainly different to see Storm acting so...carefree and expressive.

Normally he’s stoic. Not projecting his feelings unless he’s angry, from what Lightning’s seen. Though he’s got to say Storm’s plenty expressive in his own way. Maybe not with words, but Lightning can almost tell what he’s thinking from a raised eyebrow or eye contact that’s just a few seconds too long, or even when Storm’s lips form into an almost unrecognizable frown.

Storm’s an enigma, but at the same time, Lightning thinks he’s finally figuring him out, one piece at a time.

They make it back to Storm’s apartment, just in time too, because Storm is falling asleep in the seat. Lightning shakes his shoulder, and Storm responds by slumping over onto Lightning’s shoulder. Lightning can feel his hair pressing against his neck. It’s softer than he thought it would be. Not that he thought about that...

“Storm?” He says, prompting Storm to get up. He briefly considers carrying him but doesn’t know if Storm would like that. Or if Lightning could even do it.

Storm’s eyes open and he gets up to exit the vehicle, meaning Lightning wouldn’t need to attempt to carry him inside.
He and Storm walk inside and take the elevator to Storm’s floor. Storm opens the door and they walk inside, Storm flopping down on the couch.

“Don’t you want to sleep in your bed?” Lightning asks him.

Storm mumbles something that Lightning can’t hear, then doesn’t move from his spot on the couch.

Lightning turns on his heel, ready to leave before he realizes that he doesn’t have his car. He drove here in Storm’s car, and his friends are either too drunk or too busy to pick him up.

“You can stay here Lightning.” Storm mumbles from the couch into the cushion.

Lightning nods and takes a seat on the other couch. Storm’s got two luckily, so Lightning doesn’t have to sleep on the floor. Storm’s knocked out on the couch beside him, chest rising and falling slowly.

Lightning isn’t sure how he’s managing to sleep in those tight jeans, but Storm doesn’t seem to have any issue with it, seeing as he’s already asleep. Lightning gets up and grabs two blankets from the pile in the corner. He tosses one towards Storm who doesn’t even move at the gesture.

Unsurprising. Lightning figured he’d be a heavy sleeper. He lays back down on Storm’s couch, staring up at the ceiling. Lightning can’t begin to describe how weird and spontaneous past few weeks of his life have been. He thought he was done with racing professionally, little did he know a few weeks after that he’d be laying on Jackson Storm’s couch with Storm asleep a few feet from him.

Storm’s presence brings a whole new complicated aspect to everything involving racing, but Lightning, for all his initial worries and irritation regarding the man, finds he doesn’t mind him any longer. Storm is different than any friend he’s ever had, and Lightning can’t wait to see what the racing season has in store for them.
Chapter 17

Storm’s head hurts. Scratch that. It more than hurt. It felt like someone was drilling into the center of his skull with a vibrating pain that had him bordering on nausea.

“Hungover?” He hears from behind him.

Storm whips his head up, ignoring the crackling bolt of pain that went through his head at the motion, and sees Lightning standing in the kitchen. His kitchen, more specifically. It looks like he’s cooking something too.

Storm groans and brings his hand up to rub his temple. God, what the hell did he drink last night? He can’t remember.

“I figured you would be.” Lightning adds.

“That’s helpful.” Storm says rubbing his eyes tiredly.

He sits up on the couch, finding himself in the same clothes as last night. Glancing at Lightning, he at least changed into the clothes he left last time.

“Shouldn’t have so much to drink.” Lightning muses.

“Gee thanks, mom” Storm mumbles closing his eyes and leaning back against the couch. He doesn’t even realize Lightning moved over to the living room until he opens his eyes and sees Lightning towering over him.

He hands Storm a glass of water.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” Storm mumbles taking a sip. The pounding in his head immediately dulled, and now he could focus on things again. Like the fact that Lightning was in his apartment. Cooking something.

“Did you sleep here?” Storm asks though he’s almost positive Lightning did.

Lightning nods. “I didn’t want to leave you alone when you were that wasted. Plus I didn’t have my car.”

Storm grimaces. This was so not how Lightning’s first “sleepover” at his place was supposed to go. They were supposed to be in Storm’s bed, preferably without clothing. Damn him for getting so drunk last night.

Storm looks to the kitchen to see what Lightning’s making. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t have any of the necessary ingredients for a Lightning style breakfast. Storm usually exists off sugary cereals and granola bars, so he isn’t too sure what Lightning’s cooking.

“What is that?” Storm asks, referencing whatever Lightning’s making.

“French Toast.”

Storm frowns. “How are you making that?” Storm’s convinced he didn’t have anything that would let Lightning make French Toast.
“I walked to the store this morning.” Lightning states.

Storm shakes his head. Lightning’s a morning person for sure, but Storm wonders how long he’s been up to leave, walk to the nearest store and then come back.

“You should have just taken my car.” Storm tells him.

“Next time I will.” Lightning says with a laugh.

“I won’t be that drunk next time.” Storm states matter of factly, because how the hell is he going to make a move if he’s wasted.

Lightning motions for him to come to the table, and Storm starts eating what he’s pretty sure is the best French toast he’s ever had.

“So how drunk was I last night because I can’t remember much.”

“Believe me you weren’t the only one.” Lightning tells him.

Last night was bits and pieces to him, but he does remember Luigi and Guido both had a lot to drink, and he’s pretty sure Mater disappeared at some point in the night with a gorgeous looking girl.

“Although you did argue with me about my top candy bar choices.” Lightning says with a bemused smile.

Storm groans. Of course he did.

Storm busies himself with shoving pieces of French toast into his mouth so he doesn’t have to deal with the embarrassing realization that in his drunken state he could have said almost anything to Lightning.

Lightning would probably tell him if he said anything else, so Storm isn’t worried about a drunken love confession or anything like that. He would have been beyond frustrated with himself if he couldn’t gage Lightning’s reaction to it.

A rough knocking on the door resounds through the apartment, and Lightning gives Storm a questioning glance.

Storm frowns. He isn’t sure who it is.

He gets up and opens the door, pleasantly surprised to see who’s waiting on the other side of it.

“Charlie!” Storm yells as the man crushes him in a bear hug. He should have known it was him. Storm remembers he called him to come check on Lightning’s car, to fix whatever was wrong with it.

Charlie walks inside rolling a large suitcase behind him. No doubt filled with tools and car parts instead of actual clothes or anything like that.

“A pleasure to see you again Mr. McQueen,” Charlie says shaking his hand.

Lightning smiles. “Likewise.”

“So Jackson, where’s the car?” Charlie asks quickly, not one to beat around the bush.
“It’s at the Training Center.” Storm responds.

“My car?” Lightning questions.

Storm nods. “Remember when we took it out on the track the other day? I’ve seen your car go faster than 200 Miles Per Hour in tons of races before, but when you drove at top speed, it was barely reaching 195.”

5 or 10 Miles shouldn’t mean that much of a difference to any normal person, but to a racer? That could completely change the outcome of a race.

Lightning frowns. “My car’s not as fast as it used to be, but that’s just because I’ve had it for a long time. The newer cars are just made faster that’s all.”

Charlie’s face takes on a frown.

“Normally you’d be right Lightning. Cars don’t always hold up well over time, and speed can definitely decrease over the years. Your car, however, is a very special model. If I remember correctly the model it was based off of only sold around 10 cars worldwide, all modified versions of course. You, however, received the highest-quality version of it created when you were a rookie. A car built like that...shouldn’t be decreasing in speed. I brought some tools with me just in case, so I’ll see what I can do.”

Charlie turns back to the entrance. “I’ll see you kids later.”

Storm rolls his eyes. Charlie’s been calling him a kid forever. Though to be fair, Charlie’s old enough that even Lightning would be considered a kid to him.

“You’ve got an awfully nice mechanic there, Storm.” Lightning comments.

Storm nods. He imagines the relationship he has with Charlie is similar to the one Lightning had with Doc Hudson. They were both mentors in different ways. Doc had been Lightning’s crew chief. He showed him new ways of racing, and he was there to coach Lightning through thick and thin.

Charlie was the same way. Always encouraging Storm to pursue racing when it seemed like no one else would. Helping him build his car, taking him to see the races when he was younger. Helping him financially. Charlie had been his real family.

He wonders if Lightning felt that way about Doc. Storm’s sure he does, and he’s sure Lightning’s friends are more of a family to him than anyone else. Lightning hasn’t said anything about his family, though to be fair, neither has Storm. It doesn’t seem necessary to share. Storm doesn’t want to put a damper on things.

“So.” Lightning mumbles looking at his watch. “Should we head to the Training Center?”

A few minutes later Storm is begrudgingly getting dressed to go to the Training Center. He drives them this time, thankfully his hangover had mostly passed.

They spend the day rotating between different exercises. Today’s a physical day, which is good for them because later in the day Storm catches Charlie in the garage where Lightning’s racecar is, starting to tinker with it.

They train for a few hours, running on the treadmill, lifting weights or practicing more on the simulator until both of them are ready to call it quits.
They make their way to the parking lot of the Training Center and spot Cruz walking nearby.

“Hey, Cruz!” Lightning shouts, waving to her.

“Oh hi Lightning.”

“You should have come out with us last night! It was fun! Well aside from me babysitting everyone.”

Cruz laughs. “Maybe next time.”

She rushes off to the outdoor track. That’s strange, Storm thinks. It’s almost dark out. Why would she want to be training outside now?

He doesn’t dwell on it.

Storm takes Lightning home because Lightning’s car is back at his place. Lightning invites him in to have dinner with them, which Storm accepts.

It’s chaos the instant they step through the door.

“I’M GONNA ASK YOU AGAIN MATER! WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN YOU AND HOLLEY LAST NIGHT?!” Luigi screams.

Luigi and Guido are standing in the living room, Mater sitting casually on the couch.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Luigi.” Mater responds calmly.

Luigi screams and throws a pillow at him. He turns to his other friend.

“GUIDO, I KNOW SHE WAS THERE! I SAW HER! DIDN’T YOU?”

Guido shrugs. “I was too drunk to remember.”

“I’M NOT CRAZY!” Luigi insists, then turns, noticing them.

“Oh hey guys.” He says, cheeks turning red.

“Lightning, Lightning! You SAW Holley right?!” Luigi asks.

Lightning turns to Mater, then to Luigi, a wicked grin appearing on his face.

“Yes, I saw her.” Lightning says.

Mater shoots up off the couch.

“McQueen!” he yells.

Lightning levels him with a glare.

“If you wanted me to keep it a secret then you shouldn’t have left me to babysit everyone last night Mater. Besides, Storm saw her too.”

Storm nods, and to be honest he’s still baffled that girl was Mater’s girlfriend. She’s not exactly Storm’s type, but she was still hot.

“I knew I wasn’t crazy!” Luigi yells hitting Mater on the arm, eyes looking...very crazy at the
“Is Storm staying for dinner?” Guido asks.

Lightning nods and Guido rushes into the kitchen to set a place for him at the table.

Thankfully dinner preparation doesn’t take three hours this time, and they’re all sitting around the dining room after a few minutes eating Steaks. They’re incredibly well cooked, and Storm remembers that Lightning’s not the only member of the gang that knows how to cook.

Storm’s in the middle of enjoying his meal when Mater bombards him with a question all of a sudden.

“So Storm, what’s your type?” Mater asks bluntly.

Storm immediately starts choking on his steak and coughs frantically.

“Oh God, seriously Mater?” Guido asks annoyed, while Lightning glances over at Storm in concern.

Storm recovers after a minute and sits up, hoping his face isn’t too red from the lack of oxygen.

“Excuse me?” He asks.

Mater shrugs. “Well, clearly you’ve seen my...partner Holley, we decided not to use labels surrounding our relationship. I’m sure you also saw Guido talking to multiple different men and women at the bar last night and Luigi with his arm around that floozy.”

“Hey!” Luigi protests.

“Then there’s good old Lightning who told me a few weeks ago he prefers dark hair, though that’s no surprise considering Miss Sally had darker hair.”

“Mater!” Lightning hisses, narrowing his eyes at his friend.

Storm bites his tongue. So Lightning prefers dark hair? Interesting.

Mater continues “So, we were all just curious what your type is.”

Storm’s hands twist by his sides nervously. The grin Mater gives him implies he knows something. Storm contemplates his answer very carefully.

“I...like blondes.” He says after a moment.

Everyone is silent for a split second before Luigi nods his head in agreement.

“Blonde girls are the best.” He adds.

Mater leans back in his chair, seemingly satisfied with that answer.

Storm spares a glance at Lightning, but nothing looks different about him. He doesn’t have any look of realization on his face or anything.

Storm resists the urge to sigh. God damn, he’s pretty oblivious.

They finish eating, and Storm figures he better head back to his apartment soon. He won’t have to
train tomorrow since Sterling’s hosting an international Racing Banquet there. Still, he needs to prepare for that. Talk to his sponsors and see which Racers will be on the international season. Scope out the competition and all that. As far as Storm’s concerned Lightning is his biggest competition regardless, but some foreign racers could give him a run for his money. He’ll have to keep that in mind.

Storm says his goodbyes to Lightning and his friends, exiting the house.

He’s about to get into his car and leave when a hand slams down onto his shoulder.

Storm whips around, expecting Lightning. Instead though, he sees Mater.

Storm raises his eyebrow.

“What’s up Mater?”

Mater sighs, removing his hand.

“Listen Storm, while I enjoy the subtle hints you’ve been giving out, It’s gonna take more than that.”

Storm stills. “What?”

“I love Lightning, the guy’s my best friend, but boy can he be dense.”

Storm feels his heart slamming against his chest in a heated fit of nervousness. Color rising in his face.

“Listen I didn’t come out here to threaten you or expose your secrets or anything like that. I just came to tell you that the only way Lightning’s gonna figure out you like him is if you just tell him.”

Storm’s face must be bright red at this point, but he has to admit Mater’s right. From what he’s seen, Lightning isn’t going to magically figure it out. If he wants Lightning to know...he’ll just have to man up and say it.

“I...know” Storm admits aloud.

Mater gives him a lopsided smile.

“You got this buddy.” He says, patting Storm on the shoulder.

Storm nods, turning to his car.

“Oh and Storm! Don’t worry too much about it.” Mater calls out to him.

Storm nods.

The drive to his house takes longer than it normally does. His mind is wandering with Mater’s words echoing around in it. He knows Mater’s right, he knows that. It’s just...hard to talk himself into the notion of confessing.

Aside from the glaringly large possibly that Lightning thinks it’s weird or he’s joking, there’s still the fact that Storm would have to force himself to tell Lightning out loud that he likes him.

He’d need to convey it in a way that meant more of a romantic interest too, because he can picture
Lightning smiling at him and saying he likes Storm too, thinking it was merely a gesture of friendship and not a confession of his feelings.

God that would be awkward.

He runs his fingers through his hair nervously. It’s probably going to be awkward in some way or another, but the longer he puts it off, Storm has a feeling the more it will start to bug him. Plus there’s always the possibility of Lightning dating someone else while Storm just sits on the sidelines. Lightning’s an extremely attractive guy. Not just his body either, his personality is just as attractive as his face. He’s someone Storm would never be tired of being with, someone he could joke with, someone he could race with...someone he could trust.

Storm parks the car in his parking lot. He walks up to his room mind swarming with different possibilities. Lightning means a lot to him, more so than any of the other friends he’s had. Is it worth ruining their friendship with his feelings? Then he thinks about the possibility of Lightning dating someone else. How much would it hurt to see them together? He doesn’t know.

In the end, he takes Mater’s advice. He tries not to worry too much.

He falls asleep, forcing his thoughts elsewhere for now.

When Storm wakes up in the morning, he’s met with a series of calls. Two from his trainer, one from his sponsor. Great. They must have heard about the Training Center event tonight.

He calls them back and has to spend an excruciating ten minutes listening to his trainer make sure he knows the names of the other racers this time, then another ten minutes of his sponsor company’s advice on who to talk to and impress at this event.

God, he hates them. Events are his weakness. Pretending to be even remotely interested in the flashy and annoying new Racecars drains his energy, but this time Lightning will be there. So Storm will have a way out of the crazy ridiculousness of the sponsored events. If Mr. Sterlings running it...it’s bound to be pretty extravagant. That seems to be right up the man’s alley.

Storm spends his morning making sure his racing uniform is nice and presentable. He could wear a suit if he wanted, but most of the Racers prefer to wear their uniforms. It makes them more recognizable, and Storm’s pretty sure Lightning wears his to racing events.

The event isn’t till night time, so Storm, figuring he has some hours to kill spends his time watching old clips of racing from the seventies. It’s interesting to see the difference in the craftsmanship of the cars. The racers are another thing entirely. Behaving like actual human beings instead of the flashy, ignorant up and coming racers Storm sees on a daily basis.

He doesn’t even realize what time it is before he gets a call from Lightning.

“Hello?” Storm answers.

“Hey, are you wearing your uniform? I’m wearing mine but Luigi, Guido, and Mater are wearing suits.”

“Yeah, I am.” Storm responds. At first, he wonders why Luigi, Guido, and Mater are coming, but they’re all technically a part of Lightning’s racing team. Guido is his pit crew, Luigi’s his mechanic and Mater is sort of like his advisor? Storm isn’t sure what Mater helps Lightning with when it comes to actual racing, but Lightning values his opinion enough to hear him out all the
“Are you heading over soon?” Lightning asks, startling him.

“Yes, I’m on my way.” Storm replies, quickly dressing and driving over.

Even running slightly “late” they still have plenty of sense to arrive there before the actual event starts. Sterling would no doubt be displeased if they were late.

The Training Center does not have many people at the moment, but Storm can see the extensive decoration that went into the event.

There are Caterers and Bartenders setting up multiple tables and starting to prepare food for the night. Storm can see additional furniture brought in as well, all color-coordinated to match with the theme. Which for Mr. Sterling seems to be the excessive use of the color silver.

He sees Lightning walk inside a minute later, his friends rushing in behind him. Luigi and Guido in shining yellow and blue suits, and Mater, surprisingly in a dark tuxedo with his hair gelled back. Now that’s something he certainly wasn’t expecting.

People most likely won’t show up for another hour or so, so with the free time Storm suggest an idea.

“Hey, we should go check on your car Lightning.” Storm says to him.

“My car?”

Storm nods. “I think Charlie came in yesterday to check it out. Let’s see if he’s found anything.”

Lightning nods. He turns to his friends.

“Entertain yourselves for a bit guys. Try not to make me look bad.” He says, half-joking.

Storm and Lightning walk through the empty halls of the Training Center back to the garages where the race cars are kept.

Storm’s eyes wander over to Lightning. His hair is neatly combed back and styled nicely on his head, so his blond curls frame his face. He looks good.

Soon enough they make their way to the garage. Once they open the door, they are met with a string of curses.

Storm looks to see the source, and sure enough finds Charlie with the hood of Lightning’s car open, covered in grease and cursing like there’s no tomorrow.

“Hi Charlie.” Storm greets, unsurprised to see him angry. Storm’s witnessed his fair share of cursing whenever there was a particularly irritating car issue he had to deal with. Charlie cursing like that, however, meant he most likely did find something wrong with Lightning’s car.

Charlie turns around, heavy bags under his eyes.

Lightning’s face morphs into concern.

“Were you here all night?!” He asks in disbelief.

Charlie nods. “Don’t worry about me, my sleep schedule is beyond messed up. Anyway, that’s not
the issue. What’s important is that I think I know what’s wrong with your car.”

“There was really something wrong with it? The speed was decreasing for a different reason than the older technology?” He asks in surprise.

Charlie nods.

“I’ve checked everything out multiple times, and everything seems to be working but this,” Charlie says, pointing to the large mechanical section under Lightning’s hood.

“But that’s the engine.” Lightning protests.

Charlie nods again. “Well yes, there is some part of the engine that’s not working. I was waiting for your permission to take it apart so I can find the source of the issue. Don’t worry about racing though, I had a model I constructed of an engine that’s practically identical to yours shipped here. Until I fix your original engine, you’ll use this one.”

Storm turns his eyes to Charlie’s original engine design. It’s mind-blowing that he was able to have one so similar to Lightning’s flown in so quickly.

Lightning’s eyes are blown open wide. “I...I can’t believe you figured that out! You’re a genius! If my engine is malfunctioning and you fix it, I could get my top speed back!” Lightning shouts.

Charlie grins at him. “Not only that Lightning, but the engine I set up for you as a substitute should also allow for you to go your top speed. Test it out and let me know how it works Mr. McQueen, but I do believe you’re well on your way to having your Racecar just as new as the day you got it.”

Lightning’s face is radiating appreciation from all different angles. He is practically shaking in enthusiasm when he grabs Charlie’s hand, thanking him in gratitude.

Charlie shakes off the praise. “It was nothing.” He insists, giving Lightning a bright smile.

Charlie’s brilliant. Storm always knew that, but even now he can’t help but feel an overwhelming appreciation for the man. He’s done more for Storm than anyone else.

“You’re the best.” Storm says to him, voice failing to control the emotion in it at the surge of gratefulness he feels.

“Aw don’t get sappy on me Jackson, I’ve still got work to do. For now though I’m going to switch out the engines, so you’re set to use the car Lightning. That should only take me around an hour, so I’ll start working on your old engine tomorrow.”

Lightning nods. Thanking him again and promising to send him a large check after he’s finished with everything.

Charlie waves them off, telling them to go back to the event.

They go back into the Training Center, Lightning’s face is pure happiness when they walk back inside. It warms Storm’s heart to see him like that. No longer doubting himself or unsure of being a racer again. He’s also thrilled to know there was a malfunction in Lightning’s car. That means all those races Lightning lost to the Next gen racers months ago could have been due to that. A few miles of difference in speed could mean the difference between winning and losing. Storm knows that first hand.

They reenter the large lobby of the Training Center, this time seeing way more people in it.
Storm glances around the room. He can see other racers now, clad in vibrant colors. He sees different sponsors too, walking around the room in luxury clothing and expensive jewelry.

He spots Luigi and Guido trying to discreetly slip away from a sponsor talking in-depth to them. Storm’s about to nudge Lightning and show him when he hears a very familiar voice.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite American Racer. Bojourno McQueen.”

Storm turns, immediately recognizing the twisted displeasure clearly visible on Lightning’s face. Oh, God. Not him.

Storm looks up and sees him, the familiar racer clad in the traditional colors of Italy. His green, red and white uniform a clear representation of the country.

Lightning tries to hide the annoyance in his voice as he answers.

“Hello, Francesco.”

“Ah! McQueen do not sound so bitter. We cannot all be as magnificent as I, Francesco Bernoulli.”

Storm bites back a laugh. If his sponsors catch wind of it, that won’t be good. Still though, this guy is ridiculous. What the hell did Lightning’s ex-girlfriend like about him?

Lightning rolls his eyes. “Don’t you have better things to do than fly here from Italy just to annoy me?”

Francesco puts a hand on his chest, feigning hurt.

“McQueen you wound me! But alas, I did not come for the witty banter between us.”

“Then what did you come for?” Lightning asks.

“The race of course.”

“What race?!?” Storm demands.

Francesco turns to him, face taking on a cocky smile.

“Ah, you must be Jackson Storm, the up and coming rookie I’ve heard about.”

“I-” Storm starts to respond before Francesco interjects over him.

“But no matter! No Racer stands a chance against the amazing Francesco Bernoulli!” The Italian states, arms held out in a dramatic pose.

Storm contemplates punching him.

Before he can decide if that’s a good idea, Mater rushes over slapping Francesco on the back and exclaiming

“Hey! It’s you! Mr. San Francisco!”

“That is not my name!” Francesco says, face contorting to anger. He leaves quickly then, and Storm guesses he and Mater aren’t on the best of terms.

“Thanks Mater.” Storm tells him.
Mater nods. “So what was he talking to you guys about anyway?”

Lightning frowns. “He says... he was here for some sort of race, but that doesn’t make any sense! This is just a sponsored event, the international season doesn’t start till next year.”

Mater’s face takes on a particularly dark frown, unusual for him.

Lightning turns to Storm.

“That doesn’t make sense…”

Lightning’s right. What race could Francesco possibly be talking about? It has to be some illegal street race or something. If there was some kind of race held at the center Lightning and Storm should have been notified weeks ago to start preparing. Surely this wouldn’t be the first they’ve heard of it.

“GUYS!” They hear two people exclaim suddenly. Storm looks up to see Luigi and Guido rushing over to them.

“What is it?” Lightning asks.

“One of the foreign racers just told us he came tonight for a race! A real one here at the Training Center! You two are supposed to be in it!”

Storm freezes. This doesn’t make any sense at all! If there was a race, why weren’t they notified?! How can they be expected to race with no preparation?

Storm’s about to ask Lightning what they should do when he sees Mr. Sterling appear at the top of the steps.

He’s dressed in a bright silver suit, shining intensely with the lights around him. He raises a glass in the air, addressing the numerous people below him. His eyes sweep over the crowd before landing on Storm and Lightning for a brief moment. It lasts no more than a second, but Storm doesn’t miss the way a sinister smile appears on his face.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to have you all here this evening. Thank you to all the dedicated sponsors and racers here tonight. Now, without further ado, I say it’s about time to let the race commence!”

Storm eyes widen, and he turns to Lightning who’s face is completely shocked.

Tonight...the two of them have to race. With the greatest racing champions of the world.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Okay, guys just a few things.

I've decided to start taking the POV indicators at the top out of each chapter. Storm and Lightning will continue to regularly alternate each chapter.

This chapter specifically is where things start to pick up in intensity, so be prepared for that.

Thanks for all your comments and support!

Lightning doesn’t know what’s worse. That they’re supposed to race with the best international racers in the world, or the fact that everyone seemed to know besides he and Storm. Lightning turns to him, Storm’s face twisted in a frown, looking just as confused as Lightning feels.

The crowds around them are screaming in excitement. Of course they are! The international racing season only comes once every few years, and for some reason, there’s suddenly a sponsored racing event with racers from all over the country? Things aren’t making any sense.

Why wouldn’t Mr. Sterling tell them if there was a race? Lightning and Storm only found out about the event two days ago. How did all the international racers get here so quickly? More importantly, if all the other racers did know about the race, two days is awfully short to make arrangements to have their cars brought over to the U.S.

Something about this isn’t making any sense.

Once the crowds around Lightning quiet down, he sees that Mr. Sterling is about to speak again, hand raised up to one of the largest Simulators in the Training Center.

“As you can see here, these are the chosen participants of today’s race.” Mr. Sterling says graciously to the crowd.

Lightning looks toward the screen. He finds his name written first, Storm’s below it. He sees Cruz listed third, then Francesco, then about 15-16 more foreign racers listed. This whole thing is beyond strange, Lightning isn’t sure why only he, Storm and Cruz are racing, especially since the Training Center seems to have many other racers.

“When is the race supposed to start?” An eager person in the crowd asks.

Sterling smiles down from the balcony, eyes landing on Lightning.

“Oh, I’m sure momentarily. After all, we’re among the racing legends of our time.”

Lightning stands there stunned as racers from all over the world turn to look at him in surprise. He’s older than most of them, and it’s no secret that his last season was the worst of his racing career. Even the sponsors are staring at him, eyes wide in surprise that Lightning is even here. Let alone planning to race with everyone. What is Mr. Sterling doing? At first it didn’t seem like he
wanted Lightning racing so publicly until his speed improved. So why have him race with no preparation?

Storm nudges his shoulder, thankfully taking his attention away from the multiple people staring at him and the numerous thoughts plaguing his mind.

“We’re supposed to race now?!” Storm whispers, more on edge than Lightning’s seen him.

Lightning completely understands. When he went on an international tour, he trained for months beforehand in preparation. Going against the best racers in the world, you can’t afford to slack off.

And now...they were supposed to race against them in mere minutes. Lightning glances up at the listings of racers, surprisingly, he doesn’t recognize most of the names. There are no racers from his tour a few years ago other than Francesco. That makes him wonder if they all retired too. They were all around the same age, so, were they replaced by newer racers?

Lightning looks around. Many of the racers have stepped forward, easily recognizable by the bright colors of the uniforms. His suspicions are confirmed when he notices most of the racers are much younger. Next-Gen, he thinks.

Though, if all these racers were new...they’ve never been in an international race before.

International races are a whole different category of racing. Not only are you racing with the best of the best...but you have to be prepared for anything. Some countries flat out don’t like each other, which meant those racers would most likely spend the whole race trying to sabotage one racer, rather than focus on winning. Then there’s sponsor influence. Wealthy sponsors try to supply their racers with the highest quality fuel, tires, brands, but even then they could resort to other things like tampering with the other racecars.

Lightning hasn’t forgotten about the whole espionage entanglement that happened on his last tour. He also hasn’t forgotten that Mater had been right in the thick of things.

International racing is complex. Local is more simplistic. If you’re faster and have more experience, chances are you could win.

Though if none of these next-generation racers had international racing experience, Lightning shouldn’t need to worry about them too much.

Which meant...the biggest competition would be Cruz, Francesco and...Storm.

It’s not like Lightning hadn’t known this was coming. Well, he certainly didn’t know about this particular race, but he did know eventually he would have to race against Storm.

Not that it matters. Lightning doesn’t feel the same uneasiness he felt a few months ago when Storm first appeared. Back then he was arrogant. The same way Lightning had been as a rookie, and as much as Lightning didn’t want to admit it to himself then, it was like looking in a mirror.

A taller mirror with darker hair, but a mirror all the same.

Lightning isn’t going to give in that easily though. If Storm’s one of his biggest competitors, then the same is true for him. Still, Storm is his friend. He wants to give him whatever help he can, regardless of how it could hurt his chances.
“Storm.” Lightning says turning to him.

Storm pauses, staring at him face mirrored in a frown.

“International racing is a completely different ballpark than what you’re used to.”

Storm’s used to being the best. Aside from Lightning or Cruz, there are almost no competitors in the United States that even come close to his speed.

“You’re one of the fastest racers in America, unfortunately, that’s going to make you a target.”

Storm frowns. “Won’t you be a target also?”

Lightning pauses. Storm’s right. At first, he didn’t think about it, but compared to these racers Lightning has won hundreds of races. He’s considered one of the oldest professional racers still competing. If one of the newer racers could beat him...there’s no doubt their popularity would skyrocket.

They would both be targets.

Lightning nods. He’ll have to hope his car is up for this.

Wait. His car!

Storm seems to realize it at a similar time as his eyes go wide.

“My...my car! How can I race?!?” Lightning says frantically, hands going to his hair.

Charlie had taken the engine out...but the model he replaced it with should be a replica of the original engine. The question was, would it be ready?

Lightning makes a beeline for the garage, Storm following close behind him.

They take a different route than the crowds of people as they head to the outdoor track. Storm and Lightning run through the hallways until they’re both red in the face when they get to the garage where Lightning’s car is.

When they get there they find Charlie leisurely leaning against the wall, cleaning his hands off with a rag.

Lightning turns to his car...and finds it to be completely assembled. No spare parts are laying around, and all the tools had been cleaned up. He sees his original engine sitting on the floor completely intact, no damage to it whatsoever.

“Did you finish installing the engine already?!?” Lightning exclaims in surprise.

Charlie nods his head. Lightning is in complete disbelief. He doesn’t know how Charlie was able to switch the engines in such a short time. Again he's in utter shock at the brilliance of Storm’s mechanic. He makes a mental note to add an additional several grand to the check he’s writing for Charlie.

Storm grins by his side. “You’re the best!” Lightning nods eagerly, fulling sharing the same sentiment.

Charlie shakes his head. “I admire the appreciation, but it was nothing. Now I’ll be leaving soon, and I’ll be back for that engine. I can’t disassemble it here, I’ll take it to a workshop close by.”
Lightning nods, still kind of amazed he managed to switch the engines so quickly.

“Best of luck to both of you tonight.” Charlie says, gripping Storm’s shoulder before he leaves.

Time is quickly running out. Storm takes a minute to notify his trainer and pit crew, which judging by the irritation Lightning can hear through the phone, his team isn’t happy about.

Storm hangs up and turns to him, knowing he’ll have to leave and get his car to bring it to the starting line.

“Good luck tonight Lightning.” Storm says.

“You too Storm.”

And with that Storm’s gone, leaving to go get his car.

Lightning gets in his car, experimentally turning it on to test the engine. The car feels completely normal to him, and Lightning can’t sense anything different about its speed. He’ll only notice if it worked when he gets much higher, almost 200 MPH should let him know.

He pulls his car up to the starting line, spotting the other racers begin to do the same. Lightning looks over to the pit, seeing his friends give him a thumbs up.

Guido’s stripped off his suit jacket, rolling up the white collared shirt to allow for quicker movement. He took his tie off from around his neck and put it around his head in a makeshift bandana. Lightning would laugh if he wasn’t touched by the notion of Guido doing that so he could change Lightning’s tires more efficiently.

Mater and Luigi are next to him, giving him a supportive smile. There is obvious displeasure on Mater’s face. He’s probably just as angry as Lightning that they weren’t told about the race.

Still though, Lightning watches as he mouths the words “Good luck McQueen.” to him.

Lightning grins. His hands are gripping the wheel tightly, face concentrated. He pulls his helmet on, as well as his headset. He isn’t sure if anyone’s going to advise him today, seeing as last time Mater did that during an international race things didn’t go too well.

Lightning looks around the track. The lights are all on, illuminating the course. Lightning can see numerous sponsors and other races in the bleachers. They are considerably fuller than Lightning would expect, especially since there were no fans here.

Lightning sees Natalie Certain and other racing experts in the upper level of the Training Center, a clear view of the track through the glass windows is presented to them. Mr. Sterling is up there as well, and his eyes pass over Lightning with little interest.

Instead, he focuses on...Cruz?

Lightning can see her a few cars in front of him, gripping the wheel tensely. She looks nervous, and Lightning had completely forgotten to give her any guidance on the race. A surge of guilt hits him in the gut. Cruz had the least experience in this sort of a race, and instead of trying to give her some pointers he had been so concerned with his car.

He focuses himself at the wheel. He can’t do anything about it now. After all, it wasn’t his fault, right? He didn’t know about the race until tonight, how could he have helped her?
Cruz didn’t know about the race until tonight either though. She must be feeling completely overwhelmed. Racing internationally was a big deal for racers with years of experience.

Cruz, with only one real race under her belt, must be feeling so nervous right now.

Lightning finds himself looking around distractedly as the countdown for the race begins.

The announcer begins, the number three echoing loudly across the course.

Lightning’s mind is fighting through the guilt and uncertainty when he finds himself staring into a set of grey eyes. Storm doesn’t say anything. His helmet wouldn’t let him anyway, but with the intensity of those grey eyes staring into his own, Lightning knows he has to race.

As the race begins, the final number of the countdown yelled over the speaker system, Lightning slams his foot on the gas.

All hell breaks loose from there.

Lightning is drawn into one of the most intense three-hour-long racing sessions of his life. It’s a constant battle to do anything. Swerving in between the cars takes so much concentration due to all the racers trying to hit him on purpose, Lightning can feel his forehead dripping with sweat underneath the helmet.

His pit stops are frantic and quick, leaving no time for commentary at all. Lightning only pulls over when he absolutely needs to, and Guido swiftly changes his tires, fills his tank, or does anything else he needs to in the same time it takes a team of four on one of the other cars.

Lightning would get out and hug him if he weren’t so pressed for time.

Lightning constantly needs to adjust his speed, taking the inside whenever he can, but not allowing for another racer to box him in on the sides. Lightning hasn’t had much time to pay attention to his friends during the race. He sees Storm and Francesco neck and neck a few meters in front of him. They’ve been at each other’s throats for most of the race, which doesn’t surprise Lightning because technically Francesco’s car is faster than Storm’s. His top speed is 220 if Lightning remembers correctly, but he’s never seen the Italian racer handle that much speed before.

Lightning looks at his speed. He’s going around 190 right now. His engine recently only allowed for around 196 MPH, but, if this was a new engine he could go faster.

Experimentally, Lightning pushes down harder on the gas. He’s pleasantly surprised as his speed rises. It goes higher, up into the 200’s. His car can’t handle speed the way Storm and Francesco’s cars can, but Lightning’s car moves faster, quickly gaining on them despite being on the outside of the track.

He grins at Storm as he passes, even though the race is nowhere near over yet. He sees Storm recognize this and speed up. Francesco speeds up too, putting the three of them in a three-way battle for first place.

It reminds Lightning of his first race as a rookie, back when he raced against Chick and the King of Dinoco. Though now that he thinks about it, his skill level now is most like the King. Francesco is so annoying he fits the mold of Chick Hicks perfectly. Then that leaves Storm as the rookie, which is rather fitting.

Lightning isn’t paying too much attention to the cars behind him, but he does notice there have been a few crashes. It’s a rarity for local races but not for international. Luckily most racers have
enough sense to move off the course when they realize the race is over for them.

That’s what happens when you treat racing like bumper cars.

Lightning feels his hands start to ache on the wheel from gripping it so hard. It’s a good feeling. It grounds him, reassures him that he’s here. He’s racing and he’s got no intention of giving that up, whether he wins or loses this race.

Quickly though, Lightning realizes that the end of the race is rapidly approaching. They’re in the final few laps, and Storm is currently in the lead, Francesco and Lightning neck and neck behind him.

Lightning has the inside of the track, and Francesco is right next to him on the outside, blocking him from moving forward. Lightning, grinning like an idiot, pulls one of the same silly tricks he used to pull with Cal and Bobby.

He frowns noticeably, making Francesco believe he had the intention to brake. Francisco slows down as Lightning anticipated, wanting to keep him blocked.

Lightning quickly slams on the gas, then makes a dangerously close diagonal swerve in between Storm and Francesco’s car.

He’s next to Storm now, and in the final lap, both of them are pressing down hard on the gas pedal. Storm’s car is still technically faster, but Lightning’s using the drifting advantage he has on the outside every turn to keep them evenly matched.

They both are gripping the steering wheels impossibly tight, eyes set on the black and white checkered line in the distance. The cars each lurch forward, both continuing to pass each other as the last few seconds come into play.

Lightning grips the wheel and swerves it slightly, drifting across the track with faster speed as he gets closer to the finish line. Storm is right on his heels until suddenly, the line passes underneath their cars.

The race is over, and it is years of autopilot that has Lightning bringing his car back to the pit.

The end was so close! He isn’t sure who won! He gets out of his car frantically, staring at the large screen over the bleachers. The camera shows the final moments of the race. Lightning watches in disbelief. His car had passed practically a half a second before Storm’s car did.

Lightning only surpassed him by a few feet, but shocked, he realizes the outcome of the race.

He won. Lightning won.

The crowds erupt into cheering around him and Lightning finds himself standing there in disbelief when Guido, Luigi and Mater tackle him.

Their excitement is contagious, and Lightning grins a wide smile as they scream into his ear that he won. Guido’s suit is covered in oil, Luigi’s hair is all ruffled from how often he must have been grabbing in in anticipation. Mater, however, looks completely normal. He crushes Lightning in a hug.

“I knew you could do it Lightning.” He yells in his ear.

Lightning returns his hug just as fiercely. Despite how he’s grown as a person and been able to
accept his losses, it feels good to win. He feels a warm surge of pride in his chest. He wasn’t too old.

He stands there, feeling pride in his victory when Storm comes rushing over to him from his car. His helmet is off, and his dark hair is matted down to his head. Lightning wasn’t sure what Storm was going to feel like getting second place, but he looks positively thrilled.

Lightning barely has time to say his name when Storm hugs him. It throws Lightning off for a minute because he expected Storm to be upset about the loss. Storm though looks anything but upset. He pulls back, meeting Lightning’s eyes.

“You won!” Storm exclaims happily, and Lightning feels a surge of warmth rush into his chest. Hearing Storm so excited for him makes him feel good about himself. Even if Storm didn’t win this race.

“I did.” Lightning admits.

Storm leans back, arms crossed but a good-natured grin on his face.

“Well don’t be too sure of yourself McQueen. You better believe I’ll be the winner of the next race.” Storm says teasingly.

Lightning can’t fight the laughter that escapes his lips. Especially when he and Storm see Francesco throw his helmet to the ground and stomp off.

Numerous different sponsors come up and approach him. Even some of the next-gen racers offer him an apology for doubting his racing. Lightning accepts their apologies warmly.

He looks up to the Training Center, finding many of the racing analysts staring down at him in amazement. Mr. Sterling, however, is nowhere to be found.

Lightning finds that strange. You’d think Mr. Sterling would be down here shaking Lightning’s hand enthusiastically, telling him and all the people around them how he never doubted Lightning’s racing ability.

Lightning rolls his eyes. Well. Maybe Sterling had to be somewhere. He’ll find him later, and he’ll definitely have a talk with him about not telling them about this race.

Eventually, the sponsors and their racers clear out, leaving only a few remaining people in the Training Center.

Storms rubs his eyes tiredly.

“I think I’m gonna head home and get some sleep. I’ll see you guys later.” He says to Lightning and his friends.

He gives Lightning another warm smile as he leaves.

“Hey, Lightning we’re gonna pull the car around.” Luigi says. He and Guido rush off to go get the car. Mater is waiting next to him until he gets a phone call. He conveniently disappears around the corner to take the call, which Lightning has a good idea who it’s from.

“That was an interesting turn of events.” Lightning hears from a clipped voice behind him. He whips his head around at the sound of high heels on the floor of the Training Center.
He’s face to face with Natalie certain. Her hair is pulled back tightly against her head, and her dress is completely smoothed out. Free of any wrinkles or imperfections. Her eyes look as cold as ever, and her presence unnerves him slightly.

“I find it...very interesting that you were the winner of that race Mr. McQueen. By all accounts, Jackson Storm holds the higher speed.”

Lightning pauses. He didn’t even consider this before but...had Storm, let him win? No. He wouldn’t have. Storm’s just as competitive as Lightning. There’s no way he would hand him that victory. Right? The idea is already in his mind though, and before he can stop himself he asks it aloud.

“Do you think…”

“No.” Natalie Certain responds before Lightning can even finish speaking as if she knew what he was going to ask before he did.

“According to all the statistics I analyzed during the race. The number of Pit stops, Speed and Mileage efficiency, racing tactics and more, I can say with confidence that Jackson Storm did not allow you to win that race.”

Lightning feels a rush of relief run through him at that comment. He knew Storm didn’t let him win.

He doesn’t know what else to say to Natalie Certain, so he leaves. Before he leaves the building though, she calls out to him again.

“Mr. McQueen! I don’t know how you were able to win that race, however, I do know it was not given to you by anyone. You won that race entirely on your own.”

A small almost imperceivable smile makes its way on her face. It’s the closest thing to an apology he’ll get from her.

“Thank you.” Lightning says.

He heads out to the car, joining his friends for an enthusiastic journey home.

When he finally sinks into his bed after his shower, tiredness catching up to him, he feels better than he’s felt in a long time.

Lightning wakes up to see a silhouette standing over him. He almost screams, before realizing that the tall, gangly figure in front of him is Mater.

Letting sighs and runs his fingers through his hair,

“Mater, what are you doing in my room?”

“Well I was waiting for ya to wake up, then I realized It might be rude to wake you up.”

Lightning stares at him.

“So you thought it was better to stand over me while I slept until I woke up naturally?”

“Yup,” Mater responds simply.
Lightning rolls out of bed and gets up. He’s learned after years of Mater’s occasional quirks to just not question it.

“So what did you want?” Lightning asks as they head downstairs.

“Nothing. Just to tell you I’ll be out all of today and maybe tonight.”

Lightning turns to his friend raising his eyebrows. He’s got a pretty keen idea about who Mater will be with, but he doubts Mater would admit it was the case even if it was true.

“Have fun.” Lightning says, joining Luigi and Guido at the table.

He’s only sitting there for a moment before his phone rings. He sees it on the counter, probably having left it there last night.

“Hello?” He answers.

“Hey, Lighting it’s me...Storm.” Storm sounds more scattered than usual, but he’s most likely still tired from all the events last night.

“Oh hey, Storm! What’s up?”

“I was uh, wondering if you wanted to hang out today?”

Lightning’s pretty sure he doesn’t have anything to do today. He doubts either of them needs to train right now.

“Yeah sure.”

There’s a moment of silence on the phone before Storm responds again, this time sounding much more like himself.

“Great! I’ll uh, come pick you up.”

He hangs up the phone.

Luigi raises his eyebrows. “What was that about?” He asks.

“Storm wants to hangout.” Lightning responds.

“Oh.”

“Why? Did you want to come?”

Luigi pauses to think about it before he lets out a small yelp of pain. Lightning turns to see Guido with an angry expression on his face. He must have kicked Luigi under the table, but why would he do that?

“Oh right! I just remembered Guido and I have plans to uh...go to a...store!” Luigi responds nervously.

Lightning frowns. His friends are weird for sure, but he doesn’t know why Luigi’s so frantic in his response. Maybe they’re going somewhere they don’t want him to know about? In any case, he isn’t going to pry.

“Okay, you guys have fun with that…” Lightning replies, going upstairs to get changed.
Storm shows up a few minutes later, knocking on the door. Lightning answers it, letting Storm inside. Storm waves to Mater for a brief moment before Mater rushes out the door. A tad suspicious if you ask Lightning, but that’s how he knows Mater is meeting Holly somewhere.

Storm says hi to Luigi and Guido, who both greet him before rushing away quickly also. Lightning frowns. His friends are acting weird today. He makes a mental note to ask them what’s up later.

For now, he follows Storm back outside to his car. Lightning didn’t notice before, but Storm’s hair looks styled differently. Maybe he combed it back? Or put some kind of hair gel in it? Lightning isn’t sure. He isn’t sure why he’s noticing it either.

“So uh, what do you want to do?” Storm asks from the driver’s seat.

Lightning ponders it. This is the first time the two of them are going off to do their own thing. Mater, Luigi and Guido usually tag along when they go out places, which Lightning doesn’t mind, he’s just realizing now he’s not alone with Storm too often. Even when it is just the two of them, they’re usually training or racing.

It would be nice for them to do something more relaxing, even though the two of them love racing. That being said, Lightning isn’t quite sure what they should do.

“I’m not sure, what do you think we should do?” Lightning asks. If Storm wanted to hangout he must have some idea of what he wanted to do.

“We could uh, see a movie? I think there’s a new fast and the furious movie out. We could watch all the highly inaccurate portrayals of racing.” Storm offers. His voice sounds quieter than usual as if he’s a little unsure of himself. Lightning frowns, he doesn’t want Storm to be nervous.

“That sounds fun.” He responds honestly. It’s been a while since he went to the movies, and it does make him laugh to see all the crazy, exaggerated Hollywood portrayals of racing and car chases.

Storm drives them to a movie theater nearby, and when they get up to the counter to get their tickets, Storm beats Lightning to it. He asks for two and pays for both of them.

“Hey, you don’t have to do that!” Lightning insists, reaching for his wallet.

Storm waves him off. “Consider it a gift. For your win last night.” He smiles at Lightning.

Lightning reluctantly accepts the gesture. He’ll just have to buy tickets the next time they go.

They walk into the theater after a few minutes of waiting in line to get two sodas and popcorn. Well, one soda. Lightning gets an iced tea.

They take their seats into a relatively empty theater. It’s still pretty early though, and Lightning prefers when there’s not as many people.

The movie starts, and right off the bat, it’s a little ridiculous. Cars are exploding, falling off cliffs, making impossible jumps. It’s really insane. He and Storm end up whispering to each other every time something like that happens about how it doesn’t make logical sense, why would that car explode, how did the tires not pop from that, comments like those.

The car chases don’t make any sense to Lightning either. In the movie, it seems like the car is always on their heels no matter what measures the main characters take to lose them. However, in reality, when Lightning tells Mater to follow his car, Mater gets lost in two to three minutes flat.
He tells this to Storm, who agrees that the chase doesn’t make any real sense.

They have a good time pointing out all the inaccuracies of the film, and soon enough it’s over.

They sit and watch the credits. It doesn’t take long at all, and Lightning finds himself wanting to extend their day out. Storm’s fun to hang out with and Lightning would rather not go home if his other friends were going to be out for a while.

They end up getting lunch afterward, sharing a pizza between them and conversing about the race last night.

When they’re finished Storm surprises him.

“Let’s go to the beach.” He says randomly.

“Huh? The beach?! We don’t have bathing suits.”

“So what? It’ll be fun! Come on!” Storm insists.

Well, Lightning does love the beach. He hasn’t been there since they all went together a few weeks ago. With the hot Florida sun shining down on them too, it does seem like a good idea.

Storm drives, it takes them a little over an hour to get to the beach. The car ride is mostly silent, but it doesn’t feel awkward to Lightning. The silence is comfortable because he and Storm are good friends now. They don’t need to make idle conversation anymore.

They stop at a little shop near the beach to buy cheap towels and bottles of water.

Storm strips off his shirt once they get to the beach, leaving him with his shorts and boxers presumably. He rushes into the surf a minute later, diving under one of the crashing waves. Lightning follows suit, leaving his shirt in the sand and rushing into the water.

He doesn’t dive right in like Storm, because he notices after a moment that Storm has been underwater for a good chunk of time. He’s halfway through calling his name when he’s dragged underneath the water and into a wave.

For a split second, he thinks it’s a shark, having listened to Mater ramble on about how Florida beaches were one of the highest-rated places in the world for shark attacks.

A second after he sputters to the surface he sees Storm emerge too, laughing giddily. Oh, he’ll pay for that.

At first, Storm is waiting for Lightning to retaliate, tensed for whatever he needs to fend off. Lightning though plays it strategically. He waits an hour until they leave the surf and go lay down on the towels in the sand.

Storm lays on his stomach, closing his eyes as the sun beamed on him.

Lightning spots a hermit crab moving slowly through the sand a few feet from him. As quietly as he can, he picks it up and puts it on Storm’s back.

The second it moves Storm lets out a high pitched scream. If Lightning wasn’t watching it happen he would have thought it was a little girl screaming. Lightning giggles hysterically as Storm stands up rigidly, running his hands over his back to make sure the hermit crab is gone.

“That was NOT funny!”
Lightning laughs louder as Storm lays back down and elbows him in the side. It takes some time for Storm to recover from Lightning’s hermit crab attack, but eventually, his face looks peaceful again.

He’s the one to break the silence.

“You know. I’ve seen you race internationally before.”

“You have?” Lightning asks curiously. It’s been a few years since he was on an international tour. It must have been six years ago, meaning Storm was probably a teenager.

Storm nods.

“I was sixteen and heard over the radio how you were racing internationally in the summertime. I knew I needed to see the races, but my dad wouldn’t let me just fly to Italy, even if I did have the money.” Storm says.

“What did you do?” Lightning asks curiously.

Storm gives him a wry grin. “Well. I knew my school was having an educational trip to Europe the same time your race in Italy was.”

“You didn’t!” Lightning yells, somehow not surprised at all by the fact that Storm used his school’s educational trip as a cover to go see a race.

Storm nods. “Charlie helped me pay for it, and I told my dad it was a purely educational trip. The second the plane landed, I ditched my school. I ended up paying for a two hour taxi ride after that because I didn’t realize how far the race was from the airport.” Storm says, laughing.

“I can’t believe you did that Storm!”

Storm sighs. “Yeah well, it was worth it to see you race, believe me.” Storm says, glancing at him.

“Thanks, Storm.” Lightning says back.

Lightning glances around them. The beach is a perfect sight. He can see the sun starting to go down in the distance. Cute little birds are running along the beach in the distance. Lightning looks farther down the beach and sees something else.

He grins. “Hey, I’ll be right back.” He says to Storm walking down the beach. It must be a little snack bar building in the distance. Lightning can tell by the picture of the funnel cake he sees from even here. He’s not one for super sugary stuff, but he’s positive Storm will like it.

He buys one, and walks back over to Storm. His eyes are shut, so Lightning can’t see the piercing grey eye color beneath.

Lightning bends over, holding the hot fried batter covered with powdered sugar out as an offering.

“Hey.” He says, prompting Storm to sit up.

“What’s this?” Storm asks, even though Lightning knows Storm’s had one before.

“A funnel cake. It’s for you.”

Storm stares at it, reaching out to accept it. He seems relatively touched by it.
“Thank you.” Storm responds, voice soft.

“Sure.” Lightning says back.

They sit there silently. Storm eating funnel cake and getting powdered sugar all over while Lightning looks off into the surf. The sun is setting in the distance, giving the waves a nice orange hue to them.

Lightning’s aware of Storm’s hands twisting against each other beside him. Maybe the sugar’s making him antsy. Lightning isn’t sure.

“Hey, Lightning?” Storm asks quietly.

Lightning turns to look at him. He looks a bit nervous, though Lightning can’t think of why. Maybe he’s worried about racing? He didn’t seem too upset about getting second place last night though. Maybe something else is going on?

“Yeah?”

“I have to tell you something.”

The response catches him off guard a bit. He didn’t expect Storm to ask for permission to say something.

“Oh...well, go ahead. What is it?”

Storm pauses, hands gripping against each other tightly. His face is more flushed than usual. It looks like he got sunburn on his face. Storm’s eyes are downcasted, but he brings them up to stare at Lightning, eyes meeting his own.

Storm’s mouth opens, and Lightning waits for something to come out of it. Only, he doesn’t hear Storm talking. All he hears is the high pitched ringtone he set to his flip phone. Storm’s eyebrows turn up in confusion and Lightning scrambles around looking for his phone. He finds it on the edge of the towel and looks at the caller. It’s...Cruz. What could she want?

“Sorry Storm just give me one second.” Lightning responds, standing up to accept the call.

“Hello?” He answers.

He hears Cruz breathing heavily on the phone. She sounds very upset when she answers. Lightning can tell she must have been crying.

“Cruz?! Are you okay?”

Lightning’s immediately flooded with concern for his friend. He hasn’t been the best on checking up on her last night, and with a pang of horror, he realizes he doesn’t even remember what place she came in last night. He hadn’t been paying attention.

Lightning didn’t even think about what the race meant for Cruz. He had been so worried about himself and his own car that he didn’t even consider how that race must have felt for Cruz. Storm at least had more experience racing. Cruz on the other hand...had little experience on the track. The race last night must have been so overwhelming for her! Lightning didn’t even find her after the race! God, what kind of a friend was he?

“Can you...come to the Training Center Lightning? I’m there now.” Cruz tells him. Her voice
sounds extremely upset, more than Lightning’s ever heard it.

“Of course!” He responds.

She hangs up, and Lightning quickly runs back over to Storm, pulling on his shirt.

“Is everything okay?” Storm asks.

Lightning shakes his head.

“We have to go to the Training Center! I...Cruz called and she’s beyond upset. I gotta...we...can you drive us there?” Lightning says hurriedly.

Storm’s expression darkens a bit, but he nods and starts grabbing their things, walking back to his car.

Storm drives quickly, but Lightning’s displeased to see the frown on his face does not fade away. His eyes are staring straight ahead, hands gripping the steering wheel tensely.

Lightning feels bad. Storm must have had something important to tell him. Lightning will just have to ask him later.

The drive is shorter than they expect because Storm has been speeding most of the way there.

He pulls into the Training Center parking lot, and Lightning rushes inside, Storm a few steps behind him.

“Cruz?” Lightning calls out, but he’s met with no answer.

They search the Training Center and eventually find her in one of the simulator rooms. She looks bad. Her eyes are red and puffy, her hair is covering some of her face.

“Lightning?” She asks, voice wobbly.

Lightning immediately moves forward, hugging her. She wraps her arms around him and Lightning see the tear tracks on her face, what could have possibly made her this upset? She takes a step back and wipes her eyes.

“Listen Cruz I’ll be right back okay? I’m going to go find some tissues or something.” He says, patting her on the shoulder.

Lightning makes a beeline for Sterling’s office. He’s got to have some tissues or something in there. He’s not always the best at comforting people, so the tissues were a bit of a diversion to give himself time to think.

She must be upset about the race last night right? That’s the only explanation he can think of. He goes upstairs to Sterling’s office, surprised when the door opens easily. He didn’t think about it being locked but, now that he thinks about it, it doesn’t make much sense for it to be open.

Lightning enters the dark room, finding a box of tissues sitting on Sterling's desk. He grabs them and then finds himself staring at the documents on Sterling’s desk. There are a lot of different papers there. Some of them look like...brand ideas or blueprints for different items on them. A decent amount of them are themed after him, with vibrant red and gold colors and his name engraved on them.

Lightning grits his teeth, Sterling’s knows how he feels about becoming a brand.
He shakes his head. He can deal with that later. For now, Cruz is the priority. Lightning heads back downstairs, tissues in hands. He goes back down the simulator room and is about to enter when he hears voices.

Lightning stills. If Cruz is about to open up to Storm, Lightning doesn’t want to jeopardize that. He stops outside the door, holding his breath as he listens intently.

Cruz speaks first. “It’s so hard. Spending hours upon hours training, and still know you don’t stand a chance.”

“Must be hard.” Lightning can hear Storm respond, voice sarcastic.

Lightning stills. Why did he say that?

Lightning can hear Cruz shifting to stand. “Do you even know what place I came in last night? It must be easy for you! To have the fastest car and to be a great racer from the start! To never have to work tooth and nail or to fight just to have a chance at racing!” She yells.

The room falls silent again.

“Oh please.” Storm says darkly. “You can play the victim all you want, but I’m not buying it.”

Lightning stands there in shock. His feet feel stuck to the floor. He knows he should go in and stop this now, but he can’t move.

Cruz falters. “What are you talking about?!” She demands, voice wavering again.

Storm speaks again. “I don’t want to hear any sob story from you about why you can’t race, because the truth is, you’re not a racer. The only reason you’re here is because Lightning delivered a racing spot to you on a silver platter!”

Cruz sucks in a breath and a second later Lightning can hear her start to cry.

That’s it.

Lightning bursts in, staring at the two of them in shock.

“What’s going on here?!” He yells.

Storm’s eyes widen when Lightning walks in, but his demeanor does not change. He still has a scowl on his face, looking angry and irritated. He doesn’t say anything.

Lightning rounds on him, anger taking hold of him. How could he treat Cruz that way?!

“What’s wrong with you? How could you say that to her!” Lightning demands angrily.

Storm doesn’t apologize like Lightning expects. Instead, he looks even angrier.

“Say what to her?! I told her the truth! She’s not a racer! The only reason she’s here is because of you Lightning!”

Lightning sees Cruz with her head buried in his hands behind him, looking so vulnerable and sad that it makes Lightning lose it.

“You’re being an asshole!” He yells at Storm.

He regrets it instantly when he watches Storm’s face reflect clear hurt. It changes a split second
later, masked by anger. Storm’s hands are shaking at his sides.

“YOU’RE SUCH AN IDIOT!” Storm yells at him. He leaves a second after that, quickly rushing out of the room angrily. Ripping the door open and leaving before Lightning can say anything else to him.

Lightning stands there in disbelief. He’s so stupid, why would he say that to Storm? Why would Storm say that about Cruz? Nothing feels like it’s making sense anymore.

Lightning hands the tissues to Cruz.

She accepts them, wiping the tears on her face.

“I’m sorry Cruz. I don’t know why he said that.” Lightning mumbles.

In truth, he does know why Storm said that. Storm respects racers, he does not, however, respect Cruz. In Storm’s mind, he made the judgment that she wasn’t a real racer. Lightning feels extremely guilty for the small part of him that agrees.

Cruz probably wouldn’t have become a racer if it wasn’t for him.

Cruz sniffles. “It’s okay. He’s right you know. Even with months of training for last night, I still wasn’t able to even be in the top half.” Cruz mutters.

“Cruz... That’s…” Lightning starts, before he realizes something.

How could Cruz have been training for months for last night in particular? It doesn’t make sense...unless.

“Cruz. Did you know about the race last night?” Cruz stills, eyes becoming wide and face shocked.

Lightning freezes. So he was right. Cruz had known about the race for months, while he and Storm only found out a few days ago. Why, why would that information be kept from them? Why would all the other racers be informed? Why would Cruz know before them?

Lightning finds himself taking steps backward, uncertainly.

Cruz doesn’t answer his question, but her face gives everything away. By her shocked expression, Lightning implies he wasn’t supposed to know that. Lightning feels suspicion pooling in his gut. He walks back toward the door, keeping his eyes on Cruz.

“Lightning I…” She starts, before covering her mouth with her hands quickly. Lightning’s eyes widen and he tries to turn around to see what she’s staring at. He doesn’t get that far.

A heavy arm wraps around his chest, and he feels something pressed over his mouth. Lightning panics when he smells the heavy chemicals coming from the cloth. His eyes widen when he sees Cruz sitting there. Clearly distraught, yet not doing anything to help him. The realization hits him as he becomes weaker, limbs losing energy as he fights back against the person grabbing him.

He falls to the floor, feeling the harsh impact of it against him. Lightning wills himself to get up, trying to force the black dots from his vision away.

It doesn’t work. The last thing he remembers is his head slumping to the ground, blackness consuming him.
Storm doesn’t know the last time he felt so angry. It spreads through him, making his hands grip the steering wheel tighter. His face is red with embarrassment and anger.

It would be easier to deal with his anger if it were directed at one particular source, but that’s not the case.

Storm’s angry at Cruz for ruining his confession, he’s angry at Sterling for putting all this racing pressure on everyone, and he’s angry at Lightning for being so God Damn oblivious to what’s right in front of him.

So now, where does that leave them? Storm doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what Lightning thinks of him anymore. The complete shock and anger on Lightning’s face in the simulator room…

Storm had never seen him so angry, and he was on the receiving end of it. When Storm thinks about it though, Lightning is most protective of his friends. They come first…and from Lightning’s perspective…Storm doesn’t really want to know how he looked.

His words from earlier echo over and over in his mind. “The only reason she’s here is because of you Lightning!”

He grips the steering wheel tighter, speeding faster through the dark streets.

He has too much pride.

Storm’s always been that way. He always needed to be that way, because the racing world isn’t for soft people. It’s meant for the strong. For those who can race without complaint. It’s meant for people who believe in themselves. People like Lightning.

Storm has never been one to sugarcoat things for anyone. Least of all for Cruz, who’s done nothing to earn his respect since the day he met her.

Storm would like to pin it all on the irritating jealousy that jars him from all sides. It would be easier that way, if he could tell Lightning how jealous it made him that he gave her his racing number in the beginning. That Storm had trained for years to make it to the big leagues, just to have a shot at racing with Lightning, and then to watch Cruz appear so effortlessly. To watch Lightning hand over his spot so easily to her, to let her finish the Florida 500 in his place.

He was jealous of course. Not of her racing skill or personality, but because of her closeness to Lightning.

Storm exits his car angrily when he reaches his apartment building, shutting the door harshly behind him.

Now that he can see past the cloud of anger that made him leave the Training Center so quickly, another glaring problem arises.

Sterling. Sterling was the one who decided this race would happen at the Training Center. It’s partially his fault for the fight that broke out. If Sterling hadn’t arranged for this race so suddenly, then Cruz, along with he and Lightning would have had more time to prepare. Then maybe she would have finished higher in the rankings, and she wouldn’t have needed to go crying to Lightning about her performance.
What possible reason could Sterling have had for telling all the foreign racers about the race, but not them? He was their sponsor. It was in his best interest to make sure they knew, if he wanted them to win that is.

Storm rakes his hands through his hair. He wishes he cared more about that at the moment, but Sterling’s idiocy has little importance when Storm’s weighing whether or not Lightning still likes him at all.

He tries to shake away the nagging thoughts that swarmed him. What are you going to do? How will you fix this? Storm shoves them away, irritated.

“Why should I be the one to fix things? Lightning should apologize to me!” He argues back in his mind, stubbornness taking hold once again.

He takes a shower, turning the hot water all the way on. It grounds him. Steams away most of his anger until he’s left in a pitiful state of regret.

Storm’s night of sleep is broken and irritating. His dreams are restless. They present him with scenarios that leave him drenched with sweat in the middle of the night.

He sees Lightning leaving. Going back to Radiator Springs once more, telling Storm he knew it was a bad idea to trust him.

He sees himself going to his next race, only to see the frowning faces of Lightning and his friends staring at his arrival, Cruz by their side.

The last one is the worst. They’re sitting on the beach, he and Lightning. Storm confessed, but Lightning’s face isn’t at all what Storm wanted to see. His face is a mixture of disgust and sympathy, twisted upon hearing Storm’s confession.

He shoots out of his bed at that one, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. It’s reassuring that it’s a dream, but it doesn’t do much to make him feel at ease.

He can’t sleep. So Storm spends the night putting his earbuds in and blasting music. It doesn’t help his mood at all that most of the songs that conveniently shuffled happen to be sad.

He spends hours in the dark of his room until he comes to the realization that he fucked up.

Storm, in all his careful planning, managed to hurt the one person he cares about most. Lightning.

He should have kept his mouth shut, should have been nice to Cruz regardless of what he thought about her racing skills or her as a person.

She’s Lightning’s friend. Storm should have respected that.

He can’t lose Lightning over this.

By the time Storm forces himself to admit the only way he can fix this is to go apologize to Lightning and Cruz, the sun is streaming brightly through his windows.

He gets up, dressing quickly.

He doesn’t take his time, because the longer he puts it off the worse the situation becomes. What if Lightning doesn’t want to talk to him anymore?
Maybe he should call him.

Storm bites his lip and pulls out his phone. He calls Lightning and waits nervously on the other end. The phone rings, but there’s no answer. Storm hangs up, trying to ignore the growing sense of worry in his gut.

Lightning’s not mad enough at him to not talk to him right? He’s probably just busy with something.

Storm paces around his room for the next few minutes, before deciding to call once more.

Again he waits, but he’s met with silence. Now that’s enough to frighten him. Lightning usually always picks up when Storm calls. For him to not answer two times...

Storm grabs his keys off the counter, impulsiveness kicking in.

If Lightning isn’t going to answer, then Storm’s going over here. He’s not going to sit anxiously in his apartment while Lightning plays the silent game. He’s going to man up and go over there. Apologize and explain the situation.

It seems simple enough.

Storm drives the short distance to Lightning’s house. He parks his car out front and walks up to the doorbell. He isn’t sure what he expected, but it certainly wasn’t Mater opening the door before he even rang the doorbell and giving him a suggestive smile.

“How was your night guys?” Mater asks, before looking at the obvious confusion on Storm’s face.

Mater then pauses and looks past Storm frowning.

“Where’s Lightning?” He asks.

Storm raises his eyebrow.

“I was going to ask you that.” Storm responds, confused.

Mater frowns, his usual good-natured grin completely gone. He motions for Storm to come inside.

“Is that Lightning and Storm?” Luigi yells from the kitchen.

Mater shakes his head. “It’s only Storm.”

“Only Storm?” Guido repeats questioningly, walking into the living room to confirm if it’s true.

Storm shakes his head. “Listen guys, I don’t have time for this. Is Lightning here I really need to talk to him.”

Guido, Luigi and Mater all frown.

“We thought Lightning was with you.” Guido says.

“Yeah, didn’t he spend the night at your house?” Luigi asks.

Storm shakes his head. “We um, got into a fight. He was with me last night but I thought he came back here.”
Mater shakes his head. “We haven’t heard anything from him.”
He pulls out his phone and tries to call Lightning. They all wait eagerly, but nothing happens.
Guido and Luigi try to call him too. There’s no answer.

Now Storm’s starting to get worried. It’s one thing for Lightning to not answer Storm if he was
angry, but to not answer his friends? That’s not like him at all.

After Mater tries one more time with no answer, all of them share a similar worried look. It’s very
unlike Lightning to not answer. His phone can’t be dead either because as Guido put it.

“Lightning’s prehistoric phone battery lasts for weeks and I saw him charge it two days ago.”

Storm feels a nervous twinge run up his spine. The buzzing in his hand a second later jars him out
of it, and he looks frantically at the caller hoping it’s Lightning. It’s not, but Storm does recognize
who’s calling.

He answers quickly. Or tries to, but Charlie talks first.

“Jackson. Listen to me. I need you to come to my workshop now. It’s extremely important.”

“I, uh, what?!” Storm answers, response jumbled and unlike himself. He’s busy trying to deal with
Lightning’s current whereabouts, not whatever car issues Charlie’s dealing with...but he did say it
was important.

“Jackson, Come now.” Charlie hangs up, sending Storm the address of his workshop a minute
later. It’s close by thankfully, and Storm explains the situation to everyone.

“We’ll come with you.” Luigi and Guido say.

Storm nods, motioning for them to follow him to the car.

Mater grabs his keys.

“I’m going to see what I can do.” Mater says vaguely, quickly rushing out.

Storm follows his lead and drives quickly through the streets. There’s a nagging sense of unease at
the back of his mind. Why wouldn’t Lightning have called one of his friends to get him last night?
Did he end up leaving with Cruz? Even if that were the case, why wouldn’t he be answering any of
their calls now?

It doesn’t seem right.

Storm pulls up to the address in a rather harsh stop. It’s a small run-down shack. It doesn’t look
much like a workshop, more like an old house that Charlie renovated to be a car workshop.

Storm’s been sitting in his car for half a second when the door to the workshop launches open,
revealing a very distressed look on Charlie’s face.

Storm exits the vehicle quickly, Luigi and Guido close behind him.

They follow Charlie inside, revealing a more spacious interior than Storm thought. It’s cluttered
with different car parts and blueprints, but Charlie walks past all that. He stops walking once they
reach a pristine engine, curiously attached to a random car model. Storm’s puzzled, wondering
why the engine looks familiar before he realizes it’s Lightning’s engine.

“Charlie, I don’t understand. What’s…” Storm begins before Charlie raises his hand for Storm to
remain silent.

“Watch.” He says.

Charlie gets into the car. He leaves the car in neutral but accelerates quickly. Storm watches as the numbers on the dash climb higher.

50 miles, then 100, then 150, then curiously 196 miles per hour.

The speed simply stops there, regardless of the fact that Charlie’s foot pushes the gas pedal down completely. He exits the vehicle, walking over to the engine.

“Now, watch this.”

Storm watches as Charlie takes a small screwdriver, and opens up a panel on the engine. It’s small. There is no indication that it was even there before Charlie removed it.

Inside there is a piece of equipment that Storm has never seen before. It’s inserted unnaturally. The bright, gleaming silver contrasting with the darker grey of Lightning’s engine. Ever so carefully, Charlie grips one of the tools on a bench nearby and removes it.

He sets it down on the table, then gets back into the car.

This time when he accelerates, the speed goes well over 200 Miles Per Hour.

A twisting realization hits Storm in the gut. That thing, whatever piece of equipment that was, intentionally stalled Lightning’s engine. It was placed there to keep Lightning’s speed from going beyond 196 Miles per hour.

Luigi and Guido come to a similar conclusion around the same time as their eyes widen in shock.

“That thing, it was slowing Lightning’s car down?” Luigi exclaimed.

Charlie nods. “It was placed intentionally. Hidden underneath the paneling so it would remain undiscovered. Judging by the grease around it I’d say it was placed there months ago.”

Storm’s heart drops in his chest. This whole time. This entire time Lightning’s car had been tampered with. Back when they raced during the Florida 500, no. Maybe even before that.

Storm feels a sickening feeling in his gut when he thinks of Lightning’s defeats. That whole time, when Lightning had thought he wasn’t able to race anymore because his car wasn’t fast enough, it was never really him. Someone else had interfered with Lightning’s racing. Someone else had wanted to make sure Lightning didn’t have a chance at winning.

“But, who would do something like that?” Luigi asks in disbelief.

Storm looks to Guido, eyes staring at the object on the table until a realization hits him.

“Sterling.” He says, voice barely a whisper at first.

“What?” Luigi asks his friend.

“That’s Sterling’s technology. That piece, whatever it is, is colored the same way all of his car parts are. In Sterling Silver.” Guido says aloud.
Storm doesn’t hear what they say next. He doesn’t remember. It all feels like a blur to him, because the last thing he remembers is them telling him to wait. He doesn’t wait though. He drives.

Storm drives in a way he’s never driven before. Normally he’s in control perfectly. Accelerating with no issue, keeping a calm hand on the wheel. This driving is nothing like that.

It is erratic and quick. His driving is full of jerky movements as he pushes the pedal faster, fueled by desperation he’s never known before.

Storm ignores the traffic lights. He hears the curses and honks that jar him as he whizzes past. He even hears police sirens for a brief moment, but he does not slow down. In fact, he pays them no mind at all.

He makes it to the Training Center in mere minutes, tires screeching as he pulls into the parking lot. He fails to slow down, hitting the curb on one side.

He rushes inside.

Storm doesn’t know what to think. He doesn’t have a clue what’s going on. All he knows is that he has a horrible feeling about Lightning. He doesn’t have any idea where he is, only that this is where he was last.

Storm runs to the Training Center doors. He pulls on them, but the doors don’t budge. He peers through the windows, but he only sees darkness inside. There are no other cars in the parking lot, no other people training inside as far as he can see. Storm stands there, suspicion growing in his mind.

The doors shouldn’t be locked. The Training Center shouldn’t be closed. It’s supposed to be open 24/7. There’s no reason why the doors are locked other than…

No.

Storm refuses to stop here. The glass on the door is too thick, but maybe one of the windows? Storm runs around the building to the side of it, where there are plenty of windows to choose from. Experimentally, he pushes on one of them. Locked. It won’t budge even with all his strength.

Storm takes a step back, and then with careful precision, smashes his foot through the window. It shatters, and he kicks the remaining shards of glass out. He doesn’t think about the consequences of what he’s done, he doesn’t even stop and go slowly.

Storm goes through the window, shards of glass scraping him. The sound was loud, and Storm looks around to see if anyone was here. There was no alarm sounding when he broke the window. There’s nothing. The room he’s landed in is one of the Simulator rooms. It’s pitch black, and Storm knows he’ll need to get out to the hallway.

Only now that he’s here does the Gravity of the situation weigh on him. If Sterling intentionally wanted to slow Lightning’s speed, what else was he capable of? What other plans does he have? Where is Lightning now?

All questions Storm doesn’t have answers to.

Though there is somewhere he might be able to get them. Storm runs down the dark hallway to the staircase. The Training Center is completely silent, and his footsteps echo along the staircase. He
retraces his steps to Sterling’s office, Lightning having shown him where it was while giving him a tour.

When Storm tests it, he finds the door unlocked.

He goes inside, turning the lights on.

When the room’s illuminated, he’s met with boxes upon boxes of merchandise. Upon closer inspection, it is all merchandise for Lightning. There are boxes of mudflaps, of T-shirts, fuel, water bottles, even snacks, all with Lightning’s signature 95 on them. The boxes are made with his traditional Red and Gold racing colors, many of them even have his face on it.

Storm frowns in confusion. There’s no way Lightning gave Sterling permission to create a brand out of him. Lightning would never sign off on all this tacky stuff.

Storm moves closer to the desk, where he sees something that makes his blood turn to ice. There is a bottle sitting on sterling's desk. It’s empty when Storm picks it up, but he can tell from the chemicals listed on the label it isn’t good. He covers his mouth with his hand, both because he doesn’t want to breathe in but also because he doesn’t trust himself to keep quiet.

He bites his tongue. This isn’t a time for panicking, he thinks. Concern for Lightning driving the fear from his mind. He needs to find Lightning now.

Storm rushes downstairs frantically checking different rooms in the hallways. He doesn’t spot any sign of Lightning anywhere. Storm runs back to the room they were in last night. The room is empty. No trace of Lightning, Cruz, or Sterling anywhere, but there is something peculiar.

Storm looks at the ground to see a piece of white cloth. His heart hammers against his chest, but he doesn’t dare touch it. If that cloth was used for what he thinks it was...then Lightning’s in serious trouble.

It only strengthens Storm’s resolve to find him.

He walks back into the hallway, mind switching between panicked concern and careful reasoning of what could have happened.

If Lightning had been knocked unconscious, then they wouldn’t have wanted to take him far.

Storm shudders at the thought of Lightning’s panicked face, his body slumping to the ground.

He moves faster until he comes to a part of the Training Center he’s never been to before. The hallway is empty aside from one door at the very end. Storm walks to it, pushing the door open. The door opens to a dark stairwell leading down a level. Storm didn’t know the Training Center even had a basement, but he can just make out the sound of voices.

He shuts the door slowly behind him, careful not to make a sound at all. He descends the stairs with extreme caution, making him take longer than he thought to reach the bottom.

When he gets to the basement level, he sees another winding hallway, and it’s from there that he sees the light of another room.

Storm hears a voice breaking through the silence.

“...I just don’t understand…”

Storm recognizes it instantly as Lightning.
He sounds confused, and his voice is tinged with sadness.

It feels like a punch to the gut. Storm moves closer to the end of the hallway, it's lined with even more merchandise. Boxes upon boxes of useless nicknacks all stamped with Lightning’s trademark 95.

Ever so carefully, Storm peers around the corner.

The room is large, illuminated by lights on the ceiling. The ceiling is high above them, all polished grey. Storm looks further into the room and sees Lightning. His heart drops into his stomach.

Lightning is tied down. He’s sitting in a chair, but his hands are bound, as well as his legs. Storm has a side view of him and can see his face looks shocked. His eyes are teeming with betrayal, and when Storm follows them his eyes land on Sterling a few feet in front of him. Behind that he sees Cruz sitting on one of the boxes off to the side. She’s staring at the ground, with her hands tightly squeezed together.

She looks miserable, but Storm doesn’t feel any sympathy. Instead, he feels disgust. Was this all part of some plan? Did she intend for them to have a fight so she could get Lightning alone?

Storm feels sick when he thinks about last night. While he was listening to sad music in his bed pitying himself, Lightning was kidnapped.

The word feels wrong in his mind, but that’s what had happened. Lightning was tied up, with harsh ropes encircling his wrists. Last night while Storm was cursing Lightning for being so oblivious...Lightning was here for who knows how long.

Storm feels a cloud of nausea in his throat. He forces it away. The last thing he needs is to give away his position by being sick.

He surveys the situation. Right now it’s Sterling and Cruz. There’s two of them, and one of him. Lightning being tied up doesn’t do him any good. He looks back toward his friend, who’s got a rough yellow bruise forming on the side of his face.

He grits his teeth and turns his attention back to Sterling, who lets out a deep laugh at Lightning’s confused state.

“What aren’t you getting Lightning?! Everything’s clearly in front of you, yet you still don’t see it.” Sterling says condescendingly.

Lightning’s mouth opens and closes, eyes staring wide at Cruz. She’s not meeting his eyes, feeling too guilty Storm thinks.

Sterling pauses, looking back at Lightning as if he’s no more than a naive child. Lightning eyes are still on Cruz.

“Cruz...you were part of this?” Lightning asks in disbelief. His tone makes Storm want to rush over and hug him, the pure bitter betrayal in his words leaves Storm feeling an immeasurable amount of guilt for leaving him here to be kidnapped and tied up, forced to realize Sterling and Cruz had betrayed him.

Storm wants to rush out from his hiding spot and beat Sterling to a bloody pulp. He remains still though. He needs to hear why Sterling did all this, needs to know why Lightning is tied up in the
center of the room. He needs to know why Sterling hijacked his car in the first place.

Sterling’s face is dark when he turns back to Lightning. There is no more polished smile he puts on for them.

“You see Lightning, I was more than happy to allow you to race...until you kept winning.”

Lightning’s face frowns deeply. “But...I thought you wanted me to win. That was the whole reason I was training here...So I could improve…”

“OF COURSE THAT WASN’T THE IDEA!” Sterling yells out, face twitching in anger before he regains his composure.

“You see, you weren’t supposed to keep winning Lightning. I thought it would only be a matter of time before you began to see that you simply don’t belong in the new era of racing.”

Storm finds himself clenching his fists hard enough he can feel his nails digging into his skin. Lightning’s face is a mixture of horror and betrayal. It doesn’t fit his kind features, and Storm hates seeing it.

Sterling continues.

“Everything was supposed to work out so smoothly. In time, you were supposed to quit naturally, leaving me all the opportunity in the world to promote you as a brand.”

Lightning stills. “You mean all this time, you only wanted me to train here so you could promote me as a BRAND!”

Cruz shifts again in her seat, hands coming up to rake through her hair nervously. She at least looks guilty for this. Sterling on the other hand.

He laughs heavily, as if Lightning’s anger means nothing to him.

“Of course Lightning, that’s the entire reason I wanted to sponsor you. I could make millions off of you. Don’t you realize how many people in this world would be so eager to pay for merchandise with your face on it?”

“Of course my plans didn’t work out quite as smooth as I anticipated. You see, I did not intend on Jackson Storm being such a nuisance.”

“Storm?” Lightning asks.

Sterling nods his head. “Jackson Storm is a fierce racing competitor. It was my hope that his continued winning would be enough to drive you out of the racing world completely. Of course, I’m no fool. I knew it wouldn’t be enough to simply hope that he’d beat you. I needed to take other methods.”

“Other methods! What other methods?!” Lightning asks angrily, shifting against his restraints.

Sterling doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t give Lightning the whole truth. Storm watches as the realization slowly dawns on Lightning’s face.

“It was you...you’re the one who tampered with my car. Storm...he was right. There was something wrong with my car. You’re the reason I couldn’t get my car to go faster! That’s why I kept losing!” Lightning yells, a fit of anger clouding his face.
Sterling smirks at him.

“Of course I did. It wasn’t enough to simply hope Storm kept beating you. I needed another way to ensure you would lose, so I asked Cruz what the best way to do that was and she answered without hesitation, knowing your speed was one of the most valued elements of your racing.”

Cruz looks more distressed than ever, biting her lip nervously.

“Cruz?” Lightning asks, voice thick with disbelief.

Cruz suddenly shoots up from her seat, anger quickly covering her face.

“I had no choice!” She yells out suddenly.

“Don’t you see Lightning?! I can’t beat you! Even when your car can’t go it’s top speed I still can’t beat you! During the last race, I couldn’t even finish in the top three. I’ve got no shot at winning...not with you around.”

Cruz repeats the last line in confusion as if she’s been told to memorize it without believing it. Storm realizes then what’s happened. Sterling’s manipulated her, made her believe that she couldn’t beat Lightning. Storm feels like his mind is going to explode processing all this information, and he can’t imagine how Lightning feels right now.

Lightning sits there in silence before speaking, voice sounding unusually hollow.

“So why did you do all this. Why did you kidnap me? To force me to quit?” Lightning asks.

Sterling laughs one more time as if Lightning’s just said something hilarious.

“Oh Lightning, you still aren’t getting it? At first, that was my plan. To simply continue to have you lose race after race until it was too much for you to bear. Though recently I’ve realized something.”

Lightning glares at him. Storm remains frozen in place. Staring on at Sterling as he continues his crazy explanation.

“Similar to the way an artist's work increases monumentally after they die, I’ve realized the same can be true for this. Imagine how much your merchandise would sell for, if you were dead.”

Storm feels his blood turn to ice.

He watches Lightning’s expression morph into shock as Sterling reaches into his pocket. Storm looks on, unable to even breathe as the cold glinting metal of the firearm is brought into view. The world around him seems to slow, and Storm watches as the metal gun glides up through the air, until the barrel is extended right at Lightning.

He hears Cruz let out a yelp and bury her head in her hands, not wanting to see the act.

Storm feels like he’s watching the situation unfold in slow motion as Sterling’s finger wraps around the gleaming trigger at Lightning, eyes looking dark and emotionless.

“Goodbye Lightning.” Sterling says, and then suddenly, Storm is moving.

He doesn’t think about it. He doesn’t even realize that his brain has made a conscious decision to move until he sees Sterling slowly getting closer. It’s because Storm is running towards him, a part of his brain realizes. He isn’t paying any attention to that though. All he can think about it
Sterling’s hand on the trigger, gun pointed towards Lightning.

Sterling recognizes Storm running towards him too soon, and he shoots. Storm remembers hearing the loud pop of the gun as it released a bullet, sailing through the air. Storm knows exactly what will happen if that bullet hits Lightning. He’s sitting down, the way the gun was aimed meant it would almost surely hit him in the chest.

He would die.

It’s that knowledge that makes Storm react quick enough to make a decision.

His body moves, and a second later he feels himself fall to the ground, a blaring white pain flashing up the length of his leg.

He hears Lightning scream his name, but it barely registers through the hot pain searing through his skin.

He sees the angry look on Sterling’s face, gun still balanced in his hand. Farther back he sees Cruz staring at him in disbelief. Storm tries to stand, but the pain in his leg is so great it sends black dots spotting across his vision. He touches that part of his leg that’s causing pain to course through his body, and he can feel warm liquid on his hand.

Storm tries to lift his head off the ground, and that alone takes so much effort he’s surprised his head doesn’t smash back down.

He hears a string of curses fall from Sterling’s lips, and watches as the barrel of the gun moves to him.

So this is it, he thinks. Suddenly Storm finds himself wanting to laugh at the fact that this is how he will die. It seems too ridiculous to be true, but with the silver weapon pointed down at him, Storm knows he can’t die with any regrets.

Storm turns his head away from Sterling, choosing instead to look at Lightning.

Lightning is screaming his name Storm realizes, and he’s shocked to see what looks like tears streaming down his face. He’s straining hard against the restraints, but it isn’t doing him any good. Storm wants to smile at him, to make Lightning believe that everything will be okay, but things aren’t looking good.

Storm knows he’s running out of time.

So without hesitating, Storm says the three words he’s been meaning to tell Lightning for a long time.

I love you

He doesn’t say them out loud, not wanting Sterling or Cruz to hear. They were words meant for Lightning and Lightning alone, so he mouths them out silently. Storm watches Lightning’s eyes widen, he seems to get the message. Or at least have the sense to pretend he understood.

Part of him knows it was cruel. Cruel to tell Lightning that and then die, but he needed to say it. He needed to get the words off his chest before he died. His heart aches for lots of things right now, and in these final moments, he finds himself wishing for what a lot of people most likely wish for: more time.
Oh well. Life can be a bitch that way, Storm thinks as Sterling lowers the gun so it’s a few inches from his head, ensuring that this time the bullet won’t miss its mark.

He shuts his eyes, bracing himself for it.

BOOM.

Storm hears the gunshot, though strangely enough, he can’t feel anything. Tentatively he opens his eyes, wondering if Sterling still managed to miss despite how close he was.

When he opens his eyes though, Storm’s shocked at what he sees. Sterling staggers back, arm clenching his shoulder as red blossoms through his clothing, covering the pristine silver of his suit.

Storm frowns, then hears multiple voices from the hallway.

He wonders if he’s hallucinating when he sees Mater, His girlfriend, and another man in a silver suit all rush in holding guns, along with numerous other men behind them. More black spots appear in his vision and Storm tries to blink them away as he sees the man in the silver suit tackle Sterling.

Storm didn’t notice it before, but the man had a strange mustache too. He sees Mater’s girlfriend chase after Cruz as she runs down the hallway, and he watches as Mater rushes over to Lightning to untie him.

Storm fights to stay awake, but the black spots are appearing more and more, and all he wants to do is shut his eyes.

He hears the man in the silver suit talk into his cellphone, something along the lines of.

“This is Finn McMissile. We’ve apprehended the suspects and we need medical assistance ASAP.”

Storm frowns. He watches as Mater finishes freeing Lightning, and he comes running over to Storm. He drops to the ground next to him, eyes looking horrified as he glances at the gunshot wound.

Storm wants to stay awake, he really does, but he can’t.

The last thing he remembers is Lightning’s blue eyes staring down into his, hand gripping his own tightly.
Mere seconds. That’s all it took for things to happen. The shot happened impossibly quick, and just as Lightning was sure he was going to die, that’s when he saw Storm rushing past him.

It happened in a split second, making his brain fight to recognize what had truly happened. He screamed for Storm as the realization hit him. The bullet had hit Storm.

After that time seemed to blur together. Lightning couldn’t focus on anything other than Storm lying a few feet from him on the ground. He remembers Sterling swearing, screaming how Storm wasn’t supposed to be there.

There were plenty of times when Lightning felt helpless before. Like he was unable to make a difference about things. He thought that about racing a few times.

Never in his life though, did he feel this helpless. He sat there restrained, skin burning against the ropes as he dragged against it, looking for any possible way out. He strains against it harder, feeling the harsh material chafe against him. He can’t do anything though.

He screams Storm’s name, desperately wishing for the ropes to break. For Storm to get up, the bullet only grazing him, for Cruz to change her mind and save them. Hell, he wished for anything that would make him believe things would be okay.

It’s hard to remember. Hard to fight through the guilt and confusion distorting his mind. The bitter emotion of betrayal making hot wet tears bubble to the surface. He feels useless when he looks at Storm, face contorted with pain.

He looks so small lying on the ground, looks so fragile and hurt that Lightning forgets just how young Storm is.

He’s screaming. That at least he knows. Lightning was screaming through the madness, yelling for Storm. The only person in the room he still trusted, the only person at that moment he wanted to be safe.

He meets Storm’s eyes, unable to tear himself away. There’s an acceptance there. A gentle reluctant knowledge of what is about to come next. There is no fire burning brightly behind his eyes, no stubborn determination to fight through this.

Though Lightning notices as Sterling’s gun rests mere inches from Storm’s head there is no way to fight through this.

He sees Storm’s lips moving in a final message to him. Three words. Lightning screams louder, pulling against the ropes with all the strength he has. Lightning sits there paralyzed, unable to do anything as Sterling’s gun aligns itself with Storm’s head.

He wishes for a miracle then. Wishes for anything in these last moments that will save them.
Something does.

It happens so swiftly that Lightning wonders if it’s just a figment of his imagination when Finn McMissile appears in his silver tuxedo. Bursting into the room like some kind of superhero, Mater and Holley right behind him.

He realizes when Finn tackles Sterling and Mater rushes over to untie him it is real. The instant he’s free Lightning runs to Storm, tripping over himself in desperation to get to him.

Lightning feels frozen when he looks down at Storm’s face. His eyes are fluttering open and closed like he’s willing himself to stay awake but can’t.

Lightning grips his hand tightly.

He’s aware of the paramedics at their side, putting some kind of breathing tube over Storm’s face.

He looks so pale. His eyes are shut and unresponsive. Lightning squeezes his hand tightly, willing Storm to do something. Open his eyes or squeeze his hand, something to let him know he’s okay.

“S-Storm…” He asks shakily.

Storm does nothing.

There’s chaos all around him. Lightning can feel Mater’s hand gripping his shoulder. He sees a familiar man behind them in the corner of his eye, holding a silver gun that gleams in the light to Sterling’s head. Finn McMissile, he realizes.

He doesn’t have time to dwell on that once he sees the bright red liquid dripping to the linoleum tiles beneath them.

The blinding realization hits him again as he stares at the red floor. Storm had been shot.

Lightning scans his eyes for the wound, but the blood is everywhere.

One of the paramedics identifies the gunshot on the upper region of his leg, he moves to put bandages there to slow the bleeding.

The injury is horrifying to look at, but more than that Lightning is horrified of who the injury belongs to.

It’s Storm.

It doesn’t feel real. If you had asked him yesterday, Lightning never would have suspected anything like this would happen.

The paramedics are moving him onto a stretcher then, Lightning only notices because he feels the tug of their connected hands. Lightning lets go quickly and tries to fight through the clouded haze of guilt and concern that wracks his brain.

His body moves for him easily enough, too concerned with thoughts of Storm to even consider looking back to see Cruz and Sterling no doubt being cuffed and taken away.

He doesn’t think about that though.

Not when he’s watching Storm’s face get paler by the second, grey eyes hidden from sight.
Through the yelling and commotion of the other paramedics when they get to the ambulance, Lightning stumbles into it. He watches as the paramedics frantically attend to him. Bandage after bandage is exchanged, each one soaked with red.

He turns his attention to Storm’s chest, to see it rising and falling slowly.

They make it to the hospital soon enough, and Lightning numbly follows the stretchers through the halls until he realizes he can’t follow them.

They wheel the stretcher down the hallway, past the emergency doors. Lightning stands there in shock before a hand comes down onto his shoulder. He flinches and jumps away, paranoia still spreading through his mind like wildfire after everything that happened.

He relaxes immediately when he sees Mater giving him a sad smile.

“Hey, pal.” He greets.

Lightning barrels into him with a hug, wrapping his arms around him. Mater returns it just as tight.

“Why don’t we go somewhere else?”

Mater steers them away from the hallway, so Lightning doesn’t have to continue staring at it. Wondering which way Storm went, or what’s happening to him now.

It’s not until Mater brings him around the corner to a waiting room to sit on one of the chairs that Lightning remembers what Mater was doing before this.

“Sterling! Cruz!” Lightning yells out, remembering why this happened in the first place.

“Finn and Holley took them to the police station for now,” Mater responds.

Lightning nods.

He rubs his arms distractedly, harsh red marks from the ropes a reminder of what happened to him. If Lightning weren’t so concerned about what would happen to Storm he’d be more concerned about the fact that he was almost killed.

A part of him’s still in such denial about that he can’t even bring himself to acknowledge that Cruz played a part in this. Sterling he can accept. There had always been something distrustful about the man. He always thought of Lightning as more of a brand anyway.

But Cruz? She was his friend. He raced with her, he trained with her. Hell, he even gave her his racing spot.

A wave of guilt hits him as he realizes last night if he’d just listened to Storm, they wouldn’t have been in this mess.

If he hadn’t been so insistent about defending Cruz, Storm never would have left the Training Center angrily, Lightning wouldn’t have been taken and Storm wouldn’t have needed to take that bullet for him.

If the guilt he felt for not listening to Storm was a wave, then the next pang of guilt that hits feels like an ocean.

Storm took a bullet for him. He knew it was heading for Lightning and moved toward it intentionally. Why? Why would he do that?
The questions circle his mind with no answer. He doesn’t know why.

He looks up to see Luigi and Guido walking into the waiting room. They spot Lightning instantly and rush over to him.

“Lightning!” They yell out and crush him in a hug.

“Hey, guys.” He mumbles softly.

“We heard what happened.” Luigi whispers.

Lightning nods.

A doctor approaches them a few minutes later. Storm’s in surgery now he says, and it’s unclear how long it will take.

Lightning thanks him for his time.

He doesn’t know much when it comes to anatomy, but if the bullet hit Storm in the leg...he’d most likely be okay right? Lightning doesn’t know. Watching Storm get shot had been nothing like the glorified movies he’s seen where characters charge on regardless of their injuries.

The bullet had hit him so fast, and the pain. Lightning could tell by Storm’s expression he had been in so much pain.

Mater startles him from his thoughts.

“Hey pal, want some coffee? I was going to get some.”

Lightning nods. Luigi and Guido follow him, leaving Lightning to his thoughts. He’s not alone for much longer.

He watches as Storm’s mechanic - Charlie, he remembers, enters the waiting room and takes a seat next to him.

“How you holdin up?”

Lightning ponders it. “I’m alright.” He’s certainly alright compared to Storm.

Charlie nods. “As alright as you can be with the circumstances I suppose.”

“I just…feel so...” Lightning starts, wondering if he should be saying this to someone else, considering he hasn’t bothered to tell his friends about the crushing guilt in his chest. Lightning was the one that started a fight with Storm last night. Lightning was the one who stayed at the Training Center with Cruz. He was the one taken hostage, the one meant to be killed, and here Storm was taking the bullet meant for him.

“I wouldn’t feel guilty.” Charlie says thoughtfully to him.

“But I…”

Charlie waves it off. “Listen, kid, Jackson’s as stubborn as they come. He would have taken that bullet regardless of what you did, and he’ll be fine. I’ve seen the kid come back from worse.”

Lightning nods. He doesn’t know what could have happened to Storm that’s worse than a bullet, but Charlie’s certainly right about Storm’s stubbornness. He’ll be fine. Lightning’s got to believe that.
Mater returns, handing him a steaming cup of coffee.

Charlie then proceeds to fill him in on exactly what he found in Lightning’s engine. It comes as a surprise. Not completely, because Sterling did mention he’d taken “other measures” to ensure Lightning continued defeat. Still though, to hear that Sterling intentionally tampered with a part of his car months ago, it makes Lightning think.

All those times when he believed his car wasn’t fast enough, that he simply wasn’t able to keep up with the newer racers anymore, that had all been because of Sterling? That relieves some of the tension in his mind, but his thoughts are still mainly of Storm.

They sit there together for hours in the waiting room, not quite knowing what else to do. It’s clear Charlie has no intention of leaving until he sees Storm, and Lightning is right there with him. He can’t leave. He’ll be worried all night about Storm, no sleep will come to him, even if he wills it to. Mater, Luigi, and Guido have no intention of leaving either. Storm might be a new addition to their group, but they all want to make sure he gets through this okay.

A nurse approaches them into the late hours of the night. She informs them that Storm’s out of surgery now. They’ve moved him to a room on one of the upper levels. He’s unconscious for now.

They all practically run upstairs into his room. Lightning enters, and it’s a strange sight to see Storm lying on the bed unconscious, a white hospital gown on. There are different tubes connected to him. One monitoring his vitals, the other attached to his face keeping him breathing.

They all crowd into his hospital room, taking a seat inside. Lightning has no idea if they’re all allowed to be in here right now, nor does he care. No one in their right mind would tell them to leave. Periodically, nurses come through to check on Storm, and one of them stops to explain there were no complications to the surgery. All pieces of shrapnel from the bullet were removed. She explained Storm would have to use crutches for a few weeks to let his leg properly heal before he tried to walk on it, and the bandages would have to be changed every so often.

“How long does he have to stay here?” Lightning asks the nurse.

She pauses to think about it. “It would be best to keep him for a week. So we can monitor his vitals and begin some light physical therapy for his muscle movements.”

Charlie snorts in his seat.

They all whip around to stare at him.

He laughs. “You’re all out of your mind if you think Jackson’s staying here a minute longer than he has to.”

The nurse frowns. “Even as a guardian, you don’t have the authority to make that decision here.”

Charlie shakes his head. “I won’t be making any decisions. If it were up to me, he’d be here the whole week, but the boy hates hospitals. He’s twenty two, there’s no keeping him here if he doesn’t want to stay.”

The nurse leaves quickly then, either in disbelief or refusal to hear anymore. Unfortunately, that does sound like something Storm would do. If he hates hospitals, Lightning doubts he’d be interested in staying here.

Storm stays unconscious for hours. Lightning and his friends alternate between leaving the room in shifts, not wanting Storm to wake up and be by himself.
More hours go by, and Lightning can see on the television in the room that the press already got ahold of their story. There must be reporters on every channel talking about the kidnapping with Sterling and Storm’s gunshot wound. Lightning shuts it off, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

He’s in the room by himself now. The others had gone off to the hospital cafeteria to eat something. Lightning doesn’t blame them, they’ve been in here awhile now.

The nurse comes in to check Storm’s vitals again, and she pauses to look at Lightning.

“You know...it’s kind of funny how these things work.” She states.

It rubs Lightning the wrong way instantly. “It’s funny he got shot?” Lightning answers with a harsh bite to his tone.

The nurse puts her hands up immediately. “No no! I just meant...well a few months ago when you were injured during one of your races...you were here in this hospital in a coma.”

Lightning pauses. He tries to block out that memory, it had scared the hell out of his friends a few months ago when he lost control of his car trying to go faster. He’d been in a coma for a week, or so his friends tell him.

Lightning looks on, waiting for her to continue.

“Well uh, every day after your friends went home for the night, he came to sit with you in the evenings. Said he didn’t want you to wake up and be alone.”

Lightning’s mouth feels like sandpaper when he swallows. Storm had come to sit with him back when he’d been in a coma? But that was before Storm came to Radiator Springs, that was before they were friends.

That was back when Lightning thought Storm hated him, and he had wanted nothing to do with the cocky racer.

The nurse leaves the room then, and Lightning is left feeling more confused than ever.

Storm had come to visit him? He’d been worried about him? It looks like Lightning was wrong about Storm, even about the early memories he had of the man. Storm had always cared about Lightning.

Lightning’s mind is out so far in space he doesn’t return until he hears a loud gasp echo through the room.

He sees Storm sit up rapidly, and his grey eyes scan the room. Lightning is on his feet in an instant, rushing to his side. Storm seems more preoccupied in ripping the breathing tube out of his mouth though.

He rips it out of his mouth and takes several deep rapid breaths.

“Storm!” Lightning yells out, in both relief to see him awake and shock at him throwing caution to the wind as he starts ripping the wires of his chest monitoring his vitals.

“Storm you probably shouldn’t rip those off.”

Storm doesn’t pay that statement much mind though. With a wince, he yanks the IV out of his arm. The machine monitoring Storm’s vitals starts to flatline, but that doesn’t seem to bother Storm at
all.

Finally, it seems like he’s noticed Lightning’s presence.

“Oh good. Lightning help me stand up.”

Lightning stands there dumbstruck. This isn’t quite how he pictured Storm’s return to the living.

Two nurses rush into his room with panicked faces, probably confused why they hear one of the machines flatlining when Storm is sitting up on the bed looking perfectly healthy.

Charlie walks in a minute later, holding a loose pair of sweatpants and a shirt, along with two crutches.

“Oh thank god.” Storm mutters, reaching out to take the clothing. Lightning stands there, mouth open like a fish along with the nurses as they watch Storm put on the shirt. He pauses with the pants, seeming to remember he’s just been shot.

Storm shrugs and slides his legs over the bed, asking for Charlie’s help to quickly get them on. It’s over in less than a minute, and Storm is reaching for the crutches.

The nurses are moving around the room quickly, unplugging the machines and maybe calling for backup?

A Doctor comes rushing into the room.

He looks at Storm with a confused look. “What are you doing?!” He asks incredulously as if a patient’s never done this before.

“Leaving.” Storm says matter of factly.

Lightning hears his friends laugh from the hallway. They must have just gotten back. Leave it to them to make this into a joke.

Storm takes the crutches underneath his arms, standing up from the bed on one foot. The movement jars his other leg enough for a pained expression to make its way onto his face, but he doesn’t have any intention of stopping.

The doctor looks horrified.

“Young man I highly suggest you stay here. In your condition, you shouldn’t be placing weight on either leg right now, let alone try to crutch your way out of the hospital.”

Storm rolls his eyes as if the Doctor’s warning is no more than a friendly suggestion.

“Storm!” Lightning yells, wondering what possessed his friend to feel such a desperate need to get out of the hospital.

“Yes?” He asks Lightning.

“You shouldn’t leave the hospital! You have to stay until you’re better!”

Storm frowns. “I hate hospitals.”

Lightning stares at him in disbelief. Storm’s handling this with the willpower of a two year old.
Mater continues cracking up in the hallway. Charlie disappears, a minute later returning with a wheelchair. Storm doesn’t seem happy about it, but he begrudgingly sits in it and begins to wheel himself down the hallway.

Lightning rushes after him a minute later, whizzing by the nurses and doctors who look completely baffled.

One of the nurses runs after him, passing him a bag of what looks like bandages and other things for Storm. Lightning accepts it, then turns his attention back to Storm, who looks like he’s about to go zero to sixty in a wheelchair of all things.

“Storm, where are you going?!” Lightning demands, catching up to him.

“My apartment.”

“At least let me push you!” Lightning demands. Storm relinquishes his hold on the wheels, and Lightning pushes them down the hall to the elevator.

His friends and Charlie meet them inside.

“So Storm, tell us about your epic hero moment!” Mater demands.

“Yeah! What happened, tell us!” Luigi shouts.

Storm laughs. “I’ll tell you guys later.”

Charlie passes Lightning a key.

“What’s this?”

“The key to Storm’s apartment.”

Charlie kneels down to Storm.

“Is it alright if Lightning takes you back Jackson?”

Storm nods, unusually quiet.

“Here’s the key to his car too, I drove it over from the Training Center earlier.”

Lightning nods, putting the keys into his pocket.

His friends are quick to leave him when they get to the parking lot.

“Good luck Storm!” Guido says to him.

Mater waves goodbye.

“Catch up with you guys later!”

Lightning scans over the cars in the parking lot, finding Storms a few rows back. He wheels Storm over to the car, opening to door for him. Lightning grips him by the arm as he moves into the front seat, hopping on one leg. Lightning takes the wheelchair back inside and gets into the driver's seat.

As he starts the car, Lightning’s aware of the deafening silence. It seems so much greater than usual as if there’s some kind of unspoken tension in the air.
Storm is very silent the entire car ride, making Lightning feel nervous for some reason. He wonders distractedly if Storm’s angry at him. He did start a fight with him last night. More importantly, though, Storm got shot because of him. Lightning’s sure it’s painful, and he probably isn’t too pleased with that.

Every so often Lightning glances over to see Storm lightly touching his leg, face grimacing in pain.

They arrive at Storm’s apartment, and Lightning isn’t quite sure what to do. He has so many things he wants to say to Storm, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t even know how he’s going to get Storm upstairs considering they don’t have a wheelchair.

Storm though doesn’t seem to be bothered by this in the slightest. He gets the crutches out and experimentally tests them, hopping on one foot. Lightning just staring at him dumbstruck. If it was him who’d gotten shot, Lightning’s sure he’d be back at the hospital right now. Not testing out crutches.

Lightning doesn’t have time to bring this up though, because Storm starts hopping inside with an urgency Lightning can’t understand. Lightning follows him quickly though, rushing inside to see Storm in the elevator. He holds the door open for Lightning, who rushes inside.

The ride up is silent, and Lightning again can’t shake the nervous worry that Storm is upset with him for some reason.

The elevator goes to Storm’s floor, and Storm exits first, waiting at his door eagerly for Lightning to open it. Lightning does, and watches as Storm crutches over and flops onto the couch. Lightning turns the lights on in his apartment, watching Storm lay back against the couch.

He doesn’t say anything as Lightning moves to the living room. Even when Lightning stares right at him. The silence is too much for him.

“Storm?” Lightning asks softly.

It shakes Storm from his thoughts, and grey eyes meet Lightning. His gaze is not particularly angry, but he’s been so quiet.

“Are you...angry with me?” Lightning asks, rubbing his arm nervously.

Storm frowns instantly, eyebrows drawn up.

“Well...I...I started that fight the other night. I shouldn’t have said that to you.” Lightning murmurs. He winces when he thinks back to their fight in the Training Center. He told Storm he was acting like an asshole. What if that had been the last thing Lightning said to him? What if Storm wasn’t able to recover from that shot?

A wave of nausea rolls over him at the idea of what could have happened. He still can’t quite shake the cruelty in Sterling’s eyes when he looked at him. It would have been so easy for him to kill them. There was no hesitation at all.

Storm shakes his head and pats the seat next to him. Lightning takes a seat next to him.

“I was never angry at you Lightning. Angry at myself maybe, for letting jealousy get the best of me.”
Lightning frowns, a mixture of confusion at Storm’s forgiveness of him so easily and what he could have possibly have been jealous about.

There’s something he’s more confused about than anything else though. He needs an answer.

“But I don’t understand why. Why did you take that bullet for me?”

Storm pauses before he speaks, and the silence seems to stretch on. It’s endless, making Lightning fidget nervously as Storm’s piercing grey eyes refuse to drop their gaze.

“Because I love you.”

Lightning blinks when he hears it. At first, he thinks he misheard something, but then Storm is moving.

His hands move then, and Lightning feels his brain stop functioning.

Storms hands slide forward against his face, running through his hair. Lightning doesn’t have much time to think about anything else besides the fact that Storm’s pulling him closer and closer until…

Storm kisses him. Lightning's brain is busy imploding on him, but it fights through the haze of confusion to conclude that Storm is kissing him. All logic leaves him then, flying out the window as if it was never there at all.

Storm’s fingers thread through Lightning’s hair as he pulls him closer. Lightning’s body shifts until he’s leaning over Storm. The kiss is so soft, so much gentler than Lightning would expect. Storm’s hand slides down to his neck, the other still on his face, warm against his jaw.

Lightning doesn’t think to stop or to catch his breath, a part of him still conscious of Storm’s leg is cautious not to bump into it, but other than that he makes no move to shift away. His mind is at a blank, and all he can think about are those soft lips against his own. The warm hand on his back. Storm’s hand moves under his shirt, trailing up the length of his back. Lightning shudders against the contact.

He can’t focus on anything other than Storm, but on some level, Lightning does hear someone knocking against Storm’s door. He thinks it’s part of his imagination before Storm’s mouth breaks apart from his for a split second.

“Don’t answer that.” Storm practically growls from beneath him. Lightning doesn’t even think his mind can form together one coherent thought at the moment, much less get up to answer the door.

Storm’s mouth presses against his own again, this time firmer. Lightning’s mouth opens intending to say something until Storm’s tongue slides against the bottom of his lip. A spark of pleasure radiates through his body as Lightning sits there with his brain reduced to the size of a peanut.

The knocking returns fiercer. Storm breaks their lips apart again, and this time he actually does growl, voice sounding positively enraged when he yells out “GET LOST!” to whoever’s banging on the door.

“JACKSON STORM YOU OPEN THIS DOOR RIGHT NOW!” A feminine voice screeches. It’s enough to make Lightning fall backward on the couch, blinking repeatedly in confusion. Storm looks ready to kill whoever’s outside his door, and Lightning realizes that with Storm’s leg injured, he should be the one to answer the door.
Lightning gets up. His steps are wobbly and he stumbles against the wall in his rush to open it. He opens the door the reveal Emily, with a scowl fiercer than he’s ever seen her have. The girl from the bar, Ash, Lightning remembers is right behind her.

Lightning’s too busy wondering if the blush on his face is more or less worse than a tomato when Emily marches past him, Ash following.

Storm looks at her in disbelief. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! GET OUT?!” He yells, making Lightning wince. It’s enough to make him want to run for the hills, and it wasn’t even directed at him.

Emily places her hands on her hips, mirroring his anger. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN GET OUT! I CAME HERE TO MAKE SURE YOU SURVIVED AFTER GETTING SHOT! WHICH BY THE WAY YOU COULD HAVE CALLED AND TOLD ME!”

Storm’s face is red with anger, and Lightning makes a second of brief eye contact with Ash, who’s witnessing the interaction with a bemused smile.

“You have no idea how lucky you are I got shot in my leg because if I didn’t I would KILL YOU RIGHT NOW!” Storm yells.

Emily crosses her arms, yelling back at him just as fiercely.

Lightning stands there awkwardly, before realizing he needs some air. He needs to get out and process what the hell just happened.

He moves to the door, which catches Storm’s attention immediately.

“Where are you going?” Storm asks, angry demeanor fading away instantly.

“I uh. I’m gonna step out for a minute and get some air. Talk to Emily alright? I’ll be back okay?”

Storm doesn’t look happy, but he shifts his attention back to Emily as Lightning makes a quick escape.

Lightning shuts the door behind him, but he can still hear Storm’s muffled voice angrily yelling at Emily.

Lightning rushes down the steps and outside taking a few much-needed breaths of cool air. For all the good his mind did him a few minutes ago, it certainly was busy now. Storm kissed him. Storm liked him? No, not like, love, his mind corrected. Lightning felt his face turn red once more.

God, what the hell just happened? His mind is running wild with scenarios and Lightning is in desperate need to talk to someone. That being in mind he gets in Storm’s car and drives home.

Who better to help him figure this out than his friends.

He drives like a madman, whizzing through the streets despite the car not being his. He arrives at his house a few minutes later, rushing inside like a lunatic.

“GUYS!” He yells out as he yanks the door open.

He finds his friends sitting on the couch eating popcorn, all looking at him like he’s a disturbed maniac.

“Yes?” Mater answers, hiding a smile.
“I...Storm...he...we…” Lightning starts, words coming out jumbled and confused, face heating up as he realizes he doesn’t know the best way to explain the situation.

“Oh? Did you finally get laid?” Mater asks.

Guido smacks him on the shoulder, and Lightning’s grateful for the interference before Guido speaks.

“How the fuck could he have gotten laid Mater! Storm just got shot.”

Lightning stares at them, mouth open in disbelief. Luigi at least seems to be equally as confused as Lightning as his eyes go wide in surprise.

“What the hell! Are you guys on something?!?”

Lightning interrupts, ignoring his friends.

“Storm...he...he likes me!”

Mater and Guido stare at him.

“No shit.” They say.

Luigi falls off the couch.

“Woah, Woah! Likes you as in Oh Lightning you’re so dreamy?” He asks.

Lightning tugs at his hair.

“That wasn’t quite how he phrased it, Luigi!”

His mind flashes back to Storm’s earnest expression. “I Love you” Falling from his lips gently, eyes reflecting the truth he’s been hiding for so long. Lightning’s face is beet red.

Mater chuckles. “About time you figured it out pal.”

“You knew?!?” Lightning screeches in disbelief.

“Well yeah, it’s kind of obvious,” Mater responds.

“Have you seen the way he looks at you?” Guido adds.

“Or talks to you?” Mater interjects.

“Or looks at everyone who’s rude to you like he wants to beat them to a bloody pulp?” Guido says.

Lightning stares at them in disbelief. Before he’d always taken the things Storm did as a friendly gesture, but slowly the interactions come back to him, each one seeming less friendly and more...romantic.

A blinding realization hits him full force in the gut when he thinks back to the movie they saw. Had that...been a date?! Later on at the beach when Storm had something important to tell him...had he been trying to confess?!

“Wait...so how did you figure this out?” Luigi asks.

By the time Lightning explains the story to them, leaving out some of the more intimate details, all
of his friends are staring at him in surprise.

“Wait...so you just walked out on him?” Guido asks.

Lightning winces. He hadn’t quite thought about it that way with Emily’s surprise visit, thought technically Lightning supposes he did walk out on him.

“Well, what are you doing here! You have to get back over there.” Luigi yells.

“What?!”

“Yeah Lightning! Think about it from his perspective! He kissed you, told you he loved you, and you left!” Guido yells.

That hits him like a punch to the gut. He didn’t think about that at all, having been so preoccupied with needing to sort out his thoughts regarding the matter. His heart sinks when he thinks about Storm sitting in his apartment alone, vulnerable after coming clean about his feelings. Another part of him rationaly remembers that Storm is twenty two. He’s thirty five. Putting them at a thirteen year age difference, which by both Lightning and society’s standards is no small thing. It does nothing to put his mind at ease as he realizes Storm’s still just been shot and most likely needs help with things. He spends the next few hours packing his bag with random things to bring to Storm’s house. He’s stalling. Lightning knows that, but he’s never been in a situation like this before. Never had to consider carefully what his next move will be. Or how to handle this the right way. Eventually he forces himself to man up and get out of the house, much to the relief of his friends, who pretend not to notice him leave.

He starts the engine. Lightning doesn’t know how or what he’s going to do yet, but he knows he can’t leave Storm in the dark for long. He needs to tell him the truth.

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